



Clara Elena Irazábal Zurita (1963-Present)

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“There are a lot of racial and environmental injustices that impact minorities. In order to redress some of these issues, it’s very important that more minorities become part of the field.” Clara Irazábal, 2006.

Early Life and Education

“I’ve always been fascinated by cities,” says Clara Irazábal, explaining her choice of career in urban planning and design. Growing up in Caracas, Venezuela as the daughter of architect parents, Irazábal was fascinated not only by her surrounding urban environment, but also by the intense inequalities she saw manifested in it. “Caracas offers many contrasts in terms of environmental injustices, in how the poor and rich live,” she explains. “It was something that always caught my attention, and I felt a lot of responsibility to redress it.” Irazábal has devoted her career to studies of comparative urbanism in Latin America, the link between social and spatial inequalities, and how minority groups, especially Latina/os, create and utilize public spaces in the U.S.

Following her parents’ example, Irazábal earned her bachelor’s degree in architecture and her master’s degree in physical planning and urban design from the Central University of Venezuela. As a master’s student, she worked as a teaching assistant, and helped develop a comprehensive plan for neighborhoods in metropolitan Caracas to better develop socially, economically, and spatially. After completing her master’s degree, the University of California-Berkeley offered her a scholarship to get her doctorate in architecture. While at Berkeley, Irazábal worked on a number of research projects, and developed a further interest in the association between spatial and social inequalities. “I began to study how it is that some inequalities that we suffer as part of a social group are also expressed spatially, such as access to spatial resources in cities...for example, accessibility to affordable housing, open space, jobs, and the like,” she says.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Career

Upon completing her doctorate in 2002, Irazábal was offered her current faculty position at the University of Southern California, where she teaches, mentors, does service work, and conducts research. Irazábal’s current research efforts focus on two broad subjects: comparative urbanism in Latin American, and how

public spaces in Latin American capitals reflect ideas of citizenship and democracy; and “ethnic urbanism” in Southern California, focusing on how Latina/os in Los Angeles create and re-create public spaces. For Irazábal, the ability “to select my own topics for research and study, and the support I have gotten to develop those projects” has been the highlight of her career.

Mentoring Others

Irazábal now mentors and supports other minority students “all the time. The opportunity to make a difference through teaching and mentoring, writing papers and doing projects with them, and sending them out to make a difference is a strong motivation to stay in this field.” In addition to much of her research and mentoring being minority-focused (most notably on Los Angeles’ Latina/o community), Irazábal has served on several university-wide diversity initiatives, including the Multi-Faith Committee, and scholarship committees focusing on minority students. However, she believes that perhaps her most important contribution might be bringing her ability to “impact developing knowledge and practices in the field from my own perspective as a minority—an international woman of Hispanic background.”

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Mentors have played an important role in helping Irazábal define her research interests, and jump-starting her career in academia. Her Ph.D. advisor at Berkeley, Nezar AlSayyad, was an especially important influence. “He really taught me about comparative urbanism internationally and in the Third World,” Irazábal says. “Also, through him I was able to start networking with other international colleagues, which expanded my opportunities to conferences and research.” Irazábal also continues to rely on the mentorship of USC colleagues, most notably Dowell Myers and Tridib Banerjee, as well as female faculty (Jennifer Wolch, Laura Pulido, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo) who have been both personally and professionally supportive of her.

Advice to Young Professionals

For Irazábal, maintaining a commitment to her work, and doing it with honesty, integrity, and to the utmost of her ability has been her most significant achievement. Although she has faced some difficulty as a woman and as a Latina who speaks “English with an accent”, she remains committed to making a difference through her work. “I’m just persevering and doing my best,” she says. She encourages other minorities to consider the field as a way of redressing injustices and inequalities that disproportionately affect communities of color: “There’s a lot of racial and environmental injustices that affect minorities. In order to redress some of these issues, it’s very important that more minorities become part of the field.”

This interview was conducted in 2010.