Urban Heritage: Discourses of Conservation and Equity

Yvonne J Rydin

00:02 Welcome to the Bartlett Planning Podcast. My name’s Yvonne Rydin and I'm Professor of Planning Environment and Public Policy at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London. This is a series of talks that you can download and listen to at your leisure.

00:16 In each podcast, I’ll be presenting a current research project being undertaken at the Bartlett School of Planning and interviewing the researcher. You will find a link to further information about the projects, including publications on the BSP website.

00:28 This autumn, we are showcasing the work of our vibrant research student community and today, I’m talking with Monica Lopez Franco who is approaching the submission of her thesis. Welcome Monica.

Monica Lopez Franco

00:39 Hi. Thank you for having me.

Yvonne J Rydin

00:43 Delighted. Now, your research concerns urban conservation in Mexico, so can you tell us a little bit about the urban heritage of Mexico, just so we understand the context.

Monica Lopez Franco

00:53 Yeah, so what we have in Mexico, is we have what we call historic centres. So we have different types of heritage, archaeological heritage and then we have monuments and then we have what’s called historic sites or monument sites.

01:14 So it’s still a very monuments-oriented framework for heritage conservation and it is under this framework that historic centres function from the national level.

01:26 So it’s mostly the amassing of monuments within the delimitation, a geographical delimitation, so in this lens, the scope of urban conservation is still quite limited.

01:44 So that is one of the things that I wanted to explore with my thesis, the extent of urban versus heritage conservation, sort of trying to separate the approach to each one, to sort of understand the level of integration of different urban aspects into historic centre frameworks.

Yvonne J Rydin

02:08 So if I understand you right, you’re saying that conservation in Mexico is very focused on monuments and buildings, rather than, as it were, the neighbourhood or the urban area. Is that correct?

Monica Lopez Franco

02:19 Yeah, so one thing that happens is there are a lot of historic *barrios* (boroughs) or neighbourhoods that are sort of encased within that monument area and the *barrios* have sort of a functioned at the urban scale, to plan a neighbourhood level inside of the historic centres, but this has functioned, mostly, from a social level.

02:53 The policy makers/planning officials are aware of these things and they have integrated them into instruments, but the main approach to historic centres, really, is [as a] monument space.

03:06 So there is a bit of a disconnect between planning and urban conservation or heritage conservation, which is one of things I explore, that has created a bit of a conflict, to sort of create more holistic places.

Yvonne J Rydin

03:22 I understand that UNESCO has been very influential in Mexico through its framework on historic urban landscapes. What is this framework? How is it supposed to work?

Monica Lopez Franco

03:34 So the Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) was a recommendation from 2011 by UNESCO and it sort of gathers together a lot of effort in UNESCO and in ICOMOS, through the years, to start integrating urban concepts to our heritage conservation and sort of moving from heritage conservation to an urban conservation framework, what was relevant for me is that…

04:04 So Mexico City has World Heritage Site title since 1987, I think, I might be wrong, I need to check that, but Guadalajara is not eligible to that title, but it does have a World Heritage monument and it has a small delimitation that has Creative Cities Network recognition.

04:36 So these two, of UNESCO title frameworks have been more encouraging to these cities to move towards a historic urban landscape framework, even though, at the national level, it’s still not recognised in legislation.

04:59 So that’s been like a driver, to move into that direction, although it’s still a bit patchy because at the national level, it’s not recognised, it does create a bit of a difficulty, institutionally.

Yvonne J Rydin

05:17 I understand that the UNESCO framework is also pushing towards seeing multiple values in preserving heritage. Is that correct?

05:26 Yes, so it’s moving towards a bit more… the way that I thought about it is that it sort of moves into a bit of a placemaking arena, so it’s trying to involve communities, to plan at the neighbourhood level, to integrate the different urban bits that form the historic centre because we do tend to think of the historic centre as like a unit which I do take it as a case study unit, but the truth of it is that inside of the historic centre, there are many different inner areas.

06:07 So it’s sort of bringing them together in a holistic way and I think that’s why it’s so interesting about the historic urban landscapes framework because it even has a four step toolkit, I think, to start integrating social aspects, financial aspects and going about it in a more integrated way.

Yvonne J Rydin

06:34 It does also seem that emphasising the economic or financial aspect, alongside the heritage aspect, has led to this kind of idea that tourism is a solution. What’s your view on that?

Monica Lopez Franco

06:47 Well, from what I could gather in literature and what I could gather from my own experiences as well because in Mexico, I studied the heritage conservation masters and I worked for a bit in cataloguing monuments for a while.

07:06 I think the World Heritage Convention was very useful in its time, but it did sort of lead towards a tourism centred approach of monuments and like a tourism economy and even for the local people, the intention was for them to get involved in the tourism economy which is interesting, but I think, on a day to day level, it didn’t quite work as it was intended, just because these places are more than just monument sites, basically.

