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UNIVERSITY  
OF GHANA

# Global Sociology and Comparative Urbanism

University of Ghana

15–18 February 2023

Wednesday, February 15, 2023

13.00–14.30 | Keynote 1: Steve Tonah

15.00–17.45 | City, Space & Architecture 1

Thursday, February 16, 2023

9.30–12.00 | Key Theme 1: Spatial Categories in Global Sociology

13.00–14.30 | Keynote 2: AbdouMaliq Simone

15.00–17.45 | City, Space & Architecture 2

Friday, February 17, 2023

9.30–12.00 | Key Theme 2: Comparative Urbanism

13.00–14.30 | Keynote 3: Michael Okyerefo

15.00–17.45 | City, Space & Architecture 3

Saturday, February 18, 2023

9.30–10.45 | Concluding Discussion

12.00–18.00 | Excursion in Accra



Wed 15/2 | Erata Hotel

12.00–13.00	Lunch
13.00–14.30	Keynote 1 Steve Tonah (University of Ghana): <i>Making the Town: Afro-Brazilian Returnees and the Transformation of Accra from the Early Colonial Times till Today</i>
14.30–15.00	Coffee Break
15.00–16.15	City, Space & Architecture 1: Marian Burchardt & Weishan Huang: <i>Comparative Urbanism and Religion</i> (discussant: Joschka Philipps) Marian Burchardt: <i>Infrastructuring Religion at the Margins: Materiality and Ordinary Urbanism in Cape Town</i> Weishan Huang: <i>Religion, Gender, and Urban Restructuring in Shanghai</i>
16.15–16.30	Break
16.30–17.45	City, Space & Architecture 1: Marian Burchardt & Weishan Huang: <i>Comparative Urbanism and Religion</i> (cont.)
17.45–18.30	Little walk over the campus
18.30	Barbecue at Commonwealth Hall



Thu 16/2 | Erata Hotel

9.30–10.45	Key Theme 1: <i>Spatial Categories in Global Sociology</i> (Marian Burchardt & Johannes Becker)
10.45–11.00	Coffee Break
11.00–12.00	Key Theme 1: <i>Spatial Categories in Global Sociology</i> (cont.)
12.00–13.00	Lunch
13.00–14.30	Keynote 2: AbdouMaliq Simone (University of Sheffield): <i>Developments in Black Urbanism: Inventing and Extending Connections among Disparate Facets and Geographies of Urban Life</i>
14.30–15.00	Coffee Break
15.00–16.15	City, Space & Architecture 2: Soledad Balerdi & Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem: <i>Resisting Displacement: A Bottom-up Research From La Plata &amp; Jaffa</i> (discussant: Hilal Alkan) Soledad Balerdi: <i>"Legal Land Takeover": Strategies for the Access to Land and Housing in Argentina</i> Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem: <i>Out of Home, Out of Time: Privatizing the Production of Colonial Landscapes in Palestine and Beyond</i>
16.15–16.30	Break
16.30–17.45	City, Space & Architecture 2: Soledad Balerdi & Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem: <i>Resisting Displacement</i> (cont.)
17.45–18.30	Break
18.30	Dinner (Hotel)



Fri 17/2 | Erata Hotel

9.30–10.45	Key Theme 2: <i>Comparative Urbanism</i> (Joschka Philipps, Soledad Balerdi, Weishan Huang, Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem)
10.45–11.00	Coffee Break
11.00–12.00	Key Theme 2: <i>Comparative Urbanism</i> (Joschka Philipps, Soledad Balerdi, Weishan Huang, Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem) (cont.)
12.00–13.00	Lunch
13.00–14.30	Keynote 3: Michael Okyerefo (University of Ghana): <i>Safeguarding the Unique Architectural and Spatial Design of the University of Ghana</i>
14.30–15.00	Coffee Break
15.00–16.15	City, Space & Architecture 3: Johannes Becker & Joschka Philipps: <i>Doing Comparative Urbanism: Lessons from the Field</i> (discussant: Clara Ruvituso) Johannes Becker: <i>Comparing Urban Figurations from an Interpretive and Process-oriented Perspective</i> Joschka Philipps: <i>Access, Concepts, and Capture: Methodological Issues in Comparing Urban Youth</i>
16.15–16.30	Break
16.30–17.45	City, Space & Architecture 3: Johannes Becker & Joschka Philipps: <i>Doing Comparative Urbanism</i> (cont.)
17.45–18.30	Break
18.30	Dinner (Hotel)



Sat 18/2 | Erata Hotel/Accra

9.30–10.45	Concluding discussion
10.45–12.00	Transfer to Accra
12.00–18.00	Excursion in Accra
17.45–18.30	Break
18.00	Dinner (restaurant)



## Abstracts

### **Soledad Balerdi: “Legal Land Takeover”: Strategies for the Access to Land and Housing in Argentina**

My research focuses on informal settlements and housing policies in Argentina. On the basis of the emic concept of “legal land takeover” (“toma legal”), I will propose a broader comprehension of habitat and the construction of the city in developing countries, where formality / informality, and legality / illegality, are not dichotomies but articulated mechanisms in which the urban space is built. Land grabbing and self-construction of houses are the most common ways in which disadvantaged populations solve their access to habitat in developing countries. These practices are usually thematized as “informal” and “illegal” by the State, civil society and the media. And in some cases, the State intervenes through evictions to protect the right to private property. However, as my research tries to show, the State also intervenes in many cases enabling negotiation with the dwellers and their organizations to find solutions to the housing conflict, and ends up recognizing/institutionalizing the occupation as an action that, although not legal, is legitimate.

