



Seeking Northlake: Place, technology, and public as enabling constraints for urban transdisciplinary research



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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the urban transdisciplinary research of the Northlake Collective, a multidisciplinary group of graduate students in the University of Washington's Lake Union Laboratory. Through a series of place-based investigations, we explored a small slice of Seattle ultimately seeking to engage the public through an online digital humanities portal. The broader goal of our work and this paper is to address how we, as a team of emerging scholars, understand and investigate 'cities' in the current century as both networked at the global scale and dynamic places for everyday interactions and processes. The paradoxes and complexity inherent to understanding the 'city' and how to address these concerns led us to develop a framework that might enrich grounded urban theory through the 'enabling constraints' of place, technology and public. The productive character of these three concepts, combined with the practical constraints and interrelationships they bring to bear, allowed us to deepen our work and produced the context for our research of Northlake. We propose this tripartite framework for exploring the contemporary city via the structure afforded by transdisciplinary, born-digital collaborations.

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1. Introduction

For well over a century, Seattle's Lake Union has been a site of rapid change. It has undergone successive waves of urban development and redevelopment since the mid-1800s, from colonization, deindustrialization, and the construction of Interstate 5, to the development of biotechnology campuses in the south and the University of Washington in the northeast. In recent decades, the Lake and the many neighborhoods that ring its shores have undergone an immense transformation, driven by the region's burgeoning tech industry. Thus, for generations now, Lake Union has been at the geographic and symbolic center of urban growth and local conceptions of place, a hydrological backdrop to the actors and political processes entangled in such transformations. The questions of who controls growth, who makes decisions, and who has a say in this process are pertinent for understanding the future of Lake Union and Seattle.

The task of the Northlake Collective—six graduate students from geography, history, social work, and the built environment involved in the larger Lake Union Lab at the University of Washington—was to conduct an exploratory place-based investigation of a slice of the city adjacent to Lake Union that ultimately might engage the public through a digital humanities portal. The broader goal of the Northlake Collective and the current paper is to address how we, as a team of emerging scholars, understand and investigate 'cities' in the current century as both networked at the global scale and dynamic places for everyday interactions and processes. What emerged from our work is a transdisciplinary framework that proposes to enrich grounded urban theory and counter urban redevelopment marketed for the 'good of all.'

The Northlake Collective began as a way of exploring more complex urban narratives beyond or between disciplinary frameworks and connecting these new narratives with university and community partners. Urbanists from a variety of disciplines have argued that city management and planning in the 21st century are oriented towards a city's place in the global hierarchy, producing a metanarrative of 'the city in crisis' that competes on a global scale for finite capital resources and ideal urban dwellers. This manufactured 'urban-crisis' discourse is used to justify apolitical management by expert urban managers, who might argue that the issues are too pressing and concerns too imminent for a democratic process (Davidson & Iveson, 2015b; Elwood & Lawson,

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2013; Marcuse, 2015; Rizzo & Galanakis, 2015). The city in crisis often legitimizes urban renewal for the ‘good of all’ by elites including mobile urban policies (Davies & Msengana-Ndlela, 2015; Jacobs, 2012), place branding and waterfront renewal (Airas, Hall, & Stern, 2015), and the competition for managerial firms (Davidson & Iveson, 2015b). Decision-making processes in the entrepreneurial/technologically managed city create a disconnect between the image of the city at the global scale and that in local practice (Falihat, 2014; Foo, Martin, Wool, & Polsky, 2014), thus marginalizing and disenfranchising people of color, the poor, and homeless (Bose, 2015). One approach to countering this metanarrative is careful attention to the ways scholars represent and write about cities (Marcuse, 2015), employing an engaged and critical social science perspective (Gleeson, 2014), and turning towards a more local ethnographic approach that takes into account relational processes and development at the city scale (Davidson & Iveson, 2015a; Jacobs, 2012; Robinson, 2008; Secor, 2013), as well as complex intertwined histories (Hayden, 1995; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2011; Massey, 2005).

The epistemological difficulties with investigating urban processes are ill-served by isolated disciplinary approaches, and so urbanists from a variety of disciplines have called for a thematic and cross-disciplinary approach to cultivate a more holistic view of urban concerns over a singular, hegemonic metanarrative (Anderson, Brown-Luthango, Cartwright, Farouk, & Smit, 2013; Davies, 2015; Manzo & Perkins, 2006; Ramadier, 2004; Rizzo & Galanakis, 2015). Our paper follows from these critical concerns about contemporary cities, as well as the numerous calls for greater collaboration within urban research, whether between or across disciplines (Petts, Susan Owens, & Bulkeley, 2008; Ramadier, 2004; Rizzo & Galanakis, 2015). This has meant focusing on a technology (Amorim, Barros Filho, & Cruz, 2014) or artistic tool (Rizzo & Galanakis, 2015) that crosses and mediates multiple disciplines and allows for a coming-together of multiple actors and stakeholders within a given urban locale to illustrate multiple histories, identify concerns, and develop solutions. Although these technological tools are useful mediating devices, they are not a panacea to the challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration or public engagement. Indeed, they produce their own particular challenges that we will discuss in more detail throughout the article.

