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Conference Report

Planning in, and for, a Digital World: *UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference,* *5–7 September 2022*

Introduction

From 5–7 September 2022, the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference was held at the University of Manchester, marking a return to an in-person event for the first time since 2019. The theme of the conference – ‘Planning in, and for, a Digital World’ – covered topics from the potential implications of the metaverse through to the impact of planners’ values on shaping practice. Hosted by the Department of Planning and Environmental Management in the year of its seventieth anniversary, the conference brought together 76 conference papers across 13 conference tracks, five round table sessions, and keynotes from Professor Michael Batty (*UCL, UK*), Professor Andrew Hudson-Smith (*UCL, UK*), Professor Marketta Kyttä (*Aalto University, Finland*) and Ms Joanna Averley (*Chief Planner for England, Dept of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities*). Hosted alongside the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), the conference also saw the announcement of the RTPI Awards for Research Excellence.

Conference theme

For 2022, the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference 2022 was tasked with taking a critical view of the role technology can play in the future of planning practice through the theme ‘Planning in, and for, a digital world’. Responding to the rapid technological advances of the 2010s, the RTPI developed a ‘digital planning manifesto’ in 2019 aiming to harness technology to promote transparency, inclusiveness, openness and understanding across the planning system. New technologies offer opportunities for digital citizen engagement, improved access to data and new tools to support spatial planning practice, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic response which saw new ways of working centred on advances in communications technology. As new technologies continue to emerge, recognising spatial planning as a pivotal applied science to tackle grand challenges including climate change, biodiversity loss, aging

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populations and poverty, is a key aim. The Digital Task Force, co-chaired by Professor Michael Batty and Dr Wei Yang, makes eight recommendations towards achieving this aim, including establishing a chief spatial planning officer role in the Cabinet Office, therefore placing spatial planning at the heart of UK government.

Roundtables and workshops

The five roundtable discussions took place on the second day of the conference, Tuesday 6 September. The first roundtable introduced the Peri-cene project, which tracks the expansion of human settlements into areas between and around cities and the impacts of this sprawl on urban resilience. The roundtable was led by Joe Ravetz (*University of Manchester, UK*). The second roundtable was chaired by Andrew Close (*RTPI, UK*). It discussed the importance of planning research in enabling planners and policymakers to draw from evidence-based approaches to create vibrant communities. The third roundtable of the day explored the diversity of values held by planners shaping the contemporary planning practice, highlighting the experiences of young planners and those in the private sector when it comes to understanding the scope of planning in the present moment. The session was chaired by Hannah Hickman (*University of the West of England, UK*) and John Sturzaker (*University of Hertfordshire, UK*) and will be followed up by a special issue of *Planning Practice & Research*. The special issue has been commissioned to further address the gap in understanding the diversity of experiences and motivations of planners from multiple countries.

Of the final two roundtables, the first one was aimed at sharing the UK2070 Commission's experience in tackling spatial inequalities in the UK through a ten-point action plan. The plan focuses on re-balancing economic performance and rectifying present unjust social conditions. The session was chaired by Cecilia Wong (*University of Manchester, UK*). Finally, the Digital Task Force for Planning roundtable ended the day with a discussion about the next steps planned for the Task Force. The Task Force was established in 2021 and has now completed its first stage report, 'A Digital Future for Planning: Spatial Planning Reimagined' (Batty and Yang, 2022). Led by Wei Yang (*Wei Yang & Partners, UK*), the task force will work to promote an integrated digitally enabled approach to spatial planning.

On the final day of the conference, Wednesday 7 September, there was a workshop on Ketso Connect, introducing delegates to the hands-on Ketso kit which was first developed during the pandemic to support remote teaching. More recently, the kit has evolved to support hybrid and face-to-face pedagogy. The workshop was led by Joanne Tippett (*University of Manchester, UK*).

Parallel sessions

The 24 parallel sessions took place across the second and third day of the conference introducing delegates to a broad range of topics and papers. Each presenter was given 15–20 minutes for their talk depending on the number of presentations in their session. The 13 conference tracks were titled as follows: equality and diversity; green infrastructure and climate change; housing and regeneration; healthy neighbourhoods; infrastructure and transport planning; neighbourhood and community planning; planning education and pedagogy; planning history and conservation; planning theory and practice; PlanTech, the Metaverse and digital methods; urban design and place-making; rural planning, ecology and rewilding; and territorial governance and strategic planning. The diversity of topics ensured an engaged audience and there were many enthusiastic discussions as time was provided for questions at the end of each session. The papers illustrated the versatility of planning research today, particularly highlighting the crucial importance of planning scholarship in addressing the present social and environmental crises. Discussions on inclusion and representation in planning, planners' access and ability to use relevant information and communication technologies, and the opportunities offered by gamification for the education of future planning professionals underlined the importance of evidence-led planning education in ensuring that the planning practice can continue to address societal challenges effectively in the future.

RTPI Awards for Planning Research Excellence

On Monday 5 September, the first day of conference was brought to a close with the celebration of the RTPI Awards for Planning Research Excellence. Presented by Dr Wei Yang (outgoing president of the RTPI) categories included the Sir Peter Hall Award for Excellence in Research and Engagement, the Student Award, the Early Career Research Award and the Planning Practitioner Award.

