

Critical Urbanisms

Fall 2023 | University of Basel

Critical Urbanisms Newsletter

Our faculty wishes current and incoming students of the Master in Critical Urbanisms a happy beginning of the 2023/24 academic year.

Our warmest congratulations to **Maren Larsen**, who has been with Urban Studies for the past seven years as a doctoral student, postdoc, and lecturer, and now has been promoted to Senior Lecturer in Urban Studies.

South Designs: Planetary Futures

Critical Urbanisms at the University of Basel announces “*South Designs: Planetary Futures*”. This eight-month series of discussions reflects on how design, thought and practice from the South, forges planetary futures.

What do design responses to ecological crisis look like when they are grounded in the aspirations and struggles of those most affected, predominantly residing in the Global South? How does design grapple with radical interdependence in conditions of enduring injustice and rapid urban and environmental change?

In 2022, we launched a global call for projects to answer these pressing questions. Over 150 multidisciplinary teams from across the world responded. In dialogue with emerging thought and design leaders, the six winning project teams will reflect on their collaborative and speculative work with communities, sites, and materials and discuss how current social and ecological theory confronts the pragmatics and urgencies of making things together.

Tuesday, 26 September, 4-6pm CET – **Opening Roundtable Discussion with Jennifer Gabrys, Paulo Tavares, and Michael Uwemedimo**

Moderated by Kenny Cupers

Tuesday 24 October, 4-6pm CET

Planetary Occupations x Nana Yaa Biamah Ofosu

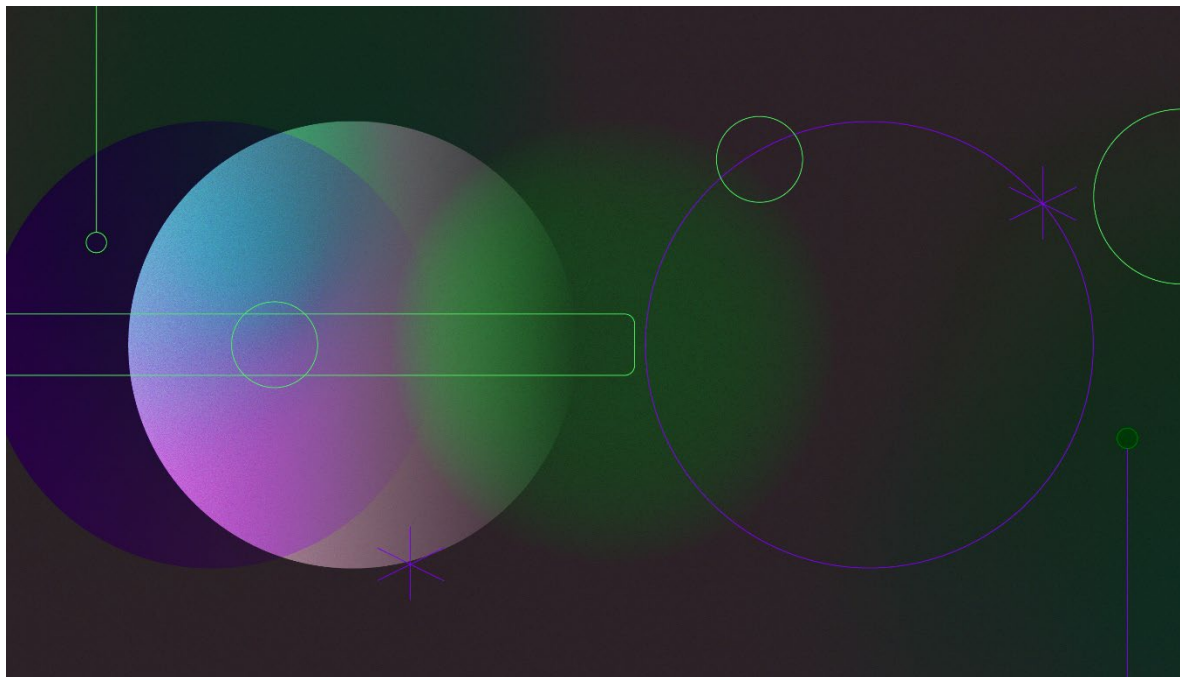
Tuesday 14 November, 4-6pm CET

Re-Imagi(nations) x Françoise Vergès

Tuesday 28 November, 4-6pm CET

Rural Futurism x Germane Barnes

All events are online and open to the public. You can find details and the full program [here](#)



