

## Claiming the University for Critical Urbanism

Jean-Paul D. Addie

Department of Geography | University College London

Questions regarding the production and politics of urban knowledge are back on the agenda in critical urban studies. Alex Schafran (2014, 2015) and David Madden's (2015) recent debate in these pages, in particular, has elevated a concern with the capacity of critical urban theory – and the wider urban academy – to catalyze emancipatory and democratic social change. Both of their interventions seek to leverage the latent potential of critical urbanism beyond narrow academic debates, but they diverge on questions of epistemology and tactics. Schafran argues critical urbanists need to think more concertedly about building power in order to serve as a vanguard for social and political change. Madden, by contrast, posits our energies ought to be focused on empowering community groups, activists and marginalized city dwellers beyond the walls of the 'ivory tower'. Both positions offer political opportunities and novel modes of engagement, but both also have their blind fields and dangers. Steer too close to the former and power and claims of urban expertise remain cloistered in elitist, exclusionary institutional spaces. Veer towards the latter and the cycle of rigorous critique and piecemeal impact continues as we swim against a vortex of neoliberal tides inside and outside of academia.

In the following commentary, I present a twofold response to this debate. First, I argue that we need to pay more attention to the impact that the overarching political economy of higher education and entrenched academic cultures have in perpetuating the limited efficacy of critical urbanism. Rather than engaging in a debate on the practice of critical urbanism *per se*, my intent is to highlight, and challenge, the institutional infrastructures of the university as a vital context through which the work of critical urban theorists and scholar-activists is operationalized. Not only are universities – and urban academics – under increasing pressure to demonstrate their social utility and relevance in an age of austerity (Christopherson, Gertler and Gray 2014), but there is also a growing emphasis being placed on their perceived obligation to contribute to their urban locales as strategic partners, economic engines and data factories supporting smart solutions to the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century city (Harding et al. 2007; Leydesdorff and Deakin 2011; Pugh et al. 2016). Although experiences vary across national and institutional contexts, many universities are now actively assuming the task of driving knowledge-based growth in the neoliberal city. This has profoundly shaped expectations surrounding what type of urban knowledge universities should be generating and the criteria through which its usefulness is judged. As May and Perry (2011, 353) put it, understanding the politics of urban knowledge “is no longer a question of what the city means for the researcher but what research means for the city – and how those concerns are mediated by the university as a site of knowledge production”.

Building from this critique, my second argument is that the wealth of critical urban knowledge generated in *CITY* and elsewhere should be concretely applied to the task of understanding and reimagining the university as a progressive urban actor and context for more socially just modes of urbanism. In other words, we need to consider how critical urban theory itself can help inform an alternative emancipatory and democratic urban university. To illustrate what this can mean in conceptual and applied terms, I utilize recent Lefebvrian urban scholarship to theorize a new urban university that, in contrast to current academic and policy dialogues, is: attuned to supporting critical urbanism (inside and outside the academy); capable of promoting more socially just modes of urbanism through its teaching, research and spatial strategies; and is strategically oriented towards the challenges of “the urbanization of the entire globe and the globalization of urbanism as a way of life” (Soja and Kanai 2007, 54). In switching our epistemological lens from the university in/of the city to that of ‘universities in urban society’, I call for critical urbanists to claim agency over the 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban university as an

institution of urban knowledge production, a process of radical critique and driver of progressive social transformation.

### **Urban Knowledge and Social Transformation (Or the Lack Thereof...)**

Schafran's (2014, 322-323) provocative assessment of contemporary critical urban studies as "smart, correct and weak" presents a troubling and uncomfortable reality: not only have we, as critical urban scholars, "never been less relevant in terms of shaping the future of cities" (323) but our established *modus operandi* and political assumptions do not appear likely to dislodge our collective marginality any time soon. For Schafran, we have relegated ourselves to the side-lines; well-versed in the critique of power, but afraid to assert it. Consequently, others have stepped up to assume positions of centrality in the production of urban space. He is not alone in his frustration at this state of affairs. Andy Merrifield laments with characteristic verve:

how low the bar is set, how unambitious and unimaginative the academy is these days with its urban knowledge production, keeping its thoughts within the narrow confines of academic specialization and arcane professional journals, retreating inwards or becoming servile, a mere handmaiden of power (2015, 753).

