

Planning history research and urban heritage conservation

Interrelations, barriers and future directions

Nan Li
Southeast University

Abstract

It is argued that the planning history field has existed since the 1970s¹, and research in planning history mainly encompasses thoughts, regulations, and ideas of urban planning. Research in planning history not only enriches an understanding of the influence that urban planning exerts on places that we live in, but also provides a basis and direction for future planning practices. From a planning perspective, urban heritage conservation can be seen as the process of maintaining and transmission of cultural heritage assets in a way that causes significant messages to remain intact and accessible to future generations. Therefore, close linkages between respective theoretical explorations are discerned. It is mainly because urban heritage conservation can be achieved through planning practice, and academic research in planning history lays some theoretical basis for heritage planning work. However, planning history research is rarely conducted nowadays, and mostly by higher-education academics; and the significance of planning history research is not widely recognised by heritage planning and conservation practitioners. This paper aims to explore the interrelations between planning history research and urban heritage conservation practice, and suggest the approaches to better integrating them.

Keywords

planning history, planning theory, urban heritage, heritage conservation practice, conservation planning

How to cite

Nan Li “Planning history research and urban heritage conservation: interrelations, barriers and future directions”. In Ian Morley and Hendrik Tieben (eds.), *International Planning History Society Proceedings*, 20th IPHS Conference, “The (High Density) Metropolis and Region in Planning History,” Hong Kong, 2 - 5 July, 2024, TU Delft Open, 2024.

DOI: 10.7480/iphhs.2024.1.7635

INTRODUCTION

Planning is a multi-disciplinary subject, and historians view it from various perspectives². According to Elliott³, ‘planning history’ ‘provides insight into current planning practice as it evolved from past practice’. Academic research in planning history encompasses all phases and aspects of the urban planning process such as theories, regulations, approaches, principles of urban planning. It also studies comprehensively and intensively about what has happened in the places (e.g. urban areas, towns) that we live in, and what people have done to improve our living conditions. Hence, research in planning history helps enhance a depth of knowledge of the past planning practice, and the experience or legacy that they left also lays a solid foundation for future planning practices.

‘Urban heritage’ normally refers to older or historic elements located in urban areas (e.g. archaeological vestiges, and historic buildings), and the city itself can be seen as heritage, which is a special type of cultural property (e.g. neighbourhoods, urban centres, and historic cities)⁴. Urban heritage conservation here could mean the approaches to “extending the life of urban heritage while strengthening transmission of its significant heritage messages and values”, when applying UNESCO’s definition of cultural heritage conservation⁵.

Therefore, as can be seen from the definitions of planning history and urban heritage conservation only, there are close interrelations in between, the main reason is that heritage is not able to be discussed without concerning historical impacts. However, research in urban heritage conservation or its practices seems solely vested in conserving the historic elements or enhancing the aesthetics of the city. The significance of planning history research is ignored by heritage planning and conservation practitioners. This paper aims to propose feasible approaches to incorporating research findings from planning history research into urban heritage conservation practices. This paper will first examine the meanings of the two terms ‘planning history’ and ‘urban heritage conservation’ as well as the interrelations in between, and then discuss the gaps between academic research in planning history and heritage conservation practice, finally suggestions on better integrating these disciplines will be made.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS OF ‘PLANNING HISTORY’ AND ‘URBAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION’

The emergence of the planning history field can be dated back to the 1970s, when people started to write about the history of planning, and its theories and practice⁶. However, the field of planning history itself still remained to be written or researched on around that time⁷. The early achievements of planning history focused on what happened in history, for example, the events that occurred in urban spaces and the key stakeholders involved in these events. With the planning history field became more and more interdisciplinary and international, it was increasingly recognised as the discipline that inspire ideas and thoughts or provide effective advice on future planning practice. For instance, knowledge in planning history helps

delivering a better understanding of the historic environment as well as the impacts that the past planning practice on it, as Carola Hein put: “planning history provides an opportunity to understand the motivations for planned interventions and serve as a foundation for future interventions”⁸.

