

Introduction to the Special Issue: Cities and Universities. Discourses, spatialities, and material infrastructures of university-driven urban change.

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## Title

**Introduction to the Special Issue: Cities and Universities. Discourses, spatialities, and material infrastructures of university-driven urban change**

## Authors:

Samantha Cenere, Department of Economics, Social Studies, Applied Mathematics and Statistics, University of Turin, Turin, Italy.

Loris Servillo, Interuniversity Department of Regional and Urban Studies and Planning, Polytechnic of Turin, Turin, Italy.

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University, students, PBSA, social exclusion, platform, gentrification, housing.

## Abstract:

This paper introduces a collection of articles variously aiming at addressing the complex interconnection between contemporary Higher Education institutions and processes of urban change. During the last years, the multiple intricacies between cities and universities have been unpacked by various streams of research. Recent research has further enriched the investigation of universities as spatial actors, paying attention to how the heterogeneous transformative power of universities intercepts global dynamics of capitalist urbanization that function as a backdrop for local university-city relations. The Special Issue situates within this line of investigation, specifically offering readings of university-driven urban change which situate the latter on the backdrop of some of the most visible trends of urban transformation. Among these, the articles look closely at the entanglement between the global knowledge-based economy and urbanization, processes of transnational gentrification, the increased financialization of housing, and the growth of infrastructures for transient populations. Taken together, the papers of this Special Issue suggest that the investigation of the multiple ways through which universities and cities are entangled could act as a useful analytical prism to understand different dynamics of contemporary urban change.

## Outline

Research on the relationship between universities and cities has gained momentum within various disciplines, such as geography and planning and the multidisciplinary field of urban studies. During the 1990s, the spatial dimension of universities' action was mainly associated with the patterns of their student recruitment (Sá et al., 2004) or, more broadly, with their regional outreach. A regional perspective was justified by the capacity of Higher Education Institutions to act as centres of knowledge production and engines of regional growth. More recently, the imperatives of a globalised knowledge-based economy and the neoliberal mantra of competitiveness, that have equally affected both universities and cities, have contributed to transform and strengthen the relationship between the two. Consequently, there has been growing acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of universities and cities (Cochrane & Williams 2013) and the attention has shifted towards a broader set of socio-spatial dynamics and toward a variety of agencies and processes at the urban level related to the presence of a Higher Education institution (HEI).

On the one hand, Universities are analysed as part of urban growth coalitions that aim at leveraging on the capacity of contemporary urban universities to be attractors of talents (Florida, 2002) and to boost the urban image and international reputation (Bose, 2015; Hubbard, 2008; Ruoppila & Zhao, 2017; Yalcintan & Thornley, 2007). More introvertedly, the importance of HEIs for local economies and communities is analysed understanding universities as 'anchor institutions' that trigger positive externalities at the local scale (Ehlentz, 2018; Goddard et al., 2014). This latter perspective has brought a shift in the HEIs' way of conceiving their mandate, with an increasingly tight relationship between education, research, and social engagement in local processes.

On the other hand, works on studentification illustrate how high concentrations of students may trigger the social, cultural, economic, and physical transformation of a neighbourhood. These studies drew scrutiny about how the presence of HEIs may negatively affect specific parts of the city (Garmendia et al., 2012; He,

2014; Nakazawa, 2017; Russo & Tatjer, 2007; Smith, 2008; Zasina et al., 2021). The influx of students and relative wealthy expats working in academia has been associated with gentrification dynamics and shortage of housing affordability for locals, while segregation, clashes between cosmopolitan population and those that do not profit from globalisation enmeshed in local dynamics are becoming increasingly hot topics in cities (Sequera & Nofre, 2020).

Recent research has further delved into the university-city relationship. Some works have unpacked the capacity of universities to produce space looking at their agency on a global scale (Kleibert et al., 2021; Schulze, 2021). HEIs have been framed as infrastructures of competitiveness (Moisio, 2018), with successful universities becoming important attracting factors for a large portion of temporary urban inhabitants and dwellers. The rising importance of universities connected to their ability to act on a multiscale level has fueled the growth of coalitions of interests that emerge in relation to HE.

At the same time, first evidence coming from the literature on studentification has been progressively enriched by studies on the multiplicity of agencies that take part in shaping the local dynamics in which universities take part. While HEIs show unexpected roles as direct agent in the urban transformation, for instance as urban developer and urban landowner (Benneworth et al., 2010; Perry & Wiewel, 2005), different players come in the picture, either empowering universities in their transformative role at the urban level or taking advantage of the latter. These include not only policymakers who identify universities with strategic partners for urban growth, but also real-estate investors and operators in the PBSA (Purpose-Built Student Accommodation) sector (Hubbard, 2009; Revington & August, 2020), landlords (Hochstenbach et al., 2021; Kinton et al., 2018), and entrepreneurs in the entertainment and catering sectors (Chatterton, 1999; Malet Calvo et al., 2017).

