

# **A world of cities? Comparison across the disciplines**

**cities@manchester workshop**

**Supported by the Hallsworth Conference Fund**

**May 17-18 2012**

**G16, Martin Harris Centre, University of Manchester**

## The context

Across the humanities and the social sciences there is a long tradition of comparative studies of cities. In disciplines such as anthropology, history, human geography, languages, linguistics, planning, political science and sociology a great deal of work has been done comparing the differences and similarities between cities, with often one city emerging as being the 'norm' against which others are compared. In urban studies, for example, think of the Chicago School of the 1920s, and the LA school of the 1980s as the most extreme and obvious examples of this phenomenon. In both cases theories were built on the experiences of particular cities at specific historical junctures. This in turn has shaped how scholars have understood and labelled other cities. For example, studies have compared cities across the world, positioning them as either more or less 'developed' on the basis of urban theories generated in a small number of cities in the global north. Likewise, cities have become understood as more or less 'global', often paying little attention to historical trends. Most recently there has been an intellectual drive to move beyond these distinctions and instead to consider a world of cities, moving beyond both simple categories and past assumptions in the constructions of urban theories. What thinking about comparison in this way means for a comparative study of cities in the twentieth first century remains unclear, however. This is the intellectual context for this two day workshop, which will draw on leading scholars from across the humanities and the social sciences.

## Workshop webpage

[www.cities.manchester.ac.uk/events/wos/](http://www.cities.manchester.ac.uk/events/wos/)

## Organising committee

Nina Glick Schiller (SoSS), Encarnacion Guitierrez-Rodriguez (LLC), Simon Guy (SED), Alan Harding (SoSS), Mark Jayne (SED), Leif Jerram (AHC), Melanie Lombard (SED), Diana Mitlin (SED), Melanie Lombard (SED), Yasminah Beebeejaun (SED) and Kevin Ward (SED).

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**May 17-18 2012**  
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## Schedule: 17 May

- 14.30-15.00: Tea/coffee and registration
- 15.00-15.15: **Welcome and introduction to the workshop**  
Kevin Ward (University of Manchester)
- 15.15-16.00: **Sue Parnell (University of Cape Town) 'Learning about the world of cities: a Geographer's reflections from the bottom of Africa'**  
Chaired by Diana Mitlin (University of Manchester)
- 16.00-16.45: **Colin McFarlane (Durham University) 'The place of slums'**  
Chaired by Simon Guy (University of Manchester)
- 16.45-17.00: Wrap up of day one and reminders about day two
- 19.00: Evening meal (places to be arranged in advance)  
Restaurant Bar and Grill, 14 John Dalton Street, Manchester M2 6JR

## Schedule: 18 May

- 9.15-9.30: Tea/coffee and welcome
- 9.30-10.15: **Vanessa Watson (University of Cape Town) 'Building a Southern perspective on urban planning using the comparative case method'**  
Chaired by Yasminah Beebeejaun (University of Manchester)
- 10.15-10.45: Tea/coffee
- 10.45-11.30: **Leif Jerram (University of Manchester) 'Spaces and Changes: Questions about Space and Explaining Cities'**  
Chaired by Encarnacion Gutierrez-Rodriguez (University of Manchester)
- 11.30-12.15: **Martina Rieker (American University in Cairo) 'Critical Neoliberal Analytics: Rethinking Comparative Urban Frameworks'**  
Chaired by Melanie Lombard (University of Manchester)
- 12.15-1.00: Lunch
- 1.00-1.45: **Garth Myers (Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut) 'From Expected to Unexpected Comparisons'**  
Chaired by Mark Jayne (University of Manchester)
- 1.45-14.30: **Jan Nijman (University of Amsterdam) 'Urban Perspectives of the World'**  
Chaired by Rajinder Dudrah (University of Manchester)
- 14.30-15.30: **Roundtable discussion and summing up**  
Panel: Dalia Said Mostafa (University of Manchester); Tim Edensor (Manchester Metropolitan University); Nina Glick-Schiller (University of Manchester); Caroline Moser (University of Manchester).  
Chaired by Alan Harding (University of Manchester)

# Biographies and Abstracts

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## Dr Leif Jerram, University of Manchester



Bio: Leif Jerram is Senior Lecturer in Modern History in the school of Arts, Histories and Cultures at the University of Manchester. His research is about modern European cities, and how they've shaped the experience of the twentieth century. In particular, he explore why they are built the way they are, and how their buildings and spaces shape our lives once they've been constructed. His work focuses on what it means to live in a metropolis, on how space directs change and continuity over time, and what we might mean by 'modernity'. He tries to bridge some of the gaps and resolve the contradictions between 'cultural' history and some of the more 'empirical' traditions historians work with. His books include

*Streetlife: the Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century* (2011) and *Germany's other modernity: Munich and the making of metropolis, 1895-1930* (2007).

Paper: 'Spaces and Changes: Questions about Space and Explaining Cities'

Many disciplines talk about space. Some have claimed a 'spatial turn' in the humanities. But there is little agreement about what space is - about what is being referred to - and almost none about what space does, and how. This paper explores some of the obstacles towards a meaningful consensus.

