

Dr. Eoin O'Neill Interview for the Fall 2016 issue of *e.polis*

Interview conducted and transcribed by: Jane Van Eerden, MS Student in UWM's Urban Studies Programs.

**Jane Van Eerden (JV): Could you please describe your background, your educational training, and your career path that led to your current role at University College Dublin?**

Eoin O'Neill (EO): So I did a BA in Economics and Geography. I did it in University College Dublin and then I went on because I was interested in spatial aspects but also having a better understanding of trying to integrate economic functioning and, sort of, applying that in a geographical sense. I was interested in planning, urban planning, urban development and economic development and sought to undertake a Masters in regional planning, which I did in University College Dublin as well, and it was a two-year Masters' program accredited with the Royal Town Planning Institute so it gives a professional pathway to be a planner, which I had originally intended to be. So, I intended to work as a planner which was my view at the time anyway, so when I finished the MRUP, I did work as a planner in the local government for a short while in Ireland. But I got a funded opportunity to do a PhD with the supervisor of my Master's thesis at the time, so I undertook a PhD. My Masters thesis was sort of planning on environmental economics to explore the application of environmental economic principles to influence settlement patterns. I decided to pursue a PhD to explore the same kind of concept. So, to what extent can the use of environmental economic thinking, and the use of incentives, be used to influence the emergence of settlement patterns and changing settlement patterns, readjusting settlement patterns to achieve better outcomes for people and to redistribute. We have some concerns; the system in Ireland, and I think this is in some of the US as well, is predominantly based on one of their own. Some people do make a large amount of money and land is zoned favorably. And others, well, lose out because they don't get that favorable zone. One of the things I was interested in, was to what extent you can redistribute some of those gains so that there's a more equitable share of some of those windfall gains amongst the wider community. So that was one of the things that I was interested in exploring. My interest in transferable development rights is one of the things that I explored in my PhD. In addition to a couple of others as well, but that was the main idea that I was interested in. Another aspect was, for example, to what extent can you provide for wider community gain, so if you have those windfall gains, can you develop – I'm not sure what the equivalent concept is in the U.S. – but essentially a community gain, like a recreational park or other betterments, that the whole community can benefit from sharing. And, although that is, it can be quite a challenge to identify what the broad community wants, in terms of social or recreational facilities, for example. So when I

finished my PhD, which was on the applications of environmental economics, to try and resolve planning problems I took up a position in the UK environment agency. I was working in flood risk management, based between Reading and London. When I joined the environment agency there was a quite a shift in terms of the model of thinking of how flooding should be managed. They had a change in mindset and it sort of replicated some of what I spoke about today where I was talking about climate resilient thinking, so that shifted from being developing plans to managing flooding that were solely dependent upon structural defenses. No longer were they just building flood defenses to solve planning problems, they had decided that they were applying flood risk management. So part of the solution in some places was still flood defenses but part of the solution in other places was land use planning, but there were only a handful of planners who worked in the environment agency. The vast majority of people who worked in flood risk management were engineers. So they were seeking to take some planners to complement the work that the engineers were doing, but also to conform the plans that were emerging about the management of flooding. I worked while there with people and regional assemblies, the regional offices of the department of the environment, local government and all the various London boroughs. We tried to help them understand that the management of flood was no longer just about building for defenses but that local authorities, and councils now had a role to play in how they allocate where developments should go, to recognize constraints in terms of flooding, so they could better identify how developments should be located and lay out the future. While I was working at the environment agency, I was still publishing in journals from my PhD. So an opportunity came up for a position back in UCD, which I went for and I was successful, and I have been there ever since and I've been a tenured academic in the university for the past two years. So I hope that explains my background.

