Office for Equity and Diversity

There, but Not There: Planning Communities for Undocumented Residents – An Interview with Fernando Burga

The Institute for Diversity, Equity, and Advocacy (IDEA) is proud to present these profiles highlighting our faculty’s outstanding research and community engagement around grand challenges.

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Many of our communities have large populations of undocumented people. Assistant Professor Fernando Burga explores, how can we plan for them?

Burga researches and teaches in the Humphrey School of Public Affairs (https://www.hhh.umn.edu/). He carries out community-engaged work focused on how urban planners can include immigrant groups in their planning practices. In addition to trying to find answers that work towards building inclusive communities, he investigates food justice in urban planning.
There, but Not There: Planning Communities for Undocumented Residents – An Interview with Fernando Burga – Office for Equity and Diversity

Urban planners, “make spaces where multiculturalism is celebrated.” Primarily they concern themselves with residents who are citizens, have property rights, and can advocate for themselves.

In certain locations, urban planners must also consider the presence of undocumented residents because they likewise impact planning systems for housing, transportation, school infrastructure, and issues related to public health.

Burga sees undocumented residents as a unique consideration for urban planners because “Urban planning practice doesn’t know what to do with them.” Undocumented residents are part of our communities. They work and live with us but they are not citizens. Urban planners don’t plan cities for them and traditionally they are not part of envisioning a city’s future. As Burga puts it, “They are there, but NOT there.”

Urban planning is perpetually evolving, according to Burga. “There are changes in the demographic makeup of our cities that push urban planning into new directions.” Part of this evolution is seen in considering how undocumented residents are perceived, included and excluded in community life. Some cities already have policies that address the situation, to an extent. Sanctuary city policies are an example of this. Other cities are catching up, yet, other cities actively pursue ordinances to exclude undocumented immigrant life.

“The truth is that cities need undocumented immigrant life – because they provide cheap labor that nobody wants to do. Government policy and the reality of people’s lives on the street are disjointed.”

Undocumented people endure an experience that is very different due to legal inclusion or exclusion. According to Burga, living an undocumented status “is also embedded with questions of power, capital, and knowledge in being able to do this. Becoming a citizen is a very hard thing. It represents a huge investment.”

Citizenship is also a very specific right. “It’s belonging to the nation-state and being a part of the political community of the nation-state. You get that right by either being born in the nation-state or by becoming a citizen.”

“The capacity to bear citizenship rights is key and has been part of our progress as an inclusive nation.” However, Burga believes that special considerations exist in accessing those rights.

Those with money, knowledge, and connections have an advantage in navigating the process. “The immigration system also has perks and openings for people who may invest in US soil, to become citizens faster. So there are all these interesting ambiguities in regards to who can access citizenship.”

For Burga, “the question of undocumented immigrant life is central to cities because it challenges normative assumptions at the core of urban planning practices.” Burga explores “how urban planning can become a platform for advocating the formation of citizenship, other than being born here or having acquired citizenship through a legal process.”

In addition to legal citizenship, Burga recognizes the possibility of “urban citizenships”. These are “types of citizenship that uphold political and civic participation at a neighborhood or city level.”

He asks, “What if we consider the cultural, economic, and political contributions that undocumented residents make toward their communities as platforms for community benefit and citizenship?”

Is there push-back around the idea of focusing on undocumented people when planning for communities?

“No. Yes. I think the pushback regarding the illegality of undocumented life needs to be considered. But we should not demonize ordinary people doing their best to forge contributing lives. Rather we should consider how we can improve the current immigration system to direct undocumented residents towards the attainment of a legal status”.

Burga explains that there are some neighborhoods, cities or districts, here in Minnesota as in other states, where there is a “concentration of undocumented residents living, working, consuming, contributing and negotiating their lives within the community”. In these communities, “it becomes contingent to think about how planners can negotiate that ambiguity regarding undocumented people, to advocate for them – or not.”


Burga is co-researcher with Tom Fisher in the College of Design on a project called – Drawing to Bridge the Gap, through a grant from U of M Extension. The project explores the challenges Latino families face in attaining educational success. This research addresses issues like transportation, school environment, housing conditions and other place-based concerns. Using design-thinking methods allows families to advocate for themselves.

Aligning this research scope with efforts addressing food justice, Burga also investigates food access through the lens of race, equity, and immigration. This work is complex, so Burga works with community groups that engage food system issues from the perspective of racial justice. “The Twin Cities is a very vibrant place for this work.” He cites the work of Saint Paul’s Urban Garden Alliance as a key example.

“The work of urban planners involves all of these questions. Where things get placed and why are planning questions. They are also questions that are embedded with power and who decides who we give precedence, in terms of decision making.”

Burga is eager to be involved in this evolution of urban planning. “I’m happy to be a witness and an ally – to get myself in tricky situations and negotiate my role as a Latino, a planner, and a scholar; to learn, grow, and move forward.”

Photo credit: Bruce Silcox