The City We Want: Against the Banality of Urban Planning Research

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It is the small virtues and vices that neither religion nor education pay much attention to, those that blink on and off without our noticing anymore as we move through our days, that can make all the difference when systems start changing.

It is a remarkable thing Camus has done, this resistance fighter, philosopher, novelist, journalist. He has invited us to reflect on how our daily, most ordinary, ways of thinking of ourselves and of acting are more or less already implicated with the most extraordinary harms we can imagine.

– Elizabeth Minnich ([2017](#), p. 22), *The Evil of Banality*, interpreting Camus' *The Plague* (emphasis in the original)

Why am I in academia? That's the question that I often ask myself nowadays. Everyone has different reasons for choosing a career path, and the motive itself may not need to be the subject of discussion. But in this era where 'impact factors' are viewed as a primary source for measuring the *value* of research – it makes me wonder what truly distinguishes academia from journalism, think tanks, or consultancy firms. Because there are so many journals and articles pouring out of the internet, and because the university sector is now considered an 'industry' rather than an intellectual pillar of society[1] – I hope to be able to argue that urban planning research has particular responsibilities and sensibilities that we as academics need to adhere to. Urban planning as a discipline has historically been dedicated to creating better

conditions for human flourishing (Friedmann, 2000, 2008), since the kinds of decisions and interventions that planners make could bear *lasting material legacies* to everyday lives of people. As Friedmann put it, "planners are not journalists who can dispassionately observe the passing scene" (Friedmann, 2008, p. 250); rather, they have to ask themselves how planning powers can be used to *change* the scene. However, this commitment to public service feels as if it has increasingly become decoupled from our research, mainly due to the reality that we face as academics – as the neoliberal logics of today's world have seeped into the culture of academia itself. In response to our difficult predicament that I detail below, I call for a movement against the banality of academic research – which begins by questioning *who* and *what* we are producing knowledge *for*.

Questioning the meaning of being in academia, its value, and responsibility – my mind drifted back to the time when I was first drawn to urban planning. In 2011, I was a college student majoring in Business Administration in Seoul. Weary of the mundane doctrine 'maximizing the profit', I hesitated about jumping into the job market. One day I stumbled across a BBC interview with Enrique Peñalosa, the famed mayor of Bogota who had pioneered public transportation in the cities of emerging economies. The possibility of change, making a society-wide impact, and having a purpose greater than one's own life – all came to me as a beam of light that ushered me into 'urban studies' which was by-then a trendy academic field. After receiving a master's degree in urban governance, I decided to pursue a PhD with the intention of staying in academia, in part for the love of writing and philosophy, in part for the value of understanding 'whys', and finally, in part for the dream of an imagined world of harmony and solidarity where ideas of 'collectivity' and 'togetherness' become an asset rather than a burden. Urban scale and localised politics somehow gave me a sense of hope that the solidarity or the feeling of community spirit can be achievable. But battling between employability and proving the utility of my research – especially in today's world where the ghost of neoliberalism has already permeated every possible career pursuit, including academia – I find it increasingly difficult to preserve the purity and integrity of my original intention.

If I ever assumed that, by entering academia, I was to get away from the neoliberal logics of the world – where 'numbers' and 'profits' are *the* guiding signposts of life, I was mistaken. Here, my value and identity as a researcher is still measured by the number of citations or 'h-index', or 'impact factors' of the journals that publish my writings. In today's

publishing game where visibility always has to come first, it is common that the performance of academic journals is evaluated through standardised scores. However, a high 'impact-factor' is no guarantee of the intellectual depth of studies. With the rise of interdisciplinary research where the fluidity of disciplinary identity is cherished, commercial presses and publishers are eager to adopt a 'more articles, more audience, more impacts' approach, resulting in numerous new journals and research outlets that embrace a perhaps extremely 'democratic' version of academic research. On the part of academics, 'publish or perish' has always been the canon, leading us to welcome this addition of new outlets as an opportunity.