(Image: courtesy of “South Designs”, 2023)

Decolonial Imaginaries in Literary and Urban Studies

In collaboration with Tamara Imboden, **Andreea-Florentina Midvighi** has organized the Interdisciplinary Symposium: [“Decolonial Imaginaries in Literary and Urban Studies”](#), 9-10 November, University of Basel. The collaborative, interdisciplinary two-day symposium brings together urban and literary scholars to exchange knowledge on indigenous epistemic traditions, and on the ways in which they shape alternative narratives about urban living. The symposium is followed by two keynote lectures by Dominic Davies and Catalina Ortiz, as well as a conversation with critically acclaimed novelist Ana Filomena Amara.

The Fire and the Song: Documentary-Led Research

As part of a collaboration between Critical Urbanisms and the Critical Media Lab, FHNW, **Solveig Seuss** has organized the film screening series [“The fire and the Song: Notes on Documentary-led Research.”](#) The practice of documenting has long been intricately entangled with capital-expanding world systems. Documentaries are not only instrumental within processes of seeing, categorizing and managing nature — they actively cut, divide, and keep relations between geographies and layers of politics separate and obfuscated. Prompted by the challenge of bringing together what has long been kept separate, filmmakers in this series are invited to open their field notes and footnotes alongside their documentary screenings. Some of the shown films connect the historical relations and archival temporalities of documentary making to modernization and development processes that undergird these documentaries. Other films in the series will insist on the documentary form as a critical method to research burgeoning extractive frontiers, territorial transformations and infrastructural plans in wake of renewable energy demands, troubling the global North-South divide. Altogether, the film series hopes to begin composing an aesthetic vocabulary not too distant from a fire or a song.

Thursday 16 November 2023

Liu Yujia in conversation with Mia Yu

Thursday 30 November 2023

Sanaz Sohrabi

Thursday 14 December 2023

Tekla Aslanishvili in conversation with Evelina Gambino

Screenings and conversations will take place at 6:30pm at Studiokino, Freilager-Platz 1, 4142 Basel

Architecture of Repair

In collaboration with Dr Khaldun Bshara and Birzeit University, Palestine, **Emilio Distretti** has been awarded a Research Partnership Grant from the Leading House MENA, at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland for the project [“Architecture of Repair: decolonization, architectural conservation and healing in the colonized landscape of rural Jerusalem.”](#) The project consists of a series of two symposia. The series discusses forms of preservation of architectural heritage in Palestine as a form of resistance to Israeli settler colonialism. The project explores how a critical understanding and re-interpretation of Palestinian architectural heritage can initiate a process of repair, an operative concept for probing the variety of marginalized political, cultural and social histories and narratives that exist and emerge in Palestine’s long history of colonial occupation. The first event was hosted by RIWAQ – Center for Conservation of Architectural Heritage in Palestine at Qalandyia Al Balad, July 2023.

The second symposium is scheduled for the 23 November at the University of Basel.



(Image: Beit Hanina, Palestine, photo by Emilio Distretti, 2023)

Racial Justice: Program Commitments

Racial justice is key to our mission for urban studies to confront social struggles and spatial conflicts with the refractions of empire and with alternative practices of world-making. In building and maintaining an inclusive and diverse collective of thinkers and practitioners around this mission, we follow an intersectional approach to racial justice. This approach testifies to the collective and ongoing nature of building anti-racist spaces and practices within and beyond the inherited structures of our institutions and lives.

