



EUROPEAN TRANSPORT CONFERENCE 40th Anniversary Celebration

Part 1: Summer Annual Meeting to European Transport Conference: Celebrating 40 years of excellence

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the European Transport Conference, we thought it would be a good opportunity to reflect on the history of SAM – ETC and we hope you find this reflection interesting and showing how the conference has evolved over these 40 years.

Michael Bach and Broos Baanders
AET Council members
London / The Hague, October 2012

Where have we come from?

The Early Days

The first PTRC Summer Annual Meeting (SAM) was held in 1973 when some 700 delegates, mainly from the UK, met at the University of Sussex near Brighton - a multi-stream conference embracing town planning, transportation and highways, with streams in each of these subject areas for developing countries.

The aim was to secure the best speakers, whilst taking account of the needs of the younger, less experienced professionals – providing an opportunity for young researchers to present their work.

The structure of the organisation from the start was one where the conference was guided by its customers – people who gave their time, expertise and knowledge of the needs of their profession to advise on the themes and content of the conference as a whole, the themes and the papers to make up the programme.

The 1978 SAM

By 1978 – the sixth Summer Annual Meeting – the meeting consisted of 13 seminars in 10 simultaneous streams giving a total of about 180 papers in 6 one-hour sessions per day in 33 seminar days over the four days at the University of Warwick.

The role and the audience was summed up in the 1978 programme as:

“providing a meeting ground between research workers and practitioners, between engineers, planners, economists, statisticians, bus managers, treasurers, police, retailers, architects, etc, between municipal, local and central government, consultant and academic staff, between UK and overseas experts.”

During the 1970s the conference averaged about 600 delegates and in 1977 24% of those attending were from outside the UK.

15th SAM – the 1987 Programme

By 1987 - the 15th conference - PTRC SAM was firmly established as the forum on planning, transport and highways in Europe. With 200 papers in 16 parallel seminars covering policy, research and practice, highlighting new techniques and fostering real debate, the conference presented recent research results, work in progress and comparisons of practice in different countries.

Participants valued the Transport and Planning Summer Annual Meeting for the following reasons:

- in-depth presentations and stimulating discussion
- content and relevance of the programme
- creating awareness of new developments
- re-kindle professional enthusiasm
- making new international contacts.

The growing international nature of the meeting is shown by:

- 20% of the PTRC Advisory Council members were from outside UK;
- 30% of Programme Committee members were from outside UK;
- 35% of papers were from non-UK speakers; and
- 45% of the attendance days were by non-UK delegates.

The 1980s – Changing composition of the programme

The original structure of the PTRC SAM was of three parallel themes – Planning, Transport and Highways, with each having seminar streams on Developing Countries. The balance between the themes and the breadth of the content changed over time and the shape of the conference changed between 1985 and 1990 by:

- “withdrawing” from planning issues, other than those retained by the Environmental Issues,
- abandoning the seminars on Developing Countries,
- introducing European themes, and
- introducing streams on Societies in Transition and “Outreach” sessions from 1993.

By the early 1990s the PTRC SAM had become, almost exclusively, a transport conference with an increasingly European dimension, although it continued to be based in the UK.

The 1990s – The beginning of the European era

Although by 1990 the PTRC Summer Annual Meeting had become an almost exclusively transport conference, the growing importance of a range of new policy issues were being recognised.

These issues helped reshape the conference, with a shift from a primarily “technical” conference sharing the results the results of research with practitioners, sharing good practice among practitioners and, the ultimate, customers – practitioners and policy makers having a smorgasbord – to a conference that increasingly shifted toward finding solutions for policy makers.

The new themes were:

- the need for **greater policy cooperation in Europe** - new broad-based streams on current developments in European policy and practice
- the **environment and sustainable development** - the emergence from Environmental Issues of a strong, dynamic, policy-oriented stream focusing on more sustainable patterns of planning and transport, while embracing air pollution and climate change, sustainable modes (walking and cycling), civilising cities, and social exclusion
- the need for **a more integrated approach to land-use planning and transport**, the transport needs of socially-excluded groups

- the development of occasional streams for **freight, rail, airports**
- the stronger emphasis on **new ways of financing transport**; and
- the issues of **countries in transition**.

