The modern university and urban transformation


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ABSTRACT

The recent rise of the discourse of entrepreneurial science as a wider policy justification for higher education funding has overshadowed of universities’ wider societal missions. University modernisation process replaced freedom from outside interference by freedom of university senior managers to manage their institutions autonomously to deliver pre-determined policy goals. This quasi-marketisation and individualisation of the academy emphasise measurable activities that generate university surpluses. Entrepreneurial science has always been a problematic notion for those disciplines and activities not closely linked to the market, and especially for those engaged in creating policy- or even community-based knowledge. This paper reflects on how the modern strategic university can contribute to urban social transformation by internally valorising externally useful knowledges that contribute to social justice.
The idea with this paper is to try to bring together a series of tensions and contradictions that I have been wrestling with for several years now, and in particular to articulate using middle level theories to articulate some of the wicked issues that face universities seeking to engage in urban development. In particular, the paper seeks to highlight some of the internally-derived limitations and pressures that universities face in urban engagement, and frame them in terms of a mid-level theory, to create a bridge between the high-level theories of neoliberalism and micro-scale analyses of new managerialism. By opening up the black box of the university the paper wants to identify the kinds of public value failures that may inhibit university urban engagement.

The paper really represents a first set of thoughts, and attempts to draw them together. I am trying here to make sense of a set of things, empirical findings from a few research projects, the observation of the rise of new movements list Science in Transition and the Campaign for the Public University, a new authoritarianism and corporatism within universities, and the apparent increasing prevalence of research malfeasance. So at this stage I don’t want to make accusations or scapegoats, it is rather than I am trying to place these divergent things in a common framework to ensure that the promise of universities to contribute to urban transformations delivers more than shiny new campuses in gated communities. The starting point to this is that there are many barriers to engagement, but they are the result of the way that higher education systems operate.
INTRODUCTION

The big context for the paper is the fact that the policy context for universities, as publically funded institutions, increasingly carries an expectation that universities will contributing to solving the grand challenges of the 21st century. Increasing public expenditure, in a time of austerity has been predicated on claims of a clear link between investments in universities and their contributions to these problems. Universities are therefore clearly under pressure to demonstrate clearly how they contribute to urban sustainability and development, one of these substantial challenges.

What we see are a number of claims made about ideal university types for ensuring that universities are able to deliver these wider contributions, such as the idea of the entrepreneurial university, the enterprising university, the engaged university and the civic university. These ideal types carry with them the implication that there is some kind of optimum organisational form for a university, and by adopting this form, it is possible to maximise the institutional contribution to urban development processes.

But at the same time, the field of urban development is not something in which universities have an exclusively intellectual interest. Universities have spatial interdependence with their host locations, and they represent the physical frame within which universities seek to carry out a range of activities. Cities – and urban development processes – tie universities into global circuits of capital, whether financial or human in nature. Universities are confronted by a range of private urban development interests with which they have to engage to meet their private needs, which affect their capacities to contribute constructively to urban development processes.

In a sense, the solutions to the problem are well-known. There is a need for greater democracy in university governance, there is a need for a reaffirmation of ethical values within universities, both their management and scholars. There is a need for the public realm to move away from approaches which emphasis direct monetary benefits over wider benefits that may be more difficult to accurately enumerate. But at the same time, these changes appear at first instance so utopian that that are impossible to deliver. Universities’ autocratic governance styles are embedded in so many institutional layers that it is difficult to envisage how an alternative could be built without other system elements simply overcoming the reforms and reimposing the centralisation.
NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND UNIVERSITY’ URBAN ENTANGLEMENTS

A range of changes at the policy level in the last two or three decades have begun to alter the nature of the relationship of universities with their cities, particularly within European countries. Previously granted substantial freedom to direct their own activities, public universities were traditionally sourced in ways that allowed excluded external interests, allowing universities to determine for themselves what were their interests in urban development. The shift to new public management – stimulating efficiency through results-based – has increased universities’ exposure to the demands of external stakeholders.

