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PRACTICE NOTE

Urban Centres in Universities: Institutional Alternatives for Urban Design

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ABSTRACT *University-based urban centres come in several types: research centres, university-based firms, community advocacy centres, extension agencies, studios, clearinghouses and umbrella or convening organizations. They all potentially link an innovative or educational milieu in the university to wider urban processes, though not all live up to this potential. In particular they can face difficulties interacting with students and faculty, staffing issues, and problems interacting with governments and the private sector.*

Institutional Environments for Urban Design

Urban planning and design involve *processes*, creating specific kinds of *products*, conducted in particular *institutional environments*. One kind of institutional environment is the urban centre at a university, i.e. units that may be variously known as institutes, projects, studios or collaboratives. Such centres conduct research, outreach or education. They provide infrastructure within the university setting to allow faculty, students and specialist staff to do research and projects that intersect with the practice of urban design and planning. Some are primarily concerned with specific subject matter—such as community-based urban design in a specific city-centre neighbourhood—but others deal with a range of topics in a broader area of urban and regional studies. All provide an important interface between universities and other communities.

This commentary reflects on the practice of urban design in such university-based urban centres, particularly their organizational structure and method of interfacing with the university, the professions and the wider public. Proposed is a classification of seven types of such centres: research centres, university-based firms, community advocacy centres, extension agencies, studios, clearinghouses and umbrella or convening organizations. While there is no single best model for an urban centre, this note touches on some of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach as environments for doing urban design. They all potentially link an innovative or educational milieu in the university to wider urban processes, though not all live up to this potential. In particular they can face difficulties interacting with students and faculty, staffing issues, and problems interacting with governments and the private sector.

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In examining urban design practice, analysts frequently focus on private firms, public agencies and perhaps non-profit developers and advocates. However, it is proposed to treat university-based centres as an additional important location for urban design and planning practice. There are, of course, far fewer of such centres than there are government agencies or private firms doing urban design and planning. There are also likely to be fewer such units than there are non-governmental/non-profit groups doing similar work. However, there are hundreds of such centres in existence, and their location in universities means that generations of students are exposed to their work. Even if marginalized within colleges, as many are, they are still more widely known and influential than their numbers would indicate. They are an important venue for the practice of urban design and as such deserve more attention.

Seven Types of University Centres

University urban centres come in a number of forms depending on their particular histories. The following typology reflects a somewhat unsystematic survey of research and outreach centres, as well as some interpretation of earlier, empirically based work on this subject (Taher, 1971; Forsyth *et al.*, 2000).[1] The models include the following:

(1) research centre
(2) university-based firm
(3) community advocacy centre
(4) extension
(5) studio
(6) clearinghouse
(7) umbrella/convening organization.

It is important to note that one centre often performs two or three of these functions, but it would be conceptually impossible to do all of them, unless perhaps as a number of quite independent units under an extraordinarily broad umbrella organization (see Table 1).

Research centres do formal research on urban issues. Some convene researchers who have done work elsewhere, asking for position papers and think-pieces, but most also undertake their own centre-identified research projects. Research in this sense is defined as work that, among other things, systematically answers questions important to a field, that is documented and subject to peer review (Forsyth & Crewe, forthcoming). In practice-oriented colleges, such centres can seem cut off from the real world. In research universities they may provide important connections to the larger institution, although the character of the links depends on the perceived quality of the research produced. Research centres are attractive for research-oriented faculty and high-level researchers not interested in teaching.

University-based firms work on grants and more often contracts, doing planning and design projects in a way that parallels private sector consulting firms. Work is often at a competent professional level answering specific questions for clients. University-based firms are in an odd situation, potentially competing with their own graduates for jobs and arousing resentment in the profession, seen as undercutting prices through student work and subsidized faculty salaries.

Table 1. Comparison of urban centres

Type	Focus	Strengths	Weaknesses
Research centre	Innovative research	Connections to university, contributions to knowledge	Can seem cut off from the real world
University-based firm	Paid practice	Neutrality	Competition with graduates, lack of innovation
Community advocacy centre	Social equity, social inclusion and environmental justice	Helps the disadvantaged	May merely ameliorate problems
Extension	Technical assistance and knowledge transfer	Provides important assistance	May be marginal in the university
Studiao	Work with a key figure	Clear focus	Very dependent on key figure(s)
Clearinghouse	Public and professional education	Universities are in an excellent position to do this	Communities may want more specific input
Umbrella/convening organization	Support of multiple projects	Useful infrastructure with potential for diverse and high-quality activities	May seem unfocused

However, university hiring is typically less flexible than the private sector, so such centres do not always have cheaper staff and in fact may attract staff interested more in university benefits than in innovative work. They are, however, attractive to funders in politically contentious areas because of their potentially neutral position. Students, in particular, can frequently raise controversial options in a way that is not overly threatening to entrenched groups. Even faculty and staff are perceived as neutral as they are rarely in the market to get large implementation contracts. As such the strength of this model is its neutrality, rather than its cost to clients.

University advocacy centres work in a typically participatory manner with low-income and disadvantaged people on issues such as housing, environmental justice and urban design. Their emphasis is on free or inexpensive practice to help disadvantaged groups and a mode of operation that emphasizes participatory design. They also typically do conceptual work and turn over detailed regulations or design work to the private for-profit or non-profit sector, although there are exceptions, particularly for small projects. They have a clear non-profit sector parallel in the non-university Community Design Centres, but typically work at an earlier stage of projects and at a larger physical scale. They can provide a crucial catalyst to neighbourhood improvement, but as design alone cannot solve the problems of poverty and marginalization, they are often criticized for merely ameliorating problems and, worse, wasting the time of community participants. They are attractive to faculty with an interest in social equity and environmental justice who typically do not want the extra salary that often comes in the university-based firm model.

