# 'Unruly' Spaces
*Public Space, Society and Politics in Urban Africa*

**Project Summary**

*The public is in crisis.* This phrase expresses a pressing global concern: the shrinking and privatization of urban public space. Although there is no single definition of public space, its politics centres our attention on socio-political issues including democratic practices, spatial justice, sustainable urban planning, state domination, and citizenship. By way of example, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the consequences of restricting citizens' access to public space to global consciousness, focusing our attention on the ways in which material public space is intertwined with the ideational crafting of a public (social, political) sphere. This *problématique* of urban public space is particularly salient in African urban areas, which are [stereo]typically portrayed – via accounts of state and urban fragility – as disorderly and ill-governed, and where violence and insecurity are widely thought to be eroding public space. Yet, African cities feature myriad – but understudied – political dynamics and urban formations whose transformative and emancipatory effects far exceed the key tenets of these discourses. **On this basis, *Unruly* will study two African capital cities – Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire) and Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC) – whose political and social lives echo these dynamics by asking the following questions.**

1. How do users of public space in Kinshasa and Abidjan – despite violence and contestation – carve out sites of political expression, collective debate, and inclusion through their quotidian activities?

2. How can those *local* acts of appropriation, subversion, and socio-political vitality provide *global* lessons into both the present dilemmas and possible futures of public space across the world?

*Unruly* is based on the proposition that the social, political, and urban formations of cities like Abidjan and Kinshasa challenge conventional, and colonially-inflected, thinking in two key and interrelated ways. First, these cities are not disorderly or unruled. They are simply 'unruly' in that they harbour a variety of actors deploying a large array of (sometimes contradictory) practices, appropriations and usages of urban spaces, that twist our vision of 'public' space as being necessarily formally organized against a 'private' sphere. Second, and relatedly, those emergent 'unruly' spaces come to question our conventional and western-centric conceptualizations of how urban spaces are governed, used, and materially configured.

While 'public space' has been a theoretical concern of social scientists and urban planners for decades, there remain surprisingly few in-depth empirical investigations on what, where and who exactly 'the public' is in non-western urban societies, and by extension, how these become political sites we can learn from globally. *Unruly* will address this gap **by conducting a comparative visual-ethnography of public spaces in Abidjan and Kinshasa.** The project will employ ethnographic interviews, participant observation, photo elicitation, and participatory mapping with ordinary urban dwellers and street-level state agents in neighbourhoods of both cities. In doing so, *Unruly* will contribute to literatures in political science, urban theory and anthropology by focusing on the tension between three key dynamics: everyday state governance, the daily uses local residents make of public space, and the precise contours of urban (physical) environments. In doing so it will develop a theory of the processes through which 'unruly spaces' are thus comparatively generated in both cities.

***Unruly* will result in a conceptual and visual comparative analysis of the politics of 'unruly spaces' in urban Africa, and generate a diversity of key outputs**. Drawing on photographic material and 'composite maps' (produced via participant mapping) during fieldwork, the project will provide a unique visual showcasing (on a dedicated website) of the dynamics of unruly spaces. In terms of publications, *Unruly* will produce a special issue, research monograph, PhD dissertation, a collective 'visual essay' and 6 single and co-authored scientific articles. Finally, the project's core findings exploring the relations between street-level bureaucracy, ordinary citizens and their material urban environments will be further disseminated via workshops, seminars and conferences in both Europe and Africa.

## 2. Proposed Research

*Unruly* addresses a problem of great concern to social scientists, urban planners, citizens and governments alike: the politics of public space. Despite 'the public space' – however precisely defined – being commonly understood in contrast to the 'private' sphere, its definitions, conceptual characteristics, and empirical traits are still intensely debated. Moreover, public spaces (and the 'public' itself), are now facing severe challenges driven by global market forces, shifting state structures, and changing urban environments, transformations impacting the experiences and freedoms of billions of citizens globally. These challenges are especially acute in African urban settings where (structural) violence, state weakness and insecurity are widely thought to be eroding urban public space. Cities like Abidjan and Kinshasa are emblematic here. However, rather than taking both cities as cases of 'negativity' through which to explore the dangers of the crisis of the public space, *Unruly* posits that the experiences of postcolonial African cities can be read in more positive terms as being critical to the *global* task of recovering 'public' space. As such then, *Unruly* asks:

1. How do users of public space in Kinshasa and Abidjan – despite violence and through contestation – carve out sites of political expression, collective debate, and inclusion through their quotidian activities (RQ1)?

2. How can those *local* acts of appropriation, subversion, and socio-political vitality provide *global* lessons into both the present dilemmas and possible futures of public space across the world (RQ2)?

The project's primary goal is to rethink the notion of urban public space from the global South[1]. To achieve this, the project builds on and contributes to **three different strands of academic literature** at the intersection of political science, urban studies, and anthropology. **First,** political scientific work on public space and its crises, with a focus on the western discourses within which these are entrenched. **Second**, insights from urban studies and political science that focus on governance issues in the 'global South'. And, **third**, critical urban theory and anthropology that studies urban life from critical, fluid, and decolonial perspectives.

### 2.1. Current State of Research in the Field

#### 2.1.1. Definitions and Crisis of Urban Public Space

The section stresses two underlying dynamics. First, public space in urban settings is being globally privatized, prompting many to fear the "end of the public space" (Mitchell 1995) or – alternatively – to ask if " it is simply taking new forms" (Carr et al. 1992, 2). Second, these privatized urbanscapes are being re-ordered in ways that depoliticize their spatial forms and potentialities. To situate these developments, it is first necessary to move backwards to the historical roots of these dilemmas. Specifically, modern understandings of public space are tightly intertwined with, inter alia, classical Grecian understandings of the relation between the *agora* and the *polis* (Squires 2018), the eventual rise of modern state bureaucracies in Europe (Brenner et al. 2008; Tilly 1989; Keates & Scott 2004), the colonial enterprises that co-evolved therein (Edensor & Jayne 2012), as well as the incremental "sanctification of property rights" across the world (Soja 2013, 44). This evolution of the commonsensical definition of public space within the confines of Western history has – indeed – resulted in a public/private distinction becoming entrenched as one of the "great dichotomies" of western social thought (Bobbio 1989). Liberal discourses, for instance, locate the difference between public and private via a parallel state (i.e. public sector, governmental) and market (non-governmental private sector) binary (Weintraub & Kumar 1997, 8). By contrast, classic work in political theory entertains a civic perspective that sees the public sphere as the realm where citizens participate in politics, and so collective decision-making processes appear distinct from private ones (Habermas 1974; 1991; Arendt 1958). Here, the 'public' is situated in-relation to, but also separate from, both market and state. A hierarchical dichotomy thus also emerges here between the private realm and the public sphere, with the latter considered in Habermasian terms as both a imaginary realm of collective political expression and physical space for that expression (Paquot 2015).

