Built Heritage
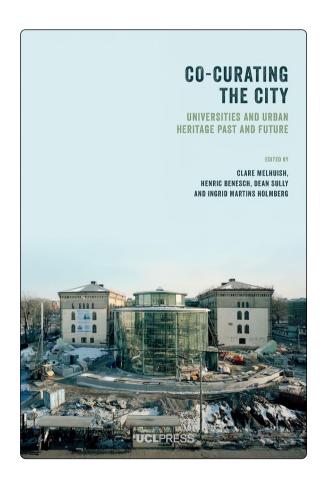
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Co-curating the City: Universities and urban heritage past and future, edited by Clare Melhuish, Henric Benesch, Dean Sully, and Ingrid Martins Holmberg. UCL Press, London, 2022. 337pp. ISBN 9781800081833

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Co-curating the City: *Universities and urban heritage past and future* explores the critical, yet under-examined, role of higher education institutions in shaping cities and influencing urban regeneration through the construction of complex heritage discourses and practices. The multi-faceted contributions to the volume highlight how universities fluctuate between challenging but at times also reinforcing 'authorised heritage discourses' (Smith 2006) in city-making, through intricate processes of knowledge production, pedagogical and institutional reform, and implementing ambitious projects of urban campus expansion. Perhaps most notably, the book examines the ways in which the university catalyses urban and societal transformation by operating at the intersection of globalised knowledge economy systems, and local contexts. In this sense, the case studies collected by the volume reflect on the role of the university as a civic institution, describing various engagements in place-based participatory processes that lead to re-shaping cities, re-shaping ideas and lived experiences of urban heritage, as well as re-shaping the institutional identity and heritage of the universities themselves. What is more, the book critically frames its conceptualisations of heritage conservation and management as processes of innovation aimed at building more resilient, participatory, bottom-up and experimental solutions to present and future challenges, going against the status quo of viewing heritage as a rigid constraint on the development of cities. In doing so, *Co-curating the City* manages to achieve its primary goal of expanding the field of critical heritage studies in relation to urbanism.

It is also important to note that the volume was born from a series of exchanges and workshops facilitated by the Centre for Critical Heritage Studies, a collaboration between University College London (UCL) and the University of Gothenburg. As a result, the editors Clare Melhuish, Henric Benesch, Dean Sully and Ingrid Martins Holmberg succeed to mobilise a multi-disciplinary body of knowledge, 'co-curating' in the volume contributions from different, converging fields such as heritage studies, urban studies, history, planning, architecture, design, anthropology, conservation, visual art, archaeology. The contributors themselves operate at the intersections between academia and practice, transforming the book into an example of the types of inter and trans-disciplinary collaborations that are so necessary in interrogating processes of knowledge production and developing more critical, transformative knowledge that can respond to complex societal challenges (Fokdal et al. 2021). Beyond the theoretical explorations and knowledge put forward by the volume, the inter-disciplinary dialogue it thus manages to construct is, arguably, in itself, an ambitious project of advancing the field of critical heritage studies, inviting us to think in more nuanced ways about the links between urban development, heritage and the role of academic institutions.

Building the discussion from the use of comparative case studies, the volume is organised in two parts. The first, *Critical perspectives*, frames more broadly questions and themes explored across the range of cases presented. The section maps a theoretical exploration of the socio-economic, political and historic conditions that have transformed universities into urban development actors, the role of universities in interrogating and constructing conceptualisations of heritage, the ways in which institutional and disciplinary discourses situate heritage knowledge in relation to the city, and the ways in which universities construct their institutional identity within the context of the new urban knowledge economies. The second part, *Sites and historical contexts, pasts and future*, contextualises these discussions by focusing on cases from London (UK), Gothenburg and Lund (Sweden), Rome (Italy), Beirut (Lebanon) and São Paulo (Brazil). The chapter summary in this review follows the case study logic characterising this volume.

In Chap. 1, Clare Melhuish examines how university identities have gradually shifted from being defined by elitist, imperialist heritage narratives (narratives that have often been instrumentalised to support problematic urban regeneration initiatives), towards more democratised, place-based and decolonial discourses that emphasise collective, plural urban identities. By using as illustrations the expansion of the UCL and University of Gothenburg campuses, she highlights the unique position and obligation of universities to bridge gaps between 'centre' (the elites) and 'periphery' (the marginalised), by developing more critical heritage perspectives that can play an important role in opening up access to urban space, thus promoting the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre 1968) and more inclusive, equitable processes of place-making and urban development. Subsequent chapters deepen this discussion by presenting a closer inspection of the dynamics surrounding the campus development and institutional reform of the two universities mentioned.

Sully (Chap. 2), Gardner (Chap. 7) and Cohen (Chap. 8) trace UCL's campus expansion project in East London, the former site of the 2012 London Olympic Games. The project is presented as a broader aspiration to consolidate the university's role in contributing to the planned legacy of the Games, role framed around ideas of the new campus as an agent of social change and regeneration. Nevertheless, the authors interrogate such framings against the backdrop of highly scrutinised regeneration ambitions at the time of the Olympic Park's development, ambitions that utilised discourses of 'deprivation', 'industrial wasteland' and 'underdevelopment' for describing East London in order to justify appropriations of urban spaces, thus subverting or even erasing, in the process, the diverse histories of places targeted for regeneration.

These tensions are perhaps most prominently highlighted in Chap. 8, where Cohen argues that the role of the corporate university in the "embourgeoisement of its immediate locality" is in increasing conflict with its "function in civic place-making" (p. 181). In developing this critique, he draws on research with communities in order to examine local perceptions to the arrival of the UCL campus in East London. In Chap. 2, Sully similarly reflects on university-led processes of community co-production centred around explorative, creative practice in East London, highlighting how these can generate new narratives of place-making and alternative, pluralistic scenarios for the future.