Extension-oriented centres use the agricultural extension model, which employs professional agents to transfer new research from the university into practice. Faculty have varying levels of involvement; non-faculty staff are especially important in this model. They differ from research centres by not doing research themselves; from consulting firms by being inexpensive or free and being more clearly focused on public interest practice; and from community advocacy centres in being frequently involved in fairly straightforward assistance to middle-class populations. As a staff-based model, such centres can seem very far from the central educational and research missions of the university. A model based on translating scientific research into agricultural practice does not necessarily transfer well to urban design, where research is more limited and also more applied. However, they can provide important assistance and, in times of declining government commitment to planning, such university-based resources may be the only professional help available to communities.

Studios occur in the design field. This is different to a studio course but rather is a model where the centre reflects the ideas of a central figure and where students or staff are attracted to the centre in order to work within that framework. This can provide a strong and coherent focus that is attractive to many in the wider public. Such directors can inspire loyalty among key staff that can be contagious in a design setting. However, the focus on one person's ideas may also make it more difficult for the kind of interaction between different viewpoints which is one hallmark of the university. In such centres, much depends on the qualities of the key figure and whether he or she can provide intellectual leadership over time.

Clearinghouses are centres that focus on disseminating information to the general public and organized groups. This may involve distribution of existing information materials, translation of technical work into more accessible terms, as well as public talks and conferences. Universities are particularly well placed to provide such services, having experience in producing and evaluating knowledge. However, in today's information-rich world it can be challenging to create products that capture attention. In addition, many communities may want more than information.

Umbrella/convening organizations are centres that provide support for a number of independent research and outreach initiatives as well as individual faculty. The centre is basically an infrastructure and its focus comes from the sum of its parts. Some of the largest and most productive university-based urban centres take this form. While they can be accused of lacking focus, by being umbrellas they can take advantage of emerging opportunities and draw on the energy of faculty and students in a way that is not constrained by an overly narrow mission statement.

Challenges for Urban Design in Centres

Urban design work can be done in each of these types of centres. Their association with universities allows them to have access to a number of important intellectual resources—libraries, new research, a culture of questioning—even if in many cases these resources are not always well used by designers.

However, urban designers face several challenges in this practice within universities.

- *The interface between the centre and students is not always a simple one.* Students are at universities fundamentally to get their degrees rather than finish specific projects or assistantships and as such can be less than desirable as workers. On the other hand, while such centres can be a helpful way of developing students' reflective practice, students may also be left performing minor roles and be better off doing more formal class work or other forms of service learning (Schon, 1987; Yarmolinsky & Martello, 1996). In addition, while students can be usefully employed in such centres they are by definition not expert, and if students are the main providers of design services the quality is likely to be patchy.
- *The same is the case for faculty.* For their part, faculty have a number of other pulls on their time: teaching, administration and intellectual work outside of a centre. In this case, work with a centre may well receive low priority. The kind of centre in place in any particular university may well not match the interests and skills of faculty at that university. For example, a centre may be applied when faculty want to do research. It may focus on funded research when faculty want to have freedom to pursue issues that are hard to fund, such as work in design theory or assistance to low-income communities. The centre may have a substantive emphasis that is uninteresting to faculty members. In such cases, faculty members can either find other ways to do their work or else change their work to match the structure of the centre. Both involve some compromises and lost opportunities.
- *Centres relying on professional staff face criticisms of unfair competition.* A centre can hire professional staff and take up more of an extension model that does not rely

on faculty, but in the design field (as opposed to areas like agriculture) staff-based models are open to the challenge that the work would be better done in other institutional arrangements: government, private for-profit or non-profit. In addition, staff are generally not as connected to the rest of the university's mission, something with its own set of difficulties.

- *Those working in such centres need to deal with the issue of being outside of government and of large development companies—the two groups with a capacity to implement urban design at a large scale.* While this distance from power is a problem, it also gives such centres an unusual neutrality in urban design practice and can play an important outsider role in the often heated debates that occur around urban issues. Urban centres can focus attention on topics that may not be of interest to these large organizations, such as working on small and left-over spaces in the urban fabric.
- *The boundary between university centre work and private practice needs careful management, particularly for studios and university-based firms.* Some do not see this as a problem, while others focus on finding work that can raise awareness about the use of design, increasing the market for the private sector.
- *The boundary between university centres and the public sector needs management, particularly in times of budget cuts.* A real risk at times of fiscal strife is that governments can begin to use the work of such centres to substitute for services that they have cut. While this is not always a bad thing, it can lead to very significant demands on university centres that they may not be able to meet, leading to problems with both managing expectations and providing adequate services to communities.

Which centre models work best depends on many contextual factors, including: the amount and type of funding; the culture of the university and college; the location of the university; the wider context of urban design in the region; and the university's student body and faculty composition. A centre may change and evolve over time, moving from one model to another. While in the culture of a university even the best-run and most innovative centre is likely to have critics, misunderstandings about the institutional arrangement of an urban centre can lead to additional problems of unmet expectations and conflicts over priorities between faculty, communities and students. The aim to improve the urban environment is the focus of most of such centres and this may not be well served if there is a mismatch between institutional capacities and wider needs. It is in this spirit that these models are offered—as a means for promoting far clearer discussions about options for work in universities and their inherent strengths and weaknesses.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. Taher (1971, p. i), in an inventory from a high period of such centres, listed approximately 300 urban centres. Forsyth *et al.* (2000) studied 17 university-based urban centres, examining how they incorporated service learning into their missions, and how they served various constituencies: faculty, students, the larger university and the public being served. See also Association for Community Design (2005).

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