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# URBAN IMMERSIONS

An innovative collaboration between one South African and one Swiss university is creating opportunities for students to learn from each other while helping their respective communities. By getting students out of the classroom and into diverse cities through experiential and engaged teaching methods, this intermixing of Swiss and African students takes a novel approach to preparing for our global urban future.

Recognising that the challenges of the 21st century are both essentially global and essentially urban, the University of Basel in Switzerland created a new Master's degree programme in Critical Urbanisms in 2016. An integral part of this new two-year programme is a semester hosted by the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, directed and taught by Sophie Oldfield – the first University of Cape Town–University of Basel Professor in Urban Studies – and Drs Anna Selmeczi and Laura Nkula-Wenz.

While University of Basel students take two courses at the University of Cape Town, they are given the chance to experience the complex urban realities of an African city first-hand and immerse themselves within the local academic culture. The semester-long programme of engaged and experiential urban scholarship opens up essential opportunities for students to get to grips with the everyday realities of African cities, to be immersed in the ethos and practices of engaged research, to try out different methods and to find a personal niche in the exciting field of urban research and practice.

#### CITY IMMERSIONS

Key to the semester in Cape Town is a set of 'city immersions' that allow students to work with communities and civil society organisations and experiment with embodied research methods. During the first part of the semester, students teamed up with People's Environmental Planning, a Cape Town-based non-governmental organisation that works

to solve stalled housing projects. During the city research project, teams of two – each comprised of one Basel student and one ACC student – recorded the personal histories of families whose recent move to permanent housing marked the culmination of a nearly twenty-year-long battle for housing security.

In addition to honing their interviewing skills and gaining confidence in their ability as scholars, students also experienced first-hand what it takes to do collaborative research at the community level. Being able to work alongside their peers from other African and Asian countries was critical. As one Basel student recalls: "The Southern Urbanism students understood the nuances of the culture, language and religion which was helpful, especially during the interviews."

A tangible outcome of the research project is the student-produced booklet *RUO EMOH – Our home, our story*, which chronicles the history of the housing project and richly illustrates individual journeys 'Ruo Emoh' families have made towards homeownership. Throughout this challenging project, both student groups appreciated the opportunity to interact directly with community members and to produce something tangible for them in return. This sharing, and its rigour, built mutual respect all around.

As one Ruo Emoh resident explains: "When the students came, they actually heard what people were saying. We saw this when the students brought our stories back to us and we read through them. When you can see that someone has listened and reflects your story in the way you told it to them – you feel



respected and appreciated. These narratives are a recognition of the work we have been doing.”

#### EXPLORING EVERYDAY URBAN SPACES

In the second part of their city immersions, students explore Cape Town’s diverse neighbourhoods, the ordinary spaces in which people’s daily lives take place. Here, they are able to choose between two options: *Sensing the City* or *Running the City*.

*Sensing the City* focused on art and public performance. This group experimented with knowing the city and its people as an aesthetic order – to learn about how urban spaces are made up of complex spatial patterns of sensory experience. For example, students were asked to visit a set of public spaces and take note of what they saw, smelled, heard and felt over the course of an hour. As one student enthusiastically noted: “I loved that the course happened outside of the regulated space and time frame of a normal class. Most of the meetings we really had outside, in public spaces or venues. Studying art, performance and effect in the city in this way was very productive and inspiring.”

*Running the City* explored mobility and movement by experiencing the city through running as a community sport. Each member of the group joined a Cape Town running club, participating in training runs on weeknights and in organised races in different parts of the city on weekends. Together, students produced various forms of field notes – texts, films, sound clips and artefacts – and forms of interviewing and conversations ‘on the move’. Students found running a good way to meet different people and get to know the city. As one reflected:



MA Critical Urbanisms students from the University of Cape Town and the University of Basel

“When you join a running club in Cape Town you are not only signing up to improve your running and your health, you are signing into a family who will make sure you reach your goals and enjoy every step along the way.” Learning through running proved to be a great way to see and feel the city on many different levels.

#### PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

This innovative mix of public and engaged learning aims to equip this generation of urban scholars and practitioners to think and work across diverse city contexts and through different forms of research practice. The programme intends to help students develop practical, as well as scholarly, forward-thinking approaches for steering cities towards more sustainable and equitable development.

This kind of urban learning is critical and urgent. More than half the world’s population resides in urban areas, a number set to increase to 66% by 2050. In Africa and Asia, this urban transition is significant because cities are home to the most precarious forms of urban

development, evident in slums, informal economic markets and fragmented cities. At the same time, most North Atlantic cities are scrambling to find new ways of dealing with the complex effects of ageing societies, new migration trends and industrial transitions, issues which shape cities in critical ways.

Successful internationalisation in the urban field requires new practices and methods of research and teaching, rooted in city worlds and in engagement with diverse and contested urban publics. Getting out of the classroom and into the city necessitates new partnerships between universities, civil society organisations, communities and fellow students from different hemispheres. There is little doubt that even the more established urban studies programmes will increasingly have to internationalise their courses to be able to meet the challenges of an urbanising world.

— LAURA NKULA-WENZ & SOPHIE OLDFIELD