

The Pulsar Effect – the 38th ISoCaRP Congress

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Introduction

The International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISoCaRP) held its 38th Congress in Athens during September 2002. It examined one of the most formidable and demanding challenges facing contemporary urban planners and managers: how to cope with the 'pulsar effect' as it relates to the provision of urban services, facilities and infrastructure.

The four South African planners who participated in the Congress, either as a rapporteur or as speakers, found the experience particularly stimulating. Accordingly, we felt it necessary to inform fellow urban development professionals about the Congress, to encourage them to join ISoCaRP and to participate in future annual Congresses. This paper covers the main Congress events without attempting to delve into the substantive issues discussed. The papers and workshop reports can be read on the ISoCaRP website (www.isocarp.org), while forthcoming individual papers will examine particular aspects of the 'pulsar effect' in more detail. The paper provides some background on ISoCaRP and an outline of the Congress theme. The Congress events included the Young Planners Congress; plenary sessions; four parallel workshops; a poster competition, as well as tours and social events.

ISoCaRP

The International Society of City and Regional Planners is a global association of professional planners. It was founded in 1965 with the objective of bringing together recognised and highly qualified individual planners in an international network. It now has over 500 members from 64 countries on all continents. ISoCaRP is a non-overnmental organisation, officially recognised by the UN, UNCHS and the Council of Europe. It has official consultative status with UNESCO.

The objectives of ISoCaRP include the improvement of planning practice through the creation of a platform for the exchange between planners from different countries, promotion of the planning profession in all its aspects; promoting planning research; improvement of planning education and training; increase information, awareness and advice, particularly on major planning issues.

The key ISoCaRP event is the annual Congress dealing with a topical international planning theme. It takes place in a different country each year, preferably on a different continent. In addition, ISoCaRP is involved in the following activities:

- Seminars, conferences and study tours
- Publication of congress and

- seminar reports and case studies
- Workshops and competitions especially for young planners;
- publication of up to date comparative material on planning policies, methods, legislation, etc. on every country
- Representation at major international events concerned with planning
- Evaluation of development and trends in planning practice.

Congress 2002 theme: the 'pulsar effect'

Pulses refer to those peaks, troughs and recurrent, or repeat events, which have a distorting effect on the day-to-day operations of the modern city. According to General Rapporteur, Jim Colman, "these events may be shaped by a formal planning process or by haphazard and unpredictable forces, which put them beyond normal control mechanisms. They often demand new operational arrangements, new forms of governance, and new approaches to participation and partnership. The context for urban professionals is one within which traditional and well tested rationales may have to be discarded in favour of expedient procedures, inadequate research and analysis, and superficial assessments of supply and demand. Importantly, it is a context in which it is easy to make mistakes whose consequences for society may be far-reaching and costly." (ISoCaRP Congress Brochure 2002:8)

"Regardless of the cultural context in which they may be working," Colman points out, "urban professionals are becoming increasingly involved in the search for appropriate responses to pulse events." For these reasons, the 2002 Congress was specifically

designed to explore the "pulse" phenomenon in some detail and bring new knowledge and experience into the public domain. Key questions that were addressed included:

- How should planners cope with "pulse" events?
- Does our traditional focus on spatial planning adequately equip us to respond successfully to peak and recurrent demands in a context where the time dimension is uncertain, unexpected and unpredictable?
- How should we deal with the post-event situation – the 'hand-over' syndrome – when the city has to recover and revert to normality? (ISoCaRP Congress Brochure 2002:8)

Young Planners Congress

Since 1991, all ISoCaRP Congresses have been preceded by a Young Planners Congress. The 12th Young Planners programme took place from 19 to 21 September 2002, preceding the ISoCaRP Congress. This annual event aims to bring together 20 to 25 young professionals from all parts of the world to give them the opportunity to work together on a specific subject/study area, in a close-knit team, to establish a good working relation and to come up with results in a very short period of time. Since its start the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) have supported this programme. In order to enable young planners from all parts of the world to actually participate, UNESCO offers financial support in some of the travel and accommodation expenses. The Young Planners Programme has been held on the occasion of ISoCaRP conferences since 1991 in Mexico. Since then Young Planners' Workshops have been held in Spain (Cordoba 1992), United Kingdom (Glasgow 1993), Czech Republic (Prague 1994), Australia (Sydney, 1995), Israel

(Jerusalem 1996), Japan (Ogaki 1997), Portugal (Azores 1998), Germany (Gelsenkirchen 1999), Mexico (Cancun 2000), and in Enschede (The Netherlands 2001).

