Postcolonialising Urban Studies: Trajectories in thinking urban politics from Johannesburg to London

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As urban studies respond to shifting trends in global urbanisation, a much wider range of urban experience is informing understandings of urban processes. This lecture will consider personal and collective pathways which have led to postcolonialising urban studies. It will consider in more detail how innovations in the practice of comparative analysis can support such an expansion in the horizon of conceptualisation of the urban. Specifically, Professor Robinson will explore how the analysis of urban politics in South Africa and in other African contexts can offer a rich repertoire of theoretical insight for all cities, stretching from governance and policy formulation in the post-apartheid era, to revolutionary urban social movements as well as a fine infrastructure of mobilisation, engagement, contestation, collaboration, evasion and invention which marks out a prosaic but significant arena of on-going urban transformation.

This lecture will confront the relative pessimism of post-democratic and post-political analyses of urban governance and contestation in London with views from post-colonies, where democratisation and hopes of transformation have figured so strongly in shaping dynamic forms of emergent political association – but where these have also very often emerged in response to spectral and peremptory forms of power. What can the post-colony bring to the analysis of post-democracy? This kind of experiment in comparative thinking takes seriously the potential of a strong post-colonial commitment to decentring theorisation, provoking a more global urban theory, and making London a destination for theory.