This has been coupled with a change in the nature of universities internal management processes, with the concentration of decision-making at the centre with managers granted substantial autonomy internally to ensure that their university is best able to respond to stakeholders needs as expressed through performance based funding, league tables and the like. And this is where the overarching tension becomes clear, in that universities as strategic actors have to manage strategic stakeholder relationships, whilst at the same time, their knowledge is diffused throughout the internal structure.

This has classically been presented as an issue of imperfect information from the centre: where universities do not contribute most effectively to urban development, it is either because the centre does not convey external stakeholders’ needs to academics or vice versa, that central management is unaware of the wealth of knowledge is held by their academics. The solution is therefore promoted as one of brokerage, dialogue and creating a collective knowledge base and support structure. Academics can therefore align their research interests and knowledge resources better with the needs of urban development partners, and the centre can better configure external stakeholders to ensure that value what universities have to offer.

But this analysis misses for me a great contradiction within universities, which as complex organisations, far more than any other kinds of public sector organisation, have very divergent interests and capabilities.

There is not just a split between a corporate centre who is driven by the interests of their dominant stakeholders such as finance and education ministries, and academics which seek to participate in their own scholarly (often disciplinary) communities. There can also be splits between types of academics, for example between those subjects which are strongly dependent on capital equipment and those which are more scholarly. Splits may exist
between those that produce knowledge in deductive-universal (e.g. science and technology) as opposed to hermeneutic-generic processes (arts & humanities).

These splits and differences mean that producing a common consensus of what are the university’s interests is not a simplistic task. Indeed it might be an impossible task to articulate a single, simple set of interests for universities in urban development. Therefore, in order to understand how universities contribute to urban development, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of how universities function as organisations, and indeed how interests are mediated, discussed and produced within universities, to understand the opportunities and limitations to universities’ urban engagement activities.

This is a point on which I have already written, illustrated for example by the case of the University of São Paulo, in a rather neat chapter in my 2012 edited book. The University of Sao Paolo, an elite university in Brazil, sought to contribute to its societal mission by creating an innovative new campus in the poorer western suburbs of the city. The horizontal and vertical segmentation within the university created all kinds of resistances and tensions which stopped the university really fulfilling its potential, and creating seamless access to elite education in poorer districts. In a sense, the story seems to reinforce the old adage that ‘services for poor people quickly become poor services’.

Therefore to go beyond that analysis, what I want to do with this paper is to unpack why precisely this might happen, what kinds of tensions and stresses hold back universities’ attempts to contribute to social justice and urban development. To do that, I contend that it is necessary to try to understand the fault lines that exist between the ways that public policy frames shape universities’ corporate urban engagement, and the grass-roots opportunities to make more positive, constructive contributions. The starting point for the argument is to highlight that universities have always faced struggles between their private and public interests, in part because their public interests are often defined in relatively flexible, generic ways that provide limited scope for interpretation in terms of resolving complex private tensions.

One of the consequences of new public management has been to increase the intensity with which universities as public actors experience external pressures on their private interests. We see across science the increasing tendency for the ‘means to justify the ends’: if there is a need to perform well in league tables, then universities are justified in doing whatever it takes to maximise their performance. Likewise, if financial solvency is demanded, then universities
are justified in shaping their academic activities and behaviours to ensure that they maintain their creditworthiness.

Given that universities private interests have through public management processes become imminent, and universities public interests have remain flexible and weakly defined, it is perhaps unsurprising that survival interests have dictated that universities are more willing to compromise their general interests and academic freedoms than face existential compromises around their access to the resources necessary for survival. This paper is not about attempts to blame or demonise particular institutions or universities, because a central part of the argument is that these public value failures are systemic outcomes; but systems have to be made everywhere, and understanding these systems and those that produce and reproduce them is a first step in attempting to address these problems.