Yvonne J Rydin

07:50 What were the problems that arose from relying on tourism?

Monica Lopez Franco

07:55 So, for example, one of the problems that I could see in different historic centres in Mexico is that values rose of buildings, so a lot of people either sold their homes or were just priced out.

08:15 Then another problem, in some particular cities more than others, but it was overcrowding with tourism and that became a really big issue because during the day and sometimes even during the night, the dynamics just changed so much that the previous local population, it would just feel too strange to them.

08:41 This gradually led to people leaving these areas and then they became entrapped in this dynamic of just being tourist sites.

08:56 I especially think of Guanajuato, the place where I did my masters, but this was also described a lot in Mexico City, for example.

Yvonne J Rydin

09:05 So does that make them vulnerable in this year, 2020, of the pandemic, when I presume tourist numbers have fallen quite radically?

Monica Lopez Franco

09:16 Yeah, I haven’t looked at numbers or anything yet, but I do think it has had a really big impact and in the Historic Centre of Mexico City, for example, there have been intentions and they have had these periods when they tried to open it up, for people to go back in and have these dynamics because it just became so empty and people were losing their livelihoods, but then it also created a problem because people were just overcrowding again.

Yvonne J Rydin

09:53 Difficult. I know your work seeks to incorporate a concern with social concerns into the discussion of urban heritage, particularly around housing and inequality. How did you manage that in your research project?

Monica Lopez Franco

10:07 Yes, so one thing that I was very interested in was housing, thinking about this phenomenon that I was talking [about] before and the way that I… so I read a lot about social justice and social equality and I became very interested in the right to housing, just because it has… although it’s quite vague and in literature, it’s still considered as developing.

10:42 I did find this structure of the different aspects, different elements to fulfil the right and I found that very interesting, focusing first of all on tenure and then affordability, housing quality, location, culture, all these different elements that I could see…

11:00 I found that intersected into what I wanted to look into, so it became, for me, an evaluative framework, to see how these different aspects were being fulfilled or not, within the instruments and also the application of the instruments.

11:26 So I focused on two, different corridors inside of the historic centre as examples of an urban renewal with urban conservation intentions and evaluating… okay, so how is housing working there, you’re looking at the…

Yvonne J Rydin

11:47 What were your key findings around housing and equality and conservation?

Monica Lopez Franco

11:52 So one of the things that I found is that because urban conservation is still very much monuments based and there is a very big expectation of… it’s still quite like of.. it’s still quite elitist in a way.

12:13 So it does expect a strong investment from a strong individual or a developer and the frameworks, for example, around that are more developer oriented than small owner or tenant oriented.

12:31 So, for example, a normal person would really struggle to get a loan for housing in the historic centre because loans can’t be given for buildings over a certain amount of years.

12:45 Whereas the developer can have incentives to have like tax incentives, [like the] development transference right, even like in the Historic Centre in Mexico City, if the developer has an intention to rent the building, they get a percentage of taxes off.

13:09 So there is an imbalance in the incentives to address historic buildings that really benefits developers a lot more and it sort of creates a landscape of inequality because… that is sort of reinforced by discourse because in discourse, the individual owner or the tenant are seen as this ignorant and sort of less capable stakeholder, but they also don’t get the same level of incentives or attention.

Yvonne J Rydin

13:54 It’s interesting there that you mentioned the term, ‘discourse’ because I know that on a theoretical level, your thesis draws on the work of Michel Foucault and Martin Heidegger, with this emphasis on the role of discourses. Can you just explain that a little bit for us?

Monica Lopez Franco

14:10 Yeah, so basically, looking at the literature and how to approach the thesis, discourse analysis sort of made it very interesting because it does have an evaluative approach from a narrative level.

14:32 I found Foucault especially interesting because the way that the framework, for him, works is that space or any other element is a representation of discourse.

14:44 And this element also continues that representation or the establishment of that discourse, so really, it seems to me that space was the embodiment of discourse, but was also making sure that discourse continues.

15:06 In that way, looking at the policy instruments and the implementation of them, it became very interesting to be able to see that.

15:16 Hajer, what I found very interesting with him was he does bring it down to an urban level a bit more and he talks about discourse in the urban space as sites of argumentation and then he identifies key incidents.

15:37 Then, through these key incidents, identifying a phenomena and it just became very interesting to be able to analyse space and social dynamics, through a discursive lens that… f I got the sense that it allowed me to draw the patterns between the discourse and the practice, the discourse and the social inequalities in a very clear way that can be hidden sometimes because discourse can be hidden at times.

16:18 Like people can say something, really meaning something else and sometimes, it can be quite difficult to trace and doing this analysis was very helpful to be able to trace this a bit more and to be able to systematically differentiate between the different intentions and the different meanings.

16:37 And then the different practices because there was also, at times, a big disconnect between what is being said, what the objective is being said to be and then what the actual result or implementation is.

