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# Community Campus as Threshold: A Space of Dialogue for Academia and the Community

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**Abstract:** This paper explores an argument for community-situated spaces of encounter – acting as thresholds – between community and academia, through which: learning can be enhanced; a greater sense of identity and efficacy can be fostered; and a defined agency can be enabled. This proposition prioritises a dialogic relationship in a shared ground of agency and discourse, whose potential is reinforced through a rediscovery of the local arising from the COVID pandemic. The rediscovery of the local has pushed civic-minded universities pre-existing interrogation of their community-based learning practice in the context of marginalised communities; a key challenge is how to foster a dialogic relationship with a community when academia is not really part of the community? A concurrent question considers the spatiality of such practice? Proposed here is a situating of the civic university directly within the community offering opportunity for everyday dialogue on and experience of local life. This proposal re-sites the university's civic initiatives outside the academy in community-based campuses. Central to this campus would be the coming together of the community and academia to envision and action joined-up approaches to multi-

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valent issues. This initiative would simultaneously afford an innovative education while enabling students and staff to contribute to the wider community; at the same time the community campus would serve as an active agent in bringing the community together and reshaping its future. The community campus would act as a dialogic threshold between academia and the community, a space grounded in its social nature, mutual embrace and exchange.

**Keywords:** Academia, Campus, Community, Dialogic, Development, Learning

## Introduction

The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness...Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold. (Bakhtin 1984b, 287)

Introduced here is the concept of a community campus as threshold – a community-situated place of encounter and agency between (and that is co-authored by) the community and academia. Serving simultaneously as an extension of academia into the community, and as a campus for the community, the community campus will act as a threshold between the community and academia; it will provide a place of meeting for the community and academia; of departure for a co-joined civic agency<sup>2</sup> of knowledge exchange (through civically engaged learning), and community development (the implementation of cultural, ecological<sup>3</sup>, economic, political and/or social initiatives, as well as physical regeneration) and building individual and shared identities.

The situating of academia in the community can better enable civic agency, offering academia better connectivity with the community within their place and simultaneously easing access to academic learning for the community, while enabling encoun-

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<sup>2</sup> For reasons of brevity, we use the phrase 'civic agency' within this text as a representation of a co-joined agenda of civic learning and community development. 'Civic learning' is used where there is need for specific reference to it this as a concept and practice.

<sup>3</sup> We use the word ecological here instead of environmental; we understand ecological as 'of or relating to the environments of living things or to the relationships between living things and their environments (Merriam-Webster "Ecological")' with emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between people and the environment which they inhabit. The use of ecological is in favour of environmental, understood as relating to 'the conditions that surround someone or something: the conditions and influences that affect the growth, health, progress, etc., of someone or something (Merriam-Webster "Environment")' which suggests a more unidirectional relationship.

ters between the community and academia. Equally critical is the nature of this place of encounter in its creation, physical structure, and everyday inhabitation. Philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin's delineation of a dialogic threshold as a site for constructing self-consciousness (where we understand this self-consciousness as the making of the whole self through interaction with another) provides useful orientation for our conceptualisation of a community campus as threshold.

We will begin our discussion by identifying the significance of our proposition and exploring the primary theory – dialogism – that frames it. We will also outline the methodology employed in investigating this proposition. We will then delineate the community campus as threshold with reference to three considerations: firstly, we will situate civic agency in the context of relevant discourse. This is presented both for those not familiar with civic agency (notably as advanced through civic learning), and to note primary outcomes that would be associated with a community campus. Further identified will be theoretical linkages between civic agency (drawing particularly on situated learning) and dialogism.

Secondly, we will explore the underexamined role of the spatialisation of the encounter between the community and academia in civic agency, i.e., the placing of this encounter as an activity in a particular place and time (Shields 2013). Our discussion will consider the situating of the community campus within the community and include reference to academia's historic position in relation to the wider community. Enabled by an act of co-authorship between the community and academia, our proposed spatialisation will foster everyday exchange between the two.

Thirdly, we will explore the nature of the community campus as threshold, considering its physicality and inhabitation. This will include examining threshold as a concept. We will then explore its key performative-spatial attributes and illustrate these through reference to relevant precedents.

## **Significance and methodology**

The significance of our proposition is reflected in growing global advocacy for an agency of civic learning. This includes the UNESCO Global Action Program on Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2014) call for academia to support students through education that seeks to make a difference in the wider community. In parallel, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals advise that by 2030 all teaching should promote sustainable development (Owusu-Agyeman & Fourie-Malherbe 2019). Such education goes beyond the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge and skills, and provides students with real-world experiences connecting them to their communities (Berard and Ravelli 2020; Dias and Soares 2018).