I am not against the multiplication of new journals and ways to publish, since they do help surface unlikely voices and rare perspectives that can be rejected by established traditions and norms. What I am anxious about, though, is how increasingly common it is to observe an irresponsible, 'hands-off' approach to research in academia. Academics today often reside in the privileged bubble of generating 'facts', 'information', or 'knowledge'. Masquerading in 'objectivity', we justify our withdrawal from taking a stand in the name of adding 'scientific' rigour to the subject. As Hannah Arendt (1972, p. 73) points out in her essay on 'Civil Disobedience' in *Crises of the Republic*: " … research has become a substitute for action. … Research has become a technique of evasion, and this has surely not helped the already undermined reputation of science". Can research really be independent from action? Black Feminist Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars such as Dorothy E. Roberts (2011) and Ruha Benjamin (2019) have extensively shown that the production of knowledge itself cannot be dissected from the social, political, and economic fabric of our society. One must remember: *By refusing to be political about what we study, we are already being political.*[2]

Producing knowledge and facts is indeed valuable, but *what are they for*? *Who are they for?* What are the implications of revealing these facts? By making certain phenomena visible, and not others, are we in any way participating in propagation of certain ideals? Of course, it is hard for the researcher – who resides in this present moment in time – to perfectly anticipate the potential role that their research will play. However, if one doesn't think that their writings will be read by students or to-be social actors in search of larger visions, "why choose to be an academic?" (Friedmann, 2000, p. 461). Today, twenty years since Friedmann offered that question, the cultural landscape of academia is in a grim state. In particular, I am worried about what the commercialisation of academic research has led us

to become (see Shore & McLauchlan, 2012), where we are constantly pressured to 'produce more' rather than having enough time to read/think/reflect more. Public funding cuts in universities have turned academia into a battle ground for competition (rather than a place for open debates and collaboration), pushing us to forge linkages with 'industry partners' who in some cases *disable* our capacity to critically examine and speak against the status quo.[3]

Hannah Arendt's renowned 'banality-of-evil' thesis argued that what lies behind the danger of 'evil' is not the profoundly diabolic quality of a presumed villain, but the "thought-defying"-ly banal and mundane non-reflection that any human being may be subjected to. This provocation is a pillar of anti-essentialist thinking, which reminds us that what's unethical or morally wrong is not a product of inherent, thoroughly-intended evil-ness, but a simple byproduct of non-thinking and cerebral numb-ness (Bernstein, 2018; Minnich, 2017). While bogged down by sustaining the material existence of here and now, one can easily neglect what's beyond one's livelihood, i.e. the vision or the prospects of the collective communities to which we all belong. Everyone is, in the end, thrown into this world without being asked; questioning why we are here and what we are here for may be what constitutes the human condition itself. And yet, caught up with everyday material needs, anyone can slip into an intellectual vacuum, unable to advance logical reasoning beyond material proofs or evidence.[4] As Minnich (2017, p. 46) puts it,

In good enough times and places, unreflective assumptions, including those we make about the chasm between good and evil but hardly it alone, shield us from the tiring daily demands of realities on our attentiveness, and so from a felt need for moral reflection. In rotten times, unreflective assumptions shield us from searing realities with which even silence makes us complicit—and right there, in such shielding in good as in rotten times, lies a germ of their complicity with the evildoing that requires many of us to happen at all.

I wonder whether this is what's happening in academia. How often do we truly encounter an article or a research paper that makes us feel intellectually nourished and connected? In comparison, how often do we read an article going through a mind-numbingly plain array of facts? In the world of impact-factors and promotion-checkboxes, where academics are pushed to keep churning out papers without rigorous reflection on the philosophical, societal, and political implications of their research, what arises is an abundance of unoriginal thinking and a normalisation of non-reflection.