What is to be done about our political displacement, ineffectual intellectual armoury, and what Catterall (2016, 7) refers to as "the fragility or even the mystificatory potential of much mainstream academic work"? Schafran's proscribed remedy is for urban scholars to transcend the rote practice of criticism as an end in itself and adopt a more active, if pragmatic, political stance. As the production and promotion of urban knowledge is not enough to engender progressive social transformation in itself, critical urbanists need to think about building their own power. This goes beyond developing a new political positionality to include the creation of new mechanisms of knowledge production and dissemination through which critical urban studies can realize a position of centrality in urban spatial consciousness and practice: "What we need is a different and partially separate urban academy, one linked to 20<sup>th</sup>-century institutions of higher education but which is located at the intersection of all the actors responsible for the production of space" (327). Only through such restructuring, Schafran concludes, can we collectively mobilize a new urban-centered politics and realize our social, economic and ecological goals.

This characterization of a weak and ineffective critical urban studies – and the role of urban theorists in perpetuating its marginality – has ruffled a few feathers, both surrounding its seeming neglect of scholar-activism and apparent placement of the urban theorist on an epistemological, and consequently political, pedestal (Meagher 2015). Madden, while largely sympathetic to Schafran's intervention, asserts that "academics have no special claim on legitimacy simply by virtue of their academic positions" (2015, 299). Urbanism, he states, therefore needs to be more reflexive about its own social and epistemological basis if it is to serve as a tool to oppose inequality and dispossession. Rather than aspiring to a new, partially separate but politically and epistemologically privileged urban academy, Madden calls for critical urbanists to align themselves in a coalition with those clearly invested in the production of more socially-just cities "to the extent that [they] are also part of these communities, projects and networks" (299). Identifying opportunities for the imminent critique of neoliberal urbanization from this position, the argument goes, presents the best hope for critical urban theory – and theorists – to concretely support egalitarian and democratic political projects.

Madden's critique importantly validates heterodox situated knowledges. He reaffirms the political stakes involved in the production of urban knowledge and draws attention to exciting instances where spaces for "public critical urbanism" have been forged at the interface of the academy and marginalized/working class communities (2015, 301). Indeed, we shouldn't lose sight of the influence and reciprocity critical urbanism currently has with urban political action and everyday life, nor its ability to move from 'academic argument' to 'people's protest' (de Matos 2015; Hancox 2016). Yet reading Schafran's provocation as "at bottom a critique about

the positionality of the urban theorist” (Meagher 2015, 801) is unfortunately one-sided. It foregrounds a critique of any claims to privileged urban expertise and authority by scholar-theorists but overlooks the pressing questions raised in regards to education, pedagogy and, most significantly, the need to rethink the *institutions* of the urban academy. These issues, in my reading, constitute the more substantive and radical target of Schafran’s polemic. Madden does ask for critical urbanists to “develop a more active stance towards the politics of the university itself... [in order to] overcome the elitism and exclusion that increasingly characterizes many universities as they currently exist” (2015, 300). But this tentative call stops well short of engaging the altogether more difficult challenge of reimagining the extant structures of academic knowledge production and dissemination. And it leaves us facing two problematic issues.

First, those critiquing capacity building in the urban academy lead us, in practical terms, down a staid path. Scholar-activists are asked to consider the ways in which they can ‘be useful’ to their community partners (Taylor 2014) or to introduce some new metaphors and epistemological reflection (Madden 2015; Meagher 2015), but by enlarge it’s ‘more of the same, please!’ in terms of public engagement, activism and participatory community-based research. Similar issues arise when Merrifield calls for (albeit emboldened) critical (or ‘amateur’) urbanists to double down on our established modes of confrontation when dealing with the ‘professional urbanists’ in our midst:

One important item in an amateur’s arsenal is surely *confrontation*, of being oppositional, of getting subversive, of not swallowing professional etiquette or soundbite, shrugging off professional ambition. Amateurs need courage; we need to fiercely guard our independence and resist professional domestication, immunize ourselves against professional lures, to being incorporated into the corporation, academic or otherwise (2015, 758).

