

Report from the 2019th association of European schools of planning annual conference: 9–13 July 2019, Venice, Italy

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ABSTRACT

The 2019th AESOP conference took place in Venice, on 9–13 of July. This year's conference consisted of five intensive days that included more than 100 different panels, which consisted of thematic and special sessions, roundtables, discussions and poster presentations. Overall, more than 1000 scholars attended the 2019 AESOP, representing almost 100 different institutions world wide. The 2019th conference was overall a stimulating and intriguing event, which was further enhanced by the city of Venice, the chosen venues and the evident organization. One could only hope that future conferences will continue to embrace the same level, depth and diversity of topics, while encouraging a wider and more critical approach to the question of planning history.


KEYWORDS

AESOP; conference; planning history; Venice

Introduction

The Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) is dedicated to promoting the research and teaching of urban, regional and national planning. Since its foundation in 1987, AESOP has focussed on encouraging new planning approaches while enhancing international cooperation and collaborations. Consisting of a fusion of urban scholars, with various scientific backgrounds that include geography, policymaking, management studies, and urban design, AESOP is a significantly diverse research association. One of the main initiatives developed by AESOP are its annual conferences, which form a vibrant and productive platform for the exchange of knowledge between different researchers, as well as a framework for developing academic networks that contribute to a more widespread planning discourse. The 2019 AESOP conference took place in Venice, on 9–13th of July. This year's conference consisted of five intensive days across which more than 100 different panels took place; including thematic and special sessions, roundtables, discussions and poster presentations. Overall, more than 1000 scholars attended the 2019 AESOP, representing almost 100 different institutions worldwide.

The conference opened with festivities on Tuesday the 9th at the famous Palazzo del Cinema. The main keynote speeches made it an impressive evening. There then followed four consecutive days at the University of Venice (IUAV), located in the historic Cotonificio building in the city centre. Although AESOP is officially a European association, the conference was attended by scholars from around the world. The international aspect was enhanced by the participation of

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representatives of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP), AESOP's American counterpart. The national diversity was further enhanced by the fusion of scholars, as the conference was attended by early-stage researchers and leading professors alike, all with varied research interests. This mixture sustained a broader spectrum of perspectives beyond the main conference theme and, in turn, led to a significantly productive exchange of knowledge. Nevertheless, bar a few panels and presentations, papers of historical scope were markedly absent. This tendency to exclude historical perspectives has unfortunately become a trend in the recent AESOP conferences. However, the protest of key researchers, including IUAV's own distinguished planning historians, eventually led to the late insertion of a special history track to the 2019 AESOP conference to highlight the role of historical scholarship as an integral part of planning research. The reappearance of the history track implies a possible return of historical perspectives to the AESOP conferences, which could contribute to even more profound and fruitful events in the future.

Planning for transition – whose transition?

The principal conference theme was 'Planning for Transition'. The organizing committee sought to address the current and future challenges faced by contemporary cities. These include the impact of climate change and ecological disasters, as well as socio-economic questions like global migrations and political unrest. In the opening venue at the Palazzo del Cinema each of the keynote speakers discussed the conference theme's relevance and urgency. In their joint presentation, Professors Paulo Pinho (University of Porto) and Ben Davy (TU Dortmund), the acting president of AESOP, emphasized the necessity of planners to be more actively engaged. They both claimed that planners should contribute their knowledge and expertise to help make a better future; especially in this period of climate change and political tension. They called for greater collaboration between planners and urban scholars and expressed their appreciation of the participation of ACSP members. Professor Alessandro Balducci (Politecnico di Milano), spoke of the social and economic transitions that planners have to deal with, and the need for them to go beyond simple technocratic regulations. However, Professor Paolo Costa raised the most critical questions about the general conference theme and claimed that a deeper understanding of the current situation is needed before debating future action.

Costa asked the simple question '*Whose transition are we talking about?*'. Costa, formerly a Professor at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice who served as the mayor of Venice (2000–2005), presented some of the different perspectives which arise in discussions of urban contexts. Analysing the term *Venice*, and how it has different meanings to a variety of people, today and in the past, Costa illustrated how it is almost impossible to speak of a single city facing a single transition. The keynote presentation of Professor Leonie Sandercock responded to the questions raised by Costa. Sandercock (University of British Columbia, Vancouver), represented the ACSP at the conference. Her talk presented her students' research and collaborative planning projects with indigenous communities in Canada. Sandercock introduced several recommendations for planners engaged in such projects, of which perhaps '*Shut up and listen!*' was the most important; stressing the need for planners to learn from the communities with whom they work, rather than try to impose their own personal perspectives and preferences upon them.

