

Ruth Potts

Conference Report

UK-Ireland Planning Research

Conference, 4–6 September 2023

The 2023 UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference was organised by the Urban Studies Research Centre in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Glasgow from 4–6 September. The conference centred around the theme of ‘Planning on a Crisis Footing’ and drew more than 180 delegates internationally to present their work across ten thematic tracks in parallel sessions. Over the three-day conference, in addition to the parallel sessions, delegates were invited to engage with a PhD workshop, six roundtable discussions (including a welcome plenary roundtable), five mobile walking tours, a keynote speech by Professor Yvette Rydin (*UCL*), and the Spaces of Hope exhibition exploring the hidden histories of community-led planning in the UK.

PhD workshop

Prior to the conference opening on 4 September, PhD students from across the UK and Ireland gathered to participate in a full day PhD workshop. The workshop was led by Dr Phil O’Brien, Dr Andrew Hoolachan and Dr Zubeida Lowton (*University of Glasgow*) and included contributions from several other University of Glasgow scholars, including Professor Ade Kearns, Professor Annette Hastings, Professor James White and Dr Robert Richardson. The PhD workshop provided PhD students with the opportunity to network with colleagues at a similar career point, reflect on and share their research interests, and learn about the intricacies of post-PhD life and academia from experienced academics.

Conference opening, plenary and welcome drinks

The conference was officially opened by Professor James White on 4 September 2023. The conference began with a welcome plenary roundtable in the James McCune Smith Learning Hub with a focus on the current and future context for planning in

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Glasgow and Scotland. The welcome plenary included Jude Barber (*founding member of Collective Architecture*), Councillor Holly Bruce (*Green councillor for Langside Ward*) and Fiona Simpson (*Scotland's chief planner*) as discussants and was facilitated by Dr Andrew Hoolachan (*University of Glasgow*). The plenary roundtable was highly engaging with discussions on practical feminist approaches to urban planning and decision-making, the Scottish government's new National Planning Framework 4 and how it addresses the climate crisis, and sustainability.

The plenary roundtable was followed by the annual Royal Town Planning Institute awards ceremony, where high-quality planning research was recognised. The Sir Peter Hall Award for Excellence in Research and Engagement was awarded to Professor Claudia Carter (*Birmingham University*) and Simeon Shtebunaev (*Birmingham University*) for their development of 'Climania', a board game to engage adolescents in sustainable built environment planning. Dr Rachel Valbrun (*UCL*) was presented with the Early Career Researcher Award for her work examining urban design for post-disaster reconstruction. Danielle Brooke (*Anglia Ruskin University*) was awarded the Student Award for her research developing an index to evaluate public green spaces in Cambridgeshire. The Planning Practitioner Award was given to Kim Power and Sara Candiracci (*ARUP, United Nations Development Programme, and University of Liverpool*) for their research on how to design cities that work for women. At the completion of the awards ceremony, delegates were serenaded by the sound of bagpipes as they descended to the foyer of the James McCune Smith Learning Hub and made their way to the Hunterian Art Gallery for the conference welcome drinks and networking with other delegates.

Parallel sessions

During the three-day conference a plethora of papers were presented across ten thematic parallel tracks on 5 and 6 September. While it is impossible to summarise or report on all 180 papers presented, of those sessions that I did attend, I was impressed by the high quality, intellectual creativity, and criticality of the presentations. In the 'Emerging Theoretical Perspectives' stream I was amused by the novelty of being told to be more 'dog' by Dr Kiera Chapman (*University of Sheffield*) who engaged with the issue of decolonising planning theory through the lens of cynicism. In the same session Professor Gavin Parker (*University of Reading*) and Dr Mark Dobson (*University of Reading*) gave a thought-provoking talk on the impact of time and conceptualisations of time on planning systems and processes, based on their upcoming book on the topic. The 'Reform and Comparative Approaches to Planning for Housing' session included three topical and reflective presentations examining the issue of housing from three different angles, with Dr Phil O'Brien (*University of Glasgow*) and Professor John Sturzaker (*University of Hertfordshire*) discussing the history of planning

