

6-7 september, 2018  
arts tower  
university of sheffield

speculative  
infrastructures  
and cities  
in-the-making

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URBAN GEOGRAPHY JOURNAL AND  
URBAN INSTITUTE/SIID  
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD

# Speculative infrastructures and cities in-the-making

6th and 7th September, 2018  
Arts Tower, University of Sheffield

A workshop sponsored by Urban Geography journal +  
Urban Institute/SIID at the University of Sheffield

## Organisers:

Paula Meth and Jonathan Silver  
with

Beatrice De Carli, Tom Goodfellow, Philip Horn, Juan Miguel Kanai,  
Michele Lacione, Melanie Lombard, Victoria Okoye, Gabriel Silvestre, Glyn Williams.

## Overview

This workshop responds to the growing prominence of infrastructure in understanding urbanisation as a dynamic, open ended and contested process of global transformation. It seeks to reflect on the utility of infrastructure as a problematic in examining cities in-the-making, developed over the last twenty years - whilst reflecting upon the expansive ways in which the term is increasingly mobilised through diverse theoretical and methodological approaches. Across the urbanisation experience infrastructure is arguably the critical materiality in the shaping of urban worlds. The workshop brings together a wide range of scholars to focus on various infrastructures and how they can be understood as practices/processes of urban speculation across multiple scales, geographies, connections and temporalities. Using notions of infrastructure, as a form of speculation in-itself the workshop aims to develop unexpected conversations concerning cities in-the-making and the increasingly speculative ways in which the term 'infrastructure' is now being used across urban studies to consider issues such as financialisation, new technologies and everyday life. The workshop is hosted by the multi-disciplinary urban research community at the University of Sheffield (including Architecture, Geography, Sheffield Institute for International Development, Urban Studies + Planning and the Urban Institute) building upon debates developed by staff that have taken place over the last two years on this topic.

## Rationale

Cities remain in constant flux and movement, shaped by transformations that often emerge as speculative and future orientated and yet remain provisional and open to reconfiguration. From households, in rapidly growing mega-cities, navigating everyday survival through clandestine pipe connections, to ongoing attempts at restructuring moribund economies in the post-industrial city, infrastructure acts as *the* materiality of urban speculation. These provisional geographies encompass multiple scales, actors and intensities. From the mega-port project aimed at emergent, surging economies to the new mobile app to escape police repression and the repurposed transit system such infrastructures create disruptions to the present socio-technical orderings of cities. Understood collectively as 'infrastructure' these materialities, of cities-in-the-making, have become increasingly central in accounts of the urban. The emergence of studies of infrastructure as a critical focus across urban geography has achieved much in helping to elucidate the provisional and multiple contours of urbanisation. Importantly, the use of infrastructure as a key problematic does not end with these visible systems of service provision and connectivity so often explored in the literature. Rather, scholars have taken notions and metaphors of infrastructure to help outline new explanations of cities as ongoing spaces of provisionality, experimentation and speculation. Examining geographical phenomena as diverse as household care and warfare the term has become a useful device through which urban researchers may find common ground to speak across various debates and ways of theorising. The rationale of the workshop is to develop a better comprehension and to understand the functions, forms and politics of the term 'infrastructure.' The workshop places infrastructure both at the centre of attempts to understand the city and as conceptual space to rethink the urbanisation process more broadly.

## Key questions

We invite participants to broadly consider the following questions in relation to your own work and alongside the questions within each panel:

- How might we develop a conceptual vocabulary of infrastructure to better understand cities in-the-making? How does the recent 'infrastructural turn' across urban geography relate to your ongoing research and ways of thinking about cities?
- What comparative tools might be available through geographic approaches to infrastructure to think across the various scales, temporalities and spaces of urbanisation?
- How do changing configurations of infrastructure offer opportunities to understand the speculative foundations of the urban?
- How do changing uses of the term 'infrastructure' relate to new theoretical/methodological tools in interrogating cities-in-the-making? Are there limits to how we can constructively use the term?

