

CASE STUDY Contributor : Dr Kathryn Ewing

Urban Design Africa: Advancing progressive spatial practices and mapping transformation in Southern cities

Teaching shifts from Western models to Southern urbanism, producing contextually relevant insights and policy recommendations for African cities.



The image shows the cover of a prospectus for the 'Urban Design Africa' short course. The background is a dense, red-toned map of an urban area. In the upper left, a black box contains the text 'Short Course Prospectus'. In the center, there is a black outline of the African continent with a red crosshair over it. The title 'Urban Design Africa' is written in large, bold, black letters across the middle. To the right, under the heading 'About', there is a paragraph of text. At the bottom left, there are logos for CPD, UCT, and the UCT School of Architecture, Planning & Geomatics.

Short Course Prospectus

Urban Design Africa

About

Urban Design Africa is a short course run over 1 x block week *in-person on campus*, linked to the Master of Urban Design (MUD) post-graduate programme at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

The course considers the application of urban design and spatial southern theory in African cities. The course involves analysis, mappings and design related to an emerging socio-spatial agenda of the contemporary and dynamic, **everyday African City**.

CPD UCT UCT school of architecture, planning & geomatics

1. Overview and Purpose

African cities currently navigate complex challenges defined by inequality, violence, conflict, migration, and economic instability, often resulting in a disconnect between formal planning policies and the pervasive reality of the urban everyday environment. The Urban Design Africa programme at the University of Cape Town addresses this challenge by applying spatial Southern theory through interactive seminars and workshops. The approach uses GIS mapping and multi-scalar analysis, ranging from the city level to the local street to interpret urban morphology and neighbourhood transformation.

This intervention is vital for sustainable urbanisation because it seeks to develop progressive spatial practices that promote social well-being and cultural expression within volatile environments. By training built environment professionals and policymakers, the course contributes to strategic capacity building and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) within municipal and local government frameworks. A primary lesson from this experience is that the local neighbourhood scale is the most effective level for understanding contextual issues, and that mapping urban form in real-time is essential for grasping the production of space under conditions of uncertainty.

2. Urban Context and Structural Challenge

The course is hosted by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa and is integrated into the Master of Urban Design (MUD) postgraduate programme and facilitated by Dr Kathryn Ewing in the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics (APG), based in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE). While the physical setting is the UCT campus in Cape Town, the curriculum focuses on the broader context of African cities. It brings together an institutional mix of academic researchers, built environment practitioners, and municipal government officials.

The programme addresses the significant disconnect between formal "overground" planning policies and the "underground" networks. In environments defined by economic instability and conflict, the course seeks to advance progressive spatial practices that promote social well-being through real-time mapping of neighbourhood transformation.

These challenges are acutely relevant to Commonwealth nations sharing a legacy of colonial city-making and rapid urbanisation. Many of these nations face similar pressures from rapid urbanisation, precarious neighbourhoods, and the need to reconcile historical urban forms with contemporary socio-spatial demands. The course's focus on Southern theory and mapping real-time changes provides a framework for these countries to develop contextualised urban design responses.

Strategically, the course supports policymaking by providing CPD-validated accreditation for spatial professionals, including architects, planners, engineers, landscape architects and other built environment practitioners. It specifically targets capacity building for local government, empowering leadership to engage with development at the local neighbourhood scale. By fostering interdisciplinary collaboration between participants, the initiative ensures that spatial understandings are integrated into broader, sustainable urban strategies.

3. Approach and Delivery Model

The Urban Design Africa programme is delivered as an intensive six-day short course, blending theoretical inquiry with practical spatial analysis. The approach emphasizes interactive, peer-to-peer learning, group activities, engaged dialogue and individual reflection over traditional lecturing. Guest lecturers and researchers (or past students from the MUD programme) from the specific two cities join in online interactive sessions throughout the week to give local expression and informed feedback to emerging questions. The process follows a structured trajectory:

