The Eighth International Space Syntax Symposium (SSS_8) was held at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (PUC), in Santiago from the 3rd to the 6th of January 2012. The event followed the biannual Space Syntax symposia tradition: London in 1997, Brasilia in 1999, Atlanta in 2001, London in 2003, Istanbul in 2005, Delft in 2007 and Stockholm in 2009. Each time the conference has brought together academics, researchers and practitioners from around the world to present their most recent work and participate in discussions on theoretical, methodological and practical issues.

The idea was to revisit Latin America 12 years after the SSS_2 in Brasilia, but now in the southern cone. Chile has been living an important urban development process since then and there was great anticipation from academics and government officials to learn about the space syntax perspective and methods. The offer of evidence-based research that could be applied to urgent problems of the region – such as residential safety, integration of vulnerable groups, and development of central core areas – raised much interest.

Delegates from 24 countries and 66 universities attended the SSS_8. The programme included a previous workshop day and a three-day conference with plenary sessions, parallel sessions and a session for posters. The plenary sessions considered keynote speakers as well as five thematic sessions with invited speakers. The parallel sessions were dedicated to present those submitted papers that had been approved by a refereeing committee. In total we had 16 invited speakers in eight plenary sessions, and approximately 70 formal papers; 13 short papers were exhibited as posters.

In this note we describe the SSS_8 highlights from the organisers’ point of view.

The Workshops
The tradition in Space Syntax Symposia has been to start the conference with one or more workshops. Following this tradition, SSS_8 began with a set of three workshops at Universidad Técnica Federico Santa María, in Valparaíso: Teaching Space Syntax, coordinated by Kinda Al_Sayed; Spatial Cognition coordinated by Christoph Hölscher; and Software Development coordinated by Akkelies van Nes and Tasos Varoudis. This activity not only allowed participants to share experiences and updates in developing areas of the field, but also to visit Valparaíso, the Chilean heritage port and second largest conurbation.
The Plenary Sessions

The first keynote speech was given by Alan Penn at the inaugural session of the conference, after welcoming words from PUC university authorities. His presentation, entitled *Theories, Practices and Models: The good, the bad and the ugly*, inquired into what is or could be a model in the architectural field and, specifically, what can be considered the space syntax approach; he followed this by discussing the possible effects that a research programme may have on professional practice.

The first full symposium day started with a plenary session by Bill Hillier. His lecture, *Advancing Depthmap to Advance our Understanding of Cities: Comparing streets and cities, and streets to cities*, presented his latest research on the normalisation of two space syntax key measures: segment angular integration and segment angular choice. He emphasised the importance of the measures, and after having validated the normalised version, showed the new insights that these could provide by comparing a sample of cities. This stimulating presentation confirmed, once more, the deep understanding of cities that can be achieved through the application of syntactic measures. It is worth mentioning that this research was one of the last contributions of Alasdair Turner, who co-authored the paper along with Tao Yang.

The third keynote speech was given by John Peponis. His talk, *What do we Mean by Syntax in the Spatial Analysis of Architecture?*, dealt with the empirical effects of the approach on professional practice and, eventually, on the built environment. He also elaborated on how space syntax can inform design during its earlier stages, arguing that it is not meant to replace the design process, but to support the design intuition by describing how spatial interfaces, understood as different spatial conditions and their interrelationships, are constructed and presented.

The Thematic Sessions

A strategy for opening the field to new researchers and practitioners was to incorporate Thematic Sessions, where traditional space syntax researchers could interact with Chilean academics and/or practitioners. Three plenary sessions were originally planned - Urban Space, Narrative and Architectural Practice - but we soon incorporated a fourth, Latin American Cities, to share more of our regional context.

The Architectural Practice session was chaired by John Peponis and included the presentation from two innovative architectural professional practices: Andreas Kourkoulas and Maria Kokkinou from Greece, and Sebastián Irarrázaval from Chile. Both not only showed their professional work, but also shared with us the process of design, decision taking and deeper fundaments leading to their design work.

The Spatial Cognition session started with a presentation by Ruth Conroy-Dalton (connected through the web) and Christoph Hölscher entitled *Navigating The Seattle Public Library: Usability, cognition and building analysis*. It showed the result of a long collaboration between space syntax and the German cognitive group on users’ adaptive strategies to enhance accessibility in buildings. Their presentation was complemented by the work of Chilean Designer José Allard, who showed us his work on the signalling system for Transantiago, the recently implemented new public transport system for Santiago de Chile.

The Latin American Cities plenary was intended to show the main urban dilemmas facing the region nowadays. Three shorter presentations were scheduled, each one focusing on a specific city: Frederico de Holanda on Brasilia and its heritage preservation threats; Alfredo Garay on Buenos Aires, with one of its relevant regeneration plans; and Luis Eduardo Bresciani on Santiago, focusing
on the development versus inequality dilemma. Eduardo Rojas, a specialist on Latin American urban development and regeneration, commented on the three presentations.

The session dedicated to Urban Space included two speakers: Anne Moudon presented a paper linking the built environment with public health and living conditions; she underlined the advances in data gathering for describing both the behaviour of individuals and the built environment - which viewed through the lens of new paradigms such as the social ecological perspective, may be of invaluable help for improving the quality of urban life. The second presentation, given by Roberto Moris, focused on the friction produced between the street markets and the public transport system, and aimed to find some principles of coexistence.

