

## **Bridging the gap: Exchanging ideas and information on urban issues in the South**

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### **Presentation to the 13<sup>th</sup> Inter-Schools Conference on Development Research and Practice: Bridging the Gap, by Geoffrey Payne**

The UK has an outstanding level of experience and expertise in research, teaching, training and consultancy within the countries of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. This is not only the result of historical involvement, but of a sustained professional interest in addressing the issues of rapid change and, perhaps, compensating for the impact of colonialism.

At the last count (during the preparation of a directory of UK academic institutions offering courses relating specifically to urban issues in developing countries), 23 British institutions were offering postgraduate courses on aspects of urban development or the built environment.

The range of subjects covered is equally extensive. Architecture, building and technology, building surveying, computing, construction management, energy, environmental planning, housing, land economy, management and surveying, planning, quantity surveying, transport, urban design and urban management, are all covered, often by several institutions.

Many of the staff at these institutions are actively involved in carrying out personal and funded research, together with consultancy assignments in most parts of the world. They are backed up by an army of masters degree students and a large, and expanding cadre of PhD students, all working on various aspects of the subject area.

Traditionally, a large proportion of research carried out by academic staff received financial support from a range of external sources and this has helped the UK to maintain its research capability in the field. However, three main factors threaten to undermine this effort:

- First, the urban sector has not always been a strong concern of agencies funding research in the South, or providing funds for aid and investment programmes. Urban aid represents a relatively small proportion of budgets within most bi-lateral and even multi-lateral funding agencies and the European Union, for example, does not have a single internal adviser dealing with the urban sector, nor a policy for programmes with an urban dimension. Many national governments have also neglected investment in urban areas, even though they represent the greatest concentrations of economic growth, socio-cultural change **and** the bulk of government revenues! For example, Bombay, which accounts for about 1.5% of India's total population, generates over 30% of all central government revenues, so even rural development programmes are dependent upon the success of the cities.
- Second, even the limited resources available from these sources have been progressively reduced in the last decade at a time when increasing attention is being paid to the role of urban areas in national development. The increasing competition for funds puts the research community in a weak position in attempting to influence the priorities of either research funding agencies, or those funding major capital programmes in the South, many of which involve substantial sums.
- Thirdly, the situation has been further exacerbated by the increasing demands on staff teaching resources throughout higher education, as a result of which the time available for individual research within contract periods has also been eroded. Even the contact time staff are able to give to students is being eroded as staff/student ratios are adjusted upwards.

Only an extreme optimist can anticipate a major change in this trend, which is being felt throughout Europe, not just within the UK. Given this situation, it is increasingly important that the research community make the most efficient use of our collective energies.

Within individual institutions, this will mean searching for new sources of funding and building on existing strengths (or comparative advantage to use the current jargon).

It also means that to maintain the contribution of research to the wider world of practice, and to colleagues working under even greater constraints within the South, increasing efforts will be needed to improve the exchange of ideas and information within tight limitations of time and money.

Whilst research itself is primarily an individual or group activity, there are at least two things which can best be done collectively - lobbying for the sector as a whole and for what the research community considers to be the key issues; and disseminating the results of research as widely as possible to other researchers and those involved in practice.

How can these issues be addressed? Two recent initiatives seek to address these issues. These involve:

- The creation of a network of European researchers working in the cities of the South.

The concept of such a network is not new; in fact, it was the original idea behind the Inter-Schools conferences when they began at Oxford in 1984 as a means of bringing together students, academic staff and consultants active in built environment issues in the South. For many overseas students at British universities, they are still the best chance of meeting others with the same interests and of receiving comments on their work from a wide range of sources. The fact that these conferences have been held annually ever since is testimony to their continuing popularity.

Another initiative for a network was proposed at a conference in 1985, held at Bordeaux and the idea has surfaced at various times since. However, there was never sufficient commitment to the idea, the technical facilities were lacking, or the external pressures were lacking, to bring a permanent network to fruition. The three factors listed above have, however, prompted a recent attempt to revive the idea during a conference organised by Interurba in Paris last October. Participants at this conference proposed to hold another meeting in Brussels to assess the degree of interest and, if this was sufficient, to formally establish a network.

This meeting took place late last week, with representatives from Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Sweden. It was unanimously agreed to establish a network, under the provisional title of AERUS, the Association of European Researchers on Urban Issues in the South.

