

# URBN.

Edited by Sophie Blumenstein



Washington D.C., March

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# ***FROM THE DEPARTMENT***

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## **Letter from the Director**

Hello URBN,

Congratulations on reaching the end of another semester. Good luck with exams and hope everyone is looking forward to summer journeys, jobs, and vacations.

This has been quite the year for Urban Studies! I hope everyone has enjoyed the various events surrounding our 50th anniversary as much as I have. This semester, our What is the Urban Now? conversation series featured three more prominent urbanists in discussion with our own Brown faculty. Our first two events featured scholars and practitioners deeply invested in community-based urbanism. Toni Griffin (Harvard-GSD) and Rebecca Carter discussed the concept of the Just City, while Ananya Roy (UCLA) and Teo Wickland talked about spatial justice and community organizing in cities. If you missed these talks the video of each event is up on the program website—along with our three fall events as well. We'll close out our series with an historical lens on similar topics: just as this issue sees the light of day Tom Sugrue (NYU) will visit to talk with Jim Morone about the last 50 years of urban politics.

The DUG featured three local urbanists: Seth Zeren of Armory Management Company talked about mixed-use development, infill, gentrification, and development in the West End, while Margaret Devos and Jake Stanton from the South Side Community Land Trust discussed urban food systems and city farming. Each of them shared invaluable perspectives on their educations, their careers, and their lives in urbanism here in Providence with our students. The DUG has also been working with the RISD Design Guild to redesign our logo—stay tuned for the results!

On May 26th more than one hundred alumni, students, faculty, family, and friends will join us for a celebration of the program's 50th year anniversary! We'll have an alumni panel, a keynote by Peter Gill Case '83 of Truthbox Architects, and a lively reception. (See the program elsewhere in this issue.) All of our speakers are eager to come back to reflect on their lives and careers in Urban Studies. Hope to see you there!

My thanks to all of you for a great year, and in particular to Matt Roth, Jeff Cabral, and Carrie Cardoso for all their work. Thanks also to our indefatigable DUG leaders: Sophie Blumenstein, Nitzayah Schiller, Toby Arment, Susan Tang, and Ava Schully. Sophie deserves special thanks for serving as our newsletter editor, as does James Dallape for his editorship of the *Urban Journal*—out soon! Next year our DUG will be headed up by Alejandro Ingkavet, Grace Austin, Sadie Elliott-Hart, and Kaylen Pak—we'll look forward to another year of URBN community. Best wishes for the summer and see you in the fall!

Thanks,  
Sandy Zipp

## Letter from the Editor

I want to express my gratitude for the genuine interest, excitement, and persistent care that my peers and professors have brought to Urban Studies classes and events this year. It's been an honor to highlight some of these experiences in the Newsletter this semester, and we all look forward to hearing what next year's DUG leaders (listed above) have in store. For this edition, special thanks to Ava Schully for the design template, Nitzayah Schiller for the photography, Professor Sandy Zipp for editing, and Matthew Roth and the entire URBN DUG for their support.

All my best,  
Sophie



*Main Green, April*

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# DEPARTMENT EVENTS

## What is the Urban Now?

***Toni Griffin, Harvard Graduate School of Design***

***In conversation with Professor Rebecca Louise Carter***

*Nitzayah Schiller*

Toni Griffin's lecture as part of the What is the Urban Now? series was by far the best talk I've been to at Brown. The informality, expertise, visuals, and concepts covered within this lecture absolutely blew me away. Griffin began by including some background on herself, opening the floor for a collaborative and personal discussion surrounding justice in cities. She described the shift she made early in her career from the private sector to the public sector, expressing how she "wanted to be on the client side" of the work in cities. With intricate maps, Griffin talked through the racial divide in our urban environments and the power that spatially driven data policy has to highlight these injustices. She went through three important factors that inform city planning and urbanization:



1. Existing conditions: We can look at trend data to notice historic and projected changes. We can map geospatial data for our cities by overlaying and stacking patterns.
2. Trajectory of policies: Where are we seeing investments going towards? Are there open space improvements? Are we reinforcing patterns through this policy?
3. Talking to people: This can include residents, civic leaders, etc. These interpersonal discussions can highlight the difference between real and perceived data sets. This refers to data that doesn't always take into account lived experiences. For example, crime, safety/security, and protection can all vary based on the location, and speaking to people directly helps highlight spatial discrepancies.