Elliott⁹ sees planning history as ‘an applied discipline’ as it “emerges out of social conditions and the practice solutions we have developed over time”, and it can also be codified as ‘a professional activity’ which “originally transmitted by practitioners via apprenticeships”. Thus, planning history enriches a deep understanding of current planning practice, and precisely the progress of how past practice evolved. Furthermore, planning history studies things happened in all phases of the whole planning progress, hence it becomes the only discipline that studies all details of planning practices, which gives us opportunities to reflect upon. The four main phases of urban planning include ‘identification and description’ (e.g. collecting information of aims, stakeholders, documentation of description), ‘assessment and analysis’ (e.g. taking stock of cultural significance or values, physical condition, management context), response or making decisions (e.g. establishing purpose and policy, setting objectives, developing strategies, synthesising and preparing plan), periodic review and revision¹⁰.

When it comes to discuss ‘urban heritage conservation’, this paper prefers to define this concept by separating it into ‘urban heritage’ and ‘conservation’. Since the word ‘heritage’ literally means what is handed down from the past, ‘urban heritage’ can be understood as what is handed down from the past in urban areas. The concept of urban heritage has two meanings: it can refer to the list of heritage elements located in urban areas (e.g. archaeological vestiges, historical buildings, vernacular architecture, historical gardens, social practices, rituals, and festive events, among others); it also sees the city itself as heritage, which means the city is a special type of cultural property that is mainly associated with neighbourhoods, urban centres, and historic cities¹¹. Thus, heritage is not only just an architecture as it is prone to be understood as, it could also be spaces at any larger scale. The term ‘conservation’ can be interpreted as ‘heritage conservation’ here, it is mainly to do with transmission of cultural heritage, as Sir Bernard M. Feilden, the former director of ICCROM, put: “The fundamental purpose of conservation is to ensure the transmission of our cultural heritage to those who follow us, its significant messages intact and accessible to the greatest degree possible”. Hossagrahar¹², the Deputy Director for the World Heritage Centre at UNESCO, elaborates on the interface between heritage conservation and urban planning, she thinks “Heritage conservation, an organised effort to protect cultural heritage, is deeply intertwined with modern city planning”, but she also argues that their meaning is contrasted with each other. It is because heritage conservation is more on conserving and preserving the past or what remains from the past, while the purpose of urban planning is mainly on setting development goals and finding feasible approaches to achieving these goals. Even the contradictions exist, these two subjects are still closely interrelated with each other, in other words, their interrelations outweigh their contradictions.

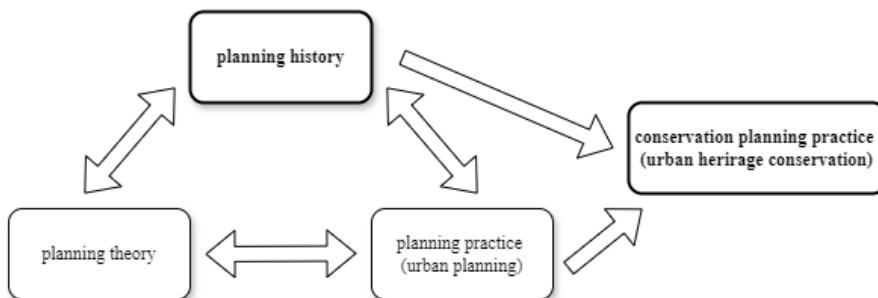


Fig. 1. Interrelations and interface among planning history, planning theory, planning practice, and heritage conservation

INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN 'PLANNING HISTORY' AND 'URBAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION'

The links between 'planning history' and 'urban heritage conservation' seem not very straightforward. However, since conservation planning is involved in general urban planning, the indirect connections between them do exist. Carola Hein clarified the role that planning plays in "the historical transformation of cities and regions", she argued that "planning history can also help us understand the downsides or shortcomings of historic planning practice and the needs for novel approaches"¹³. Thus, planning history helps us or gives us an opportunity to reflect upon past historic planning practice that also includes conservation planning practice. In addition, planning history enriches a comprehensive understanding of resilient planning system for the future and potential challenges, while taking lessons from the past into account¹⁴. As resilience is much to do with sustainability, planning history can therefore become an effective tool to conceptualise the goals of sustainable development, one of which definitely concerns heritage conservation.

