

# Urban Theory by and for Whom? Engaged Research, Authorship and Transformation Beyond the Academy

Dialogues in Urban Research  
2024, Vol. 2(1) 53–58  
© The Author(s) 2024



Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/27541258241236879  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/dus](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/dus)



**Myfanwy Taylor**

Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, UK

## Abstract

This paper engages with Loretta Lees' suggestion that this journal include research collaborators beyond the academy as commentators in its urban dialogues. In it, I highlight the contortions and contradictions involved in extracting individual scholarly outputs from collaborative research, drawing on my experiences as a doctoral researcher in the UK. These challenges are intimately entangled with key questions posed by Loretta about who counts as an urban scholar or theorist, and what urban theor(ies) are – or might be – for. The difficulties involved in publishing engaged and collaborative research in academic formats contribute to its marginalisation within critical urban studies, robbing the discipline of the particular understandings and possibilities it can open up. Making space for engaged dialogue beyond the academy within this journal can help to open up the production and circulation of urban knowledge to a greater diversity of perspectives and interests, creating a more hospitable environment for engaged, collaborative and activist research within the academy. Such a shift invites authors to bring their multiple subjectivities and identities into urban dialogues – as modelled by Loretta – challenging conventions designed to separate and elevate academic knowledge from the diverse others it depends upon. Extending urban dialogue to non-academic collaborators can therefore help to connect critical urban research with the communities and interests in whose name it claims to operate.

## Keywords

Engaged research, Collaborative research, Urban economies, Economic diversity, London

My brief commentary on Loretta Lees' plenary, delivered at the Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in 2023, explores her suggestion that this journal include collaborators beyond the academy in its urban dialogues. Her plenary emphasises *engaged* dialogue in urban research and urban studies, through active listening across difference, curiosity in conversation and collective/collaborative thinking and working within and beyond the academy. Lees generously incorporates elements of her own personal biography and experience as a

first generation or working class academic in the UK and latterly the US, modelling situated embodied engagement in urban research. She relates her own discomfort as an 'inside-outsider' in urban studies to its privileged position, held above and at a distance from the other forms of knowledge it marginalises.

---

## Corresponding author:

Myfanwy Taylor, Bartlett School of Planning, University College London, 14 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0NN, UK.  
Email: [myfanwy.taylor.09@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:myfanwy.taylor.09@ucl.ac.uk)

She also shares attempts to discipline some of her own efforts at engaged dialogue within and beyond academic urban studies by others within the field. Her plenary culminates with a determination to continue pushing urban studies' boundaries through engaged research and dialogue, while anticipating further attempts to marginalise and discipline her efforts. Loretta Lees' plenary therefore makes for essential – if uncomfortable – reading for academic urban researchers. This journal offers a conducive setting from which to engage with (rather than reject) this discomfort and the issues which produce it.

Rippling beneath the surface of Lees' plenary is the somewhat unstated question of what and who urban theory and urban studies is or could be for. She describes some of her own attempts to engage with different urban theories (specifically planetary urbanisation and comparative urbanism), holding them in productive and complementary tension with one another in order to arrive at new understandings of gentrification. Her engagement with different urban theories and ideas reminds me of Anderson's (2020) 'parallax' urban theorising through which he engages with urban change in a gentrifying New York neighbourhood from both 'major' and diverse 'minor' urban political economy perspectives. Like Lees, Anderson does not claim to determine which body of theory is 'correct' but rather identifies and explores the different views they offer, before reassembling them anew in order to understand urbanisation as 'more-than-capitalist'. He explains that this way of thinking is a response to local activists' determined refusal to accept gentrification as inevitable – and their dissatisfaction with critical urban theory which implies this – by pointing attention to moments of potential rupture and transformation. While Loretta Lees is less explicit about the motivations for her own approach to theoretical engagement in her plenary, elsewhere she articulates a strong desire to mitigate, stop and mobilise alternatives to gentrification, both through her own research and engagement and by encouraging others to engage with policy makers and activists (e.g., Lees, 2022). In this way, Lees – alongside Anderson and others (e.g., Chatterton, 2010, 2016; Kern and McLean, 2017; May and Perry, 2017; Oldfield, 2015, 2023) – entices urban scholars to orientate their theorising

outwards, excavating and nourishing possibilities for radical transformation and alternatives through engagement and collaboration beyond the academy.