Since 2020 staff, students, alumni and community in Urban Studies at the University of Basel have worked closely to develop a strategy to address structural inequality and injustice in and beyond the university. This strategy is shared publicly via our website as a [document in both English and German](#). It serves for us to express shared values and commitments, to take stock of and evaluate our work to date, and to develop new projects and practices as we move forward.

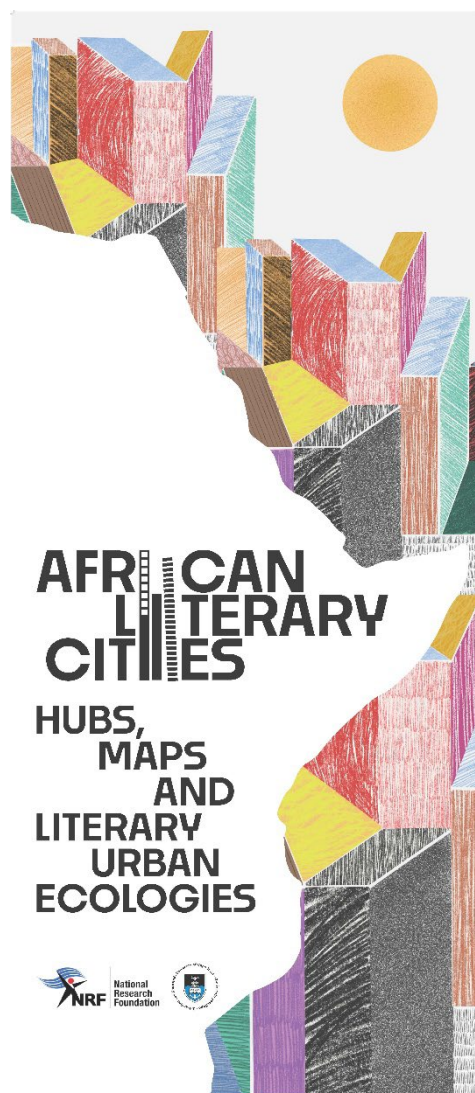
Awards

The collective [DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Research](#) (Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti) was awarded the Golden Lion for Best Participant in the international exhibition at the Venice Biennale, curated by Lesley Lokko. DAAR's awarded installation "*The Entity of Decolonization – Borgo Rizza*" explores the possibility of critical and decolonial reuse and subversion of fascist colonial architecture through spatial practices and public art. The installation comes through and from the work of two editions of the *Difficult Heritage Summer School* (2022 and 2023), a collaboration between **Emilio Distretti** and Alessandro Petti, Critical Urbanisms in Basel, the DAAS academy in Stockholm and the local community of Carlentini in Sicily.



(Image: DAAR – Decolonizing Architecture Art Research, *Ente di Decolonizzazione – Borgo Rizza*, photo by Pietro Onofri, 2022)

Together with Prof. Polo Moji from the Department of English Literature, University of Cape Town, **Laura Nkula-Wenz** has been awarded funding by the South African National Research Foundation for a three-year interdisciplinary project called *“African Literary Cities: Hubs, Maps and Literary Urban Ecologies”* (2023-2026). This project addresses the “absenting” of African literary cities - as a complex engagement with cityness and literariness - in both globally authoritative cultural policy discourses and the emerging scholarly field of literary urban studies. The project takes cognisance of epistemological interventions on African literary cities by Global South scholars, thereby expanding the current scope of literary urban studies as a nascent field.



