Thanks to the active participation of alumni who traveled to Cambridge, Massachusetts, the event held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Special Program for Urban and Regional Studies (SPURS) last October was very successful. The signs of success were visible in the sincere smiles and heartfelt embraces of alums meeting each other after many years; in the well-attended conference sessions; and in the closing dinner when we all danced to the song “We are Family.” The alums sent a very clear signal that they remain grateful for their year at MIT and committed to helping SPURS become an even better program, more suited to the needs of changing times.

The event was also marked by serious deliberations about the best path forward for SPURS, including ideas about how to endow the program and restructure activities to meet the new challenges facing urban planners in an increasingly interconnected world. Our collective deliberations over two days led to many recommendations, but three are particularly important.

First, it was evident that alums deeply
appreciate the opportunity the program offered to reflect on their careers and plan for future professional roles in their home countries. Such reflections resulted from interactions in multiple settings—ranging from the SPURS weekly seminars to formal coursework and even informal conversations with colleagues. It’s clear the program should encourage such reflections, and that means the program’s schedule of activities should not be too rigidly constructed. The Fellows must have time and flexibility to think deeply about their past work—what they liked or disliked—and to learn about their own strengths and weaknesses; using the time at MIT to rethink and retool equips them to meet future challenges. This was an apt outcome of the conference, which was titled The Reflective Practitioner Reconsidered. It confirmed that continuous reflection is necessary for improving practice and that learning requires a flexible, nondogmatic, and curious mind—qualities that our alums have well demonstrated.

A second outcome of the 50th anniversary celebration was the endorsement by the SPURS alumni of a new strategic plan, which calls for the program to engage more deeply with collective problem-solving. When SPURS started in 1968, the program did not require Fellows to be involved in any problem-solving activities. Each Fellow pursued his or her unique set of program activities and attended one weekly seminar with guest speakers. In other words, the program has traditionally focused more on the personal intellectual growth of Fellows than on any collective endeavors.

The 50th anniversary meeting opened up a new dimension by considering the question of how the program might be utilized to address urban problems around the world. Two key assumptions underlie the strategic plan that emerged. First, it’s clear that if the Fellows put their intellect and experience together, they will be able to generate innovative solutions to what are otherwise intractable urban problems. Second, such group problem-solving will create a new type of learning environment: a new forum for reflection in action.

Happily, Argentinian alumnus Christian Asinelli took a concrete step to help us implement this new vision by proposing a project for this year’s Fellows to take on: upgrading informal settlements in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The Fellows addressed this problem collectively, and the experiment was a great success, providing a new and vibrant learning environment as Fellows visited Buenos Aires and held regular group meetings. The effort took much time as well as resources, which were provided by OPISU, the Province of Buenos Aires, Inter-American Development Bank, Fundacion Banco Cuidad, Buenos Aires, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, MIT International Policy Lab, and MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning. (For more details on the Buenos Aires Project, please refer to pages 10 to 13 of this newsletter.) Now the challenge is how to replicate this model every year, and any suggestions you may have will be much appreciated.

Clearly, SPURS can benefit immensely from tapping its decentralized network of alums, a strategy that offers many advantages over the historical model in which MIT served as the epicenter of all program activities; this is the third important outcome of the 50th anniversary gathering. Alumni expressed a genuine interest in creating regional organizations that could collaborate with SPURS at MIT to implement the program’s mission. To me this was a clear sign that 2018 is very different from 1968: It is now a multipolar world, and the United States is no longer the primary model of development. In 1968, the world came to SPURS at MIT; in 2019, SPURS needs to go to the world—and can do so, thanks to the 700-plus incredible alums the program has around the globe. From Argentina to Azerbaijan, from Beijing to Bosnia, from Mexico to Madagascar, SPURS Fellows are addressing problems that can provide immense opportunities for collective action.

In fact, regional groups open the door to a wide range of new activities, such as one currently being planned by Polish alums at the University of Gdansk. On October 9-12, exactly one year after SPURS 50th anniversary, European alumni under the leadership of our Polish alums are convening a conference titled HERcity: Housing Environmental Resilience. (For more information on the conference, contact the organizers at: gdansk.spurs@pg.edu.pl.) What a wonderful feeling I have witnessing new initiatives like this springing up around the world. What could be better than to see the SPURS model of learning replicated globally in a way that strengthens the program’s network, deepens professional relationships among SPURS alums, and makes the world a better place by jointly addressing difficult urban problems.

As we look ahead to the next 50 years, I see the contours of a global learning community slowly emerging...
It’s been a landmark year for the Special Program for Urban and Regional Studies (SPURS). In 2018, the program completed 50 years of continuous service and held a commemorative celebration spread over two days in October. The main golden jubilee event was a conference, The Reflective Practitioner Reconsidered, held on October 12. More than 100 SPURS alumni from around the world joined MIT students and faculty, friends and associates of the program, and current and former SPURS staff at the conference.

This year, SPURS also spent significant time and energy on a re-envisioning exercise with the goal of making the programmatic, pedagogical, and institutional changes necessary to ensure SPURS remains relevant to today’s urban planning and governance practitioners. On October 11, the day before the golden jubilee conference, visiting alumni were invited to join this effort via a collaborative workshop focused on the future of SPURS.

SPURS kicked off its golden jubilee celebration with a welcome lunch for all alumni on October 11 at MIT’s Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP). It was heartwarming to see the joy with which former Fellows met each other; in some cases, they were meeting after decades. SPURS Director Bish Sanyal, the Ford International Professor of Urban Development and Planning, formally welcomed the group. Since many physical changes have taken place at MIT since many of the alumni have been on campus, a tour was provided after lunch. The two tour groups were led by Debbie Levey (SPURS staff) and Faizan Siddiqi (SPURS PhD associate).

