

The university and the city: spaces of risk, decolonisation, and civic disruption.

Donald McNeill
Michael Mossman
Dallas Rogers
University of Sydney

Mark Tewdwr-Jones
University College London

ABSTRACT

This paper responds to a recent EPA Exchanges paper by Eric Knight, Andrew Jones and Meric Gertler (Knight et al 2021). It concurs with their argument for the significance of economic geography for explaining the ‘local-global’ dilemmas facing the university in contemporary society. In response, it will propose three additional optics for understanding the role of the university in the contemporary city. First, as a space of risk, where the neo-liberal university is now undertaking various modes of financing their real estate models, drawing on bond markets to finance future growth, soliciting politically risky philanthropic donations, and betting on future student recruitment trends – including the high-risk international student sector – as being sufficient to fund capital investments in buildings and facilities. Second, as a space of decolonisation, where the university must seek to locate campus development within discussions about the university’s responsibilities within systems of settler colonialism, and racially inflected gentrification. Third, as a civic disruptor, where the university campus is seen as more than just a backdrop or context to the university’s governance, culture, and business models, but also as a front door to understanding the city and economy within which it is embedded.

Introduction

This paper responds to a recent *Environment and Planning A* Exchanges paper by Eric Knight, Andrew Jones and Meric Gertler (2021). It concurs with their argument of the significance of economic geography for explaining the ‘local-global’ dilemmas facing the university in contemporary society. In the paper, they propose an important leadership role for universities in navigating the social and political challenges facing universities in the current climate. In response, we would like to take the opportunity to propose three additional optics for understanding the role of the university in the contemporary city and region. First, as a space of risk, where the neo-liberal university is now undertaking various modes of financing their real estate models, drawing on bond markets to finance future growth, soliciting politically risky philanthropic donations, and betting on future student recruitment trends – including the high-risk international student sector – as being sufficient to fund capital investments in buildings and facilities. Second, as a space of decolonisation, where the university must seek to locate campus development within discussions about the university’s responsibilities within systems of settler colonialism, and racially inflected gentrification. Third, as a civic disruptor, where the university campus is seen as more than just a backdrop or context to the university’s governance, culture, and business models, but also as a front door to understanding the city and economy within which it is embedded. We choose these three optics because they each, in different ways, challenge universities to understand some of the contradictions within their apparently unified mission, as ways in which universities may move beyond their ‘everyday’ of teaching and research. We acknowledge that our examples are geographically limited to a small number of cases from the UK, North America, Australia and the Netherlands, but are interested in how the issues we raise do, or don’t, pertain to the wave of new technologically oriented universities that have emerged globally.

Understanding the role of universities in contemporary cities

The university campus as risk space

The future of the university as a spatial entity is under debate, where real estate assets and future capital costs become overheads that are set against investing in the IT infrastructure of the ‘digital campus’ or ‘virtual university’ (Robins and Webster 2002; Willetts 2017). The risky nature of this approach was becoming highly controversial even before COVID-19 disrupted these strategies, with a growing unease among faculty, students and the wider public about the business models of universities. This presents both a theoretical and policy challenge: how to understand the university campus as more than just a backdrop or context to the university’s governance and culture; and how to understand the university as part of the city and economy within which it is embedded. The way the campus is programmed, the way capital is deployed in its fabric, and the way in which bodies – students, academics, managers, public – are accommodated has great significance for its overall existence and reproduction. Stefano Collini, in his essay ‘The Global Multiversity’, captures the angst that exists within universities that are structured around specialist, inter-university collaboration, yet have to compete globally within a “kind of mercantilism of the intellect” (2012, p.17)

Universities play a significant role in the urban geographical structure of cities. They typically occupy extensive areas of high value real estate which have accumulated new buildings and facilities over decades. University management has to ensure successful product placement in a highly competitive student market, as well as integrate their campuses within wider city-regions. Yet there have long been tensions between universities and the cities in which they are located, ranging from the historical sense of the campus as being a sheltered space of learning ‘cloistered’ from the industrial modern city (see Bender 1991) to a more recent redefinition of ‘town and gown’ divides with universities cast as urban gentrifiers (Goddard and Vallance 2013). Furthermore, whether understood as neo-liberalised, financialised, or merely commercialised, the way university management resources or organises its space has been transformed by an array of metrics, management formats, revenue models, and capital deployment strategies. No longer bucolic retreats from city life, campuses are now carefully calculated real estate cost centres. If university life is now subject to tighter and tighter corporate management control (Bessant 1995; Marginson and Considine 2000; Deem et al 2008), the same applies to how academic staff and the student body occupy university space.

