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Joe Hurley, Elizabeth Jean Taylor & Kath Phelan

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Collaboration with Caveats: Research–Practice Exchange in Planning

Joe Hurley, Elizabeth Jean Taylor and Kath Phelan
School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, Centre for Urban Research, RMIT University, Melbourne Australia

ABSTRACT
Researcher and practitioner collaboration in urban planning is both critical to good outcomes and problematic to achieve in reality. Collaboration has the potential for new partnerships, better research problem definition, improved research design and greater impact on practice and policy. However, politics, stakeholder agendas and funding bodies bring pressures and constraints, for which research professionals require a broader set of skills to manage. We examine researcher–practitioner collaboration as part of an action research project on urban greening in Australia. Focusing on a stakeholder engagement workshop, we examine the mechanisms used to overcome barriers to research-practice exchange. We find overt consideration of common barriers to access and use of research when planning collaboration exercises can help facilitate more productive engagement, creating spaces for mutual understanding and generating shared objectives. However, we also find that efforts at collaboration challenge traditional research practices, involve tensions and caveats, and require a different mode of researcher engagement.

Introduction
A sizeable amount of urban research is intended, to some degree, to inform and shape policies and physical urban outcomes (Dodson, 2011). The issue of researcher and practitioner exchange in urban planning is both critical to good outcomes and problematic to achieve (Durning, 2004; Balducci & Bertolini, 2007; Krizek et al., 2009; MacDonald et al., 2014; Head, 2015; Hurley et al., 2016). Previous work has highlighted an appetite for an exchange between planning research and practice, but significant barriers to it (Durning, 2004; Head et al., 2014; Taylor & Hurley, 2016). These barriers include the accessibility of content and of language (Taylor & Hurley, 2016); the disconnect between the scope and ambition of research and the local context-specific needs of practice (Durning, 2004); the pace and politics of planning practice (Krizek et al., 2009; Phibbs, 2016) and capacity deficits of both researchers and practitioners (Taylor & Hurley, 2016).

A better understanding of the barriers to research-practice exchange, and more active engagement with these barriers when designing collaborative efforts, could improve the
value and take-up of research processes used in practice. In this paper, we examine efforts to overcome barriers to research-practice exchange and reflect on the tensions involved in attempting to do so. We focus on a project called ‘Making greening happen in consolidating cities’ which examines the intersection of green space measurement and mapping, urban development, green space or urban forest strategy and policy and land-use policy. As an action research project, it includes the ongoing involvement of interested policy practitioners, with a clear objective to proactively engage practitioners in research problem identification, knowledge creation and knowledge translation (Greenwood & Levin, 2007; Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). The ‘problem definition’ phase of the project (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 93) was informed by initial engagement workshops with interested stakeholders from local, state and federal government. The workshop at the center of this paper constitutes a ‘learning arena’ in the mid-phase of the project where researchers and practitioners could communicate ‘problems of major importance’ to participants (Greenwood & Levin, 2007, p. 94). The workshop involved reporting on a prototype methodology for benchmarking urban greening in Australian cities that responded to the problem definition phase, seeking practitioner input on the methodology and on the next stages of the research project. The research reported in this paper examines the activity of research-practice exchange at this workshop and not the specifics of the research project on measuring urban greening.

Drawing on workshop observations and documentation, we explore evidence of whether and how barriers to research in practice are overcome. We look at the ‘arena’ of exchange—the workshop—both as an attempt to break down functional barriers between research and practice and to facilitate greater collaboration between researchers and practitioners. We highlight tensions between practice and research that emerge through efforts at collaboration.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we review the literature on barriers and enablers in research to practice exchange, focussing on urban planning. We then introduce our approach to examining the workshop as part of an action research project, describing the methods for documentation and analysis of the workshop proceedings. We explore the results in two parts: first, we examine researcher and practitioner exchange in the context of access and usability barriers; and second, we consider ways in which the process of attempted collaboration with policy stakeholders produce tensions and require trade-offs for researchers. We find that an overt consideration of the common barriers to research-practice exchange when planning collaboration exercises can help facilitate more productive engagement, creating spaces for mutual understanding and generating shared objectives. However, efforts at collaboration also impact on traditional research practices, present new challenges and tensions, and require a different mode of researcher engagement.

