

Interview



TERRA NULLIUS: On Urbicide, the Zionist Colonial Project and the Destruction of Palestinian Space. An Interview with Nurhan Abujidi

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This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Nurhan Abujidi is a Palestinian architect, urbanist, and activist whose work examines the relationship between space, place, and political violence, and she has spent more than two decades researching urbicide, colonial urbanism, and Palestinian resilience. Her work demonstrates how the built environment becomes both a target and an instrument of political power, while also serving as a site of memory, identity, and resistance.

Palestine is often approached through the language of geopolitics, humanitarian crisis, or international law. In this interview, Abujidi invites us to approach it differently. Palestine is the site through which broader questions about space, place, colonialism, memory, and urban violence become visible.

Throughout her work, Palestine emerges as more than a case study. Rather, it reveals the intimate relationship between space and place, colonialism and resistance, memory and urban violence. It is through this lens that the interview explores the destruction of Palestinian space, the persistence of Palestinian place, and the enduring connections between architecture, identity and political struggle.

At the heart of this conversation lies the distinction between space and place. Space refers to the territorial, physical, and material dimensions of the built environment: it is planned, mapped, governed, and organized through infrastructures, regulations, and institutions. Place, by contrast, refers to the meanings, memories, identities, and forms of belonging that people attach to those spaces through lived experience. Much of Abujidi's work can be understood through this distinction. The destruction of space is never merely physical; it also affects place by disrupting memory, identity, and belonging. Understanding this relationship provides a powerful framework for reading the interview as a whole.

The Built Environment and Architecture as Political Discourse

We are very happy to meet you in the context of this *Urban Matters* special issue on Palestine. As we are trying to underline the connections between urban life and the genocidal war, we would like to learn more about your own research connections to Palestine.

I am a Palestinian architect, urbanist, and activist. I often say that I am an activist before anything else, because this commitment has always shaped my work. I studied architecture at Birzeit University and later worked as Chief Architect for the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, where I was responsible for the conservation of Palestinian heritage during the late 1990s.

For Palestinians, the built environment is never simply a collection of buildings or historical artifacts. Heritage, architecture, and landscape are deeply connected to identity, memory and presence. Conserving them is therefore not only a technical task, but also a political and cultural one. Palestinian heritage is part of our collective existence and a testimony to our continued presence on the land and our just cause.

One of the projects I led was Bethlehem 2000, which prepared the city for the celebration of the second millennium. Working under colonial conditions meant that access to resources was often limited, so we constantly sought ways to rely on local materials, local skills, and local knowledge. At the same time, authenticity was essential. We wanted to preserve not only the physical fabric of the city but also the techniques and cultural practices embedded within it.

This led us to work closely with older generations and traditional craftspeople while developing workshops through which younger generations could learn these skills. The project became a way of preserving both heritage and knowledge.

When UNESCO visited Bethlehem, they described the project as highly sustainable. Interestingly, sustainability was never the language we used. We worked this way out of necessity and authenticity rather than because we were pursuing a sustainability agenda. Looking back, however, many of these practices embodied principles that are now associated with sustainability and circularity.

Later, during my studies in Leuven, Belgium, I became increasingly engaged with debates on colonialism and post-colonial theory. What struck me most was the way that Palestine was framed in much of the Western literature. Palestinians frequently appeared as passive subjects of colonialism rather than as active agents of resilience and resistance. This pushed me towards the study of colonial urbanism and the development of counter-narratives that foreground Palestinian agency.

The built environment became the entry point through which I could examine broader questions of colonialism, identity, and resistance. Architecture was no longer simply about buildings. It became a way of understanding power.

Urbicide and Intentionality

In your research, you mobilize the concept of urbicide. Can you elaborate on that?

Urban destruction in conflict zones and colonial context is often justified as military necessity or dismissed as collateral damage. Yet experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine demonstrate that destruction frequently follows patterns that extend beyond immediate military objectives. In Palestine, the built environment has repeatedly become a target of political violence, not only through the destruction of buildings and infrastructure but also through attacks on collective memory, cultural identity, and the conditions that allow communities to remain on their land.