The main questions of my research are: What are the strategies and knowledge that the dwellers of informal settlements deploy in order to influence the construction of their habitat in a situation of dispossession? What is the role of the State in this process? I will argue that popular habitat is built on the basis of conflicts, negotiations and agreements between inhabitants, social organizations and the State in the local territory. And in this process, land takeover and self-construction of housing becomes a practice endorsed - albeit not publicly - by state officials to respond to demands that cannot be met through formal channels.



### **Johannes Becker: Comparing Urban Figurations from an Interpretive and Process-oriented Perspective**

In my presentation I characterize and compare urban lives based on the analysis of two small gatherings in Amman and East Jerusalem. The thorough embedment of these localized practices in neighbourhood surroundings, in the biographical trajectories of their members and in past and current figurations in the city space allows for an analysis of different horizons in urban settings. The two cases share superficial similarities, but analytically have very different setups and characteristics. I argue that it is possible on this basis to reconstruct urban figurations and different spatial positionalities which the inhabitants of the two cities experience.

### **Marian Burchardt: Infrastructuring Religion at the Margins: Materiality and Ordinary Urbanism in Cape Town**

This contribution draws on the infrastructural turn in urban studies in order to explore the profane materialities that enable particular forms of urban religion. Assuming that cities are configurations of spaces, actors and materialities characterized by dominant modes of belonging, hegemonic definitions of public space, and hierarchical orderings of spatial uses, infrastructures are a central element of cities' material bases. Based on ethnographic research in Cape Town, I develop the notion of "infrastructuring religion" as a new modality of the spatialization of religion. Practices of infrastructuring draw religious life into the profane realm of ordinary urbanism in which religious meanings run up against machines of bureaucratization, divergent investments in scarce space, and criminal economies. I argue that infrastructuring is an important addition to architecture and place-making as the hitherto dominant concepts for the analysis of urban religion.



## **Weishan Huang: Does Location Matter? – Religion, Gender, and Urban Restructuring in Shanghai**

This presentation examines the relationship between the processes of urban change and the politically and commercially constructed nature of Buddhism since 1978 in Shanghai. Political constructions cause an increasing divide between the city center and suburban areas in the religious spaces of Buddhism. The new relationship between the religious institution and its geographic relocation opens the way for new research inquiries. The mainstreaming of Buddhism, first, in the downtown areas has emerged with the new trend of economic and cultural gentrification that has generated different physical and social neighborhoods. Second, not confined to being iconized as tourist sites, temple-centered Buddhist temples led by powerful abbots are engaged in “niche-switching” between attracting commuters and visitors and attending to temple-based devotees. With new spatial strategies, such as the development of cultural philanthropy and interprovincial pilgrimages, temple-based clergy must negotiate their social positions in the commercial zones. Third, the policy reinforces the phenomenon of “temple-centric” revitalization. The gender of temple leadership is a significant factor in attracting financial supporters; nevertheless, the issue of location seems to be a more crucial factor in determining temple development. The main actors in the process of neighborhood gentrification and temple growth—the state, clergy, developer, and laypeople—will be considered in this talk.

## **Michael Okyerefo (University of Ghana): Safeguarding the Unique Architectural and Spatial Design of the University of Ghana**

The physical nature of built spaces can be understood within the crucible of a long history of society. The built environment has, therefore, undergone countless change since the beginning of human time. Throughout history, cultural empires have appeared across continents, which to this present day, have captivated our understanding of nature, man





and space. The builtSpace arranges, and is informed by, society, goods and people, creating the distribution of materiality in a potential, and ultimately realized, scene. One would suppose that the understanding of the physical nature of built spaces should be within the purview of scholars in the academy. Why then would a cross-section of academics at the University of Ghana act in concert with an insignificant and unrepresentative membership of the Ghanaian public to seek to bastardize the built environment around Commonwealth Hall of the University? This keynote interrogates this question against the backdrop of a planned University of Ghana landscape which stands in no need of gentrification vis-à-vis Accra's transcendent urban planning which straddles different eras.

### **Joschka Philipps: Access, Concepts, and Capture: Methodological Issues in Comparing Urban Youth**

This presentation is a reflection on my PhD research on urban youth and political protests in Conakry, Guinea and Kampala, Uganda. Initially conceived as a comparative project, I reflect on why I abandoned comparison as an explicit method, though it continues to shape my research perspectives. Three methodological issues will be central: a) how research access affects qualitative comparison, b) how concepts silence incongruities, and c) how one is to capture social realities—or not—in view of multiple possibilities of interpretation.