Adopting a confrontational position does not preclude working with institutions that may be “part of the problem” (Madden 2015, 299) but it continues to entrench critical urbanism on the outside of urban decision-making systems where, evidently, confrontation, subversion and criticism are disconcertingly easy for the powers that be to ignore. This brings us to the second problem. Embracing confrontation does not adequately acknowledge the pervasive institutional barriers and practical obstacles facing those looking to mobilize an impactful critical urbanism from within, or in partnership with, the academy. Universities, with their distinct organizational structures, bureaucratic traditions and cultural norms (themselves conditioned by the extended and highly variegated governance landscape of higher education), can do as much to inhibit critical engaged scholarship as power structures beyond their walls.

There is a long history for critical urbanists to learn from here; particularly the case of those urban academics (and university administrators) who sought to place tackling urban issues at the heart of the modern ‘urban university’ in the wake of the ‘urban crisis’ (Klotsche 1966, see Haar 2011). In the United States, the mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century urban university “[promised] to be a central agency in the national response to the urban challenge” (Schlesinger 1967, 471) and represented “a noble and exciting enterprise because it is an engagement with the most crucial problems of our times” (Tinder 1967, 492). Embedding the city as the mission of the urban university necessitated institutional restructuring to emphasis public service and community involvement and the embrace of the university’s location to enrich educational and research programs (Goodall 1970, 48). Yet, as Angotti, Doble and Horrigan (2011, 8) recall, the pioneers of community-engaged urban research and service learning in American universities faced several fundamental challenges in this regard: faculty members pursuing community-based work, despite their passion, struggled to align their strategic interests, tactics and timelines with those of their community partners while developing new urban pedagogies on the fly. Urban researchers and students engaged in action research with community partners often found themselves opposed to their universities’ administrators on questions of urban development and campus expansion. At the same time, the persistent failure to recognize community-based scholarship in tenure and

promotion files emerged as a major barrier to restructuring the practice of urban higher education. As federal monies that supported progressive urban scholarship and engagement were slashed by the Reagan administration through 1980s, urban policy and research centers in many American universities folded or were incorporated into planning schools or other faculties. The institutional valorization of the city an object of analysis and strategic arena of engagement faded from the spotlight.

As many of us will have experienced, comparable issues of funding, unequal (and potentially exploitative) power relations, deep-rooted bureaucracies and disciplinary modes of academic governmentality ring a discomfiting bell within today's neoliberal universities (Halvorsen 2015; Martin et al. 2014; Pendras and Dierwechter 2012). A rich tradition of urban participatory action research and education has continued (Kendon, Pain and Kesby 2007; Harney et al. 2016), including the current vogue for projects to be 'co-produced' with external partners in ways that destabilize the notion of the 'expert researcher' (Wynne-Jones, North and Routledge 2015). But while urban theory, methods and practice have evolved, this process "has tended to be separated from the context in which it is produced; the major site of which is the university" (May and Perry 2011, 365). Accordingly, not only can benefits for community partners not be assumed as a necessary outcome of scholar-activism (Rooke 2016; Winkler 2013), but neither can its recognition in the contemporary metrics-driven university (Ball 2012).

### **Sailing the Urban Academy between Scylla and Charybdis**

Critical urbanism cannot ignore the conditions, contexts and challenges presented by its relation to the 'actually existing' university. The academic production of urban knowledge is not just political in relation to our 'amateurism'/'professionalism': it is political in the context of shifting and regressive neoliberal higher education regimes grounded in institutional corporatization, the casualization of academic labor, the commodification of knowledge, and an invasive culture of competition for funding, students and global talent (Bousquets 2008; Hazelkorn 2011). It is political in the context of an ascendant knowledge capitalism and the changing expectation placed on universities as urban 'anchors' and economic drivers (Birch, Perry and Taylor 2013; Goddard et al. 2014). The production of urban knowledge is conditioned as much by research councils, foundations and funding agencies as urban researchers themselves, professional or otherwise. Shifts in the societal value placed on particular types of university-generated knowledge have catalyzed "a new role for universities in which priority is placed upon extracting economic and competitive benefits from knowledge production" (Harloe and Perry 2004, 214).

In this environment, the role of the scholar-activist is not as straightforward as some would have us assume, especially for those of us in the swelling ranks of the academic precariat. The crack of the neoliberal whip disciplines the aspirations and abilities of 'amateur urbanists' in the academy both despite and because of their institutional privilege. 'Shrugging off professional ambition' does not simply mean giving up aspirations for career advancement. As community-based research struggles to be recognized and rewarded through academia's cultural and institutional norms, in many cases it means losing your grip on the bottom rung of a slippery ladder altogether. And with this goes the opportunity to leverage the structural capacities afforded by the university to do critical urban work: (co-)producing urban knowledge and training the next generation of urban professionals to (at least partially) think more critically about our collective urban futures.

