

Universities as boundary objects: urban resilience as discursive encounter

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What is the role of the community-engaged university, and planning programs specifically, in the generation of knowledge for urban development and governance? Universities increasingly define themselves as collaborative, community-engaged, and service-oriented partners in urban development and governance. The scholarship of engagement highlights important dimensions of such partnerships, including land use development capacity, relationship-building with surrounding neighborhoods, and normative, experiential education for students (Perry & Weiwel, 2005; Rodin, 2007). Planning programs have been at the forefront of this movement, often responding to the need in adjacent communities for technical assistance such as design expertise, environmental analysis and remediation, and geospatial representation; as well as process-based support such as public outreach, plan translation, and policy advocacy. In this paper, I argue that the intellectual and ideational role of the academy is increasingly, if paradoxically important for a university that aspires to take its work “into the streets” (Rodin, 2007). Drawing on the work of planning scholars concerned with resilience – a literature with which I am connected (Goldstein, Wessells, Lejano, & Butler, 2013), although not centrally involved – I take up the question posed by Simin Davoudi: how are we to develop “the capacity to imagine alternative futures” (Davoudi, 2012)(303)? I use the work of planning theorists to introduce the concept of *discursive resilience*, and illustrate the potentially transformative role of urban universities in its cultivation and enactment. First, I emphasize social-ecological resilience as a deeply humanist, interpretive, and context-responsive disposition, as opposed to a management outcome or set of scientific conditions to be operationalized. Second, I underscore the collaborative and communicative dimensions of social-ecological

resilience, and in particular the generative characteristics of difference, uncertainty, and stress. Finally, I extend scholarship on boundary work in community-university engagement (Weerts & Sandmann, 2010), collaborative networks (Lejano & Ingram, 2009), and collaborative resilience (Quick & Feldman, 2014) to develop the post-structural and hybrid, socio-material insights of a discourse-based framework. By characterizing the university as a boundary object in networks of urban development and governance, I emphasize under-theorized aspects of its significance and potential in such partnerships. The university is an ideational space, with the capacity to intentionally prioritize lines of inquiry, forms of training, and modes of partnership. Such practices constitute the enactment of urban development and governance discourses, where discourse is understood as not just a narrative and cognitive roadmap, but also as a performance of socio-spatial ordering replete with acceptable behaviors, enabling technologies, and prescribed intents. In its ability to convene and connect various publics, the knowledge-generation role of the community-engaged university includes the power to selectively invite, amplify, and reproduce – or to unsettle and reconstitute – shared discourses of urban development and governance.

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