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# Urban Humanities and the Creative Practitioner

A manifesto

The flow of the Los Angeles River, ever-precarious and never navigable, attracted settlement along its shifting course for centuries. When the cataclysmic 1938 flood followed on the heels of lesser, recurrent flooding, the straightening and channeling of fifty-one miles of the river began in earnest, until engineers had riven the city with a concrete conduit from the Chatsworth hills to the South Bay. The channel was built to contain the water, measured in cubic feet per second, predicted to flow during a 100-year flood event. This technocratic solution precluded other forms of the Los Angeles River from emerging. Once channelized, only those alternatives in keeping with its infrastructural identity were conceivable. Therefore, when freight traffic congestion at the Los Angeles–Long Beach Port grew intolerable in the 1980s, the new vision promoted for the river was to pave over it to form a truck freeway. A new river wasn't inscribed in the public imagination until a motley crew of poets, artists, outlaw kayakers, park advocates, cyclists, wildlife advocates, neighborhood activists, and academics turned attention to those fifty-one miles, with all the futurities such a new narrative might permit. Their interventions, ranging from policy proposals to public art actions, opened up the region's population as well as its politicians to a different spectrum of imagined possibilities—that is, that the LA River is an actual river.

At each stage in the recent history of the LA River, people brought with them motivating ideas about the city—what it is, where nature belongs, what history is inscribed there. These ideas are the foundations for conventional wisdom about practices such as flood control, appropriate levels of risk, how to improve extant conditions,

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The Los Angeles Urban Rangers demonstrate that the megalopolis is a habitat for adventurous exploration; here a Ranger leads the LA River Ramble (2010-present). Photograph by Christina Edwards.

or whose interests matter. The narratives that grow from those foundations govern the spectral array of possibilities. For example, the responses to flooding in the context of a channelized river are unlikely to begin with anything other than a channelized river; the most likely proposal is for a deeper channel. But there is no reason for conventional thinking to remain so constrained. What we call “urban humanities” produce historically grounded conjectures, launched from the present toward an unknown future, that depend on and simultaneously help construct new urban imaginaries.

When poets such as Lewis MacAdams staged readings from the middle of the LA River in the last decades of the twentieth century, the public’s historical perception of the river migrated from a concrete site of danger and waterborne pollution risk, toward a place for human creativity and wildlife habitat—even though not a single piece of concrete channel had been removed.<sup>1</sup> This example demonstrates the radical power of urban humanities, for which we offer this manifesto. To escape digging deeper channels to solve urban problems, cities instead can be transformed at the creative intersection of design, urbanism, and

humanist perspectives. The manifesto is more than a declaration of principles; it is a call to action for scholars to become engaged, creative practitioners.

At the University of California in Los Angeles and in Berkeley, we are working in tandem to develop knowledge about urbanism that weaves together perspectives from architecture, city planning, landscape architecture, and the humanities in order to create much-needed, transformational urban practices. Under the auspices of a Mellon Foundation international program aimed at encouraging multidisciplinary dialogue and pedagogy focused on cities,<sup>2</sup> California is one test bed for exploratory intellectual configurations of urban inquiry focused on global metropolitan regions on the Pacific Rim. We propose that a particularly rich terrain for both intellectual reflection and action occurs at this confluence of urban humanities. Two questions that motivate our collaborative efforts warrant further consideration here. First, what conditions spark the desire for new ways of thinking through cities, particularly ways that entrain the humanities? And second, what might a contemporary California-based effort contribute to new urban understandings?

## The need for creative practices

The case of the LA River illustrates that the city as an object of study intrinsically carries implications about action and about the future. Questions about the city are fundamentally questions about our situated, collective existence—not only our histories and contemporary circumstances, but how our shared lives could and should evolve. In contrast to many disciplinary objects of study, urban humanist scholars have something at stake. Their epistemologies matter, because the products of their scholarship engender a speculative project concerning possible urban communities and, therefore, hold public significance.

We need *creative practices* to address the range of issues that confront contemporary cities—issues such as social justice, economic development, and environmental quality. Urban humanities emphasize innovative methods and practices, which evolve along with shifting epistemologies. This view stands in contrast to a current dominant narrative which holds that contemporary cities depend upon attracting a creative group of citizens.<sup>3</sup> While blue collar jobs and manufacturing marked the vitality of cities like Detroit at the turn of the twentieth century, and a services-based consumer economy fueled late-twentieth-century growth in cities such as Los Angeles, cities in the coming decades will depend on innovative tech-startup founders, creative designers, and bold eco-entrepreneurs, a population most visible today in the San Francisco Bay Area. But it is now apparent that these populations bring new problems along with new economies.