**Researching Research and Practice**

Head (2016) finds that research-practice exchange may and often does increase the effectiveness of policy-making. However, research has identified considerable barriers between urban research and practice including in Australia (Taylor & Hurley, 2016). Some barriers are specific to urban planning (Durning, 2004; Krizek et al., 2009; MacDonald et al., 2014; Hurley et al., 2016), while others are observed across the social sciences more generally (Wolman & Page, 2002; Head, 2015; Newman et al., 2016).
A recent collection of contributions from practitioners and academics explored barriers to research in practice across categories of access, usability and collaboration (Hurley et al., 2016). Access barriers include both the literal access issues associated with pay-walled academic journals, and the accessibility and intelligibility of academic language. Usability barriers refer to the relevance of research to practice, including differences between theoretically driven ideas of research work and locally context-specific interests of practitioners (Davoudi, 2006). Time and other capacity issues make difficult the translation of the relevance of theoretically focused work, or work from other jurisdictions, to local problems (Wolman & Page, 2002; Head, 2015). Planning practitioners often rely on local practice examples, media sources and rules of thumb more than on academic research (Taylor & Hurley, 2016). Practitioners view academic research as difficult to access, and difficult to interpret or use and apply to local issues. They also typically perceive research as poorly suited to navigating the political realities of decision-making.

Collaboration barriers refer to the challenges associated with professional cultures, both in research and in practice, to the more active exchange of ideas (Hurley et al., 2016). Access and use barriers pose challenges for professional cultures, both in research and in practice, and thus inhibit collaboration (Krizek et al., 2009). The perception of practitioners that research outputs are irrelevant contributes to dismissive or hostile attitudes toward research (Taylor & Hurley, 2016). With pressures in the university sector, researchers have limited capacity or incentives to actively engage with policy or practice (Hurley & Taylor, 2016). The extent of these barriers has often led to the categorization of ‘two tribes’—academic and policy-making communities—with often incompatible interests in urban inquiry (Caplan, 1979; Durning, 2004). Nonetheless, a diversity of collaborative practices exists: Some academics engage more closely with policy and similarly, some policy makers work more closely with research (Head, 2015, 2016). Rather than ‘two tribes; the landscape of research-practice exchange is perhaps better characterized as a spectrum of practice rather than stark divisions (Newman, 2014; Newman et al., 2016), with considerable heterogeneity among the attitudes and practices of both researchers and practitioners to collaboration (Head, 2016; Newman et al., 2016).

From the researcher’s perspective, efforts at collaboration require deliberate attention and strategy. Efforts at collaboration may be facilitated through everyday communication over a longer time scale—for example, through regular workshops (Hellmich & Lange, 2016). Participants in such events need to be able to and want to contribute (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013). Moore-Cherry and Mccarthy (2016), for example, report that including a keynote speech from a well-known practitioner-academic at their workshop encouraged practitioners to attend. Stead (2016) notes that policy makers may be more open to research during times of change and that this can bring more attention to research findings. More deliberative collaboration may be facilitated by adopting an action research approach (Greenwood & Levin, 2007), focusing on co-creation and/or co-production as a means to deliver both intellectual advances and public benefit (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016). However, efforts at collaboration and co-creation can shift typical researcher demands into uncomfortable territory through the need for greater flexibility, non-linearity and the blurring of boundaries between intellectual endeavors and wider impact. Krizek et al. (2009) highlight the need for different researcher capabilities, especially research leadership, that are not necessarily present in many researchers’ skill sets. Others point to the importance
of research translation and knowledge brokers (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016) and of strategic engagement with the media (Flyvbjerg, 2012).

Collaborative research, particularly as it relates to government policy contexts, can also raise concerns about compromising the goals and integrity of scholarly work, as the boundaries between academic endeavor and wider impact are blurred (Durning, 2004). As governments have moved toward managerialism, they have increasingly outsourced functions including research, with a corresponding downscaling of research capacity internal to state and federal departments (Head, 2014; Tingle, 2015; Phibbs, 2016). This dynamic brings external researchers more directly into the complex world of policy-making and its trade-offs and requires researchers to more overtly address gaps between research evidence and policy practice.

Differences in ideas about ‘research’ and its value are always present. Forsyth (2016) argues that practitioners and researchers can use the word research to refer to two distinct activities. Practitioners often speak ultimately of investigation which ‘aims to generate knowledge that is useful for solving a specific local problem rather than a question of broad interest’ (Forsyth, 2016, p. 468). Research is distinct in that it seeks to systematically fill a gap in knowledge. Where policy makers seek to involve university researchers in ‘research,’ Forsyth (2016) argues, ‘they very often want help with investigation’ (p. 468).