**PUBLIC VALUE FAILURES IN UNIVERSITIES’ URBAN CONTRIBUTIONS?**

These pressures and their manifestations in the urban realm are by no means new for universities. Urban universities have long been exposed to the vagaries of their regional land markets, and in particular those institutions located in areas which have gone into structural decline, this can form an existential threat in terms of their ability to attract students. There are notable examples of private universities in America (CUNY and Chicago, for example, in Wiewel and Perry) that have engaged aggressively in regressive gentrification activities, attempting to displace or physically exclude ‘undesirable’ communities from their part of the city.

So my argument continues that these pressures have if anything been increased by strategic modernisation of university management. In the absence of high-level measures for engaging with their cities in anything other than an opportunistic way, universities may seek to manipulate their urban environment to allow them to perform better in terms of those variables which are more directly measured. Whilst Chicago in particular was seeking to respond to students’ fear of crime through gentrification, universities’ spatial strategies can easily become caught up in their negotiations and attempts to satisfy the needs of external stakeholders.

And herein lies the rub – universities may find themselves taking decisions and shaping their regional environment not in ways that are about selflessly contributing to the common weal,
but are about improving their performance in a set of competitions the rules of which who are set by remote partners who have no interest in the core issues of urban social justice. Drawing on the ideas of Barry Bozeman, who has applied the idea to scientific research, it is possible to see that there are failures of public value, where direct attempts to measure and management university contributions create a situation with eminently perverse outcomes.

Bozeman’s great example of public value failure is AIDS drugs; despite much of the research being funded through public grants, ownership of patents in pharmaceutical companies has limited their availability to the patients who need them, particularly in sub-saharan Africa. Whilst each of the arrangements might seem reasonable, such as universities licensing their research, patent regimes to encourage long-term investments, and policing patents globally, their effect is perverse from a public welfare perspective – the private benefit overcomes the purported public interest in investing in pharma research.

Certainly, new public management has brought a range of public value failures to the domain of higher education, and there is a growing policy clamour to address these challenges. Increasing emphasis on research performance has come at the expense of the quality of student education. League tables such as those from THE and ARWU has created an ‘arms race’ amongst countries whose universities do not perform well under these measures to create so-called world-class universities, with no considerations that this has on the performance of the academic system as a whole. Publish or perish cultures appear to be related to increased uncovering of academic malpractice in attempts to ‘game’ measurement systems without having leading to material improvements in performance.

So my contention is that a similar process might be evident within universities’ urban engagement activities, the risk of a public value failure, in which the clear public interest in universities acting as stewards of place is lost in a failure of universities’ strategic efforts to perform in a range of domains unconnected to place stewardship. It is important to avoid generating a top-down discourse in which universities have no power to resist these external pressures and removing universities’ actors autonomy. But understanding how public value failures can arise in universities urban engagements and urban entanglements is necessary as a first step in creating strategic frameworks for universities to best contribute to urban development problems.

Some kinds of public value failures arise because of different interests, norms and values between different kinds of partners with rationalities shifting as the result of transactions between these different partners. In the case of AIDS drugs, fundamental research is
undertaken to prioritise knowledge creation; once that knowledge is created, it is seen as being legitimate to pass it to private partners to best exploit it. In their commercial exploitation, pharmaceutical companies may choose for a pricing structure that maximises their private profits rather than one which maximises public accessibility to the novel drug.

Indeed, part of the idea of public interest may be covered by health insurance systems in some countries which guarantee access to those drugs. African countries became, in Bozeman’s analysis, victims of spatial strategies by agents playing games in which the rules held relatively limited interest in the way those outcomes affected these countries. In the UK, where access in the public health system to drugs is regulated by NICE, there are well-informed lobby groups who seek to shape and influence these decisions, so that UK publics are not unnecessarily the victims of differential territorial pricing strategies by drug companies.

**THE PUBLIC VALUE TEST – UNIVERSITIES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE**

My starting point in making this analysis is to begin with the idea of urban sustainability to provide a thought experiment to explore the issue of universities and the public value test. I would likewise argue that although much has been written about university contributions to sustainable development, including by myself, that is at best phenomena description and avoids talking about the underlying issue, which is urban social justice. Any kind of thick conceptual variety of sustainability must necessarily include urban social justice, because the problem is not just an infrastructural one, of a shortage of green transport, local food or renewable energy but that through an unequal allocation of costs and benefits within those systems there is unequal access to them. In particular there is an emerging and critical problem in cities of social exclusion, and therefore no technological solution to an urban sustainability issue can be truly sustainable unless it addresses the social exclusion which forms an integral part of this problem.

