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Producing Inclusive Futures: Pedagogy, Governance, and the Pragmatist Reform of Higher Education

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Abstract

Visions of the smart, sustainable, innovative, and resilient city are not neutral. They rest on a habit of treating expert measurement as real knowledge and experience as mere opinion. The result is thin inclusion: more people are consulted, but what counts as knowledge stays the same. Universities matter here because they produce both these visions and the standards for judging them. This essay offers pragmatism as an alternative, where knowledge grows from working out together what the consequences of an action mean. It follows three implications through teaching and governance: who counts as a knowledge producer, how learning happens by trying things and seeing what follows, and how what people feel counts as evidence. A speculative fiction of a governance assembly in an imagined Amsterdam program shows these ideas at work. A future is inclusive only while those who live with it can still change it.

Future Imaginaries in Higher Education

The future is often treated as something that follows the present; a horizon that never quite arrives. Yet futures also act on the present. Collectively held visions of desirable and attainable outcomes, what Jasanoff and Kim (2015) call future imaginaries, organize present trajectories toward some possibilities and away from others. When a city commits to “smart” infrastructure or “resilient” growth, it is not only describing a future it expects but actively organizing present budgets, partnerships, and skills around that vision. The future, in this sense, is not a distant horizon, but a governing force within contemporary practice (Beckert 2016; Haraway 2016).

Dominant visions of future cities cluster around the “smart,” “sustainable,” “innovative,” and “resilient” city. They organize municipal agendas toward digital infrastructures, climate-oriented growth, and security-driven resilience (Jasanoff & Kim 2015; Vanolo 2014). These visions appear politically neutral and universally beneficial. Yet their neutrality is produced rather than given, sustained by an epistemic logic (Swyngedouw 2018): a tacit set of rules about what counts as valid knowledge of the future, who is authorized to produce it, and for whom. That technocratic logic treats expert measurement as the standard for serious knowledge, while experience is dismissed as softer, less reliable, mere opinion. It vests the authority to produce such knowledge in credentialled professionals and addresses it to the administrators and investors who need legible, comparable inputs (Porter 1995; Scott 1998). What this logic produces is a thin form of inclusion: more voices may be consulted, but the criteria by which their contributions count remain unchanged.

Moving past thin inclusion requires a different account of who is entitled to interpret consequences and revise commitments. Inclusive futures, as we use the term, name that account. They are futures in which those who live with the consequences, the communities, places, and ecologies that bear them, retain that entitlement. The consequences at stake are not only material but also experiential and emotional, and they extend to non-human as well as human bearers (Fricker 2007; Haraway 2016; Santos 2014). A neighborhood whose residents are surveyed about a transport scheme but cannot contest how fatigue, displacement, or ecological strain is interpreted has been consulted, not included (Arnstein 1969). Inclusion in this sense is not a destination an institution arrives at but a continuous practice of remaining answerable to those it affects, human and otherwise.

Universities sit at an unusual intersection in the production of urban future imaginaries.¹ They produce these visions: through research that turns *smart*, *sustainable*, *innovative*, and *resilient* from political slogans into

measurable indicators and evidence-backed objectives; through curricula that train students to recognize these as the futures worth pursuing; and through partnerships that carry them into municipal planning, infrastructure procurement, and policy design (Facer 2011; Miller 2018). They also produce the epistemic standards by which such imaginaries are evaluated. What counts as a credible claim about the future, what kinds of evidence are required, which methods are recognized, is shaped through academic training before it is applied in any urban decision. A planner deciding whether resident testimony or modelled projections should drive a flood-resilience plan is drawing on standards she did not invent; she absorbed them in graduate seminars years before (Bourdieu 1988; Santos 2014). This is what makes higher education a pivotal arena for inclusive futures: it is one of the few sites where imaginaries and the standards that legitimize them are produced in the same institutional motion.

Reworking them requires an alternative epistemology adequate to the task. Pragmatism is one such tradition. It emerged in late-19th- and early-20th-century America as an alternative to philosophical accounts that grounded knowledge in correspondence to a fixed reality, and its commitments have since shaped experiential learning, critical pedagogy, action research, and democratic experimentalism. For pragmatists, knowledge is not a mirror of reality (Rorty 1979) but a tool for navigating problematic situations: situations in which habitual practice breaks down and people must inquire into what to do next (James 1948; Dewey 1938). Inquiry, on this view, begins not from theory but from such situations: knowledge is generated where institutional decisions produce effects on the people and places living with them, and where those affected interpret what those effects mean. Pragmatism's relevance for inclusive futures lies precisely here. The redistribution of interpretive standing is not added to inquiry afterwards; it is constitutive of how inquiry begins.

