The Project of Universality

Francesco Zuddas

There is an unresolved vocabulary conundrum subsuming our ultimate incapacity at defining the thing we commonly call the university. What does its universality refer to? Studies on the medieval origins of the institution have shown how, more than anything else, the formula *universitas societas magistrorum discipulorumque* referred to teachers and students forming a whole[1]. The totality of knowledge was not included as constituent of the institution's universal character, nor was the existence of a single organisational, territorial or built form postulated. Rather than by an identifiable locale, early universities were defined by the interactions and clashes between two among various guilds constituting the social fabric of Europe in the Middle Ages: students and teachers. Existing without a bespoke built presence, the first universities continuously re-defined their territories by temporarily appropriating spaces in the city. If this was true for Bologna or Paris in the first centuries after the year 1000, it was repeated as a founding logic of higher education colonialism in 17th century North America, with early Yale College being born "ambulatory, like the tabernacle in the wilderness"[2].

Like in the case of many social groups of nomadic origins, also the universities' path to maturity unfolded as the desire to gain spatial stability and territorialisation, so that by the 19th century it had become unthinkable for universities to exist without a stable house. As universities grew larger and became more internally subdivided, the un-questionability of ad-hoc space was specified and turned into what would be their single dominant spatial principle for the years to come: the principle of concentration. That this principle is hard to defeat was proven by its capacity to survive the strongest attack in the history of higher education. When, around 1968, spatial concentration was equated with the centralisation of power in the hands of a controlling authority, fighting such authority led to an illusory victory. Indubitably, after the revolution, higher education became a possibility for many more. But this did not take place within the walls of a new type of institution. Rather, the university managed to protect itself by raising its bureaucratic immune system, becoming a gigantic version of its most immediate previous self: a spatially centralised organisation. It has been only with the digital turn of the late 20th century that a prospect for a de-centralised university has emerged as a possibility. Yet it remains

---

[1] Charles Homer Haskins, *The Rise of Universities* (New York: H. Holt and company, 1923).

[2] Carl A. Raschke, *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University* (London ; New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2003), IX.

uncertain up to what point information technology has been – or will be – capable of dissolving the stability – of power and of spaces - that made universities among the most immutable and conservative forms of human organisation. As well as one of the most difficult to grasp and define.

It is in the crisis between concentration and dispersion – that is, in its spatial tactics - that the university has explicated its constant search for an identity. Concentrating on one locale has been the dominant logic ever since the university became a project, and in particular a large-scale one. While the origins of universities are commonly located in medieval Europe, and their second birth is also certified European (propelled by early 19th century German idealism), the turning of the university into a large spatial project is an American invention with its specific name - "campus", a word that, like university, is also open to multiple interpretations[3]. The 1896-1899 Phoebe Hearst competition for the design of the University of California at Berkeley marked an important moment in campus design as the first important occasion when a competition was used to gather different configurations for a large piece of academic territory, a piece of land "to be filled with a single beautiful and harmonious picture as a painter fills in his canvas"[4]. Competitions had already been launched in Europe in the past for the design of institutes or colleges, as was the case of those organised by the Accademia di San Luca in the 18th century[5]. What was new in Berkeley was that the "ideal home"[6] to be designed for the institution largely exceeded the limits of a single built complex as well as of any previous American campus. This scale jump was sealed with an ambition of immortality, with the competition brief claiming that "there will be no more necessity of remodelling its broad outlines a thousand years hence, than there would be of remodelling the Parthenon, had it come down to us complete and uninjured."[7]

The space-time absoluteness declared in Berkeley was legitimised by the enthusiastic reception of the principles for a modern university defined in 1810 by Wilhelm von Humboldt in Berlin, and following on the footsteps of Johns Hopkins University, the first great American Research University modelled on the German example[8]. As is well known, the German modern university

---

[3] Paul Venable Turner, *Campus : An American Planning Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

[4] Berkeley Trustees of the Phoebe A. Hearst Architectural Plan University of California, *The International Competition for the Phoebe A. Hearst Architectural Plan for the University of California* (San Francisco: The Trustees, 1900), 8.

[5] Paola Marconi, Angela Cipriani, and Enrico Valeriani, eds., *I Disegni Di Architettura dell'Archivio Storico dell'Accademia Di San Luca* (Roma: De Luca, 1974).