Furthermore, when discussing about planning history, it is hard to avoid mentioning 'planning theory'. While 'planning history' "provides insight into current planning practice as it evolved from past practice", 'planning theories' "provide insight into the processes and practices that underlay our profession"¹⁵. Thus, 'planning history' is more to do with planning practice, while 'planning theory' is more focused on how planning practice is implemented. For example, planning theories help with a deep understanding of how cities and regions work, how planning could or should be conducted, and how the planning itself can be an approach to activating and engaging its core functions and values¹⁶. There are close associations between planning theory and planning practice because theories also learn and inform practice, as Elliott¹⁷ argued. Therefore, planning history helps to construct planning theory, and planning theory can inform future planning practice. Heritage conservation can be achieved through urban planning, or in other words, urban planning is an approach to conserving heritage or conservation planning. Theories that obtained from planning history research can also be the legacy that we can learn for our current planning or conservation practice. The

theories here are not limited to planning theories from early time, they also include theories that the planning discipline that emerged from other disciplines such as geography, sociology, history, and so forth. The interrelations and interface among these terms can be explained by Figure 1.

For example, the place-making theory was vastly promoted during the urban renaissance time of UK. The origin of this theory can date back to 1953, when the 'artistic tradition' got popular; theorists proposed the concept of place-making to capture the complexity of cities, which focused more on the public space between buildings. In 1988, Francis Tibbalds further clarified the connotation of place creation, namely humanised design, aiming at promoting complexity and pleasure in the built environment. During the urban renaissance time, Sheffield's urban development focused on 'the making of urban places', it built a number of public spaces around its city centre. For instance, the seven public spaces on the golden route not only create an impressive gateway space for visitors and provide quality public space for people's social activities, but also reconnect Sheffield railway station with the city centre and ensure a clear and an unobstructed pedestrian route¹⁸. Every public space has its own characteristics, while also exhibits similarities in design elements (see Figure 2) such as flowing water, highly crafted metal and Pennine sandstone. These design elements well indicate Sheffield's unique city character because the seven rivers that pass Sheffield, Sheffield's metal manufacturing industry (e.g. steel manufacturing), and the local natural material in Yorkshire. For example, the Peace Garden, which is just behind Sheffield Town Hall, is now a popular place for people to carry out all sorts of social activities (see Figures 3&4); its materials and design are all 'made in Sheffield'. Since one principle of place-making is to emphasize the place's unique identity in its design, this theory is well applied in the design of public spaces in Sheffield. Therefore, learning from planning history and the theories obtained from planning history, can help delivering better urban development.



Fig. 2. Stone water feature in Peace Garden, Sheffield



Fig. 3 & 4. People relax at Peace Garden in summer

BARRIERS OF APPLYING FINDINGS FROM PLANNING HISTORY RESEARCH TO URBAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION PRACTICE

Nowadays the field of 'planning history' and its academic research, including their significance, is not much elaborated in the planning discipline and also heritage conservation work. In terms of urban heritage conservation, it tends to focus solely on an historic building and restoring its aesthetic aspects, rather than taking account of the whole area where it locates. Thus, it is often to see that the historic building itself is well maintained, whereas the surroundings are in unpleasant condition. Moreover, nowadays conservation planning, as well as urban planning, both prioritise economic development in practice. To clarify, much urban heritage conservation work will not be proposed until it proves it will bring economic benefits. For instance, urban heritage in prosperous cities is normally well conserved, it is mainly because those cities are more likely to obtain funding and the finished conservation work is able to attract more visitors.