Three implications follow, and structure the rest of the essay. First, sources: who counts as a knowledge producer cannot be settled in advance; communities, places, and ecologies must be recognized as participants in inquiry, not its objects. Second, practice: learning happens by trying things and seeing what follows, organized around identifying problems in real-world conditions rather than transmitting pre-specified content. Third, register: what people feel as a result of institutional action is part of what must be interpreted, making well-being a measure of whether inquiry is proceeding adequately. Pragmatist universities can contribute to inclusive urban futures by changing the conditions under which any vision of the future can be sustained, not by including more voices in an unchanged process.

Pragmatist Pedagogy

The three implications named above (sources, practice, register) structure what follows. Each names a condition the conventional university tends to suppress, and each must be reworked if pedagogy is to ground knowledge in the consequences of practice rather than in pre-set indicators. Pragmatist pedagogy treats learning as irreducibly experiential: not as the transmission of abstract content from expert to student, but as collective reflection on the effects of practice (Biesta 1995; Dewey 1938; Elkjaer 2018; Taguchi 2011). Learners and educators engage shared problems, test provisional responses, and reflect together on the situations those responses create.

This reorients the questions at the center of the curriculum. Rather than asking what students should know and be able to do upon graduation, a pragmatist pedagogy asks: what can be learned from those who live with the consequences of what is being studied? What problems are real and present in the places where learning occurs, and how should inquiry respond to them? And what does honest engagement cost us emotionally, and how do we attend to that cost? Together, these pull the institution away from the logic of the ivory tower and toward something closer to a community garden: rooted in local soil, shaped by seasons, sustained through shared labor and responsibility.

Sources of Knowledge

The dominant epistemic logic of the university assumes that legitimate knowledge originates within it: validated by its methods, credentialled by its institutions, and flowing outward to the communities it serves. Pragmatist pedagogy challenges this assumption directly, proposing instead a more distributed account: knowledge is co-produced by the full range of actors surrounding the university, including communities, places, and nature (Martin & Te Riele 2011; Lynch & Mannion 2021; Bleazby et al. 2023; Yemini, Engel & Ben Simon 2025).

The first move is to take communities seriously as epistemic actors. Community members are not subjects of study or stakeholders to be consulted: they are holders of knowledge the university does not possess, knowledge produced through living with consequences rather than observing them from a distance. This means that communities surrounding the university can actively shape what is studied, how it is framed, and what counts as a meaningful outcome. Curriculum, in this view, is not delivered to a community but negotiated with it.

The second move is to treat the place not as a backdrop to learning but as a site of inquiry in its own right. Every place carries histories of use

and neglect, relations of presence and exclusion, conditions that enable certain kinds of action and foreclose others. These are not merely illustrative resources that enrich curriculum; they can actively shape what can be known, by whom, and under what conditions.

The third move is harder, but follows from the same logic. If communities and places are legitimate sources of knowledge because they bear and respond to consequences, then the same argument extends to the world of nature. For Dewey, experience is not a uniquely human possession but a relational process in which an organism and its environment continually adjust to each other (Dewey 1925), which means a forest, a river, or an urban ecosystem registers consequences in its own way, even if not in human language. More recent initiatives recognizing nature as a rights-bearing subject arrive at a similar conclusion from a different direction (Kauffman & Martin 2021): that environments are not passive recipients of human action but active respondents to it. To learn how responses of nature can be translated into terms that institutional inquiry can register requires methods, mediators, and forms of attention the university does not currently train its students to develop.

In practice this might look like residents formulating research questions alongside academics rather than appearing as data sources, community members designing and teaching courses on consequences they understand better than any academic could, or place-based teaching centered on physical engagement with the more-than-human world: ecological restoration, environmental monitoring, or a student formally appointed to speak on behalf of nature.

Practice: Knowledge Tested in Action

Pragmatist knowledge is tested in use and rooted in real-world complexity rather than abstract exercises. The goal is not mastery of a fixed body of knowledge through passive observation, but to train responsiveness: the capacity to act, reflect, and adjust in relation to evolving conditions. Crucially, problem-solving is not the same as skills-based training. Pragmatist pedagogy teaches to first identify what the problem is, make it visible for analysis and then execute a solution with a mix of skills, creativity, and attention to the experiences of others.