One particularly memorable point was when Griffin defined justice. She views justice as distributive, procedural, restorative, and interactional. She argued that we must establish interactional justice first in order to create a groundwork for interpersonal interactions within our urban communities. Griffin also delved into the role of personal identity when it comes to urban work and

learning. She discussed how our individual lived experiences drive our entry into a community/city/neighborhood. We should always be thinking about this interaction. Finally, Griffin outlined her Just City Lab, which I highly recommend anyone interested in Urban Studies to check out.



## What is the Urban Now?

*Ananya Roy, UCLA*

*In conversation with Dr. Teo Wickland*

*Sophie Blumenstein*

In the March 2023 What is the Urban Now discussion with Teo Wickland, Ananya Roy addressed spatial justice through the lens of Los Angeles movements by and for the city's unhoused population. Roy works in close collaboration with such movements, taking cues directly from activists. This collaboration is part of what Roy calls research justice—which for her involves “research collectives made up of university-based scholars, movement-based scholars, and unhoused comrades,” who all receive compensation. Additionally, Roy has introduced a “community-based research and review” process, which ensures that her research remains accountable to the community. Research justice is part of Roy's broader abolitionist framework of occupying state-owned spaces in the pursuit of justice. Roy clarified that she's an abolitionist rather than an anarchist, and cited Audre Lorde in her belief that “the master's tools”—in this case the public institution of UCLA— “can help occupy the state.”



Echo Park Lake in Los Angeles, which was evicted during the pandemic. The Echo Park eviction prompted Roy and others to ask what a city is. The Park was subsequently fenced off, but activists ultimately took down the fence, putting up signs including “I believe in living” and “community de-fence.” Roy likes to see her work as community de-fence.

One particularly interesting application of this framework that Roy cited occurred on May Day in 2020, when unhoused people and other activists underwent an effort to seize the Ritz Carlton in rebellion against the Los Angeles’ treatment of its unhoused population. This movement sought to unsettle traditional notions of property, arguing that because massive public subsidies made the construction of this hotel possible, it is not strictly private property. As such, Roy argued that the approximately 70,000 people living on the streets of Los Angeles at that time had a right to occupy these vacant hotel rooms.

If we accept Roy’s understanding of property, and especially of state-subsidized property, the next question is who should own collective assets. Roy argues that we can imagine such collective ownership as a “socialized set of land relations,” or what indigenous groups have advanced as the “rematriation of property into land.” While eminent domain, public housing authorities, city governments, and even land trusts conform to notions of property, socialized land implies a collective vision where we are guests on the land. It was fascinating to learn about how Roy works in conjunction with activists, maintaining the importance of academic research while supporting experimental efforts to reclaim a right to the city.

# DUG Series: Lunch with Providence Urbanists

***Seth Zeren on Real Estate Development***

*Sophie Blumenstein*

The first “Lunch with Providence Urbanists” event of the semester took place in February and featured Seth Zeren, who is Director of Development at Armory Management Company on the west side of Providence. We chatted with Seth over lunch about his journey from studying geosciences and history as an undergraduate at Yale, to working on zoning and urban planning in the public sector, to real estate development in Providence. It was especially interesting to hear how Seth views development as a way to shape the city piece by piece, particularly when one works in the same neighborhood over many years.

## ***Margaret DeVos & Jake Stanton Southside Community Land Trust***

We were thrilled to welcome Margaret DeVos and Jake Stanton for our second “Lunch with Providence Urbanists” event in March. DeVos has been the Executive Director of the Southside Community Land Trust (SCLT) since 2012. It was inspiring to hear about her strong devotion to place, which she described as originating from her upbringing and prior work in Detroit. Jake Stanton graduated from Brown in 2020, and at SCLT he primarily works on aggregating food from local farmers and distributing it to organizations that serve food insecure communities. It was particularly exciting to hear how SCLT makes the connection between immigrants with farming skills and people experiencing food insecurity.



