

URBN.

Edited by Grace Austin



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FROM THE DEPARTMENT

Letter from the Director

Hello URBN,

Congratulations to all as we near the end of another semester. This has been a fun and productive year in Urban Studies. We've had a number of DUG events, welcomed Abidin Kusno and Margaret O'Mara to campus for our What is the Urban Future? series, and seen nine students finish senior theses! We're set to debut our new Alumni Network, which will help students and alums better connect to one another. This year marks the tenth anniversary of the Urban Journal, edited this year by Adam Gendreau, and as many years for this newsletter, ably helmed by Grace Austin. My thanks to them, and to all of you for keeping Urban Studies vibrant. Best wishes for the conclusion of the semester and a relaxing and productive summer. See you in the fall.

Thanks,

Sandy Zipp, Director

Letter from the Editor

Hi readers,

Thank you for picking up the URBN newsletter! As you will see in the content covered in this edition, the Urban Studies program has had a busy semester with several talks, undergraduate workshops and events, and the creation of a new Alumni Network to connect past and present Urban Studies students. The program continues to provide a collaborative, creative, and thoughtful community that I am very grateful to be a part of and will miss after graduation this year. The current DUG leaders, Alejandro Ingkavet, Kaylen Pak, Sadie Elliott-Hart, and myself welcome the new leaders and look forward to staying connected in the future!

Warmly,

Grace Austin '24

Winter Session Course Goes to Indonesia

A Conversation with Professor Yapp about her new URBN course “The Right to the City: Focus on Indonesia.” The interview was conducted by a student who took the new course, Rafi Ash.

Interview by Rafi Ash

RA: Can you give a brief description of the course?

LY: The course was called “The Right to the City: Focus on Indonesia”. It was a winter session course sponsored by the Global and Experiential Learning and Teaching (GELT) program, the Winter Session folks, the Urban Studies Program, and a generous Brown alumnus. It looked at the ways in which communities are responding to various urban challenges in a city like Jakarta, whether that is environmental challenges, political challenges, issues around public space, etc. It was really an opportunity to think about how these kinds of urban challenges are being responded to not from a top-down perspective, but from a bottom-up perspective. The course brought students to Indonesia—to Jakarta and also a city called Solo—to show them the kinds of amazing work that’s happening on the ground through partnering with different NGOs, activists, local residents, local students, professors and to get a full picture of how these cities are working. It’s really key for students to actually be in these places and think and learn about them on their own terms, not always through the filter of an academic text or American media.

RA: One of the greatest things about the trip was how integrated with these organizational partners that we got, and how many organizations that we worked with and saw at the ground level. Can you talk about some of those groups?

LY: So there were three partners that we worked with. One was the university, Universitas Tarumanagara (UNTAR). We hooked up with the urban planning and real estate department there who are doing some really fantastic work around issues of social justice and inclusive urbanism.

But, the two main partner NGOs that we worked with were the Rujak Center for Urban Studies and Kota Kita. Rujak is an NGO focused on issues of social justice, particularly focusing on *kampung*, which are low income neighborhoods and communities in Jakarta. On the one hand, Rujak does have a strong academic focus, they have a lot of researchers and formally trained architects that are working with them. But they are also, more so than many other NGOs that I have come across, very deeply embedded in the communities that they're serving and working with. They really see these neighborhoods as true partners. They let the communities lead the work that they do. The model that they represent is an extraordinary and invaluable example of how academics, activists, and community members can really work together in a very organic, sustained way.

The second NGO we worked with is called Kota Kita (which means "Our City"), focused predominantly on issues of participatory planning in Solo. They're really interested in how we meaningfully bring in folks who have been excluded from urban planning processes, particularly women, children, people with disabilities, and the elderly. We use the term participatory planning a lot in urban studies, and it can mean many different things. And it often means something very superficial. But with Kota Kita, what they're showing is how to do it in a very meaningful way. And they use all sorts of different inventive and creative and playful strategies to do that.

RA: Yeah, one of the things that I think impressed me most with Kota Kita was they had these tactile maps of Solo that they used to help blind communities describe their daily journeys across the city.

LY: I love the tactile maps and the way they use Legos and Minecraft and role playing games in design processes. They put thought into what food to provide people at these workshops and even the way that they think about how to arrange the chairs. All those little details that make people comfortable and feel like their opinion is valued and that they can share it.

