

Plenary 3C

**Redefining Urban Futures**

Tuesday 12 November, 9.30 – 11.00

Haldane Room

Chair / discussion lead: **Prof. Adriana Allen**, Professor of Development Planning and Urban Sustainability, UCL

This session considers how urban practices of governance and development seek to frame urban futures, including climate change, digital practices and construction. Insights are drawn from innovative practices of marginalised urban communities, the unruly circulations of the material components of the future urban fabric, and the tactics and rationalities being invented to govern urban spaces and climates.

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**Prof. Ayona Datta**

Ayona Datta is Professor of Human Geography at the Department of Geography, UCL, having previously been Reader in Urban Futures at King's College London. She has an international reputation in urban and feminist geography. Her research encompasses postcolonial urbanism, smart cities, urban futures, and gender citizenship. She is author of *The Illegal City: Space, law and gender in a Delhi squatter settlement* (2012), and co-editor of *Translocal geographies: Spaces, places, connections* (2011) and *Mega-urbanization in the global South: Fast cities and new urban utopias of the postcolonial state* (2017). Ayona is a publicly engaged scholar and maintains a personal blog, 'The city inside out'. In the summer of 2019, she was awarded the Busk Medal of the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) for her contributions to the understanding of smart cities through fieldwork. Before her academic career, she practiced as an architect in Delhi and London.

**Fast urbanism: Speed, time and slowness in 'smart' urban futures**

In this talk I will discuss how speed is fundamental to transforming urban futures in the global south. Drawing upon last five years of research conducted in Indian cities, I will examine how a move towards creating 100 smart cities have had a profound impact on the management of speed, acceleration and efficiency in what I call 'fast urbanism' in Indian cities. I argue that the purpose of fast urbanism is to produce time as a commodity in order to emphasise its relative acceleration as a virtue in the future. In other words, a smart urban future gives the promise of speed and seamless governance to its citizens through several infrastructures of technology, while its actual conditions prove to be far more irregular and sporadic in everyday life. Using examples from small and metropolitan cities in India that aspire to smart futures, I will argue that fast urbanism is a utopian imagination when confronted with the social and gendered time of the city. Its relationship to a smart future is political, in which to promise speed in the future is to enact power in governing the present.

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### **Dr Hannah Knox**

Dr Hannah Knox is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Director of the UCL Centre for Digital Anthropology. Her work focuses on the study of technical projects as sites of social and cultural change and she has conducted ethnographic research in the UK and Latin America. Recent books include *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise* (co-authored with Penny Harvey) and *Ethnography for a Data Saturated World* (co-edited with Dawn Nafus). Her latest book *Thinking like a Climate: Governing a City in Times of Environmental Change* will be published in 2020 with Duke University Press.

### **Climate Change and the City**

In this talk I explore the epistemological challenges that climate change poses to urban practices of governance. Drawing on research conducted in the UK between 2011 and 2018 I outline how the calculative operations of climate science and the material relations they index, work to re-map spatial and temporal imaginaries of what is city is and what it can be. Building on these reflections I argue for a comparative understanding of the effects of this remapping on everyday practices of governing.

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### **Prof. Armelle Choplin**

Armelle Choplin is Associate Professor in Geography and Urban Planning at the University of Geneva (Switzerland). Her research focuses on the production of the urban in Africa, crossing the building perspective of stakeholders with dwelling perspective, initiated by the inhabitants through everyday practices. From 2016 to 2018, she has been Research Fellow for the French Research Institute for Sustainable Development (IRD), based in Cotonou (Benin Republic). She has been carrying out a project on the West African Urban corridor from Accra to Lagos. She analyses this mega-city region under construction through the lens of materiality, especially the production, circulation and consumption of cement and concrete.

### **Concrete Urban Futures: exploring the materiality of African cities**

In a context of “planetary urbanisation” (Brenner, Schmid, 2016) and a “construction boom” (Nunzio, 2019), trying to “redefine Urban Futures” invites us to take into consideration the new urban forms that are unfolding, such as mega-city regions and urban corridors, and their materiality. Given the difficulty of understanding who makes up a city in Africa’s contemporary urban revolution (Parnell and Pieterse, 2014), this paper sheds light on what, concretely, makes up the urban and its future, for better or worse. In particular, I offer to unpack the various roles that cement and the cement industry play in composing the urban. Cement, indeed, is a binder: it literally binds sand, water and clinker, becoming concrete; metaphorically, it also binds politics, environment, economy and the everyday practices of urban dwellers across Africa. By tracing out the material, political and social lives of concrete, the paper aims i) to understand the transformation of the construction sector and how African cities are becoming the new frontiers for the growing cement industry; ii) to examine the practices, imaginaries and material life of city dwellers who become foremen and building entrepreneurs; and iii) to demonstrate how cement symbolises the new ‘metropolitan condition’, initially defined by Walter Benjamin (1999), being (re)manufactured in contemporary Africa. This is particularly true along the West African urban corridor (linking Abidjan, Accra, Lomé, Cotonou, and Lagos), Africa’s largest

developing urban metropolis, now dominated by cement's greyish colour, where over 30 million people live, travel, consume and build (with concrete)...

Drawing from extensive fieldwork conducted between 2016 and 2018, the paper adopts a "follow-the-thing," multi-scale approach, documenting the itineraries of cement bags from the producing plants to the construction sites and the actors involved in the cement chain, from major companies to bricklayers.

Finally, while the cement industry is one of the world's most polluting industrial activities, the paper tackles the thorny issue of sustainability, engaging with international urban agendas and the SDGs. This article thus invites us to reflect further on urban future and possible alternatives, and the ways in which Africa may be a privileged site for redefining it...