

Keynote Speech

REFLECTIONS FROM A DOCTORAL STUDY AND CANDIDACY:

LIVING IN A LIMINAL SPACE

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It is a great honor and privilege getting the opportunity to make this speech at the 17th ICBM 2020 PhD Colloquium. First, let me begin by thanking the 17th ICBM team for inviting me to the Colloquium. We should all applaud the efforts of the ICBM 2020 team for being resilient during the current crisis and adapting with “the new normal” for conferences of 2020 and holding the first virtual conference for ICBM.

One of the primary aims of ICBM is to inspire doctoral candidates or early career researchers who are connecting with us in this event. Accordingly, my speech aims to draw some of the randomly selected reflections from my doctoral study and candidacy, providing a snapshot as to how I grappled with the liminal space of the research project. Listening to these glimpses would help you identify your journey for the study.

The Study in a Nutshell

First, let me give a brief idea about my study. For my doctoral study at the University of Birmingham United Kingdom under the Commonwealth Scholarship, I worked on this notion of ‘Sustainable Housing Affordability’ and what the Institutionalist Approach can offer to achieve it in the context of England. Sustainable Housing Affordability, in general, would mean afford houses within our means and make them sustainable on par with our shared aspirations. The current understanding and solutions to sustainable housing affordability housing notion,

whether it be coming from economic approach, policy approach or geographic approach is underpinned by the mainstream economic view of the world. Mainstream economics ground the understanding of the notion through the structural outcomes of markets i.e. it's a disequilibrium problem between housing or rental prices and households' purchasing capacity. The limitation of this understanding is that it does not surface the households' and other agency aspirational connection that forms such structural outcomes, and, as a result, dislocates the temporal effects to such structural outcomes. So, planners and policymakers attempt to achieve this notion by looking at only one part of the problem. The answers to social problems are dependent on how well it is defined, and the questions are framed. Particularly, this way of understanding the notion is problematic in the 21st century, where globalization is much intensified. Housing like many other is commodified and supplied through markets. Globalization pushes capital and labour markets to become deregulated and flexible, and economies to be largely dominated by large corporations in the light of economic development. Such scenarios influence the individuals to have more choices about their living-working arrangements, housing to shift from need basis to affordability basis, society to be multi-sided interest groups, the single institution being incapable of tackling social problems, limit national governments' control over the spatial organization and individuals' having dynamic lifestyle and consumption patterns of housing etc. In the light of these, I argued that, particularly in the 21st century, 'sustainable housing affordability' cannot be simply understood by only looking at its structural outcomes (i.e. demand and supply disequilibrium) at a given time-space. It requires a relational view (institutionalist approach) that surfaces the connection that the housing has with household and other stakeholders (market actors, lobby groups, planners etc.) agency – then it can surface the dynamism associated with the notion. In that sense, the notion is a social construct at a given time-space thus does not have a definitive end, it's a goal that one can work towards. The 'ideal' status of 'sustainable housing affordability' at a given time is the shared space of all 'relevant actors' aspirations and motives. Normatively, this ideal shared space can be discovered through a communicative approach.

Saving the World

At my first supervisory meeting, my supervisor asked me *how would you plan to save the world?* I thought he was cracking a joke. But the same question was repeated to me at some of the seminars and forums I participated in during my doctoral candidacy such as *Becoming an*

effective researcher, Chicago Forum on Global Cities likewise. I sooner realized that it's a question for one to see the larger picture of the work – i.e., what happens when I solve the research problem that I have chosen. Through my work on 'Sustainable Housing Affordability' I wanted to change the way the concept was understood and practised by planners to add the knowledge to the normative elements of the Institutional Approach as to how this can be utilized for the benefit of planning practice so that households in the 21st century would live in better sustainable and affordable estates. The ultimatum of doing research needs to be seen as making a real impact on society. Being qualified with a Doctor of Philosophy and getting the work published is considered only a means to an end. Activities such as *three-minute thesis* train researchers to pitch their work very quickly so that the researcher can convince the work to busy policymakers or politicians should they meet in an elevator or while having a cup of coffee etc. so that the research can make a real impact. Eventually training myself, seeing and feeling how and where my work contributes to change the world for the better, made me feel very high and altruistic about myself, and, I strongly believe it provides substance to your work, drives you to high levels of energy to work deeply in a study.

