Prof Vanessa Watson, UCT School of Architecture, Geomatics and Planning School

Prof Vanessa Watson passed away on 15 September 2021 in Cape Town. Vanessa is widely recognised as a leading figure in planning in South Africa and internationally. She made enormous contributions to planning through her research and teaching, her participation in the South African Planning Institute (SAPI), and her work in building organisations such as the African Centre for Cities, the Development Action Group, the African Association of Planning Schools and the Global Planning Educators Association Network.

After completing her planning masters at UCT and diploma at the Architectural Association in London, Vanessa joined the Urban Problems Research Unit (UPRU) at UCT in 1980. She moved to what is now its School of Architecture, Geomatics and Planning in 1989, where she remained for over three decades, joining a dynamic team of planners, urban designers and architects. UPRU and the School played key roles at the time in developing new normative approaches to planning, and challenging prevailing apartheid orthodoxy and practices. Together with Prof Dave Dewar, Vanessa produced insightful position papers on the challenges facing South African cities in the 1990s and the need for change. This work had a profound impact on local area and metropolitan planning practice in Cape Town and elsewhere, influencing the first generation of post-apartheid spatial planning in the country. Her work found practical meaning through her involvement in community activist organisations such as the Development Action Group in Cape Town during the turbulent ‘80s and ‘90s, and she retained these links and concerns through her career.

The SAPI Planning Africa conferences (PAC) from 2002 were initiatives to revitalise and rethink planning, to energise the profession. Considerable effort went into the first conference in 2002, bringing together SAPI committees, practitioners and academics. Vanessa contributed to the formulation of the themes and programme of the 2002 conference, and also presented a ground-breaking plenary paper which set the tone for the conference. She was a founding committee member of and driving force for SAPI’s 2006 conference, activating research collaboration between academia and planning practice. Her paper ‘Best practice’ planning and the de Soto thesis: questioning the validity of universalism’ challenged key orthodoxies in planning, and contributed to her later scholarly work on southern theories. Vanessa was a regular plenary participant at SAPI conferences, including the 2008 plenary session on: Confronting Current Challenges - Planning across African cities: the appropriateness of current planning methods in the context of today’s urban challenges. Her most recent contribution was on Decolonising Urban Planning Education in Africa at the
2018 PAC plenary session. She received a SAPI award in 2010 for her 2008 book Planning and Transformation: Learning from the Post-Apartheid Experience (with Philip Harrison and Alison Todes) and was given SAPI’s National Planning Award for her academic work in 2018.

Vanessa was a grounded scholar and renowned planning theorist who produced a wide range of books, chapters and articles for international and local journals. Vanessa’s book with Roger Behrens: Making Urban Places: Principles and Guidelines for Layout Planning (1996) has become a handbook for planning students and practitioners. Vanessa’s PhD which became the award-winning book, Change and Continuity in Spatial Planning, Metropolitan Planning in Cape Town under Political Transition (2002), provided one of the first reflections on the reality of planning in South Africa during the 1990s. It is storytelling at its best, with real life characters and personalities within a highly contested local power politics. Vanessa had the ability to speak truth to power, and be clear and unambiguous about it. She was one of the few planners that spoke out against irrational planning developments in Cape Town: Atlantis in the past; more recently the development of the Philippi Horticultural Area; the West Coast Development; and more positively for the state to release centrally located military owned land.

Vanessa was highly capable and insightful and could work at all planning scales, drawing on their inter-connectiveness and the multi-layered nature of various dimensions of planning. Her skill as a well-rounded city and regional planner was illustrated by her ability to draw on historic archives, ethnography, theory and praxis and to work across a range of topics, deepening research within the planning profession on issues such as informality and urban markets; poverty reduction; planning, power and conflicting rationalities; urban regeneration; regional planning and spatial planning; ethics and planning; utopias, fantasy cities and the real estate industry; planning and food security; and post-colonial planning and African cities.

Vanessa was an engaging researcher, teacher and supervisor for countless planning students at UCT’s Planning School. Her lecture style reflected a deep understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. She had the exceptional ability to explain complex development issues in a clear and unambiguous way. Vanessa’s immeasurable contribution to planning education and planning practice locally as well as globally will remain substantive, influential and meaningful and she will be missed by her colleagues, students, friends and family.

Cecil Madell with Alison Todes