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## Dr Colin McFarlane, Durham University



Bio: Colin McFarlane is Lecturer in Human Geography at Durham University. His research focuses on the intersections between urban materiality and knowledge. He has pursued this principally through a focus on the politics of infrastructure in Mumbai's informal settlements, and by examining two central questions: first, what does a focus on urban materiality reveal about the nature and production of urban poverty and inequality? Second, how do different forms of knowledge and learning enable and limit people's capacities to negotiate urban material inequalities?

He has recently completed an Economic and Social Research Council project on the everyday cultures and contested politics of sanitation and water infrastructures within two informal settlements in Mumbai. He is author of *Learning the city: translocal assemblage and urban politics* (Wiley Blackwell, 2011), and a co-edited book entitled *Urban Navigations: Politics, Space and the City in South Asia* (Routledge, 2011, with Jonathan Anjaria).

Paper: 'The place of slums'

This paper will critically reflect on the presence of the 'slum' in urban studies. The slum is an increasingly pervasive concern in urban research, often linked to the idea of the 'megacity', but what are the implications of this shift for how we theorise cities? The paper cautions against tendencies either to install slums as new urban paradigms or to treat slums as necessarily exceptional spaces to 'mainstream' urbanism. It argues for a view of slums as key reference points in contemporary urban theory, and examines the potential of comparative urbanism here not just an explicit research methodology, but as a strategy for thinking about contemporary urbanism. Arguing for a pluralised comparative conception of slum urbanism, the paper considers whether and how we might rethink the geographies of the slum. It does so, however, not by asking 'where are today's slums?', or by attempting to quantify and typologise different sorts of slums. Instead, it considers particular modes of slum dwelling, whether as forms of neighbourhood organisation - from the makeshift urbanism of precarious life to more secure and predictable spaces - or the proliferation of new marginal spaces in the form of 'tent cities', to forms of explicit political occupation of urban land. These different forms of slum urbanism depend on a politics of dwelling, where politics closely relates to the sheer territorial presence of urban formations. Thinking slums in this way requires a shift beyond imaginaries of slum urbanism as tied to the 'Global South'.

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**Dr Garth Myers, Trinity College, Hartford**



Bio: Garth Myers is the Paul E. Raether Distinguished Professor of Urban International Studies at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. He teaches in the International Studies Department and directs the Urban Studies major and minor for the Center for Urban and Global Studies at Trinity. He is the author of 3 books and co-editor of 2 others, and of more than 40 articles and book chapters, the vast majority of which focus on cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Myers earned his PhD in Geography from UCLA (1993), and he has held faculty positions at Miami

University, the University of Nebraska-Omaha and the University of Kansas prior to his appointment at Trinity in 2011. His primary research interests reside with the historical, political, environmental and comparative geographies of urban planning and urban development in eastern and southern Africa.

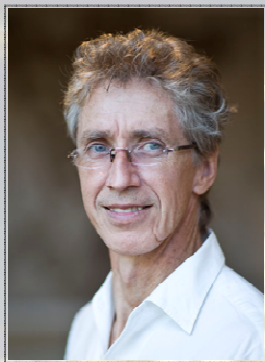
Paper: 'From Expected to Unexpected Comparisons'

In this essay, I examine my approach and rationale within three major projects of comparative urban research in cities in Africa. The first compared the legacies of British colonial planning in four cities, the second addressed policy connectivities in urban environmental governance in three cities, and the third examined five comparable

themes across more than a dozen cities on the continent (as manifested in my three respective books, *Verandahs of Power*, *Disposable Cities*, and *African Cities*). As I am currently beginning a comparative urban project working from African cities back to US cities, in this workshop, I explore what changes when one shifts from intra-regional comparative urban studies to the rare but growing arena of research demanding common ground and reciprocal idea flows between Global North and Global South urban contexts.

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## **Prof J.B.F. (Jan) Nijman, University of Amsterdam**



Bio: Jan Nijman is Professor and Director of the Centre for Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam. He also chairs the undergraduate programme in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences. Trained as a social geographer (PhD, U of Colorado at Boulder, 1990), his interests reach across the social sciences and humanities. Most of his work deals with urban theory and the role of cities in their broader regional and historical contexts. He has more than a decade of field work experience in urban India. His most recent book is *Miami: Mistress of the Americas* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011) and he is presently working on a monograph that focuses on the nature of slums in Indian cities. Nijman is chair of the Global Exploration Fund (Europe) of the National Geographic Society and he is Professor Emeritus in Geography at the University of Miami. He is a former Guggenheim Fellow.

### Paper: 'Urban Perspectives of the World'

Cities are complex, intriguing, and problematic entities. They can be viewed as spatial phenomena or as cultural landscapes and they can be viewed at a variety of scales. The city per se can be an object of study, or cities can be studied as microcosms of the world, or they can be seen as the essential nodes in larger (global) system. The field of urban studies extends across the social sciences and humanities and features a wide array of perspectives. One of the challenges, in my view, is this multi-scalar understanding of cities and the other is the multi-disciplinary understanding of cities. Globalization has compounded the challenges but also offers new frameworks for comparative urbanism. The methodological and empirical part of my presentation will concentrate on past work that employs two distinct comparative approaches: 'parallel comparisons' versus 'multiple individualizing comparisons.'

