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Civic geographies
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Civic geographies: A commentary and call for *Area*

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Abstract
This commentary introduces civic geographies as a theme in *Area*, where papers can be collected, allowing a space for discussion at a time when the civic university agenda has become a priority for the sector. It calls for the discipline to share and debate ideas about civic geographies, showcase civic geographical research and teaching, and create a community of practice to develop approaches to engagement and social responsibility.

KEYWORDS
civic geographies, engagement, place-based research

1 | INTRODUCTION

Geography and geographers play a key role in the civic university agenda. The place-based nature of civic work – locally rooted, but with strong connections to other places on national and international scales – is inherently geographical. Whilst some universities have formalized their civic priorities through civic university agreements or are working to do so, many others engage closely with local partners, communities, and other anchor institutions to achieve positive place-based social, economic and environmental impact. It is now timely for geography as a discipline to revisit its civic scope and ambition.

This commentary introduces the wider context of civic work in universities based in the UK and launches a new theme in *Area* that will showcase civic geographies in research, teaching and wider university strategies. Since its inception *Area* has been a forum where papers reflecting these disciplinary practices and concerns have been showcased, and we encourage submissions from geographers engaged with the civic agenda within and beyond the UK and hope to share good practice, provide critical reflections and encourage new collaborations.

2 | CIVIC ROOTS AND RENEWAL

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many UK universities were established as civic institutions. As Britain's industrial cities grew, the need to meet the educational needs of a growing and changing industrial and commercial workforce saw support for the establishment of institutions with a remit to serve the areas where they were located (Jones, 2019; Sanderson, 1988; Vallance, 2016; Whyte, 2015). This led to the foundation of university colleges in London and 'redbrick' universities in the large industrial cities of Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Bristol, followed by university colleges in 'smaller cities and towns such as Nottingham, Reading, and Southampton'

(Heffernan & Jöns, 2018, p. 219). (In a similar fashion, in the wake of industrialisation and the Civil War, the US saw the creation of Land Grant Universities to meet the needs of local communities – see Goldstein et al., 2020; for a critical overview of their colonial legacies and the need to decolonise 'public education', see Curley and Smith (2020), and Luke and Heynen (2021)).

Over time, however, these civic foundations often became obscured as universities negotiated the challenges of rising student numbers, challenges to research funding, and new ways of teaching. By the start of the new millennium, the civic role of universities in its widest sense had been called into question. In 2009, economic geographer John Goddard published a provocation piece offering up a number of challenges to universities, arguing that 'all publicly-funded universities in the UK have a civic duty to engage with wider society on the local, national and global scales, and to do so in a manner which links the social to the economic spheres' (Goddard, 2009, p. 4). Drawing on his research into the impact of Newcastle University on its surrounding communities, Goddard argued that this needed to be an institution-wide commitment, beyond individual academics and projects, embracing teaching and research alike, and including students, academics and support staff. He urged universities to develop their strategies to work effectively with stakeholders and wider society to address place-based needs in all parts of the UK.

This began a much-needed reappraisal of the position educational institutions play in creating mutual benefits for both the academy and wider society (Goddard, 2009; Goddard et al., 2016; Goddard & Vallance, 2013; Grant, 2021). A report commissioned by the UPP Foundation (2019) levied a direct challenge to the UK higher education sector to increase its efforts to strengthen the connection between universities and their places, and to develop clear strategies to achieve positive local impact. Importantly, the commission asked what it means to be a 'civic university' in the twenty-first century (Grant, 2021). Its primary recommendation was for universities to develop their strategic approach via the development of civic university agreements in partnership with local government and other institutions, focusing their civic activity in response to the needs of local places and communities. To date, more than 60 UK universities have committed to creating civic university agreements within their localities. Another recommendation from the UPP Foundation's Civic University Commission led to the foundation of the Civic University Network (CUN), 'a national network maximising the impact of civic universities in their place', which has been led by Sheffield Hallam University since 2020 (www.civic universitynetwork.co.uk). The CUN supports universities in developing their civic work through a range of resources, case studies and activities, including the Civic Impact Framework. Sheffield Hallam University also leads the Research England-funded National Civic Impact Accelerator programme (2023–2026; see civicuniversitynetwork.co.uk/about-us/ncia/), in partnership with Queen Mary University of London, WM-REDI at the University of Birmingham, National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement, Institute for Community Studies and OECD. Key workstreams within the NCIA programme are building a civic evidence base to understand what works, for whom and in what contexts; delivering an action learning programme to pilot civic approaches and build capacity in universities across England; and scaling up civic engagement through a programme of support, tools, training, and communications, including a new podcast series, CiviCast and resources for equitable partnerships.