Urban planning research has always been committed to making our communities better places, with a particular emphasis on the collective pursuit of more inclusive urban spaces (Campbell et al., 2014; Fainstein, 2010). Even in the absence of essentialist moral order, postmodern planning theorists such as Edward Soja (1997) and Leonie Sandercock (1998) attempted to propose a normative vision that can guide us through the danger of relativism and depoliticised technocracy. The presence of radical geographers such as Ananya Roy (2005, 2011) has pushed us to rethink the remits of urban planning and the role of the planner in an increasingly unequal world. Radical democracy writers such as Mark Purcell (2013a, 2013b, 2014) have advocated for every citizen's right-to-inhabit/occupy against the state and neoliberal forces. Deweyan democracy geographers such as Robert Lake (2017a, 2017b) ask us to centre justice as the subject of planning – through inclusive planning processes that value contextual knowledges, wisdom, and lived experiences of the 'ordinary' public. Ultimately, in any work of planning research, it all comes down to this fundamental question: *What kind of city do we want*? What makes our cities better places to inhabit – inclusive, generous and 'accidentally synchronised' (Simone, 2014) spaces filled with the possibilities that make us feel free and connected at the same time? Such speculative aspirations and questions on the definition of what constitutes 'better' contain us in a loop of discussions that centre around the role of government and its powers of intervention – which is critical especially in the dominance of capitalist-driven urban development and the resulting perpetuation of social injustices. In the meantime, the role of non-state actors and their agencies have been noted as new alternatives for casting hope in times of darkness. Urban planning research, at the end of the day, *cannot* and *should not* avoid social responsibility, precisely because the act of urban planning itself bears material consequences onto those who have to experience the everyday realities of that particular space. In other words, one cannot just produce depoliticised facts without thinking through the societal implications of the kinds of knowledge they are legitimising, and subsequently, the kinds of urban futures these knowledges may imply.

I propose three theoretical stances that could underpin the normativity of urban planning research, in order for it to reject the banality of non-reflection and non-thinking.

For History

Finding normativity or collective direction always comes down to studying the history of urban development processes and the social relations that rendered them possible. Studying urban histories, social actors, and economic geography should be connected to formulating a normative agenda for more just cities – in the sense of 'doing justice' to systemic injustices accumulated over time. Revealing the callous reality of today's neoliberal social order should be at the heart of projecting what's to be done; however, the planning discipline can add value to this dialogue by more proactively proposing how things could be done differently when informed by such revelations. If planners are never passive observers of the scene, neither should planning researchers be. We should be prepared to *go beyond* studying history for its own sake, by engaging with the design of future actions moving forward. In short, this is about 'doing the history of the present (after Foucault): asking how we got to our present condition so we can act differently in the future'.[5]

For Collectives

Urban planning research is all about creating a collective where a true sense of solidarity can be formulated, for that's the only way we can create more inclusive urban space. Where can we find a source of solidarity, without relying on essentialist categories such as gender or nationality? Urban planning research should contribute to (1) defining the scales of solidarities, (2) collecting evidence and experiences of how communities develop a source of togetherness, (3) how physical togetherness generates a fellow-feeling of non-essence that radically opens up to difference (Simone, 2009, 2014), and (4) furthering pragmatic strategies and visions for cities to pursue hope in plural democracy. In doing so, we should view 'collectives' as organic entities in a constant process of wider community-building, rather than an already-existing ('set in stone') research object. This way, our research can be more about what 'working collectively' actually looks like in practice, moving beyond the fetishization of micro-scale solidarity. In such a post-structural understanding of 'collectives', we can find research questions that are pertinent to everyday planning practices. For instance, on working collectively, our research can broaden the scope of what should count as legitimate knowledges, perspectives, or forms of expertise – ultimately contributing to the *inclusiveness* aspect of formulating 'the city we want'. The outcome of such research would encourage planners to valorise situated knowledges and contextual resources of action (often possessed by the everyday publics), relinquishing their 'expert' badge.

For Intangible Values behind the Tangibles

Urban planning research should actively look out for the intangible values and political implications behind the tangible materials that shape the form of a city. City infrastructure, buildings, urban design, or the 'built environment' – all have everyday consequences to those who inhabit the spaces they are built on; planning research will have to contribute to creating a cohesive dialogue around the impacts of these micro-scale environments at a wider, city-level scale. If 'profit maximization' is not *the* motivating value for what academics consider to be an ideal form of urban development, what then are the other values that we stand for, and how/by whom/through what process should they be decided? If we are to 'go against' the banality of mindlessly following the status quo of the world, we should be ready to embark on two major tasks. First, we should remain courageous enough to reject profit-maximising as a naturalised, internalised value. Being pragmatic and realistic about our choices[6] can be respected, but one should draw a line *somewhere* (if we hope to push for a 'change'). The question is: *Where*? Studying that 'where' is the second task. Doing something about 'social justice' does not necessarily entail an imposition of elitist-driven, transcendent (i.e. 'context-free') values (Lake, 2014, 2017a). By considering justice as the *subject* of planning, rather than a readymade set of commandments, we would be able to place the questions about 'what makes a city just' at the centre of *all* planning efforts (e.g. land use zoning, infrastructure planning, environment planning) – which should be answered within each city's unique local contexts and historic moment in time. Planning research can be about capturing and documenting how these built environment decisions are being made – by whom, for whom, and through what kinds of public input processes and discussions on social values/justice. Such research can serve as useful references for students and future planners, as they roll their sleeves up for a 'better' city.

