

**The 6th International Conference of the Cities
After Transition (CAT) Network: 25 Years of Urban Change.
Prague, 23–26 September 2015**

On 23–26 September 2015, Prague hosted the 6th International Conference of the Cities After Transition (CAT) network. The venue of the network's sixth conference (i.e., CAT-ference) could hardly have been more symbolic. The Albertov neighbourhood in Prague played vital role in the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and triggered a series of increasingly large demonstrations against the communist establishment. The end of socialism in then Czechoslovakia and its collapse across the Soviet Bloc shortly thereafter not only marked beginning of a new era. It also became the grounds for a few years later the formation of the CAT network: a community of scholars concerned with urban issues in post-socialist countries. Participants of the conference, the majority of them CAT members, could thus look back at the past 25-year evolution of the field in the setting of the community's symbolic cradle.

The 6th CAT-ference looked at developments in post-socialist cities from a variety of disciplinary points of view. About 80 papers were presented, mostly by urban geographers and sociologists, architects and urban planners, with scholars from other disciplines also represented. A multitude of research papers brought new empirical evidence of ongoing changes in urban areas around Central Europe and the former Soviet Union. Several streams of sessions were devoted to the challenges induced by the end of the state provision of housing and urban infrastructure throughout the region, debates on the current responsibilities of different actors, and the search for new directions. A stream of sessions devoted to quantitatively-oriented empirical research reported on present trends in socio-spatial differentiation, residential segregation, neighbourhood change, and mobility in post-socialist cities, based on results of the 2011 Census, population registers, surveys and mobile phone data. Further empirically rich papers covered topics such as urban revitalisation and new development projects, urban identities, public spaces, and urban tourism. Discussion papers invited to concentrate on themes neglected in previous research on post-socialist cities, namely the role of 'the political' in urban development and urban theory in general, particularly the various responses to the lack of urban planning and government policies after the fall of the socialist regimes, and the overlooked category of small towns in urban studies. Much attention was also paid to a discussion of theoretical concepts and their relevance for post-socialist cities and to debating the emergence of a new field of post-socialist urbanism and its teaching.

Past and future developments in the field were addressed by the keynote speakers in a panel titled 'Comparative Urbanism and Post-socialism: Experienc-

es and Perspectives', sponsored by the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. In the first talk, Jennifer Robinson from University College London elaborated on the notion of comparative urbanism, stressing the similar—yet in Western theory similarly undervalued—position of post-socialist and post-apartheid urban studies. Author of *Ordinary Cities* (Routledge, 2006), Robinson thus argued for global urban studies' openness to theoretical concepts originating anywhere on the globe. The 'democratisation' of urban theory was further discussed in the following speech by Slavomíra Ferenčuhová from Masaryk University in Brno, who spoke on the intriguing question: How can urban studies in general profit from a better integration of research on post-socialist cities (and the other way round)? She introduced various examples of the benefits of mutual dialogue between distinctive theoretical perspectives informed by geographically-specific research and commented on the meaning and perspectives for integration of post-socialist urban research. The third keynote panelist, Michael Gentile from the University of Helsinki, discussed the reasons for the current marginalisation of post-socialist urban studies and remedies for empowering locally produced urban theory. Somewhat paradoxically for one of the founding members of the CAT network, he argued that the 'geopolitics of the production of urban knowledge' (as previously formulated by Robinson) in general and the label 'post-socialist' in particular might have contributed to disadvantaging the position of post-socialist urban research, even though this term is used by academics both beyond and within the borders of the post-socialist area. For those who could not attend the event, the inspiring keynote session is available for streaming (see www.ijurr.org).

Besides the indoor academic part of the programme, CAT-ference participants could also take part in various field trips. During the second day of the conference, four parallel excursions to selected neighbourhoods were organised, aiming to show participants Prague as it is probably not known even by locals. A tour through the hidden corners of Malá Strana and Hradčany with a guide from Pragulic, a social enterprise, gave guests a chance to discover various neighbourhood curiosities and also to experience the position of a homeless person in Prague. Another tour, organised by Petr Ryska from Unknown Prague (Praha Neznámá), introduced Holešovice as a quarter that boasts both a rich industrial past and considerable current appeal. Participants were also able to explore some iconic works of modern architecture in Prague's inner-city neighbourhoods with expert commentary from architect Veronika Kastlová. Last but not least, a field trip to Lužiny—one of the largest housing estates in Prague—organised by Blanka Nyklová and Irena Boumová from the Institute of Sociology of the Czech Academy of Sciences uncovered the history of the estate and the unforeseen gender consequences of its construction, as well as the role and symbolism of art in the housing estate's public space.

After the official conclusion of the conference on its third day, about half of the CATference participants joined in an overnight field trip to Northern Bohemia, a region with a troubled history that saw the expulsion of the German

population after the Second World War followed by the region's resettlement and experienced the development of extensive coal mining in the socialist era. Those who took part in the excursion visited the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary exactly forty years after its relocation to its new site in the town of Most, to which it was moved on rails along 800 metres, having had to give up its previous location to make way for coal mining. The second day of the field trip was devoted to uncovering differing views on the heritage of socialist coal mining. First, the mayor of Horní Jiřetín Vladimír Buřt, who has long taken a stand against further mining in the region, presented fascinating evidence of mining activity in the past and a view of the future outlook of the area if coal-mining activity continues or ceases. This presentation in the stylish surroundings of Jezeří Castle, with a view of the land damaged by excavating machinery, incited an intense debate that was only brought to an end by the onset of rain. In order to obtain a fuller picture of the issue, the field trip participants were subsequently invited to take part in a Coal safari organised by coal mining enterprises active in the region.

The organisers believe that with over one hundred participants from about twenty countries and the interdisciplinary makeup of attendees the 6th CAT-conference provided a valuable opportunity not only for debating current issues of relevance in post-socialist cities but also for social networking within and beyond the CAT platform. As Ferenčuhová remarked in her keynote contribution, both of these aspects are equally important in order for post-socialist urbanism and urbanists to become better integrated into global urban theory and community.

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