Six Discourses on the Postmetropolitan University
Notes on the Future of Urban Campuses

The appearance and role of university buildings is steadily changing within the process of neoliberal globalization and corporatization. Christoph Lindner provides six different perspectives on this ongoing trend and asks what remains of the core mission, values, and priorities of the university within this very context.

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The University and the City

Universities and cities have a long history of interdependence. From the University of al-Qarawiyyin (founded in Morocco in 859) to the University of Bologna (founded in Italy in 1088), the world’s earliest universities developed from – and in many ways marked a response to – the new challenges of social living engendered by urban agglomeration. The traditional, historical relationship between universities and cities, particularly in the West, has been one of proximity and immediacy: the university is embedded in the fabric and history of the city, its identity intimately wrapped up in that of its location. Or so the cliché goes.

Over the last few decades, as we have entered the postmetropolitan era (the era of intensified globalization and urbanization processes), the conventional relationship between universities and cities has been changing steadily. These changes have happened in many areas, all of which have the potential to radically redefine the role and values of the university as a knowledge community in the contemporary world.

In what follows, I briefly sketch out what I see as six key discourses on the postmetropolitan university (that is, the urban university of the present era of neoliberal globalization). Hoping to stir some debate, I do my best to be critical, provocative, even speculative. For this reason, I wish to acknowledge here that the trends outlined below also have upsides along with their downsides. For instance, the university's changing relationship with the city brings new opportunities to recalibrate our academic and social values in whatever directions we collectively agree. This change also creates possibilities for universities to contribute in new ways to the efforts of cities worldwide to become more
inclusive, equitable, diverse, and sustainable. Nonetheless, these possibilities (like the values behind them) are also frequently evoked or exploited in larger, strategic maneuverings on the part of universities, too often leading to very different outcomes – sometimes by accident and other times by design. Hence my critical stance in this piece.

The Disembodied Campus

The first iteration of change is a techno-informational formation I call the “disembodied campus.” With the rise of information and communication technologies and their embedding throughout most campuses, universities have come under growing pressure to teach and research in increasingly virtual, disembodied ways. The era of new media is also the era of distance learning, MOOCs, smart classrooms, flipped lectures, virtual learning environments, and various other forms of distanced and dematerialized intellectual exchange. The impact on the university’s relation to the city is perhaps difficult to discern, but it does have a dispersing, depersonalizing effect on students and staff. For one thing, we no longer need to be present on campus to partake in our studies, our research, or even our interpersonal interaction. This means that we also don’t need the expensive, physical presence of buildings, classrooms, labs and libraries in the city as much as before. Instead, the university is increasingly becoming a virtual, portable space/condition that can be accessed/activated from anywhere with a decent wifi signal. In some ways, this is liberating, leveling, even exhilarating. It creates flexibility and dynamism. It allows us to combine urban life, work, and studying in ever more hybrid and creative ways.

Yet the disembodied campus can also have strange and unexpected consequences. For example, one worrying trend is that ICT is frequently being used not to facilitate new pedagogical or intellectual possibilities, but to compensate for the under-resourcing of universities. Another worrying trend is that technological innovation itself can become the end goal of the university, relegating content and knowledge to an expendable afterthought.

The larger issue, however, is that, faced with the disembodied campus, it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend the exorbitant cost of maintaining university buildings, particularly in expensive urban centers. This increases the pressure to downsize, economize, relocate or simply eradicate the physical campus in the city.

In moments of wild, utopian optimism, we might nonetheless imagine the disembodied campus leading towards an open, networked, virtual campus of the future which, unmoored from physical ties to any particular city, links together vast, sprawling knowledge communities across diverse geographic and cultural boundaries.

The Global Campus

The second trend in the university’s changing relationship with the city is the so-called “global campus.” From a more critical perspective, we might also call this formation the “neo-colonial” and/or “neoliberal” campus. This development has arisen as part of the broad-scale internationalization strategies of universities, and has yielded several variations. At its core, the global campus involves a formal university presence in a city other than the home metropole, usually overseas. Whether in the form of a satellite campus, a name-sharing partnership with a local institution, or an independent research/study center, the “global campus” is about promoting the transnational mobility of people and ideas. But it is also frequently about promoting the university’s brand name, trading on its reputation and generating additional revenue streams.

More to the point, there is too often an uncomfortable geographic dynamic at work in the location of global campuses, in that they are typically established by prominent Western universities in non-Western cities, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. Critics of the global campus point out from a postcolonial perspective that this dynamic closely replicates the imbalance of power (in this case around the flow of knowledge) that once characterized the European networks of empire, including their center-periphery relations.
The Speculative Campus

When I was a visiting professor at New York University in 2013, I heard the joke that “NYU is a property management company that happens to run a university on the side.” The context for this joke was NYU’s controversial Greenwich Village expansion plan, which opponents criticize for its potential impact on local businesses and housing, architectural heritage, and property values. The anxiety in this situation, exacerbated by the university’s simultaneous expansion of its global campus network, was that property and revenue, rather than research and learning, appeared to be setting the institution’s priorities. NYU is not unique in this respect, but is typical of many urban universities across the world that are struggling to expand in densely developed spaces and to manage a property portfolio in a way that furthers the interests of the institution (after all, one of the main assets of universities, that automatically comes with having a campus, is property). This is the “speculative campus” — the urban university whose growth and vitality are tied to property speculation and development.

