

Climate Change and Urban Design: *The Lessons of European Urbanism*



Uwe Brandes of the Urban Land Institute (center) discusses new research with Diana Urge-Vorsatz of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (center right) during a plenary session panel discussion. Also part of the discussion were Terje Nypan of the Norwegian Ministry of the Environment (far right), Ray Gindroz of the Congress for the New Urbanism (second from left), and Michael Mehaffy, CEU Academic Chair (far left).

From 13 to 16 July, over 200 delegates gathered at the Council for European Urbanism's Third International Congress in Oslo, Norway, to discuss the implications of climate change for urban design and related disciplines. The gathering represented leading government agencies, universities, NGOs and practitioners from every continent except Antarctica.

Agencies and NGOs represented included the European Environment Agency, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Norwegian Ministry of the Environment, Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy, UN-Habitat, Natural Resources Defense Council, Congress for the New Urbanism, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, American Planning Association, National Trust for Historic Preservation, and governments, universities and practitioners from 26 countries.

Diana Urge-Vorsatz, a coordinating lead author of the Fourth Assessment Report for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and a professor at the Central European University in Budapest, noted that the conference raised key issues for further work. She said, "while I now have to decline the vast majority of my invitations, it was extremely important that I went to this key meeting... This will significantly influence my work."

A key topic that emerged in the discussion was the critical but under-appreciated role of urban systems in affecting emissions. As Professor Urge-Vorsatz said, "we are making a mistake when in mitigation assessment models and policies we focus so much just on individual energy using devices (buildings, automobiles) rather than also the systems they operate in, such as our cities."

Researchers presented detailed work on mitigation and adaptation, and implications for science, policy, education and best practice. Government officials and practitioners presented case studies and challenges at the “coal face” of the issue. The conference concluded with vigorous plenary discussions and conclusions that will go into a conference declaration, to be published shortly.

Among other conclusions, speakers consistently reported findings that compact, walkable, mixed-use urban environments are also associated with remarkably lower emissions patterns. Uwe Brandes, Vice President for Initiatives at the Urban Land Institute, reported research that has recently been published in the report titled “Growing Cooler.” Armando Carbonell and Patrick Condon reported work by the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy and the University of British Columbia, assessing policy options and further actions needed. Ray Gindroz, chair of the Congress for the New Urbanism, described the CNU’s new initiative on climate change, working with other researchers and entities including the NRDC and the CEU. A strategic partnership was also announced with the CEU.

Another key lesson that emerged was the need to understand the qualitative characteristics of successful low-carbon urban environments. Joanna Alimanestianu, a co-founder of the Council for European Urbanism, pointed to the lessons of European urbanism as resources to develop low-carbon environments that “people will want to live in”. In remarks that were echoed by other speakers, she noted that traditional European cities are already significantly lower-carbon than other cities affording modern lifestyles, and yet they preserve a high standard of living and comparatively strong economic opportunity. This is an important resource to develop as we confront this issue, she said.

Many speakers discussed the need for further collaboration, and described the conference as an important first step in further work. Diana Urge-Vorsatz said, “I hope we will be able to write some of this up together - I think what is needed is that the two communities start to ‘speak’ better each other’s language (and that in general the urban design community is also integrally involved in IPCC and related work).”

The Council for European Urbanism will continue to post reports and material from the conference, and continue to facilitate other important initiatives growing out of the meeting in Oslo.