The change was also reflected in the organisation. In 1994 the conference became known as the European Transport Forum (ETF), led by an ETF Board of Directors, guiding the company PTRC in its delivery of the conference. This new organisation, however, lacked transparency, which was one of the factors that led to disagreement between its members.

The 25th Summer Annual Meeting – 1997

Our 25th Anniversary in 1997 provided an opportunity to reflect on our journey from 1973. In many ways it was just looking back – it was too close to the rapid change that was taking place or about to come – but there were some signs of concern about the direction of change.

The biggest change, however, was the move to becoming European, and the establishment of the Association of European Transport, which took over responsibility for overseeing the conference and, gradually, the financial risk. In 1997- 98 AET was founded to take over the activities from the ETF Board and PTRC continued its role as conference provider.

The strong desire to set up a separate, truly European organisation to run the SAM grew during the 1990s, both to meet the challenges of competing bodies and conferences, to grasp the opportunities and tap the unique goodwill that was embodied in SAM and exploit the unique positioning of the conference as an event that brings together research, practice and policy, with a growing recognition of the relationship between these elements.

By the end of the 1990s the PTRC Summer Annual meeting was:

- managed by the new Association for European Transport (AET) and starting to share the risks with PTRC;
- increasingly international (64% of Programme Committee members, 46% of the delegates and 47% of the speakers were non-UK); but
- it was still based in the UK.

However, despite these major changes in tone and content, the SAM still followed the same formula – a four-day, multi-stream residential conference based in a variety of English universities, with the proportion of non-UK delegates still around 40-45%.

The challenge at the end of the 1990s – the fin de siècle – was how to:

- **make the “new” European Transport Conference truly European**, not just in content but in location
- **rise to the new policy challenges** – climate change, sustainable development, social inclusion, changing behaviour, tackling urban road congestion, civilising our cities and encouraging more sustainable forms of transport
- **develop new ways of financing and managing transport**
- **broaden our reach to embrace the new EU member states**
- **broaden our membership and the audience of the conference**, to attract younger delegates, women and delegates from Central and Eastern Europe, whether as stewards, speakers or just attending.

Progress since 2000

Whilst 1998 was the turning point for the identity and ownership of the European Transport Conference, with the founding of AET and a resolution to take over the commissioning and, gradually, the financial responsibility for the conference, it was to take a few years to bring about the major changes to the conference we see today.

Since 2000 we have seen major changes:

- **AET has taken full control of and financial responsibility for ETC** from PTRC and the delivery of the conference done for us under contract;
- **the conference moving out of England in 2003 to make it truly European**, enabled by host sponsors from France, Netherlands and Scotland;
- **change from a residential based conference to a conference centres-based event** with delegates finding their own hotels (except in the Netherlands);
- **a diversification in the spread of papers and delegates from all over Europe**; and
- **recognition of the need to position the conference to compete.**

Nevertheless, many things remain the same:

- ETC is a member-driven conference – members can be:
 - stewards,
 - offer papers – be speakers,
 - Programme Committee members – help select the papers, draw up the programme and chair the sessions,
 - AET Council members – to provide strategic guidance to AET and to the development of the conference, and even
 - an AET Board member with responsibility for ensuring that ETC remains viable, competitive and the conference of choice, both for AET members and others interested in transport.

Indeed, this is what makes ETC different from other conferences – the degree to which the conference is shaped, designed and produced by and for its audience.

Becoming truly European

Moving away from England and from a university-based residential conference, was a big change and a big risk. Fortunately we were able to secure local sponsorship, in Strasbourg from 2003-2006 with support from national, regional, departmental and city governments, in the Netherlands from the Dutch Ministry of Transport from 2007-2009 and, most recently, in Glasgow thanks to the Transport Scotland. This change has deepened our relationships with our sponsors to whom we are grateful, for without their help we could not have fulfilled our aim to broaden the base of the conference. But what we have discovered is that we need to move at least every three years – which is a further challenge. The next three years seem clear – the conference will be in Frankfurt.

