

The Benjamin Menschel Civic Project Lab. (CPL) 2023/24

This document sets the intellectual tone and strategic vision for the Benjamin Menschel Civic Projects Lab, and to articulate and elevate the means and outcomes of its ongoing cultural and indeed, scientific outcomes and processes.

“The Purpose of education is not only to acquire knowledge but also to develop character.”

Peter Cooper

“Marking a significant step forward in its historic commitment to educating active citizens, The Cooper Union introduced its newest public space at a ribbon-cutting in November. The Benjamin Menschel Civic Projects Laboratory will be an all-in-one classroom, workspace, and public showcase for interdisciplinary projects aimed at civic-focused issues. Designed to facilitate engagement with the broader New York City community, the lab can be viewed and entered from Third Avenue where it anchors one corner of Cooper Union’s academic building, 41 Cooper Square. The Civic Projects Lab now provides a dedicated space for the kind of pedagogical undertakings that are foundational to Cooper’s mission of inspiring students to address critical societal challenges.” January 10, 2022

2024 Vision Statement of the Curator- FUTURES.

Mission:

The CPL is committed to the shared pursuit of knowledge that is informed by and toward broader civic impact, import and discourse that is inclusive of, but beyond the limits of discipline constraints.

Purpose:

To build productive intellectual and creative processes and outcomes which are predicated on collaboration between academia and society on issues of civic concern, for New York and its extended communities.

Values:

The CPL recognizes that Education is broader than the confines of Academia, and that Education should be accessible to all, regardless of race, religion, gender, or economic status, in the spirit and as per quote of Peter Cooper. This is complementary to the contemporary values of The Cooper Union.

Reflection of the Curator:

For the CPL to reach its potential, it must secure and project a theory of praxis, which gives strategic shape and hierarchy to its content and how it projects itself to The Cooper Community and society. The CPL can and should evolve toward a curated and strategic civic education resource. Whereas the role of a director is administrative in nature, the Curatorial act is an investment in coordinating the production of knowledge within a distinct thought frame. Whilst the role of the Curator is an arbiter of content, this arbitrage is informed by a structured engagement with the Communities of The Cooper Union, the city and the world, and the Benjamin Menschel family.

FUTURES is the curatorial frame for the cultural production and praxis of the Benjamin Menschel Civic Projects [CPL] for 2024/25.

The Future is understood as an unfolding reality, indeterminate in nature, but proximate to what is known, a perturbation from the current moment, and an act of critical imagination. The motor and motto of this curatorial frame is “**experimenta per disciplinam,**” or “experimentation over instruction.”

Civic: From the French word civique or the Latin word civicus, which comes from the word civis meaning "citizen," it suggests belonging to one or more communities, in which the actions of the individual or citizen are subject to and in support of a social compact with that community.

Project: A discrete set of activities and or processes with specific outcomes, it comes from the Latin word projectum, which is the past participle of the Latin verb proicere. Proicere is made up of pro-, which means precedence, and iacere, which means "to do". The word project originally meant "before an action." By nature, and desire, *projects are ideally speculative.*

Laboratory: In the 14th century, the word "laboratory" was commonly used to describe a place where labor, under a specific set of controlled conditions, took place. In the 16th century, the term began to be used to describe the workplaces of physicians, alchemists, apothecaries, and others, working on the edges of known knowledge. The hallmark of the laboratory is the experiment to advance knowledge. *It is distinct but complementary to the classroom whose primary purpose is to transmit accepted knowledge.*

“It is said that the present is pregnant with the future... no given state is naturally explicable except by means of that which has immediately preceded it” — Leibniz.

Seized by the question of what we know, and what is possible, we as civic actors sit on the cusp of looking forwards and backwards, like the mythical Janus, who saw both beginnings and endings as an equal simultaneity. The CPL is a laboratory, a primary site of speculation, and curated curiosity, where we will experiment, postulate and observe on imaginations of the Future, looking inwards and outwards, to and fro, with civic society and academia in acute and urgent dialogue with the past and present.

Operating beyond the confines of the classroom model and eschewing the temptation to replicate established knowledge as the sum of our virtue, we recognize the spirit of discovery and evolution/contestation of civic ideas is vital to the pursuit of, “dialogues of civic virtue.”

Experimenta per disciplinam.

Dialogue = Workshops_Research_Symposia_Publication_Installation_Project_Grants

Geography versus Impact.

The physical extents of the CPL are modest, but the impact and reach of the CPL will reach beyond its physical terroir. The CPL will consciously reach out across the footprint of The Cooper Union Community in line with its Civic mandate, and construct new imaginaries and projects, initiatives, alliances for the betterment of all.

Argument_ “Why Futures matter.”

