

Discussion paper (Oct. 2024)

Drivers in urban future-making

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Although taking on decisive roles in the urban fabric, urban future-makers' actions are hardly expressions of free will. As with all kinds of human action, the very doings of urban future-makers – the projects they make, the decisions they take – are intrinsically shaped by forces that transcend the acting individual. Such forces are conceptualized here as the *drivers* in urban future-making: if agency is understood as future-makers' capacity to act, then the drivers of agency are found in the multiple determinants that steer their actions in one way or another. Historical and inspiring traditions such as Marxism, practice theory, feminism, and postcolonial theory have tried grasp how people's actions are steered by forces that go beyond individual will. Seeking to create some clarity in the plethora of possible drivers, we find merit in the seminal work by Emirbayer and Mische (1998), who argue that that the drivers of agency can be allocated to the past ('what has been'), to the future ('what could be'), and to the present moment ('what is').

The past: The driving force of 'what has been'

It is safe to say that the temporal dimension of the past determines future-makers' agency. Future-makers decidedly act within pre-existing repertoires of meaning (Swidler, 1986). Earlier 'approaches', 'genres', and 'languages' of urban praxis constitute a semiotic toolkit – that is: a prefigured and habitualized way of seeing, understanding, and approaching urban problems – that simultaneously enables and constrains future-making actions. In *Future Cities*, Paul Dobraszczyk (2019) argued, for example, that urbanistic interventions labelled as 'radically new' are merely iterations of pre-existing types. In the built environment, these pre-existing repertoires can also be found in 'past futures' that were materialized by earlier generations of built environment professionals.

For example, infrastructures tailored to the automobile create path dependency or lock-in that is difficult for current generations of future-makers to escape from (Urry, 2016). One might also think of the current quest for urban decarbonization: due to the ongoing hegemony of the 'fossil-fuelled' city, carbon particles from pollution now permeate every pore of urban existence, making it increasingly difficult for architects, engineers, and planners to get rid of them (Chatterton, 2018; Hajer and Versteeg, 2019). The city thus constitutes a palimpsest or layering of past futures, the totality of which drives as well as limits what can and cannot be done by those professionally responsible for urban futures in the late-modern metropolis.

The future: The driving force of 'what could be'

The future also constitutes a pivotal driver of agency. On the one hand, techno-optimist and green-utopian imaginations of the future drive action in the present. Imagined urban futures such as 'the

smart city' (Caprotti, 2019), 'the green city' (Knuth, 2019), 'the fossil-free city' (Chatterton, 2018), 'the compact city' (Burton, 2000), and the '15-minute city' (Khavarian-Garmsir et al., 2023) all constitute supra-individual urban imaginaries of the future. These urban imaginaries can be seen as 'fictional expectations' (Beckert, 2016) imbuing human conduct with meaning and goal-orientedness in the present. But these imaginaries also circumscribe the imagination: They constitute a frame enabling but also delimiting what today's future-makers can imagine and realize.

On the other hand, apocalyptic imaginations of urban futures also drive future-making action forward. The potential collapse of the urban commonwealth – into, for example, an empty city (Pohl, 2022), a drowning city (Goh, 2019), or a radiant city (Dobraszczyk, 2010) – constitutes an imagined future plot line that fuels and ignites practices such as urban tinkering, boundary management, and commons-oriented activism (Cassegård and Thörn, 2018). Overall, techno-optimist, green-utopian and apocalyptic tellings of the future drive urban future making in the present – yet in different ways and in different directions.

The present: The driving force of 'what is'

The conditions of the present moment, finally, drive urban future-makers' agency. Professional future-makers' scope of agency is invariably limited by legal systems (international, federal, regional, local), paralegal arrangements (incentives, funding programs), and (real and anticipated) political majorities inside and outside parliaments. Especially in cities, the conditions of the present moment take on material forms as well. Scholars of 'new materialist' leanings have intensively pointed to matter as an 'active' given (Bennett, 2009; McFarlane, 2011). Matter has agency, and therefore affects what the urban future-maker can and cannot do. Urban materialities continue to require maintenance and repair in the present and thereby prescribe and limit what urban future-makers can accomplish.

Material agency becomes particularly tangible in architectural discussions about material sustainability (Lee et al., 2014; Lehmann, 2013). Urban actors are currently seeking alternatives to concrete, such as wood. Yet despite the advantages offered by wood, it still 'behaves' in particular ways that make it not (yet) entirely appropriate as a full replacement for carbon-intensive concrete. Or take the example of electric automobility: While it is valued as a carbon-free mode of mobility, the production of its battery-inherent elements is known to pose significant socioecological risks and reproduces old colonial production chains.

Lines of inquiry

In essence, in this session we will look at how urban future-makers' agency is affected by the driving force of 'what has been', 'what could be', and 'what is'. We are particularly interested in empirical case studies as well as theoretical reflections on drivers of future-making agency. The conference track thus invites foundational sociological, anthropological, philosophical, historical, and human geographical

work on human agency and its relation to urban future-making. Against this backdrop, contributions to this conference track can be linked to one or more of the following lines of inquiry:

- How do drivers from the past (such as habits, lock-ins, path dependencies, pre-existing repertoires, and architectural genres), the future (such as techno-optimist imaginaries, utopias, and dystopias), and the present (such as legal systems, normative frameworks, and material behaviours) determine the scope of action among urban future-makers? Authors may zoom in on one temporal dimension, but we are equally interested in how these different dimensions intersect. Analyses may also be of a conceptual or theoretical nature, thinking along with, critiquing or fine-tuning this paper's theoretical framework.
- How do urban future-makers in specific sectors and at specific scales experience past, present, and future drivers? Which strategies do they mobilize when faced with contradicting drivers? Authors may dedicate their analysis to specific fields of future-making such as water futures, mobility futures, energy futures, housing futures, architecture, and so on. Authors may also zoom in on specific scales: localities, organizations, nations, regions, or the global scale. Comparative approaches are equally welcomed.
- How does the dividing line between the Global North and the Global South relate to past, present, and future drivers of agency? A hypothesis is that particularly Western ways of future-making still linger on – and indeed continue to drive – urban development in colonized urban and regional contexts. The session particularly welcomes accounts from postcolonial theory and postcolonial critique, shedding a light on the inequalities that emerge when drivers are imposed on subjugated locales and populations.
- How have past, present, and future drivers changed throughout history? A further hypothesis is that ideas about the past and future – and about the kind of present one is living in – have changed historically. Architectural genres and future imaginaries change as new generations of future-makers enter the scene. At the same time, professional images, habitus, and routinized practices remain in place. The track thus welcomes accounts capturing how the drivers have changed – and resist change – throughout subsequent historical periods.
- Finally, how have the oeuvres of specific futurological architects and planners (Le Corbusier, Park, Haussmann, Hadid, Koolhaas, and many more) been influenced by the driving forces of the past, the present, and the future? And how do these oeuvres *themselves* constitute a driving force affecting the work of other future-makers? Accounts focusing on particular future-makers – be they world-renowned, newly emerging, traditional, activist, or active in the fringes – are welcomed in this regard.

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