Civic learning has become particularly significant in UK higher education, as advanced by the Civic University Network. It is further evidenced in its broad-based support by the UK government and government-funded bodies (Department for Education and the Arts Council England), independent organisations (Carnegie Trust UK and University Partnerships Programme Foundation), and universities themselves. The Civic University Network challenges universities to:

re-shape their role and responsibility to their communities to realise their potential as drivers of a new civic agenda...(and) ensure that a university's geographic role and responsibility is used more effectively as an agent to drive positive societal change...including prioritising issues around 'place' to level up the economy and society. (Civic University Network)

This challenge builds from 'Truly Civic: Strengthening the connection between universities and their places' (UPP Foundation Civic University Commission 2018), which identified steps for universities and the government to advance. 'Truly Civic' draws particular attention to the impact universities can make on the cultural, economic, ecological, and social well-being of the wider community, notably those socio-economically vulnerable communities hardest hit by austerity and spatial inequalities. (UPP Foundation Civic University Commission 2018).

While the report outlines various measures, the latter reference to the spatial dimension – place – is pertinent to our discussion of a metaphorical and spatialised threshold between the community and academia. Place is equally present in the Civic University Network's primary statement, with reference to a university's 'geographic role' and "prioritising issues around 'place' (Civic University Network)." It is however two interrelated strands within the 'Truly Civic' report to which we draw attention. The first strand highlights that today's economic challenges exacerbate the divide between 'town and gown', notably in places more economically challenged<sup>4</sup>. The report further identifies that while positive examples of academic civic engagement exist, there is a need to better understand the local population and that academia has to 'constantly earn the right to be part of that place' (Ibid, 30). Another strand suggests enhancing academia's civic engagement through a proactive spatial agenda including that 'a really simple change that some universities could make would be to open up their campus to the general public' (Ibid, 15). The report

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<sup>4</sup> The authors' own university is located within a city that is within the lowest third of socio-economically deprived UK local authorities; one of the communities in the city with which the university collaborates is ranked in the lowest 1% nationally in terms of socio-economic deprivation (Public Health).

further states that academia's civic engagement needs to be embedded in day-to-day activity, a proposition welcomed by the public.

These themes reflect challenges encountered in our own approach to civic agency as a designated civic university, and in exploring how to move our university's civic agenda forward. There are of course multiple challenges encountered in civic agency, including: an expanded sense of mission at a time of reduced resources; management of processes and institutional procedures (both internal to the academy and in relation to other external organisations) which can inhibit such work; navigating power inequalities between participants; negotiating disparities in expectations between students, staff and community; and tension over the ownership of the process (Warwick, Morgan and Miller 2019). These challenges have been well discussed elsewhere however, and are not the focus here. Our primary interest is the previously underexplored spatialisation of civic agency.

Our work to date has helped advance opening up the university, notably through a transdisciplinary Sustainability Hub on campus. This hub welcomes a range of events supporting students, staff, and external partners on sustainability agendas. This includes the Urban Dialogues Network, which hosts a regular series of seminars exploring civic agency as advanced by colleagues from across the University together with external partners. Particularly relevant here is our efforts over the past two years (however much inhibited by the ongoing presence of COVID), on university-funded research to examine the concept of a community campus. Included in this work has been an ongoing inductive review of our university's civic agency practice, and examination through a deductive literature-based review of civically engaged practices of other UK and overseas universities. This has been supplemented by interviews with academics and social-enterprise and voluntary sector community partners, and (re)reading of relevant discourse on civic learning and community development.

This text builds on that work and marks where we are headed. The range of theoretical discourse informing this work is broad, such as Augusto Boal or Paolo Freire (see Brown and Warwick 2019). We also recognise others' work delineating the concept of dialogue in community development practice (e.g., Westoby 2014), drawing for example on Martin Buber or Hans Gadamer. Our own writing is framed primarily by a reading of Bakhtin's thinking on dialogism. Our reading recognises that who we are as individuals is not an autogenic authoring, but that our attitudes, beliefs, and identity are informed by our families, friends, teachers, colleagues, and others. As Bakhtin (1984b, 287) suggests, 'I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another.' Through such dialogue we are exposed to different ideas and equally to how others

respond to our discourse, fostering an ongoing testing and evaluation of own thoughts.

Within genuine dialogue there is reciprocity, as we both gain from and share with the other. Central to Bakhtin's thinking is that through interaction with the other we achieve a true, full sense of consciousness. 'To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself' (Ibid.). Such thinking was radical at its inception and remains equally radical at a time when everyday actions and broader socio-political declarations place emphasis on claims of a self-authenticity that Charles Taylor (1991) warned against, or towards monologue against which Kojin Karatani cautioned (1995). Yet however radical, Bakhtin's dialogism gives cause for hope that through dialogue we can develop greater knowledge and understanding of ourself and the other.

Our reading of Bakhtin places emphasises on the mutual illumination offered to one and other through their engagement. This intentionality is reflected in literary scholar Michael Holquist's summation of Bakhtin's thoughts on the relation of the self and other: 'A logical implication of the fact that I can see things you cannot, and you can see things that I cannot, is that our excess of seeing is defined by a lack of seeing; my excess is your lack, and vice versa. If we wish to overcome this lack, we try to see what is there together' (Holquist 1990, xxvi). Present in Bakhtin's discourse, and implied by Holquist's reference, is that we each occupy a unique position, affording opportunity for distinctive perspectives. Intrinsic to this difference is that it offers value as we share our distinct perspectives with others. The aim however is not to generate a dialectical synthesis as Bakhtin warns against (1984a), but rather to allow self and other to remain independent while affording new insight.