(Image: courtesy of “African Literary Cities”, 2023)

Makau Kitata, Chao Tayiana Maina, and **Kenny Cupers** won a Graham Foundation Grant for the project *“Kamirithu Theatre: An Architecture for Decolonization”*. The project unearths the history of Kamirithu theatre. In 1976, local workers and peasants came together to build an open-air theatre and stage a play, confronting the endurance of colonial injustices after independence. Yet this powerful experiment in African decolonization was suppressed and the government demolished the collectively built and managed open-air theatre. Grounded in collaborative work and community engagement, the project tells this important story through a digital oral and visual history archive and a three-dimensional digital reconstruction of the open-air. For more about their ongoing work, see www.kamiriithuafterlives.net



(Image: kamiriithu: Kamirithu theatre, photo by Sultan Somjee, courtesy of George Kabonyi)

Natalie Schöbitz was awarded the Doc.CH grant from the SNSF for her doctoral project titled *“Rising Tides, Rising Stakes. Water Infrastructure Work as Climate Adaptation in Mombasa, Kenya”*. Congratulations Natalie!

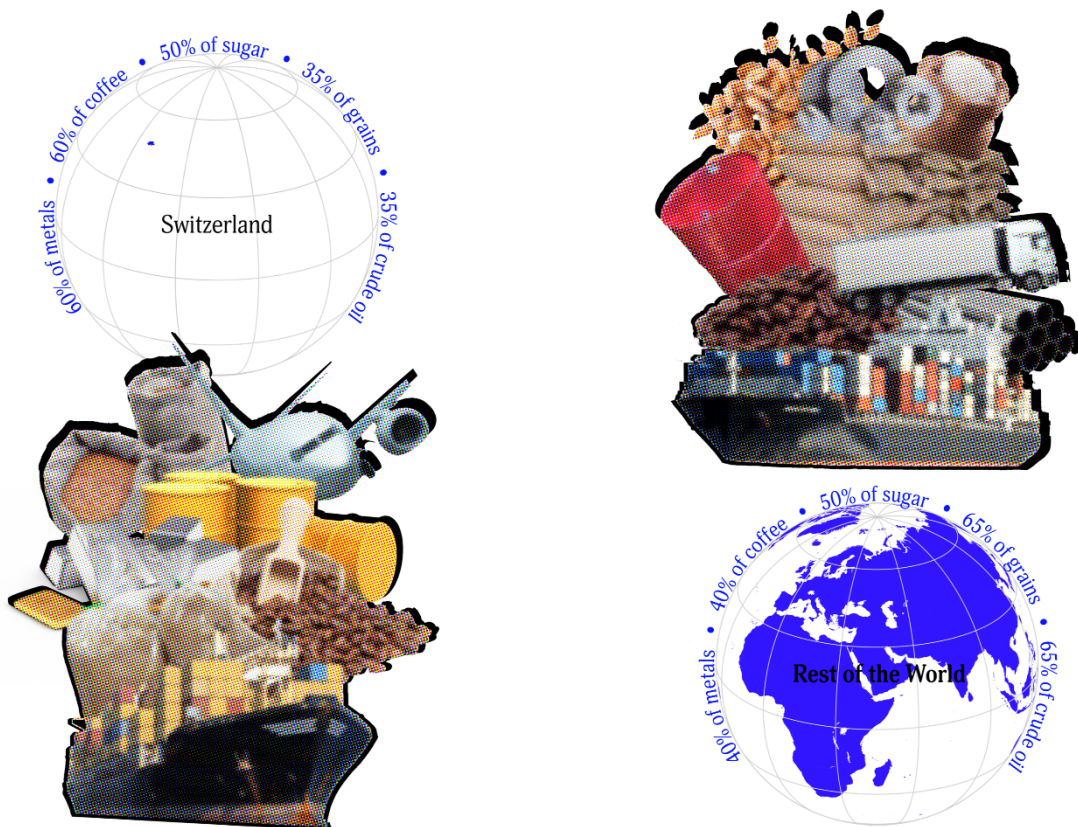
Maren Larsen has been awarded a grant from the University of Basel’s Research Fund. The Research Fund grant fuels the launch of her new research project *“Resettlement, Dwelling, and Urbanization in Secondary African Cities”*. This new project seeks to investigate questions of planetary habitability and displaceability from the perspective of recently re-settled residents in Tanga,

Tanzania and Saint-Louis, Senegal. Maren has additionally received a generous contribution to the travel expenses of the above mentioned research project from the Dr. Darda Frutiger Fund at the Freiwillige Akademische Gesellschaft Basel.