RA: We really packed it in. We were there for two and a half weeks, and we did so much. And so I was just wondering if you could pick one day or activity that was your highlight?

LY: As usual, the highlight of the trip was the thing that we didn't plan. We ended up stumbling on Kongsy-8, a queer art collective and community space. And for me, it not only was just a wonderful space to be in and opened up all sorts of really meaningful conversations, but it also was an example of what makes cities great—and what makes Indonesian cities great—which is that factor of serendipity.

RA: So then lastly, just thinking about what's next? What are future plans for repeating the trip? Or for bringing these community partners to town?

LY: So in terms of the class, I'm really looking forward to running it again. I think probably in a year or two with GELT, potentially as a winter session course or it might be adapted to a summer session course that is a bit more expanded.

But I think more importantly, I see this class as an entry point for building upon these relationships with our community partners in the future. This summer, I'm putting together a panel called "The City as Classroom" at the Association for Asian Studies in Asia Conference in Yogyakarta with many of the folks that we worked with at UNTAR, Kota Kita, and Rujak. I would also love to bring them to Brown to lead workshops and engage with folks here who are working towards a similar vision of inclusive and just urbanism in Providence. They were so gracious in bringing us there and welcoming us in their institutions and communities. I want to return the favor and see if we can find a way to invite them to share their knowledge here in Providence.



Photos by Lauren Yapp from the course trip this past winter.

Urban Studies Alumni Panel: Community-Based Urbanism

Maya Kelly



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Four Brown alumni spoke to their careers in community-based urbanism at an alumni panel this past week. From union organizing to housing justice advocacy, all four panelists discussed the experiences that led them to where they are today. For Alisa Gallo '93, Brown's coursework gave her a foundation in how to write and analyze statistics. But it was getting involved in Providence's community while at Brown that truly shaped her career path. Alex Werth '09 got his first job in the industry through an alum, later taking the place of another Brown graduate. He "entered upon this world being able to draw upon a network that was very supportive," he said, emphasizing the immense privilege that Brown's Urban Studies network offers its graduates. Nora Gosselin graduated from Brown in 2019, and now works for the Cooperative Development Institute, helping resident groups organize when their mobile home parks go up for sale, and purchase/operate their communities as affordable cooperatives. While at Brown, Nora worked 30-40 hours a week. This meant she couldn't be as active in Brown's offerings as she might have liked, but Nora picked up "vital" skills including organizing her peers. Colin Kent-Daggett '19.5 is an Advocacy Coordinator and Paralegal at TakeRoot Justice in New York City, NY. Getting there was a "windy road." Colin took a semester off to work in the Central Falls planning department. Later, he door-knocked to execute tenant outreach. In everything he's done, Colin has remained "grateful to urban studies for laying a lot of the intellectual groundwork for the value he gets out of his work."

All four panelists have dedicated their careers to working with communities, doing their best to avoid approaching any projects in a paternalistic manner. Their advice: “Be willing to show up anywhere, with anyone, to do anything.” All four panelists advised anyone looking to pursue community-oriented careers to prioritize humility, make yourself available, and be willing to do the grunt work. Alex emphasized that, while caution is needed, it is possible to meaningfully impact the communities in which you work. If you are able to approach community work with humility and ethics, “it’s possible that your expertise will be met with deep appreciation,” he said. Alisa reflected on the impacts she’s noticed in her 30 years of organizing and representing hotel, airport and gaming workers with UNITEHERE, the hospitality union. She couldn’t help but tear up as she optimistically noted that in these types of careers “it’s very meaningful to see what a dream and vision you have, how real it can manifest, and how significantly lives can be impacted by that.”

“Prophecy, Legitimacy, and the Urban Future of Indonesia”: A Talk with Abidin Kusno

Riki Doumbia

On April 5th, 2024, Urban Studies concentrators joined in Petteruti Lounge to hear Professor Abidin Kusno from York University speak as part of the Urban Studies’ “Urban Future” series. Professor Lauren Yapp gave introductions. In his talk named “What is the Urban Future? Prophecy, Legitimacy, and the Urban Future of Indonesia,” Professor Kusno raised several critical questions on the meaning of futurity in the context of urban Indonesia, often leaving guests in laughter as he did it. Of the attendees, several among them were students who took the Global Experiential Learning and Teaching course URBN 1872: The Right to the City: Indonesia in the past Winter session. As preparation for the travel component of the class to Indonesia, students of the class were able to meet with Professor Kusno through Zoom and read his book *Jakarta: The City of a Thousand Dimensions*.