Genesis of the Thesis

The genesis of my thesis, in one way, came out of my own lived experiences in different cities (Colombo, Tokyo, Birmingham) under different circumstances (first time home buyer/builder and renting a home as an international student) how my *feel-like* sustainable housing affordability changed overtime. By and large, we all consume housing and in general under market conditions; it's a place where a larger proportion of households' wealth would get invested (frozen). Therefore, housing 'affordability' and its 'sustainability' is a matter that we all feel about as individuals, despite which part of the world we come from. Secondly, I was also motivated to work on this notion due to several years of my work in the field of housing and planning; having to witness stories around social complexities associated with housing resettlement, informal housing, housing markets, green homes and technologies etc. For households, the meaning for housing is not just the physical bricks and mortar, but it's also about their social-spatial connections, lifestyle and life-pathways. These everyday lived and seen experiences made me emotionally connected to the research, always ensured me that there was a real problem for me to solve, and that enabled me to retain my interest in the study over a four to five-year period of my doctoral study.

Giving Theoretical Underpinning to My Thoughts

Having to provide a theoretical underpinning to my thoughts, I looked at theories that can hold on to, in explaining my very innate argument. There, I embarked on this Institutional Approach which draws arguments from Giddens' Structuration Theory and Habermas' Communicative rationality. The argument of this approach defies the normative *rational behaviour* of humans which claims in mainstream economics. It grounds the view of the world towards social constructionism. Giddens (1984) and his time-geography idea borrowed from Hägerstrand (1976) claims that its peoples' actions that structure their social worlds over time-space, both materially and in the meanings they make. Accordingly, the actions per se have power and mobilization of people's knowledge. In this, agency and structure are not two independently given sets of phenomena, but it represents a duality. Communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984) claims for a power neutral ideal speech situation that targets people's all types of knowledge (scientific, emotive and moral) in understanding each other's perspectives to build (structure) a shared world. Hence, if people are to structure an 'ideal' world (e.g., ideal status of 'sustainable housing affordability') their actions per se having power and mobilization of knowledge and they have to be informed through so-called ideal speech for shared understanding. Now to elaborate more on these sensitizing concepts: actions, motivations, power, structure and developing a conceptual framework for my study, I dwell on seminal work in housing and planning by scholars such as Peter Saunders, Jim Kemeny, David Clapham, Patsy Healey and so on. For instance, from this work, I drew that, households' actions for affordability would constitute their trade-off between housing aspirations and their wealth, mobilizing their discursive knowledge and ontological security (i.e. the confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds as they appear are to be), households' motivation would be driven by lifestyles, housing pathways and webs of social-spatial relationships would be influenced within and outside processes and housing construct at a time-space would have elements such as household, social structure, dwelling and neighbourhood. Though this scientific underpinning and conceptualizing meant to be firmly known by the researcher at the early stages of the study to have a crystal-clear guide for the fieldwork and data analysis and, the study is required to be fallen into either a clear inductive or deductive form never worked for me. For me, it all happened in an interactive and forward and backward process – re-examining, re-reading, re-coding, re-analysing, re-fitting ideas on and on until the end.

The Path to Find the Answers

Having argued that sustainable housing affordability is a complex and dynamic notion, the inquiry required a very complex set of data collected from pioneers at different phases of a housing settlement (preliminary planning, detail planning, master planning and design, construction and development, management of the neighbourhoods) covering all relevant agencies (developers, strategic promoters, land owners, local politicians, policy makers of state agencies, lobby groups and residents settled in at different stages of a housing development). My choice of path to get the answers for the inquiry were largely influenced by my own view of understanding the world and the environment I did my PhD, where politically more qualitative approach was greatly appreciated.

Because I needed a complex set of data, I didn't want my study to be limited by the tyranny of specific methods. Hence, I kept the epistemological consideration of the study – acceptable knowledge in a discipline, on pragmatism. Pragmatism can benefit from both positivism or interpretivism in selected proportions, in which, I selected leading proportion to be in qualitative methods (i.e., in-depth interviews, document review, observations and thematic analysis) and less quantitative methods (i.e., questionnaire survey and descriptive analysis) to fill in where breath of data was required for the study (e.g., households' reasons for housing choice). Having built the proposition that Sustainable Housing Affordability is a construct out of agency actions, my ontological stance for the study per se was on constructionism than objectivism. This stance of pragmatism in its own right reflected in every corner of my research. Because the conceptualizing gap of 'Sustainable Housing Affordability' that the study was referring to has not been empirically tested before, I as the researcher had the choice under what context the propositions should be tested. Because I was doing my studies in England and wanting to explore unknown territories for particular reasons – I wanted to understand their planning system more as Sri Lanka's roots to modern planning comes from there. I chose England as my study context and framed the inquiry that suits the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) country context. The research approach I used was case study method and I selected the large-scale housing estates namely - Dickens Heath New Settlement (DHNS) of nearly 2000 houses and Langley Sustainable Urban Extension of 6000 houses.