Our determination to diversify the Conference had already started before it moved to Strasbourg – at the 2002 conference in Cambridge for the first time more than half the delegates (56%) came from outside the UK. This rose to over 68% in 2003 and 2004, and stayed above 60% in the Netherlands, but has fallen back to 50% over the last two years in Glasgow. Moving the conference around has enabled us to involve new people and showcase the experience of our host country and city.

Since 2000 the competition has become more fierce and budgets tighter. We have sought to maintain our attendance numbers to between 400 and 500 delegates and around 1,000 delegate days over the three-day conference.

Where are we now?

We have achieved a major change in the last ten years, maintained our position as one of the key transport conferences in Europe and continued to adapt the original concept started 40 years ago – a multi-stream conference covering a range of transport-related issues, bringing together research, policy and practice, and driven by the voluntary effort of leading practitioners and researchers in the field.

We have managed this because we:

- have an open, participative approach – almost a cooperative;
- involve our members and adapt to the needs and interests of our participants;
- cover a broader, more inclusive range of transport-related subjects; and
- are positioned at the interface of research, policy and practice, with a strong emphasis on the policy relevance and application of the results for improved policy and practice.

Despite our success in adapting to change, ETC faces major challenges, particularly in maintaining the current model, retaining the energy, commitment and the time given by our members and broadening the base of our support through attracting more younger members, achieving a better gender balance and ensuring that the participants represent professionals across Europe.

Where are we going? Our Vision for 2020

AET's Vision Statement for 2020 recognises that the success of ETC has been based on the energy, commitment, donation of resources and hands-on management approach of AET members and that it is this that makes it unique and is what has kept the show on the road. This is a huge strength for a not-for-profit organisation and, whatever we decide to do in the future, it needs to be maintained and built upon.

The current model relies on willing volunteers – the Board, the Council Members, the Ambassadors, the Programme Committee Members, speakers and stewards. Significant growth or change could challenge the survival of this model and, since ETC is the main project of AET, of the organisation as we currently know it.

ETC will continue to be the main vehicle for delivering AET's vision “to be a key influencer, contributor to and shaper of the debate connecting transport policy, practice and research at the European level”.

To achieve this AET will through the ETC and other seminars:

- bring together researchers, policy makers and practitioners around ideas and visions of transport at European, national, regional and local level; a
- manage and influence the debates on developments in and related to transport policy, practice and research; and
- present the facts on transport based on leading-edge research of its members; and
- promote and disseminate the highest standards in published technical and analytical work.

AET will achieve this by involving and engaging its members by:

- being relevant to its membership, stakeholders and like-minded organisations;
- recruit a more diverse, inclusive and representative Europe-wide membership; and
- harness the motivation, energy and commitment of its members.

AET will continue to develop and market ETC to be the leading “must attend” conference for all those interested in transport policy, practice and research.

What do we see as our legacy?

So what is our legacy? Unlike commercial conferences, our aim is to have a legacy. Looking back our members tell us that SAM/ETC has provided:

- young researchers with opportunities to attend an international conference, whether as a steward or presenting a paper or testing out ideas and getting friendly feedback on PhD research;
- a meeting place for researchers, policy makers and practitioners;
- opportunities to shape the policy research agenda through the Programme Committees



- a truly international meeting place for researchers, policy makers and practitioners from across Europe with an informal, independent atmosphere where people can meet on equal terms;
- an annual event which people look forward to for the wide range of papers, intellectual stimulation and informed debate; and
- a legacy of all the papers since 1996 on open access as a resource and as evidence of what was presented at our conference.

When we first started this exercise we ourselves had no full idea of the real history of the conference. Now having reflected we think that SAM – ETC, has been doing a good job. It has changed with the times to reflect the needs of not only the profession but global thinking about transport, what it does, and what it should be doing in the future. Our intention is to keep looking to the future and to continue to make ETC the premier transport conference in Europe.