Our appropriation of Bakhtin's dialogism is prompted by the authors' own experience of civic engagement in higher education and community development practice in the UK, Africa and Asia. Much of this is grounded in working in communities where the authors crossed socio-cultural and economic boundaries and realised they themselves were the other, i.e., the one outside normalised, local perspectives. Emergent from such an experience is understanding of the importance of engaging with the local perspective, and that one's own view as an outsider is filtered through a priori ways of looking, thinking and working; while affording a fresh perspective, this a priori sensibility and practice can also be limiting (Rapport 1995; Tuan 1982). This experience and our dialogical orientation come together with our research in the literature review and interviews, echoing the threshold encounter between the community and academia our work explores.

## Civic learning

The case for civic learning has been building since at least the 1960s, arising from the spirit of change present at the time, and in response to hegemonic forces that had led to significant socio-economic and political inequalities (Schuman 2014). While advanced by numerous practitioners and researchers, Jean Lave's and Etienne Wenger's seminal *Situated Learning* notably identified that 'social engagements provide the proper context of learning to take place' (Hanks 1991, 14). This social engagement is not limited to academia or even with like-minded individuals outside it, but more significantly it extends to the socio-economically challenged in our communities too often marginalised as others. Such engagement seeks to support the common good and foster creative, compassionate students who have knowledge, skill, confidence, and agency to engage in education that simultaneously enables social change (Brown and Warwick 2019). Summarised below are key benefits of this practice, as well an outline of observed links between civic agency and dialogism.

The record on the impact of civic learning on students' learning is extensive. Building on *Situated Learning*, further research confirms it increases students' understanding of course content (Atkinson and Hunt 2008; Mayer 2019) and the development of transferable career skills (McTier and McGregor 2011). Such engagement also enables students to acquire competencies in sustainability (Molderez and Fonseca 2018; Cebrián, Junyent and Mulà 2020). Moreover, students learn they can gain knowledge and understand problems in a more complex and interconnected way (Clevenger and Ozbek 2013), while learning to communicate this knowledge to others (Jickling 2003; Barth 2007). Furthermore, working with other students and community partners helps students develop an understanding of a range of perspectives, and how to consolidate this into knowledge to share it with others (Barth 2007). Such practice will be highly relevant in the future where the co-joining of information across disciplines and with others will be essential (Molderez and Fonseca 2018).

Civic learning equally affords opportunities for students to reveal, explore, reflect upon and develop their own perspectives (Jickling 2003; Barth 2007). Through civic learning students are prompted to re-examine their existing beliefs, knowledge, and thinking (Nicol 1997; Rowe 1996). It has also been found to build students' self-esteem and self-confidence (Eppler 2011; Muhlestein and Mccann 2019; Johnston 2020). Moving beyond more personal orientation, fostered is a greater sense of multi-cultural awareness (Toncar 2006), and concurrently a heightened capacity to understand other individuals' perspectives (Jickling 2003; Barth 2007). This is further evidenced in a boosting of students' feelings of social connectedness (Eppler



2011; Muhlestein and Mccann 2019; Johnston 2020), notably with the wider community (Gullion and Ellis 2014; Graizbord 2019; Siza 2019).

Beyond students' own sense of self and efficacy, students feel a greater sense of civic engagement (Kahne and Westheimer 2006; Lee 2019), and they become more active and engaged citizens (Berard and Ravelli 2020). Through engaged learning students reflect upon the contribution they can make to wider society (Berard and Ravelli 2020; Mtawa 2021). Further research has highlighted that students develop a greater sense of agency, which resonates with leadership capacity and a civic disposition (Mtawa 2021). Oriented with such agency, students begin to envision how they can use their knowledge and skills to make a difference to communities, beyond any intellectually or socially self-perceived limits (Pleasant 2004; Mtawa 2021). Arising from this are students with greater awareness of and sensitivity to the realities faced by marginalised members of society (Walker and McLean 2013).

The communities involved in such engagement benefit as well, notably through contributions of public service that enhance the community's livelihoods (Norton 2018). Concurrently, from both community development discourse and anecdotal evidence, it is clear that communities' identities, sense of efficacy and sense of agency are heightened. Compared however to research on benefits to students, there is far less discourse on the benefits afforded to the community by civic learning. Underexamined in particular is the role that academia can play as an agent in enhancing community identity, efficacy and agency. There is clearly scope here for further investigation, but that is beyond the scope of this study.

In exploring the concept of civic agency, notably Lave and Wengers's Situated Learning, we encountered theoretical overlaps with Bakhtin's dialogism. In positing 'situated' learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) recognised they needed to distinguish their concept from existing concepts of 'learning in situ' or 'learning by doing', with which their work might otherwise be equated and as such not fully realised. They understood the need to better articulate their concept, and to understand 'situatedness' from a theoretical perspective. Such thinking echoes Bakhtin's challenge that we need to theorise our agenda, and to place our discussion within an 'overarching conceptual framework' (Holquist 1990, x). Our doing so here not only positions our discussion within its relevant field, but it equally fosters a greater criticality.