[6] Ibid, 10.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Jonathan R. Cole, *The Great American University : Its Rise to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected* (New York, NY: PublicAffairs, 2009)

introduced a complementary notion of unity to the medieval one between teachers and students. This was the unity of teaching and research that, as put by Jurgen Habermas, responded to a conception of "the scientific process as a narcissistically self-enclosed process"[9]. While set in contrast to the closed pattern of knowledge embedded in the older organisation of the liberal arts and the associated educational canon based on repeating consolidated knowledge - the traditional way of understanding the activity of "studying" – the unity of teaching and research could not happen within spatial dispersion. The centring of place was required, and the passage from closed loop to open path of scientific enquiry was translated in space with an introverted, ultimately closed diagram, receiving in Berkeley the scale and architectural splendour worthy of a masterful Beaux-Art composition.

"All has been arranged within the prescribed limits", wrote the jury about the winning entry awarded to E. Benard's pompously titled *Roma* project[10]. Choreographing buildings around a sequence of open spaces along a central axis, Benard's reference to Roman antiquity was a way to legitimise its careful assemblage of defensible quadrangles. In contrast to his sequence of fora, Howard and Cauldwell, awarded with the fourth prize, designed two parallel series of buildings flanking a central formal landscaped area. The clearer subdivisions and enclosures of the winning entry were here compromised by a more open-ended, extensible spatial principle, so that the jury's praise of Benard's capacity of staying "within the prescribed limits" resonated as a clear statement about the superiority of a spatially concentrated organisation.

To be sure, Howard and Cauldwell's project was not a complete novelty in American university design. If anything, it provided a scale jump to a spatial principle that had been famously pioneered by Thomas Jefferson. Designed and built between 1817 and 1825, Jefferson's *academical village* for the University of Virginia in Charlottesville had marked a turning point in the history of pre-German reform university design[11]. In purely chronological terms, von Humboldt's 1810 ideas were too much of a novelty to be swiftly incorporated inside Jefferson's aim to make of higher education a key driver for democracy. After all, the University of Virginia was still a small college that stood very far from Berlin's grand palace of knowledge – a literal one, as the university took possession of the former Palace of Prince Heinrich.

---

[9] Jürgen Habermas and John R. Blazek, 'The Idea of the University: Learning Processes', *New German Critique*, no. 41 (1 April 1987), 10.

[10] *The International Competition for the Phoebe A. Hearst Architectural Plan*, 32.

[11] Mary N. Woods, 'Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia: Planning the Academic Village', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 44, no. 3 (1 October 1985): 266–83.

Despite its contained size, Jefferson's design was nevertheless crucial for setting an idea of physical concentration as necessary to the correct functioning of the (higher) educational machinery. Yet, this was done in an ambiguous way that left the road ahead open for interpretation. Opposed to the then conventional American way of designing single buildings to house all parts of the institution, Jefferson argued for an exploded physical object that ritualised the life of the academic community as the constant movement along prescribed lines, within a clearly identifiable territory, and under the control of a clear spatial diagram of surveillance in which "every professor would be the police officer of the students adjacent to his own lodge"[12]. Where the singularity of the professor dwelling-classroom pavilions flanking the central lawn was accentuated by designing a different facade for each, the addition of a continuous portico contradicted such move and declared the existence of a whole. It is known that the whole was made hierarchical only once Jefferson took on board Benjamin Latrobe's suggestion of a centrepiece for the composition. Before the Rotunda came into being, early sketches by Jefferson showed a much simpler and generic diagram: a horseshoe arrangement with no clear end and open onto the landscape[13]. Often interpreted as the manifestation of its author's anti-urban attitude, the University of Virginia was born with an intention of remaining ambiguous as to how much spatially closed or open a university should be. However, what was inherited from this early instance of an intentionally designed settlement was the fact that the university should remain concentrated in space, with ambiguity reduced to the illusionary metaphor of extensibility.

Many attempts have been made to identify the precedents to Jefferson's University of Virginia, spanning between French hospitals and countryside palaces[14]. Similar readings have been advanced of 17th century American colonial colleges, where the collegiate roots of Oxbridge evolved by opening the closed figure of the quadrangle, as a declaration of outward territorial ambitions[15]. This Europe-to-America migration of ideas was then inverted in the 20th century. After opening the quadrangle (early colonial colleges), pavilionising the institution (Jefferson's *academical village*), and espousing the German research paradigm (the Berkeley competition), by 1900 the American university was ready to open its doors to European visitors in search for a new identity for their old institutions. Among the first to take on the invitation were a number of

---

[12] Thomas Jefferson quoted in Paul Venable Turner, *Campus*, 74.

