

## Report on the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers

*Seattle, Washington, April 12–16, 2011*

The Association of American Geographers held its 2011 Annual Meeting in Seattle. This meant a great geographical shift after the 2010 Washington D.C. meeting in the life of probably the most popular and colourful conference of global geography. Nevertheless, the shift was worthwhile. Seattle enjoys the benefits of being enveloped in magnificent Pacific Northwest wilderness while being accessible via Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, important transcontinental highways and an international seaport. Seattle is a vibrant, cosmopolitan city with multicultural society, symbolised by economic actors like Boeing and Microsoft. Therefore, one could hardly imagine better place for geographers to meet and exchange ideas. The conference took place in downtown Seattle at two nearby locations: the Washington State Convention Center (WSCC) and the Sheraton Hotel. Onsite check in, the exhibition hall as well as breakout sessions and plenary sessions took place in the Convention center, while breakout sessions and many reception events were organised in the Seattle Sheraton.

As usual the AAG Annual Meeting provided a fantastic opportunity for making new connections and meeting geographers from all over the world with a plethora of backgrounds. The event was attended by more than 7,000 participants which is beyond impressive. Attendees could choose from great variety of activities and subjects at the AAG



*Photo 1.* The Washington State Convention Center in downtown Seattle

annual meeting. This conference offered something for everyone. In terms of courses alone, it offered a small phone book's worth of sessions, workshops, discussion forums and studies running the gamut on everything from environmental issues to geopolitical concerns.

The work of the conference was started by thematic sessions held already at lunch-time on Tuesday, 12<sup>th</sup> of April. The opening session took place in the Washington State Convention Center at 6:30 p.m. the same day. After the welcoming remarks of Douglas RICHARDSON AAG Executive Director, and Kenneth E. FOOTE AAG President, participants could follow contributions of the Presidential Plenary Session under the title 'Geography in the Changing Worlds of Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges'. Speakers of the plenary included Duane NELLIS, President of the University of Idaho, Maresi NERAD, Director of the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education at the University of Washington, and Orlando TAYLOR from The Chicago School of Professional Psychology's Washington DC campus. As experts of higher education but being non-geographers the plenary speakers expressed their views on the future of geography in the context of the changing role of the university in society. This is a highly relevant topic not only for American geographers but also for the whole world. The Presidential Plenary Session was followed by the opening reception, which provided the opportunity to see old friends and meet colleagues at the outset of the AAG Annual Meeting. The keynote plenary of the conference was delivered by Barry LOPEZ winner of the US National Book Award with the title "Geography and the Humanities" on Friday, April 15.

From Tuesday noon till Saturday afternoon there were myriad of sessions organised in a broad spectrum of topics. Examples are discussions of how to think the immensity of climate change and biodiversity loss or how to rethink the current political landscape and systems. These questions were not only tackled in paper sessions and panels, but also by the lectures. For instance, Nigel THRIFT's presentation, 'The Insubstantial Pageant:



*Photo 2. Insight into the exhibit hall*

Producing An Untoward Land', clearly reflected his struggle to encounter recent economic and cultural changes on more than just analytical grounds. Similar concerns were addressed by Neil SMITH, who, in his lecture on ideology gave the example of the 'Arab Spring' and how it achieved an opening of the future for the whole world and an opening to imagine different futures – a sentiment which, he stated, had not been there in the past few decades. Asking questions such as 'where do ideas come from?' SMITH reminded the audience to think about everyone's potential agency in such creative processes.

Several sessions addressed geographical phenomena of the post-communist countries. Among them perhaps the most popular and most attended was the session on 'Critical geographies of post-communist cities' sponsored by the Russian, Central Eurasian and East European Specialty Group. The session was organized by Jessica K. GRAYBILL and Megan DIXON, and it took place in three subsequent paper sessions and a panel session. In the papers sessions thirteen papers were presented with a large spectrum analyzing the changing symbolic spaces, the suburbanization, or the new housing forms and their related social conflicts in post-communist cities. In the final session panelists expressed their views on legacies and current trajectories of urban development in the post-communist world.

A vital part of the AAG conference was the exhibit hall in the WSCC, where attendees could see the latest tools in teaching, field research, graphic applications, computer modelling, and data collection and analysis in geography. It was an extremely rich and diverse exhibition with 66 exhibitors, among them leading publishers in geography like Ashgate, Elsevier, Wiley, Oxford University Press and Routledge with the hottest textbooks and publications. In addition, we could learn a lot about the most recent technical advances in geography, including cartography, GIS and GPS, being represented by such renowned organisations like Google, NASA, or the US Army Geospatial Center (AGC).

This was thematically an extremely rich and diverse conference in an inspiring environment. The next AAG Annual Meeting will be held in New York City February 24–28, 2012. According to the expectations of AAG staff, the number of attendees will go upwards of 10,000, thus we can expect an even more extraordinary meeting of the American and international community of geographers.

Zoltán Kovács