Lectures and seminars sit alongside outdoor workshops, group walks, and site-based explorations. Walking, wandering, and deep listening become legitimate research methods. The most generative starting point is often a real condition outside the university (an abandoned building, a contested public space, infrastructure under strain), where the first task is simply to identify what the problem is before any response is proposed.

Register: The Emotional Dimension

Finally, the learning process can stir and unsettle, particularly when students are asked to engage with communities and environments that are close to them and to sit with consequences that are not abstract but felt. If we take it seriously, the well-being of students and educators is a measure of whether pedagogy is working at all, and universities should offer a room for emotional distress and healing. This does not mean protecting students from difficulty. It means equipping them with the capacities to navigate what genuine engagement provokes, and building structures that can recognize and respond when the process becomes harmful.

The emotional conditions that make this kind of learning possible also require deliberate design. At the outset of a course, students and educators can together establish shared conditions for working, including what to do when a topic becomes too close, too heavy, or too destabilizing to engage with productively. Short grounding practices at the start of a session, not as therapy but as a way of arriving present before entering difficult material, can become a regular part of the format. When a student or a group signals overload, this is treated not as an individual problem to be managed pastorally but as a collective signal that the program's demands require examination and adjustment. This orientation extends beyond the curriculum itself: allied health training and accessible mental health services become not optional supplements but structural features of an institution that takes mental wellbeing seriously.

Pragmatist Governance

Educational practice does not float free of how the institution is run. Decisions about curriculum content, financing, hiring, partnerships, and how each is evaluated shape what kinds of pedagogy are possible at all. A pragmatist pedagogy that is not matched by a pragmatist governance will be absorbed by the institution it is meant to transform: experiential learning becomes a program, community engagement becomes a metric, and the underlying epistemic logic remains intact. The same epistemic shift we have proposed for pedagogy must therefore extend to the architecture of decision-making.

The technocratic logic that shapes urban governance also operates within universities. Strategic priorities are set on the basis of national performance agreements, accreditation cycles, ranking positions, employability data, and labor market projections, while feedback from staff, students, and surrounding communities enters governance through surveys, evaluation forms, and performance indicators. Formal participatory bodies exist, but

they typically hold advisory rather than binding authority. In the Dutch context this is structurally codified: under the *Wet op het hoger onderwijs en wetenschappelijk onderzoek* (1992), the Executive Board (*College van Bestuur*) carries primary responsibility for institutional direction, while accreditation through bodies like the NVAO consolidates a governance grammar in which legitimacy flows from documented compliance with externally defined standards rather than from ongoing relational deliberation with those affected (De Boer et al. 2007; Dougherty & Natow 2020). This is the architecture within which any pragmatist pedagogy would have to operate, and which would steadily reabsorb it.

A pragmatist governance begins from the same premise as a pragmatist pedagogy: those who live with the consequences of institutional decisions are legitimate knowers. In the governance register, this means treating staff, students, surrounding communities, and surrounding nature not as stakeholders to be consulted but as parties with standing to interpret what the institution is doing and to what end. The current architecture already includes participatory bodies; the problem is that their interpretations are filtered through criteria of relevance set elsewhere. A staff council can describe rising care burdens, but those descriptions must compete for institutional attention with workload metrics that measure time but not strain. A neighborhood partner can describe what an outreach program has actually meant on the ground, but those interpretations are read against indicators designed to capture engagement in countable units. Governance as situated means redistributing not only voice but interpretive authority: the right to say what an experience means, on terms not pre-specified by the institution (Fricker 2007).

Extending this redistribution to non-human bearers rests on a related but distinct claim. For Dewey, experience is a relational process in which an organism and its environment continually adjust to each other (Dewey 1925). A wetland, a tree-lined street, an urban ecosystem responds to its environment in ways that register as changes in state and behavior: soil that subsides, air that grows harder to breathe, a population of pollinators that thins. The international rights of nature movement (Den Outer 2026; Kauffman & Martin 2021) and the Dutch Zoöp model developed at Het Nieuwe Instituut are recent attempts to give such responses institutional standing, the latter through an appointed Speaker for the Living whose remit is to translate non-human interests into organizational decisions (Pedroso-Roussado 2025). Technocratic architecture detects non-human changes well enough through sensors and monitoring, but detection without standing reproduces the problem situated governance is meant

to solve: the data is interpreted by the same actors, on the same terms, against the same priorities. What is needed is a role that holds authority to interpret what those changes mean and to halt commitments that exceed collectively agreed ecological limits.