This year, 21 planners under the age of 35 took part in the programme, coming from India, Italy, the Netherlands, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, South Africa, the Philippines, Bolivia, Turkey, Uganda, the United States and of course from Greece. Co-ordinators assisted the group for the entire three days by providing information and guidance. This year's Young Planners' Co-ordinators were Assoc. Prof Dr Zeynep Enlil from Yildiz University of Istanbul, and Prof Dr Dimitris Karidis, National Technical University, Athens.

The Young Planners programme usually focuses on a specific site, which is or might be earmarked for actual future development. In order to preserve the 'ad hoc' nature of the project, details are not revealed until the first day of the programme. The theme of this year's programme was: "Re-assembling the City: Establishing Urban Continuity in Athens". Participants could identify with the issues at hand as most cities face serious problems of urban discontinuity. Issues related to the process of social division of space, land use segregation and the phenomena of urban decay, which are common to many central areas. Athens is no exception and the idea behind the project was that the young planners come up with fruitful suggestions for re-assembling the fragmented parts of the city.

The study focussed on a 100 ha, mixed use area, extending from the central Athens railway station towards the port of Pireaus, which had been in decline and faced many complexities. It included areas such as Metaxourgion, Kolonos and St Paul's, which are located very close to Athens' central business district, have

strong relations with the industrial zone, and are crossed by some very important traffic routes, as well as railway lines. Existing land uses cover a wide variety of activities, including housing, retail, recreation and manufacturing.

Apart from understanding the area, the group had the task of understanding each other (and themselves) through dialogue and confronting each other with ideas. After a visit to the study area four groups were formed and each of the groups elaborated on the ideas in plans and designs. The four groups respectively focused on economic sustainability, social sustainability, transportation and movement and urban quality. Each group presented their outcome and designs to the entire ISoCaRP Congress audience at the Opening Plenary Session. The outcomes were well accepted by the audience and the Young Planners group was commended for incorporating ideas on how to make the most of the planned developments for the 2004 Olympic Games the issue of mixed land use and the accommodation of political and economic refugees. All of the selected Young Planners also took part in the main ISoCaRP Congress.

Although the programme provided the participants with the opportunity to get to know Athens better and to test and enrich knowledge on urban dynamics, the main benefit of participation would undoubtedly be the experience of meeting future colleagues and of working closely together with people from a variety of backgrounds. And of course having a lot of fun in the process.

Congress structure

The main Congress opened with a plenary session, during which the Young Planners reported their findings. The General Rapporteur, Jim Colman (Australia) then provided

an introduction to the Congress theme, elaborating on the implications of the 'pulsar effect' for planning practitioners. Keynote addresses followed, examining the "pulsar effect" of the EXPO 1992 on Sevilla (Javier de Mesones of Spain); assessing Sydney's experiences during and after the 2000 Olympic Games (Sue Holliday, from Australia); the impact of natural disasters upon the poorest urban populations (Ali Kazancigil from UNESCO); and the need for 'offensive' and 'defensive' strategies in a self-sustained city (Athanasios Avaranthinos, Greece).

The Workshops

After this opening plenary session the conference split into four workshops, each with a different theme. Delegates were encouraged to select a particular workshop and to commit to that workshop rather than moving around. This promotes a proper involvement in the material of each workshop and leads to better discussion, although it does mean, if one chooses to follow this, that one is limited to a particular field. Around half the delegates moved around and around half stuck with a particular workshop.

Each workshop was run by a chairman and had a workshop rapporteur. The chairman's function was to see to the orderly running of the workshop, to see that presenters kept to their allocated time and that the questions and discussion that followed each paper were dealt with in an appropriate manner. The rapporteur's task was to be fully acquainted with the content of each paper and to both play a role in any discussion as well as to record the highlights of the discussion. The papers were all available prior to the congress on a web platform. Finally, the rapporteur had to report back to the last plenary session of the conference on the contents of the workshop. The plenary session of the conference also

had a General Rapporteur, Jim Coleman from Australia, who had the task of integrating the four streams.