In today's neoliberal world that directs academic works to be visual, concise, and quantitatively 'impactful', it is difficult to garner attention or an audience for critical and reflective research. But let's close our eyes for a minute and put a pause on our cascading thoughts over 'making it in academia' – e.g. obtaining job security, ticking off promotion check-boxes, or producing marketable research. Of course, they are all very important; but are we going to let these dictate what we write or how we think? The reality is what it is, but it does not necessarily mean that we have to submit to it *all the time*. Can we, academics of critical minds, have the audacity to nurture and disseminate 'microinjections' (Deleuze &

Guattari, 1987, p. 239) that fiercely *express* the kind of city that we want? As much as we are constantly exposed to the risk of unemployment or surrendering to the capitalist social order, we should express, in every writing project we participate in, our aspirations and visions towards making our communities 'better'. That would involve, in some cases, deconstructing systematic injustices through studying historical processes (actors, rules, regulations) of urban development. In other cases, it would imply investigating different scales and natures of 'solidarities' that often rise out of cities' localised politics, as well as the processes of wider solidarity building through physical togetherness. Further, it would mean looking into the political implications of our everyday material surroundings, starting *from* the symbolic and affective powers of buildings/spatial design *to* consider the winners and losers of the cities' infrastructure/built environment decisions.

As I sign off from this essay in 2020, the world is still in the middle of its war against the COVID-19 pandemic. The embellished future of academia and its bloated resource bubble – viable only in so far as the flow of global capital is to be sustained – has been put on hold.[7] What this pandemic did, at least for now, is question what's really essential about what academia does – its purpose, role, and contribution to society. With glamourous facilities and libraries all standing empty and idle, the pandemic prompts us to ask ourselves what universities are really for anyway, as their physical presence becomes temporarily obsolete. Michael D. Smith, in his article, 'Are Universities Going the Way of CDs and Cable TV?', wonders whether the pandemic can be a wake-up call for academia to reboot its 'mission': "What is the core mission of higher education? That's the question we need to ask right now" (Smith, 2020). Although we are currently unsure of the kinds of permanent changes that the virus would bring, what it certainly did was wreck the status quo – obliging us to pause and reflect on what truly serves our purpose and what doesn't. So, here I ask: *what is our collective mission of academic research in the urban planning discipline, and how best can we creatively reinvent it (beyond the predominant economic logics)?* The answer, I believe, wouldn't be too far away from the pivotal role we play in higher education, because ultimately, what we teach is inseparable from what we read/study/write about.

I recently spoke with a professor who had been teaching a seminar on urban social justice for more than three decades. He said that the class he had taught that morning may have been the best he has ever had, noting how passionate and engaged students are today. Maybe this is our power. The power of our unceasing critical and reflexive thinking is its

ability to connect with young minds whose realities have not yet been tainted with 'the' reality. Let's not overcode realities. Let's not fall into submission, not just yet. Academic research and writing should retain the power of wisdom and original thinking that can instigate the politics of intervention, disruption, and social change – "causing runoffs, as when you drill a hole in a pipe; there is no social system that does not leak from all directions" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 239). Let's never forget that.

Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a "miracle" – that is, something which could not be expected. … the formation of organic life out of inorganic processes, the evolution of man, finally, out of the processes of organic life are all "infinite improbabilities," they are "miracles" in every language. It is because of this element of the "miraculous" present in all reality that events, no matter how well anticipated in fear or hope, strike us with a shock of surprise once they have come to pass. (Arendt, 1961, p. 169)

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