What initially struck me was how little attention these forms of destruction received within discussions about war crimes and crimes against humanity. Genocide and ethnic cleansing are usually discussed in relation to people, yet people are inseparable from the places they inhabit. The destruction of homes, neighborhoods, heritage sites, and urban infrastructures affects not only physical space but also the social and cultural foundations of collective life.

This observation led me to elaborate on and contribute to the concept of urbicide and,

more specifically, to the question of intentionality. Intentionality is central to legal and political discussions of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other forms of political violence. The challenge therefore became methodological: how can intentionality be demonstrated?

To address this question, I developed a methodology based on mapping. I wanted to understand what was being destroyed, how it was being destroyed, and what impact these acts had on people's relationship to place, memory, and identity. Mapping allowed me to move beyond isolated incidents and identify broader patterns of destruction.

As part of this research, I began studying Israeli military doctrine and planning more closely. What surprised me was the extent to which concepts from architecture, urban design, and planning were embedded within military thinking. Israeli military training often incorporates urban analysis, spatial organization, and forms of territorial control that are remarkably similar to the tools used by planners and architects.

This revealed a profound duality within our profession. The same tools that architects and planners use to improve urban life, strengthen communities, and celebrate human civilization can also be mobilized to fragment, control, and dominate populations and their places for living.

Understanding this duality was a turning point in my work and ultimately became the foundation of my research on urbicide. The built environment is therefore never neutral. It can support life, identity, and collective memory, but it can also become a target and an instrument of political violence.

Urbicide emerges precisely at this intersection between architecture, power, and the deliberate destruction of the conditions that make collective life possible.

Terra Nullius and the Zionist Colonial Project

In your book, you linked the concept of urbicide to direct destruction, as well as to surveillance and control. Given what has been happening in the past two years, and the escalation after October 2023, do we need to understand urbicide differently today? Is there a quantitative difference—an escalation of techniques that were already there—or is urbicide today also being conducted qualitatively differently?

Recent events must be situated within a much longer historical trajectory. The destruction of the Palestinian built environment cannot be understood by events on the 7th of October 2023. Rather, it must be understood within the broader history of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine and its relationship to the transformation of the territory and space.

For almost eight decades, the built environment has been a central target of this project. Destruction, construction, and territorial transformation have operated simultaneously as mechanisms through which a new spatial and political order has been established. What we are witnessing today is therefore not an isolated rupture but part of a longer continuum.

To understand this trajectory, it is important to return to some of the ideological

foundations of Zionism. Political Zionism emerged within a broader colonial era and was closely associated with narratives that represented Palestine as an underutilized or insufficiently inhabited territory, a logic that scholars have often compared to *terra nullius* doctrines used elsewhere in settler-colonial contexts. Throughout the history of settler colonialism, *terra nullius* has functioned as a legal and political doctrine through which land is represented as empty, underutilized, or lacking legitimate ownership. Indigenous populations are portrayed as absent or incapable of making proper use of the land, thereby legitimizing dispossession and settlement.

This logic was visible in the Zionist slogans such as “a land without people for a people without land.” Like other colonial projects, the objective was not only territorial acquisition but also the production of a narrative in which the Indigenous population could be rendered invisible. The land becomes available for appropriation because its existing social, cultural and historical realities are denied.

The establishment of Israel in 1948 marked a decisive moment in this process. More than five hundred Palestinian villages and towns were depopulated or destroyed within a relatively short period. The objective was not simply demographic transformation. It involved the reconfiguration of landscape, memory and identity. Palestinian spaces disappeared from maps, while new spatial realities emerged in their place.

What has unfolded in Gaza in the past 3 years represents an extreme manifestation of these longer processes. The techniques themselves are not fundamentally new. What has changed is their scale and intensity. Entire urban systems have become targets: housing, infrastructure, schools, universities, hospitals, cultural institutions and public spaces. The result is not merely destruction but the systematic dismantling of the material conditions that sustain (collective) life.

Urbicide, however, never occurs in isolation. It operates alongside other forms of political violence. The destruction of urban space intersects with attacks on ecology, memory, identity and social life. Ecocide, memory-cide, identity-cide, ethnic cleansing and genocide become intertwined because people and places are inseparable. You cannot destroy people without destroying their place.

This is why the intensified destruction of Gaza cannot be understood solely through the language of military operations. It must also be understood as an assault on the spatial, social, and cultural foundations of Palestinian existence.