The collaborative workshop, hosted at the MIT Media Lab, began after the campus tour. Workshop participants were organized into five regional groups: Africa and the Middle East; Asia; Europe; and two groups covering the Americas. Participants were given three questions to brainstorm: 1) How can SPURS alumni play an active role in creating a regional network of institutions, both private and public, and help SPURS expand its activities to different regions of the world? 2) What specific regional visions do SPURS alumni have for their regions/country, and what strategies can be crafted in your regions that will help SPURS move toward fulfilling that vision? 3) What fund-raising strategies can SPURS alumni suggest to help SPURS identify organizations or institutions from their regions?
The workshop generated many interesting responses to these questions. Suggestions included establishing regional offices to serve both as organizational resources as well as research institutions in a region, with support provided by the SPURS office at MIT. Alumni from all around the world expressed willingness to host and promote SPURS regional engagement in their parts of the world. It was suggested that this engagement could take the form of research projects, design studios, strategic planning partnerships with cities, and so on. (For example, SPURS this year undertook a joint research and planning project in Buenos Aires, Argentina, with the active and critical help of SPURS alumni; see another article in this newsletter for details). Suggestions for fundraising included partnering with cities around the world and with relevant international professional associations as well as targeting research-oriented, region-specific grants. Workshop participants, many of whom had arrived from their countries that very morning, showed great enthusiasm and endurance by working into the evening to report their conclusions over a group dinner.

The Reflective Practitioner Re-considered Conference, which attracted more than 160 participants, started with a welcome breakfast on October 12. After addresses by Sanyal and Dean Hashim Sarkis of MIT’s School of Architecture and Planning (SA+P), the conference featured six sessions, plus closing remarks by Sanyal. Sarkis congratulated SPURS for its 50 years of contributions and remarked that he was impressed to see so many SPURS alumni convene in Cambridge, Massachusetts, from around the world. He highlighted the importance of building institutions that stand the test of time and are resilient; he also said he hoped there would be a 100-year reunion.

Sanyal provided a brief history of SPURS, which started at MIT with a grant from the Ford Foundation. He highlighted the important role played by past SPURS directors in shaping the program into a resilient institution that is highly regarded
There is new need to synthesize local and global work and knowledge around the world for urban and regional studies. He thanked the Humphrey Foundation and the Institute for International Education (IIE) for supporting the program. He also thanked members of the SPURS Advisory Board for their continued efforts to shape the program’s future.

The first plenary session, “SPURS at 50 Years: Looking Back & Looking Forward,” included Professor Richard Lester, associate provost for international activities, MIT; Anthony Koliha, director of the Office of Global Educational Programs, U.S. Department of State; Allan E. Goodman, president, IIE; and Professor Liu Jian, vice dean, School of Architecture, Tsinghua University. These speakers highlighted the importance of investing in people through programs such as SPURS.

Koliha said that, looking forward, the U.S. government wishes to engage with alumni in Africa, South America, and Asia to understand what they are doing to make their parts of the world more peaceful and better places to live. He used the examples of SPURS alumni who have recently served in important roles in their countries—including James Jallah, director of the Ebola National Taskforce, who has worked tirelessly to overcome Ebola crises through his effective interagency communication and following processes; and Paula Moreno, who served as minister of culture in Colombia. She was the first (and the youngest) Afro-Colombian woman to hold a cabinet position in Colombia.

Jian said that there is new need to synthesize local and global work and knowledge, since greater connectivity is making the world more like a small village. She said that planners face greater challenges today and need to know how to deal with new circumstances. In this context, programs like SPURS become very significant, she said. Allan Goodman specifically acknowledged and praised the enormous contributions of Nimfa de Leon, who has been associate director of SPURS for some years. He noted that—whatever the political or economic state of the world—investing in people works to make the world a less dangerous place. Lester congratulated SPURS on completing 50 years and said that the program embodies the spirit of MIT—an Institute dedicated to collaboration, the exchange of
ideas, and tackling the hard problems that critically affect society.

The following panel was titled “The Reflective Practitioner: Has the Need for Reflective Practice Changed in the Last 50 Years?” SPURS alumnus Abdulaziz Alkedheiri, who has served as governor of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, drew lessons from his professional experience and advised practitioners not to be afraid of investing in themselves. He advised giving second chances to colleagues, developing strong listening skills, and building on the work of those who have come before. Francisca Rojas from the Inter-American Development Bank then talked about the practical skills that the planning and development field demands, including learning from clients and co-creating knowledge.

Discussing “if conventional development paradigms are a hindrance to good practice,” Senior Lecturer Otto Scharmer of the MIT Sloan School of Management argued that since disruptions are inevitable in human affairs, the key thing is to understand how to address their effects. He said it’s not possible to understand a system unless you change it; you cannot change a system unless you transform consciousness; and you cannot transform consciousness unless you make a system see and sense itself. He concluded by saying that there is an urgent need to reinvent the 21st century university. The new university must connect knowing and doing. Professor Michael Piore of MIT’s Department of Economics brought a different perspective. He said that it is difficult to escape paradigms. Without them, there is chaos. Paradigms help us comprehend where we are and where we are going. But, paradigms are also limiting, he said. Transcending the bounds of the paradigm must come from past experiences.

The conference saw lively debate and discussion around the topics of technology and planning, learning from mistakes, and redefining professional ethics. Iliac Diaz, a SPURS/Humphrey alumnus and a social entrepreneur, shared a lesson he learned from Reinhard Goethert, a research associate at MIT, who said: “The UN builds the camps, but the refugees build the city.” What this meant, according to Diaz, is that there is a need to understand and harness the potentials of a community. He then described his work in the Philippines helping victims of a Level 5 typhoon (Typhoon Haiyan), saying he drew his approach to the challenges faced on the ground from a story he had heard of a professor and his students, and a test he had given them. The professor gave each student a piece of paper with a black dot in the center of the page, then asked the students to write about what they saw. In the end, all students described
Depending on how data and technology are used, they could either hinder or facilitate good practice.

