

# A Perceptible Difference

In September I attended 'From Imagery to Map', a conference organised by Racurs. Founded in 1993 by four research graduates from Moscow Institute of Physics and Technology, this Russian company began as a developer of Photomod, aiming at data extraction from airborne stereo-imagery. Today the software can deal with all types of di-gital imagery: air or space-borne, optical or microwave, line or array camera. Below, a few noteworthy observations that lie beyond the scope of the conference report.

Professor Renzo Carlucci, interviewee in *GIM* November, discussed the effects of a country failing to nourish Geomatics education at university level, as is the case in Italy. Although a well functioning geo-information infrastructure provides the foundation for any other, including power-lines, air traffic, railway, roads and transportation pipes for water, gas and oil, managers and high-ranking officials in Italy would seem unaware of the value of the geomatics profession. The Italian Geodetic Commission was abolished in the 1970s, so today there is no unity of approach; the regions have differing geodetic reference systems and establishing a national geo-information infrastructure appears a titan task. Practitioners work guided by the software on their computer, without in-depth knowledge of the theory underpinning procedures. They even transfer large-scale aerial photos to small-scale maps by selecting one of the many GIS warping techniques.

Attended by practitioners wanting to update their knowledge and refresh their professional vision, the conference also looked at where we're coming from and going to. Eminent ISPRS experts Prof. A. Gruen and Prof. G. Konecny delivered keynotes, the first on progress and prospects for 3D/4D city modelling and Unmanned Airborne Vehicles (UAV). Konecny addressed map-update issues and gave an overview of the history of photogrammetry. He portrayed the founder of ITC, Prof. Schermerhorn, the first post-war prime minister of the Netherlands, and showed that UAVs are nothing new: they were in use already at the very start of aerial surveying, as were cameras mounted on pigeons' chests during wartime. However, an inability to control their flight path meant UAVs never attained the status of regular imaging technology. Today small planes and helicopters can be equipped with GNSS / IMU systems, enabling exact route programming. Since cameras are lightweight and software is in place for self-calibration, quick and cheap image recording is on the cusp of becoming a reality. But processing must become fully automatic; otherwise the cost of manual processing far exceeds that of image recording.

What made this conference special? Firstly, its small scale: one hundred professionals, sixty of whom from Russia. But most impressive was the complete absence of the chest drumming so flashily and embarrassingly in evidence at North American conferences; there was no glitter here, no glamour. It's not the slick marketers who set the tone at this conference, but the founders. Their involvement and affinity with science and technology is perceptible and provides the pillars upon which the event stands.