The last Thematic Session was dedicated to Narrative, understood in two different ways: as a sequence of architectural content; and as a specific research practice in the artistic and architectural fields. The first approach was advocated by Sophia Psarra through her latest research that aimed to relate the built environment of Venice to two very distant architectural projects in the city: Cornaro in the 16th century and Corbusier in the 20th; she concluded that in both projects the invisible substance of the city was translated into new structures, therefore conciliating the conflict that seems to arise between the city as a self-organising process and the architecture as an outcome of conscious thought. Regarding the second perspective, Fernando Pérez described the process through which two renowned sculptors, Rodin and Oteiza, materialised their work, emphasising the rigour and systematic strategies in both.

Parallel Sessions
The call for papers had a thematic structure similar to previous symposia, including the following seven areas:

- Architectural Theory and Spatial Analysis
- Urban Space and Social, Economic and Cultural Phenomena
- Building Morphology and Usage
- Historical Evolution of the Built Form
- Spatial Cognition
- Modelling and Methodological Development
- Software Development

Initially we received 250 abstracts that were eventually narrowed down to approximately 150 papers. Surprisingly, among the submitted papers none came under the Software Development theme. This could be considered as an indication of more interest among the space syntax researchers in testing existing methods. On the other hand, the category Urban Space and Social, Economic and Cultural Phenomena received almost half of the submissions. Given the broadness of this area we eventually subdivided it into three sub-areas: Urban Public Space, Urban Structure and Spatial Distribution, and Urban Space and Social Phenomena. The categories Architectural Theory and Spatial Analysis, and Modelling and Methodological Development were difficult to distinguish from each other in terms of their appeal to researchers based on the number of submissions. Although they are distinctive and comprehensive enough to attract many contributions, they largely did not receive much attention.

Each paper was blindly reviewed by two independent reviewers. There were only a few important discrepancies
among the referees, but on these occasions we tended to align with the most favourable review (an inevitable organisers’ bias). Although it is not possible to comment on every contribution to the event in this short note, there are a few common issues that we would like to highlight.

The first is that the papers sent to Space Syntax Symposia include similar socio-spatial issues being addressed by researchers in very different places and cultures; such as the use of traditional commercial space, regeneration of historical centres, informal settlements, amongst others. This diverse presentation of built environment based research has allowed the confluence of a rich variety of distinct cultural studies.

In second term, an important emerging trend among the papers measuring the differential impacts of infrastructure investment on the city structure. There were papers that studied the evolutionary dynamics of urban systems aiming at creating generative models of growth, or models that are able to incorporate large-scale planning interventions, or others describing how infrastructural layers may be historically articulated in path-dependent ways.

Lastly it is worth signalling a certain development in space syntax through the incorporation of distinct measuring tools. In the 1980s, syntactic analysis was enriched with traditional urban planning measurements (e.g. land density, land use); in the 1990s it was important to incorporate GIS into syntax; and over the last few years there has seemingly been a trend to incorporate new technologies (iPads, videos, smart phones), especially in the collection of data. It is still unclear whether the inclusion of Parametrics will be the next innovation.

Final Remarks

Overall, the symposium satisfied three main objectives: first, to share ideas, experiences and new challenges between space syntax researchers from around the world; second, to provide a platform for graduate students to present their research; and third, to strengthen the ties between a community dedicated to improving understanding in the areas of urban planning, building design and spatial economics.

The conference also allowed for an assessment of the current state of the community of scholars using space syntax techniques, theories and software. This community has reached a maturity, shown not only by the interest generated – approximately 150 participants in each symposium – but also by the variety of perspectives and methods incorporated by space syntax scholars from a wide range of fields: anthropology, sociology, economics, and cognitive psychology, amongst others. Although it might be argued that this has always been the case – after all, The Social Logic of Space departs from a critique of the state of sociological thought about the relation between societies and space at the time – the challenges of the current situation seem to have shifted. Rather than channelling effort into importing ideas from disciplines other than architecture and urbanism to create a comprehensive spatial theory, space syntax has become more preoccupied with combining methods and lines of thought to fully understand spatial, social and economic phenomena. It is possible to state that after having validated the relevance of the spatial variables, a claim that pervaded the first syntax conferences, it has become more important to understand how and which other variables need to be incorporated to further advance the field.

We argue that this is good news. An ever-present danger of a comprehensive theory such as space syntax...
is of simplifying our understanding of the world through a set lens, undervaluing the roles of other perspectives. Contemporary academic growth inevitably requires crossing disciplinary bridges, accepting new methods and explanatory discourses from external fields and, at the same time, refining some of the arguments and methods that have allowed the community to thrive in the academic sphere during the last 40 years. In fact, it is possible to state that the future of the space syntax community rests in its capacity to adopt a cooperative stance with other domains, using its methods as a bridge across cultures and disciplines.

Finally we wish to announce the Ninth Space Syntax Symposium that shall take place in Seoul in October 2013, where once again this community of researchers will meet and share the work done in the last two years.