Many universities have embarked on high-risk financialised property strategies which are underpinned by a set of calculative rationalities and accounting mechanisms. The best documentation of this process is provided by Engelen *et al* (2014), who chart how the University of Amsterdam (UvA) became embroiled in a highly contested process of campus estates consolidation, based on grouping different faculties and specialisms within four clusters in different parts of the central city. At its heart was the fundamental contradiction that “real estate planning is a long-term venture while student numbers are prone to short-term fluctuations, which are hard to extrapolate.” (p.1077). For this reason, the University took on a significant level of debt to finance its estates strategy. This was based on a set of assumptions: “that state budgets would not be cut, that student fees would not decline, that interest rates would remain unchanged, that building cost increases would not exceed inflation, and finally, that excess capacity could be rented to third parties at market price. These assumptions, of course, proved way too optimistic.” (p.1079). Space precludes a full description of this case, but the core mechanism at the heart of the university’s growth projections – its solvency ratio – was systematically altered in a way that will structure the university’s future operations for many decades. Perhaps as significantly, though, was the ‘professional shift in power’ from academics to non-academic property and financial managers who “have largely taken over the apex of the organization, have succeeded in transforming its organizational matrix as well as its information and cash flows in such a way that it became “legible” to financial outsiders (read: banks)” (p.1086). The subsequent occupation of the university’s Maagdehuis in 2015 in protest against closure of some humanities programs encapsulated how this logic played on into academic learning. The case aligns with a broader critique of the influence of ‘new public management’ principles on university management, the growth of interest among investors in education as an asset class; and an overarching marketization of higher education policy in many countries (e.g. Deem *et al* 2008; Marginson and Considine 2000; Schram 2016).

This example is also an illustration of the growing material power of global rankings in shaping academic staff and student choices, which is prompting universities to use their campuses as part of their brand, and a point of differentiation (Stack 2016). Similarly, ‘grand challenge’ funding schemes, which often include significant corporate research investments, are likely to absorb substantial components of capital budgets (Popowitz and Dergelo 2013). Many universities aspire to achieve the fund-raising of leaders such as Harvard, which used an intensive campaign in the 1980s based around “commercially valuable patents...finance-oriented investing, and...a renewed commitment to philanthropic support” (Winling 2018, p.170). Some have turned to issuing public bonds: it is noted in the financial press that there is a serendipitous relationship between university bonds, which are low-risk and with an aura of government indemnity, and conservative, long-term institutional investors seeking a steady return (Hale and Vina 2016). It is thus important to recognise that universities are tied into national and global capital flows, and that the location of universities is one that can only be understood in terms of complex relational economic and political geographies (Addie 2015 et al; Addie 2017; Robertson et al 2012; Robertson and Olds 2017).

Theoretically, given the intense critical political economies of urban development that have become canonised in many social theory disciplines, it is surprising to find less guidance as to how to understand the political economy of campuses. Here, we might consider how ‘university territory’ is something actively governed, calculated for risk, and programmed into existence (e.g. Mennicken and Miller 2012). In an increasingly competitive inter-university regime, these territories will remain conflictual in terms of how management seeks to unlock the human capital embodied in staff and students, and the latent value stored in the infrastructure that surrounds them, be it an expensive piece of engineering or medical infrastructure, or a simple lecture theatre.