## Format

The workshop takes place from Thursday September 6th at 1pm to Friday September 7th at 3pm including a workshop dinner (Further communication about logistics will be sent shortly). Travel and accommodation costs will be provided. As a participant you will be asked to produce a **800-1000 word commentary/provocation by 20th August** responding to the session theme that will be circulated before the event to all attendees. We hope you will be able to read the contributions in your sessions (and others) in order to fully participate in discussions. The chair in each session will then use these contributions to instigate a **panel conversation amongst the speakers and wider participants. Each panel will be 1.5 hours long.** The aim of this format is to focus on debate and conversation rather than the presentation of new papers. We will not be recording the event in any way (no microphones, cameras or such like). If you agree we would like to use your written contribution as part of a magazine style publication that will be produced shortly after the event and made publicly available in partnership with Urban Geography journal.

## Panel 1: Hijackings

**Chair:** Beatrice De Carli (University of Sheffield)

### **Panel:**

Sarah Barns (University of Western Sydney)  
Dana Abi Ghanem (University of Manchester)  
Victoria Habermehl (University of Sheffield)  
Simon Marvin (University of Sheffield)

Illicit trade, circulations and accumulations are gathered, distributed and held across repurposed infrastructures through various means, practices and strategies that underpin alternative cities-in-the-making. Such infrastructures sustain various forms of hacking the city to create new social, technological and economic relations from the clandestine electricity connection through to occupied housing. Alongside such contested infrastructural spaces new technologies threaten to disrupt current socio-technical geographies as they shift current ways of knowing and experiencing the city from phone apps to experimental data management systems. This panel seeks to consider how notions of hijacked infrastructures might help better understand these provisional intersections of urban life as transgressive, contested, deeply disruptive and the foundation for alternative ways of living in the contemporary city.

- How does your work open up questions about hijackings and infrastructure?
- How is the city 'hacked' through/across/by infrastructure? How does infrastructure become 'repurposed' and how can we understand the city through these emergent, disruptive networks?
- What kind of social relations and politics are produced through hijacked infrastructures?
- How might we understand urban futures/cities-in-the-making through these emergent networked geographies?

## **Panel 2: Displacements**

**Chair:** Melanie Lombard (Sheffield)

### **Panel:**

Desiree Fields (University of Sheffield )  
Tom Gillespie (University of Manchester)  
Charlotte Lemanski (Cambridge University)  
Gabriel Silvestre (University of Sheffield )

People experience multiple forms of displacement across cities, often from or through the infrastructures of service delivery, housing and social reproduction. Displacements often take place in the shadow of broader transformations attempting to shift urban trajectories but can themselves be understood as forms of speculation by various interests. These processes of accumulation and dispossession involve a whole range of underlying infrastructures to achieve such purposes, most notably of war and defence, finance, policing and law, as well as the contestations to such material processes. This session seeks to consider how experiences of displacement from infrastructure broadly conceived compare to the infrastructures that enable such displacements.

- How does your work open up questions about the infrastructures of displacement/displaced infrastructures?
- How does displacement take place across or through various forms of infrastructure?
- What type of infrastructures are created to enable or resist displacement?
- How can we use the term infrastructure to open up our understandings of processes of displacement to understand issues such as financialisation, housing and citizenship?

## **Panel 3: Survival**

**Chair:** Lindsay Sawyer (University of Sheffield)

### **Panel:**

Prince Guma (Utrecht University)  
Philip Horn (University of Sheffield)  
Sobia Ahmad Kaker (Goldsmiths University)  
AbdouMaliq Simone (The Max Planck Institute)

Urban populations rely upon a variety of infrastructures in order to survive. Caught in the various intersections of cities-in-the-making these systems become essential in navigating the risks and dangers, opportunities and openings of the contemporary urban experience. Survival in relation to infrastructures can mean navigating the insecurities of cities in conflict or the everyday ways in which citizenship mediates access to services or the ways in which residents collaborate across 'social' and informal systems. Across urban worlds infrastructure is a crucial materiality of survival in the city. This panel seeks to consider the various forms of infrastructure that enable everyday life across urban space.