Standing without authority to revise commitments is incomplete. Under the prevailing logic, evaluation is periodic: a cycle audit, a five-year review, an annual report. Interpretations gathered between cycles accumulate as input but rarely as cause for change, and by the time review arrives, the conditions that prompted the interpretation have often shifted or been absorbed. Pragmatist governance treats decisions as provisional commitments, examined as their consequences emerge and revised accordingly (Dewey 1938). The implication is structural rather than procedural: there is no separate decision process to which interpretations are submitted as data. The consequences arising in classrooms, partnerships, and everyday encounters are themselves the substance from which institutional commitments are continually reformulated. A complaint from a staff council about workload is not a data point for the next review but a candidate revision of the workload commitment itself; an ecological signal from a campus wetland is not an environmental indicator but a possible reason to alter a development plan already in motion. This dissolves the conventional separation between practice and governance, and gives the standing claim its institutional bite.

Fiction as Method

What follows is a speculative fiction account of a single session of the *Reflective Assembly*, the governance forum at the center of a fictional Amsterdam Urban Development program. We draw here on the tradition of critical and speculative fiction in academic research in which invented situations serve not as predictions but as a way of rehearsing possibility (Coleman & Jungnickel 2024; Watson 2025). Pragmatism holds that knowledge grows out of situations as they unfold, not from the application of theory to stable cases; by staging consequences rather than deducing them, the narrative becomes part of the method (Tomin & Collis 2024).

The Amsterdam Urban Development program is imagined as an integrated higher education initiative that dissolves the conventional separation between vocational, applied, and research tracks in the Dutch system, bringing together learners across age, background, and prior experience. The Reflective Assembly is its primary governance forum, where community members can propose experiments, participants collectively assess their consequences, and new practices emerge when existing ones

prove inadequate. The session that follows produces one such proposal mid-deliberation. Pedagogy and governance are not separate in this institution; they are two registers of the same inquiry.

The Assembly is structured by two standing practices. *Those Most Affected* are participants whose accounts of a curricular decision have flagged the sharpest consequences; their endorsement is required before any revision passes, operationalizing the redistribution of interpretive authority. The Speaker for the Living is a standing role held by an ecologically literate participant who can halt proposals that exceed collectively agreed ecological limits, extending interpretive authority to non-human bearers. The session turns on a curricular reform, the *Circles*, which restructure learning around three overlapping domains, *Body*, *Home*, and *Neighborhood*, summarized in Table 1. The Circles are a hypothesis being tested through their consequences.

Circle	Focus	Practice	Purpose
Body	Physical, emotional, creative capacities.	Movement, philosophy, meditation, theatre, craft.	Cultivate attentiveness and embodied awareness.
Home	Domestic and material competencies.	Repair, wood and metal work, gardening, food preservation, low-energy cooking.	Strengthen everyday capacities and reduce dependence on centralized systems.
Neighborhood	Local ecosystems, infrastructure, and social relations.	Urban engineering, ecological study, social work, community-based inquiry.	Understand how resources circulate and how neighborhoods are sustained by care as much as by technical systems.