My argument is therefore that there is a need to take a much broader view of the issue than purely the production of the artefacts and the technologies which are an immediate solution to the narrowly defined problems. It is possible to take a view of how universities can contribute solutions in terms of the contributions that universities make in creating or contributing to the capacities that a society has to do more and better things. In this context, the issue of urban sustainability becomes one of urban justice and in particular access to the city; urban spaces
are extremely congested and contested spaces, and the underlying politics of those contestation ultimately create the frames within which these technologies are implemented. It is therefore necessary to understand universities contributions in terms of those wider urban politics.

In this presentation I am for the reasons of time and simplicity take a rather reductionist view here of social justice in the city. I here see cities as a form of organisation, they are complex entities which are very effective at creating particular kinds of benefits in the way people live their lives, as centres of jobs, of employment, of service production, of consumption. At the same time, those benefits also create costs for those in a city, and – as the rise of gated communities demonstrates – those costs and benefits can be quite unevenly distributed. The role of urban politics is in deciding who bears the costs, and conversely who shares the benefits, something which Simin Davoudi has done graphically in the specific case of urban accessibility vs. transport pollution in Newcastle upon Tyne. Justice requires that there is effective representation and mediation of interests, and politics becomes a means for deciding the match-up between costs and benefits. We already know that different political configurations lead to deprived communities in different national political contexts being better or worse served by their political representatives in the outcome of the political games people play.

So my contention becomes that any kind of meaningful university contribution to social justice has to be one which increases people’s participation in this public sphere. And I do not here mean participation in the sense of being confronted with a range of varyingly unpalatable options and being forced to choose one. I rather point to the fact that knowledge is a vital commodity in the context of urban politics, and there is a reciprocal process by which political processes legitimise knowledge and allocate its distribution. With universities being quintessentially knowledge institutions, universities therefore have the capacities to both equip people with the knowledge to participate actively in urban governance processes, and hence to improve the quality of their own representation. But they also have a role in ensuring that the knowledge within these communities, related to their interests, is legitimated and taken seriously within these urban political processes, even where is seems parochial, small scale and messy compared to the slick, transportable discourses of neoliberalism that pour forth from the mouths of the contemporary urban administrator. Thus it is not just universities as researchers and pedagogues that is important, a role whose importance I would not underemphasise. But universities also are private, political actors and may form part of
the urban coalitions which regulate the way urban politics plays out in particular places, and have the opportunities to directly and indirectly the scope that citizens have to bring their knowledge into play in contemporary smart urban governance

**A TYPOLOGY OF PUBLIC VALUE FAILURES**

So where might the public value failures lie in terms of universities’ urban engagement?

**LOST IN TRANSLATION?**

Clearly, the first kind of public value failure is the translational issue highlighted above, where publically-funded assets devised for one purpose are – through a series of internally coherent and justifiable decisions – put to a very set of uses which change the balance of public interests. The mechanism through which this often happens is through ‘contracting out’ of services where they are operated by the most financially advantageous operator on behalf of the public university (or through public-private partnership).

There can be very clear implications for universities’ strategic urban interests when their estates are contracted out or privatised, particularly where there is a financial interdependence between the service provider and the university. Part of the university’s spatial frame and context is dependent on the success of these service providers, and therefore they may become important stakeholders for the university despite their interests being far removed from any university interests in urban justice.

The issue here is that although universities might have interests in stimulating urban sustainability in a general, public sense, there is a problem in that their locality also represents a space of dependence for them to achieve their strategic goals. Therefore, to achieve these strategic goals they are forced to – or choose – take strategic urban positions that are incompatible with wider urban sustainability or social justice.