Critics suggest that evidence-based policy derived from research/government collaboration in political and bureaucratic contexts may employ narrow definitions of evidence and use evidence to justify rather than examine decisions (Davoudi, 2006; Krizek et al., 2009, Gurran & Phibbs, 2014). Policy agenda setting that occurs as a result of changes within government often become spaces to reproduce existing power relations (McCann, 2001) complicating notions of evidence-based policy. These tensions serve to highlight the challenges of collaboration, with researchers needing to be more aware of, and engaged with, the agendas and politics of collaborators, including reflecting on their own (Clavisi et al., 2013).

Such tensions form part of the dynamics of research-practice exchange, which we now discuss in the context of ‘Making greening happen in consolidating cities’ practitioner engagement workshop.

**Examining Research-Practice Exchange**

To explore the diverse aspects of research-practice exchange, this paper analyzes a dedicated workshop held at the midpoint of the ‘Making greening happen’ research project as described previously. Stakeholder engagement workshops are a familiar component of applied and action research (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Workshops have a variety of purposes: soliciting information from stakeholders (Foxon et al., 2013; Kuzdas et al., 2014); identifying goals or priorities (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016) and developing policies, plans, models or tools, among others. Urban policy development processes increasingly require community input, and stakeholder workshops may provide the opportunity for a range of individuals to discuss and debate ideas, options and potential outcomes (Innes & Booher, 2004; MacArthur, 2016). However, participation events are not pure exercises in deliberative democracy. Power imbalances, demographic characteristics, divergent beliefs and the poor design of events influence the content, process and outcomes of participatory workshops (Innes & Booher, 2004; Barrett & Brunton-Smith, 2014).
The ‘Making greening happen’ workshop aimed to engage key stakeholders on the issue of urban greening, with a focus on connecting research to policy and likely end users in government. The researchers invited federal government, state government, local government representatives; key industry representative bodies and relevant researchers in the field to attend the one-day closed workshop. Most of those invited represented stakeholders that had been involved in the initial ‘problem definition’ engagement workshops, although in several cases organizational representation had changed. The workshop was pivotal in the research program, serving to: assemble key stakeholders for research-in-progress presentations; solicit feedback; engage participants in shaping the next phase of research and develop further collaborations necessary to ensure the broader impact of the research outputs on cities. The success or otherwise of the interaction and collaboration with stakeholders in this workshop was a critical factor in the success of the project overall. The workshop invitation described the event as an opportunity to hear about current research and provide feedback on the research objectives, methods used and future research direction. Fifty-one people in total attended. Eight of these were researchers involved in the ‘Making greening happen’ research project, with six of these people presenting aspects of the research on the day.

Our focus in this paper is the nature of research-practice exchange occurring in the workshop. One of the authors of this paper was involved in preparing the workshop and participating on the day. Being both a participant in the workshop and directly involved in the analysis of the results adds potential tension and conflict (Bergold & Thomas, 2012), but also provides the opportunity for deeper reflection on research as a practice (Schön, 1983). Acting as a researcher within the workshop helps inform further understanding of how practitioners, policy makers and researchers can work together to achieve improved urban greening. However, any exercise in communication and engagement is at least in part about gaining support for the researchers and the research. The other two authors were observers of the workshop in part to control for this tension. The complexity of the role of researchers in collaborative research is revisited later in this paper.

Preparation for the workshop focused in part on designing the structure and content of the day to address documented barriers to exchange: clear communication in practice-relevant terms; explicit demonstration of points of policy/practice relevance and scope for practitioners to discuss relevance and shape the broad research direction to best align with practice needs. These three goals make it a useful case to examine attempts to overcome barriers to research-practice exchange in an urban policy context.

In analyzing the workshop’s research-practice exchange, we aim to address the following two research questions:

- To what extent did the workshop activity overcome functional barriers with respect to access and usability in research-practice exchange?
- How do efforts at researcher–practitioner collaboration shape approaches to applied policy research?