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[1] On the term 'global South' see Dirlik 2007; Chant & McIlwaine 2009.

The fact that the "public" is facing a growing series of "problems" (to paraphrase John Dewey) now means these binaries are increasingly contested (Keates & Scott 2004). Indeed, the most striking feature of urban public space – noted across the literature – is the fact that it is "rapidly eroding in contemporary cities" through "waves of privatization […] flowing into formerly public arenas of all kinds, compromising freedoms of speech, association, and political expression" (Soja 2013, 45). Emerging "with the rise of liberal capitalist culture" (Topolski 2008, 273), this rampant commoditization of urban public spaces restricts civic culture and political plurality (Kohn 2004; Amin 2008; Lefebvre 1991). Because "consumerism accustoms us to thinking about the world as something to be used rather than collectively shaped," classical understandings of the socio-political importance of public space are being radically undermined (Levinson 2010, 478). This results in conflict *vis-à-vis* what public spaces are, do, and (should) look like, with citizens demanding freer and more communal uses of urban space (Mitchell 2003; 1995) and global forces imposing exclusionary configurations of public space through, for instance, the erection of gigantic malls or anti-homeless and other hostile architectural designs (Rosenberg 2019). This status quo connects to broader issues of segregation, securitization, and growing inequality (Wacquant 1993; Smith 2008; Wyly & Hammel 2004). Across the world, the poor, squatter communities, and street artists are monitored, criminalized and used as justifications for the extension of state control and private security companies over public space (du Toit 2010; Dum et al. 2017; De Boeck 2015; Wacquant 2008; Sennett 2012). Moreover, the securitization of public space has also led to the proliferation of gated communities (Borsdorf & Hidalgo 2008; Hogan & Houston 2002; Webster et al. 2002) and "fortified enclaves" (Caldeira 1996), manifesting an "architecture of fear" (Agbola 1997) and "security-obsessed urbanisms" (Soja 2013, Davis 2006b) that determine a 'proper public' to cater to. Unsurprisingly, the result – across the board – has been a truncated "right to the city" (Lefebvre 1968).

These discussions foreground the ways in which the material realm of public space is inextricably linked to the more abstract understanding of the public sphere as a terrain of political debate and civic engagement. Simply: the 'immaterial' (social, cognitive, intersubjective, etc.) realms of politics are always entangled with the cultivation of 'material' public spaces in which those realms emerge. **Unruly follows these insights but seeks to move away from an overly structuralist understanding of the ways in which this relationship is transforming and eroding** (i.e. through a sole focus on top-down structural conditions like neoliberalism). Often, such a focus on structural conditions risks romanticizing the possibility of a return to an abstract and ideal-typical public sphere of inclusive citizenship and political pluralism. In doing so, there remains a tendency to reify classical understandings of the public/private dichotomy and maintain the assumption that the state is an "all-powerful, all-benevolent policy making apparatus" (Ferguson 1990, 280). Expanding beyond this, **Unruly begins by examining the varied ways in which urban public spaces are being materially, socially, and discursively used, produced, and subverted by citizens and state authorities in postcolonial settings in order to unpack a set of 'local' or 'grounded' understandings of the relationship between public space and politics (RQ1).**

### 2.1.2. African Cities: Unruled and Ungoverned?

The dynamics sketched above come into **especially stark contrast in African contexts** where cities often straddle a dual political reality: they simultaneously feature some of the highest levels of poverty, urban violence, state weakness and informal settlements in the world (Murray & Myers 2007) and the rapid erection of 'smart cities' (Datta & Odendaal 2019; Karvonen et al. 2018) structured via commercial complexes and segregated residential buildings (Moustapha & Raoul 2014). Indeed, elites often leverage the imaginaries and aesthetics of futuristic cityscapes to distract from government neglect of the needs and rights of citizens (De Boeck & Baloji 2016). A tension thus exists between, first, the implementation of a neoliberal aesthetics that evokes images of 'modernity' and 'development' (Hilgers 2013) and, second, the realities of inequality, spatial fragmentation, unplanned urban expansion, informal economic activity, and vast slum communities (Ammann & Förtser 2018, Davis 2006; Paller 2020; Hoffmann et al. 2019 ).

In consequence of this tension, African contexts are often discursively situated as ungoverned or anarchically organized sites of 'disorder' dotted with 'fragile cities' (Beall et al. 2013; Nogueira 2017; Muggah 2017; UN Habitat 2010). This

discourse echoes the key tenets of 'state fragility' whereby poor governance is seen as the norm, state sovereignty is contested, and public services are absent (Milliken & Krause 2002; Newman 2009; Olowu & Chanie 2016). By way of example, the *Fragile State Index* ranks Côte d'Ivoire and DRC 32nd and 5th in 2020. Both countries face legacies of armed conflict, electoral crises, contested public authority, as well as a slow "informal privatization" of public services and state prerogatives (Mbembe 1999; Diouf 1999; Hibou 1999; Blundo 2006). "African politics and economics" are consequently "condemned to appear in social theory only as the sign of a lack, while the discourse of political science and development economics has become that of a quest for the causes of that lack" (Mbembe 2001, 8).

