

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF UNIVERSITIES ON STUDENTS?
Reflections on the University Roundtable at the World Urban Forum 2010
Rio de Janeiro

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The World Urban Forum 2010 was planned around the theme: The Right to the City – Bridging the Urban Divide. Like the hundreds of thousand participants from around the world, I anticipated a very exciting week of ideas sharing and heavy discussion. I wanted to hear how different countries were trying to prevent gentrification, re-organize slums, and repair the gap between the poor and the rich. I booked my airplane ticket, finished the work due after spring break, and hopped on the plane for a fourteen hour plane ride. I was on my way to Rio De Janeiro, Brazil.

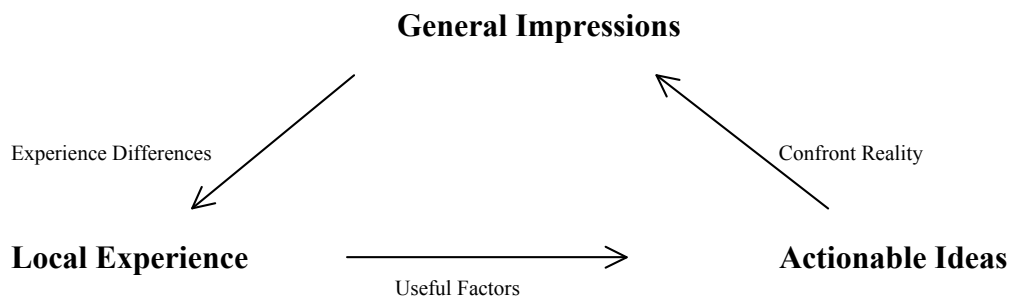
On the third day of the conference, March 24, 2010, I attended the Universities Roundtable Session: Bridging the Gap Between Research and Action at City Level – The Role of Universities. The description of the session sounded worth attending. Over 100 university leaders, scholars, and researchers in the field of urban sustainability were expected to discuss the opportunities and challenges for universities in advancing sustainable urban development through education, research, and fieldwork and bridging any research, policy and implementation gaps. I expected to hear a comprehensive overview of the challenges universities faced either in research or curriculum. More importantly I wanted to see how much each university valued its participation in urban development. As the nurturers of the future, universities carry a large responsibility in molding the ideas and thoughts of students and in shaping the priorities of the students. Whether or not urban sustainability part of a school's academic curriculum will affect its importance in the eyes of the students, of the future; therefore any discussion or programs about sustainability should rightly include universities. I hoped to see how this meeting would design appropriate solutions to the problems.

To be honest, by the time I attended this conference, I was disappointed by the various meetings I had visited. I realized that many organizations took advantage of this worldwide conference for their selfish benefit. Large corporations and well-endorsed organizations spent the allotted one hour and thirty minutes sharing how they were socially responsible groups who have tried to improve the world. Smaller organizations tried to get their names out and gain more publicity. Instead of focusing on sharing their ideas with the attendees, this forum was a way for many organizations to give a one and a half hour sales pitch.

Entering the room at exactly 1:30 PM, I thought the room would be filled with scholars and professors. Instead, I found myself in a room with only a couple attendees, most who were spectators, not even speakers. Fifteen minutes into the session, the facilitators realized that about one-tenth of the representatives would not show up. About seventy-five representatives signed up to be part of this discussion and only sixty-five actually showed up. The standing spectators were invited to take the seats of those absent. I ended up taking the seat of Belarus' Technical University.

It was announced at the start of the session that the purpose was to “discuss the challenges in advancement of urban planning in teaching, research... and what programs can be developed to encourage sharing of knowledge.” Universities have an important role to play in this aspect. As the environment which molds the thoughts and ideas of the next generation, universities are key to changing the mentality of how people perceive the sharing of information. Creating a sense of kinship and trust between different universities and students from around the world would allow them to share their personal experiences from their cultures and work experiences. Together, the students could discuss what they saw as a positive influence, what they thought of as unnecessary or inappropriate, and hopefully summon changes to create a better working experience and relationship in the community.