**JV: Yes, definitely. It seemed like there was just a natural progression to your career and you took advantage of various opportunities as they occurred. But, more broadly, why is urban scholarship important to you and what drew you to that field and what has retained your interest in it?**

EO: I suppose I'm interested in finding solutions to environmental problems and quite often they are exacerbated in urban settings. What I'm interested in finding is policy, or evidence based policy solutions to environmental problems...or urban problems. Or urban environmental problems even. So, to find out, to identify evidence, you really require undertaking research and scholarship, so what I strive to do is to do research, to explore the issues in depth and identify what are the kinds of policy options that can be applied to resolve those typically in urban settings, but not necessarily exclusively so, but most of my research has been dedicated towards urban related issues so far. And I quite enjoy, I suppose, looking at new ways of addressing a problem, and exploring how other people have addressed that problem elsewhere, and can we learn lessons from what

they've done? Or can we identify entirely new ways of doing something? And, I suppose that the nature of my job, it does facilitate you to dedicate a lot of research time to look at different problems and what kind of approaches have been dealt with. For example, in Milwaukee or Chicago, how they are looking at surface water, and to what extent are they using green infrastructure and could Dublin learn something from how things are being managed here? So that is something I will probably have a look at while I am here. Can we learn something from how things are done over here and potentially bring it back to undertake some sort of comparative analysis to see what's done? Is it different? Why is it different? Could we do better in Ireland? Or, could even some of the things we do in Ireland be applied here?

**JV: I'm curious how you see urban flood resilience, and the study of urban flood resilience evolving over time. In your presentation you mentioned that there are a lot of “hard solutions” to the problem and now you said that in one of your roles you were working with a lot of engineers, so it seems to me that urban flood resilience, historically, has been a problem that has been conventionally tackled with these structural solutions. It seems that your research is taking it and approaching these problems from a more social science type of perspective. So, could you speak to the evolution of the field of study and where you envision it going forward?**

EO: I suppose historically, and maybe there was a degree of societal expectation that drove it as well, that, if there was a flooding phenomenon, as society urbanized, but the state in the development of the cities, sort of protected the people that were never exposed to that risk. But as we continue to urbanize and as we now face climate change issues, I suppose one of the concerns is that we don't have enough money to build flood defenses everywhere. And what we want is that what we would like our environment to look like? A series of – potentially – large scale barriers and walls that sort of inhibit, or provide artificial barriers, within urban places and inhibit sort of community cohesion and redefine neighborhoods. Is that the kind of urban environment you want? Or what kind of urban environment do we want? So I suppose I see, in terms of bringing the social science element into it, if we don't have the resources to build large scale defenses everywhere, and if that's not desirable anyway, well then we need to think about what kind of urban environment that we do want. I think that's possibly something that hasn't been really considered yet. What kind of urban environment do people want to live in? Do they want one that's completely, and so far as is practicably possible, minimal risk? Or are people happy to live with a degree of risk but have an urban environment that feels like a nice place to live, to recreate, to work and enjoy a good quality of life, and feels like a nice place. I suppose those kinds of issues haven't really been debated substantially and I expect there has to be some discussion about that. What I was talking about today, I was talking a lot about environmental psychology attributes. Similarly, while there has been a reasonable degree of research on flood perceptions and the kinds of things that

influence perception, there has been very little analysis to the extent to which that research can be drawn into urban planning, urban policy. I suppose I would expect the practical application of those kinds of issues to start to be considered as well. So that is perhaps where I would see the field evolve over time. But maybe if an engineer was asked the question you would get an entirely different answer.

**JV: Could you talk a little bit about the exchange program that was recently developed between UWM and University College Dublin? And why would you recommend a student to study in Dublin, or a student to come over and study in Milwaukee?**