Destruction and Construction: The Spatial Logic of Urbicide and Control

When going beyond looking at the destructive effects of war, you have also written about the constructive and productive effects of hostile and weaponized architecture and design. Can you tell us more about the interplay between destruction and construction in this context?

One of the central arguments of my work *Urbicide in Palestine: Spaces of Oppression and Resilience* is that urbicide has diverse forms and tools. Destruction and construction are

deeply interconnected processes. To understand the spatial dimensions of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine, we need to look not only at what is destroyed, but also at what is being built.

After 1948, parts of historic Palestine remained outside of Israeli control. The West Bank was administered by Jordan, and Gaza by Egypt. Following the 1967 war, however, Israel gained military control over all of historic Palestine. From that moment onwards, new mechanisms emerged to consolidate territorial control while limiting Palestinian presence and development.

A central objective was to maintain as much land as possible with as few Palestinians as possible. This objective took many forms. While direct displacement remained important, another strategy involved making everyday life increasingly difficult for Palestinians in ways that encouraged what the Israeli policy called voluntary transfer. This process required an extensive apparatus of control operating across legal, spatial, military, and infrastructural dimensions.

One of the key elements of this apparatus is military control. The territory became fragmented through different legal classifications, administrative zones, and systems of differentiated rights. Access to land, movement, and development became regulated through a complex matrix of laws and restrictions.

At the same time, the construction of Jewish settlements transformed the landscape. Many of these settlements were strategically located on hilltops overlooking Palestinian cities and villages. Architecturally and spatially, they were designed to integrate into Israeli colonial territorial networks while functioning as instruments of surveillance and control. Their expansion also involved the appropriation of Palestinian land and the restriction of Palestinian urban growth.

This process extended far beyond individual settlements. A vast infrastructure network emerged to connect them, including roads, bypass routes, and transportation systems largely designed to serve Jewish settlements while avoiding Palestinian areas. These infrastructures reshaped mobility, redirected economic flows, and contributed to the fragmentation of Palestinian territory.

Alongside these developments came a dense military landscape consisting of checkpoints, military bases, watchtowers, and surveillance systems. These mechanisms regulate not only territory but also everyday life. Access to work, education, healthcare, and family networks increasingly depends on navigating this architecture of control.

Nablus offers a clear example. As an important economic and social center, it serves numerous surrounding villages whose residents depend on the city for markets, hospitals, and universities. Yet movement between these spaces is constantly mediated through checkpoints and restrictions. Territorial control therefore becomes embedded within daily routines and social relations.

Another key element of this military control system is the Apartheid wall. While often presented as a security measure, the wall functions as a mechanism of territorial

reorganization. It cuts through villages, separates families, restricts movement, and incorporates land and resources into Israeli-controlled areas. In many places it extends beyond the Green Line (Armistice line of 1967), altering both geography and ownership.

Natural resources are also implicated in this process. Access to water, agricultural land, and other resources becomes increasingly unequal. Control over territory is therefore inseparable from control over the conditions necessary for sustaining life.

Two additional dynamics reinforce this broader system. First, the construction of Jewish colonies continues to accelerate while Palestinian access to building permits remains heavily restricted, particularly in Jerusalem and large parts of the West Bank. Second, administrative systems classify populations according to different legal statuses and identity categories, creating differentiated rights and forms of mobility. Even something as simple as an identity card becomes a mechanism through which space is organized and controlled.

Taken together, these processes form what many scholars have described as a matrix of control. Destruction and construction are not separate phenomena. The destruction of Palestinian space creates conditions for the construction of a new colonial spatial order, while new infrastructures, colonies, and regulations consolidate that transformation.

Urbicide is therefore not only about erasing existing places. It is also about producing new territorial realities through control and dispossession.

Mapping Intentionality

In your book, and at the beginning of this interview, you talked about methodology and how you use mapping to analyze urbicide. In the last two years it seems that more digital mapping projects in relation to the genocide are emerging, and they are very powerful and illustrative. It would be interesting to hear you reflect on this in relation to your own mapping methodology.

Mapping has always been about demonstrating intentionality. When I began my research on Nablus more than two decades ago, the concept of urbicide was still emerging and the dominant narrative remained one of military necessity and collateral damage. If urbicide was to be taken seriously as a form of political violence, it was necessary to demonstrate that destruction was neither random nor accidental.