The professor however, wanted to give the students another perspective – to focus not on the black dot but on all the white space on the page – all the possibility. What this means in development work, Diaz said, is that it’s important to focus on the possibilities, rather than the problem. This led Diaz to his work with women in the community. Together, they used available plastic bottles (mainly gin bottles) filled with concrete and chicken feathers (as replacement for steel reinforcement) as building materials for a community school.

Ethan Zuckerman, an associate professor of the practice from the MIT Media Lab spoke on the role of new media, community action, and political accountability. He described a platform called Promise Tracker—developed for data collection for civic action—that monitors the progress politicians make toward fulfilling their promises. This was used effectively by citizens in São Paulo, Brazil, to monitor action on the promises made by their elected representatives.

Associate Professor Sarah Williams from MIT DUSP argued that, depending on how data and technology are used, they could either hinder or facilitate good practice. She highlighted the fact that data scarcity exists, even in this era of big data. Many countries, especially in Africa, are missing important data. In many cases, she said, this lack can lead to the denial of basic human rights. Nevertheless, she emphasized that there are groups working to address this lack. Williams cautioned against depending too much on technology because less than half of the world today has access to the Internet. She also presented her project in Nairobi, Kenya, on making matatus (shared minibus taxis) more accessible and dependable using cellular phone data through an app built by the Nairobi University. This effort was complemented by creating a map, use of landmarks, collaboration with matatu drivers and owners, and other data collection. The route maps created by the project team were printed by national newspapers, providing increased public access.

Moreno, a member of the Ford Foundation’s board of trustees as well as former minister of culture in Colombia and a SPURS/Humphrey alumna, drew audience attention to the definition of “ethics” from a book by Margaret Wheatley: Who Do We Choose To Be. Wheatley states, “Ethics are how we behave when we decide we belong together.” Moreno said ethics applies at the micro level of communities and acts as a critical cornerstone for the future of humanity. She said that while undeniable progress has been made in many areas, huge tasks remain. She said we are at a juncture where what’s needed is to plan and build the future from an ethical perspective of human advancement. Ethical reasoning requires us to put humans at the center of our agendas.
and policies. In this regard, Moreno said, MIT and SPURS have a major responsibility to promote, nurture, and incubate ethical leaders that will better use power and influence to reduce conflict and backwardness in society. We are at a moment in history, she said, where we need to be more intentional about desirable impacts.

Kenneth Sharpe, professor of political science at Swarthmore College, spoke about ethics, noting the importance of personal, domestic, and local context and the need to readdress equality, combat violence, and promote justice. He focused on ethics in everyday decision-making and referred to the idea of “practical wisdom.” Sharpe said that educating students, colleagues, and staff to be reflective practitioners involves the virtues of a good character. Using a true story about a registered nurse who faced hard ethical dilemmas on the job, Sharpe highlighted the key attributes of a practically wise practitioner: the capacity for deliberation, to act rightly, to focus on the aim of the practice, to use intuition, be caring and compassionate, have a sense of fairness and justice, and understand the fear and reluctance of others. Sharpe also highlighted the importance of “learning how to be angry about the right reasons, for the right amount of time and directed in the right way.” He suggested that education for ethics and design for wisdom are areas that can be approached from a mentoring perspective: before an incident and during and after an incident, communication is critical.

The conference concluded with a dinner for all alumni and invited guests. Guests enjoyed live music performed by the MIT Jazz Band. Sanyal thanked everyone for making the trip to Cambridge to celebrate this important occasion. He also acknowledged and thanked past directors of SPURS for their contributions. He expressed hope that regional chapters of SPURS would become active around the world, taking the lead in efforts to think about development, planning, and governance.

For videos of the SPURS 50th Anniversary Celebration and the conference on “A Reflective Practitioner Reconsidered, please visit: http://spurs.mit.edu
This year, SPURS embarked on a major new initiative, engaging the entire group of SPURS/Humphrey Fellows in a joint project to figure out ways to improve and better integrate a number of informal settlements into the Buenos Aires, Argentina, community. This significant endeavor was undertaken at the request of senior government officials for the Province of Buenos Aires, who visited MIT in the spring of 2018. They asked SPURS for help implementing a new effort to upgrade multiple, typically resident-built, informal settlements and provide better links for them into urban systems through a recently created Provincial Urban Integration Policy.

“When the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area government approached us to seek advice on how to upgrade informal settlements, I immediately thought it would be worthwhile to harness the knowledge of the Fellows, who are experienced urban practitioners. I also thought that our effort would benefit from uniting the work of Fellows with that of graduate students, who could, in turn, learn from one another,” said SPURS Director Bish Sanyal, the Ford International Professor of Urban Development and Planning.

This thinking led to the creation of a yearlong SPURS seminar on challenging the conventional understanding of urban informality. In addition to all the program Fellows, the course enrolled nine graduate students from MIT’s School of Architecture + Planning to promote cross-cultural learning and enhance the skills of both Americans and Fellows.

During the fall semester, seminar speakers introduced everyone to the city of Buenos Aires, to theories of economic and urban development in the developing world, and to real-world projects to improve public space, safety, and design. The fall seminar also addressed issues in land regularization and titling, as well as organizational design and urbanization management. Speakers from public agencies, NGOs, academia, and elsewhere provided the students with multiple perspectives on urban issues. The speakers included Nora Libertun and Francisca Rojas from the International Development Bank, both with extensive experience working in Buenos Aires; Jota Samper from the University of Colorado at Boulder, who has been engaged with community-based efforts to improve security and well-being for residents of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and Anirudh Krishna, professor of public policy and political science at Duke University, who presented his analysis of what drives upward mobility among poor residents of developing countries.

