

Linda McElduff and Rick Meijer

Conference Report

The 11th Conference of the International Academic Association on Planning, Law and Property Rights (PLPR), Hong Kong, 19–24 February 2017

The eleventh annual conference of the International Academic Association on Planning, Law, and Property Rights (PLPR) took place from 19 to 24 February 2017. The event was hosted by the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Hong Kong: the oldest tertiary-education institution in Hong Kong. This was the first PLPR conference to be held in East Asia, and after the gentle pace and medieval ambience of Bern (Switzerland) last year, Hong Kong provided a fast-moving, high-density urban setting from which to explore old and new ideas under the theme Institutional Innovations in Land Development and Planning in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

Participants were warmly welcomed by Professor Chris Webster and his organising committee, who should be commended for their hard work and diligence in ensuring that the formal proceedings, excursions and social events were well prepared and executed.

PhD workshop

Building on the success of Bern last year, a full-day PhD workshop was held on Monday 20 February during which eighteen PhD students presented their research topics and discussed various methodological approaches. These early-career researchers benefited from the mentorship of Mark Oranje (*University of Pretoria, South Africa*), Tejo Spit (*Utrecht University, the Netherlands*), Tzu-Yuan Chao (*National Cheng Kung University, Taiwan*) and Christian Strauß (*Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF), Germany*) who kindly volunteered their time and expertise. The workshop was a great success due in no small part to its superb organisation, which helped maximise participation and ensured that every student received individual constructive feedback.

Conference theme: Institutional Innovations in Land Development and Planning in the 20th and 21st Centuries

In developed economies, urban planning and land development legislative frameworks continually evolved during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, changing

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roughly every decade in the UK, for example. In fast-urbanising Asia, governments are rapidly developing their own institutions to support the conversion of agricultural land and the adaptation of redundant urban land into high-density habitats. This presents an opportunity for scholars from countries with a century or more of experience in legislating for urban growth to share experiences with newly urbanising countries: exploring what could work, what might have worked, what did not work, what can be improved and what might be a dead end. To that end, contributions at this year's conference were invited to reflect on the efficacy, efficiency and equity of established and emerging urban planning and land management instruments across a range of themes.

Excursions

As in previous years, a number of half-day pre-conference excursions were organised. Participants visiting the International Commerce Centre – a 118-storey commercial building located in the West Kowloon District – discovered how an efficient 'vertical city' is organised. The tour of Housing for the Less Privileged explored issues of informality and inequality, and participants gained an insight into the unique living conditions of subdivided flats. Other participants gained an appreciation of the complex urban space arrangements of the city during a guided bus tour of Hong Kong Island. These excursions helped demonstrate the challenges and opportunities of high-density living to the participants from abroad.

The local planning and development context was further explained at the opening reception during the opening speech of Professor Kar Kan Ling (past director of planning in Hong Kong). Prof. Ling outlined the 'DNA' of Hong Kong, explaining how the density and diversity of the city helps to facilitate innovative thinking and sustainable modes of urban development. He highlighted the role of the city as an important nexus between East and West, and between terrestrial and maritime environments, alluding here to the historical and contemporary importance of Victoria Harbour. Lastly, Prof. Ling commented on the adaptability of the city to changing economic and environmental circumstances, which can be demonstrated by contemporary urban transformations, not least on the harbour front.

Keynote speeches

As PLPR embarks on a new decade, it was only fitting that founding president, and honorary fellow, Rachele Alterman delivered the first keynote speech. In her presentation, aptly entitled 'The role of law in planning: from devil to angel', she explored the inherent tensions between planning theory (the beacon), implementation analysis (the compass) and planning law (the scales of justice), and questioned whether these

spheres can be reconciled. She argued that laws and regulations provide planning with the instruments required to achieve just and inclusive cities and regions, and may thus be regarded as angels. Yet they can also promote social exclusion, exacerbate the inequitable distribution of public services, and/or expose the poor to environmental hazards: the devils emerge. Importantly, these ‘angels’ and ‘devils’ are not absolute and much is dependent on context, interpretation and perception, which inevitably vary over temporal scales and across jurisdictional boundaries. Her message was clear: by improving our ability to distinguish between angels and devils, we can better create synergies between planning and law. In this regard she reflected on the role and achievements of PLPR to date in bringing together research, and researchers, at the intersection of planning, law and property rights.

On Wednesday evening, participants and members of the public gathered in the Yeut Ming Auditorium to hear the ‘father of carbon trading’, Richard Sandor, deliver the second keynote: ‘Financial innovations: the convergence of environmental and financial markets’. Reflecting on the achievements of cap-and-trade programmes in the US, particularly in terms of reducing sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide (the primary precursors of acid rain), Sandor argued that markets, if properly designed and regulated, play a critical role in achieving emission reductions, meeting environmental goals and improving human health. He asked the audience to consider a new hypothesis that positions fresh water as the oil of the twenty-first century. Some form of financial innovation may therefore be required to regulate its quality and quantity. Sandor highlighted an opportunity for Hong Kong to become a ‘leading light’ in environmental and financial innovations in Asia, due to its financial expertise and the pressing reality of climate change.

