



## In memoriam: Tribute to Professor Vanessa Watson 1950-2021



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Professor Vanessa Watson lost a bravely fought battle with cancer on 15 September 2021. Widely recognised for her contributions to scholarship, planning education, and community commitment, she is deeply mourned. Up until some months prior to her death, despite serious illness and often debilitating treatment, she remained in a full-time position as professor at the University of Cape Town (UCT).

Vanessa grew up in Durban and studied at the University of Natal as it then was. A consciousness of the oppressions of colonialism and segregation were built into the approaches of some colleagues. In this milieu, Vanessa developed her interest in cities, their societies, and their planning. In the mid 1970s, Vanessa enrolled in the Masters programme in City Planning at UCT, where she studied with influential planners and architects, including Dave Dewar and Roelof Uytendogaardt – an experience that shaped her views on cities and planning.

From there, she went to London and took the planning diploma at the Architectural Association in London, a programme that had its origins in post-war reconstruction. She then returned to South Africa and settled in Cape Town, where she took a position at the Urban Problems Research Unit (UPRU). Together with Dave Dewar, she began to write extensively on cities and planning, including an early book in the field of ‘informal sector’ studies as well as on other subjects such as regional planning.

Vanessa joined with colleagues and community-based individuals in the mid 1980s to set up the Development Action Group in Cape Town, an NGO that, like Planact and some others, continued to pursue the ideal of ‘cities and towns for people’. After several years of work at UPRU, Vanessa secured a position as lecturer in the postgraduate city planning programme at UCT. For the remainder of her life, she played a pivotal role in the programme, providing leadership and guidance to colleagues and building professional networks with global reach. Vanessa produced significant texts, too many to list in this instance. Her doctorate awarded by the University of the Witwatersrand generated the book *Change and continuity in spatial planning* in Cape Town and earned her the ‘Women in Science of the Year’ award from the Minister of Science and Technology. She became a member of what became SAPI, of SACPLAN, and of the RTPI.

One of Vanessa’s dreams was realised in the form of an active community of urban planning schools across Africa, namely the Association of African Planning Schools (AAPS). It took many years of perseverance to accomplish that goal. In parallel, she formed the notion of a significant urban research centre at UCT. Together with others, in particular colleagues Sue Parnell and Edgar Pieterse, that idea crystallised as the African Centre for Cities.

Along the way, Vanessa became well known and influential in almost every centre of planning education in Africa. Her representation of our continent globally through AAPS led to her acquiring a significant reputation across the world. In recent years, she wrote very widely cited articles often based on experience in Cape Town, but also in other African cities. She became increasingly concerned with questions of southern urbanism and planning,

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collaborating with, for example, Indian colleagues in producing texts such as the *Routledge companion to planning in the global South*.

Vigorous intellectual engagement about planning continued to be part of her life up to her last weeks. Vanessa helped stimulate a passion for planning for better cities among students and colleagues. Messages of condolence on Vanessa's passing express gratitude for her teaching that helped many 'to see the world of cities in completely different ways.'

Vanessa was singularly generous and selfless. She was known by her friends and colleagues for her unfailing warmth, sincerity, tasteful elegance, and quiet, wry sense of humour. She was a sharing and kind person of sharp mind, with an ability to focus on projects way beyond the usual. The loss of Vanessa Watson is a very deep wound for many people on every continent, and for planning in South Africa. Her life will continue to be remembered and celebrated by those privileged and thrilled to have spent time with her over the years.