Some of the different thematic panels addressed Sandercock and Costa's claims, including those regarding the privatization of public space, urban marginalization, community-based planning, gentrification, and socio-spatial dynamics. Some of the special sessions lingered on related questions, notably by focusing on the issues of planning and spatial tensions, *touristification*, migration, and exclusionary urban policies. Besides the briefly mentioned sessions, several other presenters at the

conference continually challenged an overly simple understanding of ‘planning for transition’ by offering multifaceted perspectives of this theme. Such contributions engendered fruitful and diverse discussions by raising additional interesting questions, rather than simply trying to answer the original ones.

The elephant and the gorilla in the room

‘Planning for transition’ can be interpreted as planning for a better future. Yet, while trying to create a future it is essential to study previous efforts so as to avoid reproducing past failures. This highlights planners’ need for historical education and research. Yet, there was a noticeable lack of sessions and panels dedicated to planning history. Nevertheless, ‘history’ or the ‘past’ was featured in most talks, usually under the guise of terms such as ‘heritage’, ‘traditions’, ‘monuments’, ‘preservation’ or even ‘identity’ or ‘background’. In this sense, as explained by Karl Fischer in his presentation, planning history was the ‘*elephant in the room*’ that everyone chooses to ignore or avoid talking about. A harsher criticism would suggest that history is even the ‘*gorilla in the room*’, as in the famous attention experiment of Simons and Chabris; where half of the participants, focusing on specific figures in a video, did not notice a gorilla appearing on screen.¹ This was most apparent in the speeches at the opening ceremony. Paolo Costa addressed the need to consider Venice as more than just a ‘*bunch of monuments*’, while Leonie Sandercock highlighted the importance of learning from traditional planning systems. All of these claims are crucial to modern planners, yet, it is quite impossible to address these issues without proper knowledge of planning or urban history. As Alessandro Balducci emphasized, we need to look back on former transitions, in order to understand future ones.

The few panels that focused on history saw the acknowledgement of that ‘elephant’ or ‘gorilla’ as the first step towards planning the future. The special session titled ‘Transition histories’, organized by professors Michael Hebbert (UCL) and Carola Hein (Delft University of Technology), offered a research-based historical perspective to the overall conference theme. This panel aimed to show a variety of former futuristic ideas that eventually shaped cities and regions, as well as how past transition strategies were implemented, and subsequently challenged, morphed, and transformed. The panel, which lasted for an entire afternoon, included 16 different presentations. Its case studies travelled from Australia to Portugal, via Iran, Israel, Palestine, Greece, Italy, and Germany. It covered nineteenth century, pre- and post-WWII twentieth century – and even 3rd millennium – transitions. Max Welch Guerra (Bauhaus University) presented the different transitions that the city of Weimar witnessed over the past one hundred years. The city has undergone the rule of Imperial Germany, the Weimar Republic, the communist GDR and currently the Federal Republic; all of which left their traces on the urban fabric and the community which has inhabited it. Additional insightful presentations included those regarding planning transitions in Tehran during the 1960s and 1970s (Elmira Jafari, Delft University of Technology), the reconstruction of Greece during the Cold War (Petros Phokaides, University of Athens), and how technocracy turned into a key factor in formation of cities during the twentieth century (Michael Hebbert, UCL).

Another panel titled ‘Space, citizenship and identity: the EU-MENA region’, chaired by Nurham Abujidi (Zuyd University) Alessandra Gola (KU Leuven) and Marco Chitti (Université de Montréal) also brought some historical focus. The discussion sought to challenge the common conception of a division between Europe and the Middle East and North Africa. It did so by attempting to promote a more inclusive approach that emphasizes the historical and present-day intertwined relations

¹Simons and Chabris, “Gorillas in Our Midst”.

between these regions. Only one of the main panels directly mentioned the term ‘history’ – ‘Theorizing urban change: Complexity and Ethics’, organized by Tijana Dabovic (University of Belgrade), Francesco Lo Piccolo (University of Palermo) and Christopher Maidment (Anglia Ruskin University). The panel discussed the ethical implications of planning and its social impact. Amongst the different themes addressed, the organizers considered the reinsertion of forgotten voices into planning histories as a means of helping contemporary planners to develop a modern ethical framework to their practice.

Besides these few examples, all other panels avoided directly addressing the term ‘history’. As well as the question of planning for the future without knowing the past, there arose other questions about the relevance of history and historical research in current planning discourse, as well as its importance in planning education courses. The lack of historical perspectives parallels its diminishing presence in the recent AESOP conferences. While previous events included a history-oriented keynote, as well as a history-themed session, in recent years historical research had been more concerted avoided. Scholars who have insisted upon the reinsertion of planning histories into the AESOP conferences, have emphasized the need for a critical historical scholarship as an integral part of planning research. This eventually led to the retrospectively added history track with historical perspectives on the conference’s main theme. Hopefully, this track and other similar sessions would become a regular feature in future AESOP conferences, an invaluable contribution to the complex and multifaceted planning discourse.