[13] Sabrina Puddu, 'Campus o Cittadella? Il Progetto di un'Eredità', in Sabrina Puddu, Martino Tattara and Francesco Zuddas, *Territori della Conoscenza* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017), 134–51

[14] André Corboz, 'Les Précédents Du Plan de Jefferson Pour l'Université de Virginie', *Artibus et Historiae* 26, no. 51 (1 January 2005): 173–94.

[15] Paul Venable Turner, *Campus*.

European delegates on study journeys across the most accomplished American campuses to inform the design of new "university cities" in their home capitals during the 1920s. These journeys provided an opportunity to confirm the unquestionable status of the principle of concentration, with official endorsement coming from *L'Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* that claimed concentration as a characteristic leading back "to the very foundation of the first universities, that is, to the twelfth century"[16]. Rewriting the history of universities as one of spatial concentration was legitimised through a wider reading of modernity as the necessary centralisation of major establishments and services for collective life. "Concentrating these services is essential to their functioning and efficiency"[17] - and this was considered paramount for a university.

What the American example taught the Europeans of the 1920s was that universities needed to be big and clustered in space. If the Ciudad Universitaria in Madrid was "the first American-style campus in Europe"[18] that replicated the exile of the university from the city in the form of a large peripheral academic park, it was in Fascist Italy that the principle of concentration was put into use inside the city, giving architectural expression to centralised power. Commenting on his master plan for the Citta' Universitaria in Rome, Marcello Piacentini claimed that "the idea of concentrating all university institutes in a single, new, modern site could only find its legitimation in the political and ideological climate created by Fascism."[19] The lessons learnt from Harvard, Virginia, Columbia, Pennsylvania, and California were both taken on board and disguised under a new, ideologically-charged invocation of Imperial Rome that, of course, was more obvious in Mussolini's capital city than in Berkeley's *Roma*, four decades earlier. The forum was promptly claimed as the model for a properly Italian university, with Piacentini hailing the availability of a large site in the city to implant a university "perpetuating in modern forms the spirit of ancient civility."[20]

The space-power nexus inherent in the principle of concentration became an obvious object of criticism in light of the post-war project for democratic open societies. As socialist ideals started permeating the architectural and planning discourse in response to two decades of dictatorships, it came as no surprise for the University Roman Forum to be listed among the main indicted for

---

[16] Alexandre Persitz, 'Les Cités Universitaires', *L'architecture D'aujourd'hui*, no. 6 (June 1936), 8.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Pablo Campos Calvo-Sotelo, *The Journey of Utopia : The Story of the First American Style Campus in Europe* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2006).

[19] Marcello Piacentini, 'Metodi E Caratteristiche', *Architettura*, no. XIV (1935), 2.

[20] Ibid, 4.

authoritarian social engineering. For a short time, especially between the 1960s and 1970s, a widespread debate on the joint futures of higher education, society, and their spaces developed. With open education considered a key asset for the Welfare State, universities became a privileged testing ground for ideas of democracy. However, the path to the open society was all but a smooth one as was the concentration principle all but easy to defeat.

Confirmation of such invincibility was found in the common strategy, among western countries to expand higher education by establishing new universities in peripheral locations and beyond main urban areas. Great Britain pioneered this trend, with the "Plateglass" universities hailed as gems of architectural innovation[21]. Designed to democratise access to higher education, these universities were ultimately self-contained small villages detached from properly urban environments. Their peripheral location revealed an anticipatory defence tactic: by keeping a distance from the city and its power structures, the new detached campuses could contain the palpable growing protest of the mid-1960s. This also allowed for architectural innovation to be promoted inside carefully protected environments, offering an opportunity too attractive for architects to refuse. Where many accepted the offer, often ending up realising some of their most important projects – as in the case of Denys Lasdun in the UK, Walter Netsch in the US, and Arthur Erikson in Canada – others opposed it as a continuation of the status quo of elitist education. For the latter, to upset the equation between spatial centering and old-fashioned forms of top-down education, and really reinvent the university, it was necessary to find an antidote to concentration.