Lave and Wenger's situated learning is further underpinned by a comprehension that integral to it is a person carrying out the act (i.e., the agent), the act itself (i.e., the activity), and the wider world beyond the person and act; moreover, this 'agent, activity, and the world mutually constitute each other' (1991, 33). Such emphasis acknowledges the involvement of the whole person, rather than reducing learning simply to the passive receipt of knowledge. Intrinsic to this making of the whole is

that ‘learning involves the construction of identities’ (Lave and Wenger 1991, 53). This conceptualisation of situated learning has strong overlaps with Bakhtin’s dialogism. Central to the latter is the argument that greater understanding is achieved in dialogue with another, indeed that we can only become our whole selves through encounter and interaction with another. In this encounter we are active participants with the world and those within it, and through this we gain a full and true sense of consciousness of ourselves – that is, a genuine and full sense of identity (Bakhtin 1984b).

## **Situatedness**

Everything must be approached from the point of view of – point of view. And point of view is always situated (Holquist 1990, xxviii).

The beginning of this paper noted Bakhtin’s proposition that an encounter between one consciousness and another is situated, transpiring in a particular place. Holquist’s statement, drawn from his introduction to Bakhtin’s *Art and Answerability*, further reinforces the significance of situatedness. Emphasised through these propositions is that our experiences of the world – our encounters with others, our approach to them and the world as a whole – are framed by where we position ourselves. We believe that this situatedness is critical to civic agency.

The spatial dimension of civic agency, despite the length of time such practice has been pursued and discussed, is surprisingly underexamined in discourse. Civic agency does not occur in the abstract, but like all human activities as philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1992) argued, is spatially situated and through that relations between people, event and space are engendered. This thinking is underpinned by the overarching spatial turn in philosophy anticipated by philosophers Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec (1986). The linkage of people, event and space is further reinforced in anthropological and environment behaviour research, (see for example: Bell 1992; Brown 2013; Hester 1993; or Kawano 2005); these discourses reflect Bakhtin’s (1990) own unification of people and event in a particular place. While acknowledging that virtual experiences have validity, even in fostering a sense of community (Mathews 2000), both our own experience and specific investigation of civic learning practice and community development attests to the very tangible impact of place. Our interviews with community-based collaborators further evidences the significance place plays in civic agency. So, in acknowledging the spatial dimension of civic agency, just what sort of place are we talking about?

Our response begins by first examining the received history of the academy, whose origins lie in cathedral and monastic schools (Riché 1978). The academy’s originating ethos can be found in its initial meaning in Latin, which reflected a number of

people brought together and associated into one body (Lewis and Short 1966). By intention this association of people was an introverted community, reflected epistemologically, ontologically, and spatially. Historically the academy set itself up within a distinct site to protect its knowledge from the interference and challenges of wider everyday life. This introversion was often reinforced by the presence of a boundary – whether physical or implied – between the campus and the surrounding community. The courtyards of Cambridge or Oxford, many of which one can only look into but not enter, reflect this. Similar demarcation has been signified through the physical character of the campus itself; phrases such as ‘ivy-covered walls’ have come to be associated with universities, such as Harvard University. Such delimitation and practices fuelled perceptions of academia as a place apart, sitting behind a boundary with its people and practices disconnected from the wider world.

Over the last 60 years academia has moved away from such a self-fostered seclusion. Architect and educator Anthony Schuman’s (2014) account of the history of civic agency, and the current presence of the Civic University Network and UN SDG, all evidence this, along with numerous other initiatives. At the same time critique of academia’s spatial position and orientation still retains validity. While found across various institutions, civic agency is not universal as reflected in still emergent calls for its implementation (Hurtado 2019). We recognise that meaningful civic engagement by academia with the community does exist; equally, we do not seek to suggest all learning be pursued within civic agency. Yet where civic agency is pursued, our own research finds it typically carried out from the university campus; as attested to by community partners, there is a sense of academia “parachuting” into the community on its own terms and time and departing once the academy’s agenda has been met. Such experiences reinforce perceptions of academia inserting itself to impose its own agenda<sup>5</sup>. A key danger identified is not giving space for the voice of the community, or the coercion of the community’s voice by academia (Boyle-Baise 2005). All this reifies a perception that the academy is not part of the community.

That such a perception exists is in part not so surprising. Typically, the communities with which academia works are socio-economically challenged. Using our own institution as an example, our civic agency in just one community (amongst others) ranges across a pro-bono law clinic to health awareness (e.g., food nutrition) and health care (e.g., medical and nursing students supporting local clinics) to the arts (e.g., recording oral and physical histories through film). Further agency is enacted through transdisciplinary projects involving architecture and education students co-designing with school children and then building outdoor education centres for loc-

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that all civic agency initiatives operate in this way, as there exist examples of situated practice. What we are referring to here is tendencies rather than some absolute.

al schools; other work brings architecture, arts and medical students together in scenario planning for the long-term regeneration of the community. This work arises as a response to that community unfortunately ranking in the highest 1% nationally of multiple deprivation, most notably in depressed levels of income and employment, poor health, higher than average levels of crime, relatively low educational attainment, and a poor quality of the indoor and outdoor living environment (Public Health) which has been too long neglected. Further undermining many in the community is a lack of self-belief or hope of possibility of employment or higher attainment in education; not only are many unemployed, but their parents and even grandparents also did not know regular employment.