Well, Dublin is, in an Irish context, it's the major city in Ireland. The greater Dublin area comprises about 40% of the population. So if you want to go to a major city in Ireland, Dublin is really the best bet. Today, Dublin is a fairly international city so there are many nationalities present in the city that perhaps someone in the U.S. may not expect that, I don't know. But there is quite a diverse population in the city today with a lot of international companies that bring a lot of – especially in the IT sector – which bring a lot of youth and vibrancy to the city. The university is not in the city center but just south of the city center. It's about three miles out of the city, so it has a large park on campus. It is one of the largest urban sort of campuses in Europe in terms of the scale. So from one end of campus to the other end of the campus could be thirty, thirty-five minutes of a walk. So it's quite a large, extensive, and attractive. It has all the services you would expect in a modern university. It has about thirty thousand or so, twenty-five, thirty thousand students, so it's a large university in Ireland. In terms of its influence in Ireland, which may be of interest to some people, University College Dublin would be one of the major university. About twelve or so of the fifteen cabinet ministers had been educated at University College Dublin. So it's hugely influential and hugely important to the Irish economy. The other, I suppose, good thing about Dublin more generally is that it has connections and ease of access to the U. S. but also to the rest of Europe. So you can come to University College Dublin. It's in the top in the most recent ranking documents that came out and is under hundred universities in the world. While being a really high quality academic institution, it also gives those opportunities to travel and visit a lot of Europe. There is a large number of regular flights out of Dublin to London, which is one of the busiest air routes in Europe, and to also most other, all other, European countries. Ryanair is particularly well known as offering good value flights. In that sense, Dublin is a really exciting place and it gives an ease of access to all sorts of other places. For some as well, I suppose Dublin offers an opportunity for those with Irish heritage to visit Ireland as well, which may be an important thing for some people.

As for coming here, Milwaukee, it's bigger, perhaps, than a lot of students may anticipate. Dublin is quite a low-rise city and Milwaukee is surprisingly relatively high-rise in comparison to Dublin. So it does offer an opportunity to visit a relatively large

U.S. city, but I think, maybe, at a slightly lower cost than of some of the larger metropolitan cities, while at the same time you are only an hour and a half from O'Hare, so you can arrive at O'Hare and hop on a bus and you're here in about an hour and a half. So it's quite easy, with daily flights to Dublin. Accessibility is probably an important characteristic as well for people coming here. And the university is well recognized, particularly the Urban Studies program is well established and so I think it is a good institution and a good program for people to be able to participate in. So the program, after some bureaucratic hurdles were overcome, is official and it has been signed off by both universities. So we are hopeful that something can commence in the near future, in terms of active exchange of students between Dublin and Milwaukee.

**JV: Could you speak a bit more to the specifics... what class offerings and programs will be available to exchange students traveling to Dublin?**

EO: I think that the main program that is anticipated that students will exchange on is the MA Geography program. There is the possibility of some new programs emerging, so there may be alternative options, but that is not certain at present because there has been some restructuring at the university, so there have been some changes as how the schools operate. But I think at the moment it looks like the MA program will be the one. It comprises of Geography at UCD which has Physical Geography, Human Geography, and Political Economic Geography. These would be the three main contributing groups and the MA comprises elements from these. Physical Geography is looking at geography of cities, geomorphology, and climatology in terms of the physical geography. And you have social and urban geography, so a number of colleagues who would be looking at different urban issues, not necessarily just in an Irish context, but Dublin would obviously be a good lab for exploration. For example, Dublin has experienced quite a lot of redevelopment in recent years, in the docklands, so there's a lot of analysis of Dublin docklands as case study in terms of urban renewal and urban development. And then there are various elements in terms of political and economic geography.

**JV: That sounds great! It looks like it is going to be a great fit between the two programs. So one final question for you, Dr. O'Neill. I was hoping you could just provide some words of wisdom to current students and young urban scholars. As far as one piece of advice you would offer them as they embark on their career and their studies in urban scholarship, what would that advice be?**

EO: While I would advise pursuing your own area of interest, I would also advise to seek to learn from other areas because there may be really good examples of solutions to problems or methodological advances that may be applicable in the area that you want to explore in depth. You may learn a lot of lessons from looking beyond your own specific individual subject area to other wider areas that may seem somewhat irrelevant or alien to you initially. But when you read into it, the subject or maybe the methodological

approach or their conceptual approach to the analysis of a problem, or something else, it may be that you can learn an awful lot from them as well. Look beyond your own subject area to learn, even though you can pursue a passion for your own specific interest.

**JV: Very appreciated! That is a great advice for myself and I'm sure everyone who hears it.**

**Thank you!**