Big congratulations to **Fabrizio Furiassi** who was awarded the [Columbia University GSAPP Incubator Prize](#) for a second year. The prize is dedicated to supporting new forms of anti-racist professional practices that critically redefine community engagement and participation. With the project "*Uni(wi)fied*" Fabrizio is co-running community workshops for the co-design of architectural devices bringing free internet access to underserved Black and Latinx communities in Harlem, New York City. Fabrizio was also awarded a Mobility Grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation and spent a semester between Rome and Palermo to develop part of the research for his doctoral thesis "[Mafia, Concrete, Territory: A Material History of Power in Postwar Sicily, 1945-1975.](#)"

Critical Urbanisms Pedagogy

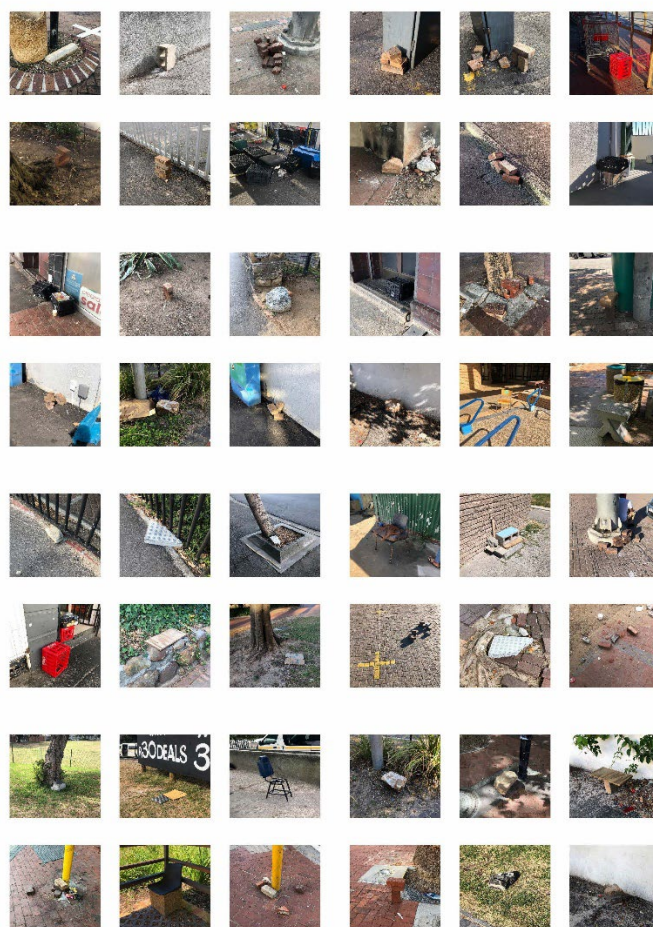
Critical Urbanisms students have been exploring the true footprint of Swiss corporations in the world. In Fall semester 2022, they engaged with both archival and cartographic research methods, while reflecting on the political, ethical, and epistemological questions that come with them. Focusing on the corporate food giant Nestlé, they interrogated the entanglements of race and resource extraction, studied architectures of global governance, and confronted corporate responsibility with anti-colonial struggles. Some of the students' work is available here: [Swiss Corporate Coloniality](#), by Critical Urbanisms students, **Kenny Cupers, Shourideh Molavi, and F. Baranyk**.