***Washington D.C., March***

# ***STUDY ABROAD REFLECTION***

## **Adam Gendreau: Transportation and Trolls in Copenhagen**

This semester I have been studying urban studies and climate science with the DIS Program in Copenhagen, Denmark. Copenhagen has been a phenomenal experience. People make a city, and Copenhagen is a reflection of its Danish people: relaxed, humble, and friendly.



The metro system in Copenhagen has been one of my favorite parts of study abroad– the system is nothing short of incredible. Electric train cars traverse the underground of nearly the entire city. If you miss your train, it is not a problem: trains come every 2-5 minutes. The metro system was opened in 2002, with a new “city ring” line opening during 2019. All of the stations are uniquely designed to reflect the urban environment above. For example, the station next to one of the city’s biggest parks has green wall panels. The metro design is intentional, practical, and efficient.

In Urban Transportation in Modern Europe, we work on a semester-long partnership project with the City of Copenhagen’s Metro System. The class fieldtripped to the Metro headquarters one day where we got to meet the lead planners and designers of the system, and they outlined our project. Danes are allowed to bring their bikes down into the metro station and onto the trains, or simply park their bikes at the stations. All metro stations have underground bike parking rooms, but to bring a bike down there, one has to carry their bike down the stairs. Consequently, the ground-level entrances of stations are inundated with haphazardly parked bikes. For our project, we are assigned a station in the city, and have to develop a redesign of the station’s bike parking infrastructure. I have done several data collection studies at my specific station, and even tried parking my bike there and bringing it

onto the metro. To consider accessibility measures, we tried using the metro station as deaf people (wearing noise-canceling headphones), blind people (wearing a blindfold), or with children (wheeling an extra-wide stroller). In this class, to create a design proposal, it is believed that we personally experiment with the station. This professional project has been unlike any project I've done before.



Orientkaj Metro Station, the station I am studying for my Urban Transportation project

Sometimes, when I have time off from class, I like to search for giant wooden troll statues. Danish recycle-art activist Thomas Dambo has spent the last decade constructing massive wooden trolls in Denmark and all over the world. In fact, there are at least six discovered trolls in America! The large trolls are scattered around dense forests, large fields, coastlines, and cities. To hunt for them, I usually do a combination of biking, riding the train, and lots of walking. Their locations are intended to bring people off the beaten path to rediscover nature. It is now a personal goal of mine to find all the Danish trolls in my time left here!

Coming to Denmark certainly had its adjustment period, but I am having some truly unforgettable experiences inside and outside the classroom. This is an amazing city in which to study, explore, and live.



Trolls!



# ***CHINMAYI RAJARAM ON URBAN FLOOD MITIGATION IN INDIA***

I'm Chinmayi, a first-year student, and in my first semester at Brown, I took Introduction to Urban Studies with Professor Yapp. The course sparked my interest in the ongoing issue of flooding in Assam, India. We covered various topics related to the problem, including crisis and disaster, and health and environment. These modules exposed me to case studies of similar natural disasters in other parts of the world, such as rebuilding efforts in Banda Aceh after the 2004 tsunami, and the effects of urbanization on Jakarta's floods. Similar problems are present in Assam, and the course pushed me to consider solutions like infrastructure construction and the removal of informal settlements. The New Orleans hurricane disaster also showed how a lack of preparation can be a major issue. All of these connections have inspired me to research the causes and impact of flooding in Assam, and what preventative measures can be taken to mitigate the effects.

