

## **A Letter to the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)**

September 10, 2024

We, a collective of students at, and alumni of, the Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), are writing to emphasize our heightened concerns regarding DURP's activity on social media. This letter builds on previous concerns which were communicated to DURP's head, professor Marc Doussard, by DURP graduate students in two official emails (mailto:[mdouss1@illinois.edu](mailto:mdouss1@illinois.edu)) on [April 3, 2024](#) and [April 4, 2024](#) and during in-person, closed meetings on April 5, 2024 and April 9, 2024.

Former discussions with professor Doussard addressed DURP's endorsement of a University [event](#) that invited Yifat Bitton as a speaker in posts<sup>1</sup> on the Department's [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts. Our worries are now deepened after the Department posted—on September 5, 2024—a “DURP Student Intern Spotlight” about an undergraduate student who completed their internship in Jerusalem, Occupied Palestine over Summer 2024. 334 days into the latest Israeli attack on Gaza, [this post](#) was published on DURP's Instagram account and featured photos in front of the City Hall | Jerusalem Municipality, [a pillar of manufacturing Israeli apartheid](#)<sup>2</sup>. Not only has the post generated a space for a violent discourse, but it also has created an environment of doxxing, harassment, and racism.

In the meetings with professor Doussard, students were told that endorsing the earlier event was an oversight. It was also conveyed to students that, due to University policies, the Department cannot take public stances on political matters and not every global issue counts as a planning objective. Students were also encouraged to use DURP as a space to make their voices heard about topics relevant to social justice in the United States and elsewhere. Here, we rhetorically ask: does posting an image that includes a large flag of Israel, combined with advertising [a course on conflict resolution using the example of “Jewish-Arab” relations in Israel](#)<sup>3</sup>, not disclose the Department's attitude towards the Palestinian cause? Should transportation planning on occupied Palestinian lands not count as a global issue that requires the attention of the Department? How can students freely express and organize on topics that are relevant to social justice when DURP is lending its platform to professor Benjamin A. Bross,

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<sup>1</sup> The posts for Yifat Bitton's talk were removed before students sent the emails or had the meetings with professor Doussard. For context, Yifat Bitton is the same “humanitarian” who was invited to the Women and Gender in Global Perspectives Program (WGPP)'s [teach-in on “Understanding the Israel-Hamas War from a Feminist Perspective.”](#) which got canceled after WGPP students and graduates wrote a collective [letter](#) about the subject in December 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Israel has been recognized as an apartheid state by multiple human rights organizations including [Human Rights Watch \(HRW\)](#) and [Amnesty International](#). On July 19, 2024, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued [an opinion](#) declaring Israel's occupation and annexation of the Palestinian territories unlawful and that its [discriminatory laws and policies](#) against Palestinians violate the prohibition on racial segregation and apartheid.

<sup>3</sup> The course (then GLBL 499, now GLBL 199) was promoted to DURP's students by DURP's Director of Graduate Studies, professor Andrew Greenlee, in an email (mailto:[agreen4@illinois.edu](mailto:agreen4@illinois.edu)) sent on [July 23, 2024](#).

who is not affiliated with our Department and one of the many [faculty members at UIUC who openly called for suppressing free speech on our campus?](#)

This platforming cannot be viewed in isolation from a persistent trend in DURP where vulnerable faculty stand up alone for the Department's students despite the fact that they have the most to lose. For example, when students requested support from faculty regarding the University's silencing policies through signing an open [letter](#) to DURP's faculty senate representative, the majority of faculty signatories were non-tenured or noncitizen academics. We are grateful to them for making us feel encouraged. However, we are disappointed in our faculty in positions of power who choose to not actively and visibly advocate for what is socially just, especially when the Department claims to have "[a core emphasis on equity and justice.](#)" An equitable and just community assesses its members' risk and mobilizes to support them throughout tumultuous times; it does not push its vulnerable people to the frontlines and leave them on their own. The words and promotions of DURP as a socially just Department ring hollow.

In addition, we must bring to the Department's attention that this student spotlight post stands in direct contradiction to our [core vision](#) statement which declares that "through engaged teaching, innovative research, and a *core emphasis on equity*, we foster planning processes in which the three pillars of sustainability work in concert with one another for the creation of *socially just communities.*" How does boosting the practice of colonial planning in an apartheid state represent our Department's "emphasis on equity" for "socially just communities?"

It would appear that DURP's mission and vision are simply platitudes. To that end, we **demand** that the Department:

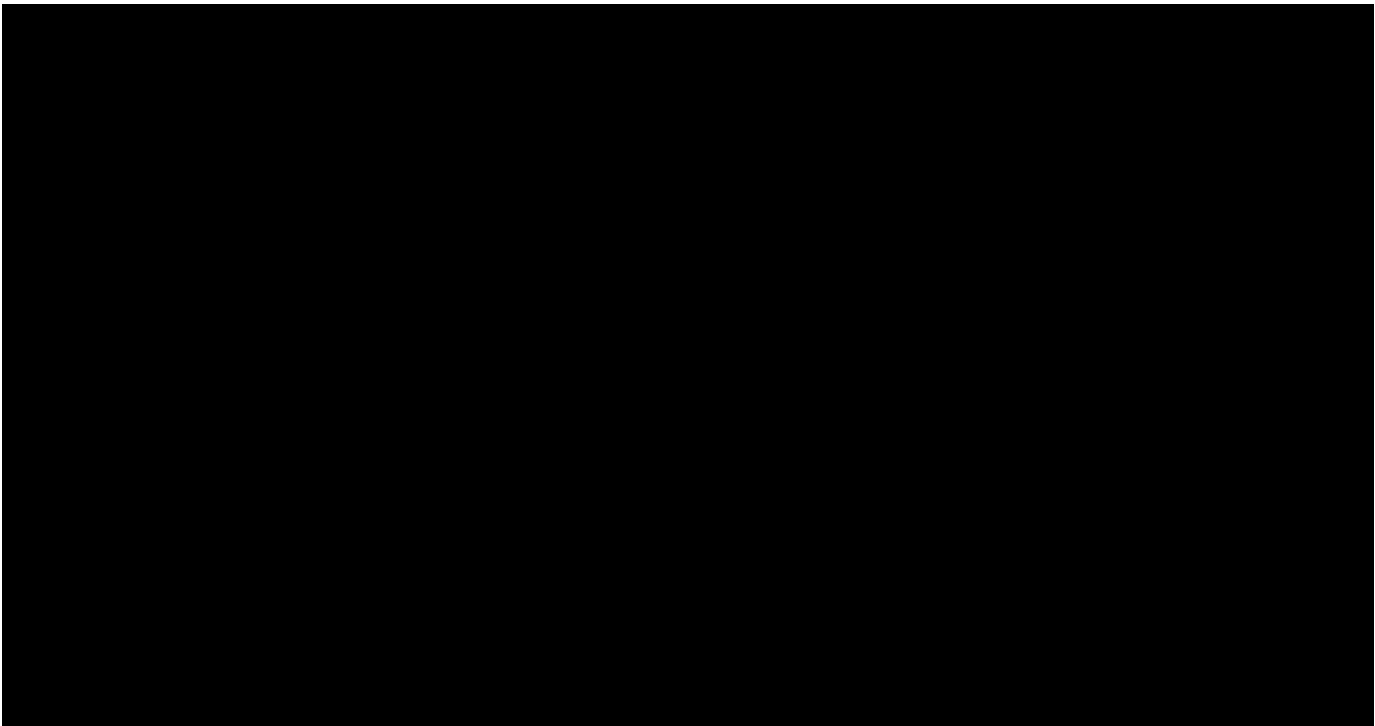
- **Remove the post, draft protocols/vetting process for the use of social media spaces, and provide us with the measures it will take to mitigate future incidents of this kind;**
- **Apologize for publishing the post, acknowledge the harm it has done, and push UIUC's College of Fine and Applied Arts (FAA) to take similar steps;**
- **Highlight the achievements of every student who completed an internship over Summer 2024;**
- **Acknowledge that female and BIPOC faculty members and students are being harassed and inform us about what is being done to support and protect them;**
- **Take a clear position on Palestinian liberation, the unfolding genocide in Gaza, and their interconnectedness with other national and global struggles—including those of a pedagogical nature, such as DURP's relation to Israeli academic and cultural institutions.**

We are giving DURP a seven-day period to provide us with a written response addressing each of the aforementioned demands. If we do not receive the response by September 17, 2024, we will publish a public statement denouncing DURP's complicity in the ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of the Palestinian people.

We reaffirm our refusal to pander to genocidal narratives or to be mere stenographers for Israeli propaganda. We acknowledge the inherent settler-colonial legacies of planning thought and practice from Turtle Island to Palestine. We view the urban projects, and analytical frameworks, of domicide, urbicide, and scholasticide as symptoms of genocide. Furthermore, we are aware that those urban phenomena, and their theoretical interpretations, are an extension of the empire and its workings. This is the same empire that: established this academic institution on the homelands of the Peoria, Kaskaskia, Piankashaw, Wea, Miami, Mascoutin, Odawa, Sauk, Mesquaki, Kickapoo, Potawatomi, Ojibwe, and Chickasaw people; designed and executed urban renewal, redlining, and Jim Crow laws; and is still reproducing segregation and gentrification across the nation.

We reiterate that we know, understand, and recognize how (neo)liberal ideals of peace, unity, and coexistence can be adopted by oppressive, hegemonic regimes and regurgitated as sustainable solutions through different mediums, including social media. Consequently, it is our duty to be critical of such approaches and to amplify alternative analyses (see [Myth: The Two State Solution Is the Only Way Forward](#)).

In solidarity,



Anonymous | Alum | PhD in Regional Planning 2020

Efad Huq | Alum | PhD in Regional Planning 2021 | Alum of MUP 2016



Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018

Patrick Ang | Graduate Student | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018 | Alum of BAUSP 2017 & MUP 2018

Anonymous | Graduate Student | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2025

[Redacted]

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018

[Redacted]

Susan Martinez | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018

[Redacted]

Andrea Pimentel Rivera | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2023

Mahmood Al Wahaibi | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018

Anonymous | Undergraduate Student | Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies and Planning (BAUSP) 2025

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2020

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2022

[Redacted]

Anonymous | Graduate Student | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2026

[Redacted]

Anonymous | Undergraduate Student | Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies and Planning (BAUSP) 2026

[Redacted]

Elli Dastrup | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2022

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Anonymous | Undergraduate Student | Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies and Planning (BAUSP) 2027

Kelly Chen | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018

Miriam Keep | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2017

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2021 | Alum of BAUSP 2019 & MUP 2021

Celía Burke | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2019

Sarah B | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018

Julia Curry | Alum | Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies and Planning (BAUSP) 2023

Maggie Kosterman | Alum | Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies and Planning (BAUSP) 2022

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2023

Sang Lee | Alum | PhD in Regional Planning 2020 | Alum of MUP 2008

David Wright | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2023

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2021

Anonymous | Undergraduate Student | Minor in Urban Studies and Planning 2025

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2023

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2023

Anonymous | Alum | Master of Urban Planning (MUP) 2018