Though, I selected England as the case study out of my guts, at the beginning I was stressed out and was thinking how this could even be possible – had several sleepless nights. Because I

knew little about this piece of geography (i.e., England), I had no connection to any person whatsoever- and I was a complete ‘outsider’. To begin with, I first read the relevant materials available about the case study projects and started the fieldwork through desktop research (visiting websites, following twitter and Facebook groups of the community). Having technology, for the contemporary research, the ‘field’ in the fieldwork will not always be limited to the physical field. Secondly, I started discussing my concerns with my senior colleagues in the PhD room. There I realized the importance of doctoral candidates sharing all kinds of thoughts about each other’s studies. For me they were my main source of cultural intelligence which I had to largely embark on prior to data collection and analysis. Pragmatically, in order to recruit respondents, the first thing I worked on was gradually developing my networks. On one side I used LinkedIn, Facebook, emailing using publicly available email IDs to get respondents recruited which worked for me to some extent. On the other side getting to know a pioneer Birmingham city council planner involved in the project through my supervisor, keeping him as a gatekeeper and use snowballing thereafter yielded results very well. Not only that, in order to recruit elite respondents such as Chief Executive Officer of National Housing Federation or Secretaries of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, President of Royal Town Planners Institute likewise, I strategically participated in some of the seminars they attended and got myself introduced during tea time or so, and eventually asked for an interview. To approach communities in housing estates responding to my quite lengthy questionnaire and also to understand people, I joined one of their community clubs and a yoga class for a few weeks. Building trust was important to me for them to participate and open up (as a research participant) and let me know the ‘truth’. So, in that sense, though my data collection with communities were meant to be observation and questionnaire survey, in doing so, I almost went to the outer borders of ethnographic inquiry. Maintaining a field diary recording all my data collection reflections and observations during the day was essential part of the fieldwork. This posture turned me very positively at the data analysis stages.

Researcher’s Positionality: Insider – Outsider and Power Relations

Being a non-British, non-native English speaker moving there from Sri Lanka, at the beginning I was an ‘outsider’ to the research context. The researcher being an “insider” is an advantage to ensure the credibility of the research. However, “outsiderness” and “insiderness” are not fixed, rather they are ever-shifting. Living in the same city that I picked the case studies from (i.e. Birmingham), engaging in university activities, associating with natives and understanding

the English way of everyday social life over time, continuous learning through transcribing the interviews from the beginning of the fieldwork and research employing multiple sources of data for triangulation and validation enabled me as a researcher to gradually evolve as an “insider” to the research. One of the advantages of being an “outsider” at the beginning of the research was I could set back myself from the granted meanings for affordable housing and sustainable housing in policy practice and be critical about it. Because the more insider you become the more embedded you are and hardly see anything wrong in the system. But evolving as an “insider” was also essential as I had to make sure the credibility and transferability of inferences. I think, in most cases, every researcher at varying degrees is an outsider at the beginning of the research and they gradually become insiders. Having to collect a significant proportion of my data through in-depth interviews, in the process of me becoming an outsider to insider, I had to ensure that my power relations with the research participants were held at a balance level-need to handle bias, disclosure and authenticity of data. For this, I set up my interviews at neutral locations such as coffee shops, community centres likewise whenever possible. I found, being a good listener, showing empathy for what the interviewee would say (regardless of whether you agree or not) and ice-breaking questions at the beginning of the interview eventually let the research participant come to a natural dialogue which is the key for successful in-depth interviews. Doctoral Study is a liminal space that one will discover not only new knowledge but also, will surely transform the researcher to another level. This few reflexives from my end hopefully would provide a shade to such transformation of yours.

I sincerely thank everyone who supported my doctoral study.

The world awaits you to save it. Dare to be bold!

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