- **Self-welcome** is an online testing space for technology, resources, and ways of thinking, doing and being before entering the course.
- **Workshop 1** – recognition of urban design in Africa, is a space for cooperation and co-design with care, intentionally creating a space of hospitality. The first workshop intends to provide bridges between diverse participants and activities. This further enables exchanging information during day 1 and day 2.
- **Workshop 2** – redress of urban transformation in Africa, as a space for care and agency, enabling collaboration on spatial change theories, practice, and projects. On day 3, participants engage with an "Urban Design game" for analysis and develop an "Action Plan" for implementation, moving from city-wide scales down to the local street level. Trust building and collaboration are taking place in teams during the remaining day 4.
- **Workshop 3** – as a space for reflection with a group presentation and social event on day 5 as a place for distributed care and the culmination of the short course. Workshop 3 shows growth and development allowing for deep reflection. It supports open, adaptive, and courageous dialogue facilitated by guests and other design students, practitioners and APG staff (inside and outside of urban design). Day 6 enables participants to individually present their e-journals/portfolios as a summative assessment in the form of a mini online exhibition.

4. Transferable insights

The Urban Design Africa course at the University of Cape Town (UCT) facilitates a fundamental shift from traditional Western planning models toward a contextualised understanding of Southern urbanism. A primary insight is the criticality of scale; while urban design operates across multiple levels, the local neighbourhood scale is identified as the level where contextual issues can be most fully understood and acknowledged.

The curriculum delves into the "politics of space," teaching participants to distinguish between formal planning policies and the pervasive networks of informality that drive transformation. Mapping is used as a method of inquiry that goes beyond the public realm to reveal how economic instability, migration, and informality impact spatial change in real-time. This approach allows practitioners to question the production of space in uncertainty, identifying hidden agendas, biases, and contradictions within contemporary African cities.

For professional practice, the course operationalises Southern theory as a practical framework for critiquing and informing design in complex environments. It champions interdisciplinary integration, positioning spatial design as the core discipline that synthesises findings from the built environment. Participants develop real-time data competency through mandatory open-source GIS and spatial analysis, which is essential for interpreting patterns of growth. Finally, the course fosters action-oriented thinking by transitioning from theoretical seminars to the creation of an "Action Plan," ensuring that spatial understandings are translated into implementable strategies.

5. Key Lessons

The Urban Design Africa course directly supports the mission of the CSCC Integrated Planning Action Group (IPAG) by providing a practical, multi-disciplinary framework for managing rapid urbanisation in the Global South.

The following points highlight how the course aligns with and reinforces IPAG's objectives:

1. Addressing Capacity Gaps through Professional Development

A core objective of IPAG is to support capacity building for local governments and professionals to respond to "limited professional capacity" in Commonwealth cities. The UDA course specifically targets built environment professionals and municipal officials/policymakers. This aligns with IPAG's strategy to leverage the Commonwealth network for "just-in-time capacity building" where formal training may be unavailable.

2. Tool-Based Analysis of Rapid Urbanisation

While IPAG focuses on testing and refining the Rapid Planning Toolkit (RPT) for urban expansion, UDA employs complementary digital tools such as GIS mapping, Miro platform, and a specific game/tool for analysis and design intent. Both initiatives emphasize the need to understand "real-time changes" in urban morphology to manage rapid growth effectively.

3. Interdisciplinary and Multi-Scalar Collaboration

IPAG advocates for "multi-level, multi-disciplinary, and cross-sector action" involving government, professionals, academics, and civil society. The UDA course operationalises this by bringing together postgraduate students, practitioners, and government leadership to work across scales, from city-wide systems to the local neighbourhood scale.

4. Mapping Informality and Spatial Justice

IPAG seeks to understand how to integrate land tenure, housing, and services into planning for inclusive urbanisation. Similarly, UDA focuses on the "politics of space," contrasting official policies with networks of informal urban space, providing the evidence-based insights IPAG requires to promote just and inclusive planning.

5. Operationalising Southern Theory

Both the UDA course and IPAG are rooted in the context of the Global South and the Commonwealth. UDA uses spatial southern theory to move beyond Western planning models, offering a curriculum that reflects the emerging socio-spatial agenda of contemporary African cities, generating policy-relevant recommendations that are contextually appropriate for rapidly urbanising Commonwealth member states.

This Case Study was prepared by Dr Kathryn Ewing, Senior Lecturer in Urban Design, University of Cape Town, by way of contribution to the work of the CSCC Sustainable Urbanisation Expert Group, 10 February 2026.



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