### **Yara Sa'di-Ibraheem: Out of Home, Out of Time: Privatizing the Production of Colonial Landscapes in Palestine and Beyond**

This study is part of my attempt to comprehend contemporary phenomena through historical contextualization, bottom-up perspectives, and methodologies. It examines current hegemonic neoliberal urban, political, and economic processes and how these alter the sense of time-space in indigenous geographies under colonial settler settings. Particularly I focused on urban Palestinian refugees' properties (in three cities: Haifa, Jaffa,



and Jerusalem), which were confiscated by the Israeli state in the aftermath of the 1948 War, and on their transformations within the neoliberal regeneration and privatization schemes. Through an intensive micro-geographical study of specific homes, I was able to unveil fragments of concealed knowledge – the hidden historiography of specific places - in official archives and thereby subverting policies of silencing. Subsequently, an alternative archive for each address and neighborhood was created, where historical pre-1948 data with post-1948 information converges and processes that evolve over time could be traced. This enabled me to pinpoint the various urban processes that Palestinian properties have undergone, such as what I term “spaces-in-waiting”, namely spaces put on hold, thus turning the neighborhood into slums and ruins, ready to be “discovered” through urban renewal and gentrification; and “re-frontiering” which takes place when neoliberal means and discourse, through settlers “pioneers” and the private sector, enable a second wave of Judaization of already-dispossessed spaces. I continued this research by focusing on eviction, displacement, and dispossession as a point of entry into an analytical engagement with urban regeneration and temporalities of marginalized spaces around the world.

**AbdouMaliq Simone (University of Sheffield): Developments in Black Urbanism: Inventing and Extending Connections among Disparate Facets and Geographies of Urban Life**

How different black populations have formed and inhabited specific urban contexts around the world offers important materials for conceptualizing ways in which heterogeneous urban practices and realities might speak to each other. How apparently contradictory and marginal experiences might extend themselves to each other as both analytical and concrete affordances, opening up new ways of living the urban. This is not a matter of accounting for the situations of black people in cities. But rather a way of incorporating different histories of black inhabitation to engage the urban everywhere.



## Steve Tonah (University of Ghana): Making the Town: Afro-Brazilian Returnees and the Transformation of Accra from the Early Colonial Times Till Today

During the first half of the 19th Century several hundred ex-slaves, freed slaves and wealthy individuals and families of persons of African descent returned to the Gulf of Guinea from Bahia, Brazil in what has been commonly described as a reverse transatlantic migration.

These returnees

and their retinue settled in towns such as Lagos, Cotonou, Lome and Accra. The impact of the Brazilian returnees on the social, cultural and economic lives of the indigenous population amongst whom they settled have been considerable. This lecture examines the contribution of the few hundred individuals, later on referred to as the Tabom people, who returned to Accra from Brazil between 1820 and 1860. During this period Accra had been under Dutch protection until it was handed over to the British, who not long thereafter transferred their capital from Cape Coast to Accra.

The lecture examines the contributions of the Tabom Afro-Brazilian returnees to the development of Accra. The Tabom influenced several aspects of the lives and livelihood of the indigenous Ga population including their housing architecture, warfare techniques, religion, music and dance, food, fashion, herbal medicine and education. They also brought along artisans with skills and expertise in areas such as well-digging, subsistence and plantation farming, masonry, carpentry, tailoring, and other specialized areas. However, the returnees were not always a force for good. In spite of their emancipatory struggles for freedom in Brazil, they also got involved in the ignominious slave trade and slavery in exchange for imported goods as well as slave labour on their plantations and as domestic servants. The poor management and struggles for land among the Tabom also contributed to the chaotic and poor land management situation in the city.

Although very much integrated into the local Ga population, the Tabom have till today cultivated their Afro-Brazilian identity and maintained their unique hybrid culture in Accra.



Descendants of the Tabom returnees have over the decades become highly stratified with a small wealthy, educated and cosmopolitan elite living in the leafy suburbs and their impoverished relatives who still have their abode in a vibrant and breezy neighbourhood in Central Accra.



## Readings

### Key Theme 1: Spatial Categories

- Dirlík, Arif (2007). Global South: Predicament and promise. *The Global South*, 1(1), 12-23.
- Wagner, Peter (2017). Finding one's way in global social space. In: Wagner, Peter (ed.), *The moral mappings of South and North*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1-17.
- Wolvers, Andrea et al. (eds.) (2015). *Concepts of the Global South*. Cologne: Global South Studies Center, University of Cologne

### Key Theme 2: Comparative Urbanism

- Lees, Loretta (2012). The geography of gentrification: Thinking through comparative urbanism. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(2), 155-171.
- Robinson, Jennifer (2011). Cities in a world of cities: The comparative gesture. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 35(1), 1-23.