The first question aims to contribute the design of better research-practice exchange learning arenas (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Using the data gathered from the workshop, we reflect on the success (or otherwise) of research-practice exchange against the objectives of access and usability. The second question then critically examines the workshop itself as a collaborative exercise, exploring the implications of researcher–practitioner exchange in the context of potentially competing interests.
The workshop comprised a combination of content delivery (presentations), whole-room discussion sessions, breakout table discussion, and reporting back to the whole group. Each presentation was followed by five to ten minutes of questions, comments and clarification. The initial session built on previous ‘problem definition’ engagement activities, re-establishing a shared knowledge-base and purpose for urban greening in Australian cities. The middle session presented and then discussed research work on mapping and monitoring urban greening, focusing on relevance for setting policy targets and monitoring change. The final sessions were breakout table discussions: tables addressed a range of questions on the research strengths and limitations, future directions, necessary actions and potential future collaborations.

The workshop was recorded through detailed note-taking by two researchers who captured the exchanges in the workshop question times and during reporting back of table discussions. The note takers sat behind a table on the side of the room and were not involved in the workshop activity. The note takers’ role was made clear to the participants who gave consent for documentation of the workshop for the purposes of this paper’s research. Being uninvolved and unobtrusive, the note-taking is classed as ‘simple observation’ (Bryman, 2015, p. 270). The note takers used a framework developed prior to the event based on existing research-practice exchange literature. The framework consisted of a template for recording notes with four column headings: time, person speaking, content and coding notes. To populate coding notes, we developed a predefined list of exchange characteristics (see Table 1). This allowed the note takers to record both the content of contributions and the characteristics of exchange. Two note takers increased coverage and cross checking.

Table 1. Workshop coding notes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who is speaking?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who is being spoken about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is being spoken about?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus (technical, policy, political and financial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to place, specifics examples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge sources being referred to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type and nature of workshop interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation, comment, question (actual, self-referential and rhetoric)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show of enthusiasm/concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate/ongoing exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key insights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concerns and barriers:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘You’re missing the point’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What researchers don’t realize is’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘This has been done before’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘But this won’t work’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What is really difficult is’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest and insights:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What I like/d about it is/was’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What I find/found really useful is/was’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Finally someone is’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What this really shows is’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What we are really interested in is’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘What will really work is’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research-to-practice issues:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access issues (paywalls, language and theory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use issues (local context, time and utility)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political and organizational barriers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of quality. In addition, table discussion sessions produced written materials. During the last session, groups at tables discussed specific questions and documented key elements on butchers’ paper. Details varied between tables. Results reported here are coded as ‘Participant’ (individual participants’ spoken comments during whole-room discussion), ‘Presenter’ (comments from presenters during whole-room discussion) and ‘Table’ (written responses based on table discussions of six to eight people).

After the workshop, we distributed a paper questionnaire and provided a link via email to an identical online version available for two weeks. Participants could complete the digital questionnaire after the event and received an email reminder one week later. The questionnaire gave participants the opportunity to provide input on the workshop discussion that may not have been captured on the day due to lack of opportunity, and to identify or elaborate upon specific resources relevant to discussion topics. The questionnaire results are a supportive but secondary source. Our primary focus is on analyzing interactions within the workshop to identify the lessons and challenges for successful exchange.

We thematically coded the primary data (workshop notes and records of table discussions) based on the two research questions (see Table 2). In the following sections, we use the results of this coding in our analysis of the workshop in relation to barriers to research-practice exchange, and broader challenges posed by collaborative efforts to integrate research process with policy and practice perspectives.

### Overcoming Barriers to Research-Practice Exchange

The ‘Making greening happen’ workshop included presentations on background, methods and data demonstrations to selected policy practitioners and other stakeholders. The participants had opportunities to ask questions about the research, including about its relevance to policy, and provide feedback on future directions during facilitated discussions. The researchers presented a specific method to monitor urban green space coverage. Previous work on exchange between research and practice in planning (Wolman & Page, 2002; Krizek et al., 2009; Hurley et al., 2016) has identified access and usability as key barriers to the use of research. The researchers’ workshop presentations sought to demonstrate that research outputs would be accessible, usable and relevant to policy practitioners. Issues of access proved to be uncontroversial in the workshop setting. The workshop presentations emphasized that the research outputs, a method and tools to monitor urban green space coverage, would be freely available to users. Workshop participants were satisfied that the research being presented, with its open access, had significant potential to inform their activities:

### Table 2. Thematic coding.

To what extent did the workshop activity overcome functional barriers with respect to access and usability in research-practice exchange?
- Accessibility of material presented to practitioner audience;
- Practitioner engagement with research material presented;
- Comments on usability and relevance of the research presented to practice; and