The fall seminar also offered two instructive workshops. Early in the semester, Professor Larry Susskind from DUSP challenged seminar participants to learn about joint fact-finding as an effective approach to defining and resolving problems in complex environments. Also, two senior researchers who work on Latin America for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, Martim Smolka and Enrique Silva, led a workshop on land regularization and public fiscal innovation in informal markets.

Key visitors in October were Santiago Lopez Medrano, minister of social development for the Province of Buenos Aires, and Milagros Maylin, executive director of the newly formed provincial agency Organismo Provincial de Integración Social y Urbana (OPISU), which is responsible for planning and implementing the new upgrading program.

Maylin said she has high hopes for the collaboration between OPISU and
SPURS. “We are excited to have gained MIT and this group’s support. We expect that our cooperation will produce innovative and feasible initiatives to make these settlements safer, more livable, and healthier for their residents. And we hope that our efforts will also lead to the creation of new employment and provide entrepreneurial opportunities, which would improve the livelihood of the local population.”

During the fall semester, in consultation with Maylin and others at OPI-SU, the MIT project team defined both a geographic and a topical focus for addressing key issues. The work has concentrated on three adjacent informal settlements on the outskirts of Buenos Aires: Costa Espe-ranza, Costa de Largo, and 8 de Mayo. It has also been focused on five major issues: housing, informal upgrading, and relocation concerns; informal and local economies and livelihoods; informal land markets and regularization; open space design for accessibility and security; and organizational arrangements for project implementation and maintenance. These are complemented by cross-cutting concerns such as safety and security, residents’ economic well-being, environmental degradation, and women’s rights.

During late January 2019, both Fellows and graduate students, along with two faculty members, Sanyal and Louise Elving, a DUSP lecturer with substantial experience in affordable housing and community development, traveled to Buenos Aires for a week. The trip to Buenos Aires clarified the issues and theoretical models studied during the fall semester by providing the real local context of the diverse settlements. OPI-SU arranged multiple visits for MIT team members, who repeatedly visited the three target communities. OPISU staff members explained the evolution of the neighborhoods and their geographic, economic, and political relationships with the surrounding area; they also provided introductions. MIT team members spoke with leaders in neighborhood-based community centers and local waste-sorting cooperatives to learn their goals for the area and how they seek to improve residents’ lives.

The team also met with representatives from large public organizations that impact the community, notably the regional waste management company Ecological Coordination Metropolitan Area State Society (CEAMSE), which operates a major landfill adjacent to the target neighborhoods, and Comite de Cuenca del Rio Reconquista (COMIREC), a government agency charged with remediating the heavily polluted Rio
Reconquista River nearby. CEAMSE has a significant impact on the local neighborhoods because many residents make their living scavenging on its landfill, and it has underlying ownership interests in much of the land in the neighborhoods.

Elsewhere in Buenos Aires, the MIT group visited Barrio 31, an older informal neighborhood near the commercial heart of Buenos Aires that has benefited substantially during the past decade from targeted public investments in housing, safety, infrastructure, and job training—demonstrating the possible opportunities for integrating and upgrading other informal communities.

There were many surprises for the Fellows and students. “I was really surprised by the existing public spaces. Usually, in informal settlements, you don’t have enough space to provide services. In the case of Costa Esperanza, there is this potential,” noted Asmaa Ibrahim, a SPURS/Humphrey Fellow from Egypt who is also a professor of urban development at Cairo University.

Visiting two community-owned, cooperative waste sorting facilities enhanced DUSP graduate student Haily Tran’s picture of the power of community solidarity. “The most informative visits were those to two different recycling cooperatives, which were more formal than what I had imagined. I knew that there was an economy built around waste, but my conception of how these people work was quite single-dimensional. It was insightful to learn about the history, how their development paths diverged, and how that led to different challenges for expansion. This was key because now we know the diversity of needs and constraints.” Representatives of several other community cooperatives also met with students and Fellows, enlarging the team’s understanding of residents’ achievements and concerns.

During the week in Buenos Aires, the MIT team also benefited from a half-day seminar with four faculty members and urban researchers from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), who shared their in-depth perspectives on metropolitan development issues. UBA is a longtime SPURS partner, having sent one or two Fellows to the program every year for the past five years. Additional information was provided by students and faculty at the University of San Martin (UNSAM), which is located close to the three neighborhoods where SPURS focused its work. Both UBA and UNSAM also generously provided meeting spaces for the MIT team.

Everyone returned to MIT energized by the intense week of site visits and meetings in Buenos Aires. During the
spring 2019 semester, weekly three-hour seminars with the entire cohort of Fellows, graduate students, and faculty were held to synthesize everyone’s understanding of the issues and to discuss how to develop an integrated plan for urban upgrading. Fellows and students were organized into four major working groups that met weekly to conduct research, consult with OPISU staff via Skype, and advance the group’s assessment of how to improve informal settlements with an eye to all the financial, organizational, and political constraints.

Meanwhile, the seminar continued to consider wide-ranging issues such as: What are the key characteristics of informal settlements? What should be the sequence of interventions to integrate the areas into the main city? Who will implement these interventions? What role is politics likely to play in shaping the interventions?

The year-long program culminated on May 6, 2019, with a daylong symposium. At this event, seminar participants presented their work for review by OPISU staff and others from Buenos Aires, representatives from the Inter-American Development Bank and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, and faculty from MIT and other universities. With the benefit of input from these stakeholders, a final report will be prepared during the summer 2019 for submission to OPISU that will document the research undertaken throughout the year, including examples of relevant projects elsewhere in the developing world. The goal will be to carefully delineate proposed projects, policies, and approaches to benefit the informal communities.