The renewed focus on the civic role of universities – whether formalized through civic university agreements or through other statements of civic purpose – spans teaching, research and knowledge exchange, as well as other core work in the sector, including employment practices, procurement policies and approaches to sustainability. It allows institutions to respond to the priorities of local places and communities and develop a guiding strategy for partnership in support of a shared mission, which is often linked to local and regional growth and development. For example, the West Midlands Regional Economic Development Institute (WMRedi) is part of the University of Birmingham's wider civic commitment. Located in the city centre, it provides regional data, analysis, policy support and training to assist local strategies for wider economic and social impact.

In reframing their civic missions, universities now seek to develop their strategic civic partnerships, refocus and extend university–community activities and develop their civic impact. Shared themes across many civic university agreements and statements of civic purpose include social, economic, health, educational, cultural and environmental impact and engagement. The civic university agreement launched by Queen Mary University of London in 2022, for example, has five priorities: inclusive place-making, pathways for life, healthy and sustainable futures, Queen Mary as a cultural hub for East London and enabling civic practice. Queen Mary's civic commitments to East London are place-based but not place-bound and recognize that 'East London is already a global community. Its people and places have deep-rooted connections to the wider world' (Queen Mary University of London, 2022).

3 | CIVIC GEOGRAPHIES

The relevance of geographical teaching and research beyond the academy, and its impact on local places and communities, has featured within this journal from its inception (see, for example, early discussions including Berry, 1972; Blowers, 1972; Chisholm, 1971; Eyles, 1971, 1973; Robson, 1971). Over the ensuing 50 years geographers have worked with local communities and other partners to maximise place-based impact through research on, for example, development and regeneration (Muir et al., 2000; Whitehead, 2003), debates on localism and sustainability in planning (Harris & Moore, 2015; Raco, 2015) or risk management (Thaler & Priest, 2014), community cohesion (Davies, 2002; Thomas et al., 1996), participatory geographies (see guest editorial by Wynne-Jones et al., 2015) and methods (see Kindon, 2003; Pain & Francis, 2003).

Building on this long tradition of geographical work and the reinvigoration of the civic university agenda – alongside new place-based funding opportunities, including, within the UK, recent programmes on Strength in Places, ESRC Local Policy Innovation Partnerships and NIHR Health Determinants Research Collaborations – it is now timely for geography as a discipline to revisit its civic scope and ambition. As part of our wider disciplinary practices, geographers often work with external stakeholders, partner organisations and communities through place-based research that addresses local as well as global challenges (see, for example, Wills, 2016 on localism). Civic priorities, community engagement and teaching that involves students addressing 'real-world' issues have also become an important part of our educational practice (Jarvis, 2023; Jenkins & Pänke, 2023). Co-designed programmes, placement modules and fieldwork enable our students to access the 'out-in-the-world' nature of civically engaged geography and help students to gain foundational knowledge about real-world challenges (Trudeau et al., 2018).

This is not to say that we should blithely take civic geographies at face value. As Philo et al. (2015) note, the idea of 'civics' is not a neutral term, and can hold conservative and even reactionary connotations, as well as offer the potential for a critical and transformative engagement with community and place ('counter-civics'). Philo et al. (2015) call for an opening of the question of what *civic geographies* could look like, 'suggesting that to consider the civic is to explore what makes – enables, empowers – people to feel connected to or associated with something "larger" than themselves, an assembly of others who might be regarded as a "community" or a "society", likely with some sense of *placed-ness* involved'.

As the university sector more widely reconsiders its wider civic responsibilities, it is therefore timely for geography as a discipline to do likewise. Thus, the challenge to the geographical community is to ask questions of our role in this agenda: how do we articulate our civic engagements, how can we critically evaluate our past, present and future civic geographies, and what can spatial frames of investigation and analysis bring to civically responsible research and teaching?

This commentary introduces civic geographies as a theme in *Area* where papers can be collected, allowing a space for discussion at a time when the civic university agenda has become a priority for the sector. Alongside this, the RGS-IBG's Civic Geography Network, launched in 2023, provides a forum to share and debates ideas about civic geographies, showcase civic geographical research and teaching, and create a community of practice to develop approaches to engagement and social responsibility.

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