As a transdisciplinary research team, our approach was largely exploratory: to engage with a local site by employing the sorts of methods, data sources, and research products possible given the particular make-up and manifestation of our team. Thus, in research and through this

paper, we endeavored to put aside existing disciplinary methods and collectively construct a uniquely urban epistemological framework to explore the ongoing challenges of urbanism. We draw from previous scholarship, particularly Rizzo and Galanakis’ (2015) notion of Transdisciplinary Urbanism as a methodological framework that allows for the study of “uncertainty, chance and open-endedness, and to transparently renegotiate power structures in urban space” (p. 36) by engaging various urban actors, theories, and practices. The paradoxes and complexity inherent to understanding the ‘city’ and how to address these concerns led us to develop a framework that might enrich grounded urban theory through three ‘enabling constraints’: place, technology and public (see Fig. 1).

Constraints, in this undertaking, are reconceptualized with a positive and productive capacity, as opposed to a solely prescriptive and confining function (Hayles, 2001; Introna, 2011; McDonnell, 2011). Place, technology, and public, formulated as ‘enabling constraints,’ set limits to our approach of the complexity of the city, while also opening up space for possibilities in that approach. *Place* provided a certain malleability as a loosely bounded location that was also subjectively experienced, leading us to questions of scale, methods, and our epistemological rendering of place as geographically constrained. Born-digital, our project saw *technology* or digital scholarship as a tool and end product for the power of visual argumentation that could be harnessed more fully in cross-disciplinary work – although those same productivities also imposed operational and typological limits. Finally, *public* or public scholarship offered accessibility to the city and a common space for collaboration both within and beyond the academy, while also raising the challenge of the moral imperative of public engagement and constituting the ‘public’ itself. These affordances allowed us to deepen our work and produced the context for our research.

At the intersections of these enabling constraints emerged questions regarding how issues of place, technology, and the public might affect one another (see Fig. 1). Reflecting on this particular set of challenges and their interrelatedness allowed us to identify the constituent elements of our collaboration and how these might lead to more meaningful research on cities. These challenges included our privileged position within a prominent, long-established university and our use of digital technologies, both of which undermined attempts at non-expert knowledge production. The limitations of our attempts at transdisciplinary urbanism, as well as our accomplishments, shed light on both the difficulties and the possibilities of novel research structures and

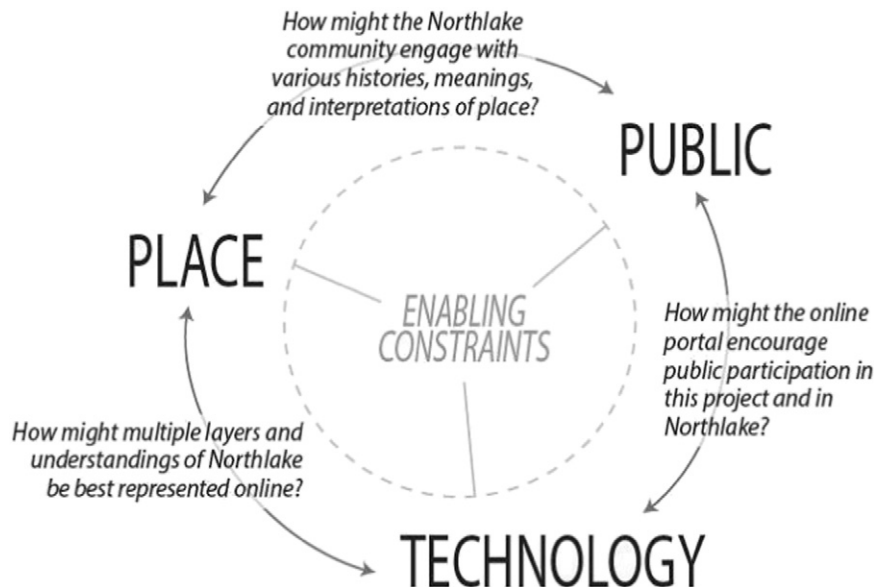


Fig. 1. Enabling constraints and interstitial questions.

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