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## Conference Report

# *Land as a scarce resource: the 10th conference of the PLPR, Berne, Switzerland, 15–19 February 2016*

In February 2016, the 10th annual conference of the International Academic Association on Planning, Law, and Property Rights (PLPR) was held at the Institute of Geography, University of Berne (Switzerland). After the spring-like conference in Volos (Greece) the previous year, Berne provided wonderful winter scenery to discuss current research issues under the topic ‘Land as a scarce resource’. The topic was even demonstrated in the venue and its surrounding. The medieval Old Town of Berne is a wonderful example of high-quality urban design on a very limited amount of land – and nowadays one of the top ten most liveable cities in the world. About 160 participants from 39 different countries followed the invitation to Switzerland – tantamount to a new PLPR record.

### **Full-day PhD workshop**

Before the official beginning, the Berne conference could already celebrate a great achievement. For the first time in PLPR history, a full-day PhD workshop was held. On the gorgeous Gurten mountain, 19 PhD students presented their research topics and discussed various methodological approaches. The young researchers profited from the experience of Benjamin Davy (*TU Dortmund, Germany*), Marta Lora-Tamayo (*UNED, Spain*) and Chris Webster (*HKU, China*), who volunteered to serve as mentors. The workshop was a great success due to the wonderful organisation of Cygal Pellach (*Technion, Israel*) and Andreas Hengstermann (*University of Berne, Switzerland*) and the abundance of the different research projects from everywhere around the world.

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## **Land as a scarce resource**

Spatial planning is often accused of not being up to the tasks it is supposed to deal with: more parsimonious use of natural resources; conservation of regional identities in the face of global standardisation processes; promotion of integrated transport infrastructures; and reduction of socioeconomic disparities among territories.

During the last century, Western countries developed complex administrative organisations to shape their spatial development. Most countries have passed planning acts accompanied by the development of training programmes for planners through national planning schools. Planning departments were created at all levels of government. In most national settings, spatial planning instruments were crafted in a context of land profusion. But are these systems able to meet the challenges of scarcity today? Sprawl reduction, redevelopment, densification, mixed-use development and urban land conversion implies that public actors, developers, real estate specialists and neighbourhood or tenant associations will have to deal with competing interests that are rooted in complex property rights situations or regimes. For effective steering of spatial development, a deeper understanding of the tight interactions between spatial planning and property rights is required.

Even where economic growth is still progressing, the actors of spatial planning struggle with this new focus on the redevelopment of pre-used plots. Besides technical challenges, scarcity also questions our development patterns oriented towards growth, increased resource consumption per capita and growing inequalities.

## **Excursions**

The scientific programme was opened by thematic sessions to introduce the participants from abroad to the local planning circumstances. The sessions focused on the local Land Policy (organised by Jean-David Gerber, Andreas Hengstermann and Valérie Fux) and Swiss Housing Policy (organised by Ivo Balmer). The participants were shown urban developments in Berne, such as the 1920s Weissenstein, the 1970s Tscharnergut, the 1990s Brünnen-Westside area, the 2000s Wankdorf area and the current Warmbächli project. The main focus was on the underlying policy models of these projects. Among other aspects, the examples demonstrated the high importance of the Bernese Burgergemeinde (Civic Corporation) as the largest landowner in town, and their strategy of not selling land, but rather providing building leases.

## **Parallel sessions**

During the four-day conference, 114 papers were presented in 28 thematic sessions organised in four thematic tracks, focusing on social, ecological, institutional and

instrumental and governance aspects. The presentations showed a broad diversity of studies within the intersection of planning, law and property rights. The perfect synchronisation of the content of the presentations by the organisation enabled vivid and fruitful debates in all sessions. The presenters dealt with a variety of instruments: novel approaches, such as the closed real estate investment fund, and also some of the more frequently discussed aspects, including expropriation. Various perspectives of land scarcity were raised, including land scarcity that is artificially caused by the resistance of landowners and land scarcity caused by spontaneous densification. Across European countries similar developments regarding the renewal of planning systems was reported, which led to interesting debates on the incentives for these developments and on how these adjustments in existing planning systems are being executed.

As in previous conferences, the main topics that were related to planning, law and property rights were environmental issues such as climate change, instruments, coastal areas, commons, housing, EU legislation on planning and public participation. All participants had the chance to learn about these specific topics from different countries across the world – in particular, the Netherlands, Israel, USA, Australia or Switzerland. In addition, special sessions were organised on the impacts of EU legislation on planning, on recent tendencies pertaining to land markets (land and property markets under stress), on negotiated developer obligations, on the different national experiences with specific instruments (instruments of land policy to deal with land scarcity) and on property rights under changing environmental conditions.