These conditions stand in marked contrast to academic students and staff who typically are from more relatively advantaged backgrounds. While our university has long prided itself for its outreach in making higher education accessible to those often marginalised or overlooked portions of society, the reality is that our students and staff tend to benefit from relatively higher levels of income and/or prospects for future employment, better health, and a safer environment which contributes to their well-being. In contrast to the forgotten and underattended physical landscape of our partner community, our campus (like many others in the UK) benefits from the provision of accessible, well-maintained, and often greened open spaces between buildings, not to mention the high standard of the buildings themselves. Students and staff's well-being is further reinforced by the efficacy they feel in orienting themselves towards a positive future.

Such difference is reflective of a wider urban condition; the places we live, notably our cities, are defined by multiplicity as attested to by numerous cultural geographers, philosophers, and urbanists (see for example: Amin and Thrift 2002; Bridge 2005; Donald 1997; Lefebvre 1991; Madsen and Plunz 2002; Massey 2005). Such multiplicity is intrinsic to the city as site to which multiple, diverse groups of people are drawn. Yet equally intrinsic to this multiplicity and diversity is difference. The question is how we work with and generate positive moves from this difference.

So, returning to our initial question, just what sort of place are we talking about? Back in the 1970s writer Adrienne Rich (1979) spoke of a 'university-without-walls' which would not only break down the barriers between community and academia but also act as an agent in restructuring education. More recent have been calls for universities to open up their campuses and re-organise themselves together with the wider community and so find alternative ways of teaching and learning amidst what are radically changed and charged conditions of contemporary life (Sperlinger, McLellan and Pettigrew 2018). What is argued for is a move toward collaborative

environments which can better foster approaches which are open to experimentation (Pereira 2019b).

While there are multiple examples of civic agency, an exemplar for us is the University of Miami's (Ohio) Over-the-Rhine Program. Engaging like others in various initiatives of civic agency such as the design and construction and/or refurbishment of buildings or teaching in local schools, distinctive in their work is the residential immersion of the students in the community itself. Spending a semester in the community, students are afforded an alternative experience in being situated in the community, with opportunity to co-author their own learning in consultation with the university and through collaboration with the community.

A community campus reflecting the intentionality of the Over-the-Rhine Program would offer a spatial move away from the traditional space of the academy. The community campus would literally be present within the built fabric of the community. Our intention here is not however of some aspiration to be first, and rather to better articulate what this situatedness might afford. Various discourse attests to the emotional and mental, and even spiritual connection that is formed between people and place (see for example: Bachelard 1969; Lovell 1998; Norberg Schulz 1979; Tuan 1974). It is a seemingly metaphysical link that is perhaps best illustrated in French writer Noel Arnaud's poetic, 'I am the space where I am' (cited in Bachelard 1969, p. 137). Further recognised here is that what people do, that is their performances most notably in the everyday, are intertwined with where they enact those performances, and in turn with their identity (Allen 2007; Butler 1999). Here people's identity, their performances and the place they inhabit are dialogic, mutually informing each other.

A community campus represents an ontological shift away from the institutional nature and place of the academy. Given the dialogic nature of people's identity, performances, and place, changing where a particular performance (or activity) is enacted in turn impacts on its performance and my identification with it. Through the situating of the academy in the community, the way that the academy thinks of itself would be transformed, being understood as part of that community's social fabric. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation evidences that locality – i.e., being local – prevails over relations of ethnicity, race or socio-economic class in generating a sense of belonging to place and connection within the community (Hickman, Crowley and Mai 2014). This is not to presume that by merely showing up academia would be accepted as part of the community. However, experience from the authors' own professional community development practice, in which local offices were established within the community, demonstrated its effectiveness in helping to build a relationship within the community. The community's challenges and successes

would be something that academia would share in, fostering not just greater awareness but a deeper sense of empathy and understanding with the place and its inhabitants. By occupying a space within the community, academia can demonstrate a commitment to the community – a willingness to engage with the community on its terms, to participate and share in its everyday life, and contribute to its livelihoods. As researcher Laura Pereira (2019b) posits, *gravitas* is gained by extending the commitment beyond any single act and becoming part of an ongoing process. This view is supported by our own discussions with community-based individuals. Such a situated commitment by academia would have a pronounced impact on community-academy relations, both as networked and/or organisational entities and on an individual level between community inhabitants and academic students and staff.

