

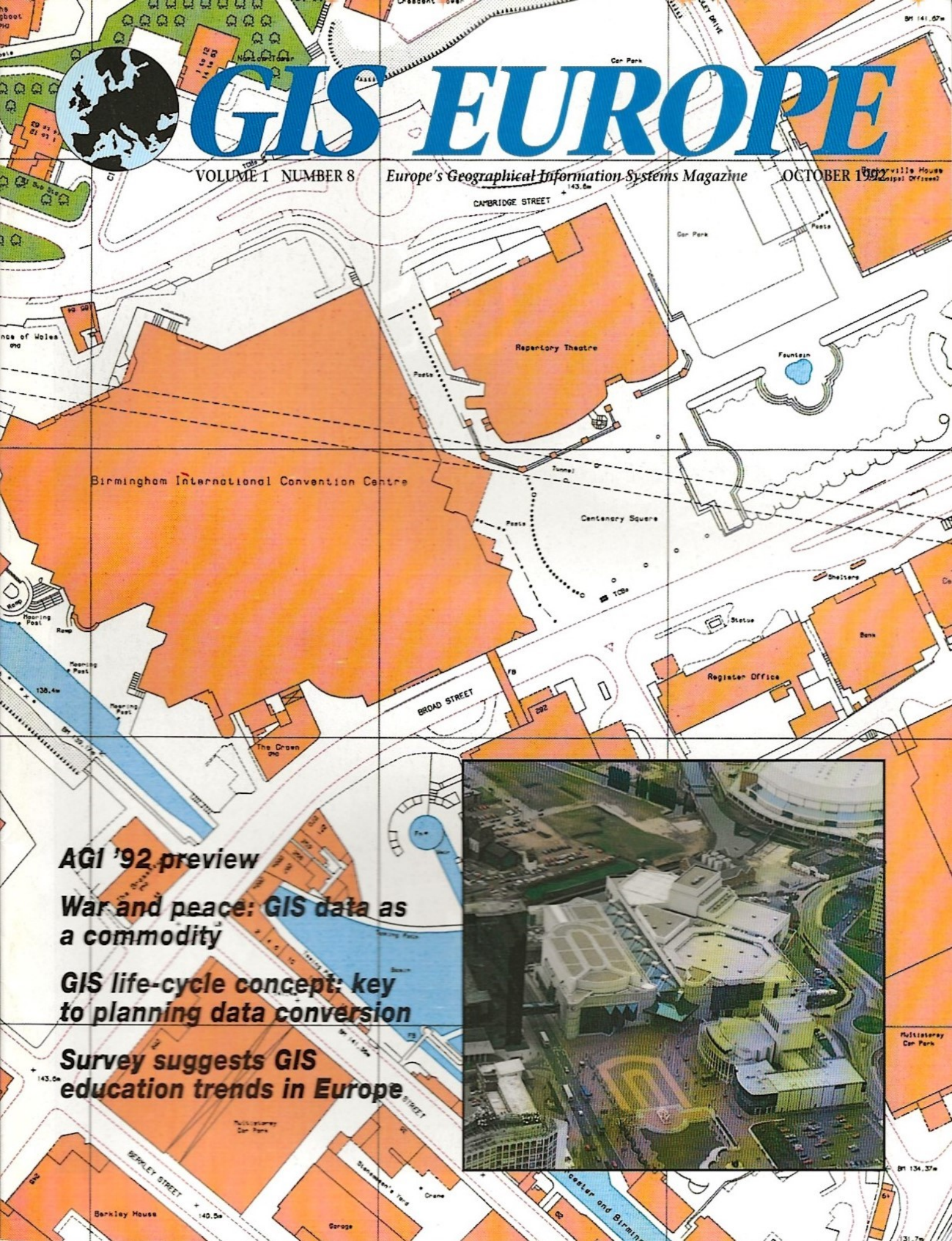


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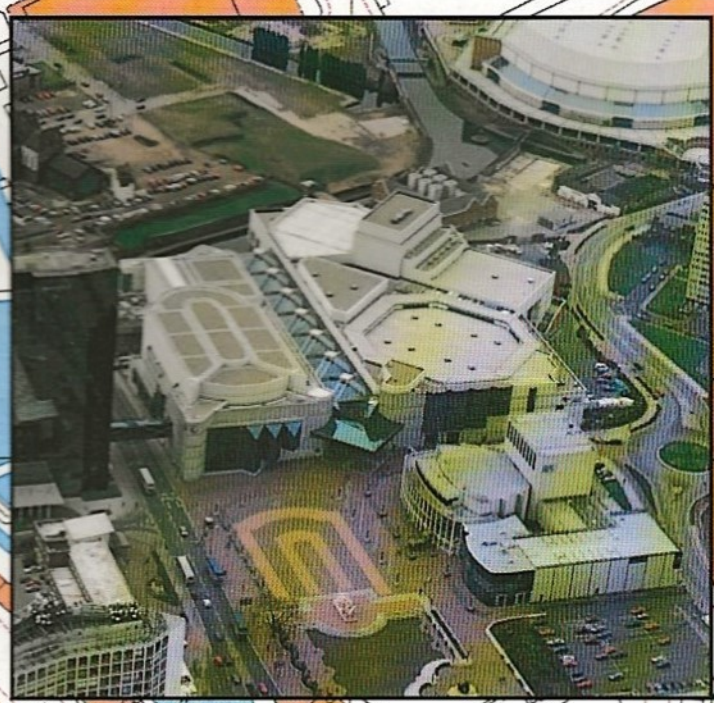


AGI '92 preview

War and peace: GIS data as a commodity

GIS life-cycle concept: key to planning data conversion

Survey suggests GIS education trends in Europe





Towards an equitable pricing policy for digital maps

The Association for Geographic Information (AGI) has been concerned recently with the problems faced by the Ordnance Survey (OS) in determining a pricing policy that satisfies customers and government alike. To this end, AGI has chaired a number of round-table meetings to air the problem and identify possible solutions.

This is no mean task. The issues are complex and go to the heart of the funding issues which underlie the role of OS. Should there be government support not just for a national map archive, but also for a properly maintained and readily available digital map database of the whole country? The US experience suggests that

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government investment in digital map data pays dividends by promoting the use of GIS and earning more through indirect revenues than can be achieved by charging the full cost-recovery price of digital maps.

Unfortunately, the UK government is set on imposing cost-recovery targets for not only the small-scale series, but also its other digital products. The Canadian experience of this approach is to reduce demand and limit the growth of GIS. By imposing cost-recovery, the future of OS will be determined by financial targets, and the contents and price of products, inevitably, also will become the subject of unpredictable change. The road centre-lines data is a case in point.

The problem is that OS finds itself in an unenviable position. The agency manages and maintains the national archive — a costly business — and it has to meet the needs of a wide variety

of user groups. However, OS cannot become a truly market-driven organisation due to governmental financial controls.

There is concern over what the core activities of the national mapping agency are, and what may be regarded as "fringe activities." In particular, the user community needs to be certain of the stability of the products they are to receive and that any specification changes should be discussed and made known well in advance. The road centre-lines being extracted from the large-scale digital