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## Prof Sue Parnell, University of Cape Town



Bio: Sue Parnell (susan.parnell@uct.ac.za) is a Professor of urban geography in the Department of Environmental and Geographical Sciences and is a member of the Executive of University of Cape Town (UCT) African Centre for Cities. Prior to her appointment at UCT she taught in the Wits University Geography Department (Johannesburg) and the School of Oriental African Studies (London). She has held academic Fellowships at Oxford, Durham and University College London. Originally concerned with the historical geography of the South African city, since 1994 and democracy in South Africa her work has shifted to contemporary urban policy research (local government, poverty reduction and urban environmental justice as well as more general debates about formality and informality at the city scale). By its nature this research is not been purely academic, but has involved liaising with local and national government and international donors. She is also on the Editorial boards of many specialist academic journals including *Urban Studies*, *Environment and Planning*, *Urban Affairs Review* and *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.

Paper: 'Learning about the world of cities: a Geographer's reflections from the bottom of Africa'

Geography is a field-based discipline, but one whose methods and techniques of investigation remain poorly defined in the sub-discipline of urban geography. Urbanists such as Bunge (1971) have long toyed with the notion that the city is itself a laboratory and that residents have much to teach the academy. It is some time since the practice and ethics of city-based engagements have been at the forefront of radical geographers' reflections on how knowledge is constructed and produced. The recent turn to "Southern" cities, where the absence of secondary literature and published secondary sources, demands that urban geographers re-engage primary data to generate a new wave of urban scholarship informed by twenty-first century urban challenges and opportunities. Reflecting on my own experiences in working with municipal officials in post apartheid South Africa (rather than community groups or individual residents), I probe the ethical dimensions of generating "Southern" urban theory.



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## Dr Martina Rieker, American University in Cairo



Bio: Martina Rieker, Ph.D., is the Director of the Institute for Gender and Women's Studies at the American University in Cairo. Martina Rieker, along with Kamran Asdar Ali, is the founder (2001) and coordinator of the Shehr Comparative Urban Landscapes Network. Publications include: *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia* Edited by Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker (Oxford University Press, 2009); *Gendering Urban Space in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa* Edited by Martina Rieker and Kamran Asdar Ali (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); "Urban

Margins: Envisioning the Contemporary Urban Global South." Special Issue Guest Editors: Kamran Asdar Ali and Martina Rieker. *Social Text* 26, no. 2 95 (2008).

Forthcoming publications: *Rethinking Feminist Interventions Into the Urban*. Edited by Linda Peake and Martina Rieker (Routledge, 2012); *The Social Factory: The Politics of Categories and Social Change* Edited by Martina Rieker (2012); *Against the Familiar: Conversations Across Gender and Region* Edited by Martina Rieker and Hanan Sabea (2013); *Neoliberalizing Academies and the Problem of Gender Studies: Comparative Dialogues* Edited by Martina Rieker and Hanan Sabea (2013).

Paper: 'Critical Neoliberal Analytics: Rethinking Comparative Urban Frameworks'

This paper engages comparative urban interventions within critical neoliberal analytics. Using Sassen's influential *The Global City* (1991) as a point of departure, the paper explores the effect of the global city/ mega-city focus in comparative urban work over roughly the last twenty years. Attention is given to the urban contexts, and processes therein, which have come to inform particular moments and have been made visible within this genealogy of comparison. This paper reflects on the possibilities, limitations and tensions within this comparative urban library for the production of knowledge concerning especially "global south" urban contexts, questions of dispossession, and sites and subjects rendered de facto invisible or marginal within these frameworks. The paper will draw on the global comparative urban studies field with particular focus on Cairo.

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## Prof. Vanessa Watson, University of Cape Town



Bio: Vanessa Watson is professor in the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics at the University of Cape Town (South Africa), and on the exco of the African Centre for Cities. She holds degrees from the Universities of Natal, Cape Town and the Architectural Association of London, and a PhD from the University of Witwatersrand. Her research interest is in developing perspectives on planning from the global South.

Paper: 'Building a Southern perspective on urban planning using the comparative case method'

The theory and practice of urban planning remains strongly dominated by scholarship emanating from one particular region of the world: the Euro-American territories. Yet the most difficult planning issues arise in cities of the global South where over 70% of the world's urban population now resides. Assumptions that ideas from these northern territories have universality, and can be simply transplanted onto very different contexts, are highly questionable. Current planning thought and practices are thus unhelpful when it comes to dealing with the primary urban issues of the 21st century. Clearly context must be a critical informant to new ideas, but these also need to be drawn from a far wider canvas of cities than has been the case in the past. Developing new 'situated' planning ideas, and the limits of their transferability, requires in-depth case study research of a comparative kind, where common issues (eg land, informality) are compared across very different contexts.