

## **Urban governance**

### **3 sessions:**

#### **1. Transformative adaptation in Africa's fast-growing small towns**

**Session organiser:** Ole Mertz, University of Copenhagen, Denmark, **E-mail:** om@ign.ku.dk

Africa is undergoing major spatial transformations where rural land and villages are increasingly becoming urban in form and living. The result is a new urban landscape that not only includes the growth and spatial extension of large cities, but also an exceptional growth of small towns and intermediate cities. These changes coincide with the impacts of climate changes that highly influence everyday life in both rural and urban areas although with different implications for citizens' access to critical ecosystem services and related to this how they experience climate change related vulnerabilities. This panel will focus on social and environmental aspects of small town development in Africa and address how different actors and governance structures are impacted by these rapid changes and how transformative adaptation processes arise. We welcome contributions that address transformative adaptation in small towns from a wide range of perspectives, including data driven (geospatial, econometric etc.) to more qualitative approaches.

#### **2. Emergent Diversity in Urban Governance in an Era of Polycrisis**

**Session organiser:** Fangzhu Zhang, University College London, United Kingdom, **E-mail:** fangzhu.zhang@ucl.ac.uk

We invite paper presentations that explore ideas, initiatives, and practices that contribute to — and are driven by — the transformation of urban governance in our era of political restructuring and escalating polycrisis (Wu et al., 2024). These transformative processes may be initiated, envisioned, or realised by diverse agencies, including but not limited to authoritarian states, capital giants, municipalists, and grassroots communities (Lauermann, 2018; Robinson et al., 2022; Wijburg and Waldron, 2025; Wu and Zhang, 2025). State-led projects envision hegemonic urban prospects. Ecological resources are increasingly associated with sovereignty and territorial interests. Market-driven decarbonization initiatives have created new categories of financial products. Grassroots initiatives exhibit complex dynamics that transcend mere resistance or detachment from top-down interventions.

Geographers' critical perspectives highlight these not as parallel but as interconnected practices that advance a field of research examining changes in power dynamics and spatial politics. We welcome papers engaging with this dynamic field of inquiry, including but not limited to the following themes:

- Emerging initiatives in social, ecological, and environmental governance transformation demonstrating diverse logics, such as experimentation with environmental-friendly building technologies, energy saving, inclusive ecological transformation, resilience, and hegemonic visions.
- The proliferation, decline, strengths, and/or limitations of entrepreneurial governance approaches.
- Multi-scalar, multi-faceted, and multi-directional roles of statecraft in processes of governance transformation.
- Social agencies and actors empowered or disempowered by socio-ecological initiatives.

- Comparative perspectives across different geographical contexts or among initiatives driven by distinct agencies, visions, and motivations.
- Conceptual and theoretical challenges to established perspectives in urban governance, critical urban geography, environmental geography, state theory, and sustainability transition studies.

Please send your paper proposals (title and abstract of 200-250 words) by **23 March 2026** to Fangzhu Zhang (fangzhu.zhang@ucl.ac.uk) or Handuo Deng (handuo.deng.22@ucl.ac.uk).

## References

Lauermann J (2018) Municipal statecraft: Revisiting the geographies of the entrepreneurial city. *Progress in Human Geography* 42(2): 205–224.

Robinson J, Wu F, Harrison P, et al. (2022) Beyond variegation: The territorialisation of states, communities and developers in large-scale developments in Johannesburg, Shanghai and London. *Urban Studies* 59(8): 1715–1740.

Wijburg G and Waldron R (2025) Cities under state capitalism. *Urban Studies* 62(10): 2154–2168.

Wu F, Deng H, Feng Y, et al. (2024) Statecraft at the frontier of capitalism: A grounded view from China. *Progress in Human Geography* 48(6): 779–804.

Wu F and Zhang F (2025) *Governing Urban Development in China: Critical Urban Studies*. 1st ed. Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group.

## 3. Urban Sound from Noise to Asset: Sonic Borderlands, Aesthetic Values and Spatial Disciplining in the City

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Urban soundscapes have long been contested terrains, shaped by conflicting interests and aesthetic values across public-private spaces. But with the rise of leisure economies, cultural branding, gentrification, and an emphasis on dense, mixed-use developments in contemporary urban planning, tensions around urban sound and noise have intensified and transformed, giving rise to a range of new shifting sonic borderlands and complex conflicts around sound in cities. While “unwanted sound” continues to be framed as a threat to health and well-being, some kinds of sonic events and “cultural sound zones” – generally associated with particular races, classes and cultural practices – are celebrated as tools for city branding. Sonic governance and atmospheric policing increasingly operate as tools of urban disciplining, often under the guise of safety and security, while simultaneously producing new aesthetic standards and value regimes.

This requires greater attention in urban sonic geography to questions of aesthetic value and the definition of sonic “assets”. Traditional approaches to noise mitigation, narrowly focused on decibel reduction rather than the particular qualities or cultural and political roles of sound, fail to capture the relational, porous and highly politicised nature of urban auditory realms in which certain kinds of sound and noise are taken to have cultural and economic value, depending on where, when and by whom they are heard. As sound interacts with governance and the differently scaled spaces of the city in new ways, we call for geographers to address sound’s role in the formal and informal power processes of state intervention, atmospheric regulation and everyday urban life.

By centering sound in urban analysis, this panel seeks to advance geographical approaches to sound-human-environment relations and provoke critical dialogue on the politics of sound and disciplinary listening regimes in contemporary cities. In particular, we seek contributions that foreground sonic borderlands, zones, and frontiers as both enduring and emergent exposing layered inequalities inscribed in urban space. We welcome papers that

interrogate how sound mediates urban transformation, enables and maintains racial and class boundaries and shapes inclusion and exclusion through aesthetic production. Key questions include:

How are cities reconfigured by sonic policies and governance?

In what ways are borderlands policed and negotiated sonically in gentrifying cities?

What are the relations between spatial and sonic governance?

How does urban sound intersect with race and class production?

How do different sonic aesthetics and conceptions of aesthetic value shape urban inclusion and exclusion?