Table 1. *The three Circles: focus, practice, and purpose.*

The Reflective Assembly

Circles

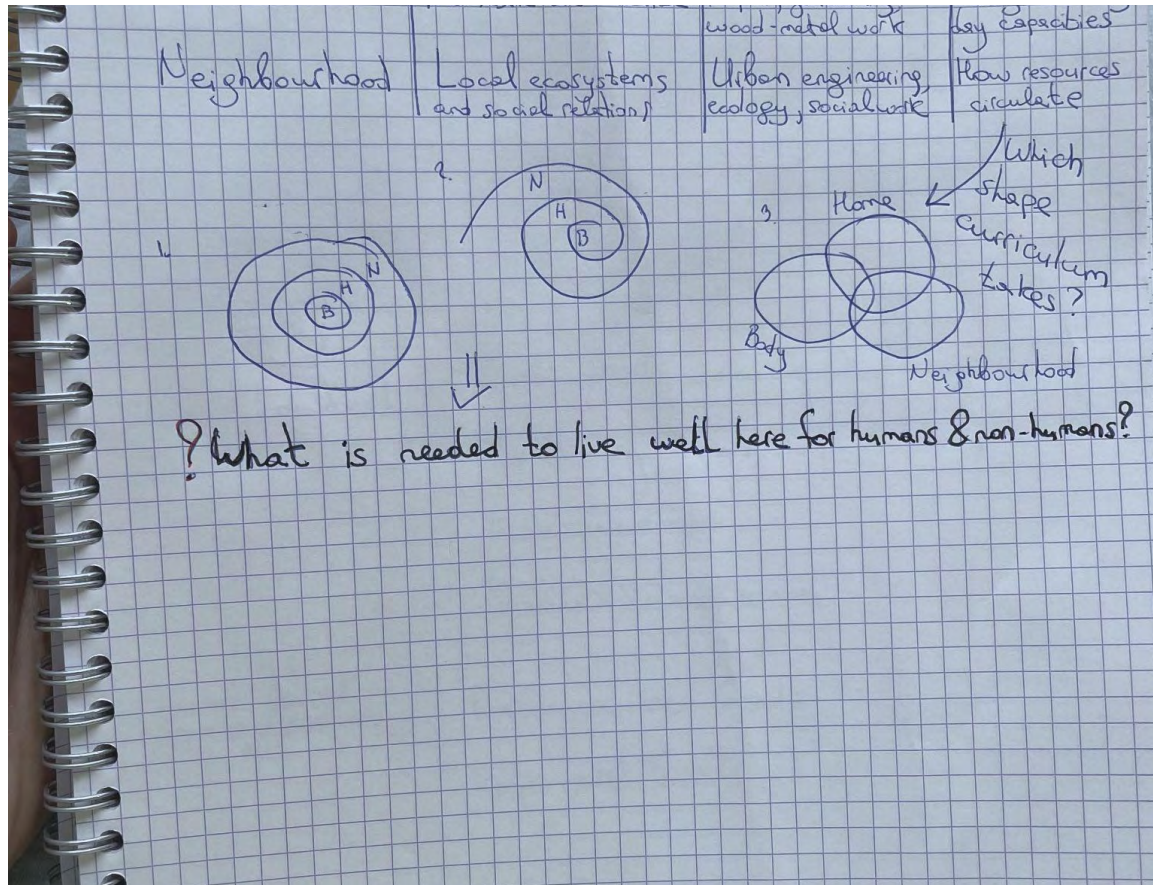


Figure 1. Hannah's notebook with notes from the previous Assembly, 2026.

Photograph by: Anya Naumova

On the tram that morning, Hannah had reread her notes about the experiment they had approved at the previous Assembly.

She remembered the longer discussion that had produced these notes. Body, Home, Neighborhood. The participants at the previous assembly had insisted the three belonged together. Amsterdam's housing crisis would not be a case study but a structuring reality. Water governance would not be history alone but a living inheritance. Field-based seminars would replace some lectures. Social work would sit alongside engineering. Credits would matter less than contribution.

On paper, it looked coherent. Almost modest. But what looked modest on paper had required months of negotiations. The Circles did not fit neatly into existing course codes. They blurred the line between classroom, workshop, and neighborhood projects.

She folded the pages back into her bag before entering Ru Paré.

Ru Paré

Figure 2. *Ru Paré's building*, 2026. Photograph by: Anya Naumova

The temperature in the room was colder than comfortable. A heating system the students had designed never quite warmed the building evenly. The radiators clicked on and off, part of a setup that had been put in place in a hurry.

The Assembly gathered in Amsterdam-West's Ru Paré, a former school building with lofty classroom windows and wide staircases polished by decades of foot traffic. It was a common public area rather than an academic campus, hosting mutual-aid meetings, language collectives, legal consultation hours, and sewing workshops.

Today's meeting was organized in one of the larger rooms on the first floor. A long wooden table stood in the center. Chairs and floor cushions were scattered loosely around it, arranged and rearranged as people arrived.

For every meeting, participants were invited to bring an artefact symbolizing an experience, a thought, a wish, which they wanted to put

“What problems are real and present in the places where learning occurs, and how should inquiry respond to them?”



Figure 3. *Ru Paré's garden and outside area*, 2026. Photograph by: Anya Naumova

up for public discussion. This morning the table gradually filled with a jar of canal water collected after heavy rainfall, a small branch from a tree in Rembrandt Park, a ball of thread dyed in the Body circle's craft class, a USB stick containing interviews recorded with residents, and a battery.