It is clear to me that we need to seriously engage the limitations and lacuna inherent within the institutional architecture of critical urbanism as currently practiced. Schafran is insightful here, arguing that "the 20<sup>th</sup>-century academy – which is brilliant at developing knowledge and the knowledgeable in the sciences and humanities – is not constructed to produce urban citizens in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century" (2014, 326). And as a result we need a restructured urban education system that looks beyond traditional degree structures to place "pedagogy at the center of praxis" (2015, 304). Remaking these urban educational institutions, structures and

practices is likely to be a difficult and lengthy – but existentially crucial – process for the practice and efficacy of critical urbanism; which is why it is a conversation that we need to have in both practical and political terms.

Ironically, however, the importance Schafran places on the inclusivity of the ‘urban academy’ – understood “as those parts of the university whose work is on or about the urban, defined broadly” (2015, 305) – deprives it of both a cohesive politics capable of clearly informing social and policy interventions and a robust indication of what it means to the produce ‘21<sup>st</sup>-century urban citizens’. The urban academy is internally heterogeneous, fractious and comprised of diverse actors with competing interests. Schafran is guilty of overlooking the unequal power relations inherent within this motley urban crew. His urban academy includes both critical urbanists obsessed with the political-economic and socio-cultural and motivated by progressive values *and* the ‘professional urbanists’ dashed, as Merrifield (2015, 755) might have it, upon the rocks of positivism and technocracy by the siren song of Deutsche Bank financing. A more politically active urban academy is not guaranteed to dialogically arrive at the type of emancipatory urban-centered politics (or urban education) we’d hope to foster precisely because funding, evaluation and access are decided by those already occupying positions of centrality relative to urban decision-making: the state, research councils, consultancies, private developers etc. (see Calhoun 2006). Those in power are themselves inclined to finance and leverage research (often of the instrumental-rational and technocratic variety) that supports their chosen policies, strategies and the “sound management” of cities (Gleeson 2014, 69; Madden 2015). The mainstream urban academy clearly has no problems escaping the confines of narrow academic debate. We can see this in the influential populism of the ‘urban age’ agenda and creative class thesis, shifts towards instrumental ‘policy-based evidence’ and the creation of new quasi-academic spaces – e.g. the NYU Center for Urban Science and Progress (CUSP), Amsterdam Metropolitan Solutions – that in many ways represent a new, partially separate urban academy; albeit one focused on meeting the demands of an ascendant urban technocracy. Any retooling of the urban academy therefore needs to take seriously the challenges presented by internal relationships with other (non-critical, ‘professional’) academics (including competition for resources and access to urban actors) and often confrontational engagements with university administrators who themselves are attempting to adapt to the changing landscapes of higher education (over internal management, evaluation and institutional missions etc.) (Deem 2001).

The neoliberal university has been subject of stringent critiques surrounding its role as an urban and regional developer (Bose 2015; Harding et al. 2007), its embrace of financialization and managerialism (Engelen, Fernandez and Hendrikse 2014) and the colonial race to carve up new global markets (Lim 2009). But this should not dissuade us from examining the tremendous capacity universities do have to function as sites of, and actors driving, progressive social and urban transformation. If critical urbanists occupy and can claim the city “from the same basis as any other city dweller” (Madden 2015, 299), they can also occupy and claim the university from the same basis as any other ‘professional urbanist’. And if the ‘right to the city’ is understood as the struggle to remake the city in concrete and metaphorical terms, reimagining the institutions of urban education and knowledge production are central to this cry and demand (Lipman 2011, 6). This is not a case of constructing “a politics of privileged expertise” arising from “academics qua academics... building power” as Madden (299) suggests. Rather, the university can be a transformative urban actor not because of some special claim to legitimacy regarding the production of urban knowledge, but because it is the one institution or apparatus determining the production of urban space that critical urbanists are an integral component of.<sup>1</sup>

From this position, instead of fortifying ourselves against ‘professional lures’, it is worth examining how Merrifield’s ‘amateur’ impulse can flow in the other direction: undermining the

