Introduction

The Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) was established in 1987 in Belgium and is the largest European association bringing together academics working in the field of spatial planning and urbanism. It is the only representation of planning schools in Europe. The association organises several activities, such as summer schools, PhD workshops, the online In Planning platform, thematic groups, lecture series and the cooperation with the AESOP Young Academics Network. Its core activity and biggest event is the annual conference. Traditionally, the AESOP conference is held in July and is hosted by one of the member universities. This year we all gathered in the capital city of the Czech Republic, Prague. The conference lasted for four full days, from Monday 13 to Thursday 16 July 2015.

The conference theme

The main theme of the 2015 conference was ‘Definitive Space – Fuzzy Responsibility’. This theme is in line with the previous conference themes of Dublin 2013 ‘Planning for Resilient Cities and Regions’ and of Utrecht 2014 ‘From Control to Co-Evolution’. The conference theme is chosen to address the current ongoing evolution and change of the former public control on spatial affairs towards more bottom-up initiatives today. Countless good practice examples affirmed the endless possibilities these new driving forces can achieve. However, the sense of responsibility hardly overstepped the domain of city halls and ministries. The diverse initiatives on the one hand and the still centralised responsibility on the other led to the current gap between sprawled power and the blurred sense of responsibility.
Spatial planning as an instrument for urban and regional management is supposed to overcome these obstacles. However, the main problem is that the spatial planning process itself was affected. The former hierarchic control by state and local governments is now replaced by a shared and dissolved control. The public–private partnership projects led to a situation where it is not clear who has to take responsibility in spatial affairs. Cities and regions are still seen as the actors who are responsible, but the predominance of outsourcing-related activities is preventing this. Therefore, the question these days is how spatial planning can deal with these new relations between actors, spatial developments and responsibility; hence, the theme of the AESOP conference 2015: ‘Definite Space – Fuzzy Responsibility’.

The opening event

On Monday 13 July, the congress started with a small pre-congress before the official opening event. This pre-congress comprised different thematic groups, special sessions and roundtables. The thematic groups are long-established working groups on specific theoretical research themes. They are established to create a more effective platform for debate and discussion among AESOP members and many thematic groups organise one of their meetings during the main conference. After a short break, ten round tables were organised around specific theoretical and practical research topics. Everyone was invited to take part with a short presentation or by discussion. As expected, many of these round tables resulted in very interesting and dynamic discussions.

After this ‘warm-up’ part of the conference, the opening ceremony (Figure 1) was convened in the beautiful Bethlehem Chapel in the city centre, presided by Prof. Karel Maier (Czech Technical University Prague) and AESOP President Prof. Francesco Lo Piccolo (University of Palermo).

The opening ceremony lasted for four hours. These four hours were filled up with four keynote lectures chosen to fit in with the conference theme. The first keynote speaker was Prof. Erik Swyngedouw (Manchester University). The title of his presentation was ‘Insurgent planners and the spectral return of the political in the post-democratic city’. He focused on the current ‘Jan Hus-thinkers’ who are questioning the present political democratic structures, but are not welcomed by current political leaders. These thinkers are stating that although we suppose we are living in a democratic world, we are not actively participating in the democratic processes, but are undergoing global processes. We cannot choose which political forces we want to follow (referring to the Greek crisis). However, different grass-roots movements around the

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1 Jan Hus (1369–1415) was a Czech priest, philosopher and Master and Rector at the Charles University in Prague. He was the first Church reformer and is seen as the key predecessor to the Protestant movement. Because of his ideas, he was burned at the stake.
world are protesting and demanding the return of the democratic city. According to Swyngedouw, this is the ‘post-democratic paradox’. He concluded that geographers and planners are in the ideal position to find possibilities to connect existing and new political spaces. The second keynote speaker was Iván Tosics (Metropolitan Research Institute, Budapest). Based on his own experiences, he focused on the 25 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the development path of East Europe since then. Instead of convergent economies under Soviet rule, now every country could choose its own trajectory after socialism. In most cases, free market relations replaced overarching state control. The main restructuring processes were the privatisation of industry and the housing stock and the decentralisation of the administrative structure. The result today is that the former social housing market in many East European countries has been transformed to a housing market with almost 100 per cent private ownership. However, the negative effect of this rapid mass privatisation is a growing social–economic inequality and spatial differentiation between districts, followed by social polarisation. Tosics concluded that market-led urban development has partly failed and neglected the local actors. Therefore, it needs to be better regulated by the state. The third keynote speaker was Peter Mehlbye (ESPON) giving a lecture about the most recent spatial developments in Europe. Especially interesting were the spatial effects of (un)employment in Europe following the crisis in 2008 and the recent noticeable improvement. The ESPON maps are interesting for regional spatial planners because these maps show perfectly the different spatial impacts of a diverse set of variables around Europe. The fourth and last keynote speaker was Matěj Stropnický (Czech politician and journalist). Different to the others, he did not use slides, but read out loud a text written by himself about the interaction between politics and spatial planning. He urged that spatial planners have to stress the complex gap between the political and the practical view on spatial planning.
All in all, the four keynote speakers fitted well with the conference theme and presented complementary aspects of the different fuzzy responsibilities occurring in spatial practice. The opening ceremony ended with a reception next to the Bethlehem chapel.