SPURS believes this undertaking will not only create effective initiatives for specific areas of Buenos Aires, but also have international implications. Even though it is widely acknowledged that informal settlements (which house the majority of urban residents in developing countries) need to be integrated—spatially, economically, socially, and politically—with the core city areas, there is still very little knowledge about how such integration can be initiated and implemented. The SPURS seminar is addressing this gap directly and should thus provide lessons that can be used in many parts of the developing world. In addition, Sanyal notes, “This exercise will create reflective practitioners who are intellectually curious and flexible in their approach to problem-solving, wherever in the world their future work takes them.”

This challenging and engaging project has been made possible by generous financial support from diverse organizations. SPURS gratefully acknowledges financial assistance from OPISU, the Province of Buenos Aires, Inter-American Development Bank, MIT Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, MIT International Policy Lab, and Fundacion Banco Cuidad, Buenos Aires. Thanks are also due to officials and staff from these organizations, who generously shared their knowledge and insights with the SPURS team. The work has benefited significantly from the participation of SPURS research associate and PhD candidate Laura S. Wainner, who initially came to MIT as a SPURS Fellow four years ago, as well as current SPURS Fellows from the University of Buenos Aires. Their extensive knowledge of Buenos Aires and local contacts of these many people contributed greatly to the SPURS practicum.
EXCERPTS FROM 2018 - 2019 SPURS/HUMPHREY GRADUATION SPEECH
By Christian Asinelli, Humphrey Fellow 2010-2011,
president of the City of Buenos Aires Foundation

When I started to consider what I was going to say to you today, I thought about the day I was sitting where you are and tried to remember what the person who was given the same difficult task Bish has given to me had said. To tell you the truth, I couldn’t remember anything! So, I called some of my friends from the program and asked them if they could help me, but they don’t remember either. What we do remember is being so excited to arrive at this point at the end of the cycle that we were just in our own little worlds with our families and friends, as you must feel today. So, I told myself I would only say three simple, easy-to-remember things. If out of these three you only remember one, excellent! That’s 33 percent of what I said. So here they are:

1. Stop-continue
2. Experience of others
3. Ambassadors

Stop-continue

You’ve surely heard Bish say it a bunch of times—that MIT is unique and impossible to duplicate. I am sorry to tell you that it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to find another opportunity like this one: the best place in the world to study, the most intelligent people around you, the best program of study, friends from around the world, and an incredible cultural experience. Tomorrow you’ll go back to your countries, and this will only be a good memory. Well, no. You can convert this experience of having passed a year here into something permanent. Convert this experience of having stopped a year to think and consider your future, your professional life, your life. Whatever it may be. Convert this experience into a methodology. Yes, a methodology of “stopping” and “continuing.”

As I was saying, tomorrow you return to your countries. To the urgency of non-important things. Where everything was needed yesterday. But I can assure you that even if you have not yet noticed, you return as a different person. You will get better jobs and get paid more. You will be more successful. But in addition to everything you learned and now carry in your hearts and minds, take away this methodology of knowing how to stop and then continue.

When you are back home with your obligations, where everything is urgent again, always give yourself the time to consider the decisions you have to make. Always give yourself time to care. To care for your loved ones. If you could all be away from your countries for a year exercising your abilities to think and rethink ideas, you can, from time to time, take a morning, a whole day, a weekend, or whatever you need to think about where you are going. If you follow your path, you’ll see that each time you stop, you are able to continue with more strength. You need that strength to make great changes, to leave your mark.

I imagine that many of you have read the book The Little Prince by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. For those who haven’t, I recommend it. It is a book of important instructions for life. There is a chapter that we could relate to this methodology of stopping and continuing. As you probably know, the little prince arrived to Earth from a very small planet. He was very alone here, and he wanted to make friends. One day he met a fox. The little prince asked him to be his friend, and the fox accepted. But he gave him one
condition—that the prince had to go visit the fox every day at the same time. The little prince questioned him: Why? And the fox said to him that he needed to be able to prepare his heart. If he knew that he was going to arrive at 5, he would already be content from 3 o’clock. At 4 o’clock, his heart would be full of anxiety. And at 5, when the prince arrived, the fox would be extremely happy. The fox taught the little prince that for everything in life, time and patience are needed. It was important that the prince take time to build that relationship with the fox to have a true friendship, his goal in the end. He needed to stop each day and continue the next, while keeping his goal in mind.

Stop and continue is what allows us to consolidate our achievements and our goals.

**Experience of others**

An Argentine philosopher said: “Personal experience arrives late and costs dearly. And it is a master of fools.” Always take advantage of the experience of others when they face difficulty. I know that it’s the style and many will say (or you’ve already heard many times) that you must learn from your own mistakes. Or those guys in Silicon Valley say you have to make many mistakes before building a huge business. This is not the case! Sometimes it is inevitable to make mistakes, but it is very different to go against the current and always be exercising this method of paying attention to our surroundings, to the small gestures that can make great differences, to history, to errors of others, to what they get right.

If others already were wrong, hallelujah! Use that experience to not commit the same errors and help the world evolve faster and better. Learn from the great leaders worldwide!

This means you don’t have to rely on memory to avoid making mistakes. If we had used this tactic in our own history, we could have avoided many problems, wars, and poverty. This is much easier said than done. How many of us make the same mistakes over and over again? But making the effort to see the bigger picture and learn from past experience as well as the experience of others will help us to make fewer mistakes. And when we must make big decisions, we can choose to use not only technology and data but also the experience of others.

**Ambassadors**

Return to your countries and be ambassadors of the SPURS program at MIT. Do not lose contacts with professors of the topics that interest you, with Bish [SPURS Director Bish Sanyal], with Nimfa [SPURS Associate Director Nimfa de Leon], and all the team. You can be protagonists. Please note that we are the most privileged [people] in the whole world that in the last 50 years we have been able to pass through here. There are only about 700, if I remember correctly. We are few! That is a great responsibility that you are carrying today, to be part of the world population that has traveled these corridors. When I came back to Argentina in 2011, I was appointed undersecretary of the office of the president’s cabinet. I had returned with the idea in my head of doing something because I had noted that in the 40 years of the SPURS program only three Argentines had participated. And, in addition, I saw that there were very few Argentines at MIT, at Harvard, and in the USA in general who had study grants.