The city of Yantai is located in the East of Shandong Peninsula, adjacent to the Yellow Sea and the Bohai Sea, it faces the Liaodong Peninsula, Japan and South Korea across the sea (see Figure 5). Since July 2013, Yantai has become the 122nd national historic city. Now there are 142 in total. In July 2023, the Shandong Provincial Government formally approved the '*Conservation Plan for the Historic City of Yantai 2021-2035*', which aims to Improve and enhance the awareness of historical and cultural value and historic city conservation, fully demonstrate the unique charm of Yantai and so forth. This city originates from a coastal city, Qishan Weisuo City, which belongs to Fushan County. At that time, the regional central city of Jiaodong Peninsula is Dengzhou prefectural city.

In August 1861, Yantai was officially opened as a port, becoming the first treaty port in Shandong and one of the first three cities in the north (Tianjin, Niuzhuang, Yantai). By 1932, a total of 16 countries had established consulates in Yantai Hill and its surroundings, among which 14 consulate buildings survived to this day (see Figures 6&7). There is an abundance of natural and cultural heritage that the period of opening has left. Now there are a few designated 'historic conservation areas' around the city of Yantai, and a number of well-preserved

buildings (e.g. taxation office, foreign firms, and business houses) that present high historical and cultural value. The work on urban heritage conservation in Yantai is generally going well, however, it still faces some challenges. There is an uneven focus on urban development which focuses more on well-preserved architecture, and also more on the Yantai central urban area, not the historic city agglomerations. The urban heritage of Yantai includes traditional counties (e.g. Penglai, Mouping) as well. Moreover, there are issues with current historic city conservation planning strategies. Current strategies do not help to show unique characteristics of Yantai as a historic city and Chinese coastal cities, and they do not take account of Yantai's own planning heritage (e.g. planning thoughts, planning system, planning approaches, etc.)¹⁹.

In addition to the issues with conservation planning, obstacles of conducting planning history research could also be a reason. Although there has been more and more research activity and publication on the history of planning, this area is still not as large as other subfields within planning. Many planning historians do not think they belong to the planning field, they might think they belong to other academic disciplines (e.g. history, geography, architecture, landscape architecture and art history)²⁰.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS ON BETTER INTEGRATING PLANNING HISTORY RESEARCH AND URBAN HERITAGE CONSERVATION PRACTICE

Sheffield is a city that was built on seven hills, 61% of the entire area is green space; one-third of the city is located in the Peak District National Park. Because of its central location in the UK, it has excellent rail and road links. Sheffield's unique geographical location provides the city with excellent steelmaking conditions. Nowadays Sheffield is famous for the names 'the steel city' and 'the greenest city' in the UK. Sheffield has a rich heritage, most of which are important historic buildings located in the city centre; although these buildings might look a bit plain, they are still of considerable significance as witness to its industrial past²¹.

In the 1940s and 1950s, the post-war 'positive' planning by the public sector was swamped by private-sector redevelopment. Sheffield was replanned in 1945, then the city underwent another four major plans before 2000. In 1999, the Lord Rogers' Urban Task Force report promoted the urban renaissance in England, then the general quality of urban environments and the urban design dimension became the utmost important aspect of planning work. As mentioned earlier, with the application of the place-making theory or approach, many places with high-quality designs were planned and delivered such as the seven public spaces on 'the Gold Route'. Now the city has transformed successfully from an industrial city in history to a liveable and vibrant city. Sheffield City Council made lots of efforts to maintain and promote the city's distinct industrial status. It is noteworthy that the making of development plans of Sheffield is based on a thorough analysis of the city's history, including its planning history. These plans do not confine to local plans for the whole city, they also include development plans at other city scales.