Indeed, most (neo)liberal and developmentalist perspectives on Africa (and its cities) are structured by a set of 'best practices' on 'what a city should be' derived from classical western theories (Mager & Matthey 2015; Fourchard 2011). As a result, this literature (and the governance initiatives it promotes) takes limited interest in the complex compositions of the 'everyday state' arena and their broader effect on maintaining and building urban governance, ignoring the ways in which African urban life is also characterized by inclusionary politics, popular expression, collective debate and political action in ways that not only subvert and appropriate Northern concepts of 'democratic participation' and 'civic culture' but also actively create new understandings of the relationships between public space and politics. **Unruly thus takes Kinshasa and Abidjan as especially well-suited cases on which to build a multi-sited ethnography of public space, not only because these cities exhibit the global tensions (between commercialization, civil participation, etc.) sketched earlier but also with the goal of moving beyond the North/South binary (of good or bad governance, etc.) by exploring the transformative potentialities for urban renewal present in postcolonial cities (*RQ2*).**

*2.1.3. 'Unruly' Spaces: Challenges from the South*
Forming part of a "southern urbanism" perspective (Schindler 2017; Parnell and Oldfield 2014; Kanna 2012), a burgeoning literature across critical urban studies and anthropology has argued non-western urban formations are a source of global theory building and political innovation, rather than pathologized sites of exception, (Niang 2018; Robinson 2006; 2002; Mbembé & Nuttall 2004; Simone 2001a). By exploring African cities' 'worldliness' these works move away from seeing the non-West as posing "problems in relation to 'Western' understanding of urban life" (Edensor & Jayne 2012, 3). Following this, **Unruly will aim to show how African cities are sites that creatively problematize dominant narratives and classical accounts of public space by developing the concept of *unruly spaces.*** The concept of *unruly spaces* will unveil how urban spaces in Abidjan and Kinshasa are not necessarily ungoverned, or 'unruled.' Instead, **the project posits they are 'unruly' in that they entail multiple actors whose representations and practices come to defy (or 'disobey') western, and colonially-inflected views of urban public space (RQ1).** Cities like Abidjan and Kinshasa are 'unruly' in the sense of being productively unamenable to classical modes of discipline and control as deployed in Western cities (*viz* Michel Foucault). The concept thus seeks to subvert negative discourses of urban fragility through a study of the multifaceted reality of postcolonial urban formations (see *detailed research plan, below*). In studying these elements, *Unruly* will seek to unpack how a comparative lack of state capacity across African cities **may paradoxically allow for transformative ways of living with/in the city to emerge through practices of resistance to, and subversion of, modes of neoliberal privatization, dynamics that provide global lessons (RQ2).** In sum, the term 'unruly' allows us to escape hegemonic discourses of a "coming anarchy" (Kaplan 1994) in postcolonial settings by moving beyond parochial accounts subordinating these cities to conceptual norms developed within western contexts.

To elaborate on the concept of *unruly spaces,* I also draw on literatures that explore urban space in more 'fluid' terms. This can be traced to feminist theory and its efforts to understand what are typically thought of as spheres of private life – say, the domestic and intimate domain of the 'household' – as being central to broader politics and so the public (Boyd 1997; Landes 1998; Gavison 1992; Keates & Scott 2004). Encapsulated in the mantra *the personal is political*, this approach begins from the view that "the mundane matters" (Hanisch 1969; Enloe 2011) by describing – for example – how "a private dining room in which people gather to hear a *Samizdat* or in which dissidents meet with foreigners" evolves far beyond a single

room to become part of a broader public space (Benhabib 1993, 102). This fluid understanding of public space also links to accounts in critical urban studies, anthropology, and postcolonial theory that stress how classical understandings of public space both entrench and make-invisible the forms of violence and control described above (2.1.1), as well as practices of resistance (Bhabha 1984; Fanon 1967; Rao et al. 2009). In these views, the public realm must be conceptualized as a liminal space, structured by daily interpersonal interactions, suffused with power relations, and layered with heterogenous practices.

This perspective has been captured further by multiple empirical studies (Low & Smith 2013; Low 1996). For instance, Söderström captures the variations in the use urbanites make of public spaces in Hanoi where "spaces regularly change uses and users. In the morning sidewalks might be swept by the residents and used to cook and sell the popular Pho (noodle soup) for breakfast, while others might use the sidewalk in the morning as an outdoor quasi-private space to wash their hair, shave, or dry their clothes" (2014, 99). Kinshasa and Abidjan offer similarly intricate "street scenes" (Drummond 2000) that display mixed-use or 'inside-out' areas where sidewalks, doorsteps, railroad sides and street corners are construed differently from one actor to another, and from one moment in time to another, foregrounding therefore "an uneasy tension between the adoption of normative discourses of urban management and governance, and the proliferation of more provisional and informal modalities of association" (Simone 2001b, 102; see also Chris 2001; Gondola 1999; 1997; Diouf 2003; Madanipour 2003). In both cities, public space is always "diversified through various different and often conflicting views on what collectivity, sociality, solidarity, collaboration, or the associational might mean on a very immediate daily basis" (De Boeck 2015, 153).

**Unruly** will thus draw on these anthropological approaches, which value the experiential knowledge of ordinary urban dwellers in a bid to investigate the local formations – and changes – of public and private spaces through thick analytical accounts of the real-world politics and difficulties of forging an urban world in common (RQ1). However, *Unruly* seeks to **do so with the more specific goal of inquiring into how these accounts challenge, subvert and provide insights into the possible transformation of global understandings of public space beyond the African context (RQ2).** To achieve this, *Unruly* will expand beyond the usual focus of these anthropological accounts, which – by orienting themselves around non-state actors and ordinary citizens – often omit an account of the ways 'everyday state governance' shapes space (Blundo & Le Meur 2008; Lazar 2005; De Herdt & Olivier de Sardan 2015; Hagmann & Péclard 2010; Lund 2016). Indeed, the relations and practices of actors like street-level bureaucrats and 'state intermediaries' are generally overlooked across southern urbanism perspectives. However, such actors structure both public service provision and the "spatial articulations of state power" that define who, what and where the public space 'is' in ways that often conflict with citizen-led efforts to appropriate public space (De Herdt & Titeca 2019; Brenner & Elden 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2012). Drawing from my previous research in the DRC, *Unruly* will thus retrieve these street-level bureaucratic practices and their effects on the emergence of 'unruly' spaces and probe how they mesh with those of ordinary citizens and their immediate and broader urban (material) environments.