More pragmatically, the significance of the community campus being situated in the community has received added impetus from the rediscovery of the local during the COVID pandemic. Owing to governmental lockdowns and concerns for their own well-being, urban inhabitants spent less time in urban centres for shopping and related activity; instead, the once-forgotten local shop or amenity was rediscovered (Mortimer, Grimmer and Maginn 2021). This coincides with already proposed shifts in the provision of community services to more local hubs, such as for healthcare (Braithwaite 2018). Through this the local has taken on added value with a greater critical mass of people present in and around local neighbourhood centres. Moreover, the COVID experience has reaffirmed that we are social creatures and that the spatial dimension of our socialisation – i.e., face-to-face interaction with one another – is significant (Hales, Woods and Williams 2021).

## **Threshold**

Crucial to our proposition of a community campus is a conception of it as a threshold, both in a metaphorical sense and in its literal representation spatially and through its inhabitation. To explore this, it will first be necessary to articulate inherited meanings of a threshold and how it applies here. Following this we can then apply this understanding to how the community campus would act both metaphorically and literally as a place of encounter between the community and academia, and as a place of departure for civic agency. We will then illustrate our thinking with a few examples.

Historically, places have been defined by a boundary, a physical or implied element defining and dividing one space from another (Eckler 2012). Through the presence of a boundary inside and outside are delineated, affording a sense of enclosure and presence to a place (Norberg Schulz 1979). This delineation of boundary contributed to places being conceived of as bounded and self-contained, distinct from other spaces around it (Charlesworth and Cochrane 1997). Such thinking can be useful in

identifying a particular place conceptually, in discourse with another, and navigating our way within the physical environment.

Such thinking has limitations however; at its worst it can be used to delineate not just one place from another, but equally those inhabiting each, fostering and reinforcing notions of us and them. This of course runs contrary to our intentions and practice of civic agency. Moreover, recent discourse has both challenged and expanded our sense of boundary. We now understand a boundary not as a divide but rather as a meeting point which 'implies that there is a continuation beyond' it (Eckler 2012, 80). Further discourse recognises that any domain – e.g., a neighbourhood, a city – is not some hermetically sealed, bounded self-determinant entity, but rather is better understood as being situated in a wider multifarious context of various networks of activity, interrelations, knowledge and movement extended across its boundaries (Amin and Thrift 2002).

Such understanding underpins our own thinking on threshold, and the relation between community and academia. Moreover, we conceptualise the threshold shared between community and academia as a meeting point and a point of departure. It both welcomes movement inward and generates possibilities for action outward. We are aided in this conception by returning to Bakhtin's reference to the meeting that occurs 'between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the threshold (1984b, 278)' In his writing Bakhtin invites the reader to take up this position and to orient him/herself not only inward, but also outward. It is a place of meeting, exchange and movement. Bakhtin articulated his discussion of threshold further in exploring the literary works of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Bakhtin highlights within Dostoevsky's novels the marked role that spaces like staircases, the front hall and corridors play. These act as physical thresholds between one space and another, and as literal thresholds in the narrative of the novel. Bakhtin (1981, 248) suggests that these thresholds 'are the main places of action in those works, places where... events occur...decisions that determine the whole life of a man.'

There are of course other metaphors that have been suggested in the course of our own discussions. Given the public nature of the interaction between community and academia, an oft suggested precedent is that of a public square. Images of squares resonate well with the idea of gathering implied in our discussion of the community campus. Even Bakhtin refers to squares in his own discourse (Bakhtin 1981). Yet however accessible and positive the imagery, recent critique of the square exposes its coercive and/or exclusionary capacity. One historic example is presented by the much-referenced agora as the locus of Greek communal life and an early exemplar of public space. Closer examination however finds that the agora was site of exclusion, with participation limited to free-born males (Basson 2004). Critiques of



contemporary public squares reveal a commodification of public space (see for example Smith and Low 2006). The latter raises questions about ‘marketplace’ as a suitable metaphor, as we wish to avoid associations with a commercialisation of social exchange, and the socio-economic and political connotations that poses.

Much has been made earlier in this text about the situating of the community campus within the community. While that holds true, metaphorically we can understand it as a threshold site which links the space of the community and space of academia together. Again we draw from Bakhtin to expand upon our discussion. For Bakhtin an aesthetic event – i.e., the attempt to make a whole, how things are brought together into a mutually supportive relationship – can only happen when there are two participants present and engaging together in dialogue. This aesthetic event can’t happen through a monologue advanced by one party (Bakhtin 1990), but rather happens in our encounter with an other. This encounter enables us to be exposed to not only different ideas and ways of acting, but also to prompt critical reflection upon our own thinking and operations. Bakhtin suggests that by positioning ourselves at a threshold, we not only expose ourselves to others’ thinking but that we also reduce the difference between how one and an other see and engage with the world (Bakhtin 1990). This is not to suggest that they enter into some form of dialectic synthesis through which individual identity might be lost; rather, Bakhtin was adamant that while mutually informing each other each retain their sense of independence (Bakhtin 1984a). This simultaneous embrace with, but also independence from the other is reflected in our thinking of the meeting space of community and academia as a threshold.