More and more into the future, these learning centers will play a role locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally in contributing to sustainable urbanization via teaching, research and knowledge management. Study shows that students working with locals are more willing to share what they learned to help others understand the real world processes of working collaboratively and within different cultures. The diagram below proposed by the University of Auckland in New Zealand displays the cycle of a student’s learning experience.



According to the University of Auckland, this cycle demonstrates how a student’s initial impression can change when they receive hands-on experience working with the local community. They will develop skills and accumulate knowledge that will spur them to take action on ideas created while working on site. These skills can range from how to better communication between contractors and local residents to selecting which building method is more ideal. Implementing these ideas and recognizing the differences between theory and practice will allow the students to focus on making a better work environment for the future. With this ideal diagram in hand, it is the wish of the many professors and scholars to regenerate this change to create urban sustainability.

The term “Urban Sustainability” was mentioned as a way to make cities more efficient. “Sustainability” has taken on many meanings since it was first used. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, sustainability means to use “a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged.” However the meaning of this word has been extrapolated to mean replicability, affordability, or cost effectiveness. I interpreted this jargon as a way to approach urban environments so they will last longer in both community and building structures. The goal was to cover how education (effective ways of teaching), research (areas of knowledge to advance), knowledge management (how to share knowledge), and institutional cooperation (universities relating in social, environmental, and economics sense) can repair the urban sustainability problems in diverse areas of the world.

Representatives from all over the world, including China, Jamaica, London, Mexico, Nairobi, and the United States, came to discuss this topic of urban sustainability. The breakdown based on location came to:

South America/Caribbean – 21

Europe – 21

North America – 9

Asia – 6

Australia/ Pacific – 5

Africa – 3

Note the large difference between attendees from Europe and Africa. Susan, the woman I sat beside questioned the un-proportional range of representatives. “I thought the main point of this conference was to discuss how we could share ideas with those around us to help better the developing countries. Why are there only three universities representing the developing country’s needs?” she questioned. With so little representation from the developing countries who most likely could not afford to send representatives this far to Brazil, but who were also most in need of this help, it is unknown how accurate our assumptions would be. This lack of attendance was brought up a few times, but quickly forgotten.

The discussion had two rules: One- only the university representatives are allowed to speak, meaning spectators were not allowed to share their opinions. Two- each speaker was allotted three minutes to speak.

The floor opened up to discussion about methods of teaching. Norway’s representative from the University of Science and Technology, Dr. Hans Scotland was the first to speak. He shared how the University of Science and Technology has used an approach to teaching and learning which closely mimicked the method recommended by University of Auckland. Another university in Norway announced that it introduced interns to locals in hopes of addressing the reality of implementing small projects. This hands-on experience allowed students to gain knowledge of problem’s complexity in either disruptions in communication, behind the scene politics, or more technical details. A representative from Shanghai, China quickly joined in to share how his university collaborated with the mayor for Shanghai to work on the urban development front. This gave the students access to resources and contacts throughout China. Westminster University from UK emphasized how it included ethical values as a core component of its curriculum, relating to who has the right of earth and non-human life. The architecture department of University College London shared its firm belief in “not teaching how to build shapes, but how the environment can create shapes,” basically using the environmental factors to design the building structures. Erasmus University from the Netherlands said they were different because they focused on the political role cities played in urban conflicts, concentrating on the role of people who live in the territory. Dozens of other spokespersons eagerly waited to share how their university was spectacular in allowing their students to gain real life experiences.

It was not until the representative from Jamaica spoke that a larger, overarching problem was brought up. Her university in Jamaica has a partnership program with a college in a first-world country, which invites a professor from that country to teach a semester long lesson her university. Although it is very generous of the professor to take a whole semester off to help her students with their education, his or her teachings leave as soon as the professor leaves. There is no lasting footprint. It is not that this partnership was bad – the direction was good. It was a great idea to expose students to different methods of teaching and education. The results, however,

were not ideal. It is difficult to maintain the strength of the education when the students do not have the resources or encouragement to follow up and pursue further. There should be some follow up program which works with the previous semester's curriculum from the visiting professor, either by inviting another visiting professor or giving the students hands-on opportunity to implement the learned education. With the technology today, it is easy to quickly connect with the visiting professor via Skype or another technical method in case the students want advice or have any questions.