### 2.3. Detailed Research Plan

*Unruly* will address its main research questions by crafting a comparative visual-ethnography of 'unruly spaces', and will pursue the following objectives:

1. Document everyday relations between and practices of *street-level authorities*, *ordinary residents* and their immediate and broader *urban environments* in Abidjan and Kinshasa;
2. Identify and compare how the interactions between these three key elements come to compose 'unruly' spaces in both cities;
3. Build a comparative and visual framework to provide new theoretical insight on emerging unruly spaces in African urban contexts and to contribute to re-thinking western-centric notions of the public realm across social science.

These goals will be achieved via three work packages (WP) that are sequentially organized but also thematically inter-linked. WP1 will focus on the (presumably) 'official city' (i.e. formal urban planning projects and the micro-governance practices of street-level state agents). WP2 will chronicle and analyse the daily practices of ordinary citizens residing in Abidjan and

Kinshasa. WP3 will tend to the material and spatial specificities of the urban environment, visually mapping out 'unruly' spaces' in both cities. **Each work package heuristically connects to the proposition that 'unruly' spaces are constituted by a) (street-level) governance practices (WP1), b) ordinary urbanites' practices (WP2) and c) the urban built environment (WP3). Taken together, these work packages will build a comparative framework for rethinking public spaces.** The core of the project will be carried out by the applicant, a PhD student, as well as colleagues based in Abidjan and Kinshasa. *Unruly* is a field-work intensive project involving three four-month long periods of fieldwork. In each period, two months will be spent in popular neighbourhoods of Kinshasa (e.g. Lingwala, Barumbu) and Abidjan (Youpongo or Koumassi for instance). For a comprehensive overview of all project activities, refer to the section 2.4. below.

*2.3.1. WP1 – The 'Official City' and the Micro-Politics of Urban Governance*

**Work Package 1 (WP1) will investigate the so-called 'official city' through desk research and fieldwork in selected popular neighbourhoods of Abidjan and Kinshasa.** As discussed above, macro-level dynamics such as state structures, commoditization and private real estate development radically shape urban space and its crises. This is evident in, for example, the large infrastructural projects proposed in Kinshasa (SOSAK) and Abidjan (*Grand Abidjan*) with uneven implementation patterns. Political leaders there, are often preoccupied with urban development projects supported through private investment that mirror the cityscapes of Dubai or Singapore, and see city projects as emblematic ways to leave a concrete trace behind. The notion of 'official city' captures such endeavours and the risks they pose to socio-political inclusion (Yapi-Diahou 2012). Nonetheless, the impact of these projects on communal life, the spatial distribution of power, and the governing activities of local authorities are poorly understood and understudied. WP1 will thus ground *Unruly's* visual-ethnographic focus within the politics and practice of these broader infrastructural programmes.

Importantly, then, the 'official city' also comprises lower-level 'everyday' governance dynamics that structure urban formations. Indeed, Abidjan and Kinshasa are the sites of land disputes, societal conflict, and material precariousness, often aggravated by state-sanctioned demolition campaigns, corruption, and brutal policing measures that low-level administrative and police agents both embody and carry out at the lowest, but most conspicuous, levels of urban governance (Bouquet & Kassi-Djodjo 2014; Perazzone 2019a; 2020). Yet, both cities also feature more subtle micro-level regulatory and mediating activities from street-level state agents who, occupying a liminal space between ordinary citizens and higher state authority, 'soothe' and palliate infrastructural and service scarcity (Lipsky 1971; Zacka 2017; Koh 2001; Thill 2019; Perazzone 2019b). Nonetheless, much of the literature overlooks the presence and activities of neighbourhood-level state agents and so omits the pivotal – albeit ambivalent – function they hold in simultaneously stabilizing and fragmenting these spaces (Leimdorfer et al. 2013). *Unruly* thus also seeks to analyse these lower levels of the 'official city' under the intuition that they may occupy a crucial role in controlling, shaping and regulating 'unruly' spaces. Alongside a focus on the higher politics of infrastructural development, WP1 thus also explores the micro-politics of urban governance by integrating the key actors and practices that shape everyday governance into its conceptual development of 'unruly' spaces.

*Methodology for WP1*

To document this 'official city', **WP1 will draw on extensive desk research and multi-sited ethnography.** Desk research will consist of a literature review across the academic and grey literature on urban public spaces in Africa, as well as on the specific socio-economic and political history of Kinshasa and Abidjan. The review will analyse the official administrative, spatial and political organization of each city (districts, communes, neighbourhoods etc.) so as to provide critical contextual knowledge central to *Unruly's* comparative approach. Concomitantly, the team will 'map out' key urban development trends in both cities, cataloguing the most recent projects, on-going or planned, for each city and determining the various actors (local, national, international, public, private, etc.) involved in their design, funding and implementation. The socio-political effects of these projects will then be assessed through an analysis of available news sources (in DRC, Côte d'Ivoire and 'international'). These infrastructural aspects of the official cities will then be compiled into a synthetic comparative framework, summarizing the actors, challenges and location of these urban planning endeavours.

The multi-sited ethnographic element of WP1 will allow *Unruly* to explore both micro and macro-level understandings of public space and carve out the analytical leverage necessary for building a comparative lens between Kinshasa and Abidjan (Marcus 1995). To achieve this, the **first period of fieldwork carried out as part of *Unruly* will focus on the actors of the official city at both macro and micro levels of city-planning and governance**. In Kinshasa and Abidjan, the research team will conduct semi-structured interviews with the key actors involved in recent urban planning and/or real-estate projects. These actors will include: state officials (from ministries, municipal urban planning and habitat services, etc.), international actors (UN Habitat, World Bank, etc.), and commercial enterprises. The interviews will focus on how higher-level actors present and understand the commercial rationale, governance objectives and broader politics surrounding such projects. This will complement the earlier desk research and result in a holistic on-the-ground 'mapping' of the most significant urban development projects in both cities, providing crucial context for *Unruly's* further research activities.