Assam is located in northeastern India. Ten major rivers flow through Assam, the largest being the Brahmaputra River. In addition to these many rivers, the topography of neighboring hilly states causes rainwater to flow into Assam. This causes near-annual, excessive flooding, which has particularly extreme repercussions for the many people who have built their homes around these rivers in order to profit from fertile land. Despite the frequency of flooding, there continues to be a lack of prior planning and preventive action. Nearly 40% of Assam is at risk of flooding, and Assam has nearly 10% of India's flood prone land. This problem is historical—since 1950, flooding has eroded 4.27 lakh hectares of Assam's land. Climate change has exacerbated the floods, as a melting glacier in Tibet is adding water to the Brahmaputra River.<sup>1</sup> The 2022 Silchar floods of Assam, which began on June 19th, triggered landslides in many urban districts and disrupted road and rail services. More than 113,000 hectares of land and 3,000 villages were inundated. By June 25th, the death toll was 118, and according to the Assam State Disaster Management Authority (ASDMA), the total affected population was 4.7 million people. Furthermore, the Silchar floods were the second in less than a month, demonstrating the frequency of flooding in Assam.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of government action, the army and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) have been deployed to urban districts such as Cachar, where flood impact is high and relief camps and distribution centers have been established. However, despite having dealt with the same floods almost annually, in the 2022 floods, 200,000 people were living in shelters, and food and drinking water were running out in many parts of the state. This shows how underprepared the government and disaster

committees are and highlights a problem area that needs to be fixed. This question should matter to planners and the government, as it makes painfully clear how poor urban planning leads to issues with crisis and disaster management.

A variety of flood mitigation proposals have been made so far, none completely successfully. The Brahmaputra Board, established in 1980, suggested building dams and reservoirs to control floods in Assam. However, their construction didn't consider the state's ecology, rendering them ineffective as they hinder fertile silt deposition on floodbanks. The dams were opposed by officials and never built, and the government resorted to short-term measures of constructing embankments that need annual rebuilding after floods. This highlights how bureaucracy hampers crisis management. I propose that Assam develop an independent, integrated flood forecasting warning and response system. In 2014, China and India signed an agreement that in exchange for 8.2 million dollars annually, Beijing will provide crucial flood data to India. However, China only provides India with flood season data on an annual basis, and India would benefit from non-monsoonal data collected more regularly. Furthermore, reliance on China for this crucial data leaves the Indian people vulnerable to political turmoil. During the 2017 Doklam stand-off between China and India, China withheld the Brahmaputra river data from India.<sup>4</sup>

In order to fully understand the poor infrastructure and planning that exacerbates the effects of Assam's urban flooding, fieldwork is required. One approach would be to examine the preventative measures implemented for major floods in Assam and analyze whether the floods' impact has lessened over time. Another is to explore new technological developments such as the Integrated Flood Observing and Warning System (IFLOWS), developed by the Ministry of Earth Sciences, and the Chennai Flood Warning System (CFLOWS). The IFLOWS can provide warnings of possible flooding between six and 72 hours in advance. It can also calculate the risk and vulnerability of elements exposed to flooding.<sup>3</sup> CFLOWS, a web GIS-based decision support system, is India's first integrated coastal flood warning system. It integrates data and outputs from various models to provide a comprehensive view of potential flooding, making it worth considering for adoption in Assam.<sup>3</sup> Improved flood mitigation practices in Assam will reduce the impact of floods, protect lives and property, promote economic stability, preserve natural resources, and overall increase the region's resilience to future flooding events.

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# ***NEW URBAN-RELATED CLUB***

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For Roni Wine '24, who grew up in Rio de Janeiro, “E-bike was the definition of freedom for me when I was 17 or 18.” Fast forward to about a year ago, when economics-concentrator Roni developed an interest in transportation planning. He’s now enrolled in Professor Azar’s course, “Transportation: An Urban Planning Perspective.” Most recently, Roni and fellow students Ford Shaper and Jesse Edelstein founded the Brown Urban Mobility Project (BUMP) centered around their shared vision of a transformed Thayer Street—”Thayer for People.” They reached out to Liza Burkin, lead organizer of the Providence Streets Coalition, who helped them understand how to generate change through community organizing. When asked about Brown’s role in Providence and particularly on Thayer Street, Roni emphasized that many Providence residents don’t actually want a different Thayer. Additionally, he identified a tension that many students can relate to—between his long-term relationship with his home city of Rio and the fact that “we’re here” in Providence.