Attendees

Learners from all three circles, educators, neighborhood partners, and anyone else who had provided feedback on the current experiment were all invited to the Assembly. Some had attended every Assembly; others had never spoken in the room before.

On the far wall sat Mira, the Assembly's Speaker for the Living. Soil traced the cuffs of her jacket; dried mud lined the hem of her trousers. A field biologist before taking on the role, she was more accustomed to wetlands and sampling grids than deliberative circles. Her role was to attend to what could not speak for itself: soil, trees, the air drifting through the open window. No decision moved forward without her acknowledgement.

With a stack of printed papers resting on her palm and her gaze sweeping the crowded room, Hannah rose slowly. She had strong feelings about the Circles, but her role required her to hold them lightly.

Unlike the advisory councils common in universities, the Assembly did not simply offer recommendations. Its conclusions directly shaped the program's structure. Facilitating these meetings required a different kind of attention than in other working groups, less urgency, more attention; fewer corrections, more care. "Thank you all for being here and for providing your written reflections over the past week," Hannah softly began, slightly lifting the stack. "From the conversations we had and the letters you wrote I got the feeling that the Circles are working as we had hoped. Maybe even better. But there are also consequences we did not anticipate, and we gathered today to think about our response to them."

Those Most Affected

She glanced briefly toward the six members of Those Most Affected and slowly scanned the room, putting faces to the reflections she read. The exhaustion of juggling the Home workshops with paid shifts. The tension in a Neighborhood partnership that felt more extractive than reciprocal. The Body circle reopening memories someone was not ready to hold. They were those who, in their written reflections, had described the highest levels of disruption or unintended costs resulting from the Circles experiment. In the pre-assembly vote, these accounts had been tagged as the most severe. Those Most Affected must recognize themselves in the adjustments. As part of the Assembly's practice, no revision could pass without their endorsement.

The category had emerged the previous spring, after an experiment with public progress reports. Two participants had warned the format risked exposing unfinished work punitively; their concerns were folded into a broader summary about transparency. Within weeks, educators described the sessions as humiliating. The Assembly spent an evening retracing how openness had turned into exposure.

After that, they changed their practice. Anyone who felt the weight of a proposal most sharply could request to sit among Those Most Affected. The aim was not to rank suffering, but to ensure that the sharpest edge of a decision was visible before it hardened into structure.

"I highlighted some of the different perspectives in this summary which I would like you all to read before we discuss. After you're done reading, take a couple of minutes to write down your reactions. Just like last time, we will go round to give everyone an opportunity to share their thoughts."

She passed half of the stack of printed copies of the handwritten report to her left and the other half to her right. The room quieted as people focused on the sheets in front of them. When the reading was done, no one spoke. The heating clicked on, then off again. Mira glanced at her notes, then gave a small nod. As the first people began reaching for pens and post-its, Hannah looked over at the six members of Those Most Affected one by one. She gave a small nod to one of them and Benjamin responded with a half shrug and raised brow.

When the last person put down their pen, Hannah walked to the whiteboard beside the ecological panel and uncapped a marker. Two columns. On the left, she wrote: Unintended Consequences. On the right: Benefits Experienced. She faced the room.

“Let’s visualize this before we jump to solutions. Are there any consequences that people want to highlight or add? And remember, for this Assembly to work as intended, we listen to understand rather than to respond. Those Most Affected will summaries before we move toward revision.”

One of the first-years leaned forward. “Should we start with the satisfaction scores from the mid-term survey? They’ll tell us where the strain is.”

Hannah let the question sit before answering. “The scores will tell us how many. They won’t tell us where the weight has landed, or on whom. We need both, but not in that order.”

The student nodded slowly and sat back.

Invisible Labor

Benjamin leaned back, one ankle over his knee, in a posture carved from worksite breaks rather than seminar rooms. He smiled easily, but the smile did not fully disguise the fatigue around his eyes.

“Thank you, Hannah. My name is Benjamin. I recently got involved with your Urban Development program. I have worked for twelve years as an electrician for the municipality...”

He paused, then said: “There was a girl, second week, who watched me tape a junction and asked why we ran the cable around the willow root rather than through it. I’d never been asked. I’d just always done it. We spent an afternoon mapping which trees the grid had to bend around. That’s the kind of thing this was supposed to be.” His voice flattened. “But for every one of those, there were five who didn’t show, and I was the one calling them. It was very draining.”

The battery on the table seemed suddenly less symbolic.