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<sup>1</sup> This viewpoint, of course, runs counter to the broad idea and governmental practice – now widespread across the neoliberalized landscape of higher education – that “academics are no longer treated as constitutive members of the university but as its *employees*” (Shore 2008, 289).

barricades that keep urban knowledge cloistered in academic towers, demonstrably defetishizing privileged instrumental and technocratic reasoning and redressing the entrenched bureaucracies that inhibit the efficacy of critical scholarship and action. Such a move embraces and surpasses Schafran's (2015, 304) call to situate the urban academy "as a central point in the aggregation, distribution and simultaneous critique of urban media" and place it at the center of formal and long range planning processes. It focuses on the potential of realigning the broader orientation, modes of operating and strategic imperatives of the 'urban university' itself: both by pushing the critical academy outwards in ways that are reflexive and responsive to the realities and power relations of 21<sup>st</sup>-century urbanization, and by turning our attention inwards to reform institutional structures, cultures and other exigencies that inhibit the practice, recognition and impact of critical urban work. Leveraging the structural capacities of the university to empower critical urbanism and those who would most benefit from the production of more social just cities enables critical urbanists (in the broad sense) to chart a course between Scylla's corrupting elitist academic spaces and Charybdis' ostracized critical scholarship. Indeed, it is only by doing this that we can establish an institutional environment capable of supporting the transformative educational agenda necessary for a more just 21<sup>st</sup>-century urban world.

### **Laying the Foundations of 'Universities in Urban Society'**

Critical urban theory and practice have a tremendous capacity to not only critique but reshape the university as a central institution in the production of urban knowledge and the mediation of broader contests over urban space. But to realize this potential, critical urbanists – both members of the urban academy with relevant expertise (e.g. on accumulation by dispossession, neoliberal urbanism, community planning etc.), and those reimagining the urban in novel and relational ways (planetary, post-colonial or otherwise) – need to be at the forefront of the conversation in a way they have not been up to this point. Deploying the conceptual tools of critical urbanism to reimagine the institutional sites and practices of urban knowledge production can enable us to claim a vigorously redefined urban university on our own terms, and in a manner that more adequately reflects the conditions, complexities and potential of contemporary urbanism.

To this end, in the remainder of this paper, I consider the implications of placing 'urban society', rather than 'the city', at the heart of our thinking about the urban university. Drawing from recent Lefebvrian urban scholarship (e.g. Brenner and Schmid 2015; Lefebvre 2003; Merrifield 2013; Wachsmuth 2014) I mobilize the core categories of urban society – *mediation*, *centrality*, and *difference* (Schmid 2014) – as an entry point to vigorously redefine a new urban university:<sup>2</sup>

- The notion of *mediation* draws from Lefebvre's (2003, 79-81) suggestion that the urban forms a mixed 'intermediary' level that communicates and articulates between the global level of abstract relations, institutional knowledges, and distant orders and the private level of inhabiting and everyday experience. Although Lefebvre posits the global as the level of "institutional space", which is produced by capital in order to expand accumulation (79), general institutionalization processes – which are material, mental and strategic – are grounded in the city's concrete spaces, practices and politics. Positioning the urban university at the mediatory, rather than global, level of social reality: (1) foregrounds the organizational structures and cultures through which the university establishes "active intermediation" between researchers, disciplinary canons, communities, and city governance regimes (May and Perry 2011, 365) and: (2) directs assertive intervention in urban decision-making and planning processes (e.g. providing technical support for community groups opposing revanchist urban redevelopment

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, other critical urban theories, as applied in distinct geographic contexts, will likely yield alternative urban university imaginaries and I encourage scholars and activists working in alternative critical urban traditions to engage the arguments presented here in their own terms.

projects) (Schafran 2015). Moreover, in contrast to the university being a “monumental institution” that oppresses and colonizes the space organized around it (Lefebvre 2003, 21), placing mediation at the core of a new urban university compels an opening of cloistered physical and mental spaces. Rendering the university more porous is therefore an on-going process guided by a sensitivity to the ways in which university practice and critical urbanism relate the abstract and concrete as they come together (in partial, fragmented forms) for different urban inhabitants.