Mobility, something proper to the early *universitas* with no buildings, was such antidote. Cedric Price's 1966 *Potteries Thinkbelt* project is surely the most famous statement of mobile higher education[22]. Blurring the pure sphere of intellectual enquiry (the traditional realm of the university) with the impure one of labour, and translating this in the form of a university more similar to an industrial plant than to a traditional series of classrooms, libraries and lecture halls, Price's project has been read as an essay on the coming post-Fordist condition in which what is most stable is, ironically, a condition of instability[23]. Predicting the withering of a strong state, but at the same time longing for its decay as a paternalist presence, *Potteries Thinkbelt* stabbed in the back the old idea of a university acting *in loco parentis*. It crudely put in front of the eyes of a

[21] Stefan Muthesius, *The Postwar University: Utopianist Campus and College* (London: Yale University Press, 2000).

[22] Cedric Price, 'PTb. Potteries Thinkbelt. A Plan for an Advanced Educational Industry in North Staffordshire', *Architectural Design*, October 1966.

[23] Pier Vittorio Aureli, 'Labor and Architecture: Revisiting Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt', *Log*, no. 23 (December 2011): 97–118.

growing number of prospective graduates the desolate landscape of uncertainty that the new campuses blossoming in the western world were hiding behind a pastoral screen. In such scenario, anyone was made responsible for their own life, in a mixture of liberation from top-down chains and insecurity. Ultimately killing the enlightenment promise of a transparent future achieved through knowledge, this new idea of the university dismantled the stable image of its palaces. Or, at least, it longed for establishing an alternative.

Similar ideas came from other architects that shared a common belief in the possibility of reinventing more open, liberating institutions through architecture. If Price found in an industrial plant the image of a different university, Giancarlo De Carlo looked at the protesting students on city streets as an anticipation of a dispersed university[24]. His plan for the University of Pavia (1971-76) literally translated such dispersion in the form of multiple "poles" located in different urban areas and designed as pieces of civic service open to a wider community than the academic group. Moved by similar motivations, his Team X colleague Shadrach Woods claimed the university to be an "education bazaar"[25]. However, Woods' design response, as represented in the Free University built in Berlin, was opposite to De Carlo's. Rather than a literal pulverisation throughout the urban fabric, the liberated and liberating university was, for Woods, a continuous architectural interior acting as surrogate to the performance of an urban space but, ultimately, not escaping spatial concentration[26].

De Carlo's plan was not thoroughly implemented, and when Woods' Free University was opened in the mid 1970s, the times were approaching for the abrupt end to a short-lived season of thinking beyond the canon of concentration that had been driven by unashamed ideology at various degrees of the political left spectrum. Whereas radical ideas of pedagogy continued to illuminate the discriminatory power of centralised forms of schooling and kept the conversation on alternative educational ideas alive – particularly, the work of Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire[27] -, the space of higher education was soon absorbed in the vortex of the open market. With cuts to governmental funding becoming common to both European (mostly public) and American (largely private) higher education, various crossing paths were paved for the post-modern university in the age of the free-market: Commercial Street, All-Administrative Avenue, Customers Row, Entrepreneurial Road, Excellence Close, etc.

[24] Giancarlo De Carlo, 'Why/How to Build School Buildings', *Harvard Educational Review*, no. 4 (1969): 12–35.

[25] Shadrach Woods, 'The Education Bazaar', *Harvard Educational Review*, no. 4 (1969): 116–25.

[26] Francesco Zuddas, 'Pretentious Equivalence: De Carlo, Woods and Mat-Building', *FAmagazine*, no. 34 (2015): 45–65.

[27] Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1970); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

The announcement of the "end of the grand narratives"[28] and the correlate postulate of a fragmentary condition constantly pieced together in search for a "difficult whole"[29], echoed in doubts as to the existence of "any 'common feature' left to the variegated collection of entities called universities, and to the equally variegated interior of any one of them […] that upholds the claim of their unity?"[30] This question was optimistically answered by its creator, Zygmunt Bauman, who claimed it to be "the good luck of the universities that there are so many of them, that there are no two exactly alike, and that inside every university there is a mind-boggling variety of departments, schools, styles of thoughts, styles of conversation, and even styles of stylistic concerns. It is the good luck of the universities that […] they are not comparable, not measurable by the same yardstick […]"[31]

More than an attempt to find sense in the proliferation of higher education institutions that have claimed the status of university during the last four decades of the millennium, Bauman's post-modern optimism was an anticipatory warning of what laid waiting around the corner. This was the Bologna Process, the inter-ministerial agreement to make of Europe one single higher education area capable of contrasting the American domination. To surpass the competitor it was necessary to take on its identity, hence the homogenisation of curricula (a common structure of bachelor and master's) along with a growing aspiration to the corporatisation of attitudes, protocols and language – not to mention all the related campus paraphernalia, gadgets and memorabilia.