“What was originally intended to be a community-oriented form of learning forced me to drag a bunch of kids along by the hand. I wasn’t trained for

this. I understand this was an experiment, but I think we should seriously reconsider how to reorganize the course so that the community doesn't end up paying for something that sounds good on paper."

The heating clicked off again. Mira remained still, listening, her pen resting against the page. Lauren, a retired librarian who now splits her time between the community garden and afternoon childcare, nodded slowly.

Emergence

"What do you think a redesign would require?" Lauren asked softly.

Amira, a second-year student, pushed her chair back before speaking. She hesitated just long enough to gather the room's attention. "I think we've made a mistake," she began. "We keep saying students are learning by doing. But in practice, they arrive as beginners in projects that cannot afford beginners." Amira continued, more deliberately now. "What if no one joins a community project until they demonstrate that they can actually contribute? Not on paper. For real."

"We design a readiness check," Amira said, stepping closer to the board. "Before entering the energy module, students demonstrate basic technical literacy, reliability, and task ownership. Not through an exam. Through peer and community certification."

"Certification?" someone echoed. "We might need to look for a better word..."

Benjamin looked across the table. "You mean I wouldn't get a group of six people who disappear after week two?"

"Exactly," Amira replied. "If they can't commit yet, they stay in preparation labs. They practice. They shadow. They don't enter the field." She tapped the board lightly beside the new heading, as if fixing the proposal within the Assembly's shared practice.

One of the Body Circle facilitators raised their hand. "Doesn't that just shut people out? The Circles were designed to lower thresholds, not raise them. What happens to the ones who aren't ready yet? Do they fall behind?"

Before Amira could respond, Mira lifted her hand. Hannah turned toward her.

"I want to pause us for a moment," Mira said quietly. "As we speak about increasing preparation and field presence, I hear an assumption that more time on site automatically strengthens contribution. That might be true for people." She rested her pen against the page. "But environmentally, it may also increase strain." A few people shifted in their seats. "The temporary grid installation is already under pressure. If redesign means more movement, more testing, more material adjustments, we need to consider what that does to air quality and soil disturbance in the coming weeks."

Lauren had been quiet for a while. Her eyes were on the window, not on the board. “If we change this,” she said, “we change who this program produces five years from now.” She was not speaking only about graduates. The electricians, planners, and facilitators who passed through this room would later sit in municipal offices and decide how streets were rewired and parks maintained.

Mira looked up from her notebook. “The soil disturbance readings from the installation site peak mid-week,” she said. “The same days the students report the highest stress in their reflections. I don’t know what to make of that yet. But I’d want to look at it before we assume it’s unrelated.”

“Then any redesign must include ecological limits alongside social ones,” Lauren added, leaning forward, palms flat on her knees.

Hannah nodded slowly. “Agreed. No increase in field activity without prior ecological assessment and a cap on hours at the installation site.”

“Preparation labs remain off-site unless explicitly cleared,” Amira said after a brief hesitation. The room settled around the proposal.

Hannah looked toward Mira. “Is that sufficient for now?”

Mira held the silence a moment longer. Her fingers rested lightly on the edge of the notebook, as if weighing whether what she had written there justified interruption. “For now.”

Experimentation

“Let’s structure this as a trial,” Hannah said at last, uncapping the marker. She hesitated a fraction longer than usual before writing, aware of the direction she herself would have preferred. She wrote at the top of a new sheet: Readiness Check. Those Most Affected leaned closer together as she spoke, chairs drawing inward in a quiet circle of their own.

“Let’s try two approaches side by side,” Lauren suggested. “In one Circle, open entry continues. In another, readiness confirmation is required.”

Hannah nodded. “We begin by paying attention to three things: the strain carried by community partners, how students develop before and after entering projects, and the quality of the work itself. If those turn out to be the wrong lenses, we revise them.”

“Students can reflect on their skills before and after entry,” Amira added. “It may make them more confident once they enter.” Benjamin allowed a small smile. “Then we all benefit.”

The heating pulsed back on briefly. Hannah faced the circle again. “If anyone objects to running this trial, please raise a hand.” A pause followed. Someone shifted as if considering it. No hand rose. Mira remained seated, hands folded loosely over her notebook.

“Then we begin next Monday,” Hannah said. “Those who want to refine the details meet tomorrow at fifteen.” The battery remained on the table. It was not removed, nor resolved, but it was no longer left unnamed.