- *Centrality* focuses our attention on where university engagement takes place, and how it brings together people, ideas, resources and experiences (Schmid 2012). Rather than expressing a claim to occupy the center of the city (as in the ‘right to the city’), centrality in this context is best understood as “a locus of actions that attract and repel, that structure and organize social space... [it] is something that is the cell form of the urban... its *sine qua non*” (Merrifield 2013, 918). While Lefebvre defines the city through its centralizing imperative, it is vital to note, as Merrifield does, that centrality is premised upon a dialectic of attraction and repulsion. At the level of social form, internalizing the dialectic of centrality within a new urban university drives the imperative to both extend access across social space while constantly questioning who and what is being excluded through diverse modes of centralization. The urban university is revealed to act as a center in itself (and in doing so invokes its own differential access and exclusions) and functions to interpolate centralities elsewhere. This becomes increasingly important as the spatial strategies pursued at the institutional level, and by universities’ constitutive urbanists, are integrated into the production of – and production of knowledge about – new urban socio-spatial forms.
- Centrality is vital as it makes encounters with *difference* possible. The accommodation of difference, understood as where “*different* things occur one after another and do not exist separately but according to their differences” (Lefebvre 2003, 117), involves negotiating the central contradiction between the university as a collective – and potential obfuscating – institutional actor *and* a contested entity which, like the city, is comprised of heterogeneous and contradictory voices, interests and politics. Recognizing this reaffirms the position of critical urbanism and urbanists (broadly considered) within the university, and their capacity to enact agency over building a more socially just urban university and regime of urban knowledge production. For instance, as the neoliberalization of the university fosters processes of creative destruction across the academy, embracing difference as the central characteristic of everyday practice provides scope for critical urbanists to appropriate the rhetoric and toolkits of entrepreneurial education – including pedagogical innovations from bringing outside ‘experts’ into the classroom, project-based learning and tying learning objectives to the ‘economic’ aspects of problems (see European Commission 2013, 9) – and infusing them with an alternative progressive politics (Evans 2016). In other words, critical scholar-activists and theorists may be decisively positioned to wield the tools of neoliberalized educational practice against the hegemonic order to produce a more diverse and inclusive academy.

Although their content can only be known through empirical investigation and application (praxis) – and articulations and outcomes will vary in differing historical, national and institutional contexts – Table 1 illustrates how we can utilize these urban characteristics as: (1) *a mode of critique* to question universities’ urban knowledge production, spatial strategies and institutional structures and hold institutional practice to account; (2) *strategic principles* that imbue the university with a clear political imperative to inform action; and (3) the basis to implement the *concrete tactics* that underpin a ‘new urban university’ in practice.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

The new urban university framework set out here provides a cohesive agenda around which critical urbanism can be operationalized through near and far-oriented strategies (integrating both nascent existing tactics and new terrains of engagement for ‘amateur’ urbanism, see Catterall 2015). It opens dialogical spaces within and beyond the academy through which the practices and goals of critical urbanism can be aligned with other existing university strategic goals. At the same time, it also reaffirms the collective agency of critical urbanists to challenge and reshape the university a central institution in the production of urban knowledge and the mediation of broader contests over urban space. Perhaps most significantly, using critical urban theory to promote an active internal critique of the types of knowledge and practices of knowledge exchange being valued within the urban university establishes the conditions to push back against the regressive micro-politics recognition, funding and ‘impact’ and the broader restricting of the ‘entrepreneurial university’. It draws attention to the concrete organizational barriers to critical urbanism prevalent in the ‘actually existing’ university: including entrenched bureaucratic traditions, disciplinary silos that dis-incentivize interdisciplinary collaboration, the restrictive requirements of funding agencies, and the marginal recognition often afforded to non-traditional scholarship.

In practical terms, this re-theorized urban university framework provides a rejoinder to extant highly-territorialized policy frameworks focused on leveraging universities as civic tools (Goddard 2009; Watson et al. 2011), establishing localized ‘anchor institutions’ capable of sustaining economic growth and the cultural vitality of place (Birch, Perry and Taylor 2013; Maurrasse 2007), or promoting academia as an agent of regional economic development, innovation and technology transfer (OECD 2007; Etzkowitz 2008). Underpinning such approaches is a strong tendency to treat both ‘the city’ and ‘the university’ as rational, monolithic and capable actors in a manner that: (1) normalizes the university an instrument of neoliberal growth and governance; and (2) relegates the knowledge generated by critical research, and its potential to tackle urban problems, behind the symbolic and competitive value the university provides the city (May and Perry 2011, 360). While the territorial, economic and administrative dimensions of the city remain important contexts for public policy engaging higher education institutions (Cochrane and Williams 2013), universities are actively recalibrating where in the world, and the city, they are strategically engaging: from expanding their physical and virtual presence and entering into global research networks and partnerships, to internationalizing curricula, recruitment and outreach programs. By breaking from the extant approaches that are epistemological tied to ‘the city’, examining ‘universities in urban society’ reframes them as dispassionate but highly imbricated players producing, extending and fragmenting urban space at a global scale in material and ideological terms (Wachsmuth 2014).

