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Costanza La Mantia, is an architect, urban designer and urban planner holding a PhD in urban and regional planning and extensive research and practice experience on the African continent. In July 2013 she joined the NRF:SARChI program as Postdoc Fellow in the project “Resilience Assessment for Sustainable Urban Development”, focusing on the link between urban governance and urban form within the urban resilience framework.

Her professional practice and scholarly research focuses on urban resilience, participatory planning and community design, framing pro-poor policy and practice through a socio-ecological lens. Her work outlines how the co-engagement of people and nature can generate new kinds of strategic socio-ecological infrastructure within the city, leveraging innovation and creativity generated through collaborative practices and supported by a flexible, decentralized governance system. Accordingly, her recent research focuses on participatory slum upgrading, aiming to link policy framework and spatial issues through community participation and flexible governance processes.

Informality and the Rainbow City: spontaneous practices and socio-environmental rights in Greater Johannesburg

Costanza La Mantia



Greater Johannesburg refers to the metropolitan area gravitating around the City of Johannesburg, which has been the epicenter of South Africa's enormous mining industry since the discovery of gold in 1886. Informal settlements in the area are characterized both by the absence of basic services and serious environmental risks (soil and water pollution, frequent fires, landslides and floods, etc.) but also by highly adaptive and resilient communities driving bottom-up responses to the numerous challenges they face.

The specific focus of this research is on how informality responds to the environmental and infrastructural challenges mentioned above. By looking at the Greater Johannesburg metropolitan area, the intervention explores the tensions created by constant growth and environmental degradation, in which a mix of practices embedded both in radical incrementalism and open political struggle provide fertile humus for alternatives.

This presentation will look at three informal settlements in the Greater Johannesburg metropolitan area through the analysis and comparison of socio-ecological dynamics and the struggle for basic rights. Observations gained from these three sites will be used to question whether these informal practices offer promising alternative to capitalistic and neoliberal urban development models or are merely ephemeral and fragile every-day practices, unable to challenge the logic of centralized power and equitable access to development? Can informal practices reveal alternative development patterns able to balance socio-environmental rights, access to basic needs and services, and help in addressing Johannesburg's fragmented, socially and spatially polarized, and environmentally degraded landscape? How can the state become more supportive of and even learn from self-organizing practices in order to support alternative forms of citizenship? How does this relate to the states unwillingness to decentralize and delegate power to "informal citizens"?