Professor Kusno began his talk by explaining his interest in exploring the question of the urban future. He described the Indonesian concept of futurity as movement, rooted in the Bahasa word *gerakan* (movement). He went into depth on Indonesia’s colonial history, beginning with Dutch presence and the conflation of colonial presence with urban modernity. He illustrated colonialism

as a symbol of dominance yet also resilience for the Indonesian resistance of Dutch colonization. Professor Kusno then began to transition to looking at Jakarta's future with its current context. Inspiring critical thought in attendees, he posed the question of "Not only the urban future, but whose urban future?" Urban modernity in Indonesia has continued to usher in a seemingly contradictory era of neoliberal private development with state support. Answering the question he posed not too long before, he explained how the new planned capital city relocation from Jakarta to Nusantara is guided by "the developers' lens of the urban future." Referencing the political history of the city, he addressed the crises of Jakarta and the cited reasons for relocation: crowding, water crises, and financial decisions.

Professor Kusno described the relocation to Nusantara as informed by political succession as well as the aforementioned cultural concept of movement. He analyzed further comparisons drawn by the prior administration between former President Joko Widodo and Indonesia's first President after colonization ended, Sukarno. Sukarno's administration was the first to suggest the move to a capital city, believing that Jakarta was "genetically defective" because of its colonial history. Professor Kusno demonstrated the moving of legacies through time, creating transference and movement through President Joko Widodo attempting to embody the spirit of President Sukarno. The formal portion of the talk ended with Professor Kusno emphasizing how history is both circular and cyclical. As stated so poignantly by him, "When we talk about the future, we're actually talking about the past."



Sunset view from India Point Park.

Book Talk: Ryan Lee Wong's *Which Side Are You On?*

Alejandro Ingkavet

Over two dozen students joined the Urban Studies Program, in collaboration with the American Studies Department, to hear from Ryan Lee Wong '10, who published his debut novel *Which Side Are You On?* a little over a year ago. The short novel revolves around American and urban history, Asian American identity, activism, and race relations. Born and raised in LA to Chinese and Korean parents, Wong discussed how he found writing, how his Urban Studies education at Brown was crucial to his activism work, and his discovery of meditation. "It's incredibly healthy," he said, "for twenty-year olds to be angry and want to burn the system down."

According to Wong, most author's first novels are really concealed autobiographies. Yes, the protagonist is a version of Wong, but by writing under a different name he can distance himself from the protagonist's actions and opinions. Not only does fictionalizing his own past give him more liberty in storytelling, but it is also the responsible and ethical thing to do, according to Wong, whose parents were activists in Los Angeles leading up to the Rodney King riots, or Saigu, as it is known to Koreans.

Wong read a passage from his novel, explaining afterward through an urban studies lens how a constantly changing built environment permits us to repress our history from collective memory. The setting of Los Angeles is incredibly important for the story, especially considering that whenever the protagonist is walking, rather than in a car, he is in trouble.

"No character is totally right or wrong," stressed Wong, who wants readers to embrace the ambiguity of divisive issues, opinions which might only be created by lived experiences. The title and central question of the novel, *Which Side Are You On?*, comes from a Kentucky coal miner strike song in the 1930s. Wong sees it as a necessary simplification of a story mired by taking sides on complex issues.

Wong concluded the discussion by emphasizing the need to find compassion when speaking with multiple groups with histories of shared trauma.

Club Spotlight: Tactical Urbanism with the Brown Urban Mobility Project

Romilly Thompson and Camille O'Mara

Though you may not have noticed them, I hope the daylighting projects by the Brown Urban Mobility Project (BUMP) have made an impact on your day to day safety. This past school year, we've worked on six intersections across East Providence, painting colorful designs near busy crosswalks. The goal? Improve pedestrian safety by discouraging drivers from illegally parking next to the crosswalk, which creates a dangerous blind-spot. We use bright colors to draw attention to pedestrian zones and to encourage drivers to slow down.