### Engaging with urban economies

My own engagement with urban studies has been similarly motivated by an interest in and desire for transformation and alternatives – and this has of course shaped my reading of and commentary on Loretta's plenary. My doctoral research (2012–17) focused on London, where I have lived and studied or worked most of my life, and was profoundly shaped by my collaboration with the London-wide community planning network, Just Space (Lipietz, Lee and Hayward, 2014), with whom I set up and supported a dedicated 'Economy and Planning' sub-group, JSEP. It was through Just Space and JSEP that I began to engage with London's economy – both the 'global city' perspective underpinning its official metropolitan strategies and plans, and the everyday and diverse economies which Just Space and its member groups knew, valued and campaigned in defence of. When my own university, University College London, proposed to build a new campus on the site of an existing council housing estate, Carpenters, in Stratford, east London, I was able to offer some support to residents and businesses' threatened with displacement to develop their own alternative proposals for the local economy as part of a wider community planning process supported by Just Space and the London Tenants Federation through their wider collaboration with Loretta Lees (London Tenants Federation et al., 2014; Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020; Taylor, 2024). These two experiences in turn inspired and shaped my engagement with the struggle over Seven Sisters Indoor Market (also known as the Latin Village) and Wards Corner in Tottenham, north London, both as an activist-researcher during my PhD studies and more recently as Board member of the Community Benefit Society set up to deliver the community plan.

My engagement with Just Space, the Carpenters Community Plan and Wards Corner developed gradually, through which specific possibilities emerged for collaborative action research, which I defined in my thesis as, 'research which is done in collaboration *with* community and activist groups, which recognises

the legitimacy and authorship of collaborators' knowledge and labour and which is embedded in and oriented towards their goals and aims' (Taylor, 2017: 114, emphasis as original; see also Benson and Nagar, 2006; McLean, Rankin and Kamizaki, 2015; Oldfield, 2015). In practical terms, this involved working with my collaborators to challenge and develop alternatives to plans and development proposals that threatened to displace London's market traders, migrant and minoritised ethnic retailers, industrial firms and other small businesses.<sup>1</sup>

Turning to the academic literature, however, I found little mention of such contestations over London's economy. In the early 2010s, the idea of London as a global city dominated critical academic analyses, as well as policy-makers and planners' perspectives, leaving its economic diversity largely invisible and unexamined. Inspired by Gibson-Graham's (2006) engagement with the performative role of language in playing a role in bringing into being the world it describes, I began to identify and gather together a range of different ideas and accounts that could help to bring the diverse and contested nature of urban economies back into view, making space for new readings of their politics and possibilities. My account brought together Gibson-Graham's diverse and community economies research with a wide range of other urban and economic research including feminist and postcolonial engagements with unpaid and informal labour and a growing body of work on commercial gentrification (Taylor, 2017, 2020, 2024). The resources I assembled were wide-ranging and, of course, I struggled – and am still struggling – to make them measure up to the dominant accounts I more readily encountered. None-the-less, from this starting point, a 'weak theory' of the politics of diverse urban economies is beginning to emerge, informed by my research and engagement in London.

### **Extracting individual scholarly outputs from engaged urban research**

By the time, I began writing up my PhD research in the mid 2010s, my engagement had already contributed to and supported collective knowledge and

action through multiple workspace struggles across London, resulting in various different outputs and outcomes (e.g., Just Space, 2015; London Tenants Federation, 2013). Yet, when it came to writing up my thesis, none of this counted. I found myself in the seemingly impossible situation of having to extract an individual academic thesis from these multiple, embedded and extended processes of collective knowledge production and action. Finding and claiming my own voice within these collective processes was – and often still remains – very hard. In my thesis, I wrote:

I felt uncomfortable about turning collective knowledge and action into nuggets of information which I could use in my own thesis. I became concerned that I would undo all my efforts to combine activism with research, stripping out the messy, mundane and everyday aspects of my work and the knowledge and work of others in order to create orderly, clean data for individual scholarly analysis (Taylor, 2017: 146).

