

Obituary

YVES CABANNES, UCL EMERITUS PROFESSOR OF DEVELOPMENT PLANNING (1952-2025)

Professor Julio D. Dávila

UCL, London

Countless colleagues and friends were deeply saddened by the news that Professor Yves Cabannes passed away unexpectedly on Sunday 12 January 2025 at the age of 72. He was a distinguished scholar, lecturer and activist in the urban field, having worked in over 60 countries in Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Europe. Yves had been University College London's (UCL) Professor of Development Planning between September 2006 and March 2015 when he retired from UCL. At the core of his work was a profound engagement with social justice and the respect of human rights. His research work centred around urban agriculture and food sovereignty, collective and communal forms of land tenure, and local governance, including the development of urban management tools such as participatory budgeting, a Brazilian innovation to involve local communities in making decisions about the investment budgets of municipalities.

Yves was a passionate defender of marginalised urban communities and used his vast network of contacts among scholars, practitioners and international aid agency staff to raise awareness of the plight of thousands of people, while steering efforts to build staff capacity in municipal governments, non-governmental organisations and universities. Between 2004 and 2010 through his work as Chairperson of the Advisory Group on Forced Evictions to the Executive Director of UN-Habitat (AGFE), he supported urban people's movements and their struggles against arbitrary evictions across many countries, travelling to work with them, connect them to others, and to document their resistance.

Prior to UCL, he worked for three years as a lecturer in Harvard University's Graduate School of Design. Between 1997 and 2003 he was the Regional Coordinator of the UN-Habitat/UNDP Urban Management Program for Latin America and the Caribbean based in Quito, Ecuador. There, he oversaw the production of numerous studies and training programmes to improve the effectiveness of municipal governments, a role that saw him visiting tens of cities in the region while widening his already considerable network of contacts.

Yves was a supportive mentor, teacher, coordinator and friend, and after his retirement returned every year to UCL to teach MSc students and collaborate with colleagues on research and activism. He was a systematic thinker with unbounded levels of energy, travelling frequently to meetings, conferences, training events, and street demonstrations in distant cities, at a pace that was only slightly reduced by illness in recent years. His considerable height and mastery of empirical facts added to the feeling of authority wherever he went, but his personal warmth quickly put people at ease. He was a consummate polyglot, who could quickly switch from his native French to Spanish, Portuguese and English. Born in Southwest France, he also spoke Languedoc and was at ease speaking Catalan. He used these qualities to great effect, from bringing people together to putting pressure on governments and international aid agencies.

His premature loss is deeply mourned by a large range of people, from leaders of poor urban communities and social movements to municipal officials, United Nations staff, former students, and friends. Our thoughts and solidarity are with Cecilia Delgado, his widow, and his children.



Photo Credit: Julio D. Dávila, 2009



Photo Credit: Julio D. Dávila, 2024

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IN MEMORY OF YVES CABANNES

Prof. Dr. Robert Biel, UCL

Yves and I met as colleagues when he first joined University College London (UCL), and we worked together for many years, becoming very close. We were contrasting personalities and had our differences, which made the friendship even more interesting and meaningful, and I must say he was the most loyal friend I ever had. I saw so many instances of how committed and generous he was with people, including students whose future careers he always felt a responsibility to support. With Yves, one really had a friend for life, and this is why his disappearance has left such a sense of loss, for me, and I'm sure a huge number of others.

Yves' work had many facets: the right to the city, participatory planning and design, urban agriculture, resisting evictions, community land trusts/housing trusts, alternative currencies. In each of these areas, he was a – or in many cases *the* – leading expert at a world level. Although the main focus of my practical collaboration with Yves was urban food-system planning, our discussions were usually about the cross-cutting themes which link *all* these movements. The key theme was to develop an enduring commons-based institutional focus for the struggles of the most oppressed and marginalised populations, in a way both relevant to immediate day-to-day livelihoods, and also prefigurative of a wider, emancipatory social order.

We were both rooted in the radical political tradition, and this of course traverses' phases of optimistic upsurge, and other phases where the situation appears more challenging. At such moments, when one might easily be discouraged, Yves was invariably a source of positivity. He kept his finger on the pulse of the real struggle, and never wavered in his qualities of humanity, empathy and commitment to the cause ... as well as his great sense of humour.

In terms of practical application, there is something which made him an extremely *effective* operator in getting results in the real world. He possessed an astonishing intuition, so that if you parachuted him into any situation, or place, he could instantaneously sense the relation of forces and know exactly where to intervene to unblock the situation. He consciously trained himself in this faculty and kept me entertained with his explanations of how he employed strategy and tactics, notably aphorisms from the French translation of the Chinese military classic, *The Art of War* by Sun Zi, which was his constant companion. The key is always the relation between the concrete local gains and the bigger strategic picture.

We can, and must, continue to reflect on all these lessons, and re-affirm the commitment which Yves always embodied.