From my position, I helped create a program that provided 10 times the number of young Argentines with scholarships to study in the United States. In 2011, the Fulbright Commission only gave eight scholarships per year for Argentine students to study in the U.S. The following year, we were giving more than 100 grants. When Bish gave me the opportunity and invited me to be part of the international advisory board of SPURS, in our first meeting, he told us about his vision to start working and thinking about the next 50 years of SPURS. That gave us the idea to make a practicum that joins SPURS Fellows with students from the department and faculty to work on something together. I proposed to make the pilot experience in Argentina, where most of you had the opportunity to participate. And I take this moment to thank you for all the contributions you have made this year—taking time to travel to Argentina and creating some interesting proposals such as those that were featured yesterday at the symposium. The possibilities of each one of us to be protagonists and to convert an idea into a concrete project can be realized here.

So, be SPURS ambassadors in your countries, in your cities. As I said, three ideas. Let’s see if you remember at least one, so that in eight years, when some of you are in the place that I am today, [you can] remember: “Stop and continue,” “experience of others,” and “be ambassadors” of SPURS.
REFLECTIONS ON MY 10 MONTHS AS A SPURS FELLOW
By Aparna Das, Spurs Fellow 2018-2019, India

“SPURS.” This acronym, if pronounced in a certain way, translates in the Hindi language as “healing touch.” My time as a Research Fellow at the Special Program for Urban and Regional Studies (SPURS) indeed has been a healing touch for me. I have been working with German International Corporation, in Delhi, India, for the last 10 years as a senior advisor. During this time, I negotiated and implemented complex projects that regularly presented me with difficult questions about my profession as an urban planner. I often faced doubts: As an urban planner, do I have any influence in the public policy-making process? Do I have any unique skill sets that are needed in the policy-making domain? This ‘pause’ year allowed me to reflect—an act that I would say is a luxury in practice. I could relate my experiences from the practice and appreciate the abstraction of these experiences in theories. SPURS is an excellent platform for exploring such connections between practice and theory, especially for mid-career professionals who need to realign their career paths going forward.

I am now six weeks away from going back to my previous job. To be honest, I am anxious about facing that familiar setting after a gap of 10 months. The logic of practice is often in conflict with academics. For practice, the analogy that I love to use is of jumping onto a moving train; one has to run and leap, even when one is not prepared. The luxury of reflection is most often limited in practice, but SPURS conducted a series of workshops and leadership training sessions that allowed me to address these anxieties. Now, I feel confident enough to go back and pick up the thread where I left it. This is a fantastic feeling that can only be experienced.

SPURS has this amazing ability to encourage Fellows to get involved, but it never indulges them in the utopian world of pure theory. It ruthlessly forces Fellows to face realities. Once on the giant wheel of SPURS, there is no escape from swirling around; however, turning on the wheel allows one to see the facts from varied viewpoints. SPURS calmed me, put Band-Aids on my cynicism and gave me clues to how I could go back and say: “An equitable society is possible. All is not lost!”

On August 18, 2018, I reached Logan Airport with my family and six big, brightly colored suitcases in the late afternoon. We were approached by an Asian person who offered his services to get us an Uber. To my surprise, we bargained with him as we would have in India. I paid him in cash without any receipt, a challenge to my assumption that in the USA, all transactions are accounted for. In the fall semester, I took a course with Lecturer Martha Chen at the Harvard Kennedy School of Public Policy and learned more about how the informal economy works in a developed country. The informal economy topic cut across all the courses that I attended.

At the Department of Urban Studies and Planning (DUSP), course selection is made in a ritualistic manner. At the beginning of the fall semester, I was amused to see teachers making a pitch for their courses. On top of that, the students who came to attend were given free food to eat! This was unimaginable for me. I selected my courses thinking I would explore topics that I am not familiar with. I followed a deliberative process before picking each course, yet on reviewing my platter of courses now, I realize with surprise that I selected courses that mirror my ideological position. Given another opportunity, I would nudge myself to attend courses that capture another way of thinking.

I am fixed on the idea that the formulation of public policy is a public function. In the class on Southern Urbanism conducted by Associate Professor Gabriella Carolini, I expressed that planning is a public function. This was challenged vehemently by my colleagues. This resistance was a surprise for me. The role of the private sector in formulating public policies is an area that I have yet to explore. But, I have been overcoming this by exchanging ideas with the 15 Fellows in my cohort, each of whom had been expanding their horizons by taking courses at MIT, Harvard, and beyond. The informal discussions with my colleagues about courses such as GIS (geographic information systems), real estate, China studies, sustainability discourses, etc., have all been super exciting. The diverse cohort of SPURS provides great opportunities for learning.

Nimfa de Leon, the assistant director of SPURS, and Faizan Siddiqi, a PhD candidate from DUSP, are true believers in processes. I am fascinated by the rigor that they put into designing even small tasks or events. One such task, in the very early days of our program, was the allocation of our workstations in the SPURS room. They conducted a lottery, and through a truly democratic, transparent process, assigned the desks. I got a workstation with a view to 77 Mass Ave. Appreciating the prime
real-estate value of my 4 square meters, I made full utilization of this spot.

It was fun to know Debbie Levey, SPURS alumni correspondent, who to an extent reshaped my ideas about American consumerism. She encouraged me to eat free food on the fourth floor of building 9 in DUSP. I must say I enjoyed this very much. It was like living my college life again. She helped me to break my inhibition to use recycled stuff. I do not think that without her, I would have walked up to the recycling bins of MIT. She was excellent in nudging me to recycle.