Eventually, I developed ways to write collaborators' knowledge and authority into rather than out of my thesis, learning from and clinging onto feminist geographers' insights and practices. Koni Benson and Richa Nagar's insight that, '[w]hat counts as fieldwork or about the resources it requires often assume solitary "experts" producing "original" knowledges on the lives and problems of the marginalized (2006: 585)', helped me to resist individualising and extractive modes of data production and analysis, as did Jane Wills' straightforward clarity that '[a]ll knowledge is coproduced through thinking and acting with others, even if such engagement is often ignored' (2012: 120). In its place, I took up Cindi Katz' invitation to 'begin to learn not to displace or separate so as to see and speak, but to see, be seen, speak, listen and be heard in the multiply determined fields that we are everywhere, always in. In this way, we can build a politics of engagement and simultaneously practice committed scholarship' (1994: 72).

For me, this involved writing the process of collective knowledge production and action into – rather than out of – my scholarly writing. I used

my collaborators real names (with permission) wherever possible, in order to acknowledge the legitimacy and authorship of the knowledge and experience they contributed both to the struggles I was engaging with and to the analysis I was able to present in my academic thesis. I included and analysed collective documents within my own text, as well as the most generative discussions and activities. I remained in dialogue with my collaborators as I wrote the thesis, keeping them in mind as well as my examiners as I inched towards an account that spoke to both these constituencies. The processes and practices through which urban researchers could contribute to building new collective knowledge, solidarities and possibilities for action became one of the major contributions of my thesis (Taylor, 2017, 2024). This approach was fundamental to the new perspective of urban economies as diverse and contested that emerged through my research and engagement, previewed earlier in the article, illustrating the potential for engagement beyond the academy to produce new understandings and possibilities.

While this process was therefore ultimately generative, I do not wish to underplay its significant difficulties and limitations (both my thesis and this article are, clearly, individually authored). Progressing engaged and collaborative urban research beyond the academy often remains, at present, extremely challenging (see, e.g., Perry, 2022). It takes time, care and resources which can be hard to gather together and sustain to support meaningful long-term engagement, collaboration and action. This careful labour remains undervalued within universities, leaving researchers struggling with too many competing demands. Lack of resources, support and recognition too often compromises collaboration, leading to frustration and disappointment for both academic and non-academic partners. As an early career researcher, I have struggled in particular to balance the priorities and possibilities emerging from engagement with writing and publishing the specific forms of outputs needed to secure a career and livelihood in academia in the UK. In this context, Loretta Lees' call for urban scholarly publishers to make themselves open to the collective and collaborative knowledge production involved

in community engaged research is powerfully legitimising and re-energising. Of course, such a shift would also require journals to demonstrate their usefulness to non-academic collaborators (whose labour would need to be resourced in many cases), and academic institutions and funders to value expanded collective authorship equally.

### **Recognising community authorship, transforming urban studies**

Recognising and valuing community knowledge, labour and authorship is a legitimate aim in itself, consistent with the ethics, practice and politics of knowledge production that animate community-engaged urban research in all its varieties. Opening up academic publishing in urban research would not only make a significant difference to engaged research and researchers, however. It also offers a potential route for bringing critical urban studies closer to the communities and concerns that animate it, inserting knowledge and insights 'from below' into the heart of the discipline to open up new much needed understandings and possibilities for radical transformation and alternatives. Extending opportunities for dialogue and engagement beyond academia via this journal and others could help to identify and develop issues of mutual concern and shared interest, as well as to expose and encounter generatively tensions and conflicts. The proposed ethos and format of *Dialogues in Urban Research* are particularly exciting in this regard, offering collaborators the possibility to articulate their knowledge and authorship in relation to and in dialogue with one another, echoing the processes and dynamics that shape collective knowledge production and action. Such dialogue would be insightful for urban researchers using a wide range of methods and approaches beyond engagement and collaboration. Expanding urban scholarship to include non-academic authorship might also encourage more academic urban scholars to bring their varied experiences and identities within and beyond the academy reflexively into their analysis, challenging false divides between academia and activism. In so doing, urban researchers can continue to break down the barriers which constrain the discipline's

potential to contribute to radical transformation and alternatives.

