

Urban Studies at the Institute of Geography, University of Neuchâtel

Written by
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The University of Neuchâtel has a more than 20-year long tradition of research in urban studies. Early research in the late 1990s dealt with sustainable urban development, regimes of urbanization and urban sprawl. In the early 2000's the Institute worked on the first overall study of gentrification in Swiss cities. This project led to collective work on emerging forms of gentrification, such as new-build gentrification.

More recently, our work has been organized within three axes:

1 Relational urban development in the Global South

The central argument in this research axis is that the analysis of urban development cannot be enclosed within easily definable spatial units, but must today be approached as a relational process. We have studied this urban relationality mainly in terms of translocal processes and mainly (but not only) in the Global South, i.e. how changes in the built environment, in urban policies and everyday lives are constituted by connections, flows and exchanges between cities. One of the main research foci here is the study of mobile urban policies which is an important dimension of policymaking in a global urban age. Studies in smart urbanism – one such mobile urban policy – is another strand of research in this axis (also related to the third axis below). In a first step, we explored a few years ago the discursive logics and rationalities at work in the emergence of smart city policies as well as alternatives to dominant smart city narratives. More recently, in a project together with Ayona Datta at University College London, we started analyzing the 'provincialisation' of this urban policy in India and South Africa. In other words, we study both how this global narrative 'lands' in those contexts and how it takes quite original and specific forms, such as right to the city claims by civil society empowered by the use of digital platforms.

Researchers

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Selected References

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2 Urban precarities

Since 2014, the Institute of Geography has developed studies in the field of urban precarities, and more specifically on the forms of urban living experienced by precarious social groups. Urban mental health and the still largely unknown mechanisms accounting for the higher prevalence of psychosis in dense urban areas has been the focus of a large recently completed interdisciplinary research, involving geographers, psychiatrists and linguists, based on mixed methods – from video-recorded go-alongs to a survey. This research has recently led to the formulation of a therapeutic strategy in urban mental healthcare and will be pursued by a forthcoming collaborative research proposal including an urban living lab project. It has also led to more general reflections on contemporary forms of precarious urban lives developed with Hester Parr and Chris Philo at the University of Glasgow. A forthcoming applied project in and with the Canton of Neuchâtel will expand this research strand to an analysis of elderly people's social resources and access to public space.

Researchers

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3 Urban public space and power

A third research axis to highlight revolves around issues of power and control, related to urban public space. On the one hand, this theme is being approached from a specific security, policing and surveillance viewpoint. The aim here is to study and question the influence of contemporary policing and securitization strategies with regard to the transformation (re-generation, splintering, commercialization, privatization, etc.) of urban public space and life. This research not only examines how specific techniques of policing and surveillance are being set up, transferred, negotiated and put into practice by relevant stakeholders, but also focusses on the individual and societal experiences and perceptions of the techniques of power deployed and of the spaces concerned.

On the other hand, and connecting with the aforementioned research focus on smart urbanism, current research conducted at the Institute of Geography at Neuchâtel explores the role of (smart) digital technologies in the management and regulation of everyday urban life more broadly. Think of the use of RFID chips in tickets and goods, of location- and user-aware smartphone applications, differing tracking and profiling devices, drones and CCTV cameras, or of the development of increasingly "smart" urban infrastructures, from transport systems to electricity grids. The point here is to investigate critically the power issues surrounding the software-mediated, digital city, in terms of social inclusion-exclusion, privacy, security, civil rights and social justice for example.

Researchers:

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Sunčana Laketa, Post-Doc Ambizione
Silvana Pedrozo, PhD student

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The neo-French 'Manor Villas' development in Hanoi. Photo by Ola Söderström, 2011.



Smart City Centre, Rio de Janeiro. Photo by Dennis Pauschinger, 2014.



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Conclusion

Beyond these three axes of research, the urban studies group at Neuchâtel, which includes the above-mentioned 10 persons, but also former members of the Institute now active elsewhere, is interested and engaged in the development of an urban studies network in Switzerland. The importance of the urban phenomenon as a scientific question and as a political issue is, as yet, not matched by the existence of an organized research community in urban studies. There is no Swiss Centre for Cities and no National Centre of Competence in Research on cities in Switzerland. Swiss urban studies scholars should collectively try to change that in the years to come.

Urban Studies at the University of Basel

Urban Studies at the University of Basel was established in 2016, built from approaches rooted in geography, architecture, and history, and with perspectives from critical heritage, postcolonial studies, political science, and anthropology. Speaking from a regional focus on Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, our research and teaching explore the contradictory ways of knowing that shape cities, territories and built spaces.

Our research has developed through individual intellectual trajectories, outlined below, as well as through collaborative interdisciplinary research. Our Masters of Arts in Critical Urbanisms, launched in 2017, has engendered an exploratory space for pedagogy that traverses disciplinary purviews on the city, linking the University of Basel with the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town. Working together on the curriculum design and teaching has shaped our intellectual agenda and a strategic approach to interdisciplinary urban studies.

A key anchor of our research is a focus on Southern urbanisms, inspired by the complex and rapidly changing realities of Southern cities worldwide. In this context, Sophie Oldfield's research engages empirical and epistemological questions central to urban theory. Her work reflects on political practice and everyday urban geographies, analysing the ways in which citizens and organized movements craft agency to engage and contest the state. Anna Selmeczi's work builds on social and political theory and participatory research to substantiate the connections between orders of knowledge production and urban space, and how practices of popular politics contest and change these orders. Laura Nkula-Wenz works on the nexus of cultural production and urban change in Southern African cities, focusing on the transformation of urban governance and the construction of local political agency through international accolades, urban experimentation and interurban knowledge networks. In "Cities of Integrity", a Dfid-funded research project together with planning theorist Vanessa Watson (University of Cape Town), she also works on rethinking common anti-corruption measures in the context of Africa's rapid urban expansion, exploring ways in which the professional integrity of local planners can be activated and promoted.

Our work on the relationship between housing and the state stretches across Southern and Northern cities, foregrounding how the materiality of home making and the multiple forms of housing expertise shapes inhabitant contestation as well as state transformation. Focusing on the banlieue, Kenny Cupers explores how dwelling serves an object of modernization, an everyday site of contestation, and a domain of expertise. His work on French and other geographies examines the role of housing and architecture

in neoliberal transformation. Sophie Oldfield and Anna Selmeczi's adopt a collaborative research approach, built with partners engaged in a mix of Cape Town-based debates, struggles and practices around housing and land access. Projects – regularly involving our Masters students as active participants in the research process – track state-funded housing initiatives and how they produce uncertainty for ordinary residents that aspire to, and become, homeowners. In analysing the contingent and often surprising encounters evident in housing projects, and by examining the struggles and afterlives of ordinary urban dwellers in these contexts, this work challenges reductionist assumptions that formality leads to security of tenure, reworking instrumental and technical understandings of the relationship between (in)security and (in) formality in practice.

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Another cluster of research focuses on (post)colonial infrastructure and how built heritage shapes political and urban geographies. Manuel Herz analyses and documents how architecture is witness to, and provides evidence for, the complexities and contradictions of decolonization and nation building in Sub-Saharan Africa. He is currently preparing a sec-



Sahrawi Refugee Camp El Aïun, Algeria. Photo © Iwan Baan, 2016.

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