

Urban studies in ascendance¹

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Of the intellectual projects of which Anne Haila was passionate, one was urban studies. For her, urban studies was a scholarly haven, a portal to the international exchange of ideas, and a perspective without which the universities of Finland could not meet their obligations to an increasingly urban society. Haila's particular interests were land and property, rent theory, and the politics of real estate development. She approached her work, though, with a broader agenda, one that reflected the expansive aspirations of the urban studies project.

Urban studies is anchored in the notion that cities – complex, dynamic, messy, and elusive – require an equally, multifaceted scholarly perspective. The field had its origins in the United States in the 1960s when the country's cities were mired in deepening poverty, expanding slums, racial unrest, spreading crime, population loss and declining property values. A moral panic ensued around the threat that these cities – conflict-ridden and on the verge of economic collapse – posed to American society. The cities were in crisis. In response, the federal government along with a few state governments launched numerous public initiatives to reverse the spreading decay and assuage the dissatisfactions of African-Americans, a group disproportionately burdened by urban trauma and still suffering from centuries of discrimination and marginalization.

No single discipline – whether economics, government, or geography – offered the intellectual tools to tackle such a multidimensional problem. Moreover,

¹ This essay is based on Robert A. Beauregard (2010). Urban Studies, in Ray Hutchinson (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Urban Studies*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 930–935.

none of these traditional social science disciplines were particularly inclined or organized to give policy advice: the research in which they engaged could not be easily or directly related into governmental programs. What was needed was a collaboration among different disciplines. What was needed was a scholarship relevant to real-world issues. Urban studies was what resulted. Unlike scholars from the disciplines, urban studies' scholars would do research based on problems faced by the public, not on puzzles spun off from disciplinary paradigms.

This expansive and pragmatic point-of-view paralleled and was enhanced by an emerging fascination with inter-disciplinarity. It was not only urban scholars who were uncomfortable with the substantive limits of the traditional social science disciplines. This shift occurred not just in the United States. When combined with rising levels of urbanization in the UK and Europe, inter-disciplinarity further fueled support for urban studies. In response, sub-fields such as urban economics and urban anthropology emerged within the traditional disciplines and their professional organizations established specialty groups to accommodate them. Nevertheless, the boundaries between urban studies and these sub-fields has remained porous and many scholars in urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design would consider themselves just as inter-disciplinary and as expansive in their approach to the city.

The cities had not been neglected prior to the emergence of urban studies. Scholars such as Robert Park in the United States and Heikki Waris in Finland were engaged in studying the problems of the industrial city. Numerous urban research centres existed in the United States and other countries. In Finland, the Centre for Urban and Regional Studies was set up in 1968 and housed at the then-Helsinki University of Technology. Decades earlier, in 1911, Helsinki City Statistical Office was established by the city government to provide statistical analysis for managing Helsinki and its region. It joined numerous, other municipal research bureaus in cities around the world. All of these various organizations spread and supported the urban studies agenda even before urban studies existed as an academic field. Projecting urban studies internationally was a major journal – International Journal of Urban and Regional Research – first published in 1975 and a research committee (RC21) of the International Sociological Association that became the conference focal point of worldwide urban scholarship. Anne Haila was a central figure in both. In 1998 she became Finland's first professor of urban studies at the University of Helsinki where she taught for much of her career.

The breadth of the urban studies' gaze is both a strength and a weakness. Its scope is seemingly endless. Housing and neighborhoods, local government services, city politics, redevelopment initiatives, economic and technological

development, and metropolitan organization are high on its agenda. Transportation, particularly as it involves transit-oriented developments and mass transit, has risen in importance over the last few decades. Poverty, crime, and unemployment have always been central concerns. Climate change, gentrification, informality, multi-culturalism, immigration, and infrastructure are also perfectly acceptable issues. Cities lead everywhere. The urban studies' community is held together less by substantive interests than by a sense that these issues are most significant in cities and can only be understood in that context.²

Further solidifying the field is a commitment to reform; that is, to making cities function better so that people can live better. This commitment to improvement does not mean that there are no differences of opinion, approach, and even politics. One group of scholars rails at the inefficiencies of government, another at social injustices, and a third at the deficit of democracy in urban decision-making. In reality, these positions are not so easily disentangled. Yet, when urban studies' scholars look at the city, some see an opportunity for creativity, innovation, and prosperity (not to mention solutions to climate change), while others see stark inequalities of income, racial discrimination, immigrant struggle, and concentrated political power, all of which need to be addressed.

Although urban studies programs and research centres tend to study the countries in which they exist, their faculty members, researchers, and courses also attend to international comparisons. Initially, urban studies was a project of the developed world – emerging out of dissatisfaction with the industrial cities -- and mainly Anglo-European. Spurred by the rise of mega-cities and an increasing fascination with globalization and the global cities that spread this phenomenon, it came to encompass the cities of the global South. With urbanization most robust in the global South and their cities housing more and more of the world's population, these cities are not just important demographically but also in terms of trade relationships, immigration, and climate change not to mention terrorism. Consequently, urban studies has spread beyond the global North with scholars, academic programs, and research centres found in the global South as well.

Like any scholarly project, urban studies faces the unrelenting challenges as regards theory and method. Less fixated on theory than the traditional social science disciplines, urban studies scholars still need to have a way to think about cities. Should they adopt a neo-liberal perspective, a creative city line of thought, political ecology, right-to-the-city, planetary urbanization? What kind of object is the city? There are choices to be made. At the same time, how

² This point is the basis of Robert A. Beauregard (2018). *Cities in the Urban Age: A Dissent*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL. <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226535418.001.0001>

should urban studies proceed methodologically? The field seems currently divided between large-sample, quantitative assessments and mixed methods, but other approaches (such as ethnographies and discourse analysis) can also be useful. Urban studies, though, prides itself on not stipulating or even privileging a theoretical or methodological approach. Its eclecticism reflects the complex, multifaceted, and ever-evolving nature of cities.

An additional challenge comes from the relationship between urban studies and urban policy. As an applied field, the objective is to make a difference in the world outside of the academy. It is not enough to define and document a problem or evaluate the consequences of different public policies. Urban studies' knowledge has to travel into the realm of public policy where it can aid governments and communities to do and live better. Accomplishing this is a perennial challenge not only involving access to decision-makers but also the politics of giving advice. Values are inseparable from facts and all analysis is prescriptive. Whether carried into the world by university scholars or independent research centres, this positions urban studies on the political landscape in ways that can become quite problematic.

For those scholars who love cities and find them fascinating and who want their work to be relevant, urban studies beckons. For Anne Haila it provided a nurturing environment for exploring the complexities and international variations in the nature of property and the politics of urban development. That it does so for many others with quite diverse interests is a testimony to its inclusivity and to the seemingly endless desire to know about the urban world in which many of us live.