## Keynote speeches

The debates were inspired by four keynote speeches. Lukas Bühlmann (*Swiss Planning Association VLP-ASPAN*) introduced the conference participants to the Swiss planning system. He illustrated the omnipresent problem of urban sprawl (consistently around one square metre per second), its causes (increasing consumption per capita and ongoing immigration) and the attempts of the Swiss government to tackle development issues (especially with the new planning act which was accepted by 62.9 per cent of voters in 2013). As second keynote speaker, Peter Knoepfel (*University of Lausanne, Switzerland*), talked about the historic evolution of the Swiss planning system. His main focus was on the incoherent developments between the property regime and land-use policy. He questioned whether land-use plans are really policy driven (as normally those who are drawing the plans do not influence spatial development any more than those who are paying for the implementation). Focusing on the guarantee of property, Jacques Dubey (*University of Fribourg, Switzerland*) talked about absolute vs. relative scarcity in legal systems. He stated that there is no difference in scarcity between chattel (relatively scarce) and land (absolutely scarce). The question of justice was addressed by Isabelle Anguelovski (*Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain*) who asked

if ‘green cities’ can be just. She showed examples where planning projects aimed at achieving green cities resulted in the exclusion of socially and racially vulnerable people and intensified gentrification. However, Angelovski argued that green cities *can* be just, and demonstrated that community-based land use such as parks or urban gardening can help to improve the environment and increase the local involvement (sense of place) of citizens.

## Roundtable

Besides the traditional debates in the different sessions, two plenary roundtables were held. The first one picked up on the conference topic and reflected on the different international perceptions of the scarcity of land. Sonia Guelton shared the Swiss perspective and mentioned that the French planning system is subject to quite similar challenges – and includes similar instruments to cope with them. Completely different is the situation in the USA, as Harvey Jacobs stated. Land is not seen as a scarce resource and a centralised planning system is simply absent in the USA. Serious developments, meanwhile, can be witnessed in the Netherlands, where the scarcity of land is a centuries-old concern. Erwin van der Krabben reported that the Dutch planning system is undergoing a far-reaching change as the entire approval system has been replaced by a ‘ladder of sustainability’. With his South African perspective, Mark Oranje stressed the psychological aspect of scarcity. Scarcity is a perception. If we look to the world without boundaries, then issues of scarcity will be entirely different. Ana Morais agreed, explaining that in Portugal it is not the land itself that is scarce, but the demand – and this has to be managed by an appropriate planning system. Rebecca Leshinsky took this opportunity to emphasise the contradictions – in the planning system and in the political system – as she reported from Australia.

Celebrating the 10th annual conference, the second roundtable reflected the association’s history and its future. Moderated by Thomas Hartmann, the panel (Ben Davy, Eran Kaplinski, Richard Norton and Rachelle Alterman) stressed the strength of PLPR. The past years have proven the intersection between planning, law and property rights research to be a relevant and significant point – and the annual conferences to be open platforms. The main challenge for the association’s future development will be to strengthen the efforts to promote young scholars. Michael Kolocek took the jubilee to inspire the discussions by highlighting a meta-analysis he did on PLPR itself. He analysed the content of all 880 papers presented during the last ten conferences and highlighted the various hot topics and the varying priorities depending on national background. With his data, he could confirm the function of PLPR as a platform for international, but not global, discussions – although the majority of papers reflect on national research results.

## **General Assembly, elections of officeholders and next PLPR**

At the end of the conference, it was also time to elect the new PLPR Executive Committee. New ExCo members serving for the period 2016–18 were elected: Richard Norton (President), Thomas Hartmann (Vice-president), Cygal Pellach (Secretary-General) and Andreas Hengstermann (PhD Coordinator). The elected members are supported by the appointed ExCo members, including: Eran Kaplinski (North American representative), John Sheehan (Pacific Rim representative), Leonie Janssen-Jansen (AESOP PLPR theme group leader), Jean-David Gerber (previous PLPR conference host) and Chris Webster (upcoming conference host). The last and his team are preparing the 11th PLPR annual conference, which will take place at the University of Hong Kong, 19–24 February 2017. The next meeting of the PLPR community was at the World Planning Schools Congress in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in July 2016.