Nimfa, on several occasions, told us that we are a select group. Yes, we are unique as we were part of the 50th year of SPURS. But I am sure the next batch of Fellows will be special too. However, we did have the unmatched experience of being the first SPURS Fellows to work alongside master’s students on one common project in Bueno Aires, Argentina. I thank Laura Weiner, a PhD candidate from the department who patiently explained all the specificities of Bueno Aires to us. Fellows Joaquin, Patricio, and Sophie generously gave us an inside view of Bueno Aires. This was much appreciated as we learned a lot as a group from this exposure.

SPURS Director Bishwapriya Sanyal lives up to the true meaning of his name. “Bishwapriya” means someone who is loved by the world. He is an eminent urban thinker and a no-nonsense person. Every time I proposed an idea to him, he asked me with a deadpan expression: Who will pay for this and why? He encouraged Fellows to think outside the box but kept all of us grounded. It was an enriching experience for me to work with him. He is knowledgeable but in no hurry to intimidate anyone with his knowledge. He explained theories in a grounded manner, drawing references from the practice. I liked the way he pushed us to operate within a realistic framework and to explore doable solutions. I congratulate him and his team for continually innovating the structure of the program. He is a good listener, and that allows him to get the best out of each Fellow.

It took me some months to shed my bangaliyana (Bengali traits) to address Professor Sanyal as “Bish,” but it took me no time to address Lecturer Louise Elving as “Louise.” Louise was for me the quintessential American: polite yet upfront. I learned a lot from her, especially her work on the Community Land Trust, which is very inspiring. During our seminar presentations, she captured our discussions succinctly. It was an excellent tool for us to refer to later. Her processing speed was incredible; I wish I could take notes like that.

It was an honor for me to work with Wesley Harris, C.S. Draper Professor of Aeronautics and Astronautics, in conducting a course (11.A.11) for undergraduate students. Both Harris and Sanyal have shared their vision about training international students and shaping a global community. I got a chance to live in New House at Memorial Drive and make many young friends. Living with these students and exploring a collaboration with SPURS and International House made my stay more meaningful.

I met many who said that SPURS would be a life-changing experience, but I resisted that in the beginning and tried to pass that off as a cliche. Now that I am at the end of the program, I have to admit that it has been life-changing for me. True, I gained a lot from the courses that I attended, but the most valuable experience that I am carrying with me is my renewed belief in my profession as an urban planner. I believe that as an urban planner, I have much to contribute in shaping a plural, diverse, equitable society.

Aparna Das
You are cordially invited to attend a conference on HERCity - Housing, Environment, Resilience and the first Regional SPURS Alumni Workshop hosted by Gdansk University of Technology (GUT) SPURS Alumni, Poland team on October 9th to 11th, 2019 in Gdansk, Poland.

During the SPURS regional workshop, we will discuss the outcome of last year’s meeting at MIT and how to move forward. The goal of this year’s workshop is to create a framework to implement the new mission of SPURS which was presented on October 11, 2018, and to continue to explore ways to deepen the relationship between SPURS and members of its remarkable alumni community.

The SPURS Alumni workshop in Gdansk is also the 30th anniversary of Poland’s structural transformation (1989-2019). It will help highlight some fundamental questions concerning our SPURS background and missions – i.e. planning in times of dynamic changes caused by global politics and economy.
**Agenda**

The GUT/SPURS MIT in Gdansk, Poland on October 9 to 11, 2019:

- **October 9th** –
  An international conference on HER City - Housing, Environment, Resilience. A debate focusing on key important approaches for global society.
  European Solidarity Center

- **October 10th** –
  A workshop to discuss the future of SPURS. Gdansk University of Technology

- **October 11th** –
  Professional site visits - Confronting the results of Transformation in Poland Tricity metropolitan area: Gdansk-Sopot-Gdynia. The goal of this one-day site visits is to assess the transformation of the Polish landscape as well as to determine the common global problems and issues that drive contemporary spatial planning.

We look forward to your participation in this event to be held at Gdansk, Poland on October 9 to 11, 2019. If you need further information, please contact gdansk.spurs@pg.edu.pl

Sincerely yours,

Justyna Martyniuk-Peczek, Gabriela Rembarz and Piotr Lorens
(Poland Team)
Around 90 alumni, most traveling great distances, attended the SPURS’ 50th anniversary on Oct. 11-12, 2018. Current Fellows enjoyed meeting representatives of earlier classes: Borislav Stojkov SPURS ’71 (Serbia), Om Mathur SPURS ’71 (India), and Peter Cook SPURS ’73 (USA), all of whom remain professionally active.

Over his long career, Peter Cook SPURS ’73 (USA) has worked on national transport planning programs and policy studies in India, China, Southeast Asia, Latin America, West Africa, and the United States. Many of these programs have continued for decades. More recently, he managed teams that developed FastPath, a software tool to help decision-makers in the transport/logistics sector from both the public and private sectors to identify and prioritize improvements. This type of analysis was used in the Program for Infrastructure Development in Africa for work involving transport, water, power, and telecommunications across the continent.

Pedro Ferraz de Abreu SPURS ’91 (Portugal) was the first coordinator of the e-Planning doctoral program in Portugal.

Monica Amorim SPURS ’92 (Brazil) and husband Francisco C. de Oliveira SPURS ’92, ’93 still live in Fortaleza, Brazil. He has retired from both the Federal University of Ceará and the State University of Ceará, and remains busy with other projects. She continues working at the Federal University of Ceará and recently prepared a major paper for a career promotion.

Jose Angel Velasquez SPURS ’93 (Venezuela) currently works as academic vice-rector at the International University of Guatemala (Universidad InterNaciones).

Starting with the 2018-19 academic year, Ewa Miklaszewska SPURS ’94 (Poland) expected to be working full-time at the Cracow University of Economics.