Enabled by this threshold the community and academia – as spatialised social structures – converge and overlap. Yet the threshold equally acts as a literal representation of a place where people, both as individuals and communally, meet. This meeting of community and academia begins with their co-authoring of the community campus. Rather than precedents in which academia has positioned a university space within the community, our conception of the community campus prioritises its co-creation and ongoing operation as implemented by both the community and academia (and other relevant partners).

In the context of community development, when contributing professionals operate from a space of which they are the sole authors, the community regards that space as belonging to the professionals and not the community. Our own research with community-based organisations affirms this. Lessons drawn from the authors’ own professional experience in community development not only in the UK but also in the Global South further testifies to this (Brown, Kalra and Theis 2005). While not community campuses, Pereira (2018) carried out a review of a number of com-



munity-based spaces utilised in co-joined community development and research projects. Revealed through this latter work was the significance of such spaces being co-created and co-realised.

Central to both our own and other's findings was that this co-authoring affords each participant a tangible sense of connection to and ownership of that place, of being part of its making and ongoing life. It should be understood that the co-authoring need not involve any literal construction; rather, as stated by architect John Turner (1976), seminal for his work with the urban poor in Peru, crucial is the community having a role in determining their future. Afforded by this is a sense that all participants can share in that place, and contribute to what emerges from it particularly here through civic agency. Further enabled through this is a greater sense of efficacy about what the community and academia can collaboratively achieve.

Yet just as a threshold is a place of meeting (i.e., arrival), it is equally a place of departure. This thinking reflects not a literal movement away from the threshold, but rather extends our earlier discussion of place being defined by a mutually informing relationship between physical place and the people who inhabit and enact performances within it. Place in this sense is not a thing unto itself, and rather is equally defined by what we do there and the nature of how it has come into being. We are thus able to open up place from being a fixed, found entity which remains static and immutable, and understand its potential for being in a continual state of becoming through its construction and continual remaking in the everyday. Thus departure here is not about physical movement, and rather about actively enabling change.

Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of threshold (drawing on Dostoevsky) articulates thresholds as places of action, and of change. Implied however is that such places are not deterministic, and instead provide a setting within which human-precipitated events occur. As such they operate dialogically with those that inhabit them. This dialogic place is not some simple universal space that accommodates everything, and thus nothing. Rather, it suggests and implies, and opens itself up to what people can make of it. Thus people, place and performance become co-joined in a shared act of creation and discovery.

There are two key spatial qualities that inform the dialogic nature of this threshold. First is its ambiguity. It is neither one nor the other, but rather occupies multiple positions (e.g., inside, outside, and in-between) even simultaneously. It is both a place in its own right, and equally part of spaces adjacent to it. It is multi-layered, both physically and programmatically rather than being just one singular place. Physically it has gradations of space, whether pronounced or subtle in their presence. Its ambiguity affords it being open to appropriation and reinterpretation as people colonise and adapt it. This ambiguity is equally presented in how activities and

people move from one space to another, both into and across this threshold, so that the place both expands and compresses in response to its inhabitation. A further characteristic of this ambiguity is that programmatically this dialogic threshold can not only accommodate different things at different times, but also different things simultaneously; crucial is that these things inform each other through their presence.

The second key spatial characteristic about this dialogic threshold is its playfulness. We understand playfulness as an attitude that frames how we engage with other people, ideas, activities and objects and places. While it can be disruptive and challenging like play, it is equally respectful of its found context. Yet simultaneously that found context is open to reinterpretation, inviting users to (re)make it and take possession of it through their inhabitation. It affords inhabitants opportunity to play off the context and find new, even lateral ways of using it, and so redefine its meaning. Perhaps most notably, in its playfulness a place can prompt the imagination of the inhabitant. Dialogic in nature, it can stimulate new expressions, knowledge and even values (Sicart 2014). This sense of playfulness is evoked in what educator Jos Boys (2010) has identified as informal learning spaces. Operating outside but in compliment to the more formal, traditional education delivered in formal teaching spaces such as lecture and seminar rooms, informal learning spaces are more ambiguous and playful in character. These are the residual spaces in buildings that can be playfully appropriated by students and staff for informal gatherings, turning for example objects a window ledge into a place of learning. While seemingly insignificant, the appropriation and redefinition of a simple window ledge (whether as space in which to set work, or as frame through which to critically examine the world outside) can offer a platform for learning. Such spaces and the spontaneous activities that arise there have been found to play a crucial role in students learning, fostering a deeper, more critical approach as they engage in dialogue with others.

## **Precedents**

To help illustrate our spatial conception of threshold we will quickly refer to four precedents. The first three present different conditions of threshold, from being on the edge, to being internalised, to occupying a position of in-betweenness. These examples are drawn from outside of civic agency, though are programmatically related to aspects of it. Each of these exhibit ambiguity and playfulness, inviting inhabitants to change these spaces to accommodate different usages. The fourth example, drawn from community development practice, discusses how a place as whole might be reimaged through the introduction of a new activity.