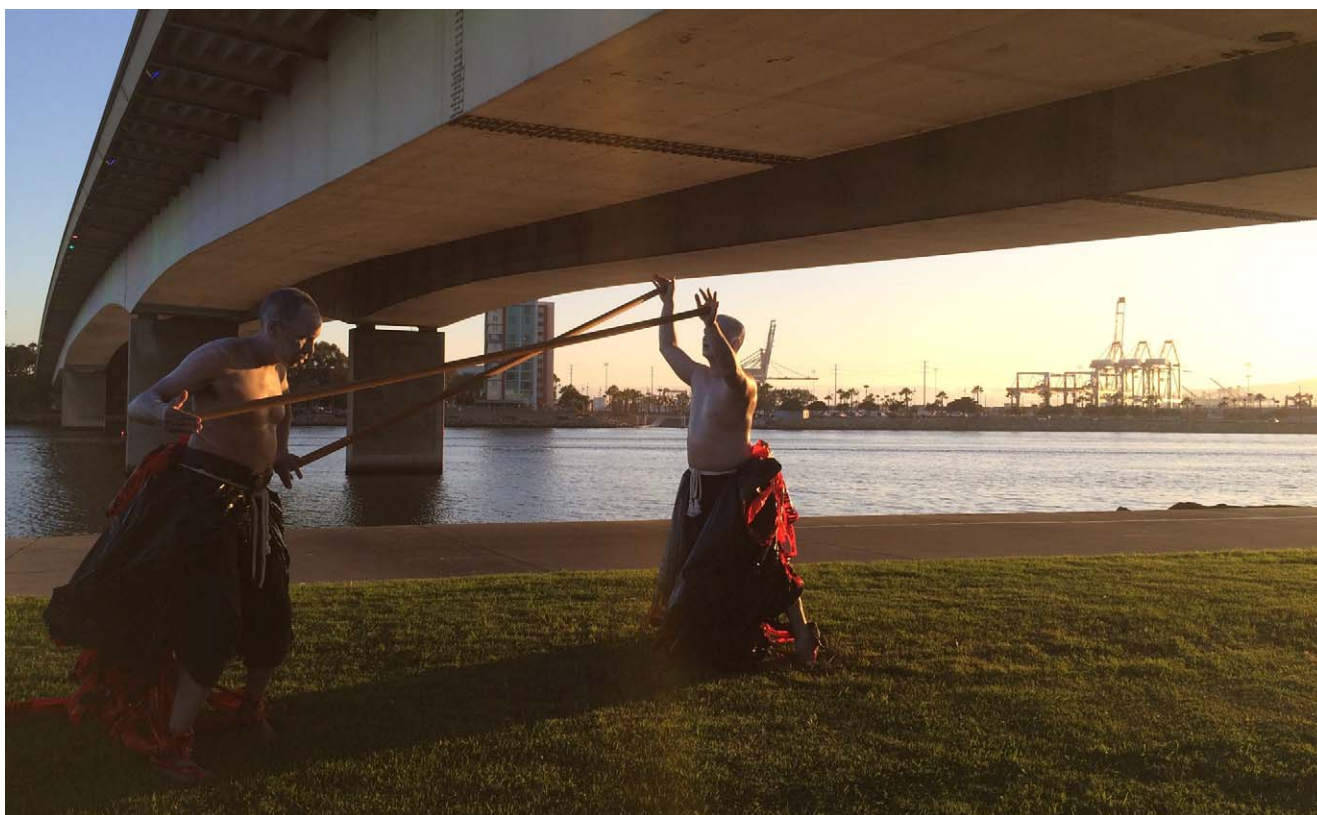
A wide array of disciplines, from the physical sciences to art history, hold potential for creative urban practices. Such practices involve a disruption of existing ideas and the definitive transgression of boundaries that govern existing urban thought. There have been productive breaches of disciplinary boundaries—urban planning and geography in the form of geographical information systems (GIS), or architecture and computational science in the case of digital design. Now, with big data and the “city science” movement enriching our understanding of urbanism, the absence of a humanist perspective in urban thought is brutally apparent. The number of households living below the poverty line in Mexico City, toxic air emissions in proximity to freeways in Los Angeles, suicide rates among Tokyo’s youth, or miles of subway built in Shanghai over the last decade—such cold metrics need

*translation* via history, narrative, and interpretation if they are to make a meaningful difference and influence creative practice and novel approaches in each city’s evolution.

