

Learning/Speculating from Mauritius

An Observatory of Architecture and Territories

International Research Symposium

Architectures of Cities and Islands Between the Extraordinary and the Ordinary. Heritages and Bifurcations

Mauritius, ensa Nantes [Mauritius] – March 23-27, 2026



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Ensa Nantes [Mauritius] is the international campus of the Nantes National School of Architecture located in Mauritius. Since 2016, it has been training students from the Indian Ocean and various countries in Africa in architecture and urban planning.

Approaching these disciplines from the perspective of this region and its insular condition has collectively engaged the campus faculty and students in an exploration of the making of spaces and territories. This approach has not only shaped and structured the campus' pedagogical and research orientations but has also opened up new avenues of inquiry.

The organisation of an **international conference in March 2026, marking ten years since this campus' founding**, aims to further define and consolidate the research directions developed there, and to reflect on their impact on architectural and spatial planning theory, practice, and education, in light of current challenges.

Contemporary urbanisation in Mauritius is characterised by a polarisation between two dynamics. On the one hand, unplanned urbanisation continues to expand, largely driven by self-built housing and various forms of informality. These built forms are part of the social history of villages, extending their spatiality while transforming them (Couacaud 2023). On the other hand, more circumscribed spaces are emerging, centred on 'imported' contemporary programmes of an international scope (smart cities, resorts, etc.), and interconnected through efficient infrastructure networks (Lainé, 2024).

This configuration is fully aligned with the global processes of urban production associated with globalised capitalism, whose characteristics have been widely documented. Initial analyses of the Global City (Sassen, 1991) and the Generic City (Koolhaas, 1995) have gradually been refined to better grasp the forms and logics of contemporary urban transformation. These approaches now incorporate the notion of the 'ordinary city' and practices developed outside the sphere of architects and urban planners, thereby contributing to a renewal

of urban realities and representations: peri-urban and diffuse cities (Secchi; Grosjean), "ruralised" forms of urban and post-rural territories (De Marchi & Khorasani Zadeh), as well as self-built neighbourhoods (Navez-Bouchanine).

An analysis of these complex hybridisations—between generic planned models and ordinary localised constructions—intersecting with specific geopolitical dynamics, suggests that cities around the world are not converging towards uniformity. Globalisation does not necessarily lead to spatial and cultural homogenisation (Appadurai, 1996; Noizet & Clémenton, 2020). However, many of these forces produce spatial hierarchies and dependencies that intensify the vulnerability of living spaces and generate socio-environmental injustices (Gervais-Lambony & Landy, 2007). These dynamics contribute more broadly to what some authors refer to as the world habitability crisis (Connell, 2013; Secchi, 2015).

These observations invite us to question both the ways in which territories are constructed (Choplin, 2020) and the evolution of the professions of architecture and urban planning (Lambert, 2017; Lussault, 2024). New perspectives and avenues for reflection are now being proposed by critical geography (Robinson 2006), environmental studies (Ferdinand 2019), postcolonial and decolonial studies (Lambert, 2017), and interdisciplinary research in the environmental humanities (Rose 2019, Tsing 2017) – such as Discard studies (Leboiron and Lepawsky 2022).

Here, we propose to explore these avenues by drawing on the opportunities for 'decentralised' knowledge production offered by ensa Nantes [Mauritius] educational and research environment. The international symposium **Architectures of Cities and Islands: Between the Extraordinary and the Ordinary. Heritage and Bifurcations** invites us to compare situations observable in Mauritius with architectural and urban experiences in other cities of the Global North and South (Robinson, 2011; Le Galès and Robinson, 2023). These comparisons will mobilise architectural, urban and cultural studies, as well as historical and anthropological research on material cultures, terri-

torial studies, and project-based practices. They are grounded in the hypothesis that such cross-readings may reveal insights and leverage points capable of influencing—or even redirecting—the trajectories of contemporary territories in light of the challenges they face.

