

## Judith Ryser looking back on the congress [Extract from Congress Digest]

Is there any political summit, any conference which does not claim that it was a success? The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary ISOCARP congress is no exception. What counts though is who has experienced it as a success and for what reasons. Frankly, the devolved and interactive nature of the congress was a gamble, initiated by a handful of ISOCARP planners who were keen to make this anniversary special, aiming high without the safety net of an institution or guaranteed budget.



Pulling off the cooperation of 12 cities in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany to work with ISOCARP members from all continents on locally innovative planning issues with worldwide relevance is a major criterion of success. Another is the large number of planners who joined the congress from all parts of the world and who chose to participate actively in the city workshops, often in their preparation as well, and agreed to share their knowledge not ex cathedra but at interactive exchanges. Self-determined cooperation at

city level resulted in very diverse workshops. Some involved experienced planners from abroad in hands-on work on specific planning tasks in selected areas, engaged them in playing roles in city games, or interacting with local activists, at round tables with key stakeholders, and comparing interpretations. Most importantly they generated alternative planning approaches to goals, such as creating synergy between ports and airports with their adjacent cities, rejuvenating cities after traditional industry had left, introducing food provision into planning as well as renewable energy generation, cross border and regional planning and, most urgently, empowering people to participate actively in the shaping of their living and working environments.



Choosing a regenerated space where submarines were built in the past as the venue for the plenary sessions in the Port of Rotterdam was another contribution to success. Unconstrained by formal seating and an elevated stage participants could stand, walk or sit on flat packed cardboard stools made up and ready to take from event to event. This made for a fluid constituency moving between face to face participation, listening from afar or networking with each other in the adjacent open space.

The mayors' summit which fostered a direct encounter between planners and mayors from these cities and elsewhere was another mark of success. The cities made their pitches at market stalls where they displayed results of the workshops. The mayors were invited to express what they expected from planners at a walkabout from stall to stall, led by the host mayor of Rotterdam Ahmed Aboutaleb who summed up his position at the town hall reception after that.



Another criterion of success was the eagerness of the participants to pursue further cooperation with the cities, as well as between themselves or through finding partners for their own projects facilitated by the first ever matchmaking session at an ISOCARP congress. Yet the *primus inter pares* criterion of success is the active participation of a large number of young planning professionals from all parts of the world who contributed their innovative ideas to the city workshops, mobilised exchanges between them as well as with the city workshop teams, contributed as a creative engine to the workshops and are now preparing an Action Book as a follow up.

Public participation is a major aspiration of planners albeit not often accomplished as substantiated in the book on 50 years of knowledge creation and sharing of ISOCARP<sup>[1]</sup> and the 2015 edition of the International Manual of Planning Practice.<sup>[2]</sup> A key aim of the congress was to make participation happen at every event of the congress in pursuit of 'reinventing planning'. Therefore, participatory dynamic was also sought between the keynote speakers Rajni Abbi, Yusuf Patel and Maarten Hajer who were invited to set out their stances respectively as politician, developer and urban thinker and lead parallel debates on their positions with the participants. Concluding remarks from members of the audience challenged some high aspirations attributed to planning, such as being able to balance sustainable growth or create equity and prosperity. Instead they found that without political support planners were not in a position to mediate between a multiplicity of contradictory forces and even less to elaborate new tools toward deliberate democracy.



Yet, too often planning followed or even imposed categorical solutions considered technical or even scientific which appeared to be detrimental rather than helpful later on. Planning is about the future but planners would do well to resort to their collective memory including mistakes and learn from them while acknowledging their changing role in a new governance environment and accepting their share of social responsibilities. The congress deliberations showed that planning had become, or perhaps always was political. A key contribution of planners may be to help reconcile what biologists from opposing scientific standpoints like Richard Dawkins<sup>[3]</sup> and Edward Osborne Wilson<sup>[4]</sup> see as inherent ingredients of human society for its survival, namely the selfish gene as well as altruistic cooperation.

Jaime Lerner was adamant that without an understanding of people and politics planning was merely a technocratic tool.<sup>[5]</sup> A key message from the 2015 congress is that planners have a social responsibility to the planned in a coalition with all stakeholders.



---

Judith Ryser, General Rapporteur of 2015 ISOCARP congress  
London, November 2015

---

- [1] Judith Ryser. 2015. International Society of City and Regional Planners: Fifty Years of Knowledge Creation and Sharing. ISOCARP
- [2] Judith Ryser & Teresa Franchini (eds). 2015. International Manual of Planning Practice, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. ISOCARP
- [3] Richard Dawkins. 1976. The Selfish Gene. Oxford University Press
- [4] Edward Osborne Wilson. 1978, On Human Nature. Harvard University Press. – Edward Osborne Wilson. 2012. The Social Conquest of Earth. WW Norton & Company
- [5] Jaime Lerner. 2014. Urban Acupuncture, Celebrating Pinpricks of Change that Enrich City Life. Island Press