Decolonising the campus

The second element which is of great relevance to local-global optics is the historic role of universities in underpinning colonial power structures, and the gradual progress that has been made in recognising, accounting for, and make reparations for this role. The ways in which universities have benefited from colonialism, and more specifically slavery, has often been ignored. This is often a complex history: an

internal review by Glasgow University, one of the first universities to address its past, noted both a civic role in anti-slavery advocacy, as well as being recipients of gifts and bequests from individuals who had built wealth from slavery (Belam 2018). The decolonisation process has also been significant in South Africa, where leading universities have had to reconcile their role as part of the apartheid state structure (Jansen 2019). Much of the activity to date has involved renaming research institutes, buildings, and campus streets, as well as the removal of statues associated with academics and donors involved in slavery, eugenics or racist or exclusionary practices (Viglione and Subbaraman 2020)

As well as the important role of revisiting past donations and commemorations, much still needs to be done in terms of research into land ownership endowments and campus expansion plans. Approaching the question of university land from urban political economy, Davarian Baldwin (2021) shows how contemporary universities in the United States have an "increasingly powerful hold" over their cities. These universities have acquired considerable real estate holdings through colonial and post-colonial land acquisition, and are increasingly leveraging these assets in urban land markets in the cities they are located within. In the process, argues Baldwin, vulnerable communities are displaced, and the public domain is increasingly privatized and securitized, with some universities in the United States commanding their own security forces. Baldwin's work demonstrates the ways in which universities are using urban land as an asset class in the city with negative social outcomes for the often-poor communities surround these institutions. For example, the University of Pennsylvania displaced 600 low-income and African-American families to build a science centre in West Philadelphia in the 1960s; more recently the University of Southern California and University of Chicago have been involved in contentious urban development projects, the latter in its construction of the Obama Presidential Center (Baldwin 2021).

Universities are thus implicated in a complex process of engaging global student flows while recognising historic – and by definition highly localised – incursion and expansion. Some universities have been notably proactive in developing strategic plans which merge socio-economic and opportunity advancement with campus interventions, such as the University of British Columbia and University of Sydney. For example, the neo-Gothic Great Hall of the University of Sydney was temporarily transformed by a group of First Nations high school students as part of a pedagogical collaboration with one of the authors. In this process, the materials which distinguished the structure of the Hall – marble flooring from *Gandangarra* Country, sandstone from *Wangal* and *Gadigal* Country, and red cedar from *Bundjalung* Country - were traced in terms of the impact of the university as a colonial enabler and actor. As Mossman (2021) puts it:

The story of the marble floor in the Great Hall—quarried from Country, dug up, destroying existing ecological and environmental systems, severing intimate, long-standing relationships between people and place—is a story of incarceration and disturbance. What was below ground is unearthed and polished. It ornaments the space. It is used to convey permanence, to intimate a connection to the marble monuments of Europe, to acculturate *terra nullius*. Indirectly, the floor is a funereal monument to Country. (Mossman 2021, p.200).

As part of a longer term process of reconciliation, The University has committed to a set of design and placemaking principles – *Wingara Mura* Design Principles – which includes the observation that the “University’s original Gothic revival architecture, for example, its commanding positioning on a ridge and plantings (added in the late 19th century), marked European cultural dominance upon the landscape.” (University of Sydney 2016, p.15). The Principles set the stage for a range of campus interventions that sought to reconnect with Country, a fundamental concept of Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing. The University of British Columbia, similarly, has pursued a far-reaching strategic plan which includes specific campus interventions such as the Reconciliation Pole at a central point in its Vancouver campus, and the completion of its First Nations Longhouse (University of British Columbia 2020).

There are other interventions within university governance and campus design that indicate a growing commitment to decolonisation. It remains the case, however, that many globally mobile students tread the path dependency of studying in the universities at the heart of imperial or colonial expansion. Decolonising the campus is an important corrective to discussions of links between universities and global cities.