How do efforts at researcher–practitioner collaboration shape approaches to applied policy research?
- Stakeholder perspectives on collaboration;
- Evidence of researcher acceptance of stakeholder perspectives; and
- Challenges to researchers and the research process from stakeholder contributions
It allows users to have benchmarks that can be identified and can be tracked which is great. [Table C]

As this data [being presented] is freely available… [it] gives you that first instance of knowing where your trees are or not. [Participant 7]

While participants felt that access barriers had been addressed, issues of usability stimulated more debate. Participants were largely satisfied that the presented research could be used in their organizations: It was appropriate to the problems they were facing, and the skill sets they possessed. For example, participants highlighted the issue of urban growth planning, and the role this research could play in improving planning for urban growth:

We’ve had a discussion about urban growth, about urban boundaries and the contested landscapes where urban expansion is competing with green areas. The fact that this mapping can be used to inform this process as it goes forward means it has a valuable use in terms of planning on the urban fringe. [Table F]

However, participants identified several potential limitations in usability: the ability to tailor research outputs to the specific needs of local jurisdictions; relevance to different end user groups and the dominance of political pressures on local policy decision-making. Different spatial areas of concern are an example of a barrier to applying research outputs in specific local contexts. One workshop table observed that: ‘[Urban greening research] will have different relevance depending where you are, so an inner-city vs. suburbs vs. greenfield, public or private land’ [Table A]. Time and other capacity issues also make it difficult to translate policy research across jurisdictions, and to distill the implications of theoretically grounded research for local practice (Wolman & Page, 2002; Head, 2015).

Participants also emphasized the importance and value of local, practice-based knowledge, implicitly questioning the value of the research presented. This is consistent with prior research where planning practitioners report that researchers are out of touch with practice realities and politics (Taylor & Hurley, 2016). The researchers’ presentations deliberately demonstrated examples of how the research outputs could be adapted to take into account different local contexts: emphasizing that users ‘can call the shots and analyse green cover in different ways’ [Presenter 3], and highlighting their understanding that researchers need to take into account end user needs. This was done in an attempt to demonstrate usability: that the research could be both local and generalizable, where local context and knowledge could complement rather than conflict with research outputs.

Research relevance to practice is a core assumption of underpinning research collaboration. In the workshop, participants challenged the relevance to different ‘end users.’ On some occasions, participants defined the end user; for example, one table referred to user diversity for urban greening evidence: ‘You have a range of researchers who want raw data, you have in the middle GIS people who want to manipulate data, and at far end you have those who just want a PDF document to say “this will happen here”’ [Table E]. But often end user needs or characteristics were left unstated. Here, a practitioner questions the research’s functionality for end users, implying skepticism about the research project:

I’m very conscious of designing the shoe to fit the foot. Not just designing the shoe. It’s critical it’s fit for purpose depending on who the user is. How to get the maximum value based on the key stakeholder needs? That’s critical in this piece. [Participant 21]

End user relevance is crucial for collaborative research that seeks impact in practice. However, this also illustrates a challenge in stakeholder engagement and collaborative
research: on which end users and whose needs should the research focus? Participants alluded to many different end users in the workshop. Some of the described or inferred ‘end user needs’ give more insight into stakeholder agendas when describing such needs, rather than identifying the most important user groups’ specific needs. The ‘end user’ may operate as a proxy for ‘what our interest group wants to see (or not see) resulting from the research.’ Soliciting targeted contributions from practice on the likely needs of end users has significant value, but requires researchers to be aware of competing stakeholder interests and agendas, and to maintain clarity and rigor in research objectives.

Some participants’ comments suggested concern about the political reality of researchers and policy makers influencing urban development: ‘The backyard plantings have all disappeared. The [contribution of] private [land] has stopped. It’s no good just having councils on board if the private [land] is disappearing’ [Participant 4]. The proposition here is that the measuring and monitoring methodology being presented, while perhaps interesting, missed the point if local governments were not empowered to reduce the impact of urban infill development on private open space. In attempting to deal with these issues of relevance, during discussions the researchers turned questions regarding limitations around, asking ‘What would it take?’ and ‘How do we get there?’, thus engaging with barriers and inviting co-production.