### Acknowledgements

The doctoral research discussed in this paper was conducted in collaboration with Just Space, Wards Corner Community Coalition and the Carpenters Community Plan group, with whom I organised to defend economic diversity in London. I would like to acknowledge in particular Richard Lee (Just Space), Sharon Hayward (London Tenants Federation), Carlos Burgos (West Green Road / Seven Sisters Development Trust / Wards Corner Community Benefit Society) and Victoria Alvarez (Wards Corner Community Benefit Society / Seven Sisters Market Tenants Association). I would also like to thank my PhD supervisors, Professors Jennifer Robinson and Michael Edwards, and the editorial team at Dialogues in Urban Research and Loretta Lees for the opportunity to engage in these discussions.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number 1061886] and the Leverhulme Trust [grant number ECF-2021-172].

### Note

1. This work is discussed in more detail in Taylor (2020, 2024).

### References

- Anderson CM (2020) *The Everyday Life of a Gentrifying West Side Neighborhood*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Benson K and Nagar R (2006) Collaboration as resistance? Reconsidering the processes, products and possibilities of feminist oral history and ethnography. *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 13(5): 581–592.
- Chatterton P (2010) The urban impossible: A eulogy for the unfinished city. *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action* 14(3): 234–244.
- Chatterton P (2016) Building transitions to post-capitalist urban commons. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41(4): 403–415.
- Gibson-Graham JK (2006) [1996] *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Just Space (2015) London for All! A Handbook for Community and Small Business Groups Fighting to Retain Workspace for London's Diverse Economies. [https://justspacelondon.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/workspacehandbook\\_highres.pdf](https://justspacelondon.files.wordpress.com/2015/09/workspacehandbook_highres.pdf) (accessed 1 February 2024).
- Katz C (1994) Playing the field: Questions of fieldwork in geography. *The Professional Geographer* 46(1): 67–72.
- Kern L and McLean H (2017) Undecidability and the urban: Feminist pathways through urban political economy. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16(3): 405–426.
- Lees L (2022) Gentrification, urban policy and urban geography. *Space and Polity* 26(2): 109–114.
- Lipietz B, Lee R and Hayward S (2014) Just space: Building a community-based voice for London planning. *City: Analysis of Urban Change, Theory, Action* 18(2): 214–225.
- London Tenants Federation (2013) Carpenters Community Plan 2013. <http://www.londontenants.org/publications/other/Carpenters%20community%20plan%202013%20%28final%29.pdf> (accessed 1 June 2022).
- London Tenants Federation, Lees, L, Just Space and SNAG (2014) Staying Put: An Anti- Gentrification Handbook for Council Estates in London. <https://justspace.org.uk/2014/06/19/staying-put-an-anti-gentrification-handbook-for-council-estates-in-london/> (accessed 2 February 2024).
- May T and Perry B (2017) *Cities and the Knowledge Economy: Promise, Politics and Possibilities*. New York: Routledge.
- McLean H, Rankin K and Kamizaki K (2015) Inner-suburban neighbourhoods, activist research and the social space of the commercial street. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14(4): 1283–1308.

- Oldfield S (2015) Between activism and the academy: The urban as political terrain. *Urban Studies* 52(11): 2072–2086.
- Oldfield S (2023) *High Stakes, High Hopes: Urban Theory in Partnership*. Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Perry B (2022) Co-production as praxis: Critique and engagement from within the university. *Methodological Innovations* 15(3): 341–352.
- Sendra P and Fitzpatrick D (2020) *Community-Led Regeneration: A Toolkit for Residents and Planners*. London: UCL Press.
- Taylor M (2017) Contested urban economies: representing and mobilising London's diverse economy. PhD Thesis, University College London, UK.
- Taylor M (2020) The role of traders and small businesses in urban social movements: The case of London's workspace struggles. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 44(6): 1041–1056.
- Taylor M (2024) The economic politics of anti-displacement struggle: connecting diverse and community economies research with critical urban studies on the carpenters estate, London. *Antipode* 56(2): 672–693.
- Wills J (2012) The geography of community and political organisation in London today. *Political Geography* 31(2): 114–126.

### Author biography

**Myfanwy Taylor** is currently Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the Bartlett School of Planning, University College London (UCL), UK, where she researches economic development 'from below'. Prior to this, she was Senior Research Fellow on the Markets4People project at the School of Geography, University of Leeds, UK. She completed her doctoral research on contested urban economies at UCL's Department of Geography in 2017.