Chap. 7 adds to this discussion with Gardner's critical analysis of text, media and political discourse, which highlights how the UCL East campus development is informed by the legacy of two London 'mega-events': the 2012 Olympic Games and the 1851 Great Exhibition. The complex picture painted in this chapter suggests that ideas around the new campus development are built upon the selective understanding and use of heritage discourses, shifting between the maintenance of the status quo and driving change.

Expanding on these reflections from a different disciplinary field, Brown in Chap. 4 examines how higher education institutions mobilise heritage in visual imagery

(more specifically, architectural renderings), in order to construct future identities as leaders of the knowledge economy, and competitively position themselves within systems of global idea circulation.

In the book, the case of UCL East is presented in comparison with that of University of Gothenburg's Näckrosen Campus project. Holmberg (Chap. 3), Caldenby (Chap. 5) and Benesch (Chap. 6) follow the university's development in space and time, the institutional reforms and the ever-evolving narratives of institutional identity and heritage, which impacted not only the relationship between the university and the Scandinavian city but also the urban landscape itself.

In Chap. 3, Holmberg delves into an analysis of the university's disciplinary dynamics, in order to reveal the direct role played by academic knowledge in influencing re-framings of urban politics and therefore, urban interventions. More specifically, she demonstrates how 'expert' knowledge on historic urban buildings produced in the fields of architecture, art history, planning and archaeology, in dialogue with other actors such as writers and the media, historically shaped narratives on the city's urban heritage and contributed to the safeguarding of an area planned for redevelopment. Likewise, Benesch in Chap. 6 investigates the discipline of design, contextualising it within the history of University of Gothenburg's institutional and curriculum reform. Somewhat in contrast to Holmberg's observations, this exercise reveals that the new international, cross-sectorial orientation of design education at the university has become increasingly disconnected from the city context in which it operates.

Adding to the reflection on the city-university rapport, Caldenby in Chap. 5 goes beyond thinking about systems of knowledge production, and urban flows of ideas and actors (students, citizens, researchers) in city universities, and investigates how the 'material apparatus', or spatial presence of the institution within Gothenburg, shaped the historic city's identity, infrastructure and landscape.

In Chap. 9, Kärrholm and Yaneva shift their focus to a different Swedish city, Lund, in order to explore, in a similar manner, how academic scientific developments, directly linked to systems of urban economic growth, result in large-scale university structures being developed in the city, thus engaging in what the authors call a process of both 'de-heritagisation' and 're-heritagisation' that forever alters the past, present and future of the historic urban landscape.

The remaining three chapters of *Co-curating the City* expand the discussion to geopolitical contexts that go beyond the Anglo-Swedish research nexus. In Chap. 10, Wetterberg and Nyström outline the socio-political and spatial dynamics surrounding the development of Roma Tre University, and demonstrate its impact on the regeneration of a post-industrial district in Rome. The authors attribute the transformation of the site to a long-lasting, reiterative process of formal and informal negotiations and collaborations between the university and a series of local actors including community groups exerting various forms of grassroots agency.

Similarly, Myntti and El Hallak (Chap. 11) analyse the American University of Beirut's engagement in a series of participatory, social outreach programmes aimed at addressing the consequences of 'urbicide' in a city devastated by civil war, at promoting community wellbeing, and at strengthening the institution's own links with the historic neighbourhood in which it resides.

Perhaps not coincidentally, the volume concludes with what could be considered the most radical example of academic engagement with socio-spatial transformation. This is represented by Arantes' Chap. 12, which describes the institutional reform and spatial vision of UNIFESP in São Paulo, guided by the university's operation at the intersection between radical processes of knowledge production and social activism. The chapter thus focuses on the expansion of the university's campus in the city's East Zone, committed to engagement with the surrounding working-class, diverse communities – a vision challenging the hegemony of colonial epistemologies and narratives of national identity, quite literally embodying the heritage of Paolo Freire's 'pedagogy of liberation'.

The case studies collated in this volume provide a deep examination of the university's role as a civic institution, inviting readers to envision what may happen once academics 'descend the ivory tower' and attempt to engage with communities in ways that are genuinely redistributive of cultural and intellectual capital. What is more, the authors highlight the central role of universities in engaging with critical heritage perspectives, reimagining the past, present and future in ways that go beyond a predominant concern with monumentalism, often still prevailing in our thinking about cities and their histories.

Finally, cases such as the ones from Beirut and São Paulo are critical in advocating for the responsibility of establishments such as universities in leading radical processes of societal transformation, particularly in contexts challenged by fragmented governance mechanisms and the inequitable hegemonies of colonial pasts. If anything, the volume could have been enriched by giving more centrality to learning from such cases, which presently find their place in a chapter entitled *Elsewhere* (p. 200–269) that, to some, might feel like an afterthought. Equally enriching would have been a concluding chapter providing a deeper comparison between the experiences and cases cited, reflecting on lessons learned and

ways forward, and reinforcing once again the book's key messages.

Nevertheless, notes from the final chapter highlight that the editors of this volume are currently working on developing a comparative approach between cases such as UCL's and UNIFESP's East campuses – an exercise that might perhaps stimulate other researchers to reflect on the symbiosis between university and city, thus enhancing a much-needed inter-institutional, cross-disciplinary and globally-informed dialogue on this important topic. In this sense, beyond those interested in expanding their understanding of the critical heritage studies – urban studies research axis, *Co-curating the City* could prove a valuable read for any academic or practitioner interested to engage in a critical reflexive process on the multifaceted role of universities in producing transformative knowledge, challenging hegemony, and leading more participatory heritage and city-making practices.

Abbreviations
UCL: University College London; UNIFESP: Universidade Federal de São Paulo.

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