In terms of political relevance, the research itself had previously benefited from a federal government direction to investigate setting targets for urban greening and a senior federal government representative presented this intent to the workshop audience. In Australia, the federal government has traditionally taken a limited role in urban policy and issues, and where present, during periods of progressive (Labor) government (Dodson, 2015). In the lead-up to this workshop, a conservative federal government appointed a cities minister, and the federal environment minister declared support for urban greening (Hunt, 2016). The federal representative at the workshop explained: ‘We’re here because we share the goal to improve the extent and quality of greening, and to increase the liveability of Australian cities’ [Participant 32]. This reaffirmation of the policy shift from one of no engagement with urban greening, to one of support from the federal government, helped focus the workshop on how to achieve change, rather than being stuck debating whether change was possible or desirable. This is consistent with Stead’s (2016) observation that practitioners tend to be more open to research during times of change. The researchers emphasized that this policy needed input from practitioners in the room to develop ‘detailed information and understanding to set and meet targets’ [Presenter 5].

The above discussion indicates that overt efforts to design collaborative activities in response to identified obstacles to practitioner engagement can overcome many access and usability barriers, and can facilitate more engaged and constructive discussion. Participant comments and responses indicated that they experience barriers to access and usability consistent with existing literature were willing to openly discuss those issues and in most cases, were satisfied that the research dealt actively and successfully with those barriers. The researchers made a careful case for the method’s reliability, localized detail, limited funding and skill demands; aiming to demonstrate empirical rigor and reliability along with suitability for practice. The overt effort from the researchers to demonstrate policy relevance, and engage proactively in addressing barriers to research-practice exchange, resulted in participant confidence that research outputs would be valuable for local policy contexts:
It’s wonderful; it’s not the silver bullet—but man, that sort of data is amazing for local government. [Participant 7]

I think it’s wonderful. The ability for us to be able to have some policy conversations because this data exists … We can actually have a conversation about [urban greening] policy. A few years ago, this question came up, and we didn’t even know where the trees are … With this research we can actually have a conversation about how our older suburbs may need to change. [Participant 38]

This demonstrates the value of overt consideration of common functional research-practice barriers to access and use in designing ‘arenas’ of exchange. This apparent success, however, invites reflection on researcher-practitioner exchange in the context of efforts at collaboration.

**Be Careful on What You Wish for—Shaping Research for Practitioner Collaboration**

In this section, we examine how the process of seeking collaboration with practitioners may shape the research and the actions of researchers. We consider the workshop from the perspective of potentially competing interests in urban research: Who is included and excluded in collaborative efforts, and how researchers and participants influence the scope of research objectives and activities. In the context of constrained funding, we also discuss the tensions between research funding and investment in practical implementation, and the pressure to appeal to research funding streams.

The organizers designed the event to gather researchers, policy makers and other practitioners together with an agreed interest in urban greening and the value of research to independently inform policy. Yet the design of the workshop and its participants inherently shapes the exchange. Some participants raised concerns about the selection of attendees: One practitioner commented that ‘it’s always difficult how to work out who to invite to this … but others should be here—from outside the tent … ’ [Participant 15]. The suggestion here is that actors who might resist the underlying urban greening objectives of the research may be important to include if research outputs seek to inform policy creation in a politically contested landscape. The researchers noted that ‘some were invited but were not able to come. We are going to have follow-up meetings … ’ [Presenter 2].

The researchers also needed to establish their own research credentials: Their presentations aimed to demonstrate their qualifications and independence, along with rigorous and appropriate methods and data. Testing these credentials one participant asked how the presented method compared with ‘what’s happening globally … Are we learning from what’s happening abroad? Let’s not reinvent the wheel if it’s been done’ [Participant 21]. In response, the researchers referred to European standards and other research which had recognized their own expertise. Further confidence in credentials came from inviting researchers with relevant expertise in addition to the research team.

Collaborative efforts to define the research agenda occurred at previous events and in consultation with the federal government, who funded the research. The previously agreed research boundaries included a focus on developing a method for monitoring urban greening suitable for benchmarking existing green cover in cities and setting targets for canopy cover. To focus the workshop, several more politicized or contentious questions were intentionally left out: greening as an environmental value (rather than for human...
amenity); biodiversity benefits of greening and climate change (avoiding or adapting to it). The approach was to focus on presenting methods and tools that could inform local governments who could then formulate (and fund) their own greening policies, strategies and programs in response to their specific local objectives. This tactic aimed to avoid prolonged debates about potentially competing or controversial policy objectives, or sources of implementation funding. The workshop’s scope thus constrained the political complexity of the material in favor of increasing the accessibility of the material to multiple and diverse stakeholders in the room. These research boundaries nonetheless resulted in some participant frustration with suggestions at several points during the workshop that the method and the focus of the research were too narrow and did not satisfactorily account for other elements of urban greening [Participant 29]. The presenters acknowledged this weakness, but argued that the current methods available to develop good understanding of issues such as species diversity were not feasible for a national assessment of urban green space.