**WP1 will also conduct participant observation and ethnographic interviews with local authorities in selected districts.** This includes neighbourhood and street chiefs, local market administrators, and street-level police officers. Participant observation will involve accompanying informants throughout their daily activities and duties and taking notes on their interactions and practices. As in all ethnography, the aim here is to "capture the nature of social reality holistically by means of the researcher simultaneously participating in and observing social acts" (Rodgers 2007, 444). Alongside participant observation, ethnographic interviewing will involve extended interviews that ask informants a set of open-ended questions focusing on their individual and collective routines from morning to night time (Spradley 1979). These enable personal life stories to emerge through what a 'typical day looks like' and will provide thick descriptions of civil servants' own representations of urban spaces and their multiple ways of crafting (or subverting) urban governance within these spaces.

*Unruly* will analyse the findings of these observations via the notion of 'daily practices' which refers to the importance of 'zooming in' to the mundane routines of urban dwellers so as to effectively *see* the city from the viewpoint of its inhabitants and administrators (De Certeau 1985; 1984). Such daily practices are not monolithic things but entail complex material, spatial, social and discursive dimensions. For example, WP1 will document how state agents regularly occupy, and sometimes craft, urban spaces such as their homes, and their various parts (courtyards, doorways), their (makeshift) offices, streets, stadiums, markets, municipal buildings, cemeteries, and street corners (*spatial practices*). Ethnographic observation will be used therein to record the ways they assign meaning to different places, whether they act according to their own (state-informed) normative standards (*discursive practices*), how they craft relationships with other civil servants, state hierarchies, and ordinary urban dwellers (*social practices*), and finally the ways they navigate the material culture of the locales they go to, and how they utilize or build the various 'ordinary' objects (i.e. documents, stamps, chairs, uniforms, paperwork etc.) that punctuate and mediate social life (*material practices*). Gathering insight onto these practices will show how urban spaces come to be situated at the heart of the 'official city' and state governmentality (Scott 1998) *in spite of and through* issues of insecurity, urban violence and 'poor governance', determining therefore who and what is the 'public'.

### 2.3.1. WP2 – Ordinary Urbanites' Practices

**WP2 focuses on the ways in which a presumably 'official city' can come (or not) into conflictual relation with how ordinary urban dwellers use and imagine cities.** WP2 leverages the same methods in the same neighbourhoods as WP1 but shifts the focus from state agents to the local citizens who live side-by-side with them. In both DRC and Côte d'Ivoire, a large majority of citizens are deprived of health care, drinkable/running water, tarred roads, adequate property titles, electricity or safe, paved sidewalks. By contrast, the political and commercial elites are privileged publics whose status and social position grants them priority in enjoying basic services and in designing their own 'common' spaces behind the walls and cameras of their gated communities. These power differentials hold important consequences for those who live in precarious conditions and experience urban spaces differently. As discussed above, the streets of popular neighbourhoods in Kinshasa and Abidjan are often crowded with the market places and small shops of 'illegal' street vendors. At times, entire sidewalks are turned into someone's living room or kitchen. Within this mix, ordinary citizens engage in intricate and

ambivalent usages of public spaces that are often described as informal, or worse, illegal by state officials and urban administrators who seek to control fast-changing urbanscapes.

In Kinshasa and Abidjan, for instance, municipal authorities regularly mobilize the police and issue legal decrees to 'clean up' the city from the (perceived) blight of beggars, orphans, street-vendors (Bouquet & Kassi-Djodjo 2014), 'pirate markets' (Ngur-Ikone 2010; Thill 2019), or prostitution. In these conditions, residents uneasily negotiate their usages and perceptions of public space. However, despite the possibility of seeing these negotiations as moments of creative possibility (to reimagine public space, etc.), there remains a tendency to view these practices as mere 'survivalist' responses to systemic inequalities and poverty or, alternatively, to reduce the complex politics underlying them to a romanticized portrait of the urban poor-turned-shrewd-entrepreneur (Choplin & Pliez 2018). This not only deprives African societies and urban communities of retrieving and expressing their own agentic power, but it also discounts and obscures the many invisibilized dynamics that might support and generate new ways of appropriating the city, *by working with and along its local inhabitants.* **WP2 will thus ethnographically detail these practices in order to empirically and conceptually understand how they may be generating new political spaces, grounding the notion of 'unruly spaces' in relation to the possibility of micro-political transformation in urban spaces.**

*Methodology for WP2*

**WP2 draws on participant observation and ethnographic interviews with urban dwellers.** The groups *Unruly* will focus on will be selected to provide a representative sample of the diversity of urbanites in each city. By way of example, this will likely include 1) women who work on informal markets they establish (illegally) along streets, 2) 'taxi-moto' drivers who provide various services, 3) students, activists and other individuals (groups like the 'Sorbonnards' in Abidjan, or LUCHA activists in Kinshasa) who contribute to the neighbourhoods' political and collective life, 4) members of the art and entertainment communities (sculptors, street artists, *sapeurs*), and 5) marginalized groups such as prostitutes and youth-gangs (called *kuluna* in Kinshasa and "microbes" in Abidjan for instance). **Echoing WP1, WP2 will follow, interview, and observe members of these different groups in order to chronicle their everyday material, social, spatial and discursive practices.**

This will involve recording their individual life stories and daily routines, accompanying and following ordinary citizens through some of their activities, studying how they make and use mundane objects, and analysing how they inhabit, arrange and assemble the locales and places they frequent. Gaining detailed insight on these practices will provide an appreciation of how private, interpersonal and public spaces and *branchements* (relationships) intertwine through daily routines. It will also allow *Unruly* to document how citizens cope with the 'mathematics' (difficulties) of daily struggles, confront or ignore state authority, and ultimately, occupy, relocate and re-imagine public space. This will include, for example, spatially grounding and casting a fresh outlook on practices such as rotational saving banks (the "tontines") and 'open-air parliaments' whereby individual comment on local news out loud in open space, and how these might intertwine with broader identity-building processes along ethnic, religious or regional lines. Overall then, WP2 will produce a rich set of field observations allowing for a holistic image of 'unruly spaces' in Kinshasa, Abidjan, and perhaps beyond. Informants for this stage of the fieldwork of *Unruly* will be selected and accessed based on my existing research networks (and those of the recruited research teams) as well as via chain-referral/snowballing sampling (Browne 2005).