The social upheaval of the 1960s onwards has meant that university leaders – especially in the US – have advocated a closer relationship between campus and city to address social disadvantage and encourage community access. For example, Clark Kerr, the founder of the University of California university system, was an eloquent advocate of how the modern university could engage with ‘the city of infinite variety’ that had engulfed the traditional idea of the campus (Marginson 2016, p.22). Similarly, in *Beyond the Ivory Tower* (1982), Harvard’s then President Derek Bok set out his institution’s diverse engagements with the Cambridge/Boston region, which ranged from anti-apartheid activism to spin-off biotech firms, and how this placed new demands on its campus spaces. More recently, Goddard and Vallance (2013) have strongly advocated for universities to embrace their role as civic institutions, and to actively partner with local institutions for social benefit, and to connect universities into areas of socio-economic disadvantage. Some universities, such as Newcastle in the UK, have experimented with assertive engagement into the city-regional economy (Vallance et al 2019, 2020), and Knight et al (2020) provide a range of examples from the UK, Canada and Australia of how universities intervene in their immediate cities and regions.

There is a considerable variety in the way that universities now interact with their cities and regions that go beyond property partnerships, campus urban spaces, and business models. These interactions also encompass selective institutional partnerships with business, municipality and voluntary organisations in their own territories, that may involve shaping public policy, informing new business growth for companies, and providing small-scale funding for engagement and networking events. There may be a disconnect between the preferred partners of university senior management, and the external networks of individual academics. From this perspective, the civic university may be less concerned with how, institutionally, it performs a role within their own urban and regional spaces, and possibly more to do with the ideas, visions and commitment of individual academics to causes and organisations they wish to support through their own work.

In the UK, there has been momentum to revive the concept of the ‘civic university’. This has occurred through the setting up of a Civic University Commission (2019) whose aim was to set out how universities could serve their own places more significantly. The Commission’s initial report sought to operationalise a university’s civic mission and influence the UK Government into allocating new funding mechanisms that supported places in a post-Brexit, levelling-up context. By 2021, it had prompted almost 50 publicly-funded universities to sign up to the principle of the civic university and prepare individual Civic University Agreements. The UK Government then set up a Ministerial University Research and Knowledge Exchange Sustainability Task Force in 2020, to share intelligence and good impact practice. However, even where universities have committed to sign local Civic University Agreements with regional partners, these can remain largely ‘paper commitments’ with on-going uncertainty over the allocation of dedicated outreach budgets, their relationship to the university’s core teaching and research endeavours, and links to and discretionary spending of student fees.

The Newcastle-Gateshead urban living partnership pilot, Newcastle City Futures (NCF)¹, was an explicit attempt promoted by Newcastle University, led by their Vice Chancellor, to focus on the civic university and address societal and public policy issues within the city and the region. Although this was very much part of the legacy of the university’s historic reputation as a civic anchor, it was also a pragmatic attempt to respond to the university’s role in a region suffering from austerity measures, while fusing together several competing funding, property and globalising agendas. This included the need to develop the university co-owned new science quarter in the heart of the urban area. NCF’s five year pilot initiative has been written about elsewhere (e.g. Vallance et al., 2019, 2020). What has not been discussed, to date, is how this was embedded as an operational civic university platform in the face of various pressures. The Vice Chancellor and the Director of NCF realised that they could not shape and deliver an agile place-centric platform for the city and region within the university using existing or normal structures and line management. This was as a

¹ This write up is based on the experiences and reflections of <insert name> during his time as director of the initiative <add further details, post refereeing>.

direct consequence of a number of competing issues: the rigidity of new public management; the neo liberal pressures; the pre-existing professional services modus operandi; and even the attitudes of some academic and professional service leads of the institution, the rule intermediaries, all of which added up to standard, rather than agile, work practices that precluded transformational change from within. Thus, NCF was set up outside and beyond traditional internal organisational lines, floating outside and above all faculties, and devoid of key performance indicators, with a remit to roam across the university.