Within each engagement with stakeholders, potential pressure exists to redefine scope. From one perspective, the research can thus adapt to better match evolving practice needs; but at the same time, stakeholders may subject the research to political pressure and demand that it justify itself to any and all agendas. During workshop discussions, comments about the role of land-use policy and regulation emerged as proxies for influencing the research agenda and scope. Some participants felt the barriers to increased urban greening stemmed largely from local government planners [Participant 12]. To some extent, this served industry groups’ agendas, shifting responsibility for urban greening out of their sphere of influence:

Property developers understand the increased value [urban greening] adds. I think sometimes the developers are ahead of the game but are being prevented from being able to deliver [by land-use planning policy and regulation]. [Participant 26]

And further:

In new developments it’s almost impossible for private [land] to have a role in green space. Where is there space to put those trees? A key thing to think of is that the liveability of the future will depend on public land, as we can’t depend on private [land]. [Participant 21]

By arguing that private land has little capacity, this practitioner implicitly criticized the researchers’ presented method to measuring green cover on all land-uses, suggesting instead that the method should only focus on public land. Such criticism cast doubt on the need for the research being presented, and on the researchers’ ability to address urban development policies’ impact on urban greening. The researchers responded by attempting to explain the connection of the urban greening research to land-use planning, highlighting the importance of land-use planning decisions on green space: ‘we can’t give up on private space … we need the data to demonstrate the impacts of development, and the loss of green space’ [Presenter 5]. During such exchanges, the workshop moved from research-practice exchange to informal testing and potential renegotiation of the overall research scope.

Toward the end of the day, the workshop attendees highlighted a key barrier to implementation: research funding to scale-up the monitoring methods presented: ‘this would take a lot of dollars, collaboration, and buy-in. But mainly dollars’ [Table E]. The role of funding presents another tension in research-practice exchange and collaboration. Collaboration, in this case, is within a context in which research funding is highly competitive (Hurley & Taylor, 2016), and in which government research funding and capacity are considerably diminished (Tingle, 2015; Phibbs, 2016). While researchers expect independence from
political influence, a collaborative research context with engaged stakeholders and appealing agendas are more likely to lead to funding for researchers. However, practitioners have an understandable wariness about calls for greater support for research in collaborative endeavors. As one participant commented:

… it’s great that this mapping is going on, but if there isn’t going to be a flow in funding to support change, then what’s the point in mapping? We have to think about both. Otherwise it will just be telling bad stories all the time. [Participant 21]

The issue highlighted here is one of priorities. It is relatively straightforward to get researchers to agree to the importance of practical implementation, and professionals to accept the value of a rigorous and relevant research-evidence base. But in a resource constrained environment, the relative allocation of spending on research or implementation is more contested. Research has a functional not inherent role in policy: a tension visible and constantly balanced in exchange between researchers and practitioners.

These tensions around the framing of research as relevant to practice are reflected in the workshop opening and closing comments, which positioned the research topic as both necessary and exciting, prompted by clear (federal) policy directions, and addressing a range of local interests. The workshop was an ‘opportunity for collaboration’ and proposed an ‘efficient use of investment’ [Presenter 4]. The research would be relevant, locally situated, and possible on a practical level. To the practitioner audience, the researchers did not describe it as theoretically significant; critical of policy or government or open to questioning urban greening benefit assumptions. This approach implicitly accepted potential industry collaborators’ risk aversion. The workshop highlighted the propensity for such risk aversion, with government participants raising concerns about the way ‘… industry groups, lobby groups, and the like, could use this [research] to highlight deficiencies and I suppose raise the community’s awareness of what they should expect from government in this space’ [Table D]. In other words, knowledge is dangerous in politics.

The workshop demonstrated a level of willingness and enthusiasm for collaboration between researchers and practitioners, in part enabled by researchers’ proactive engagement with access and usability barriers discussed in the previous section. However, the above discussion highlights several implications for researchers engaging in collaborative research efforts. Collaboration creates space for ongoing engagement, facilitating closer connections between research focus and practice needs, and the potential for co-creation of outputs. But this proximity and frequency of contact presents challenge to more conventional research problem definition, design and execution. It creates spaces that can open renegotiation of research parameters: who is included; what the scope and approach is and which researchers are best placed to deliver. Further, while we support the argument that research-practice collaboration presents opportunities for increasing the impact of research efforts, tensions arise designing research that facilitates collaboration while delivering research rigor, and in balancing the demands for research and implementation funding.