Her short speech was applauded. Yet similar to the brief the discussion of the shortage of African representatives, this Jamaican situation was quickly dismissed. Another topic was brought up: the advancement of knowledge. The Development Planning Unit of the University College London began this new prompt by saying that there are many urban centers out there that have done a lot with little resources. These are examples we should all look at to learn more about urban sustainability. Others agreed, adding on that students should be looking at these urban centers because they have the energy to change and creatively design an urban setting that is up to date with modernity. There is a limit to archaic operation. We must know when archaic operations should be redesigned and the ones who have the creativity, energy, and power to take this extreme step are students. Universities are the middlemen who can help the students in this process since it has a combination of academic knowledge from accomplished professors and the creativity of young students. The combined force can break this inflexible archaic foundation brought on by national institutions or large corporations, which tend to be static and inflexible either because of politics or the older generation who run the show. If universities collaborate to share their ideas and "make a complex problem elegant," there is the possibility of actually making a collective change.

The Global University Consortium, a collection of universities ranging from Thammasat University in Thailand to University of Nairobi, proposed a three-point approach which would promotes getting universities involved in the important role of structuring programs towards sustainability. These points include:

1. Enriching curriculum and exposing students and faculty on current development issues by requiring all outside consultancies to offer a public presentation at the school.
2. Providing hands-on and practical opportunities by setting up a program and budget with in-country program offices of funders.
3. Encouraging innovation and research by faculty and students by including 1% in development program budgets from outside funders for research: 50% for areas suggested by funder, 50% open research administered by school.

The idea behind these three-points is to actively engage students in being part of the sustainability process while they are still in school, in hopes that they will be inspired to follow through in bridging the gap between research and action in the future. Many universities, such as MIT, have already followed through with this proposition. MIT offers classes with professional guest lecturers involved in various departments of architecture and urban planning. This university also allows students to part take in a cultural exchange program which lets students analyze a foreign environment, design a building structurally safe and culturally fitting for the environment, and actually construct the structure by hand. In addition, MIT offers research opportunities to students and faculty members to look further into pressing issues at the moment.

This three-point approach not only benefits students, but faculty members as well. Point one, which offers public presentations, will bring the current thinking standards of presentation back to the universities, keeping both students and professors up to date with the latest innovations and ideas. Furthermore, it encourages the interaction between the professional world and students. These sessions not only act as informative lectures, but also networking for potential joint efforts. Point two of offering internships would be, at most, additional costs to the donors, not universities. One percent of the donations made to the school should be used to offer hands-on experiences. The intent is for relatively richer donors to shoulder the burden of costs, benefiting them as well since they will be promoting their newest endeavors. This trade is a good deal for both donors and students.

However, as ideal as these propositions are, they are targeted towards universities who have the reputation and the donors to offer the funds. It takes a lot to be able to convince outside consultancies that the time they spend in educating the students will be worth the time. It takes money to be able to setup these programs that offer hands-on opportunities. It requires donors who are willing to donate money to universities to have a budget for research. Most importantly, this proposition needs educators and motivators who are willing to inspire and encourage the students to continue through a challenge. In countries such as Jamaica, these resources are hard to find.

As a student attending this session, I was puzzled by these scholars who were promoting the inclusion of students into these plans, yet excluding them from this discussion. If the representatives wanted to design a way to share creative ideas, what better way would there be than to allow the students exchange information with each other? Perhaps the main goal was not to actually develop a solution for creating urban sustainability, but to generate buzz around the idea that universities can be a stepping stone, a tool, in developing this bridge connecting the urban divide. Allowing each and every representative from the sixty-five universities to recognize and be aware that his or her university is the future to making urban sustainability happen is already a success. What the representatives will do with the information shared will be up to them.