Also, while Thayer St was the club’s founding vision, BUMP now has the broader goal of affecting change in College Hill and Providence at large. Improving Thayer is very complex, and Roni noted that he may not see change before he leaves Brown. Beyond Thayer, BUMP has conducted two tactical urbanism projects (otherwise known as guerilla urbanism): they’ve painted a long-needed crosswalk and set up a temporary parklet. Roni emphasizes that “people need to see to believe,” which makes tactical urbanism exciting for the club. BUMP also organized a group bike ride called the Brown Bike Jam and hosted a discussion with two Brown graduates working in transportation. Roni and I agreed that “once you see all the possibilities, you can’t stop thinking about it.” To get involved, contact [roni\\_wine@brown.edu](mailto:roni_wine@brown.edu), or follow BUMP’s Instagram @[urbanmobilityproject](#) and Twitter @[bumproject](#).



# HADLEY BENJAMIN ON PRIVATELY OWNED PUBLIC SPACES



Between the black-and-white portrayal of public and private space in New York City, a category of quasi-public spaces exist in the gray. Privately owned public spaces, otherwise known as POPS, form a network of such hybrid spaces across New York City. POPS are legal paradoxes that were created in the 20th century and have integrated themselves into the fabric of the city, presenting in a variety of forms such as through-block passageways, indoor circulation spaces, outdoor plazas, sidewalk widenings and above-ground terraces. My

senior thesis, titled “Public Spaces in Private Hands: Examining the Paradoxes of Privately Owned Public Spaces in New York City,” explores three specific elements of POPS (signage, street furniture and amenities) that contribute to the production of this quasi-public gradient. Each of these components influences the extent to which each space serves the general public by affecting who is welcome into the space and what they are allowed to do there. Due to the quasi-public nature of POPS, these spaces can also be used to illustrate the tensions between property owners, the general public, and the government, resulting in an array of problems and possibilities for the POPS program.

## FROM THE DUG

### ***Some Favorite Rhode Island Spots:***

Carr Pond

Ava Schully

Small Point Café

Nitzayah Schiller

Rhode Island Desert

Sophie Blumenstein

Gano Park dock overlooking the Seekonk River

Susan Tang

Riffraff, Beehive Café

Toby Arment

### ***Some Favorite Urban Studies Classes:***

City Politics, Professor Morone

The Just City: Speculative and Animated Futures, Professor Carter

Cities in Mind: Modern Urban Thought and Theory, Professor Zipp

Urban Asia: Beyond Tradition, Modernity, and Crisis, Professor Yapp

Downtown Development, Professor Azar



# ***Join Urban Studies alums for an afternoon of discussion, memories, and merriment***

Friday May 26th, 2023

2-6pm

Smith-Buonanno Hall 106

95 Cushing Street, Providence RI

## **Featuring:**

### Greetings

#### **Samuel Zipp**

Professor of American Studies and Urban Studies  
Director, Urban Studies Program

### Alumni Panel

(2-3:30pm)

Memories of the urban studies program and reflections on lives and careers in urbanism

#### **Steve Cowell '72**

Cowell Consulting, formerly President of E4TheFuture

#### **Victoria Mason-Ailey '79**

Retired, Associate Vice President for Planning and Community Affairs, Columbia University; formerly Director of Community Planning, Philadelphia

#### **Chris Cirillo '95**

Executive Director and President, Ascendant Neighborhood Development, East Harlem, NYC; formerly with Housing Preservation and Development, NYC

#### **Olga Abinader '05**

Director of Environmental Review and Land Use Planning, Matrix New World Engineering; formerly Director of Environmental Review, City Planning, NYC

#### **Alex Morse '11**

Town Manager, Provincetown, MA; formerly Mayor of Holyoke, MA, 2012-2021

### Keynote Address

(3:45-4:30pm)

#### **Peter Gill-Case '83**

Principal and Founder, Truthbox Architects, Providence, RI

### The paradox of cities revisited in the age of climate change

All the embodied energy in cities - in steel & concrete, in art & haute cuisine, in trash & ruins - goes unnoticed in daily life and generates activity and the need for more resources. The bread, the bricks and debris all come from somewhere else, leaving scars where extracted, impacting our existence. Cities are as natural an outgrowth of humanity as love and war; we are drawn together in community. As stewards of urban life, what stories seem most relevant to share?

### Reception

(4:30-6pm)

**Drinks, food, and merriment!**