The objectives of the network are to lobby, especially within the European Union, for more resources to be allocated to addressing urban issues within the South and for the results of research to be circulated widely among members. It is clear, for example, that there are different research traditions within Europe and that this diversity can offer considerable opportunities for fruitful exchange.

At present, a press release is being prepared (read out if ready) outlining these objectives and this will be followed by another meeting to establish the structure and seek funding. It is proposed that membership be open to any established, or qualified researcher or research institution. A conference will be held, possibly at the DPU, in London, next March to identify ways in which the European Union in particular could contribute more effectively to the urban sector in terms of both action and research. This is an opportunity which British researchers cannot afford to miss and I would urge all those represented at this conference to contact the interim secretariat at La Cambre, in Brussels for further details:

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- The second initiative is in many ways complementary to AERUS and is presently being developed in parallel. This is the creation of a network on the Internet called FORUM and is being launched this month. It is the initiative of the Polytechnic and University of Turin and is being developed by one of my former students, Silva Ferretti.

The main objective of the Forum is to provide a space on the Internet for anyone, no matter what their background, level of expertise, or status, to exchange ideas or information. The Forum focuses on education, training and communication within the field of design and development and encourages participation from the South, not just Europe. It also welcomes contributions of work in progress, not just completed projects, so that anyone seeking examples, references, or contacts can register a request and hope to receive a wide range of replies quickly and at little cost.

The Internet is ideal for accessing databases and other publications and for establishing contacts with others working in related fields, assuming that they are relatively computer literate. Since this applies to most research students (possibly more than their supervisors!), they can make full use of the new technology.

As part of the Turin FORUM, a new discussion list called La Chambre will soon be opened on the Internet, also organised by the Polytechnic of Turin, which plans to act as a focus for discussion, debate and the exchange of ideas.

One of the great potential advantages of an Internet based network is that it is completely democratic and accessible to anyone with access to the hardware. Another is that students can increasingly improve their knowledge by learning from each other. This is an integral part of any learning process and one of the attractions of university life. Now, however, students can learn from others in different universities, not just their own and at virtually no cost. Given the large number of overseas students in the UK, this represents a vast opportunity. If abstracts of theses (masters or PhD) were added to the network, it would minimise wasteful repetition of effort and enable students from one institution to build on work done previously elsewhere. How one would identify and prevent plagiarism is another question altogether!

Information on the Forum can be obtained from:

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Anyone wishing to consult documents already on-line are invited to look up the following WWW address:

**<http://obelix.polito.it/departments/diite/servizi/forum/welcome.htm>**

To add a document, contact Silva Ferretti at the number above.

There are, of course, several existing networks within Europe concerned with aspects of the urban sector in the South. The difference with these new ones is that they complement those concerned with specific aspects, such as architecture (EASA), sociology (ESA), town planning (EASOP) and housing (ENHR), or those with an even broader developmental focus, such as EADI, DSA and Medcampus.

Whilst the level of priority accorded to the urban sector and the level of research funding addressing urban issues gives justified cause for concern, these new initiatives open the possibility of making the best use of the resources which are available. We can no longer justify the common situation whereby research students spend three or more years working intensively on a sector of critical importance to national social and economic development, only to find the results gathering dust on library shelves. We need to place our research, or at least abstracts and recommendations, into the public domain both for our collective benefit and for that of practitioners in the South who are often even more restricted in their access to research material.

In closing, I would like to offer one final proposal for increasing the exchange of ideas and information between researchers and the wider professional world. The editor of Open House International, Nick Wilkinson, has invited me to edit a special volume of the journal on current work being carried out on built environment studies in countries of the south within British academic institutions.

Open House International is one of the few international refereed journals which focuses on design as well as policy aspects of the built environment in the South. It therefore offers institutions and individual students the chance to have examples of their work published widely.

It is proposed to dedicate the September or December issue to work being completed during the present academic year. I would therefore like to invite all representatives of colleges at this conference to let me know as soon as possible if they would like to contribute examples of student work in the form of summaries of theses, special studies or design projects for this issue. Inevitably, editing will need to be rigorous and it may not be possible to publish all work submitted. However, if you are interested, please see me during the conference, so that I can ensure you receive details shortly.

At a time when resources are making it increasingly difficult to even cover the costs of meetings like this, I hope that these proposals will help to improve the exchange of ideas and information on a key aspect of international development.

Thank you.

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