Over the past two semesters, students in BUMP have come together to work on these daylighting projects, pushing paint rollers and sketching out designs onto Providence streets. During our painting sessions, we've had the chance to chat with local residents of all ages (some of whom even join in on the fun!) and receive their feedback and input on future project locations. In the coming semesters we plan to work with community partners across Providence to work in other neighborhoods as well.

To get involved or learn more, check out our Instagram @urbanmobilityproject and website <https://brownurbanmobility.org>.



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BUMP members highlighting street designs with vibrant colors at the intersection of Governor St. and Power St. in Providence.

Margaret O'Mara's Talk on Silicon Valley Urbanism

Jonathan Ewanchuk

On April 18, 2024, Professor Margaret O'Mara (University of Washington) came to Brown and gave a presentation on Silicon Valley urbanism, co-sponsored by the Urban Studies Department and Computer Science Department. In her talk, Professor O'Mara detailed the history and development of tech cities and campuses. As a double concentrator in Urban Studies and Applied Mathematics—Computer Science, I felt the talk did an excellent job of describing both the similarities of the disciplines and the tech industry's unique stake in urbanism. Tech giants have been in the business of creating their own “smart” cities and campuses, playing an undeniable role in crafting the urban future.

Silicon Valley urbanism, as described by Professor O'Mara, can be defined by a few central tenets: separate and self-contained, green, new equals better, and privately controlled. By separate and self-contained, Professor O'Mara explained that she was referencing not only the way in which these campuses are established far outside city boundaries but also how they are built in a way so that employees should never have to leave for basic necessities such as food and even housing in some instances. As convenient as this may seem, these establishments are not without

their cons. Despite claiming to be “green,” Professor O'Mara made it clear that, unfortunately, in many cases, pollution is just offshored elsewhere. Additionally, the origins of Silicon Valley urbanism are intertwined with segregation, as many of these tech campuses sprouted up in the predominantly white suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s. Professor O'Mara specifically touched upon the development of the Santa Clara Valley to emphasize this point.

Furthermore, the desire to be “new” is a worrying prospect, as it means that rather than improving current cities, we would be leaving them behind. As elites look to create entirely new “smart” cities, it's important that we keep our expectations measured. Rather than making meaningful investments in existing cities, new development both redirects resources needed to address existing issues and exacerbates physical and non-physical harms of urbanization. This concept in this industry is incredibly interesting due to the fact that it's pretty antithetical to how programmers work. When programming, we are constantly building upon our knowledge of old designs and concepts and modifying them to make them better, not just restarting.

In reflecting on the talk, it seems that creating separate campuses only adds to the privatization of daily life and contributes to class division, therefore begging the question of whether these private entities should have this much of a role in building cities. Professor O'Mara concluded her talk by explaining her belief in what the urban future looks like: "big tech, but bigger." This is a daunting prospect, in my opinion. While a microchip may look like a city from above, the tech industry should probably stay away from urban planning. If Silicon Valley urbanism is really our future, it needs to be vastly reassessed.

What Is the Urban Future?

Celebrating
50 Years of
Urban Studies
at Brown

A series of conversations on the critical questions facing cities and urban life



The Other Tech Bubble: Silicon Valley Urbanism, Past, Present, and Future

Margaret O'Mara

University of Washington

3pm April 19th
Friedman 102

Sponsored by the Urban Studies Program and the Computer Science Department, with the support of the Dean of the Faculty's Lectureship Fund and the Harriet David Goldberg '56 Endowment

The term "Silicon Valley" no longer refers merely to a place in Northern California but has become shorthand for a global industry of staggering size, wealth, and cultural influence. As the industry has grown, its leading entrepreneurs and firms have come to wield outsized influence on the political economy of twenty-first century cities—because of the real estate they inhabit, the disruptive software products they sell, and the utopian projects they finance.

Drawing on her decades of work examining tech's past and present, including her books *Cities of Knowledge* (Princeton, 2004) and *The Code* (Penguin Press, 2019), Margaret O'Mara will speak to the deep and curious history of high-tech urbanism and what Silicon Valley tech—and Silicon Valley products—might mean for the future of cities, of work, and of urban reimaginings.

The poster provided by the Urban Studies Program advertising Margaret O'Mara's talk this spring.



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