Fig. 5. Location of the city of Yantai



Fig. 6 & 7. Former British Consulate; Former East Customs Tax Department

From studies on Sheffield's heritage conservation experience, there are a few things that can be suggested on better integrating planning history research findings and heritage conservation work. It is more important to conserve the wider area than just a building when designating development plans. For example, the Sheffield City Centre Strategic Vision 2022²² shows a plan of the city centre, illustrating six city character areas around the city centre (see Figure 8). In these character areas, the historic sites and cultural quarters are defined. Hence, urban heritage is conserved within the wider area that they are in. In these defined character areas, there are a number of good practice examples of urban heritage conservation such as the Kelham Island Industrial Conservation Area²³. Kelham Island is one of Sheffield's oldest manufacturing sites and therefore proudly shows the city's industrial history, is now transformed into a vibrant and modern neighbourhood that presents an abundance of historic elements.

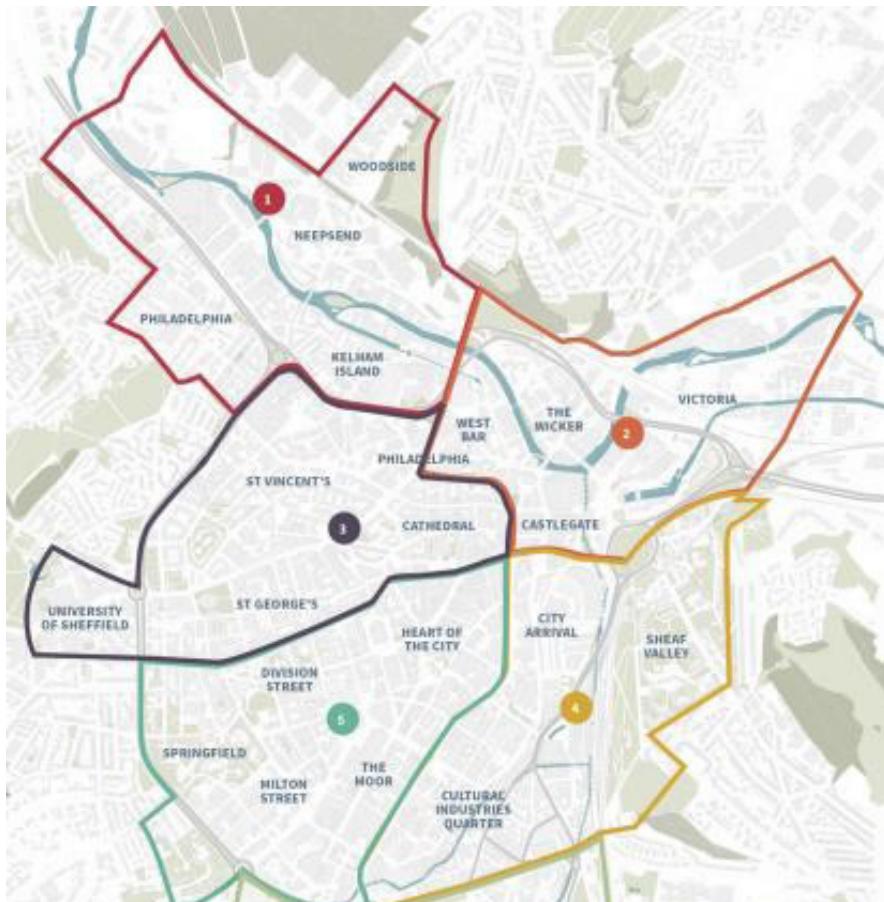


Fig. 8. A plan of Sheffield City Centre illustrating the location and boundaries of the 6 city character areas and the 23 neighbourhoods