## Experiments in urban humanities

For new structures of knowledge based on multiple disciplines to emerge, two conditions must be met. First, there must be an object of interest that defies conventional logic and resists constructive change. For us, this common object of interest is the city itself, along with the many challenges it poses, such as segregation, congestion, and affordable housing, but also, proximity, precarity, and identity. Second, those who try to collectively address the issue at hand must be willing to transgress boundaries that separate their fields of expertise and modes of urban understanding. It is worth reflecting here upon what we mean by “the city,” which is used synonymously with the urban. Ours is a wide net with a tight weave, one meant to catch material artifacts, cultural nuance, literary accomplishment, social relations, and power struggles that collide in space over time. By “city,” we mean situated collective life emplaced in an urban context, comprised of historical interpretation, material environments, contemporary culture, and speculative futures. Therefore, the name “urban humanities” captures the metropolitan dialectic between space and humanism.

Perhaps the most widely recognized fields of expertise considered relevant to urban concerns are design and planning along with engineering and the physical and social sciences. But what of the humanities? Those fields that aim to understand history, the arts, meaning, expression, and experience make substantial contributions to our thinking about cities and culture. From classicists to contemporary film scholars, humanists enrich an understanding of situated collective life. Yet, we are uncertain about just how that scholarship ought to contribute to urban practices, broadly defined. At least since Plato’s *Republic*, the tangled web of urban social life comprised utopian narratives. But if the death of this genre has been proclaimed, it gives rise to other kinds of narratives. As suggested by the LA River example, the possibility of the river as a greenway linking diverse neighborhoods throughout the city emerged with humanities-oriented creative practitioners reinterpreting this metropolitan seam and critical site of urban infrastructure.



CONFLUENCE, a dance piece, performed where the Los Angeles River meets the Pacific Ocean in Long Beach. Photograph by Catherine Gudis.

Only through sharing a common object of interest—the city—are we effectively bridging disciplinary divides. At UCLA and Berkeley, we are integrating the humanities and humanistic social sciences into the epistemological mix. Students and faculty have joined from history, area studies (e.g., Asian Languages and Culture, Latin American Studies), film studies, literature, performance studies, art practice, anthropology, ethnomusicology, architecture, landscape architecture, and planning. Using the rubric “urban humanities,” we have taken global cities of the Pacific Rim as our objects of interest at the broadest level, knowing that they defy conventional logics and need creative practices—and creative practitioners—to instigate new urban possibilities.

Over the past three years of this exploration, we have learned that when designers, urbanists, and humanists come together to explore some particular urban concern, there are no ready terms of analysis, grounds for interpretation, or prescriptive responses. Creative practices for engaging the concern have to be invented. Even the dimensions of any issue must be detected.

When architects consider urban density, for example, they are likely to give it material dimensions (measured in square footage or building mass, etc.) and to consider program (such as density of housing, parks, or commercial space), whereas planners will consider some of the above as well as policy (such as floor area ratio maximums) and metrics (such as residents per acre). What humanists add to the conversation is as vast as the disciplines that comprise the humanities. For example, *density* might be reformulated as proximity in terms of social relations between neighbors, cultural representations in film and fiction, or tensions around constructs of property. A history of the idea as well as the emplaced idea (proximity in a specific city, such as Mexico City) is informative. By broadening the basis for imagining the city, we intrinsically engage history that imparts a critical perspective on the present, enriching our understanding of contemporary circumstances, which in turn adds new dimensions to our speculations about future conditions. If we learn how proximity, in its relevant forms, is managed in the packed informal settlement zones in



Mexico City—whether through the artful orientation of houses or community-based mediation processes for conflict resolution—we might begin to understand the braided system that any new densities must reference and deploy.

At the same time, a focus on the city has the power to reshape the humanist project to at least some extent. Exposed to alternative forms of pedagogy and practice, place-based speculative exploration, and a project orientation, the humanities may bolster their relevance to the everyday and the future. In so doing, they may dramatically disrupt conventional urban approaches and move from the sidelines to the center of urban activism. As the humanities undergo a marked transformation with challenges to postwar area studies designations along with energized alliances from digital to environmental humanists, activism is a distinctive characteristic of urban humanists. Rather than utopian narratives, activism underscores the significance of creative urban practices that have real world consequences and take positions that engender conscientious action. Criticism has not lost its value, but yields an additional dimension—one that bears the risk of speculation about the future. Returning to the river, poems drift out from the poets' public readings to form collective visions in and about the urban landscape that in turn guide new possibilities for action.

### Looking left from the Left Coast

That these experiments are happening in California and focus on Pacific Rim cities matters. When Saul Steinberg created his ironic 1976 "map" for the cover of *The New Yorker* entitled "View of the World from 9th Avenue," its westward gaze portrayed everything between the Hudson River and the Pacific Ocean as a deserted wasteland. Indeed, American urban histories have typically looked the other direction, across the Atlantic toward ancient Greece and Rome, and the Medieval and Renaissance cities of Europe. Within the United States, New York and especially Chicago undergird our urban imaginaries; the latter provided the dominant model of the city with a singular commercial-industrial core surrounded by concentric residential rings of decreasing density and increasing socioeconomic status. This model was held to be true even though the twentieth century cities of the Southwest bore little resemblance to Chicago or other earlier gridiron economies and cultures.