**DEFENSIVE LOCK-IN**

A second, very different kind of public value failure can arise when institutions’ private interests lead them to take strategic defensive decisions that benefit key participants but at the same time reproduce rather than addressing key issues that arise. There is a nice strand in the regional development literature of where particular regional political coalitions become locked-into particular ways of things, in seeking to preserve and support particular declining industries and hence seeking to hold back change. This can be understood in terms of
dominant partners in these coalitions having very high sunk investment costs in existing ways of doing things, whilst it is other, emerging industries that would benefit from co-ordinated investments in those fields.

The public value failure in this case is therefore in the opportunity costs of failing to make the right kinds of investments in order to try and defensively protect the interests of those existing powerful actors. Where universities hold assets in the built environment, then social justice can become a challenge to vested interests which directly benefit them. Universities may become drawn into socially-contested processes such as gentrification or land-banking to defend the value of their assets and to ensure their financial security. Progressive urban development may become a justification for regressive and predatory investment behaviours which serve the university’s private interests, and indeed which help them serve their wider public roles.

Whilst the first two kinds of public value failure emerge through direct involvement and interaction with universities stakeholders, the second set of failures are more pernicious because they emerge primarily internally. These external stakeholders are still important, in disciplining universities at a distance, in a Foucaultian sense of making universities’ continually mindful of these ‘large’ external pressures without them having to be continually imposed on universities.

THE URBAN AS STRATEGIC SPACE

The third set of public value failures for universities come through the opportunity costs of universities playing strategic games with little consideration for local urban interests, rendering the local environment as a strategic space to be manipulated within these wider power structures. At the highest level of the university structure, this may come through mergers of universities in different spatial locations; although universities are often referred to as anchor institutions in that unlike firms they do not close or relocate, universities do change their spatial patterns over time. This is not entirely true, because universities do clearly change their spatial structure, particular when they have multi-site arrangements, and this is not always concerned with the vitality of the particular spaces they do or not leave behind.

In the UK, for example, there are examples of universities that have changed their location, a clear example being the University of Humberside, which relocated over the course of a
decade to Lincoln. Acquisitions of smaller campuses by larger institutions have sometimes had negative consequences for those locations in terms of the closure of those locations, such as the events around the closure of Wye College in Kent, as documented in David Hewson’s rather interesting Saved. Universities have engaged with urban development programmes to acquire flagship new campuses with relatively limited local impacts and benefits with the threat to relocate.

These new developments – particularly if integrated into the development of new technopoles and science cities – may contribute to processes of suburbanisation, increasing urban segregation and car dependency. This can indirectly be associated with imposing costs and seeing services withdrawn from communities fixed into inner city areas whilst the universities are able to benefit from the additional opportunities these developments create. At a micro-level, the desire to perform symbolically in various arenas such as research exercises and league tables may lead to reorganisations and changes to improve performances in these exercises that at the same time reduce the university’s capacity to meet the meets of a broader array of urban stakeholders.

There is no need to necessarily accuse the universities of acting in bad faith with regard to any of these scenarios. As strategically managed organisations, recognising the reality of the fact that they manage the totality of their assets. Their urban campus is an asset which creates connections, dependencies and also opportunities, and has to be managed to produce the best outcomes from these assets. The locus of these management decisions in turn and these may not always coincide with the interests of social justice in a particular location.

**FUZZINESS OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM**

A fourth public value failure can be identified where universities are faced with strategic conflicts between their internal and external stakeholders, and resolve those in ways that favour their private strategic interests over the wider public interests in urban justice. Urban development is inherently, in the model with which we are using to reflect on the situation, a competitive situation. Urban positions are positional, and scarcity in land brings actors into conflict within one another. Because of the diversity of interests and knowledge within the university, it is entirely possible that universities might find themselves simultaneously on different sides of these struggles. Dealing with that issue can prove difficult, particularly where high-level strategic interests come into conflict with academics’ knowledge-production and circulation activities.
A key battleground for this has been the idea of academic freedom to advance opinions which may be contrary to a university’s strategic positions and interests. This is not a novel situation; in *Warwick University Limited*, E. P. Thompson writes provocatively on the effects of the orientation of Warwick University towards the private sector on the kinds of research trajectories which are encouraged or discouraged. The key issue within academic freedom is the dissonance between the strict and broad definitions of the term, in particular in a domain such as urban development where there are no right or wrong answers to a problem. In a strict reading of academic freedom, academics are limited to public pronouncements on the basis of their published, peer reviewed research, whilst in a broader reading, academic freedom is the ability, or even duty of academics to freely voice an opinion in any area where they feel adequately qualified.