Our first example is the Storefront for Art and Architecture in New York. This small art gallery occupies the space of a former store at ground floor level, playing host to a variety of exhibitions of art and architecture as well as holding a small shop. The key

feature of this place the “Storefront” is front façade, which opens up literally to the street. Different panels – some bigger than a person – pivot inwards or outwards or fold downwards, projecting into the gallery and also outside onto the footpath in nice weather. This allows the gallery to open up to the street, and pedestrians to move seamlessly into the building. The shifted panels offer an element of surprise, animating the street with exhibition material suddenly taking up position outside, while animating users as they move around and between the panels into the gallery. Created is an ambiguous layering of space, in which outside and inside merge together.

Our second example is the Apollo Schools complex in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Here a central internal multi-storey atrium sits in the middle of the complex, surrounded by classrooms and other educational spaces. Key in this atrium are subtle invitations to the children to occupy spaces within it in various ways while formally serving different functions. The latter is present in the atrium functioning as a lecture/performance hall, vertical circulation, and informal gathering and learning space. This multiplicity of function is enabled by a series of platforms that step up from the ground floor to the first floor, and which can be occupied as seating during a lecture or performance or used as stairs. The deep size of these platforms allows children to spread out with learning materials or gather in small groups. Balconies overlook this space, serving as additional platforms for seating during a performance, while offering further spaces for children to colonise for semi-secluded learning or gathering.

Our third example is the KwaZulu Natal Society of the Arts in Durban, South Africa. The distinguishing feature of the building is a lattice-covered veranda which sits in front of the building’s main, mostly enclosed block which contains art gallery space. The moveable lattice and overhanging roof enable the veranda to act environmentally to keep the sun out while allowing cooling breezes to enter the building. Simultaneously, the veranda acts as a flexible space, serving as the main circulation space in the building while being appropriated as needed for extra space for exhibition or for dining tables for the café. The panels of the moveable lattice swing upwards, providing overhead canopies to block the sun and a shadowed space underneath in which to situate café tables.

Our fourth precedent is the Ndlovu Medical Centre in Elandsdoorn-town, South Africa, just north of Pretoria. The centre is situated in a community mostly defined by the social and economic challenges it faces. Operating in a joined-up way, the Centre provides in addition to health care, health awareness programmes (e.g., AIDS-HIVS awareness, food nutrition) and dental care, further support to the community including through childcare, a technology training centre, social activit-

ies, a post office and a bakery. One of the more interesting challenges the Centre addressed occurred when wives in the community came to them complaining that too many of their husbands were mispending too much of their pay checks while out drinking on the nights they got paid. But rather than admonish the men for their behaviour, the centre fomented a more dialogical response, embracing the problem as a solution; the problem was that the men were partying, so the Centre decided to host a party. The Centre instituted a Friday night braai (barbecue) to which both the male employees *and* their wives were invited, using the braai as an event at which to distribute paychecks from local employers. With the wives in attendance, the paychecks quickly found their way into the families' household finances and not the men's evening entertainment (Brown, Kalra and Theis 2005). What we admire here is both the lateral thinking shown in responding to the problem of how men were spending their paychecks, and the sense of playfulness that the Centre's management exhibited in reimagining and reappropriating spaces in the centre as the site for a braai.

## Conclusion

In our discussion we have introduced the concept of a community campus as threshold – a place co-authored between the community and academia and situated in the community offering opportunity for encounter and agency. This community campus would act as a both a metaphorical threshold between community and academia; it would enable a place for meeting but also the pursuit of a co-joined civic agency of civic learning and community development, and the building of identities. Explored has been its theoretical underpinnings, grounding in civic learning, situatedness in the community, and its dialogic nature as a site of encounter and departure. Such a proposition warrants consideration as universities pursue the challenge to advance their civic engagement and contribution to the wider community. This dialogic threshold can provide a new space in which agency can be activated, allowing for a stepping outside of normative places, ideas and ways of thinking (Charli-Joseph 2019); benefitting from this are not only the academics, but equally (if not more significantly) the too-often previously marginalised community who acquire an enhanced sense of agency (Drimie 2019; Pereira 2019a).

Scope for further work remains. What is needed is further detailed examination of other spaces which have some relevance to the discussion here; for example, non-campus based sites of civic learning which are not situated in the community but say in the urban centre, and/or are not co-authored by the community. Also not addressed are challenges to our sense of public space posed by civil unrest and confrontation. While public space has previously been understood as a site of conflict (Merrifield 2002) and even been argued as vital to its potential (Sennett 1996), recent disturbances arising out of political tensions pose challenges to any space of

gathering by the public. While worth exploring such an inquiry demands a discussion in its own right.

What this text has argued for is community campuses situated within the community, that are co-authored between community and academia, and from which joined-up civic agency can be pursued. Moreover, the co-authoring and activation of this space through its appropriation can contribute to the sense of identity and efficacy felt by community and academia alike. Prompted by its ambiguity and playfulness, community and academia can extend their thinking to new ways of operating. Significant to this dialogic space is the co-joining of community and academia and event and space. It offers a threshold to a more situated and dialogic practice of civic agency.

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