

YORK HAS ALWAYS BEEN ON THE CUSP, geographically speaking. Neither downtown nor in the suburbs, the Keele campus is situated in what Roger Keil calls the “in-between city”. It’s the fluid periphery where global cities like Toronto really do their morphing as immigrants settle and shift. And it will distinguish the new City Institute at York University from other urban research centres. “We’re at the line where the old city meets the new city, the interface between Toronto and the outer city. We’re right in the middle of a completely new landscape of urbanity,” says the environmental studies professor and the institute’s first director. “The in-between city is where we are. We have a unique opportunity to say something others cannot.”

That’s not to say the City Institute will focus only on its own backyard – or that urban research is a novel endeavour at York. In fact, researchers at the University are renowned for their global expertise on city issues, ranging from housing and the urban economy to immigration and transportation. Until now, however, they have worked disparately. The City Institute will change that.

“We’re not inventing something,” says Keil. “We’re already doing urban research at York. The City Institute is an organizing principle, an attempt to bring things together.” Among 1,400 faculty, 80 of whom have been identified as urban scholars, such an institute will foster awareness and lead to more collaboration and interdisciplinary projects. To the outside world, governments in particular, it will signal that York is ready to tackle city-related research.

Considering Keil’s academic pursuits, it should come as no surprise that he sees the City Institute as a robust research centre that is also socially responsive. “I think the University needs to play an active, critical and empathetic role in the city. The city is not a laboratory rat. It is also our home.”

Toronto has been Keil’s home since 1991. Multilingual and cosmopolitan, the 48-year-old German lives in the trendy Beaches area with his two children and Swiss wife Ute Lehrer – also a York environmental studies professor specializing in urban research. Keil has lived in three major metropolises, including Frankfurt and Los Angeles. “I consider Toronto one of the luckiest things to happen to me. It’s the best place I have ever lived in my life.” That’s high praise from a scholar of the planet’s truly global cities and a world traveller who revels in ethnic, social and cultural diversity.

Keil has always been interested in cities but it wasn’t until he was well on his way to a PhD that he found his calling. Out of high school, Keil wanted to be an urban planner and before he even enrolled at university he had a thesis in mind: he would design a city entirely accessible to wheelchair-bound people like his younger sister, a concept well ahead of its time. “She influenced my whole outlook on the world,” he says of his enduring interest in social and environmental justice.

Instead of urban planning, he went for a teaching degree, but seized a chance to take urban and black studies – and learn all about America’s inner-city ghettos – during a third-year exchange to the University of Illinois. Back in Frankfurt, he rejected teaching in favour of doctoral studies in political science. One day, casting about for a thesis, he read an article by John Friedmann in which the leading American urban planner observed the emergence of a network of world cities. “A whole bunch of lights went on in my head,” says Keil. He would study global urbanization. He bought a ticket to Los Angeles to do field research and completed a doctorate in urban politics.

Now Keil teaches courses on global cities, urban and regional environments, politics and planning. Co-author of *Nature and the City: Making Environmental Policy in Toronto and Los Angeles*, he is also editor of the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*. And he’s a founding member of the International Network for Urban Research and Action, which is involved in urban activism and research in different cities.

Eighty per cent of Canadians now live in urban areas, Keil points out. “York is at the doorstep of a fantastically rich growing immigrant metropolis. There are some pretty big urban issues out there.” York’s City Institute will be a catalyst, a “one-stop urban research centre” where researchers work with community partners to address those issues, spawn real-world solutions to big-city problems – and “move forward to create a better city.” ■

Urbane Researcher

Roger Keil will lead a new institute at York focused on the city.

BY MARTHA TANCOCK

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