Ironically, to homogenise it proved necessary to pursue an institutionalisation of the values that were proposed as antidotes to the status quo of the old, immutable forms of elitist higher education. A fifty-year time jump since *Potteries Thinkbelt* finds us today taking for granted the very ideas that Price proposed as destabilisers of the status quo, with mobility being a banner of contemporary higher education[32]. The Erasmus generation has lived universities in rather different ways than their parents exactly because of the opportunity to move around countries, which is indubitably an enriching experience. At the same time, however, the variety of what they could get out of this movement has had very little to do with the encounter of really

[28] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition : A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

[29] Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

[30] Zygmunt Bauman, 'Universities: Old, New and Different', in *The Postmodern University? Contested Visions of Higher Education in Society*, ed. Anthony Smith and Frank Webster (Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education & Open University Press, 1997), 20.

[31] Ibid, 24.

[32] Alida von Boch-Galhau, 'On the Move: Cross-Border University Cooperation as Driver for Transnational Development' (MA thesis, Architectural Association Graduate School, 2017).

different ideas of university and more with an often extenuating process of conversion of exams and credits to fit bureaucratic requirements. Mobility has come to act more as a training ground for a forced life on the move – the age of the precariat – than as the post-modern constitution of self through piecing together true differences. At the base of this is an opposite reality to Bauman's end-of-millennium optimism: universities are, in essence, almost the same everywhere, the most relevant change brought by the European homogenising project being the magnification of its bureaucratic apparatus.

Just as mobility has not created radical forms of bottom-up education as hoped by its progenitors fifty years ago, the prospect of more fluid forms of access to knowledge appears today compromised by the combined action of bureaucracy and commodity in higher education. The digital turn stimulated enthusiasm for making knowledge more fluidly accessible and, perhaps, de-centralising its institutional channels[33]. Only a couple of decades into the 2000s, such enthusiasm seems to have shrunk due to the peculiar capacity of the university to absorb it as an ultimately unwanted revolution. While digital protocols have been introduced in the daily life of academic courses and in the administrative apparatus, they have up to now mostly been approached as mere technological tools without allowing them to shape a real epistemic shift in the idea of higher education, which remains anchored to its traditional resistance to change. Thus, the physical university not only survives, but it is also pushed to strengthen its concentration in space as a defence mechanism from the pulverisation of knowledge on the digital highway and the cloud.

At a quick glance, statements made less than two decades ago about the postmodern university being "a knowledge and research emporium – a multi-centred, if not in fact centreless, learning 'centre' that is radically de-centralized"[34] would appear to hold true today, when numbers of students are at their historical highest and higher education is offered by multiple institutions. Yet the de-centralised university is mostly the result of a mix of multiplied sameness and colonisation, with more institutions aiming to the status of "the" university and the strongest ones opening branches in franchising around the world. If we consider the limited case of architecture as an academic discipline, the proliferation of visiting schools and the likes in the last decade has surely offered precious occasions for debate and confrontation but is ultimately worthless in a world that only values official transcripts, certificates, and titles granted by *real* universities. Thus, what has really been realised of the postmodern university is the "emporium",

---

[33] John Tiffin and Lalita Rajasingham, *The Global Virtual University* (Routledge Ltd, 2003); Raschke, *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University.*

[34] Raschke, *The Digital Revolution and the Coming of the Postmodern University,* p.11.

where everything – tutorials, research, discussions - is exchanged for money. Most critical diagnoses[35] of the contemporary state of the university signal the lost mission of unimpeded critical enquiry. What is teaching, other than a service bought by the students? What is research, if not the direct satisfaction of predetermined goals for the creation of utilitarian knowledge? Where – if anywhere - does the verb to study – if anyone is studying at all - dwell in the university today?