Tommy Firman SPURS ’94 (Indonesia) is a professor in the Department of Regional and City Planning, School of Architecture and Planning, at the Institute of Technology Bandung in Indonesia.

Jun Shan SPURS ’02 (China) has become professor of architecture and vice dean of the School of Architecture at Tsinghua University, Beijing, where he mainly teaches architectural design and theory.

Since 2003, Gilberto Antonio do Nascimento SPURS ’02 (Brazil) has been working in Caixa Economica Federal, the Brazilian Public Bank, on infrastructure, housing, and sanitation. He and his wife visited MIT and SPURS in June 2018 and were taken on an extensive campus tour to see the many changes in the last 17 years.

Before showing up for the SPURS 50th reunion, Zaklina Gligorijevic Humphrey ’04 (Serbia) and colleagues from Serbia visited the New York City Museum of Modern Art’s special exhibit, Architecture and Urban Planning in Post-War Yugoslavia, 1946-1980. She pointed out that the Urban Planning Institute of Belgrade had supplied original plans from 1950 for the show. In 2018, she received a prize from the Serbian Chamber of Engineers for exceptional results in urban planning and design.

In November 2018, Tomer Gothelf Humphrey ’05 (Israel) was appointed the planner of the South District in Israel, which contains 64 percent of the country’s area. He reports being very busy.

James Dorbor Jallah SPURS ’07 (Liberia) has left his country’s Public Procurement and Concessions Commission as executive director and CEO after completing four years of service.

Daleen Brand Humphrey ’10 (Namibia) has left her former position as town and regional planner with Stubenrauch Planning Consultants and become the manager at the Planning Department for the City of Windhoek, Namibia.

Maha Jameel Issa Humphrey ’10 (Iraqi Kurdistan) moved to Chicago and is currently teaching part-time.

Following his MIT experience, Delmo Roncarati Vilela Humphrey ’10 (Brazil) started a PhD at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, where he did research on water treatment and water supply techniques in rural communities (quilombolas) in Brazil. After completing his doctorate, he worked as a consultant in the supply and treatment of water and sewage in rural areas. Currently, he is a consultant for shelters for Venezuelan refugees flocking to Brazil.

Abdillahi Ismael Humphrey ’11 (Djibouti) has been promoted to general director of the Djibouti Housing Company as of December 2017.

Christian Asinelli Humphrey ’11 (Argentina) recently earned his PhD from the University of San Martin (UNSAM), Argentina.

Bah Mohamed-Imine Abdellahi Humphrey ’11 (Mauritania) continues as a researcher and instructor at the Nouakchott University Al-assyria, Mauritania. He is also a senior expert at the National Commission in Charge of Public-Private Partnership.
Abel Manangi Humphrey ’13 (Zambia) is principal engineer for rural water supply and sanitation in Zambia’s Ministry of Water Development, Sanitation, and Environmental Protection.

Araya Santisan Humphrey ’13 (Thailand) is a head designer at HUB of Homeprise Co., Ltd., and a part-time lecturer at King Mongkut’s University of Technology North Bangkok.

Sandra Gutierrez Poizat Humphrey ’14 (El Salvador) is an academic at Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas. She recently visited Gdansk University of Technology, hosted by Justyna Martyniuk-Peczek SPURS ’05 (Poland), and the two alums discussed starting an academic collaboration between their universities and jointly establishing MIT SPURS labs in their countries and regions. Gutierrez also met with private real estate developers in El Salvador to develop a plan for the recovery of natural environments in urban areas, and to combine the recovery of urban rivers with networks of public spaces, alternative transportation, social housing, and commercial real estate investments.

From 2015 – 2016, Carlos de la Torre SPURS ’15 (Peru) was a research fellow at the Malaysian Sustainable Cities Program at MIT, where he focused on consumer and producer energy subsidies in Malaysia. He is currently a tax policy advisor with the Ministries of Finance and of Revenues of Ethiopia as part of a tax policy and administration program financed by the UK Department for International Development.

Nilima Shrestha Humphrey ’18 (Nepal) has a new job with the City Planning Commission as an assistant expert to the mayor of Kathmandu, Nepal, whom she is advising on planning and development work. She is responsible for project design and supervising a team of 15 planners, architects, and engineers.

After returning home, Alka Palrecha Humphrey ’18 (India) organized a symposium on rural-urban relations focused on water. She continues to work on issues of wastewater reuse. Two MIT students from the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering are working with her, and one is incorporating this research into her PhD.

Due to the political crisis in Nicaragua, Bernardo Perez Humphrey ’18 (Nicaragua) spent five months in Guatemala before returning home. He is actively involved in urban initiatives related to intermediate cities and smart mobility, and he is taking online courses related to urban nature-based solutions and zero-energy design buildings.

In April 2019, the U.S. State Department celebrated the accomplishments and impact of Humphrey alumni with events around the world, including a conference in Panama mostly attended by Latin American and Caribbean alumni. SPURS attendees included Juan Ortega ’08 (Colombia), an innovation and entrepreneurship policy and management expert; Sandra Gutierrez Poizat ’14 (El Salvador), an academic at Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas; and Cesar Cruz ’18 (Mexico), a researcher at the Water Research and Technology Center in Lima, Peru.

Faculty visit alumni
- Bish Sanyal gave a presentation on “The Limits of Development from Below” at the MIT-China New City Forum, Beijing, China, November 12, 2018. While there, he met with SPURS alumni from Tsinghua University and toured the Great Wall of China.

Larry Vale may have written two editions of Architecture, Power, and National Identity—a book about designed capital cities—but he had never visited Thimphu: Bhutan’s capital since 1961. He used MIT’s Spring Break to rectify this, meeting up with 2016-17 SPURS/Humphrey Fellow Dago Zangmo. Dago is currently Chief Engineer in Bhutan’s Ministry of Works and Human Settlement, and had attended Larry’s “Introduction to Urban Design and Development” classes in 2016.