*2.3.3. WP3 – Visualizing and Conceptualizing Unruly Spaces*

**WP3 tends specifically to visual methods with the goal of providing a visual-ethnographic and material picture of urban space that *allows* the project to develop the concept of 'unruly spaces' at a more general comparative and**

**conceptual level.** Throughout the fieldwork conducted in WP1 and WP2, a series of visual methods (photo-elicitation and participatory mapping, see below) will be deployed alongside ethnography. These methods are designed to allow *Unruly* to engage more precisely with the intimate and concrete geographical milieu – the 'urban environment' – of its informants. This refers to the material and spatial aspects of the daily practices at work between low-level state agents and ordinary urban dwellers. This focus on the materiality of urban life follows the idea that cities present a "dense ecology of presence" by which human interactions form, and are formed by, their urban physical and spatial environment (Amin & Thrift 2002, 70).

**The ultimate goal of WP3 is thus to combine visual methods with the ethnographic study of urban life and everyday (spatial) practices in order to produce *a 'composite map' of unruly spaces* that visualizes their dynamics** (Brennan-Horley et al. 2010). This composite mapping will feature distinct but inter-related and three-dimensional layers representing 1) infrastructural/urban planning projects documented in WP1, 2) the types of actors the research team interviewed, 3) the places they identify through interviews and participatory mapping, and 4) the different private, personal, collective, mixed or public usages (depending on their own representations and perceptions) they make of them. As such, it will show how the broader urbanscapes of Abidjan and Kinshasa straddle the 'prosaic geography' of ordinary residents and state agents and the top-down geography of the 'official city.' *Unruly* suggests that taking this visual approach is crucial because, despite strong scientific interest in the political and spatial practices of urban environments, there are remarkably few efforts to visualize what the dynamic complexities of these environments constitute (Ulmer 2017; Ivakin & Ivakin 2015; Matthews et al. 2005). This is a significant shortcoming of the existing literature because visual approaches are useful not only for generating valuable data that cannot be captured textually, but also because visual tools allow us to show how micro-political dynamics at the most local level of society interact with broader 'macro' level political processes in dynamic and often transformative ways (Schwartz 1989).

Finally, and following from this, WP3 will allow for a systematic comparative analysis of the interactions and inter-connectedness between the three constitutive elements of unruly spaces. In doing so, it will allow *Unruly* to translate its empirical findings into broader theoretical insights. Taking the fine-grained analysis of the ordinary politics of public space in Abidjan and Kinshasa produced, WP3 draws out broader lessons on how unruly spaces can become transformative sites of political and social change and, in doing so, will challenge Eurocentric conceptualizations of who, what and where the public realm 'is' across the world. In this respect, *Unruly* will aim to show how the "close observation of human experience and especially ways that basic categories of understanding are formed" does *not* entail that we can make only limited social, political, and conceptual claims (Calhoun et al. 2012, 25). On the contrary, as "micro-level decisions are the basis of many macro-sociological phenomena; every decision, each small in themselves, can also be aggregated and have huge effects" (Ibid), the visual-ethnographic insights of *Unruly* will address the deeply ambiguous ontological status of public space at a more global theoretical level (Dewey 1954). **In doing so, *Unruly* will invert the usual application of European conceptual norms upon postcolonial space, asking what lessons postcolonial cities might teach the world at large vis-à-vis how we can reimagine and rethink the past, present and future of urban public space.**

*Methodology for WP3*

**WP3 draws on both photo-elicitation and participatory mapping**. These methods will be deployed across the fieldwork periods described in WP1 and WP2 but be analysed and conceptually synthesized principally as part of WP3. Specifically, photo elicitation here will involve taking photographic portraits of informants (street-level bureaucrats or ordinary citizens) *but allowing those informants to direct how, where, and when photographs should be taken.* This includes, for example, allowing the informant to 'stage' how they wish to pose – both their bodies and objects around them – as well as 'what' they wish to depict (i.e. which particular spaces or phenomenon). The focus is on drawing out the places and objects of the urban environment they deem especially important to their lives. As such, the processes through which the photographs are taken are as important as the pictures themselves because it allows researchers to engage in conversations with informants around why specific decisions on photographic framing were made, for example, as well as to more generally ethnographically

observe how people present themselves in a given location and in relation to a more abstract or distant normative and ideational political order. Beyond mere illustrative purposes, photography will be used as a data-gathering tool that elicits details about crucially important but often hidden aspects of human praxis and as such, both yields more information, and information of a *different* kind (Harper 2002; 1988). Taking photographs can help informants formulate the (collective) imaginaries they entertain *vis-à-vis* urban life by recovering how they literately and figuratively occupy urban places, and what they believe public space should be for and look like, producing thereof localized yet structurally situated, normative narratives on the urban 'public' space.