database and put into the Ordnance Survey Centre Alignment of Roads (OSCAR) product is, again, a case in point.

The reports from the AGI round-table meetings highlight a number of concerns from users about OS pricing policy. The frequent price increases in digital data in recent years clearly affect a user's ability to undertake effective business planning, especially when prices are in excess of the Retail Price Index. The difference in prices between the paper, vector and raster products is not clear, and many users would like to see the costs of the various programmes justified by OS. There also is an obvious cost-penalty for rural users of OS products because, in areas of sparse population, digital data costs more per head because of the greater areas covered.



Many UK users are looking for update information to be provided not just in the form of a complete refresh of an OS map, but in other ways as well. For example, it could be that only map changes are supplied, or a layered approach to updating is adopted on a regular basis. Clearly, there is a need for OS to be more responsive to user needs for updated information.

Finally, the whole pricing issue is closely tied to that of copyright. Copyright is restrictive and overly complex, and it constrains the development of wider applications. In many ways, the poor take-up of digital products, particularly by the smaller users, is a reflection of the twin problems of pricing and copyright.

There have been calls for some form of regulatory body to oversee OS pricing policy. What is needed is clear guidance from the highest levels of government on the way forward for OS. The agency is being asked to fulfil a conflicting role: keeper of the national archive that must recover costs on products to which only it has copyright privileges. It is not possible for OS to effectively maintain the national digital database for the benefit of the nation and also act as a

commercially constrained map-producing organisation at one and the same time.

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