The Sir Peter Hall Award for Excellence in Research and Engagement was awarded to jointly to Professor Claire Colomb (*UCL, UK*) and Dr Tatiana Moreira de Souza (*University of Liverpool, UK*) for their project titled 'Regulating short term rentals. Platform-based property rentals in European cities: the policy debates' and to Professor Matthew Carmona (*UCL, UK*) and Valentina Giordano (*UCL, UK*) for their project titled 'Appealing Design'. A commendation was awarded to Dr Alexander Wilson (*Newcastle University, UK*) and Professor Mark Tewdwr-Jones (*UCL, UK*), for their project titled 'Digital Participatory Planning: Citizen Engagement, Democracy and Design'.

The Student Award was awarded to Samantha Simmons (*University of Westminster, UK*) for their project titled 'Mental health and the built environment: delivering mentally

healthy places'. A commendation was awarded to Catherine Denning-Johnson (*University of Brighton, UK*) for their project titled 'Levelling up on the urban coast'.

The Early Career Research Award was awarded to Amy Bristow (*Heriot-Watt, UK*) for their project titled 'Meeting the housing needs of BAME households in England: the role of planning'.

The Planning Practitioner Award was awarded to Heather Pugh (*David Lock Associates*) for their project titled 'Effective delivery of strategic sites: a toolkit for planning authorities'. Commendations were awarded to Martin Taylor (*Lichfields*) for their project titled 'Tracking progress' and to Matthew Spry (*Lichfields*) for their project titled 'Taking stock: the geography of housing need, permissions and completions'.

Keynotes review

Building on the work of the Digital Taskforce, Professor Michael Batty delivered the first keynote of the conference on Monday 5 September titled 'Manchester, computation and the emergent digital transformation of cities and city planning'. In the presentation, Professor Batty considered the history of the computer (the 'universal machine'), its links to the University of Manchester through Alan Turing, and computing's long relationship with planning. The systems approach was considered in some detail and the presentation was punctuated with light-hearted anecdotes from Professor Batty's career. Insights and highly educated guesses as to the future direction of new technologies and planning were offered, setting the scene for the key theme for the conference.

Taking the theme in a specialised direction, Professor Andrew Hudson-Smith considered the potential of the metaverse, digital collaborative spaces and virtual and augmented realities, to shape the future of digital planning on Tuesday 6 September (keynote titled 'Urban metaverses: the future of digital planning'). The origins of these technologies and previous attempts to develop virtual spaces (such as Second Life) were reviewed, and the impact that Facebook's (now Meta's) interest in the technologies may have, were outlined. Professor Hudson-Smith drew on extensive first-hand experience in the development of virtual spaces to explore the significance that such visual technologies can offer planning.

From future impact to current impact, Professor Marketta Kyttä reviewed the 'softGIS' methodology and its use in a keynote titled 'Digital citizen engagement & transactional person-environment research' on Tuesday 6 September. Identifying this advanced use of PPGIS (public participation GIS), Professor Kyttä evidenced the ability to unlock citizens place-based knowledge in planning and overcoming the limitations of traditional participatory methods. Maptionnaire, the commercialised arm of the softGIS team, was noted for its use in over 2,000 projects in more than eighty countries.

On Wednesday 7 September, the closing keynote titled ‘Levelling-up and the role of planning’ was delivered by Joanna Averley (*Chief Planner for England, Dept of Levelling Up, Housing & Communities*). Drawing on a high-profile career in spatial planning and expertise in place-making, this presentation highlighted the intrinsic link between the levelling up agenda and the role of the planning sector in substantive change.

PhD workshop

A full day PhD workshop took place during Monday 5 September. The workshop was well attended by many PhD researchers who were also presenting papers the following day. The workshop was led and organised by Andreas Schulze Baing (*University of Manchester, UK*) and Bertie Dockerill, who was in charge of the conference arrangements on behalf of the University of Manchester. The workshop consisted of four key sessions. The first session was led by Bertie Dockerill and focused on the importance of proofreading and editing when preparing to submit a thesis. The second session was led by Richard Kingston, who usefully shared his own journey in attracting funding. After lunch, Cecilia Wong held a session on how to get published, and the day concluded with a discussion chaired by Helen Zheng and Caglar Koksal on the subject of ‘Life after the PhD: post-doc opportunities’. Each session was followed up with a Q&A.

Next conference

The next UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference will take place from Monday 4 September until Wednesday 6 September 2023. The conference will be titled ‘Planning on a Crisis Footing’ and will explore the present moment of multiple crises from the cost-of-living crisis to the climate crisis from a planning perspective. The conference will be hosted by Urban Studies at the University of Glasgow, at the university’s new James McCune Smith Learning Hub. Key submission dates, conference tracks, guest speakers and other information will be posted on the University of Glasgow website in the coming months.¹

¹ See the University of Glasgow website for further information: ‘UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference 2023: Planning on a Crisis Footing’, *University of Glasgow*, <https://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/socialpolitical/research/urbanstudies/events/planningresearchconference2023/>.