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Andrew Harris

To cite this article: Andrew Harris (2023) The expertise of urban expertise, Urban Geography, 44:3, 562-565, DOI: [10.1080/02723638.2022.2163102](https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2163102)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2022.2163102>



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Published online: 19 Jan 2023.



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COMMENTARY



The expertise of urban expertise

Andrew Harris 

Department of Geography, University College London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Expertise is a central and under-explored component of cities and urban life with increasing prominence in a politically populist and post-Covid era. Yet there remains a pressing need to investigate the particular ways that urban expertise is produced and circulated, and how it is involved in not only forms of control but can be enacted into more progressive knowledge practices. Crucial in developing a research and activist agenda around urban expertise will be greater efforts to blur distinctions drawn between so-called experts and communities, fuller accounts of the historical contexts and pathways shaping contemporary manifestations of urban expertise, and new efforts to use the politics of urban life to think afresh about the place and possibilities for the expert.

ARTICLE HISTORY


Received 11 November 2022
Accepted 28 November 2022

KEYWORDS

Expertise; urban expert;
knowledge practices

Experts and expertise have always been a central, if largely assumed and underacknowledged, component to any modern, technological society. Yet the last decade has witnessed expertise take on new positions of prominence and visibility. The Covid-19 pandemic pushed the health expertise around epidemiology, virology and statistics into immediate public view and urgent new everyday conversations. Within the world of urban policy-making, expertise has taken on a heightened role with the widely-trailed “Urban Age” increasing opportunities for consultancy firms and other globally-mobile specialists, including academics, to peddle and produce data aggregation techniques, mapping exercises and diagnostic toolkits in efforts at measuring, monitoring and managing urbanization and its attendant social and environmental issues. Expertise has also become a target for a rapid recent growth of populist politics, notably in the Brexit campaign for the UK to leave the European Union; “experts” are portrayed as exemplars of an aloof and unaccountable elite public culture.

This special issue then is expertly timed; it begins the important task of addressing a surprising lack of sustained critical engagement with the politics of expertise in relation to cities and urban life. The papers valuably scope a broad range of actors, agendas and approaches involved in a contemporary globalized “industry” for urban expertise: from the training guides central to efforts at embedding the UN Sustainable

CONTACT Andrew Harris  andrew.harris@ucl.ac.uk Department of Geography, University College London, North-West Wing, Gower Street, WC1E 6BT, London

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Development Goals (SDGs) in urban policy to neighborhood beautification schemes, Green Infrastructure projects and linear parks, consultancies on climate reliance and, less prosaically, the floating cities of “technofuturist aquapreneurs”. Crucially all the papers detail how these contemporary manifestations of urban expertise tend to reinforce or maintain uneven power dynamics and forms of control, albeit in inadvertent rather than necessarily explicit ways. Clear commonalities emerge in how the practice of expertise frequently struggles to reach productively beyond its largely top-down inclinations and universalist framings: this is repeatedly a story of the unmet promise and limits to participatory planning and urban localism. Similarly, the language and presentation of expertise in the array of examples and solutions collected here often acts to exclude groups without the relevant technocratic knowledge or political know-how.

Nevertheless, rather than throwing-out the expert “baby” from the urban “bath-water”, this special issue seeks to “shift horizons” and highlight how expertise can help support and shape what the editors, Enora Robin and Michele Acuto (2022), refer to as “progressive knowledge practices”. The issue’s impressive geographical diversity – all populated continents feature with the exception, unusually, of North America – demonstrates the wide variety of urban settings in and through which expertise is practiced and negotiated. This means that blanket claims around the retreat of the state in urban development since the 1980s require some qualification. Although the state’s role has been generally less monolithic and managerial, the papers’ range of political contexts document enhanced democratic opportunities and expectations: in the new freedoms of post-Apartheid Cape Town, the post-Independence aspirations of Pacific Island countries and the post-developmental strategic localism of twenty-first-century Seoul. Notably the adoption of a new Colombian Constitution in 1991 has provided, as Sotomayor et al. (2022) detail, scope for community organizations and social movements in Bogotá (as well as middle and upper-class neighborhood groups) to mobilize legal expertise in efforts at establishing better communication and engagement with citizens in urban planning initiatives and infrastructure projects. Progressive knowledge practices are also to be found in the issue’s central emphasis on how urban scholarship is not somehow necessarily separate from the urban development it often seeks to critique but can be channeled in more activist and transformative modes. In particular, the fascinating reflections on processes of SDG localization and associated acts of translation in Cape Town and Bristol offer exemplars for how “embedded” academics can work in active yet patient and self-reflexive ways in efforts at co-producing more collective and sustainable configurations of urban expertise.