To provide a more dynamic mode of visualization, WP3 complements photo-elicitation with participatory mapping, which will unveil how urban environments are spatially enacted and navigated (Allen et al. 2015; Fox et al. 2008; Kim 2015). This will be crucially important to producing the composite mappings described above. Throughout the fieldwork carried out during WP1 and WP2, street-level civil servants and everyday citizens will be asked to locate the sites or places of particular (personal, professional, etc.) importance to them on print outs of base maps (by way of example, see Figure 1 below). The goal is to identify the various social, interpersonal or intimate sites our informants embody, transform and inhabit, as well as to gather the meanings they assign to each place. However, the goal of *Unruly* is not to produce an 'objective' cartography featuring random citizen' movements and all district amenities. Instead, using Geographical Information Systems (GIS) tools, *Unruly* will produce qualitative maps reflecting the phenomenological yet also materially and concretely embodied lifeworlds of urbanites. This process will thus be achieved in close collaboration with informants and draw on smart-phone geolocation technology, as well as (due, in particular, to infrastructural constraints) hard (paper) copies of neighbourhood maps on to which the research team and their informants will geo-localize (and describe) the places civil servants and ordinary citizens construe as important locales of their daily lives. Base maps will be retrieved from OpenStreetMap (OSM), in printed form or electronic form (depending on circumstances). This methodological approach is based on prior research by the project's PI, and has proved effective.
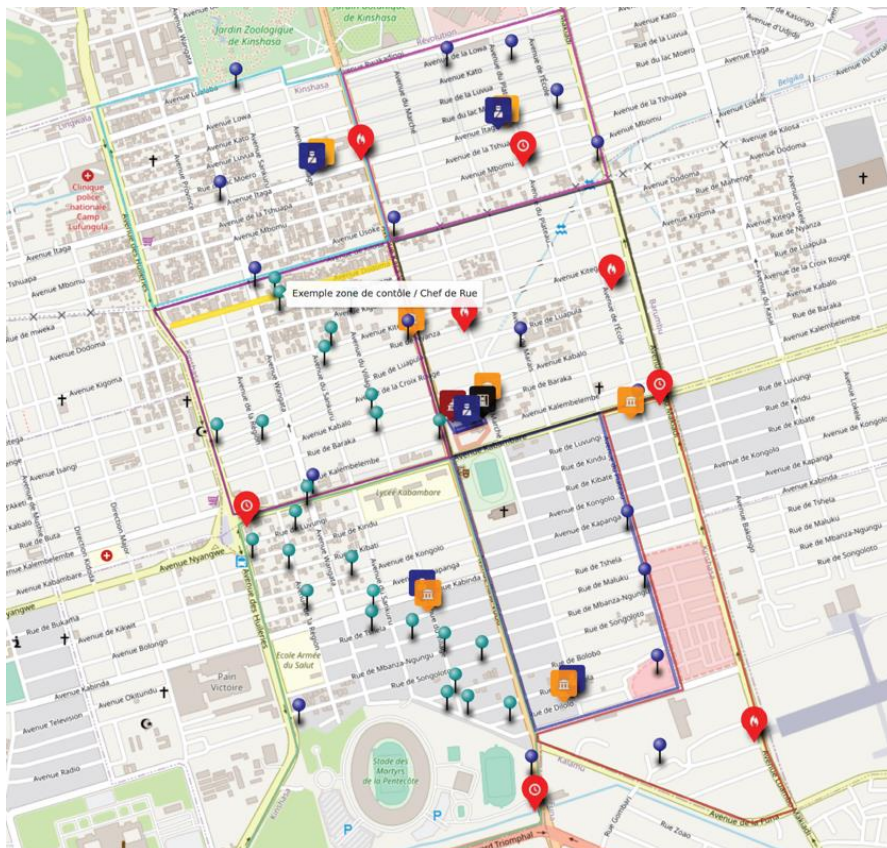


**Figure 1.** Prototype example of participatory mapping conducted in Kinshasa, 2109. Base maps: OSM.

Following the sequential unpacking of the three core elements central to the conceptualization of 'unruly spaces' that *Unruly* will develop (street-level governance practices, ordinary urbanites' practices, urban

environments), WP3 moves to deciphering **both how unruly spaces 'come into being' and what their potential for social and political transformation (negative or positive) might constitute. It will do so by developing a qualitative coding scheme through which to analyse interview transcripts and fieldnotes, as well as visual material, and around which a conceptual framework for holistically understanding 'unruly spaces' across their material, spatial, social, and discursive dimensions will be developed.** The framework that will be developed will be comparative both between Kinshasa and Abidjan and vis-à-vis these different dimensions of unruly spaces. Such a comparative perspective is important for setting social events "alongside one another [in order to] see what comes out of an examination of their similarities and differences" (Lazar 2012, 352) rather than "creating typologies based on rigid taxonomical frameworks" (Jensen & Rodgers, forthcoming). Such analytical flexibility and sensitivity to context will be crucial to achieving one of *Unruly's* core goals: a disruption or deconstruction of classical conceptual binaries, such as the public and the private. As such, the ultimate conceptual-theoretical ambition is to provide a 'grounded' understanding of urban public spaces directly informed by and contingent on the 'real worlds' experienced of Congolese and Ivorian informants. In short, WP3 will close this research by producing a conceptual framework of 'unruly spaces' that will allow us to reimagine the present and future of public space from within postcolonial contexts but in ways that may have far more global transformative relevance.

*2.3.5. Research Team*

*Unruly* will be hosted by the Global Studies Institute (GSI) at UNIGE. *Unruly's* team includes: 1) the PI and PhD student (GSI), Didier Péclard (GSI), Armelle Choplin (UNIGE), Dennis Rodgers (IHEID); 2) Prof. Malukisa (University Catholique du Congo, DRC) and Dr. Zina (Université Alassane Ouattara, Côte d'Ivoire), along with Research assistants and auxiliaries (RAs) and members of the OSM community in Côte d'Ivoire and the DRC; and 4) Prof. Kasper Hoffman (University of Copenhagen).

*2.3.6. Research Ethics*

*Unruly* will involve contact with marginalized groups and research in difficult settings, as well as the use of methods (i.e. GIS) that can be sensitive in post-conflict states. However, I and my collaborators have extensive experience of research of this kind and its ethical requirements (see Laudati, Mertens, and Perazzone 2019). Ins general, **my research project will benefit to the people it works with in two different ways.** At a global level, this research advocates for better, decolonial, understanding of both urban governance and urban spaces that ceases to pathologize non-western societies. On a local scale, it will allow participants to voice their political grievances to their local municipal administrators, and, through the dissemination workshop, to take these issues to the higher levels of international partners and government officials. For specific information of how the project will protect its researchers, informants and data, please refer to the project's DMP.