The third keynote was delivered by Professor Yoram Barzel: a widely celebrated economist, who took us on a journey through the history of property rights within economics during his presentation: ‘Information costs, property rights and markets’. Using examples of automobile ownership, produce sold at supermarkets and restaurants operations, Barzel highlighted the relationship between transaction cost and economic property rights as they factor into buyer and seller behaviour over commodities. His presentation challenged the audience to differentiate between legal property rights and economic property rights and to consider the importance of institutions and the economic logic of their variety.

Parallel sessions

During the three-day conference, 126 papers were presented in thirty-one thematic sessions organised in four overarching thematic tracks. These tracks focused on planning and land markets, informality and future challenges, law and policy in planning and environmental markets, and institutional arrangements in land markets. As in previous

years, there was an eclectic mix of topics demonstrating the breadth of studies at the intersection of planning, law and property rights. The highly diligent organisational team did a fantastic job of grouping together kindred papers, which enabled connections, and sometimes contradictions, to be made across the presentations and in the group discussions. Topics related to, for example, land policy, governance, housing, informality, development instruments, coastal planning and management, climate change, urban conservation and migration, as well as theories and methodologies. In true PLPR spirit, presenters questioned established truths, critiqued prevailing legal procedures, explored emerging institutional innovations and introduced new research questions and ideas.

Four special sessions were held. The special session on An Emerging Agenda of Planning, Law, and Property Rights in China discussed current issues and future possibilities in relation to land value and finance models, land management reform, taxation legislation and mortgage enforcement in Chinese cities. The special session on Property Rights and Governance of Integrated Sustainable Under-Above Ground Developments reflected on issues of social equity, ownership rights, public interests and the planning and design challenges associated with the creation of underground spaces and cities. The special session on Developer Contributions towards Better Infrastructure was spread across a number of sessions, which helped facilitate an extensive, and fruitful, discussion, and enabled linkages to be drawn across the papers. Presentations in this series focused on the design, regulation and challenges of developer obligations from a variety of perspectives and contexts, including Uganda, Vietnam, Canada, Israel, Poland and the Netherlands. A final special session focused on the Governance of Land Use and incorporated discussions relating to evolving planning cultures and land policies in the Netherlands and Switzerland, institutional arrangements of club goods in China and the role of spatial planning in responding to changing environmental conditions in Serbia.

Roundtables

In addition to the parallel sessions, two plenary roundtables were held. Benjamin Davy (*TU Dortmund University, Germany*) chaired the first roundtable, which provided an opportunity for the panel, and participants, to discuss the theme of this year's conference. The panel members first questioned how well institutions are understood. In discussing informality as an unresolved debate, Peter Ho (*Delft University of Technology, the Netherlands*) referred to the creditability thesis and the need to better understand the function of institutions. Similarly, Douglas Harris (*University of British Columbia, Canada*) called for greater interrogation of the purpose of institutions and improved understandings of the reciprocal relationship between property rights and urban development. Panel members also deliberated the impetus for, and shape of, 'innovation'.

Magdalena Belof (*Wrocław University of Science and Technology, Poland*) shared innovations in Poland resulting from changing socio-economic conditions and highlighted issues of self-governance and neo-liberalism, temporary arrangements and inherent local suspicions of institutions. Using housing as an example, Nicole Gurran (*University of Sydney*) highlighted the need to break away from formal and rigid structures which do not allow for spontaneous market changes and negate the flexibility necessary for innovations to take root.

Janet Askew (*University of the West of England*) chaired the second roundtable on Friday afternoon. Panel members (Richard Norton, *University of Michigan*; Tamara Maricic, *Institute of Architecture and Urban and Spatial Planning of Serbia*; and Zhi Liu, *Peking University / Lincoln Institute Center for Urban Development and Land Policy*) were asked to critically reflect on the achievements of the conference, identify future challenges and propose key themes to be carried forward to next year. The international, disciplinary and cognitive differences in the use of language and terminology were highlighted as an inevitable, but also potentially perplexing, aspect, and there were calls for presenters to be more explicit in how terms are variously used. Nevertheless, the panel reflected positively on the standard, diversity and appropriateness of the presentations and the thought-provoking discussions that followed. PLPR president Richard Norton, for example, reflected on the disciplinary and *interdisciplinary* learning experience and the invaluable exposure to new ideas and concepts from across the world.

Ten years of PLPR served as a milestone for both reflection and crystal-ball-gazing, and during the closing session participants were invited to share their views of, and suggestions for, the future of the Association. Participants commented positively on the growth of PLPR both horizontally in regard to the variety of topics and growing number of participants, and vertically in terms of the depth of discussions and debates. This closing session also provided an opportunity to acknowledge the ongoing dedication and support of members and a resolution of appreciation was awarded to Professor Leonie Janssen-Jansen (*Wageningen University, Netherlands*) in recognition of her contribution to PLPR.

PLPR to Serbia in 2018

The next PLPR conference will be held at the University of Novi Sad, Serbia, with the theme Migration: Impacts, Law and Spatial Planning. More details will be available on the conference website soon.¹

¹ See www.plpr2018.uns.ac.rs.