The transformation of university-city relation is also due to a profound change investing urban populations. Cities are progressively becoming places of complex cohabitation between resident and various transient populations, such as tourist, students, digital nomads, and other forms of cosmopolitan mobile workers, conjuring up a new conceptual framework through which understanding the role of actors, drivers, and capital investments. Relatedly, a growing economic sector intercepts the changes in urban dynamics and lifestyle, shifting the power relation between local and global actors, and their capacity to shape local agendas. Capitalist urbanization and the global knowledge-based economy constitute the framework within which new actors and new forms of agency find a series of exploitative opportunities, with broad consequences on urban policies and governance.

Taken together, the multifarious research on the urban role of universities has shown that the relationship between university and city is a complex, multiple, and, sometimes, contradictory one. Considering the wide array of socio-spatial transformations associated to universities, the investigation of the multiple ways through which universities and cities are entangled could act as a useful analytical prism to understand different dynamics of contemporary urban change. Thus, thorough investigation of urban changes goes hand in hand with the understanding of the contemporary urban contexts and their socio-spatial and economic dynamics. Exploring this variety, the Special Issue shows how universities are, on the one hand, powerful institutions co-opted in local political agendas and strategies of economic restructuring and, on the other, mobilizing factors for other stakeholders' strategic orientation.

### The special issue

In line with the evidence coming from more recent works on universities and cities, the Special Issue contributes to unpacking the capacity of contemporary HEIs to act as either factors or drivers of profound processes of urban change. The heterogeneous transformative power of universities is investigated paying attention to how it intercepts global dynamics of capitalist urbanization that function as a backdrop for local university-city relations. Among these, the papers pay specific attention to the global knowledge-based economy, processes of transnational gentrification, increased financialization of housing, and the growth of infrastructures for transient populations.

Drawing on empirical evidence from different contexts located mainly in the Global North, the Special Issue gathers five contributions that show the transformations of both universities *per se* and the role they

play in urban development processes in a context of economic restructuring and global competition. Some of the articles focus on the direct role played by universities as powerful stakeholders, stressing how the production of knowledge entails the production of space at the urban and metropolitan scales. Some other contributions shed light on how other actors take part in shaping university cities and attractive student destinations, unpacking the heterogeneous dynamics, material and social infrastructures, discourses, and interests that shape the city-university nexus.

As part of the first group, Ruming (2023) offers an example of how universities as urban actors can shape local and regional development, and play a key role in real estate development, land-use planning, and local politics. Using the case of Sydney, in Australia, the paper shows the possible role of universities in cities from a multi-layer perspective, addressing their implications at neighbourhood and metropolitan level. Here, the universities have emerged in planning strategy as pivotal catalysts in pursuing global city status and driving economic performance. This underscores the evolving understanding of universities as economic infrastructure, intertwined with entrepreneurial models that connect universities with private and government stakeholders. Their valuable presence as economic infrastructure and reputational assets are counterbalanced by lower consideration for the potential civic roles that universities can play in the metropolitan areas. The paper stresses the need to balance economic considerations with more socially just outcomes, advocating for expanded recognition of universities' roles in civic and social realms. Still, it highlights how the general strategy pursued by the city aims at overcoming place-based inequality through a more equitable access to education, and the intention to use university relocation as catalyst for place-based regeneration or development activity.

In line with the analytical lens advanced by Ruming, the paper by Cenere, Mangione, Santangelo and Servillo (2023) investigates how in Turin (Italy) processes of university-led urban transformations are associated to structural changes in mainstream policies and urban narratives. The narrative that identifies HE as a key growth strategy for the city has framed multiple actions of both institutional actors and players in student-related economic sectors. Their converging actions have led to several urban changes in a secondary city that wants to shift from its post-industrial condition to a cultural and educational hub. While a growing mismatch between the university-driven development strategies and the needs of the local population has become evident, the contribution sheds light on how the geographies of exclusion within university cities cannot be solely attributed to the impacts of student concentrations, but rather to a broader urban transformation process involving various stakeholders. This perspective challenges a linear and simplistic reading of studentification-as-gentrification that sees students as the sole disruptive factor. Here the negative externalities and latent conflicts are suggested to be conceived as effects of capital investments materialised in university-related 'fixes' (Harvey, 2001; Jessop, 2016), whether they take the form of student housing premises, changes in the commercial and leisure landscapes, or profound impacts on the housing market.

The disruptive effects on both urban housing and the real-estate sector exerted by the growing material and immaterial power of HEIs in a context of global knowledge-based economy are further explored in the Special Issue. Through a comparative investigation of different geographical areas, Revington and Benhocine (2023) address the emergence of purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) as a "global" asset class that has physically and socially transformed university cities through "new-build studentification" (Sage et al., 2013) implicated in the financialization of urban space and in exacerbating age and class segregation. In the paper, the intricate connection between financialization, student housing, and urban landscapes is dissected in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on student mobility. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed substantial risk in such a sector, which had typically been considered a safe "recession-proof" investment; still, PBSA investors have proven to be capable of reorienting the market through the crisis. However, considering the exclusionary effects of the increased financialization and privatization of student housing, the Authors claim that the response given by PBSA firms to the pandemic have worsened these dynamics, thus making even more urgent the identification of socially just alternatives.