The world is in a polycrisis where anthropocentrism has created an interconnected web of climate and social shocks and risks, which cannot be adequately read or mitigated against via purely local means. The polycrisis is a network of perils defined by the non-linear amplification of local predicament, and these aggregate to significantly degrade humanities prospects for success in a pluralistic and nature positive world. The local and the global are in this inescapable continuum and the climate transition is just as much a political, technical and innovation process and entanglement of anthromes.

The world is accordingly split between the tensions of climate denial and techno-optimism, and the paralysis caused by the seemingly insurmountable ecological stewardship this epoch requires. These splits are maintained by the notion that science alone can reconfigure reality and discover new efficiencies that will suppress the necessity to reimagine the relationship between body and earth, body and community, political economy and various social constructs that shape who we are. Equally a growing subsidence from fact has led to unstable social and political discourse and the ascendancy of doubt and a reassertion of discredited tropes.

Encountering these socio-technological divides and their impacts on society is, in a manner, an act of civic duty, and an acknowledgement that education devoid of the social contexts or communities in which they operate is a diminishing enterprise. To be civic is to engage in the public arena, Civitas indeed denotes belonging to community, with codified cultural rights and responsibilities which aggregate to a social construct of productive participation. Thus, to be civic is to be a citizen, and the city remains the premier archetype and articulation of the multiple communities of citizenship and belonging; the city is the complicit vehicle for the daily flow of goods, services, material, social and political practices. Accordingly, “rewriting the city,” has civic implications, and conversely one cannot be civic without a cosmopolitan entanglement with the city and its cultural, social, ecological and material boundaries.

New York.

The city of New York has a strong unifying super culture that coexists with neighborhood subcultures and a wide variety of traditions, it stands out as a globally unique urban example of cosmopolitanism. It has always been a city of the “Other,” in 1855, 51% of New York were foreign born, and it is no wonder that it earned the title of the great, “Melting Pot,” (Israel Zangwill, 1908) for its ability to provide an immersive and diverse experience of culture, religion, and traditions from all over the world. New York is the home of the United Nations, with over 800 recorded languages, and is a global center of finance and commerce, culture, technology, entertainment and media, academics and scientific output, the arts and fashion.

Accordingly, to be “civic,” is to be engaged in this city, it’s milieu and metropolitan modernities- which are often global and local in nature. Thus, the future of the city and its rural hinterlands are dynamic, porous and precarious; in cultural, geopolitical and ecological terms.

Cities and urban areas are responsible for 70% of GHG, and causal to various negative externalities such as, biodiversity decline, anthrome expansion, increased inequality, and extreme weather patterns; to name a few. Global building floor area is forecast to double by 2060. To accommodate the largest wave of urban growth in human history, we expect to add 2.4 trillion ft² (230 billion m²) of new floor area to the global building stock, the equivalent of adding an entire New York City to the world, every month, for 40 years. Achieving zero emissions from new construction will require energy efficient buildings that use no on-site fossil fuels and are 100% powered by on- and/or off-site renewable energy, with vast labor relation, educational, technical implications, and dependencies. This urban demand will largely be in the so called lower-middle-income countries.

“Cities are major contributors to climate change. According to UN Habitat, cities consume 78 per cent of the world’s energy and produce more than 60 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions. Yet, they account for less than 2 per cent of the Earth’s surface.

The sheer density of people relying on fossil fuels makes urban populations highly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Fewer green spaces exacerbate the problem. According to the IPCC report, limiting global

warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius would “require rapid and far-reaching transitions in uses of energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings), and industrial systems.”

An added challenge is the projection, in a [UN report](#), that another 2.5 billion people will reside in urban areas by 2050; nearly 90 per cent of them in cities in Asia and Africa. The good news is that cities around the world have already begun to take measures to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and are putting policies in place that encourage the use of alternative energy sources. Efforts by policy makers and administrators to address climate change, however, will need to accelerate to keep pace with population growth and the rapid climate change.” (UN, 2018)

In sum, the city captures Architecture, Engineering, Art and the Human Social Sciences, all of which are ontologically engaged with the flows of goods, ideas, and social constructs, and implicated by the city as the predominant stage for human behavior. To confront and orient civically grounded pedagogy, is to work across, though, and with[in] disciplines in shaping **FUTURES**.

Accordingly, whilst we operate and conceive our actions in-loco, a cosmopolitan regard is required, and a deliberate rethinking of the centrality of the monolithic human in the context of the planet. The Sixth Industrial Revolution (Makeka 2024) suggests a planet-centric approach to development, bending the current arc of the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR, the digitization of manufacturing, and the Internet of Things/IOT), and the 5th Industrial Revolution (5IR, the Internet of People/IOP) towards Planet-smart socio-economic development. To shape the next generation of thinkers and doers who will in turn shape a world that will ameliorate the impacts of global warming of 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways is our task. To nurture actors who are equipped to navigate and articulate a local and global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and eradicate poverty; the CPL must contribute to planetary impact through local action and partnerships.