Conceptually, rethinking ‘universities in urban society’ does not assume the society in which we live in is, or can be, a fully urbanized, nor that a fully urban university can be an achieved condition in practical or conceptual terms. Not all actors within a university are involved in urban activities and universities themselves are embedded within a landscape of contingent non-urban institutions and networks from national policy makers and state legislatures to private donors and funding agencies. The urban does not erase the rural, nor does urbanization-as-accumulation erase the foundations of industrial capitalism – a critique of ‘planetary’ urban theory frequently highlighted in this journal (e.g. Catterall 2016, 5). Rather, viewing urban society as an incomplete project of collective imagination, negotiation and struggle “offers an open horizon in relation to which concrete struggles over the urban are waged... leading to the formation not only of new urban spatial configurations, but of new visions of the potentials being produced and claimed through [these] activities.” (Brenner and Schmid 2015, 178). My contention here is that the urban can be strategically elevated within particular university forms and practices (see Table 1) to open new progressive ‘conditions of possibility’: i.e. *urban* concerns within an alternative *new urban university* achieve “ecological dominance” but do not dominate other universities non-urban relations (after Jessop 2000). This is not to assert a

singular institutional model, but rather to promote an understanding of the urban university as both place and process that internalizes – and therefore must negotiate – many of the contradictions of urbanized social relations. Mediation, centrality and difference are therefore not, of themselves the objective goals of a new urban university, but rather serve to disclose key contradictions internalized with the dialectics of abstraction-social practice; centrality-peripherality; and institutionalization-difference that we must be attuned to. The question for critical urbanists then becomes how to make the process of establishing a new urban university more just – transforming the central function of the university from providing the labor, skills and knowledge required by the dominant mode of production to producing, collating and exchanging knowledge of the urban “for new values and alternative civilization” (Lefebvre 2014, 203)?

## **Conclusion**

This is a crucial juncture to rethink the urban function of universities and elevate conversations regarding the problematic potential of (critical) urban knowledge to catalyze emancipatory social change. The pervasive neoliberal political economy, at once highly urbanized, is now viscerally internalized within the creaking corridors, labor relations and refocused missions of the university as a social institution. This goes beyond epistemological debates about the positionality of the urban theorist, and its implications reverberate beyond both the university and the city. Within this milieu, the university is now nothing short of a setting and site for social struggle at a global scale. From Amsterdam to Johannesburg, Quebec to Hong Kong, we have witnessed a proliferation of high profile strikes by precariously employed teaching staff, student sit ins and mass protests over fees and universities’ colonial legacies, and opposition to predatory campus expansions at home and abroad (Hall 2016; Krause et al. 2008; Ratcliffe 2015). There are encouraging signs; the traditions of engaged urbanism and participatory action research are alive and well in the urban academy (Campkin and Duijzings 2016; Harney et al. 2016) and there are avenues opening up to reevaluate the ‘impact’ expectations of the neoliberal university through feminist methodologies (Evans 2016). But in order to truly grasp the right to centrality through the spaces and structures of a new urban university, we need to engender processes of restructuring that not only open the university to increased diversification and inclusion, but strategically facilitate the active (re)learning of higher education institutions’ urban relations across the university’s institutional spaces: from the internal coordination of knowledge production, through networked, territorial, placed-based, and multiscale terrains of operation, to social and technological mechanism for widening participation. Critical urbanism, I have argued, holds great potential to reinvigorate the university as a progressive urban actor through its conceptual tools and modes of engagement that accommodate the dynamics of new and extended urbanization patterns and qualitatively distinct modes of urbanism, with their associated urban knowledges. Here, the urban university, like the city, must be both place and process. And it must be actively claimed by those looking to foster a more just 21<sup>st</sup>-century urbanism.