Not until the mid-1980s did a group of academics codify this new order—and they were from the West Coast. Building on Michael Dear, Mike Davis (both in this issue), as well as Reyner Banham's famous "four ecologies," the Los Angeles School counter-posed a new polycentric suburban logic in which the hinterland organized the center, against the bull's eye urban form forwarded by the Chicago School. Both of us played some small role in the LA School debates, when it was useful to consider the sprawling Southern California metropolis as paradigmatic.<sup>4</sup> Whether neo-Marxist or postmodern in terms of theoretical bent, the future envisioned by LA School scholars involved further racial and ethnic segregation, advancing environmental degradation, fragmented governance, and technology-driven spatial and class divides, with little hope for more optimistic urbanities. Davis's *City of Quartz* presaged a bleak future that stemmed from surrounding trauma at the time—from Rodney King and the 1992 LA Uprising to the 1994 Northridge earthquake; from *Blade Runner* to ballooning homelessness and Reaganomics. The LA School was dominated by planners and geographers with little benefit from architecture or the humanities. However, it is not clear that adding designers and humanists would have changed the tenor. Since that time, several turning points have caused new directions to seem more plausible: the city's first Latino mayor was sworn into office in 2005, the seemingly endless sprawl of the city reversed when thousands of new housing units were built downtown, and artist-activist Lauren Bon turned thirty-two acres of urban wasteland into cornfields. Her next project, "Bending the River Back into the City," will create sustainable public spaces along the LA River through the artistic engineering of a spectacular waterwheel and dam. Projects like Bon's can open a future for the city that was hardly imaginable before, one that lifts up communities, the arts, and the environment simultaneously.

Urban humanities at Berkeley and UCLA are founded on this augmented LA School, taking into account the area's role in the twentieth century as global producer of urban imaginaries through arts, film, music, and design, from Hollywood to hip-hop to Frank Gehry. Now, urban humanities must ask what the twenty-first century might bring.

Over time, LA scholarship has increasingly emphasized the region's pervasive links to the Pacific Rim, along with its cultural hybridity, artistic effervescence, and openness to transgressive identities. Humanists contributed to this



*Porciúncula*, an installation on the LA River made of balloons filled with the river's fragrance: "grass, ocean air, desiccated concrete, industrial zoning, railyards, soda cans, wild animals." By LA-BOR (Jia Gu and Jonathan Crisman), 2015. Photograph by Monica Nouwens.

regional understanding, with the emergence of the digital humanities generating broad (if controversial) interest in big data and multimedia visualization for creating narratives of place and the formation of urban identities. At the same time, the rise of Silicon Valley and the Bay Area's techno-youth culture is shaping academic ideas about urban futures in a context of deepening inequality, gentrification, and worries about climate change. Drawing on the public arts, creative placemaking, design innovation, the DIY "maker" movement, and digital technology powered by big data, speculative ideas about the city have become more nuanced, tactical, political, and material (as illustrated by several of the articles in this issue).

As such, the urban humanities constitute an emergent epistemology arising from this multidisciplinary confluence in this specific place. It is just this sort of creative discipline-crossing scholarship that can encourage new historical narratives, new contemporary interpretations of culture, and open speculation about urban futurities. In short, a manifesto for urban humanities rests on the conviction that such place-based, engaged scholarship and pedagogy will produce cadres of creative—as well as reflective—practitioners. **B**

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We can distinguish between predictable next steps in addressing problems (an urban equivalent of Thomas Kuhn's normal science) and speculative, engaged approaches. The aim of urban humanities is not to create visionary, utopian schemes or science fiction scenarios, but instead to open new paths of possibility. For thick mapping, see Todd S. Presner, David Shepard, and Yoh Kawano, *Hypercities: Thick Mapping in the Digital Humanities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); for futurity, see Amir Eshel, *Futurity: Contemporary Literature and the Quest for the Past* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013); for crisis and revolution, see Eric Cazdyn, "Disaster, Crisis, Revolution," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.4 (2007): 647–662.
- <sup>2</sup> The Mellon Program, started in 2012, is called Architecture, Urbanism, and the Humanities, and has funded a series of related academic projects in over a dozen universities.
- <sup>3</sup> The term "creative" seems more ubiquitously applied to new developments than the term "green," as in creative office or creative class. Popular adoption of Richard Florida's ideas about the latter have done little to expand our understanding of the metropolis or guide cities toward more humane futures.
- <sup>4</sup> Members of the Los Angeles School included Michael Dear, Mike Davis, Ed Soja, Michael Storper, and Alan Scott, among others.