Not for history’s sake

The need for historical research and education inside planning and urbanism studies does not only concern historians. A roundtable themed ‘Historiography of Transitions’ headed by Carola Hein (Delft University of Technology), Max Welch Guerra (Bauhaus University), Karl Fischer and Stephen Ramos (University of Georgia) discussed the need to understand past events as an integral part of the planning process. As Welch Guerra stated there, historical research is meant ‘not only to achieve disciplinary self-conception but also as a potential groundwork for future planning’. Moreover, Welch Guerra mentioned that there are entire planning histories that are still untouched, as they did not correspond with the dominant economic values. In this way, he emphasized the gaps in the existing scholarship while highlighting the common misuse of history. Stephen Ramos, in his presentation regarding the relations between American and European ports, explained how historic exchanges dictate current flows of goods, technologies, and ideas today; thereby underscoring how without studying past planning cases, it is almost impossible to understand current ones and, needless to say, future ones.

While addressing the importance of history it may be helpful to recall Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) definition of historiographies. In his text *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874) Nietzsche defined three main historical methods: the monumental, the antiquarian and the critical. Monumental historians are interested in the great figures, occasions, and discoveries of the past and use them as a source of inspiration. Antiquarian history is used by those that admire the past as is and want to preserve and re-live it constantly. On the other hand, critical history according to Nietzsche, is an approach that focuses on analysing the past and human nature, all in order to release ourselves from the mistakes of previous generations, which are an integral part of our current identity. Therefore, only through a critical historical perspective, we are able to be free from the past.² Nietzsche’s approach was in a way supported by Karl Popper’s book, *The Poverty*

²Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*.

of *Historicism* (1957), which confronted the attempts to simplify history as a continuous series of large and significant events that are tied one to the other through causal relations. Popper claimed that history is not simply the chronicles of the violence of mankind, but the everyday life practices of the various women and men. He, thus, stressed that it is by critically investigating small-scale social changes that function as historical case studies that we can ‘learn from the past’.³

It was surprising to discover that the Venice Biennale of international art, which ran parallel to the conference, presented several works that addressed the issue of history’s relevance. The Danish pavilion included an intriguing video art named ‘In Vitro’, produced by Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind and curated by Nat Muller. In this exhibit Sansour illustrated a post-apocalyptic future haunted by collective memories and nostalgia, thus, turning the present into a limbo of inherited traumas. The Dutch pavilion, which included works by Remy Jungerman and Iris Kensmil, and which was curated by Benno Tempel, combined different historical inspirations. It sought to merge elements of the Dutch De Stijl and Russian *avant-garde* with traditional African and Surinamese influences, creating a fusion of historical references. These two examples demonstrate how a critical historical perspective is much needed, not in order to sanctify the past, but rather to better plan the future.

The city of Venice, which hosted the 2019 AESOP conference, stresses the importance of critical historiography. Venice’s innumerable historical landmarks and its picturesque canals, bridges, and alleys are worshiped in monumental and antiquarian perspectives. Yet, it is exactly those virtues that have turned the city into an open museum that functions as a touristic Disneyland, while limiting the development of the local community’s everyday life. It is precisely this approach that sees Venice as merely a ‘*bunch of monuments*,’ as claimed by Professor Costa in his keynote presentation, that planning history is supposed to challenge. While modernist planners were accused of trying to forget history, asking to create a clean new slate, Venice illustrates the exact opposite: a city with an everyday life that is subjected to admiring its history and therefore continuously revolves around it. The main mission of planning historians is to challenge these two opposing examples; asking to study and learn from history not for the sake of admiration, but instead for the sake of knowledge and development. By researching the past, we are able to learn from it, yet, we are able, and more importantly we must try, to free ourselves from its constraints.

Conclusion

The numerous presentations, variety of research and researchers at the conference represent the productive platform AESOP intends to develop. The diverse panels and perspectives that they included contributed to the overall planning discourse, significantly broadening the initial conference theme. The historical perspectives, which were added retrospectively, significantly contributed to the abundance of research presented, which is precisely the very mission of associations like AESOP and the annual conferences it hosts. The 2019 conference was a stimulating and intriguing event throughout. It was further enhanced by the city of Venice, the venues and noticeable organizational efforts. One only hopes that future conferences will aspire to this high standard whilst also ensuring the diversity of participants and encouraging wider and more critical approaches to urban and planning history questions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

³Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*.

Notes on contributor

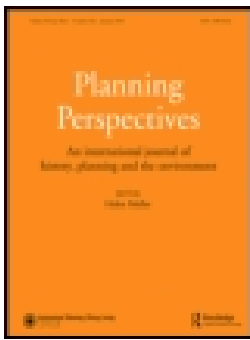
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