**Conclusions**

Urban researchers are increasingly engaging with practice and policy-making (Dodson, 2011). Conducting research in this way does not necessarily contradict the principles of independent scholarly research, yet it requires reflection on the different roles of research.
It involves researchers needing to be more aware of their role in a broader public sphere (Flyvbjerg, 2012; Newman et al., 2016).

We have highlighted that effective exchange and collaboration relies on concerted effort to align researcher and practitioner needs. The activities of the urban greening workshop ‘arena’ examined highlight the value of purposefully addressing real or perceived barriers to the usability and relevance of research in practice. The researchers emphasized connections between research outcomes, relevant policies and feasible practices. They also capitalized on participant interest through proposing refinements to scope in response to stakeholder input. These actions helped maintain policy and industry practitioner engagement at the event, diminishing the influence of skeptical voices in the room, and facilitating a productive and solutions-focused mode of engagement. The researchers’ appreciation of and engagement with the political content of research was also important to the success of research-practice exchange. Political circumstances often create opportunities for engagement, especially in moments where key agendas established or are recast (Stead, 2016). Recent moves from a conservative federal government that encourage a policy focus on urban greening have recast the issue to one with largely bipartisan support in Australia, at least when carefully framed as distinct from climate change, infill housing policy or other more contentious policy areas. The researchers were able to capitalize on this shift and present the potential impact of the research in relatively uncontroversial ways thus addressing functional barriers to the usability of research in policy and practice.

However, these concerted efforts at effective engagement pose challenges for researchers more accustomed to linear and closely controlled modes of inquiry. In traditional funded research, the scope of inquiry is typically set in the funding application, largely by the researchers. If funded, that scope holds, perhaps after some negotiation and refining in the contracting phase. Where such research has an impact on policy and practice, it is typically after the full scope of research is completed. Such research is deliberately at arm’s length of the context-specific demands of practice or the normative and temporal dimension of political interest.

Policy and practice will continue to evolve—whether an evidence base is present or not. The potential for research to impact on policy and practice in part depends on the ability to meet practice needs and capitalize on political interest. Collaborative research seeks a closer engagement with these practice realities. Closer proximity and frequency of contact between researchers and practitioners create spaces for research objectives and to be co-created, and research outputs co-produced (Campbell & Vanderhoven, 2016). This presents opportunities for more dynamic engagement with practice. Yet as we found, this proximity also creates spaces for research objectives, design and execution to be continually questioned, and places pressure on researchers to either re-prosecute previously agreed outcomes, or determine whether mid-project adaptation is desirable and possible. It requires negotiating tensions between functional and pure research, and between appeals to research and policy-funding sources. The process of balancing these, in turn, shapes the research process.

From a strategic research perspective, collaboration and stakeholder engagement can help secure resources and support, in addition to ensuring impact. Academic research is valued for its independence and rigor, but the pressure for funding, and collaboration to increase potential for funding, can erode the integrity of the research process. Even if policy decision makers view proposed research as useful, they may not support research-practice exchange processes if these require funding or do not immediately justify desired policy
outcomes (Head, 2015; Forsyth, 2016). Researchers must be confident about their research design and objectives, designing research that facilitates collaboration while delivering research rigor; and clearly understanding when their efforts constitute ‘research’ and when they are ‘investigation’ (Forsyth, 2016).

Finally, our example of action research demonstrates that collaboration efforts can be resource intensive, demand commitment from researchers and practitioners and require a set of skills not necessarily familiar to many researchers. In addition to more traditional research practices, researchers must use communication and facilitation skills, and must be sensitive to (yet aware of an inability to avoid) the politics and agendas of a diverse array of stakeholders. A clearer understanding of, and engagement with, the barriers to research-practice exchange adds to a research skill set, helping researchers to be opportunistic, strategic and politically astute, beyond their more conventional analytical and methodical approaches. When combined with the important role of research translation and communication (e.g. see Head, 2015; Newman et al., 2016), these skills can help enable not only exchange but also collaboration in applied urban policy research, facilitating greater impact on practice and policy.

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ORCID
Joe Hurley https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4232-0902
Elizabeth Jean Taylor https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5189-9480
Kath Phelan https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8322-2124

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