reform, arguing that incremental changes over time have had significant impacts on the planning system. Dr Martha Mingay (*University of Sheffield*) presented a case study examination of community land trusts in Haringey, London comparing state-led and community-led approaches to participatory planning. Finally, Dr Neale Blair (*Ulster University*) spoke about the unique governance challenges associated with planning for housing along the Dublin–Belfast corridor and identified a number of opportunities to enhance cross-border planning efficacy.

The parallel roundtable sessions were well attended and offered lengthy and stimulating discussions on the topics of nature recovery, planning reform, feminist planning in Glasgow, and the state of planning research, practice and policy in 2023. I attended and particularly enjoyed the ‘Planning Reform in England: State Failure, Ideology, Incremental Change’ roundtable session which featured a stimulating discussion between Professor John Sturzaker (*University of Hertfordshire*), Dr Andy Inch (*University of Sheffield*), Dr Olivier Sykes (*University of Liverpool*), Dr Phil O’Brien (*University of Glasgow*), Dr Kiera Chapman (*University of Sheffield*) and Dr Naomi Luhde-Thompson (*Oxford Brookes University/Rights: Community Action*). The roundtable explored a wide range of concerns centred around privatisation and centralisation within the English planning system. The discussion was sobering, reflective, and left much food for thought at the end of what felt like a very short session thanks to the highly engaging interactions between the speakers and audience members.

Mobile tours

The conference provided delegates with the opportunity to explore planning issues in Glasgow in situ, with five mobile tours offered. The tours variously engaged with retail retreat and regeneration, the history of Glasgow’s development, Glasgow’s tenements, heritage and cultural regeneration and design-led regeneration. The tours were led by the very knowledgeable team of scholars from the University of Glasgow who spoke passionately about the city of Glasgow and its development. The tours gave delegates a chance to see another side of Glasgow, and involved exploring the hidden alleyways, riverfront, city centre and tenements within the city centre, as well as taking the city’s famous subway system.

Conference dinner

The conference dinner was held at the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery on the evening of 5 September. Delegates were welcomed to the conference dinner with drinks paired with a jaunty playlist of songs being played on the museum’s pipe organ. During the welcome drinks, delegates were invited to experience the museum and art gallery’s extensive collection of paintings, taxidermy animals and historical artefacts.

The dinner was opened by Professor James White and was followed by a welcome and keynote speech from Professor Frank Coton (*senior vice principal and deputy vice chancellor [academic] of Glasgow University*). Professor Coton spoke passionately about the development of Glasgow University and the contributions of scholars such as James McCune Smith, the first African American to earn a medical degree from the University of Glasgow in 1837. The meal was a lovely way to end the first full day of the conference, chat with colleagues, and a great chance for many of the delegates to taste the Scottish delicacy haggis for the first time.

Keynote lecture and next UK-Ireland planning research conference

The conference concluded with a keynote lecture by Professor Yvette Rydin (*UCL*) who gave a provocative and engaging talk questioning traditional approaches to planning, arguing that it is possible to meet the challenges of planning without taking a growth mentality. Her talk drew on case study examples and illustrated creative but practical ways in which the planning system could be reformed to address the crises of climate change, inequality, and others.

Prior to the closure of the conference by Professor James White (*University of Glasgow*), Dr Chris Maidment (*University of Reading*) announced that the University of Reading would be hosting the UK-Ireland Planning Research Conference in September 2024, and gave a rousing speech about the many attractive and exciting opportunities that await next year's delegates.

The 2023 UK-Ireland Planning Conference provided an intense, but highly engaging three-day programme of talks and events. Thanks must be given to the conference organising committee at the University of Glasgow. The conference was well organised, well catered and delegates all thoroughly enjoyed themselves.