When undertaking the heritage conservation work, all stakeholders should at least have a basic knowledge of the area's planning history before starting doing their role, especially for plan makers. Prior to the start of conservation, the team might want to consult researchers or academic researchers in planning history or those who have substantial knowledge of the place's development planning experiences. Their knowledge in planning history helps to identify the goals of conservation work, most of which are prone to enhance the place's historic character. Plan makers need to be aware of the place's unique historical and cultural value, evolution process, spatial pattern, and so forth. The Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) approach can also be applied where appropriate in the conservation work, in order to reinforce the unique city identity and character, and also balance urban development and life quality on a sustainable basis. Since heritage stands for emotional connections between people and the physical environment, one goal of the conservation work is to facilitate 'relationship building',

as Steve Brown, special advisor to GML heritage suggest, “for me, heritage is about relationship building, facilitating connections between groups who may value places and practices differently. Relationship building creates a better and more respectful future for everyone.”²⁴

In 1982, the State Council of China announced the first batch of 24 historic cities, and China began the historical and cultural conservation work at the urban space level. Now it has been 40 years since the historic city conservation work was in place, thus an abundance of experience in conserving these historic cities is now obtained.

It is important to reconstruct the unique historical and cultural spatial structure of historic cities²⁵. The conservation work of China's historic cities is significantly different from that of general cultural relics and monuments. Urban space conservation is characterised by integrity, hierarchy, and extensiveness, while cultural relics and monuments conservation is characterised by independence and quantification. Conservation planning of historic cities could start from the recognition of its authenticity, conducting holistic conservation, and defining the local or unique character of its urban space. Then it needs to explore the multi-dimensional and structural interaction between historic cities and natural landscapes, spatial functions, administrative governance, and urban-rural relations, in order to reconstruct the consistency and continuity of urban spatial structures in history. With regards to the current situation where the urban-rural spatial relationship is weakened or even disintegrated, the conservation, restoration, and development of the historical and cultural spatial structure of historic cities are of vital importance for the whole city's development planning²⁶.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

From what has been discussed above, there are close interrelations between planning history research and heritage conservation practice, and acquiring a deep knowledge of planning history helps with the continuity of history in conservation practice. Planning, as well as heritage conservation, are both tasked with setting goals and using knowledge and action to achieve these goals. As mentioned earlier, urban heritage can mean a bigger urban area such as a historic district and the city itself can be heritage, hence conservation work is involved in planning process, and planning work must take account of heritage conservation. In other words, planning can be an effective approach to delivering heritage conservation achievements.

Academic research in the planning history field not only enriches an understanding of the influence that urban planning exerts on places (e.g. urban areas, regions) that human beings live in, but also provides a basis and direction for future planning practice. Amongst the three types of theories (normative theories, disciplinary theories, procedural or process theories) that Elliott established in 2023, clearly a deep and broad understanding of ‘planning history’ contributes to the construction of procedural or process theories, which mainly examines the action of planners²⁷. Such examination of planners’ actions therefore become the experience that planners can learn for future planning practice.

Although their interrelations are recognised, there are still a number of obstacles in applying the research findings of planning history to heritage conservation work. It is not only because current conservation planning is more prone to focus on a historic building or a monument only, rather than on a wider area, it is also because planning history seems to be an ignored field in the urban planning discipline. It is important to recognise the value of planning history research at first place, and all stakeholders working in conservation should have a basic knowledge of the place's planning history. It is not easy to ensure all urban heritage is conserved well in all places due to differentiation in economic circumstances, at least preserving it still helps. Urban heritage tells a whole story of the city and facilitates connections between the city and its residents, having a good knowledge of planning history and applies it to conservation work, will help with narrative or story-telling of urban heritage.

ENDNOTES

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IMAGE SOURCES

- Figure 1 Made by author.
- Figures 2 & 3 & 4 Photos taken by author.
- Figure 5 Made by author.
- Figures 6 & 7 Photos taken by author.
- Figure 8 Sheffield City Council. *Sheffield City Centre Strategic Vision*. (Sheffield: Sheffield City Council, 2022).