As people began gathering their things, Mira remained seated. “Can I say one more thing?” The room resettled. “We’ve decided to slow the pace of field entry and cap the hours on site. That’s good. But I want to name something we haven’t resolved.” She turned a page in her notebook. “We’ve been talking about the site all morning as if it’s just a limit on what we can do. I think it might also be a collaborator. The changes we’re seeing in the soil, the air quality shifts, the way the embankment is responding to the grid, these aren’t just measures of our impact. They’re part of what the students are learning out there. I don’t think we’ve found a way yet to let that into the curriculum.” A few people paused at the door. Hannah added a line to the board beneath the session’s decisions: The site as collaborator... return to this.

The note remained on the board as the room slowly emptied. The temporary energy installation down the street would still be running in the morning, drawing its uneven load from the neighborhood grid. Next week the students would return to it, some prepared differently; some not yet allowed to enter. The Assembly would meet again to see what had changed. Whether the redesign had reduced the burden, whether the soil readings had shifted, whether the new sequence of preparation and contribution had altered how people worked together. The Circles had never promised certainty. Their purpose was simpler: to make sure that the streets rewired, the embankments maintained, and the housing retrofitted across Amsterdam-West would carry forward not a settled vision of the future, but the practice of remaining answerable to those who lived with it.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that urban futures are not merely planned but epistemically produced, and that universities, as sites where knowledge is legitimized, bear a particular responsibility for whose experience counts in that production. The dominant logic privileges what is quantifiable over what is experienced, and trains practitioners to reproduce that distinction in the institutions they later inhabit. We proposed pragmatist epistemology as an alternative grounded in the collective interpretation of consequences, and developed its implications across pedagogy and governance. The argument is not that universities should include more voices on existing terms. It is that they should change the terms on which any vision of the future can be sustained.

“Curriculum, in this view, is not delivered to a community but negotiated with it.”



Figure 5. *Streets of Amsterdam-West*, 2026. Photograph by: Anya Naumova

The fiction made visible what the theoretical argument could only assert: that pragmatist institutions do not simply process information more inclusively but treat emotional response, embodied strain, and relational friction as forms of knowledge in their own right. Benjamin's frustration with the energy module was not an obstacle to institutional functioning. It was where genuine inquiry began. His complaint surfaced a structural transfer of invisible labor that no survey would have captured. The Assembly treated it as knowledge to be interpreted rather than noise to be managed. What this dissolves is the conventional separation between learning and deciding. In the Assembly, every pedagogical moment is also governance, because the knowledge produced through shared inquiry directly reshapes the program's structure. The redistribution at stake is not from silence to voice, but from "we heard you" to "you determine whether we understood."

This answerability is what makes the futures the institution helps produce more inclusive. Under the dominant logic, an imaginary becomes authoritative when it is endorsed by the right institutions, validated against the right indicators, and aligned with the right strategic horizons; its inclusiveness is

then measured by who has been consulted in its formulation. A pragmatist university operates on a different standard. An imaginary becomes authoritative only as long as it remains revisable in light of its consequences, and inclusiveness is measured not by the breadth of consultation but by whether those who live with the imaginary's effects retain the standing to revise it. A future is inclusive, in this sense, to the extent that those who live with it retain the interpretive authority to say what it means. This is a more demanding standard than participatory or deliberative inclusion. It is also continuous rather than completed at any one moment of consultation or design.

We do not pretend this shift is simple to institutionalize. Pragmatist deliberation is slow, labor-intensive, and structurally at odds with quality assurance regimes that assume knowledge can be pre-specified. The fiction is honest about this: Benjamin's exhaustion is partly caused by the program's own ambitions. Whether such ongoing reflection becomes productive or exhausting depends on conditions the Assembly alone cannot secure: adequate funding, institutional patience, and a willingness to tolerate uncertainty as rigor rather than failure. To stay in line with both pragmatism and speculative fiction, we resist closing with a settled conclusion. The Reflective Assembly is not a model to be adopted but a speculative prototype, an exercise in institutional imagination whose value lies in the questions it opens rather than the answers it provides. We invite readers to interpret its consequences, challenge its assumptions, and consider what it would mean for their own institutions to take seriously the claim that the future should not be decided in advance, but discovered through the consequences of what is tried together.

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End Notes

1. When we use the term university here, we mean this broadly: not the research university alone, but higher education across its full range (in the Dutch context, MBO, HBO, and WO alike), because each level trains people who will act on urban environments, and expanding who can produce more inclusive visions of the future.