There remain, however, further efforts that might be pursued in rethinking and recalibrating approaches and understandings around urban expertise (Tironi, 2015). The “expert” in many of these papers tends to be contrasted, directly or indirectly, against “community” or “non-expert” recipients deemed to lack the coordinating capacities and tactical abilities to formulate and mobilize knowledge through bureaucratic procedures and technical registers. Yet as shown in several examples from this issue around environmental policies or legal entitlements, urban expertise perhaps is most effective when assembled through sustained interaction, alliances and brokerage between so-called experts and communities. These exchanges can not only assist in

questioning who might be best conceived to produce and enact expertise, they can also help better recognize and accommodate lived experiences and, in Trundle and Organo's (2022) paper on Pacific cities, forms of traditional knowledge that are nearly always overlooked in standardized and more conventional modes of developing expertise on cities. Ideally an agenda for formulating urban expertise would be established that gives primacy as much to the civic forum, legal clinic and street corner as to the UN office, consultancy whiteboard and participatory focus-group.

As well as expanding and problematizing the socio-spatial coordinates framing and determining urban expertise, there could similarly be a more expanded historical agenda pursued. Croese and Duminy's (2022) paper is especially helpful here in highlighting historical contexts and pathways that can shape the present-day scope for expert action (and inaction); they reflect on how the legacy of anti-apartheid activism established an epistemic community that has helped mediate and nurture particular opportunities in Cape Town for critical academic engagement in policy-making. Fox and Macleod (2021) similarly mention in passing the history of environmental activism in Bristol, and Trundle and Organo (2022) talk of colonial "echoes" around the extractive industries that continue to exploit the Blue Pacific continent. But more might be probed on how present-day expertise is shaped by historical precedents. Further connections could be drawn between contemporary urban expertise and the central role for techno-science and experts in the history of colonialism especially around the production of ideas of "development" (e.g. Mitchell 2002). What continuities link the apparent "rise" and "emergence" of a new "industry" of urban experts with older practices, techniques and rationalities associated with public health, engineering, surveying, administration and global planning (see, for example, De Dominicis & Tolic, 2022)? And how does the central role afforded to expertise in attempts at managing urban life under the Covid-19 pandemic compare and contrast with earlier examples of urban crisis shaped by disease and contagion?

This special issue provides a welcome and overdue grappling with the politics of urban expertise. But it also signals how much more work will be needed in exploring and detailing what "urban expertise" actually is beyond a sometimes too general and simplistic conflation with urban knowledge, advice or policy-making. How is urban expertise produced and mediated by forms of professional norms and standards, educational practice and institutional validation (Kuus, 2021)? What distinctions, intersections and hierarchies emerge between different modes and traditions of urban expertise? What have been the role of specific practices, devices and techniques, including those associated with the digital realm, that make expertise knowable, shareable, commensurable and marketable? And what sites, categories and understandings make expertise actually "urban"? There remains scope not only for more in-depth accounts of the intricate and contested workings around the politics of "urban expertise", past and present, but also for considering how a focus on the politics of urban life can generate new conceptual and critical insights more broadly on the place and possibilities for the expert.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Andrew Harris  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3031-0977>

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