(Image: Swiss Corporate Coloniality, Critical Urbanisms, 2023)

Starting with the rich schedule of the Contemporary South African Debates block course (facilitated by Rosca van Rooyen) that introduces students to Cape Town's contested and multilayered history and present, students of the Urbanisms from the South track began their semester at the African Centre for Cities (ACC) at the

University of Cape Town in early February 2023. All throughout, they worked together with the first-year cohort of ACC's MPhil in Southern Urbanism, both in the classroom-based course of Urban Everyday (co-facilitated by **Laura Nkula-Wenz** and Inge Salo) and the two practical modules of City Immersions. In the first one, with the guidance of [Geetika Anand](#), students engaged in a partnership with a local NGO, the People's Environmental Planning (PEP) and the residents of two small informal settlements (NN and Masikhule) in [Khayelitsha](#) to co-produce research on perennial flooding that affects these neighborhoods (for the facilitator's account of this studio, please see issue 2/2023 of [GeoAgenda](#)). The second studio, led by [dr heeten bhagat](#) and co-facilitated by **Anna Selmeczi**, shifts gears from the very real concerns of urban intervention and collaborative knowledge production, and directs attention to embodied and speculative ways of knowing the city. This year, under the title "*Listening in the City*", it invited students to work through the synaesthesia of their vision and tactility as they moved through the city at the tune of a carefully curated library of podcasts.



(Image: street tools from Cape Town, photo by Yassine Rachidi, 2023)

In Spring 2023, the **Urbanism across Geographies** study track engaged with infrastructure and decolonial ecology in Palermo (Italy) and Lamu (Kenya).

Guided by **Dr. Shourideh Molavi**, students explored issues of infrastructural violence, neo-colonialism and decolonial ecologies in Palermo, Sicily. Questioning geo/cultural constructs such as ‘the Mediterranean’, the ‘Middle East’, ‘Africa’ and ‘Europe’ the students collaborated with local communities of residents, academics, NGOs and local artists, exploring the ways in which structural racialized inequalities manifest in the city as the reverberation of Italy's and Europe's colonial legacies. Among the students' projects, a public dinner and conversation was hosted in collaboration with [kirmal: Cucine Narranti](#). The collaboration investigates how colonial imaginaries become visible through the aestheticization of food and how food can serve as a lens to re-imagine ‘the Mediterranean’, delinking it from Eurocentric narrations. Students also re-imagined non extractive relations between the city and the sea, and mapped street art through the districts of Palermo. The students were generously provided a studio by the art collective [Église](#).



(Image: Site visit at the social housing district ZEN, Palermo, photo by Shourideh C. Molavi, 2023)

In Lamu, the ongoing implementation of the *LAPSSET (Lamu Port, South Sudan, Ethiopia Transport) Corridor*, one of the biggest infrastructure projects in Africa, raises important questions about social and environmental justice. These debates bring up both ancient and recent histories — about Lamu’s past as an important trade node of the Indian Ocean and about historical injustices before and after independence. The future development of Lamu hinges on how this inheritance is mobilized to negotiate local people’s stake in plans and projects from elsewhere. Eight Critical Urbanisms students traveled to Lamu for six weeks to work together with researchers from the Lamu Youth Alliance. Guided by **Kenny Cupers**, their collaborative research focused on the perspectives, experiences, and aspirations of those who are inhabiting and transforming Lamu today. It is in their everyday lives and memories that students anchored important questions about heritage, development, security, and future mobility. For more information, see the project website: lamufutures.net



(Image: public screening of students' produced movie, photo by Kenny Cupers, 2023)

Fabrizio Furiassi was appointed Director of the AA Visiting School Basel, a joint program of the Architectural Association School in London and Critical Urbanisms at the University of Basel. The 10-day summer school, entitled “*The Materiality of Art Fairs*”, took a critical look at the materials that constitute world fairs, expos,

biennials and triennials, and the works of artists, architects, urbanists, curators, and institutions involved in them, with a particular focus on Art Basel 2023.