The investigation in student-housing supply is complemented by the article by Cocola-Gant and Malet Calvo (2023), which addresses the phenomenon of platformisation of urban housing markets and its implication for the student-related sector. The paper highlights the case of 'Uniplaces' in Lisbon as an

example of how platforms have restructured the housing market for students, mirroring aspects of the Airbnb model. This research also explores the broader landscape of mid-term rental platforms catering to diverse mobile populations with short- or mid-term stays. The accommodation industry appears to be more and more formed by myriad of market actors and distribution channels -platforms- of which Airbnb and Uniplaces are only two examples. The discussion probes into the potential implications of this evolving market, raising concerns about transnational gentrification and tenant vulnerabilities within a platform-driven housing ecosystem.

Finally, while Cocola-Gant and Malet Calvo show the synergies between tourism and university-driven urban transformation, the paper by Russo and Salerno (2023) unveils the hidden conflicts and frictions between the two through a focus on the capacity (or, the inability) of Venice (Italy) to retain post-student population. This analysis reveals a nuanced interplay between student integration and mobility, as well as the forces that trigger decisions to stay or leave after completing studies. The tension between tourism and student-oriented strategies is often latently present in attractive cities, but in the case of Venice this is made extreme and explicit. The increasing pressure of tourism in the housing and labour sector is a primary cause of Venice's incapability to retain post-student population, while the paper suggests these two sectors as determinant for aiming at a more urban resilience structure. The study suggests that the evolving trends observed in Venice resonate with challenges faced by numerous European cities.

### Conclusive remarks

The articles collected in the Special Issue make evident that the interplay between universities and urban environments is not confined to a single dimension. Instead, it encompasses a multitude of facets, among which we can list city's social and economic aspirations, student mobility, housing dynamics, financialization, global and local interconnection of capital investments, and the impact of digital market. The Special Issue explores some of these complex intricacies, revealing some of the various forces at play and offering a nuanced understanding of how universities have been playing an increasingly important role in cities' physical, economic, and social transformation.

As a common thread, the papers shed light on how processes of university-driven urban transformations may be associated to heterogeneous effects which could not be merely reduced to studentification. Socio-spatial exclusion emerges in multiple, non-exclusive forms. While the creation of student-attractive cities and neighbourhoods may be a factor of exclusion of local residents, students – especially low-income ones – may experience exclusion too when local political agendas favour a specific economic sector. These considerations are connected to a reading of university-driven urban change which situates the latter on the backdrop of an increasing transformation of cities into hubs for transient, cosmopolitan populations. The cases of Venice and Lisbon presented in the Special Issue clearly show how this form of capitalist urbanization entails diverse processes of exclusion, in which coalitions of interests foster the attraction of specific mobile populations while limiting others. At the same time, the financialization and platformisation that characterise the interconnection between local student housing provision and the global dynamics of housing work as further disruptive factors, with processes of exclusion experienced by both low-income students and local populations, facing processes of age and class segregation and of exclusion from the rental market. What emerges from the contributions is the growing mobilisation of universities as part of neoliberal urban political agendas, which frequently put economic interests in front of social justice. Taken together, the articles contribute to elucidate how universities either directly or indirectly take part in global trends of capitalist urban development which are variously entangled with contextual specificities, to which the Authors remain sensitive.

Additionally, the Special Issue discusses policy implications arising from the findings. It suggests the need for rethinking urban planning strategies, housing regulations, and community engagement frameworks to address the challenges and opportunities posed by the university-city nexus. Indirectly, the Special Issue stimulates further research that questions the role of both universities and students. While the first seem to be rarely aware on their impact on cities and of the potential role they could play toward more cohesive urban environments, students are part of a variegated transient population, which may have both the role of gentrifiers and sources of cultural and social capital, as well as of factors of emancipation.

Finally, by offering alternative narratives to prevailing paradigms, such as focusing on cities' retentiveness of student populations or considering the implications of digital platforms, the Special Issue contributes to opening new paths for future research. Besides these stimuli coming from the contributions here collected, various possible avenues of investigation may enrich future research on the topic, among which we can name three lines of development. First, the differences in universities need to be taken into account in relation to their role in cities, or the differences between highly ranked universities and others, between polytechnics and 'general' universities, between global players with franchises across the globe and locally anchored universities, etc. Second, the size and the type of cities together with the characteristics of their local coalitions of interests play important role in shaping the relationship that HEIs weave and the urban dynamics triggered by them. Finally, geography matters. While the Special Issue addresses dynamics almost exclusively in the Global North, future research would benefit from a broader overview of processes and challenges in the Global South, as well as from a more thorough institutional and culturally sensitive perspective at finer grain.

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