- How does your work open up questions about survival and infrastructure across range of scales and domains in the city?
- What type of urbanisms are shaped, produced and through infrastructures and designed for survival and social reproduction?
- What type of groups/populations/collaborations emerge from attempts to configure infrastructures of survival?
- How might we reframe the urban political through questions of survival and infrastructure?

## **Panel 4: Fluctuations**

**Chair:** Juan Miguel Kanai (University of Sheffield)

Idalina Baptista (Cambridge University)  
Rivke Jaffe (University of Amsterdam)

Stephen Graham (Newcastle University)  
Jochen Monstadt (Utrecht University)

If cities in-the-making involve infrastructure as a form of speculation then paying attention to the fluctuating economies that are configured across and through these systems opens up new ways to consider urban economies in turbulent times. From the toilet entrepreneur in an informal settlement to a new skyscraper or suburban extension these infrastructures of speculation encompass multiple governance factors from marginalised residents and metropolitan mayors, national politicians and pipeline engineers as they navigate the fluctuations of contemporary urban economy. This session seeks to consider the materialities that establish new and speculative economic trajectories from the neighbourhood to the urban, the regional to the global that are orientated around various infrastructures and urban governance actors, both formal and informal.

- How does your work examine/address the relations between infrastructure and economic transformation across cities?
- How can we think through
- What forms of speculation - financial or otherwise are created across/through infrastructures?
- How can we understand the urbanisation process as a form of speculation? What kind of urban futures are being configured?

### **Session 5: Margins**

People are pushed at the 'margins'; people live at the 'margins'; the 'centre' as opposed to the 'margins' – one could continue along this line of definition of the margins as space, place or social structuration. But what if the margins are not something that can be defined and measured and studied and governed; but rather a politics that can only be performed, arranged, oriented, embodied? In this panel we are interested in exploring the infra-structural (un)making of the margins: the make+shifts, the everyday life, the assemblage of performances and matters that emerge once the veil of social categorisation is lifted, and the margins are set in motion. The notion of infra-structure (or that of infra-making) signals a desire to trace the structural makings of inequalities, social exclusion and poverty, looking at how they are contested and reinvented through the crossroads of everyday urban life. Reading the margins through infra-structures requires a historically informed ethnographic attendance to the multiplicity of life, and to its performative unfolding: a midst in-between which the researcher has no chance of detachment, but only responsibility of commitment.

**Chair:** Michele Lancione (University of Sheffield)

Suzi Hall (London School of Economics)  
Victoria Okoye (University of Sheffield)  
Tom Goodfellow (University of Sheffield)  
Tatiana Thieme (University College London)

- In which ways does everyday life become an infrastructure 'at the margins'?
- What is the relational politics of infrastructures such as markets, sewages, bridges, side-walks when they meet with the infra-makings of urban life? Can marginality be reconfigured, as an analytics, from those relationships?
- What is the 'infrastructural' responsibility of the work you do? Does it intersect, does it sustain, does it allow knowledge to flow and liberate?
- What kind of epistemology is needed to look at life at the margins across north/south divides?

### **Afterword**

A panel of PhD students will provide a collective response to some of the key issues emerging from the event.

**Chair:** Glyn Williams (University of Sheffield)

# **PROGRAM**

## **Day One**

Coffee 13.15-13.30

**Welcome** 13.30-14.00

**Panel 1: Hijackings** 14.00-15.30

Coffee Break 15.30-16.00

**Panel 2: Displacements** 16.00-17.30

Dinner (Venue TBC) 19.30

## **Day Two**

**Panel 3: Survival** 9.00-10.30

Coffee Break 10.30-11.00

**Panel 4: Fluctuations** 11.00-12.30

Lunch 12.30-13.15

**Panel 5: Margins** 13.15-14.45

**Afterword I** 14.45-15.00