The eclectic variation of sessions

At AESOP, different subjects in spatial research come together, making the different papers eclectic. Even so, as every year, the organisation succeeded to group similar research papers together in sessions, which are part of one of the nineteen main tracks. Most of these tracks are connected to the different long-lasting AESOP thematic groups, giving it a more recurrent characteristic. Tracks are therefore monitored and chaired by a specialist in that specific research field, ensuring the scientific quality.

The track sessions were organised in one and a half days, making the scientific core of the congress packed. There were seven parallel track sessions in total, of which each one lasted one and a half hours. Every session covered a specific research subject. Every paper presentation lasted for ten minutes followed by five minutes of discussion. Considering the nineteen tracks, the seven parallel sessions and the average of five participants per sessions, the eclectic variation is logical.²

The parallel sessions ended on Wednesday at noon and were followed by the mobile workshops in the afternoon. These workshops were very diverse, but logically connected with either a spatial theoretical theme or with a spatial practice subject in Prague.

The general assembly: looking forward to Ghent and Rio

The key event on Thursday was the general assembly. The general assembly is traditionally the moment where the AESOP President, Professor Lo Piccolo, and Secretary General, Professor Izabela Mironowicz, give a statement. The President thanked the city of Prague and the Czech Technical University for their support. He praised the scientific level of the conference and thanked all authors for their efforts. Referring to the conference theme, the conference succeeded to explore ways of thinking about planning which considers the social context of ethical perception and public political behaviour.

The secretary general manages membership issues. Her main task is to organise the process of accepting new AESOP members and to inform the Executive Committee. She stated that especially since 2011, the AESOP membership has seen a dynamic increase.

² All the presented research papers can be found in the book of proceedings, http://www.aesop2015.eu/ (accessed 20 August 2015).
growth. At this moment, 115 institutions are full members, twenty-seven are associated members, seven are corresponding members and nine have an affiliated membership.

After these two statements, the award ceremony followed. The award for excellence in teaching 2015 went to Professor Francesca Cognetti (Politechnical University Milan) for the course ‘Mapping San Siro Lab’. The jury stated that this course is innovative and well designed. The award for the best published paper 2015 went to Mee Kam Ng for the paper ‘Intellectuals and the production of space in the urban renewal process in Hong Kong and Taipei’, published in Planning Theory & Practice, 2014, 15, 77–92. The jury praised the innovative aspect of the paper in addressing two different urban planning systems and the role for experts and activists. The award for the best conference paper 2015 went to Lukas Gilliard and Professor Alain Thierstein (Technical University Munich) for their paper ‘Competencies revisited: an educational approach to conceptualise planning as a boundary discipline’, presented in track 3.

After the award ceremony, the new elected board members were announced. Vice-president Professor Gert de Roo (Groningen University) is stepping down and will be replaced by Professor Anna Geppert (University Paris IV Sorbonne). The new elected Secretary General is Professor Paulo Pinho (University of Porto) (Figure 2).

Finally, the general assembly closed with the announcements that the 30th AESOP conference will be a world planning schools congress hosted by the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (3–8 July 2016) with the conference theme ‘Global crisis, planning and challenges to spatial justice in the north and in the south’. This conference will be preceded by the PhD workshop (June) 2016 hosted by the University of Leuven, Belgium. The AESOP Young Academics conference (March–April) 2016 will be hosted by the Ghent University, Belgium. I hope to see you there.
Urban Planning Forum (UPF) is a bimonthly academic journal published by the College of Architecture and Urban Planning of Tongji University, which has the highest impact factor among all Chinese architecture and urban planning journals in recent years. It is listed in Core Chinese Journals, Chinese Sci-tech Core Journals, Chinese Humanities and Social Science Core Journals and the Chinese Social Science Citation Index. By July 2012, 202 issues have been published and circulation of each issue has reached ten thousand copies.

UPF focuses on issues and practices of China’s urban-rural development and it represents the frontier of urban planning research in China. UPF sincerely calls for cutting-edge research papers, commentaries and book reviews that can contribute to the understandings of China’s urban development and planning and that can generate profound influence on the Chinese society.

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