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 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 Nikula-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.

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-

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.

Written by

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A growing area of research explores how design shapes urban, transnational, and planetary politics. Kenny Cupers’ research and forthcoming book focus on German colonialism to reveal how conflict over land in Africa and the borders of central Europe shaped the modernist belief that the world can be governed by design. Manuel Herz’s construction of shared values, which celebrate collaborative, engaged sociologies and co-coordinated by Kenny Cupers, explores the newly implemented EU hotspots. Funded by the Swiss Network for International Studies, the project explores how such migration infrastructure reshapes the Mediterranean border regime. Within this project, Alaa D’ia’s dissertation explores the design of the hotspots as a new type of bordering device and human landscape. Emilio Distretti, together with documentary-photographer Mimi Mollica developed a research project across Sicily and Tunisia that reads contemporary migrants’ deaths at the Mediterranean Sea borders as part of the long durée of Europe’s colonial history.

“Our research and teaching explore the contradictory ways of knowing that shape cities, territories and built spaces.”

Selected References
SOCIETY AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF URBAN SPACE

KENNY CUPERS


 paediatrician Dr. Ali Kauff and Dr. Tomasz Miodowski, who documented the first infants of a refugee camp. The project explores how conflict and migration shape the modernist belief that the world can be governed by design. "Manuel Herz's construction of public health and education infrastructure in Sene-

Selected References