Events and Updates

Jon Schubert presented preliminary results from his [PRECURBICA](#) fieldwork in Beira, Mozambique at department seminars in Lausanne and Hamburg. **Ambre Alfredo** and **Semhar Haile** completed their first phase of doctoral fieldwork in Cotonou, Benin and Freetown, Sierra Leone, respectively.

Our warmest congratulations to **Shahin Haghinavand**! Shahin was awarded a doctoral start-up grant from the G3S to develop his project *“Rentier state urbanization revisited: Oil-time metropolitan development in Tehran, 1970-2020.”* The project seeks to critically revisit this dominant development theory by way of unused archival and field research materials from Tehran.

We are excited to introduce new members, who are bringing cutting-edge research to our program. **Dr. Patricia Noormahomed** joins Urban Studies as a Swiss Excellence Postdoc Fellow for 2023-2024. Patricia is an architect and researcher in the field of architecture, heritage, and urban habitat. She finished her PhD in Architectural Heritage at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid (UPM), and will be working on her postdoc project *“Historiographical and conceptual decolonization of Mozambique's modern housing heritage: a critical overview beyond the ‘authorized discourse.’”*

Valerio Riccardo Orlando is a Visiting PhD student from Italy, joining us this Fall semester to work on his project *“South of Imagination”*. The project brings together diverse communities through collaborative workshops — online and in person — and mobilizes multidisciplinary spaces founded by international artists in decentralized territories. This process-based research refers to the unconventional knowledge produced by the demodiversity of the South.

Samuel Giraut has received a G3S Start-up Stipend starting 1st October 2023 to work on his dissertation entitled *“Securitisation and the renegotiation of (semi)public spaces: a perspective from the South.”* The project homes in on the everyday urban dimensions of security in Cape Town.

We welcome **Nadja Imhof** as a Visiting Researcher from the University of Lausanne. Nadja just submitted her PhD thesis titled *“The Multispecies City: Becoming with rats in Zurich”*. Nadja applies an interdisciplinary perspective, drawing on anthropology, ethology, political and biological approaches to study the dynamics of multispecies interactions and cohabitations in urban ecosystems which shape human and other-than-human realities.



(Image: Beira, Mozambique, photo by Jon Schubert, 2023)

Publications

Together with Cole Roskam and Girma Hundessa, **Kenny Cupers** published [“Architecture as Technical Governance at the African Union”](#) in *Architectural Theory Review*. He has also published a conversation with Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni on [“Architectural Expertise and the Coloniality of Knowledge”](#) in *ABE Journal*, and develops the notion of “infrastructural Inheritance” in a forthcoming issue of [New Geographies](#) on “Corridors”.

Emilio Distretti has published the article [“The Coloniality of Italian Fascist Architecture”](#) in the *Journal of Architecture* (September 2023). Together with Alessandro Petti, Emilio has co-authored “Visions for Architectural Demodernization” in the forthcoming issue of *forA on the Urban* (Fall 2023).

Anna Selmeczi, Laura Nkula-Wenz and Geetika Anand shared their reflections on the 2023 City Research Studio in Cape Town in two articles for *GeoAgenda* 2/2023. In her piece “*From week zero to six, and beyond*” Geetika provides a richly illustrated, annotated timeline of the collaborative field engagement, which was conducted in collaboration with People’s Environmental Planning (PEP), a Cape Town-based NGO focused on issues of low-income housing. Following her article, Anna, Laura and Geetika then provide “*Three reflections on developing collaborative pedagogies*” in which they share some of their learning from several years of engaged teaching and learning within the Critical Urbanisms program.

Last but not least...

We congratulate former faculty **Dr. Claske Dijkema** and **Dr. Shourideh C. Molavi** for their new positions. Claske has taken a position of Associate Professor at the Bern University of Applied Sciences at the Institute for Social and Cultural Diversity (Social Work). Shourideh will start a new position in January 2024 at Columbia University, NYC as Senior Lecturer in Human Rights. We wish them every success in their new roles, and thank them warmly for their contributions to the program and the University of Basel over the past years!