Each workshop was organised around a theme that related to the overall conference theme. Workshop One dealt with "Planning for Pulses and Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD): Are they Compatible?" Saleh Al-Hathloul from Sudi Arabia chaired the workshop, and the rapporteur was Amit Prothi from the United States. Workshop Two dealt with: "Flexible and Adaptable Infrastructure in a Pulsar Context - Dream or Reality?" This workshop was chaired by Ismael Fernandez Mejia from Mexico and with joint rapporteurs AK Jain from India and Yildirim Oral from Turkey. Workshop Three was concerned with: "The Socio-Economic Impact of Big Bang Events" and was chaired by Julia Lourenco from Portugal. The rapporteur was Harry Kokkossis from Greece. The fourth Workshop was a Marketplace or Open Forum workshop and had both as chairman and rapporteur Peter Robinson (South Africa).

There were around fifteen papers in each workshop with the presenters being given ten minutes for their presentation (in practice around fifteen minutes) followed by ten minutes of discussion. The workshops started late on Monday afternoon, continued all Tuesday and concluded on Wednesday morning.

The attendance of the conference by delegates from all corners of the globe as well as the personalities of the various chairmen and rapporteurs ensured that this was not just a Pan-European conference, but was a world gathering of planners. The generally used language was English, and translation facilities were available for those who needed them. The workshop system was an effective and stimulating way of organizing the presentation of what

was a huge mass of world-class conference material. Related to the workshops were the posters, the submissions to a competition. There were around twenty A0 sized posters, mostly reflecting the contents of papers presented in the workshops. They were on display in the foyer of the conference venue where they provided a colourful and interesting diversion much enjoyed by the conference delegates.

At the conclusion of the Workshop presentations and discussions (3 days later), the Plenary Session re-convened to receive reports from the Rapporteurs of each workshop and a synopsis by the General Rapporteur. The full Congress report will be published towards the end of 2003.

Tours and social events

The other great feature in the program, that so well matched the theme and objectives, were the tours of the Greater Athens Area. The tours were deliberately held on different days so as to focus of specific aspects.

The "Pre-Congress Tour took place the day before the main Congress started. Delegates were taken through central Athens to all the key towns of the East Attica region. Some of these towns have key historical sites and economic regeneration projects that are being implemented. The tour also took delegates to the Olympic Rowing-Canoeing-Kayak Center, which is currently under construction as part of the preparations for 2004 Athens Olympic Games. On the construction office site a senior official of the Ministry of Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works who gave us a brief presentation on the construction works received us. The tour therefore gave one a good overview and an overall

feel of the East Attica region.

The second tour took place mid-way through the Congress. It was called the "Technical Tour" mainly because it focused on the planning for the 2004 Olympic games. With the active assistance and involvement of the members of the Organising Committee for Olympic games, delegates were taken to all sites of the 2004 Olympic games. This tour was very relevant to theme of the congress, partly because the Olympic games are one good example of a 'big bang event'.

On both tours delegates were given about 2-hour long breaks for lunch, which was useful from a social point of view. It provided a great opportunity for delegates to get to know each other better, mingle more, exchange business cards and network. The technical tour ended with a dinner, at which delegates were hosted by one of the popular arts and cultural centers of

Athens. A post-Congress tour provided delegates with the opportunity of a conducted visit to the Thessaly region in central Greece.

Conclusions

Apart from the professional value of the Congress, in terms of the substantive presentations and debates, the ISoCaRP Congress provided us with an exceptional opportunity to establish new, and renew previous, contacts with planners from around the world. For these reasons we encourage fellow South African planners to step boldly into the third millennium and become more directly involved with planning in a global context. Participation in ISoCaRP's activities and becoming a member of the organisation, open the way to establishing an international network of professional planning contacts and helps to keep in touch with global trends. On the basis of our experience in Athens, we urge local planners to extend their horizons and become involved internationally.

Forthcoming Congresses:

- October 2003 in Cairo
- September 2004 in Geneva.

Applications for membership can be made by contacting members of the ISoCaRP National Delegation in South Africa, or the ISoCaRP secretariat:

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