Futures is an invitation to redefine these and other social constructs, as sites of experimentation between the social, artistic and scientific spheres of being. It is, however, not a denunciation of the past, but rather a positioning of the imagination as an act of creating, “future pasts,” or plausible speculations of society as we know it. **Futures** suggests that an intermingling of indigenous and scientific traditions, of the academic and speculative, of canon and the unknown may reveal fertile pathways to thread our way through the polycrisis.

One cannot imagine **Futures** without questioning what it means to be human through the myths, arts, science and tenets of our time.

What constitutes being?

What does planetary stewardship entail?

What must we ask to answer the questions of our time?

What is the creative and social intersection between knowledge and enquiry?

What is local and what is global?

As the CPL explores “**Futures**,” its purpose is far less about the secure transmittal of authoritative fact, (the classroom in its narrowest scholastic sense,) but rather as a thematic connective tissue between society and our imagination, exploring its tension and porosity as fertile grounds for reframed scholarship, partnerships and discovery. It is more accordingly ontological than pedagogical, more interrogative than canonical, and prioritizes speculation across disciplines over teaching within one discipline. The CPL should be the site of discovering anew.

Futures will deploy Inter-disciplinary tools within The Cooper Union community but pursue trans-disciplinary methods in the interests of societal impact and comport with a view toward relevance and engagement beyond academic confines.

Futures acknowledges the polycrisis of the prevailing human condition, and the unique confluence of the CPL and the City of New York, acting as a globally exceptional conurbation of communities, talent, and potential.

Futures is where the world meets our community, and our community meet’s the world.

Futures draws new lines amidst the old and seeks to describe the interstitial space and societal possibilities between, using past, present and the future as complementary and indivisible areas of enquiry. The “Theory of Change,” ideas flourish in a climate where they are gestated, nourished, and released into the lived world, to reinform our thinking and to foster the generation of new ideas.

To achieve this ambition, The CPL will have three pillars recognizing that a theory of change model for greatest impact and dialogue:

- ❖ **Incubate**
- ❖ **Facilitate**
- ❖ **Integrate**

Incubation.

The CPL recognizes that it acts as a connective tissue between the schools of The Cooper Union and society, a laboratory for experimentation, and structured speculation. As such it can host initiatives, ideas, ventures and pedagogical propositions which sit, “**beyond teaching outcomes,**’ but overlaps with, “**the learning intent of societal import.**” The CPL can also serve as a place where faculty, students and indeed society can submit

experiments/initiatives for nurturing and hosting, subject to Curatorial approval and alignment with thematic constraints.

Facilitation.

The CPL recognizes that building, “thought-bridges,” between our faculties and society will require active curation and solicitation of content. Whilst the work of transcending disciplinary boundaries is core to the ethos of Peter Cooper, it remains a work in progress at The Cooper Union. Interdisciplinary practice within the schools will be addressed in part by aligning interests to societal issues that will require collaboration between our faculties and civil society.

Addressing the polycrisis is the underlying tenet of the Curatorial theme, “**Futures.**”

Complexity theorists Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern first used the term polycrisis in their 1999 book, *Homeland Earth*, to argue that the world faces, “no single vital problem, but many vital problems, and it is this complex intersolidarity of problems, antagonisms, crises, uncontrolled processes, and the general crisis of the planet that constitutes the number one vital problem” (p. 74) (Morris, Kern, 1999) (“Where did the term polycrisis come from? - Polycrisis”)

“South African sociologist and sustainable transitions theorist Mark Swilling then adopted the term to capture “a nested set of globally interactive socio-economic, ecological and cultural-institutional crises that defy reduction to a single cause” (2013, p. 98).” (“Where did the term polycrisis come from? - Polycrisis”) Climate change, rising inequality, and the threat of financial crises interact in complex ways that multiply their overall impact (Swilling 2013, 2019).

Integration:

The CPL shall play an active role toward influencing curriculum evolution, supporting enrollment, inspiring, “intra and extra- civic discourse,” and where necessary leading with agency on processes to secure and deploy resources, partnerships, and creating the necessary infrastructure to enable this.

The CPL is premised on a belief that project-level interventions can achieve impact at scale at a policy and professional level where insights can be delivered across multiple civic spaces and communities. Policy and practitioner level interventions can also guide practice and education at the project level, where solutions can be further informed by the realities and requirements of policymakers and practitioners and the insights of our community. Across all engagements, the user-centric insights collected within the communication and engagement workstreams can be further integrated into solutions that are activated to ensure as inclusive of an approach as possible. Potential activation outputs include the development of

progressive and inclusive policies to influence education through civic relevance: Leveraging the creation of data and knowledge to advise decision makers in communities of interest.

Futures is a curatorial commitment to creating knowledge that is civic in impact, technologically grounded, transdisciplinary in mode, and Planet-Smart.



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THE BENJAMIN MENSCHER CIVIC PROJECTS LAB- 2024/2025