This involved performing three catalytic roles simultaneously: to find ways to identify and harness cities and regions related research and engagement in all corners of the university, by engaging with researchers directly irrespective of their and the director's disciplinary backgrounds; to develop a test-bed approach to solving the region's problems by shaping innovation projects within the area and, if feasible, on the university's own science quarter; and become a front door to city and regional organisations external to the university from the state, business and community sectors. In this way, the objective was to avoid embarking on a 'telling the world' dissemination approach, akin to the research impact evaluation models, and rather develop a listening device to hear what others in the city and region had to say about their own region, on their terms. It adopted an ambitious stance as its chosen way of working to facilitate collaboration between a range of sectors, striving to shape each project ideas into four objectives simultaneously that could deliver something back for each partner: an excellent research project; a business growth model; a public service cost saving or transformative practice; and a voice for citizens in urban change.

Conclusions

The paper has made an argument that in order to add to Knight et al's (2021) commentary, it is also important to understand the university estate as a collection of risk-based assets, settler colonial spatial arrangements, and a disruptor to other public institutions. The debate is important: multiple generations of stakeholders, from first-in-family aspirants to those who still keep a watchful eye on their alma mater, have a strong interest in the quality, cost, and accessibility of university campuses. There is an increasing interest in how universities can act in the "post-cloister" age as active participants in civic life and social justice, where the campus is asked to accommodate a spectrum of views ranging from enhancing the business life and productivity of cities, as a site of activism and civil disobedience, and as a source of 'dangerous ideas'. The campus is also a key site of social mixing and mobility, and issues such as access, safety, and student comfort will be particularly important as campuses are reconfigured to accommodate the impact of COVID-19. We have suggested that the neo-liberal educational model of institutional competition means that many universities have to undertake risk calculations that may have significant longer-term implications for their balance sheets. It may also lead to a situation as in current Australian Federal Government policy where science, technology and engineering subjects – seen as being key to national productivity – have their fees reduced relative to humanities subjects, which may in turn drive campus development and staffing choices.

It is also important to note also that many of the examples in both the Knight et al discussion, and the examples given in this paper, relate to the specific spatial formations of the global city. It needs to be acknowledged that the global city is a generator of significant inequalities, structurally sorting the educational opportunities of its inhabitants, as well as being a meritocratic generator of new social possibilities for a minority of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The cultural cachet of having a degree from a leading university, compared to a lower-ranked regional institution, is still an important social divider, before we even consider the alumni networks that perpetuate class wealth. The organisational milieu of leading universities actively sorts and introduces hitherto unaware students into the world's highest paying jobs and firms through career fairs, placement programs, and informal networks (Binder et al 2015).

Finally, there are many other important dimensions in play in the world's lesser-known universities (of which the Times Higher ranks approximately 1400). This requires insights into the governance arrangements, opportunities, and challenges in the diverse higher education landscapes in different nation-states. It is interesting to note that given the concentration of global universities in a small number of

electoral jurisdictions, the spatial distribution of universities within nation-state will act as a brake on the continuing growth of global universities. While there will be a role for globally focused universities to engage with the local as Knight et al suggest, there are also many financial, political, and civic tensions that require acknowledgement. As Collini (2021) has noted, the question of ‘what universities are for’ remains highly contentious and spatially variable.

REFERENCES

Addie, J-P, R.Keil, K.Olds (2015), ‘Beyond town and gown: universities, territoriality, and the mobilization of new urban structures in Canada’, *Territory, Politics, Governance* 3 (1): 27-50.

Addie, J-P (2017), ‘From the urban university to universities in urban society’ *Regional Studies* 51 (7): 1089-99.

Arup (2018), *Campus of the Future*. London: Arup. <https://www.driversofchange.com/projects/campus-of-the-future-2018/>

Baldwin, D. (2021), *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities are Plundering Our Cities*. New York: Bold Type Books.

Belam, M. (2018), ‘Glasgow University to make amends over slavery profits of the past’ *Guardian* 17 September. <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/sep/17/glasgow-university-to-make-amends-over-slavery-profits-of-past>

Bender, T. (1991), ed. *The University and the City: from medieval origins to the present*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Bessant, B (1995) ‘Corporate management and its penetration of university administration and government’, *Australian Universities Review*, 38 (1), pp. 59-62.

Binder, A.J., D.B.Davis, N.Bloom (2015), ‘Career funneling: How elite students learn to define and desire “prestigious” jobs’ *Sociology of Education* 89 (1): 20-39.