We are assisting to the latest in a series of morphings of that thing we very hardly can define the identity of the university or, with a more commonly used term, its idea. Famously, an early and still consistently cited contribution was Cardinal Henry Newman's mid-19th century "The Idea of the University", where the point was made against professional and pro liberal education as "a habit of mind […] which lasts through life"[36]. Analysing the condition of higher education at the end of the 20th century, Bill Readings traced a disquieting history of liberal education and the modern university, which he identified in the succession of three ideas: reason, culture, and excellence[37]. The University of Reason was the product of the Kantian Conflict of Faculties, where the autonomy of critical enquiry (reason) was declared along with the superiority of philosophy over the three lower faculties. Creating an institution out of this was, as Readings noted, a contradiction in terms, because "reason can only be instituted if the institution remains a fiction."[38] The university was eventually institutionalised through its subjugation to a second idea – national culture – that shaped the ambiguous relation of autonomy from and subjugation to the state. Finally, entering the world of business corporations in the 1980s, the university turned to excellence as its subsuming idea, a very hard to define though because, as Readings put it, "everyone is excellent, in their own way"[39]. Since excellence "draws only one boundary: the boundary that protects the unrestricted power of the bureaucracy"[40], the result is that "the University of Excellence serves nothing other than itself, another corporation in a world of transnationally exchanged capital"[41].

Readings' words echo in the more recent ones of Stefan Collini, who raised again the problem of defining the idea of the university today in the form of a question:

---

[35] Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012); Terry Eagleton, 'The Slow Death of the University', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 April 2015.

[36] John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 77.

[37] Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[38] Ibid, 60.

[39] Ibid, 33.

[40] Ibid, 33.

[41] Ibid, 43.

"Shouldn't we stop thinking in terms of the nineteenth century European ideal and focus instead on how it is the Asian incarnation of the Americanized version of the European model, with schools of technology, medicine, and management to the fore, which most powerfully instantiates the idea of the university in the twenty-first century?"[42]

Part of Collini's argument is that, over time, we have become used to thinking the university as possessing a set of features that make it tend to the complete status of "the" university, something provided with a universal character, a sort of Platonic idea to aspire to. With their growth in number over the last century, universities themselves have aspired to a status of completeness, to be as identical as possible to the Platonic idea. Yet there is wide disagreement as to what this idea should be. Readings' diagnosis of the age of the empty bottle of excellence – which occupies centre stage in commencement speeches and university websites - does not sustain much optimism, nor does Collini's dismissal of the frequent invocation of Cardinal Newman's theses on liberal education as just an anachronism.

By tracing a historical trajectory through the spatial vicissitudes of the university, from monastic origins to the digital turn, an institution in the constant search for identity is unveiled. This is a trajectory made of moments of appropriations (often from other types of organisations), codifications, failures, successes, exportations, re-appropriations, re-codifications, etc., in a continuous loop that took place across the Atlantic and that today has created a global geography of higher education trapped between the obsession for diversification and subdivision (with always new disciplines being created) and the threat of homogenisation under the levelling sword of neoliberalism.

Whereas other human functions have swiftly lent themselves to a physical normalisation, the university is remarkable for its reluctance to be subjugated to a similar process. Notably, it managed to escape the 19th century grand normalising project - the invention of building types – as well as its late 20th century revisited version: neither Durand nor Pevsner included the university in their dictionaries[43]. If architecture does not manage to normalise, it means that there is something ultimately ungraspable in the reluctant patient, some sort of impurity. Located at the intersection of a subsection (allegedly the highest) of schooling, an instance of workplace, and a service open to society at large, the university is a hardly definable type of organisation. A general reason for the difficult codification stands in the fact that it has always been shaped by

---

[42] Stefan Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, 13.

[43] Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand, *Précis of the Lectures on Architecture ; With, Graphic Portion of the Lectures on Architecture* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2000); Nikolaus Pevsner, *A History of Building Types* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976).

many forces outside of itself, which obliged it to continuously adapt to changing conditions. But it is probably the lack of an original identity as a built presence, that is, the medieval institution with no buildings, which has managed to survive as an autoimmune disease of the university, battling against the hegemonic principle of concentration. It is in its indefinability that lay the problems of the university, but also its capacity of survival and its hopeful redemption during dark times. Indubitably, the current are not among the brightest.