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(Re)constituting urban research in a neoliberal planning climate

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ABSTRACT

This special issue shares how early career researchers (ECRs) are using their scholarship to think through how the research-practice nexus might be differently negotiated and understood to build potential for change. As urban scholars, we are drawn to the plight of cities, not just with a curiosity that besets most researchers to describe, analyse and offer comment, but also with a vision to shape new perspectives and ways of thinking. To this end, urban scholarship across Australia and New Zealand becomes political, motivated by a desire for new ways of doing planning to support inclusiveness, diversity, and ecological stewardship. Sometimes colliding with prevailing orthodoxy, dominant discourses, and entrenched frameworks that determine how planners, politicians, and residents think about urban issues, urban researchers are required to consider innovative ways to engage with policy and practice that move 'beyond' these norms and discourses. This editorial positions the contributions in this issue against the question of how are ERCs (re)constituting urban research in a neoliberal climate.

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Introduction

A curiosity to understand cities inspires a deep intellectual engagement with how cities can do and be 'better'. Australian urban scholarship forges a powerful critique of contemporary urban policy and practice (see e.g. McLoughlin 1992; Mees 2003; Dodson 2009; Curtis and Low 2012; Gleeson, Dodson, and Spiller 2012; Whitzman, Gleeson, and Sheko 2014) exposing the need to address a range of urban issues including social injustices, environmental degradation, and institutional path dependencies. As urban scholars, we are drawn to the plight of cities, not just with a curiosity that besets most researchers to describe, analyse, and offer comment, but also with a vision (if you will) to shape new perspectives and ways of thinking. To this end, urban scholarship across Australia and New Zealand becomes political, motivated by a desire for new ways of doing planning to support inclusiveness, diversity, and ecological stewardship. Sometimes colliding with prevailing orthodoxy, dominant discourses, and entrenched frameworks that determine how planners, politicians, and residents think about urban issues, urban researchers are required to consider innovative ways to engage with policy and practice that allow a movement 'beyond' these norms and discourses.

This special issue shares how early career researchers (ECRs) are using their scholarship to think through how the research-practice nexus might be differently negotiated and understood to build potential for change and that 'movement beyond'. We have compiled six papers by ECRs at different stages of their

ECR careers who are engaging with this 'wicked problem' in a variety of ways. Our aim is modest yet purposeful: to showcase the work of Australia's next generation of leading urban thinkers and critical 'guides' on how the 'flow of knowledge' (see Hillier 2016) can and should impact on urban and city planning. As the inaugural chairs of the Australasian Early Career Urban Research Network (AECURN), we felt compelled to put together a special issue that showcased the work of early career urban thinkers who are using their scholarship to chart new urban agendas. When the call for abstracts went out in late 2014, we received 46 abstracts, and we were heartened by the myriad of ways that ECRs are directly questioning the underlying practices and frameworks that have come to steer planning.

To assist us with identifying the papers for this issue, we established an advisory team led by members of the 2014–2015 AECURN Board. In this issue, we are pleased to include six papers that responded to our research brief of offering (1) innovative methodological approaches that facilitate the translation of research into urban practice and policy, (2) novel conceptual engagement with enduring 'wicked problems' that progresses thinking and evokes new paradigms about the urban, and (3) future directions and possibilities for contemporary urban research in the 'neoliberal age'. The common theme that threads the six papers together is intentionally broad attracting an eclectic mix of research papers that present different ways that ERCs are (re)constituting urban research in a

neoliberal climate. Turning to the substantive focus of the issue, in the following section, we briefly set up the issue of the research-practice nexus as a wicked problem. We position this nexus in a contemporary political and practice culture that has come to be widely regarded as neoliberal and characterised by a strong orientation towards enabling growth and designing efficient processes. The editorial will then conclude with a short introduction to the six papers that appear in this issue.

The research-practice nexus as a wicked problem in a neoliberal urban context

Concern that urban research is not reaching urban practitioners has proved a provocative and fruitful platform for debate and reflection in recent years across Australia, New Zealand and beyond (Randolph 2013; Troy 2013; Bunker 2015; Giles-Corti et al. 2015; Porter 2015; Taylor and Hurley 2015). While this question seems to keep surfacing in plenary discussions at the State of Australian Cities Conferences (2013 and 2015), these debates are underpinned by cautionary tales that unless our political leaders look to ‘serious, informed exploration of alternative approaches to the social, locational or environmental consequences of the way Australian cities are developed and managed ... [the] climate of urban research will be bleak’ (Troy 2013, 147). Establishing a role for urban research in planning practice becomes ever more challenging within the neoliberal urban context in which research and practice is conducted, where economic imperatives remain the priority often at the expense of evidence that stronger public intervention is needed to ensure social and environmental goals are also served.

The ascendancy of neoliberal political regimes, accompanied by a paralleled shift towards efficiency, expediency, and economic prosperity as dominant imperatives, has shaped Australian (Gleeson and Low 2000) and New Zealand planning practice and discourse (Grundy and Gleeson 1996). This is evidenced by recent planning reforms in several Australian states that are unequivocally pro-growth (Ruming and Gurr 2014), and market oriented (Smith and Coombes 2012). In the face of deep-seated neoliberal policy orthodoxy, with the associated agenda of economic liberalism, de-regulation, privatisation, and strong private property rights (Beeson and Firth 1998), questions should be raised about the potential for research to continue to influence public policy and to help chart a more transformative course. Indeed, some urban commentators and scholars have considered ‘what capacity, or space – practical and conceptual – still remains for planning [scholarship] to change the world for the *better*?’ (Campbell 2012, 1).