Yvonne J Rydin

16:55 It’s very interesting. How did that impact your methodology? What did you actually do in order to capture those discourses and be able to trace the links that you were talking about there?

Monica Lopez Franco

17:09 Yeah, so I sort of developed three different approaches.

17:17 So in the first, I just focused on policy and interviews as texts and just analysing all of those in a textual way.

17:32 And then going from there to see the spatial implications of interviews and policies and then starting to see the reflection of them, as well, in space.

17:43 So the second approach was looking a lot at the urban space and then the third approach was seeing how the urban space and how the discourse… the dominant discourse, to call it, how that had an impact on housing.

18:06 In that sense, I looked at housing in the discourse as well from residents, so it was very interesting to see the narrative that dominant discourse was carrying and then comparing that to the narratives by residents where you could see that there were a lot of key incidents that were common between both, but then the way in which they were experienced or described or explained were very different.

18:39 And then, looking at space and looking at the policies themselves, that provided a very wide picture of the situation.

Yvonne J Rydin

18:49 So it’s a combination of analysing those discourses in the interviews in quite a lot of detail, but also, it sounds like there was kind of triangulation, you were looking at some quantitative data and what your knowledge of the city as well, alongside these discourses, present in different people’s expressions of what they feel about the city and their heritage.

19:11 Is that the kind of approach?

Monica Lopez Franco

19:13 Yes, so I also looked at census data, for example and I looked at rent changes, for example.

19:29 I compared discourse to change in rent, so how were rents, at a certain point, compared to what residents said they were before and also using the policy instruments to triangulate that as well because there is a mention of that in policy instruments.

19:51 So yeah, looking at quantitative data, mostly just to triangulate and I also looked at different levels of space, so also looking at it from a governance point of view because it became very clear that each…

20:13 So like the public space, the spaces that are a bit semi-public and then the private spaces like housing, it became very clear that they were each considered as belonging to a different stakeholder.

20:29 There was also something evidenced in the discourse and that was also something that became very useful, to sort of understand the dynamics of everything that was happening.

20:38 Then, with the quantitative data, it just helped to substantiate the argument.

Yvonne J Rydin

20:45 Yeah, there’s a lot of skill in pulling all that data from different sources together in that kind of way.

20:52 I know you contributed to the launch of the BSP Expo which is currently available on our website and you said you hoped that this kind of emphasis on discourses would also be useful to planning practitioners.

21:05 Can you say a little bit about how that might be the case?

Monica Lopez Franco

21:09 I guess, now, I’ve become a bit of an advocate on the importance of discourse and the role that discourse has in shaping practices and in shaping policy as well and the importance of it.

21:28 I think it would be very interesting to see policy makers and planners becoming aware of the importance of discourse and planning from a… I think they are, but at the moment, discourse is more used as a tool to implement visions and ideas, but maybe quite personal and not as socially integrative.

21:55 So it would be interesting to see more of a congruent approach to planning, in practice, considering that discourse will really shape and have an impact.

Yvonne J Rydin

22:18 Can you just tell us a little bit about your experience of being a research student at UCL?

Monica Lopez Franco

22:23 So I’ve been here for some years now and it really has been a really great experience and a great opportunity.

22:35 I’ve learned so much from everyone and when I first arrived, I didn’t have much of an academic background and I think everyone is so nice and so friendly, it was a really great experience to get kick started on a path into academia, without feeling too out of context, I guess.

23:07 I think just everyone is doing so many interesting things and it’s just so incredible to see that happening and to be a part of an environment where all of these things are happening and it’s really inspiring.

Yvonne J Rydin

23:25 It’s really good to hear that.

2:3:27 Do you have any advice to someone who may be listening to this and who’s thinking of applying to a doctoral programme?

Monica Lopez Franco

23:34 Yeah, I think one of the main things for me was to talk to people as much as possible and to try and learn from people as much as possible and also like be open to the fact that we don’t know everything and we are still learning and not be frustrated by that.

23:53 I think that’s one of the things that I would probably tell myself, if I could go back, to just be open, to keep learning and that’s why, for me, talking to people is so important because you learn so much from talking to other people.

24:09 Like I say, it can be so inspiring, so rather than bringing you down or anything, it really just gives you ideas and keeps you going as well.

Yvonne J Rydin

24:20 That seems very, very wise words. Thank you so much, Monica.

24:24 You can see more of the work of our research student community in our virtual BSP Expo which is available online.

24:31 This is a virtual walk through of the cloisters of UCL and there, amongst the work of our under-graduate and post-graduate students, you will find a PhD wall.

24:39 Click on a tile on the wall and you’ll find details of one of our research student projects. Do try it out.

24:45 You will find more details on the BSP website and there you can also find past episodes of the BSP Podcast or you can search for the Bartlett Planning Podcast, through the usual sites and search engines.

24:57 So thanks again to Monica and goodbye to you and thank you for listening.