

Experiential planning education with Southern partners: Critical reflections for the (post)COVID “global” University

Planning programmes in UK universities and accrediting bodies such as the [Royal Town Planning Institute](#) are committed to promoting just, equitable, and sustainable global urban futures. Toward this end, more attention is being paid to realities in the global South where urbanisation occurs at an unprecedented level and where there is a need for planning professionals with the relevant skills and knowledge base to assist in making urban places that leave no one behind.

As academics point out the limitations of universal planning fixes as well as uni-directional North-South learning and policy transfers, the need for the co-production of context-relevant knowledge and more equitable North-South partnerships moves centre stage. Meanwhile, as students increasingly demand the decolonisation of their curriculum, planning departments must consider new teaching approaches that incorporate multiple types of academic and non-academic knowledge and more experiential learning experiences outside the university classroom.



In our own teaching in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (USP) at the University of Sheffield, we run a fieldtrip to the city of Durban in South Africa. This fieldtrip has run since 2019 and is tied to a core module that introduces students to conceptual and policy debates on informality. In Durban, we collaborate with a local NGO called [Asiye eTafuleni](#) (AeT) that supports informal traders working on the inner-city markets of [Warwick Junction](#) as well as academics and students from [Durban University of Technology](#) (DUT)

and the [University of KwaZulu Natal](#) (UKZN). While we were unable to run a ‘live’ fieldtrip in 2020 due to travel restrictions linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, we instead ran the fieldtrip online, and continued collaborating ‘virtually’ with AeT and Durban-based academics. To some extent, this still allowed our students to learn about the challenges and opportunities facing informal traders from the perspective of our Southern partners, and to think through their role as future transnational professionals.

The following insights come from our 2019 and 2020 student cohorts – for whom this fieldtrip often represented a first encounter with the global South – and Durban-based collaborators. Our discussion focuses on the potential and constraints of ‘live’ and ‘virtual’ field-based learning with Southern partners that needs to be considered by planning schools, especially in a (post)COVID world.

Uncovering planning myths through experiential learning

“Perhaps the biggest message that I took away from the content and learning process of this module is that secondary knowledge and learning from a distance is simply insufficient. (...) There are about 8,000 traders operating in Warwick (...) All of these people possess their own situated knowledge about the market, and it is their experiences that should inform any interventions”. This testimony from one of our students highlights that ordinary people, in this case informal market vendors, often

possess an important source of knowledge about planning that academic and policy texts are unable to provide.



Our Durban fieldtrip exposes the mismatch between planning theories, mainstream practices and grounded realities. Prior to interacting with our Southern partners, students are introduced to Durban's Apartheid planning history as well as the municipal government's contemporary vision for the city – closely building upon the image of the “World Class City” – and plans that seek to bring “Dubai to Durban”. Once in the city, students engage with local researchers, NGO representatives and people living and working informally who

often highlight how past and present planning interventions adversely affect or fail to meet the needs of the urban majority. When conducted ‘live’, such encounters provide a five sense experience that enables students to learn about the realities of post-colonial Apartheid planning hangovers – such as ongoing segregation, racism and marginalisation – and the practical consequences of the ‘World Class City’ image – gentrification and associated livelihood threats for low-income residents.

Interactions in the field, according to another reflection by one of our students, help to “*reposition power asymmetries and initiate a process of seeing from the South*”. Understood as such, then, fieldtrips – when designed in a way that they put otherwise marginalised voices at centre stage – can lead to a decolonial process of unlearning universal planning truths. Once the limits of planning as we (normally) know it are uncovered, students can explore the potential of alternative solutions.

Learning from local changemakers

Our Durban fieldtrip places local NGO professionals, community activists, and engaged scholars into the spotlight. By engaging with respected local gatekeepers, students are able to enter new urban worlds, or as one student explained: “*what gave us greater legitimacy was being with the wardens [associated with the NGO AeT] and people who knew the markets and its traders*”.

Direct engagement with local professionals exposes students to important social skills required for achieving meaningful and sustainable change in urban communities. For example, reflecting about a visit to the informal settlement “Quarry Road”, which was facilitated by Durban-based researcher Dr Cathy Sutherland, one of our students highlighted that “*through working with UKZN I saw great examples of ‘working with’ rather than ‘writing about’, which I believe will inspire my work*”. The student here refers to Cathy's capacity to build trustful long-term relationships with Quarry Road residents. Another student noted how they were “*definitely piggybacking on the trust she [Cathy] had*



established with this community”, realising that without the company of locally respected professionals an engagement with local communities “would have not been available”.

For our local partner organisations, working with students is considered of mutual benefit as it helps them to influence how planning education is delivered at universities and to prepare future generations of practitioners to reflect better on the realities of people who live and work informally.

Field-based learning in a (post)COVID world

“And, while the [COVID-19] crisis has evidenced how research and analysis correspond to a reality that might not come back soon, the value of understanding local realities and uniqueness of places is now more important than before.” (student, 2020)

As it unfolds globally, the COVID-19 crisis is radically transforming the way we live, work and spend our free time in cities. As highlighted in the above testimony by one of our students, this requires new and locally grounded planning responses. In recent months, government-led policy and planning interventions across the globe have focused on strict lockdown measures that are often impossible to implement in dense low-income communities or that have further marginalised those who live and work informally. In Durban, for example, lockdown measures forced [informal workers operating in Warwick Junction](#) to stop trading for more than six weeks, leading to significant declines in incomes. In informal settlements, where residents lack adequate access to water and sanitation facilities, physical distancing practices and hygiene measures are difficult to maintain. Despite all this, local communities, and support NGOs such as AeT, [developed strategies](#) to cope with the pandemic and associated uncertainty.



We covered the above topics in this year’s fieldtrip module which, due to lockdown restrictions, was [delivered virtually](#). We presented students with a wide array of learning material, pre-recorded lectures and facilitated live online discussion sessions with AeT’s Richard Dobson. While our students evaluated this experience positively, most of them also highlighted that the switch to online learning should not be maintained, warning that it is

setting the wrong precedents.

One student highlighted that virtual learning *“automatically excluded the participation of anybody or anything that was [or cannot be] invited into the virtual space”* – in other words, the majority of people living and working informally who are at once negatively affected by COVID-related lockdown measures and at the same time digitally excluded from international learning exchanges

around this topic. Another student further explained that learning about a place virtually and remotely is an “*uncomfortable task (...) reminiscent of the colonial era*”, especially when this is undertaken “*from the isolated safety of the global north*” and characterised by “*the lack of participation from beneficiaries*”.

These honest testimonies point towards an ongoing need for experiential and field-based learning. This should be seriously considered by UK planning schools who, in a (post)COVID world, need to balance global commitments towards internationalisation, decolonisation and sustainability with growing pressures by university management to restructure teaching delivery in a more cost-effective way. Instead of returning to a teaching model that is prioritising online classes delivered predominantly by UK-based academic frontline staff, we therefore call for planning schools to sustain Southern academic and non-academic partnerships and to embed fieldtrips within novel modes of ‘blended’ learning.

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