Bok, D. (1982), *Beyond the Ivory Tower: Social Responsibilities of the Modern University*. Cam. MA: Harvard UP.

Collini, S. (2012), *What are universities for?* London: Penguin.

Deem, R., S.Hillyard, M.Reed (2008), *Knowledge, Higher Education, and the New Managerialism: the changing management of UK universities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Engelen, E., R.Fernandez, R.Hendrikse (2014), ‘How finance penetrates its other: a cautionary tale on the financialisation of a Dutch university’, *Antipode* 46 (4): 1072-91.

Goddard, J. and P.Vallance (2013), *The University and the City*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Haar, S. (2010), *The City as Campus: Urbanism and Higher Education in Chicago*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hale, T. and G.Vina (2016), ‘University challenge: the race for money, students and status’, *Financial Times* 23 June <https://www.ft.com/content/c662168a-38c5-11e6-a780-b48ed7b6126f>

- Jansen, J.D. (2019) *Decolonisation in universities: The Politics of Knowledge*. Johannesburg: WITS University Press.
- Knight, E., A.Jones, M.Gertler (2021), 'The public university and the retreat from globalisation: An economic geography perspective on managing local-global tensions in international higher education' *Environment and Planning A* 53 (1): 210-218.
- Marginson, S. (2016), *The Dream is Over: The Crisis of Clark Kerr's California Idea of Higher Education*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Marginson, S, and Considine, M. (2000), *The Enterprise University: Power, Governance and Reinvention in Australia*. Melbourne. Cambridge University Press.
- Mennicken, A. and P.Miller (2012), 'Accounting, territorialization and power' *Foucault Studies* 13 4-24.
- Mossman, M. (2021), 'Third Space, Architecture & Indigeneity: Studies of Designed Environments and Cultural Narratives in Australia', PhD Thesis, School of Architecture, Design and Planning, University of Sydney
- Popowitz, M. and C.Dorgelo (2013), *Report on University-led Grand Challenges*. Los Angeles: UCLA, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/46f121cr>
- Robertson, S.L., K.Mundy, A.Verger, F.Menasby, eds (2012) *Public-private partnerships in universities: new actors and modes of governance in a globalizing world*. Northampton: Edward Elgar.
- Robertson, S.L. and K.Olds (2017), 'Locating universities in a globalizing world', in T.Strike (ed), *Higher Education Strategy: A Professional Guide*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Robins, K. and F.Webster (2002), eds., *The Virtual University: Knowledge, Markets and Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schram, S. ed (2016), *Neoliberalising the university: implications for American democracy*. New York: Routledge.
- Stack, M. (2016), *Global University Rankings and the Mediatization of Higher Education*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Temple, P. (2014), ed. *The Physical University: Contours of Space and Place in Higher Education*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- University of British Columbia (2020), *UBC Indigenous Strategic Plan*. https://aboriginal-2018.sites.olt.ubc.ca/files/2021/06/UBC.ISP_StrategicPlan2020-SPREAD-Borderless-REDUCED.pdf, accessed 12 August 2021.
- University of Sydney (2016), *Wingara Mura Design Principles*. <https://www.sydney.edu.au/documents/about/working-with-us/wingara-mura-design-principles.pdf>, accessed 12 August 2021.
- Vallance, P., M.Tewdwr-Jones, L.Kempton (2019) 'Facilitating spaces for place-based leadership in centralized governance systems: the case of Newcastle City Futures'. *Regional Studies* 53 (12): 1723-33.
- (2020), 'Building collaborative platforms for urban innovation: Newcastle City Futures as a quadruple helix intermediary', *European Urban and Regional Studies* 27 (4): 325-41.

Viglione, G. and N.Subbaraman (2020), 'Universities scrub names of racist leaders – students say it's a first step' *Nature* 584: 331-332.

Willetts, D. (2017), *A University Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Winling, L.C. (2018), *Building the Ivory Tower: University and Metropolitan Development in the Twentieth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.