Heeding the call for improved planning processes and built form outcomes that reflect a commitment

towards social equality and environmental sustainability, Albrechts (2010) suggests that researchers should consider the different ways that ideas and concepts travel and translate into new and innovative ways of policy-making and planning. Planning research has always served the dualistic role of describing the current planning milieu – the institutions, rationalities, and social and cultural context of planning – and possibilities for making planning more democratic and its outcomes more just. As Campbell (2012, 143) contends, ‘The world *is* complex, uncertain, even chaotic, and inequalities and injustices abound; the question is, given such circumstances, what *ought* to be done?’ If ‘more of the same ... vested concepts, discourse and practices’ (Albrechts 2010, 1124) are not enough to confront the injustices, inequities, and environmentally *unsustainable* trajectory of cities, planning research, and scholarship must interject and offer new insights and ways of overcoming these ‘wicked’ challenges (Rittel and Webber 1973).

Porter (2006, 84) contends that for planning practice to provide for ‘better socially and culturally just ways of being’ in the face of colonial and capitalist challenges, scholars need to push the boundaries further. She argues that the current critiques focus on planning forms that ‘prevent real possibilities for change and mobilisation’ and calls for planning scholars to work ‘beyond’ these planning forms (2006, 383). Thus, it is not just a matter of providing more accessible and policy-relevant research (Innes and Booher 2000; Giles-Corti et al. 2015; Taylor and Hurley 2015), to overcome the circuit break in the translation of knowledge into action (Friedmann 1987). Changing planning practice requires methodological approaches that respond to the political and socioeconomic conditions that research is conducted within, and challenge the deep-seated assumptions underpinning planning that advocate for efficiency, productivity, and growth. In order to challenge this hegemony, urban geographer Castree (2015, 1) argues that ‘we [urban scholars] need to get out from under the shadow’. Perhaps this is towards a more active and intentional form of urban scholarship that in addition to forging new ways of thinking, also registers new ways of doing urban research.

Emerging from the shadows

This special issue casts a spotlight on ECR urban researchers who are actively engaging in theoretically and methodologically innovative urban scholarship. We asked each contributor to respond to the question: *How might urban research interject and provoke new ways of addressing contemporary ‘wicked problems’ in planning practice and policy.* The papers that follow highlight challenging questions that provoke reflection and critical analysis around three key issues. These are: the role of the urban researcher and of urban research

in shaping contemporary planning praxis and advocating for change; how research methods could be a vehicle for strengthening research-practice engagement; and how recasting what is 'wicked' can drive a more nuanced and transformative response to challenges.

Perhaps the most vocal on the subject of the research-practice nexus in the past year, Joe Hurley and Elizabeth Taylor's paper builds on their recent work published in *Urban Policy and Research* (2015). They offer a detailed analysis of ECR engagement with the research-practice nexus, and how urban ECRs are being directed to focus on the production of academic publications, and meeting teaching and administrative expectations. Hurley and Taylor argue that this unique period in an academic career propels ECRs away from building relationships with the industry and practice sectors. As a result, their capacity to engage in knowledge translation activities or even reflect on how their work might change practice is limited.

For Ian Woodcock, methodologies that engage with the design process (as opposed to traditional research that separates the research and design process) can have significant benefits for urban policy. By assembling a range of policy actors at the research-practice nexus, he argues that opportunities are created for a more action-oriented approach to research. Also on the theme of innovative research methodologies, Hayley Henderson advocates for the adoption of an ethnographic sensibility in urban research, to facilitate exploration of practitioners' actions and perspectives, and ensure that findings are relevant to practice.

In contrast, Laura Schatz and Dallas Rodgers describe the tensions between expert-driven planning, participatory planning frameworks, and the neoliberal planning paradigm, using New South Wales state government policy as the case study. Their context is the power struggles within governance, and the challenges planners and policy-makers face in navigating these often contradictory governance systems.

Reframing or expanding understanding of planning issues can also challenge conventional technical urban planning practice and scholarship. Taking the focus towards the notion of the 'unspeakable', Deanna Grant-Smith and Natalie Osborne highlight the urban planning implications of policy problems that possess strong elements of emotive and embodied talk within the context of emotional geographies, sexscapes, and necrogeographies. Rational discussion of such policy issues, they argue, opens up the possibility of addressing them in a more considered and evidence-based way.

The final paper, by Edward Morgan and Rachael Cole-Hawthorne, focuses on the use of knowledge in planning theory and practice. Specifically, they discuss the impact that neoliberal ideals have had on the use of

Western Scientific and Aboriginal knowledge in planning practice, arguing that more work needs to be done to achieve a shared understanding of planning for sustainability, based on multiple knowledges.

The special issue concludes with a short but provocative epilogue by Emeritus Professor Jean Hillier who reminds us of the unique challenges that surround the ECR. Hillier masterfully threads the papers in this issue together around the notion of flow: the 'flows of people, of ideas, knowledges, values and practices' and that the research-practice nexus is a space of fluid exchange and learning. While a common theme across the papers in this special issue is a strong desire for challenging the current planning system and the frameworks we use to assess and engage this system, there is also a humility through an explicit acknowledgment that urban scholarship itself must evolve. Drawing from a variety of disciplines such as geography, design, strategic planning, political science, sociology, science, and Indigenous planning, the contributors bring multiple perspectives on theory, empirical research, planning practice and methodology. They illustrate just how ECRs across Australia and New Zealand are at the forefront of thought and creating research-based solutions to the complex problems facing cities in Australia and beyond. These papers are only a small sample of the research innovation that is occurring across Australia and New Zealand, but they are a mark of progress in how research is challenging, informing and engaging with planning practice today.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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