Three thematic strands and one transversal theme will structure this week of discussions:

- The island condition as hypercontext;
- The architectures and modes of production of globalised urban areas re-examined by the ordinary fabric of cities and territories;
- The new conditions of architectural and urban projects: questioning practices through the prism of critical habitability and spatial equity;
- Transversal theme: Learning from the South * . Towards the production and transmission of situated and critical knowledge.

These themes will foster scientific exchange among participants and open up in depth-discussions with stakeholders in Mauritius. For ensa Nantes [Mauritius], they update and advance the ongoing project to establish an Observatory of Architecture and Territories, as well as the development of a local, regional, and international research network centred on these issues.

Finally, a workshop bringing together Master's students will be organised during the week, strengthening exchanges, encouraging cross-perspectives, and nurturing collective reflection on contemporary challenges in architecture and territories.

PANEL 1_The island condition as hyper-context

The establishment of the Nantes School of Architecture in Mauritius has inevitably enhanced our understanding of architectural, urban, and territorial issues in relation to the island and coastal character of the territory. Coastal atlases, hydro-topographical maps, sensitive surveys in fishing villages, analyses of coastal and retro-coastal changes, perimeters of relevance at the scale of the land and sea borders of the Mascarene archipelago, global geopolitical analyses and local land ownership etc. are all educational tools that draw on the island's unique characteristics to encourage students to think about and design projects.

Insularity is therefore a veritable laboratory for research, scientific inquiry, and social, political, and climatic experimentation (Redon, 2019). It constitutes 'an experiment and a tool for understanding the world,' confirming the need for new atlases and novel approaches to interpreting the contemporary world from the perspective of islands (Besse and Monsaingeon, 2019). Planetary boundaries thus resonate with insular boundaries, acting as a magnifying mirror – or a hypercontext – of the contemporary challenges we face: the intensification of socio-climatic risks, urban sprawl on a naturally limited territory, land grabbing and competition, resource constraints, and the degradation and depletion of terrestrial and marine soils. They also encompass the aporias of overtourism and evolving relationships with living beings. The spatial densification of buildings, together with the economic, political, cultural, and social legacies of a post-colonial island shaping land-use planning, leads us – both in Mauritius and elsewhere – to imagine resilient architectures and reflect on approaches to adaptation, redirection, or bifurcation. Which approaches? And how?

This perspective encourages reflection and action on the ecology of the project, which is not only environmental but also social, grounded in cultural realities and attentive to the ways in which residents' sensibilities and forms of urbanity are constructed. The island condition thus allows for a forward-looking

* A concept that emerged in the social sciences and is subject to debate, the use of the term 'the South' refers to a plurality of situations and will be discussed during these Meetings.

perspective, undoubtedly one of a certain socio-spatial anticipation (utopia?) (Merlini 2013), capable of redefining contemporary habitats and ways of living, both here and elsewhere. It prompts reflection on the methods and tools of investigation, spanning the measurement sciences, humanities and social sciences, art research and project sciences. It also questions representation, among which cartographic invention certainly remains a salient issue in research.

With this first theme, we will collectively explore what an Observatory of the Insular Condition might entail. It would necessarily be interdisciplinary, combining reflections on the measurement of coastal risks, the cultural, social, and sensory history of insular spatialities, and the design of project dynamics made possible through an insular perspective.

PANEL 2_ The architectures and modes of production of globalised urban areas re-examined by the ordinary fabric of cities and territories

The urbanisation dynamics at work in Mauritius reflect several decades of land conversion of former agricultural land inherited from colonial history and the plantation system. Linked to public territorial planning, these land conversions have produced new, often single-function urban extensions that serve as veritable showcases of globalisation - waterfronts, the Port Louis CBD, smart-cities, education hubs, Ebène Cybercity, and gated hotel complexes. They convey the image of a safe, connected and attractive island, designed primarily for high-income populations and international tourist flows.