The timescales of academic research make it extremely difficult for this strict academic freedom criterion to be met in the highly fluid environment of urban change. However, the fuzzy nature of academic freedom, between these strict and broad readings, place this very principle under threat. In short, academics who find their pronouncements at odds with the corporate university positions, or indeed not to the taste of universities’ external stakeholders, van find themselves facing pressure to moderate their arguments and activities. This potentially has the undesirable effect of leaving knowledge and assets within the university, potentially useful to promote social justice, being unexploited.

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It is possible to identify problems and public value failures at a level below that of the institution internally, that is the effect of these policing and disciplining activities by universities, seeking to meet external stakeholder demands, on individuals. By internalising and even manipulating these rules of the game which oriented to delivering to external stakeholders, these may come at the expense of universities’ overall contributions. There are a set of problems of omission, where academics choose not to make their knowledge relevant or accessible, or it is made in various ways inaccessible from communities able to benefit from it. The second set are those of commission, where new public management has produced a set of game-playing behaviours, which results in despite apparently increasingly levels of knowledge outputs about urban systems, contexts and trajectories, this masks a decreasing level of overall usefulness of the produced knowledge.
RESEARCHER SELECTIVITY UNDER PRESSURE

There may be public value failures of omission at the individual level, where individuals choose to construct their knowledge production activities in ways that favour particular groups over others, and which hence skew the field of urban discursive opportunity in favour of existing powerful actors. Accessing the knowledge produced by universities is not a straightforward or simple task, because universities are complex knowledge-producing communities with their own rituals, routines and norms that may be off-putting to outsiders. This can function at a range of levels, from the kinds of partners with whom researchers choose to engage in constructing their research activities, to the degree of control they allow those outsiders over the way the research is framed and findings constructed, and ultimately, the ownership of the knowledge.

It is impossible to get away from the issue that research is a relatively intensive, expensive activity, that takes place in situations of resource constraint. There may then be a drift to well-resourced partners, and likewise to those that are sufficiently cognate to academic communities to avoid imposing additional burdens on the knowledge generation process. There are a set of related issues about whose knowledge and for what purposes, and indeed the way that it is deployed in urban contexts, particularly in settings of imminent conflict. These issues do not make effective engagement impossible, but there is a key issue as to who gains the benefits of the produced knowledge, given the way that the knowledge is constructed.

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A SEARCH FOR QUALITY AND THE SHIFT TO MYSTICISM

The final set of pressures which emerge amongst all those shifts are those which in the name of improving research excellence, quality and output have had the rather perverse effect of undermining the value of that knowledge. There have been calls in some quarters to undo these pressures; in the Netherlands, the Science in Transition movement chose yesterday, the day before the start of the academic year to reinforce their arguments that something needs to be done differently in science. They are aligned with the Slow Science movement, analogous to the slow food movement, seeking to create knowledge that is conscience of and rooted in the places and problems of its creation, and which is far more satisfactory than the practices of the pressured academy.
The issue is sometimes understood as a pressure to engage fundamental research at the expense of the kinds of useful, applied research that can make a difference within contexts of urban struggle. However, there is no reason which good research at the service of subaltern communities cannot be excellent in its own terms. However, the problem becomes evident where there is increasing amounts of activity being devoted to creating things which whilst they are measurable as ‘excellent research’ do not meaningfully contribute to the creation of useable knowledge.