## 2.4 Schedule and project milestones

| WP ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION | YEAR 1 Fall 2022 Q1 | Winter 2022 Q2 | Spring 2023 Q3 | Summer 2023 Q4 | YEAR 2 Fall 2023 Q1 | Winter 2023 Q2 | Spring 2024 Q3 | Summer 2024 Q4 | YEAR 3 Fall 2024 Q1 | Winter 2024 Q2 | Spring 2025 Q3 | Summer 2025 Q4 | YEAR 4 Fall 2025 Q1 | Winter 2025 Q2 | Spring 2026 Q3 | Summer 2026 Q4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PREPARATORY PHASE & CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recruitment of PhD student | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Kick-off public event at the GSI | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Establish project website | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| MoUs for Dr. Zina & Prof. Malukisa ('X' = finalized) | ▪ | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Desk Research for WP1 (Literature review of academic & grey literature) | ▪ | ▪ | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Mapping infrastructural projects in Kinshasa and Abidjan For WP1 ('X' = finalized) | ▪ | ▪ | X | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 preparatory online workshops | | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Recruitment of Research Assistants in Abidjan & Kinshasa | | | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **EMPIRICAL INQUIRY (Fieldwork in Abidjan & Kinshsa)** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Fieldwork in Kinshasa for WP 1, 2, & 3 ('W' = workshops) | | | | W | ▪ | | | ▪ | ▪ | | | | W | ▪ | | |
| Fieldwork in Abidjan for WP 1, 2, & 3 ('W' = workshops) | | | | W | ▪ | | | ▪ | ▪ | | | | W | ▪ | | |
| Writing seminar for WP 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | ▪ | | | |
| Fieldwork with Prof. A. Choplin for WP 1 & 2 | | | | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| **CONCEPTUAL CONSOLIDATION (Analysis and Writing)** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Photo & mapping data bases for WP3 ('X' = finalized) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | | |
| OSM intercative composite map for WP3 ('X' = finalized) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | X | |
| Qualitative coding scheme for WP1 & 2 ('X'= consolidated, 'W' = workshop') | | | | | | W | | | | | | | | X | | |
| Project's comparative analytical framework WP 1, 2, & 3 ('X' = finalized) | | ▪ | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | X | | | |
| Monograph Writing for WP1,2 & 3 ('X' = submission) | | | | | ▪ | ▪ | | | | | | | ▪ | ▪ | ▪ | X |
| Collaborative visual essay for WP3 ('X' = submission) | | | | | | | | | ▪ | ▪ | | | X | | | |
| Special issue for Development and Change ('X' = submission) | | | | | | | | | | | | | ▪ | ▪ | ▪ | X |
| Dr. Zina's single-authored article ('X' = submission) | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | |
| Prof. Malukisa single-authored article ('X' = submission) | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | |
| Co-authered article with Prof. Choplin for WP 1 & 2 ('X' = submission) | | | | | | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| PI's single-authored paper for *Politique Africaine* for WP 1 & 2 ('X' = submission) | | | | | | | | | | X | | | | | | |
| PI's single-authored paper for *Environment and Planning D*, WP 3 ('X' = submission) | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| PhD student's single-authored article ('X' = submission) | | ▪ | ▪ | | ▪ | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| PhD student's dissertation writing ('X' = submission) | ▪ | | | | | | | | | | | | ▪ | ▪ | ▪ | X |
| **DISSEMINATION & OUTREACH** | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Academic Conferences | | | ▪ | | ▪ | | ▪ | | ▪ | | | | ▪ | | ▪ | |
| Events and Teaching at GSI | | | | ▪ | | | | | ▪ | | | | ▪ | | | |
| Final International Conference at the GSI | | | | | | | | | | | | | | ▪ | | |
| Update & Finalize project website | | | | | ▪ | | | | ▪ | | | | ▪ | | ▪ | |

## 2.5. Relevance and impact

*2.5.1. Proposed Scientific Outputs*

*Unruly* will produce the following academic publications (see 2.3.4 & 2.4 for details):

1) five single-authored articles across the team,
2) one co-authored article,
3) one collaborative visual essay,
4) one special issue,
5) one monograph,
6) one PhD dissertation

In addition, the team will create a project website focused around its photographic and participatory mapping material. The website will be structured around these visuals but also present *Unruly's* analytical and conceptual approach, as well as it final composite mapping, including explanatory material and interactive tools to assist in understanding its various layers. The mapping will be fully interactive, allowing users to navigate around particular geo-localized points and be provided – upon a mouse click – with photographs portraying the people, objects, physical places, and more that these points consist of.

*2.5.2. Broader Impact*

Public space is generally still 1) understood from top-down perspectives that overlook ordinary citizens' agentic power, and 2) too often based on disputed western socio-historical standards. **Unruly will help address these biases.** This is particularly important at a time where it is increasingly recognized that these reified understandings of public space cause structural damage and violence to many people across the world and – moreover – appear not to be assisting in improving living conditions or societal solidarity globally (Chakrabarty 2008; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). As such, *Unruly* will help put neglected political sites back 'on the map' and bring about an understanding of the creative possibilities latent within places usually viewed as laboratories for external social engineering. This is relevant to the project's main *problématique* since research

knowledge, is – in Habermasian terms – part of a broader, and now global, public sphere, and its modes of production and dissemination should be questioned and improved if it is to be truly 'for everyone.' More specifically, by developing the concept of 'unruly spaces' – and in doing so moving beyond the Eurocentric epistemological and political biases of much social science – the project hopes to expand the possibility of reimagining public space at a global level. Put simply, though focused on two African cities, *Unruly* seeks to derive lessons from those contexts that are applicable elsewhere. *Unruly* will thus **provide a novel and methodologically innovative outlook on public space that explores the limitations and possibilities for emancipatory politics, as well as collective and associational life, "for the city yet to come" (Simone 2004), and more broadly in cities across the planet.** In doing so, *Unruly* hopes to have broader societal impact. Exploring the present and future of public space, and its relation to political life, is crucial in a time of global unrest (mediated by various forces – natural, economic digital, social). Recent events – we all know – have decidedly put 'the public and its problems' at the centre of global politics. *Unruly* modestly hopes to contribute also to that debate.

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