This was the starting point of my methodology. I wanted to understand not only what had been destroyed, but why particular places had been targeted and how patterns of destruction related to military objectives and political goals. To do this, I examined Israeli military narratives and public justifications alongside the spatial realities on the ground. For every military operation, I asked a simple question: how does the destruction correspond to the official narrative explaining it?

Mapping allowed me to compare military claims with actual patterns of destruction. I analyzed the typology of damaged buildings, the scale of destruction, and the distribution of attacks across the city. When entire neighborhoods lose significant portions of their

housing stock, it becomes difficult to sustain the argument that destruction is merely incidental. Patterns begin to emerge.

The Old City of Nablus was particularly significant in this regard. Its urban fabric developed through centuries of social, cultural, and economic interaction. Like many historic Arab-Islamic cities, it is characterized by dense spatial networks, interconnected buildings, courtyards, and narrow pathways that create strong relationships between inhabitants and their environment.

These characteristics were not merely architectural. They sustained forms of social solidarity that became especially important during periods of military invasion. Resources could be shared, movement could continue despite restrictions, and communities could support one another. The spatial organization of the city contributed directly to its resilience.

What became increasingly clear through my research was that these very characteristics were often the targets of military intervention. Strategic demolitions disrupted socio-spatial networks that had developed over generations. The objective was not simply to destroy individual buildings but to weaken the urban relationships that enabled collective life and resilience.

One of the most striking findings concerned the way Israeli military forces moved through the city. Rather than relying exclusively on streets and conventional routes, they often penetrated buildings by creating openings through walls and moving from one structure to another. The city itself became a medium through which military operations were conducted.

I reconstructed many of these movements and routes through interviews, military documents, and spatial analysis. In doing so, I discovered that numerous openings and demolitions appeared to have little immediate military function. Some led nowhere. Others duplicated routes that had already been established. When viewed collectively, these interventions suggested a broader logic: maximizing the disruption of the urban fabric itself.

The implications were particularly significant given the structural characteristics of Nablus. Located in a seismic zone, many buildings depend on the integrity of interconnected walls and support structures. Repeated perforations and targeted damage gradually weakened the urban fabric, increasing the likelihood of future collapse. What appeared as isolated acts of destruction formed part of a broader process of destabilization.

Looking back, this research emerged at a moment when proving intentionality was extremely difficult. The dominant narratives were largely accepted, and access to evidence was limited. Mapping became a way of constructing an alternative archive capable of revealing spatial patterns that were otherwise obscured.

Today, the situation is very different. Digital technologies, satellite imagery, geospatial analysis, and open-source investigations have transformed our ability to document

violence. The scale of destruction can be measured almost in real time. Researchers can analyze entire territories, compare historical and contemporary landscapes, and establish patterns that would previously have remained invisible.

These technologies have also contributed to a broader shift in public awareness. The destruction of Palestinian cities is no longer documented solely through official reports. Citizens, activists, journalists and researchers participate in producing evidence and counter-narratives. Social media, digital archives, and forensic mapping have become powerful tools for challenging dominant representations.

What is particularly significant is that these tools allow us to move beyond anecdotal evidence. They help establish forensic proof. They reveal scale, pattern, and repetition. Most importantly, they strengthen our ability to demonstrate intentionality.

The question remains the same as it was twenty years ago: why is destruction taking place in the way that it is? The difference today is that we possess far more powerful tools for answering that question.

Palestine Is Everywhere

How do you think about the agency of Palestinians and Palestinian spaces in the face of intentional destruction and erasure?

The Palestinian experience cannot be understood solely through destruction. If urbicide reveals how space is targeted, Palestinian agency reveals how life continues despite attempts of erasure.

Since 1948, Palestinians have experienced displacement, occupation, fragmentation, and dispossession. Yet Palestinian existence has not disappeared. Rather, it has continuously adapted to changing political realities, producing new forms of social, cultural, and spatial life.

This history requires us to rethink what we mean when we speak about Palestine. Palestine can no longer be understood solely as a continuous territory. The fragmentation of Palestinian space has generated new geographies of belonging that extend far beyond historic Palestine. In this sense, Palestine is everywhere.

