

# Liquid Urbanisms in Africa: Thinking Climate Adaptation with and through Water

An International Conference co-organized by PRECURBICA project (Critical Urbanisms, University of Basel) and the Swiss Society for African Studies

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**DATE** 12-13 June 2025 (Thu 11am to Fri 5.30pm)

## Liquid Urbanism in Africa

Faced with rising sea levels, cities across the globe are being remade to confront the threat of water. The climate crisis meets water and urban life head on, manifesting in an array of contact zones that both threaten and give hope to the people who live with them.

Recent historical scholarship has started to question the terracentric, territorially bound notions inherited from Empire, colonialism, and the concomitant development of international law that fixes people and histories to bound borders to ask what new, decolonial understandings about life in the Anthropocene could be gained by thinking with the ‘Ocean as Method’ ([Hofmeyr 2010](#); [Mawani 2021](#); [Menon et al. 2022](#)). The ‘terraqueous’ ([Chalfin 2019](#)) nature of the dynamics that shape contemporary urban development has been taken up by critical social scientists to think about the ‘gradients of wetness’ ([Anand 2023](#)) that historically made and continue to remake cities as, in, and with water ([Mathur and Cunha 2009](#); [Scaramelli 2021](#); [Carse and Lewis 2017](#); [Goh 2019](#)). Yet in conversations about how cities, especially in the Global South, should adapt to the climate crisis, water is still too often framed as a threat to be managed by investment in Big Infrastructure (dams, seawalls, drainage canals). Apart from technical or star architect-solutionism à la Sponge City or Makoko floating city ([Adeyemi 2012](#)), what would it mean to change perspectives and think urban adaptation from and through water?

Using water as a way of seeing through, with and about climate-related urban issues, this workshop invites a critical examination of the urban/water interface in African coastal cities, particularly in the context of climate change. African coastal cities are at the cutting edge of water-borne climate change, as they are forecast to attract the highest urban growth and commercial investment, but also persistently scripted as the least well equipped to deal with climate-related disasters, making manifest the tension between the imperatives of economic growth and sustainable urban development.

The workshop aims to bring together urban planning and critical social theory by exploring the diverse ways African urban communities are adapting their lives and environments to these challenges. Through a focus on various real-world examples based on in-depth qualitative empirical research, including but not limited to the practices of street-level bureaucrats, fishing communities, home-builders, residents’ associations and city planners, the workshop seeks to uncover new modes for living in and with the “urban sea”.

These insights are crucial for reimagining urban futures in times of environmental change, especially for African contexts, where pessimistic or development-centric narratives of crisis dominate, to develop a perspective of critical hope on sustainable urban development in the face of global climate challenges.

**Venue/hosting institution:** Division of Urban Studies and Centre of African Studies, Basel

Preliminary programme:

**THU, 12 June**

10.30: registration, arrival

11.00: Welcome from the Organisers

11:15: Keynote : “Watery Archives, Aqueous Methods” by Huda Tayob, followed by Q&A

13:00 *Lunch break*

**14:00 PANEL 1 — Material Circulations**

How are practices of adaptation, building and dwelling conditioned by the circulation of materials? From the transformations of waste into earth, sand into concrete, scrap metal into rebar, or firm into watery ground and back, how can we chart and analyse the parallel and competing cycles of production and consumption of materials that inform how cities are living with the water?

Chairing: Silvia Balzan

Discussants: Armelle Choplin, Kenny Cupers

***Sand Banks: City-sand formations from Freetown and Accra*** (Kate Dawson, UCL)

***Democratizing Endogenous Building Systems: A Path Toward Resilient Housing in Senegal*** (Nzinga B. Mboup, Worofilia)

***Cement Bags and Floodwalls: Waste, Vulnerability, and Resilience in Informal Settlements of Pointe-Noire, Congo*** (Dany Tiwa, University of Basel)

***Reclaiming the city: incremental placemaking in Freetown’s coastal margins*** (Semhar Haile, University of Basel)

15:30 *Coffee break*

16:15 - 17:45 PANEL 1, second half

***Polytanks and Urban Plasticities in Ghana: Iconic Objects of the African Anthropocene*** (Brenda Chalfin, University of Florida)

***Questions & Answers*** (Discussants, Presenters & Audience)

19:00 CONFERENCE DINNER (invited guests, St Alban Eck Restaurant)

**FRI, 13 June**

**09:00 PANEL 2 — Vulnerability, politics and infrastructures**

From large-scale infrastructure and urban redevelopment projects to more mundane, individual projects of consumption, building, investment, and social advancement, cities are being reshaped by

flows of finance and capital. Big infrastructure also regularly leads to new processes of managing and displacing populations that are deemed at risk and/or contributing to climate risks through 'improper' behaviour. How are big infrastructure projects accommodated, appropriated or subverted to live with the risks posed by rising waters?

Chairing: Armelle Choplin

Discussants: Jon Schubert & Sascha Roesler

***On the Importance of Defining and Conserving Urban and Architectural Heritage in the Coastal City: The Case of Dakar*** (Carole Diop, le Loft Dakar)

***Home-making and life trajectories in flood-risk areas of Central Mozambique*** (Anna Mazzolini, University of Copenhagen)

***« The ocean gets angry » : multi-vocality of knowledges and representations about coastal vulnerability from Cotonou to Lagos*** (Juliette Reflé, University of Geneva)

***Climate resilience and infrastructural subjectivities in the bas quartiers of Antananarivo*** (Fanny Voélin, University of Bern)

10:30 *Coffee break*

11:15 PANEL 2, second half

***Exsiccating the City: A Coastal (Un)settlement Study of Saint-Louis, Senegal*** (Maren Larsen, University of Basel)

***Questions & Answers*** (Discussants, Presenters & Audience)

12:45 *Lunch break*

14:00 PANEL 3 — Amphibious Ways of Making the City

Proposing a multidisciplinary dialogue that bridges architecture, anthropology, and urban planning this panel explores innovative approaches to urban development in African coastal cities which confront rising sea levels and the associated challenges of climate change. The panel focuses on "amphibious" strategies that rethink traditional methods of urban construction and repair. It aims to highlight both techno-scientific and situated, bottom-up perspectives, bringing together experts who can offer insights into the potential and the challenges of water-based urbanism as a sustainable and adaptive strategy for future cities.

Chairing: Jon Schubert

Discussants: Andreas Kofler & Silvia Balzan

***"Pulling the plug, opening the dam": turbulent flow of Volta's industrial nations*** (David Quartey, Royal College of Art, Imperial College London)

***African water cities*** (Kunle Adeyemi, NLé Architecture)

*Radical incrementalism? Water infrastructure workers and re-making of the coastal municipal regions of KwaDukuza/eThekwini, South Africa.* (Natalie Schöbitz, University of Basel)

*Amphibious Lagos - displacement and 'volatile' livelihoods at the urban earth/water frontier"*  
(Francesca Ceola, Technical University of Berlin)

15:30 coffee break

16:00 - 17:30 PANEL 3, second half

*Living with water: Everyday experiences of flooding in lakeside neighbourhoods of Cotonou, Benin*  
(Ambre Alfredo, University of Basel)

*Regenerative Sand–Lagoon Barrier Landscape In the Re-Imagination of Coastal Lagos Amphibious Architecture* (Tunji Adejumo, University of Lagos)

*Questions & Answers* (Discussants, Presenters & Audience)

17:30 - 17:45 word of thanks, wrap-up, end of conference

Individual departure of participants

19:00 informal dinner for participants leaving on Saturday