The internationalisation and circulation of urban ideologies from the North to the South raises questions about how these 'imported' urban models fit into inherited territorial contexts. The main criticism levelled of these new projects is their disconnection from the existing urban fabric in favour of "smart" cities built from scratch. On the Indian edge of Africa, this criticism of the smart city model, based on inequalities in citizens' access to technology,

echoes the 'neovernacular urban thinking' developed in West Africa as an alternative to urban capitalism (Agbodjinou, 2022).

In Mauritius, a multipolar island territory marked by historical, infrastructural and land fragmentation, these global logics coexist with local forms of urbanisation and situated practices. Alongside these globalised spaces, more ordinary forms of urbanity are emerging, resulting from self-promotion or residents' initiatives that are often invisible. These spaces, in continuity with existing villages and fabrics, bear witness to other spatial cultures, ways of living and forms of community experimentation adapted to the social, climatic and cultural conditions of the territory. They reveal an urban fabric that is developing 'by itself', on the margins of institutional frameworks.

Studying them invites us to move beyond traditional categories - planned vs. informal cities, urban vs. rural, centre vs. periphery - and encourages us to observe, simultaneously, the diversity of geographical contexts, spatial power relations, historical identities, and social tactics that give rise to specific forms of urbanity.

These intertwined dynamics – global and local, planned and ordinary - raise several questions:

- How do these urban models interact with one another, and to what extent do they conflict?
- How do they coexist spatially, creating boundaries and contact zones at different scales?
- What urban imaginaries do they mobilise – smart cities, Indian tech hubs, shopping malls, resettlement cities, suburban neighbourhoods, gated communities?
- What are the challenges of development in an insular and limited territory: spatial fragmentation, issues of habitability, preservation of resources?
- Finally, who are the actors in this urban fabric – public actors, major economic operators who are the heirs of the sugar industry, landowners, developers, civil society, associations, communities – and what discourses shape their interventions?

Analysis of these situations certainly invites us to acknowledge the potential of what is 'already there' and to explore, particularly through research, forms

of decolonial and sensitive urban development that are attentive to social and material realities. It invites us to rethink the place of the historiography of architecture and urban planning, not as a simple archive of buildings, but as a critical tool for documenting spatial processes and experiences.

This second theme thus paves the way for reflection on the contemporary conditions of architectural and urban research, linking local resources, territorial constraints and project practices. Finally, it proposes to collectively lay the foundations for a critical observatory of the ordinary city, a place for dialogue between researchers, practitioners and local stakeholders, in order to consider the possible directions for Mauritian urban development.

PANEL 3_ Rethinking architectural and urban design practices through the lens of critical habitability and spatial equity

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion are just some of the phenomena threatening the habitability of our planet. Architecture contributes to this crisis, directly or indirectly, through design, production and spatial organisation approaches that are still largely based on models of extraction, predation and competition. What ideas and practices should be implemented to explore other avenues for building more hospitable living environments for all humans and living beings in a sustainable and equitable manner?

This third theme explores the signs of potential turning points in the approaches developed in both the North and South in particularly exposed territorial contexts - islands with limited resources, coastlines subject to urbanisation, erosion or marine submersion, but also territories weakened by land scarcity, soil artificialisation, social inequalities and spatial injustices, or a combination of these vulnerabilities. It focuses both on the construction of new frameworks for analysing and conceptualising the creation of spaces and territories, and on identifying courses of action and experimentation that define new conditions for architectural and urban projects.

We are therefore interested in work that continues the extensive re-examination of cities and territories undertaken at the end of the 20th century by architectural and urban research, through the observation, description and interpretation of the diversity of spaces and everyday practices.