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Jean-Paul Addie is a Marie Curie Research Fellow in the Department of Geography at University College London. Email: [j.addie@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.addie@ucl.ac.uk)

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**Table 1: Towards a New Urban University**

<b>Urban Society</b>	<b>The New Urban University:</b>		
<i>Characteristic (level)</i>	<i>as a mode of critique:</i>	<i>as strategy:</i>	<i>as practice (a non-exhaustive sample of potential tactics):</i>
<i>Mediation</i> (social reality)	<b>Dialectic of abstraction-social practice:</b> What type of knowledge is valued? What organizations and external relationships does the university prioritize? How does the university colonize and produce urban space? How does the neoliberalization of higher education institutions and regimes infringe upon the work of critical urbanists? How does the university facilitate urban actors representing themselves, rather than just being represented?	The responsible and reflexive production, collation and exchange of urban knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishing a robust institutional critique of urban knowledge; checks and balances on the exercise of urban power/expertise (Merrifield 2015)</li> <li>• Developing syllabi and shifting pedagogical practice to foreground engaged urban practice and on-going struggle over urban space;</li> <li>• Coordinating interdisciplinary conversations on urban issues and providing institutional support to facilitate collaborative research (Cantor et al. 2015)</li> <li>• Relating to urban communities in ways that are beneficial to the academy, but not patronizing or exploitative (Goodall 1970)</li> <li>• Offering pro bono legal and planning consultancy for marginalized communities in their neighborhoods; offering ‘executive education’ training for community organizers</li> <li>• Enabling critical urbanists to adopt an active role in urban planning systems, opening universities as sites of mediation (Schafran 2015)</li> <li>• Engaging urbanization and urban governance concomitantly at different scales, demonstrating the necessity of incorporating multiple spatial perspectives into urban practice</li> </ul>
<i>Centrality</i> (social form)	<b>Dialectic of centrality-peripherality:</b> Where in urban space do university activities and engagement happen? What internal and external drivers catalyze universities to assume the role of urban actors? How do they respond to, and generate, new metropolitan forms and translocal urbanity through their spatial strategies, institutional modes of operating, and pedagogical practices? How does campus infrastructure function to include or exclude urban partners and communities near and far? What and who is dialectically peripheralized as the university centralizes?	Opening access and exchange across social space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing novel and adaptive sites for university practices in varied urban spaces and with varying degrees of permanence (from branch campuses to pop-up workshops and virtual forums, MOOCs)</li> <li>• Restructuring courses (in terms of content and mode of delivery) for part-time access and for working people</li> <li>• Engaging groups in emergent urban and suburban landscapes that do not have the established institutional thickness or community organizations found in traditional sites of research and teaching (Benneworth 2013)</li> <li>• Developing strategies to access, engage and empower those displaced from positions of centrality in the city by gentrification and other forms of revanchist urbanization</li> <li>• Placing social, rather than physical infrastructure needs at the core of university expansion plans</li> <li>• Establishing a robust institutional critique of the university as a center in itself and mechanism interpolating centralities elsewhere</li> </ul>

*Difference*  
(everyday life)

**Dialectic of institutionalization-diversity:**  
How do university outputs and practices empower/marginalize those excluded from extant power structures (directly and indirectly)? How is the university rendered porous? Where are the key interfaces and what information is transferred? How are heterodox voices validated in this framework? How are outreach and engagement valued internally? How can pedagogical innovations be infused with a politics of social justice?

Fostering  
emancipatory  
opportunity  
through difference

- Recognizing divergent contributions to meeting local and regional needs for diverse stakeholders (Evans 2016)
  - Bringing diverse voices and urban actors into the classroom
  - Incentivizing urban academics to explore innovative engagement practices with marginalized city dwellers (near and far) (Catterall 2015)
  - Restructuring tenure portfolio and 'Research/Teaching Excellence' criteria to facilitate 'slow scholarship' (Mountz et al. 2015)
  - Institutionalizing pedagogies and faculty training to promote resilient and mutually beneficial community partnerships
  - Preparing students, faculty and critical urbanists (more broadly) to engage across interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral lines
  - Appropriating entrepreneurial neoliberal higher education 'innovations' and infusing them with a new politics
  - Increasing diversity within the academy and its institutional apparatus (faculty, journal boards etc.) (Madden 2015), but also on research council and other funding agencies
  - Expanding beyond degree qualifications, introducing new, relevant modes of assessment and evaluation (Schafran 2015)
-