Palestinian spaces exist within historic Palestine, in refugee camps across the region, and throughout the global diaspora. They differ politically and geographically, yet remain connected through memory, identity, and collective experience, as well as the collective aspiration for liberation and return.

The distinction between space and place becomes particularly important here. Palestinian space has been fragmented and reorganized through occupation and displacement. Palestinian place, however, continues to be reproduced through relationships, memories, and forms of belonging that transcend territorial boundaries.

As a member of the Palestinian diaspora, I experience this directly. I live in Belgium, yet Palestine remains part of my daily life. My relationships, concerns, and emotional

attachments constantly connect me to what is happening there. Like many Palestinians, I inhabit multiple spaces simultaneously.

Agency therefore manifests itself not only through political resistance but also through everyday life. Building a home, completing an education, raising children, sustaining a community, or simply continuing to live become acts that affirm Palestinian steadfastness.

This is particularly visible in Gaza. Even under conditions of extreme destruction and Genocide, people continue to reorganize collective life. Temporary shelters become schools, clinics, grocery stores, and community spaces. New forms of urbanity emerge despite circumstances that appear designed to make urban life impossible.

Palestinian agency therefore should not be understood merely as survival. It is the continuous production of Palestinian space and place despite repeated attempts at its destruction.

Reclaiming the Palestinian Narrative

In the first part of the interview, you mentioned that the pro-Palestinian movement has gained a new quality and that awareness has increased due to technologies such as social media and digital mapping. Does this shift affect the understanding of Palestinian space?

I believe it does.

For a long time, Palestinians were often represented through a narrow set of stereotypes. They appeared primarily as victims, refugees, or passive recipients of aid. These representations obscured the complexity of Palestinian society and reduced Palestinians to the condition of their suffering.

One of the most significant developments of recent years has been the ability of Palestinians to represent themselves directly. Social media, digital archives, mapping projects, and citizen journalism have created new possibilities for narrating Palestinian experiences of living under colonialism from within rather than through external interpretations.

This shift has had profound consequences. People around the world are increasingly encountering Palestinians, not only through images of destruction but also through everyday life. They see families, students, artists, professionals, parents, and children. They encounter a society with aspirations, creativity and resilience.

The visibility of Gaza before its destruction is particularly important. For many years, Gaza was largely represented through conflict and crisis. Today, countless images and videos reveal another reality: a vibrant urban environment where people studied, worked, celebrated, socialized, and built their futures, hence humanizing the Palestinians and their just cause.

These representations challenge processes of dehumanization. They remind audiences

that Palestinians are not abstractions or statistics but human beings whose lives are marked by the same desires and aspirations found anywhere else.

At the same time, new technologies have strengthened global solidarity networks. Information circulates more rapidly, alternative narratives become more visible, and forms of evidence that were once difficult to access are now available to wider audiences.

This does not eliminate asymmetries of power, but it has contributed to a significant shift in public consciousness. Palestinians increasingly appear not merely as objects of history but as active agents capable of narrating their own experience.

Sustainability Beyond Sustainability

UNESCO described the Bethlehem 2000 project as sustainable. You have proposed a broader understanding of sustainability that includes resilience, human needs, and anti-colonial resistance. How should we rethink sustainability?

I am often critical of the way sustainability is discussed today. The concept has become attached to a series of technical indicators and policy frameworks that sometimes obscure more fundamental questions about how human societies actually function.

Human beings are part of larger social and ecological systems. Historically, many communities lived according to principles that we would today describe as sustainable, even though they never used that terminology.

For my grandparents' generation, waste was largely absent as a concept. Materials circulated continuously between different uses. Resources were reused, repaired, and shared. The output of one process became the input of another.

I continue to observe similar practices in many marginalized communities today. People with limited resources often develop remarkably resilient and circular ways of living. Clothing, tools, services, and knowledge circulate through families, neighborhoods and social networks.

What contemporary sustainability discourse often overlooks is the importance of community. Sharing is not simply an economic strategy. It is a social practice. Mutual support, reciprocity, and collective responsibility strengthen the resilience of communities in ways that technical solutions alone cannot achieve. This is particularly visible in many Mediterranean societies and among migrant communities. Social relations remain central to everyday life. People continue to exchange services, support one another, and maintain strong communal ties.