This work has led to a reconceptualisation of the themes and programmatic and operational frameworks of contemporary urbanisation (Secchi 2009), and to a recognition of the capacity of architectural and urban planning projects to produce knowledge themselves (Viganò 2014). This descriptive effort is now being renewed through the prism of environmental and decolonial issues, and the contributions of critical studies and situated epistemologies, which question the very tools and frameworks of knowledge production. It is expressed through new research and project approaches, such as work on urban metabolisms (Choplin 2020, Bertrais 2025), critical cartography (Zwer and Rekecewics 2021) and learning-from approaches (Hutin 2021). These perspectives contribute to a questioning of the dominant paradigms of architecture, to a decolonisation of perspectives marked by a growing demand for the decolonisation of architecture itself (Lambert 2017, Rollet 2024). In particular, they emphasise the notion of locality (Laotan-Brown, 2025), encourage a geographical and epistemological decentring of teaching (Aymard 2024) and call for a critical re-reading of the history of architecture. Conducted from Mauritius, this work could test the concept of the 'plantationocene' (Haraway et al., 2016; Mitmann, 2019), to consider the continuities between land use, spatial production and colonial legacies, and to propose new frameworks for reading and interpreting contemporary architectural and urban fabric.

The examination of architectural and urban practices through the prism of critical habitability and spatial equity is based, on the other hand, on the observation of project approaches whose conditions and/or experimental dimension constitute forms of research that are less academic but which provide situated knowledge that can be grasped or grasped by researchers. Two main approaches are favoured here. The first, 'building materials', refers to the materiality of cities and the world, and to changes in the mechanisms of space production. Above all,

it reflects renewed interest in construction methods based on local renewable resources — bamboo, earth, wood, straw, among others — which are giving rise to numerous experiments. The second approach focuses on the modalities of space production, and potentially on the very notion of the project. It examines positions, mechanisms and processes that reinvent forms of dialogue with what already exists—spaces, temporalities, uses, human and non-human—and strive to reweave the relationships between architecture and society, with a view to shared responsibility and sensitivity to living environments.

This third thematic entry will enable collective reflection on the challenges facing an Observatory of new conditions for architectural and urban projects.

Transversal theme_ Learning from the South. Towards the production and transmission of situated and critical knowledge

Teaching, and more specifically pedagogy, plays a key role in the transnational circulation of knowledge. Developing a pedagogy “of the South” involves questioning these epistemic foundations, shifting perspectives and exploring knowledge that is not limited to the Western horizon (Sarr, *Afrotopia*), while recognising other epistemologies capable of providing sustainable frameworks in response to contemporary social, environmental, and educational crises (de Sousa Santos).

Rooted in the Mauritian context, marked by the coexistence of multiple cultural and linguistic traditions, ensa Nantes [Mauritius] must be able to question the conditions of production, transmission and experimentation of the knowledge it helps to create. The pedagogy developed there is based on fieldwork - surveying, observation, localised surveys - as a method of learning both research and project work. Through its anchoring in Mauritian contexts, the campus communities are gradually cultivating situated knowledge. Many educational spaces thus explore design within existing contexts, starting in the early years of study: work on architecture and climate (from the arid west coast to the rainy mountains of the centre, to the east, which is subject to

trade winds); studies conducted in the historic cities of Mahébourg and Port Louis; research on the urban transformations brought about by the Metro Express since 2019, revealing new scales of living and mobility, etc. In situ research is inseparable from architectural design: it involves learning to observe what is already present, mobilising local resources, and acting in accordance with the uniqueness of each place. The educational project aims to prepare architects capable of inhabiting the complexity of contemporary contexts by developing a situated, sensitive and critical approach to architecture, urban planning and design. It is about learning to see what is already there, to mobilise available local resources, to work with the uniqueness of situations to enable future professionals to ‘continue the world’ in an informed manner, based on a critical reading of the models imported by globalisation.

This cross-cutting theme forms the reflective basis of the programme. It opens up a collective space for rethinking the foundations, methods and narratives of knowledge based on experiences of intercultural knowledge exchange. It could take the form of a workshop held at the end of the week, focused on the format and content of a collective publication (to which a Réunion-based publisher could contribute) and on the future of a possible collaborative research space (presentation of the *Observatoire de la pédagogie architecturale et urbaine* tool developed by ensa Nantes [Mauritius] and reflection on a travelling research seminar).

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