Whilst as Frank Kolfschoten reminds us, research malpractice is by no means a phenomenon limited to the late 20th and 21st centuries, it is clear that many are voicing concerns over the increasing prevalence of research outputs which have become divorced from any kind of real-world referents, leading to a kind of ‘research mysticism’. In some disciplines, those rooted in extensive, synthetic knowledge, this manifests itself through obvious fraudulent activities, such as falsifying data sets or manipulating images of results. In the social sciences, where there is a greater degree of interpretative flexibility, this can manifest itself in an increasingly complex set of theoretical frameworks with decreasing flexibility for real-world challenges to these orthodoxy.

The last five years has witnessed as an example of this in the social sciences an increasing resistant to mathematical economics as the gold standard for economic analysis, based on a rigorous set of deductive rules in which anomalies have to be explained away. More political-economic approaches have gained some cachet as providing more elegant ways of understanding the way that despite supposedly competitive financial markets, no one foresaw the issue of systemic risk. But there are all kinds of pressures on researchers to deliver ever-rising numbers of research publications and it is not clear whether these pressures are at the same time increasing researchers’ sensitivities to the kinds of knowledge that are necessary to address the grand challenge of urban sustainability.

**SIX WICKED ISSUES FOR UNIVERSITIES TRANSFORMING CITIES**

The challenge is not to immediately take the massive and improbable step towards introducing democracy and ethics in a system into which transactions – and hence public value failures – are a core part of the system. There is a need to rebuild the system to avoid these public value failures, and in so doing, to ensure that there are not the simple elisions that undermine the capacity of universities to contribute, so that rather than putting their
knowledge to the service of urban sustainability, they contribute to exacerbating urban tensions

The six wicked issues:

**Translations from public to private domains**: although universities might have interests in stimulating urban sustainability in a general, public sense, there is a problem in that their locality also represents a space of dependence for them to achieve their strategic goals. Therefore, to achieve these strategic goals they are forced to – or choose – take strategic urban positions that are incompatible with wider urban sustainability or social justice.

**Defensive Lock-in**: the risk that universities align themselves with elites with established positions in the existing urban configuration because of their existing investments, and feel threatened by the challenges and changes that urban sustainability will bring.

**The urban as strategic space**: universities use their strategic land holdings and positions in order to better meet the challenges they face from stakeholders with no interests in the city, sustainability or urban justice

**The fuzziness of academic freedom**: there is the risk that academics knowledge inputs are managed in ways that do not challenge universities’ strategic urban interests and holdings, and academics are forced into a restrictive version of what academic freedom is, so chasing/reporting on rather than intervening, shaping and contributing to contested processes of urban change.

**Researcher selectivity under pressure**: there is a tendency to construct urban sustainability research projects as large, and cash intensive, restricting the capacity to participate to those able to contribute their own resources, and giving them a high degree of participant closure. This makes it extremely difficult to genuinely engage with and involve the interests and knowledge of subaltern/excluded groups

**The risk of researcher mysticism**: there is a problem with attempts to manage research activity that this management is changing the nature of research activity in ways that are not entirely helpful. In the social sciences, there are two pulls, one is to embrace the certainties of emergent empirics, like big data (and we have been here before with the quantitative revolution) and the other is to retreat into defensive obscurantism producing knowledge that is of no value beyond the assessment exercises which are its exclusive audience.
It is of course far beyond the scope of a brief presentation to be able to present a cut and dried set of answers to these wicked issues, but my contention is that more account need be taken of these tensions and issues in contemporary university engagement narratives. Models that focus on what can be positively done need to consider far more the politics of their activities, and in particular the ways in which particular technologies are contributing to the changing of the structures of particular local political economies. At the same time, the reality of these tricky political messes is that they are not something that universities feel comfortable portraying to the world in their full, unsatisfying messiness, and this makes this model or approach inherently vulnerable to political interests. Nevertheless, it is only with a greater eye for the challenges that universities face in trying to do meaningful urban engagement that we can understand their true potential to harness their knowledge to address the grand challenges of urban exclusion in the 21st century.

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