For this reason, I have increasingly moved towards the idea of resilient architecture and resilient urbanism. Sustainability cannot be reduced to buildings, technologies, or environmental performance. It must also include the socio-spatial relationships that enable communities to flourish. Without community, sustainability becomes an empty concept.

Decolonizing the Urban

Thank you very much for your time. Would you like to leave our readers with a final reflection?

This interview is linked to the *Urban Matters* journal. That brings me to one of the questions that has occupied me throughout my work concerning the meaning of what is *urban*?

Traditional definitions of urbanity often rely on demographic criteria. Yet when I was researching urbicide, I encountered situations that challenged these assumptions. Could the destruction of a refugee camp be considered urbicide? If urbanity is defined purely through population density or administrative categories, then perhaps not. But that answer seemed inadequate.

This led me to revisit the philosophical foundations of the urban. The urban is not simply a concentration of buildings or people. It is a condition of coexistence. If we return to the idea of the polis and the agora, urbanity emerges through encounters between different people, identities, and perspectives. Human beings are political and social animals. Public space plays a crucial role because it creates opportunities for these encounters to occur. The commons allow us to negotiate difference, build relationships, and sustain collective life.

One of the ways I assess the health of a city is by looking at its public spaces. Healthy cities create conditions for heterogeneity. They allow different communities to coexist without requiring uniformity. I do not need to share your beliefs, ideology, or faith to recognize your right to exist alongside me. This, for me, is one of the most beautiful dimensions of concept of the urban. It also helps explain why urbicide is so significant. Urbicide is not only the destruction of buildings. It is also an attack on heterogeneity itself. It seeks to replace coexistence with homogeneity, diversity with exclusion.

For this reason, I believe we must continue to decolonize knowledge. Many of the concepts through which we understand cities, public space, and social life remain rooted in colonial frameworks. We need new ways of thinking about urbanity that are capable of embracing complexity, plurality, and interconnectedness.

In many ways, the Palestinian cause and the Genocide in Gaza has become a test of what kind of world we want to inhabit. It forces us to confront fundamental questions about human rights, international law, and collective responsibility. What is at stake extends far beyond Palestine. If there is one lesson to draw from Palestine, it is that the destruction of place is never only about the destruction of buildings. It is about the destruction of the social, cultural, and political conditions that make collective life possible.

Defending Palestine therefore is not only about defending a people or a territory. It is also about defending the possibility of coexistence itself.

Note: The work and perspectives discussed in this interview are informed by over twenty years of research, teaching and professional practice conducted by the interviewee. Any opinions,

interpretations and conclusions expressed are those of the interviewee alone and should not be construed as representing the official position of her employer or affiliated institution.

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Jennie Gustafsson is a political-economic geographer with an interest in rental housing, municipal governance, and housing inequality. She is currently researching institutional investments in rental housing, the effect of residential property investments in local rental markets beyond larger cities, and the municipal governance of international property investors. She is also interested in tenants' lived realities, housing struggles, and how housing activism can inform housing research. Also, she works on a research project investigating renovations, privatizations and conversions of rental housing together with Ida Borg (PI) and Eva Andersson at Stockholm University, financed by Vetenskapsrådet.



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Chiara Valli is Associate Senior Lecturer at the Department of Urban Studies. She is an urban geographer interested in housing and planning and their relations to social justice. After her PhD degree in Social and Economic Geography at Uppsala University, Chiara has conducted a postdoc project at the University of Gothenburg, a postdoc at IUR within the CRUSH project, and finally a postdoc in the project *Smart cities for city officials*. Chiara's research interests include: housing, housing financialisation, gentrification, segregation, Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), smart cities, labour precarity, urban activism, participatory and visual research methodologies. Since December 2021, Chiara has been leading the project *Financialization of everyday life in Sweden*. Intersectional perspectives on housing and labor precarity.



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Defne Kadioğlu is an urban political sociologist with an interest in urban policy, housing and urban political economy. In particular, she has worked on gentrification processes and their intersection with territorial stigma and racism in Germany. She also worked in the context of Turkey, in particular on the political and social dimensions of urban transformation projects in formal and informal Istanbul neighborhoods. Currently she is conducting comparative projects on urban policy, racialized territorial stigma and housing in the context of the Swedish and German welfare states.