

Conference Report

Yearly Conference of the International Academic Association on Planning, Law, and Property Rights (PLPR), Ann Arbor, 1–5 May 2023

From 1–5 May 2023, the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA, served as the host for the annual conference of the International Academic Association on Planning, Law, and Property Rights (PLPR). The PLPR 2023 event brought together approximately 100 scholars from 21 different countries across four continents. The conference featured parallel sessions that explored a wide range of subjects central to ongoing research. These encompassed topics such as rural planning, housing security, land valuation, urban green spaces, densification, climate change and law, comparative policy analysis, and more.

PhD workshop

As has become tradition over the last years, the PLPR conference kicked off with a full-day PhD workshop organised by the PhD coordinators Josje Bouwmeester (*University of Bern*) and Dr Sofija Nikolić Popadić (*Institute of Social Science, Belgrade*). After a short welcome by the conference host Prof. Richard Norton (*University of Michigan*), the workshop started with input from the mentors. This year, the PhD students profited from the expertise of Prof. Rebecca Leshinsky (*RMIT University, Melbourne*) and Prof. Edwin Buitelaar (*University of Utrecht*). Prof. Leshinsky provided tips and tricks on how to shorten and simplify the theme of a PhD thesis, while Prof. Buitelaar shared his experience on publishing academic articles, stating that quality needs to be prioritised over quantity. Workshop participants were then divided into two groups. Within each group, the PhD students presented their topics very briefly, after which they received questions, feedback, and comments from their peers as well as the mentors. The relaxed and easy-going atmosphere throughout the day allowed all participants to speak freely about their questions and concerns. As participants work on similar

topics but focus on different geographical contexts, the discussions revealed many interesting similarities and differences across planning systems. The vast experience of the mentors and their dedication contributed to a very successful and inspiring day.

Keynote speeches

As our host of the 2023 PLPR conference, Prof. Norton, stated: we cannot start a conference on planning, law and property rights in Ann Arbor without first understanding the origins of the state of Michigan and its largest university. Aiming to honour the original stewards of the land, the topic of the first keynote of the conference was very fitting: the indigenous people and their relation to property rights. Experts on indigenous property rights, among them Prof. Matthew L. M. Fletcher, Prof. Winnona T. Singel and Whitney Gravelle, portrayed how the state of Michigan has, just as many other lands across the world, a history of denying full property rights to indigenous tribes. The speakers described the process of dispossession that has been taking place in Michigan over centuries, and explained how until today indigenous tribes are fighting for recognition of their rights. The panel on indigenous property rights also brought to the fore the notion of property right, as perceived by Native Americans, which is entirely different than Anglo-American and common law notions. In particular, the idea that humans cannot dominate nature nor land is essential for understanding the cleavage between indigenous populations and new settlers in America.

After focusing on these origins, the remaining keynotes dealt with the US planning system in general and planning challenges in Michigan in particular. Prof. Mark A. Wyckoff presented the challenges of today's planning system in the state of Michigan, underlining how the complexity of the governance structure – containing over 1,800 local jurisdictions – impedes the implementation of planning goals and makes land-use planning rather unpredictable. Following this, the audience was introduced to the challenges and opportunities of planning in our host city, Ann Arbor, circulating around the 'town and gown' relations between the municipality and the University of Michigan as major employer and landowner.

On the second day of the conference, participants were introduced to the captivating history of the city of Detroit with its extreme challenges ranging from building deterioration and stark segregation to high poverty rates and the collapse of police and fire services as a consequence of continued shrinkage. The special session also highlighted the continuous cycles of decline in Detroit that resulted in a drop in property values. This process emanated from risky mortgage loans, industrial decline, tax foreclosures and the subprime crisis. The afternoon was dedicated to a variety of excursions to Detroit and its metropolitan area as well as the city of Ann Arbor. This way, participants got a glimpse of the functioning of PLPR in our host city and its surroundings.

The sessions

The parallel sessions were distributed over the four days of the conference and led to vigorous discussions among participants. On the first day, the session on valuing and managing land by water raised questions on whether or not housing markets and property rights can appropriately integrate the risk of flooding events, and if planning regulations should allow for rebuilding after intense flooding events.

Another important topic of this year's conference was housing security and social inclusion, covering contributions on development-induced displacement, the maintenance of public housing, affordability in densification projects and the role of planning and property rights in advancing social cohesion.

Comparative studies are an integral part of the PLPR community. Indeed, contributors presented cross-national, cross-jurisdictional work with the aim of facilitating mutual learning. Amongst others, presentations on tenancy rights in German-speaking countries, and ways of ensuring plan implementation after the granting of building permits in Germany and the UK, showed the value of comparisons to better understand one's own context and overcome seeing planning problems in an insular way. In the same way, the session on easements, exactions and takings addressed the potential of existing property-oriented instruments in various contexts of climate change adaptation.

In addition, discussions on planning in rural contexts made some important distinctions between geographical contexts. In the US, many rural municipalities do not have a zoning plan in place, given the vastness of these rural areas. This hinders consistency between planning and zoning, for example regarding renewable energy planning.

Discussions furthermore focused on landowners' strategies and rationales in connection to land valuation and land taxation. Presenters discussed the differences between property and land value taxes and their respective incentives for or against urban densification; increasing property consolidation in the Netherlands and the resulting negotiation power of certain landowners, as well as the relations between planning-induced value changes and the application of compensation instruments. Similar topics were discussed in the sessions on planning, design and implementation, where presenters explored Dutch landowners' strategies of lobbying for land-use plan changes that allow for more development. In a similar vein, such forms of institutional entrepreneurialism were observed in Flanders, Belgium, where local politicians successfully achieved a watering down of growth restrictions in agricultural areas.

The sessions on governing densification once again provided comparisons among different European planning systems, focusing on how local governments are able or not to implement densification goals across Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland. Throughout the sessions, the presenters highlighted the shift towards more flexible planning approaches, for example through project-based planning or

continuous negotiations with landowners and developers. In this context, trade-offs were discussed between flexibility on the one hand, and quality and effectiveness of plan implementation on the other.

Such trade-offs were also taken up in the last session, where participants discussed the legal formulation of growth management goals, representing a compromise between trying to achieve ambitious policy goals and making laws implementable. As such, the session addressed the formulation of the natural resource protection goal in Oregon state legislation and the formulation of the no-net-land-take goal in France, the latter navigating between objectives of farmland protection, biodiversity and soil permeability.

Flag ceremony and the next PLPR conference

In keeping with tradition, the PLPR flag was handed over to the organiser of the next PLPR conference after the last session. Liliane Raths received the flag on behalf of Prof. Walter de Vries, who will organise the next conference from 18–22 March 2024 at Technical University of Munich (TUM). It will be hosted by the chair of land management in the School of Engineering and Design. More information can be found on the organisers' website <https://plpr2024.bole.ed.tum.de/> and the website of the PLPR association <https://plpr-association.org/>.