The global financial crisis of 2008 brought this situation to the fore, as speculative campuses around the world suddenly found themselves financially overextended and drowning in property debt. In the years since, as the situation has attracted more scrutiny, it has emerged that the success or failure of property ventures has directly impacted the academic/intellectual life of universities. In some extreme cases, decisions about closing departments, cutting programs, and laying off staff have been determined by the values of the buildings that house them.

A related trend is for universities to get involved in policy-led urban regeneration projects in collaboration with city governments and/or private investors. In this scenario, the university builds a new complex (usually subsidized or incentivized) in an area of the city targeted for renewal, acting as a cultural/creative anchor for an up-and-coming neighborhood. The critique here is that the university becomes yet another agent of gentrification in the neoliberal city, contributing to the displacement of disadvantaged populations while simultaneously — and paradoxically — working to improve inclusive access to higher education and to revitalize “failing” neighborhoods.

While it is easy to critique universities for getting overly involved in the property game, we need to remember that, for public institutions especially, property speculation and development is one of the few options available (short of raising tuition fees), to compensate for steady cuts in government funding. The danger in this inverted situation is that the financial life of buildings comes to direct the intellectual life of universities.

The Creative Campus

Closely related to both the speculative and disembodied campuses is the “creative campus.” This particular formation is the result of the viral popularity of the concepts of the “creative city” and the “creative class” as promoted by the scholar-consultant Richard Florida. As cities around the world have consciously developed urban creativity policies to attract and retain the creative class, universities have become embroiled in these initiatives as locations of concentrated creative activity, as producers/trainers of the creative class, and as partners in private-sector creative enterprises. The concomitant rise of the “creative industries” as a loose clustering of output-oriented, tech-centered creative professions has led to a situation where the aura of innovation surrounding the university makes it a key part of the creative city paradigm.

An extreme example of the creative campus phenomenon can be found in Yachay Knowledge City, a government-backed, purpose-built, hi-tech “innovation city” in rural Ecuador designed entirely around a new university whose creative energy is intended to generate a steady stream of exploitable knowledge (and knowledge workers). Crucially, the impetus for building Yachay is a desire to close what the government perceives as a national knowledge gap, and thus to gain competitiveness in the global knowledge economy.
As the design of Yachay reveals, the creative campus is also the entrepreneurial campus. It is tech-savvy, hype-driven, business-friendly, and industry-ready. But it is also a campus that depends on the economic relevance and applicability of the knowledge it produces, making it susceptible to the same condition of precarity characterizing working life in the creative industries.

**The Fortress Campus**

Faced with the sorts of challenges and choices outlined above, some universities are taking a different approach, opting to retreat from the city back into the perceived safety and comfort of the urban campus. Such a move reinforces a long-standing formation I call the “fortress campus.” The fortress campus dates right back to the medieval university and its fortified architecture of defense and containment. In its current form, the fortress campus marks a disengagement from the city, expressing a desire to disconnect from its social conditions and lived realities.

Like the defensive militarization of urban space in the postmodern city (google anti-homeless spikes), or Western Europe’s carceral urbanism in response to the current flood of migrants and refugees, the fortress campus is about enforcing boundaries and producing otherness in a climate of fear and paranoia. While the fortress campus is a minority trend, it is both historically and spatially entrenched in the contemporary city. Its articulations range from affluent private colleges in declining cities creating enclaves of exclusivity and privilege; to securitized, gated learning communities in megalopolises of the Global South; to high-tech urban archeologies (self-contained, densely populated vertical habitats offering a contemporary version of the medieval walled community).

We can even connect the trend of the fortress campus to the university’s flight to the suburbs in the 1960s and 70s when, paralleling the middle-class evacuation of urban centers, quite a few universities (especially in North America and the UK) also opted to relocate to urban peripheries in exchange for more space, better security, and lower operating costs. In this scenario, the urban condition represents a threat – or, at least, a drain – to the vitality of the university.

The key point to make here is that, like all border zones, the fortress campus is a fluid, porous space in practice, never as secure or contained as its spatial organization would suggest. And while it may respond to and even exacerbate spatial and social division in the city, the fortress campus is also simultaneously a place of permeability, contingency, and transgression.

**The Corporate Campus**

As we contemplate the postmetropolitan university of the future, the question is not which combination of the campus formations outlined above is the right one (even if we accept that different combinations are needed for different urban locations). And of course, there are several other variations we could add to the list, such as the “bling campus,” the “green campus,” or the “clean campus.” Before we address what form we want our future campuses to assume, we first need to discuss in a much more organized and public way what values should guide the continued evolution of the university and its relationship with the social and built environments around it.

The overarching trend that connects all of the campus formations outlined above is the neoliberal corporatization of the university and, as part of this process, its de-democratization, precarization, and (for public institutions) privatization. Universities of the immediate future, like the cities they inhabit, are likely to be more corporate, not less corporate. While there are plenty of people inside and outside the university who support such change (and who argue for the gains made in areas like efficiency, flexibility, and accountability), the fact remains that the core mission, values, and priorities of the university as a knowledge community are also being redefined in increasingly neoliberal terms. It is a transformation that now registers in all aspects of university life, from the books and articles we publish, to the courses we teach, to the spaces where we work.
Christoph Lindner (http://christophlindner.org) is Professor of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam and Director of the Netherlands Institute for Cultural Analysis. His latest book *New York City: Literature, Urbanism, and the Visual Arts, 1890–1940* (Oxford University Press, 2015) (https://global.oup.com/academic/product/imaging-new-york-city-9780195375152?cc=nl&lang=en&l) explores how and why skylines, sidewalks, slums, and subways have come to emblematize the modern urban condition.

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