

## Call for Papers

# Urban future-making: Situating agency within the built environment

International conference, 5 & 6 May 2025, HafenCity University Hamburg

Urban areas have become crucial sites where aspired pathways towards desirable futures are imagined, forecasted, and variably negotiated. Through the lens of ‘urban future-making’, our research training group (RTG) explores the activities of experts and administrators responding to expected threats and risks to urban societies through measures related to the built environment. The international conference will present insights from the first cohort of the RTG. It aims to situate our results in the context of wider interdisciplinary debates about the transformation of cities in the light of pressing challenges and multiple crises. We invite papers from scholars working on various aspects of urban future-making along five streams, each addressing different aspects that allow us to understand agency within the built environment.

### **Stream 1: Drivers in urban future-making**

The multiple crises of the present come with an imperative to act in order for just and sustainable urban futures to be realized. The drivers in urban future-making encompass the many determinants that influence urban future-makers’ agency. If agency is understood as future-makers’ ability to act, then the drivers of agency are found in the multiple determinants that steer actions in one way or another. This track looks at how the past (habits, lock-ins, path dependencies, pre-existing repertoires, architectural genres), the future (techno-optimist imaginaries, utopias, dystopias), and the present (legal systems, normative frameworks, material behaviours) drive urban future-makers’ scope of action.

### **Stream 2: Arenas of urban future-making**

Arenas can be understood as physical or non-physical spaces at the interface of conflict and negotiation between different social groups or political forces. In relation to urban future-making, arenas evolve through socio-spatial relations and are central for urban transformation. As such, the investigation of arenas allows us to better understand the powers at play in the processes of urban change. This track aims to understand the physical, metaphorical, relational, and temporal features of the arenas of urban future-making as an invitation to explore their role in the shaping of urban futures.

### **Stream 3: Resources of urban future-making**

Resources shape urban futures. Above all, material resources such as timber, cement, steel, rubber, or rare earths provide the basis for urban futures to be created and maintained in the form of lasting built environments and advanced digital infrastructures. Equally important, immaterial resources such as urban imaginaries, mobile policies, or insights drawn from citywide data are being used in decision-making processes about urban futures. However, different actors also have highly different degrees of access to such resources; this enhances agency for some while restricting it for others. This track thus

explores the role of material and immaterial resources, as well as the varying levels of access to them, in shaping the agency of different (groups of) urban actors and, as such, urban futures themselves.

**Stream 4: Tactics in urban future-making**

Dealing with tactics in urban future-making means focusing on the subtle politics of urban change and the art of manoeuvring transformative interventions. Featuring in different formats, from urban experimentations, to tactical urbanism, to the day-to-day politics of addressing climate change in urban areas, tactics reveal the underlying processes, the agential dynamics, and the power relations through which targets are achieved (or blocked). This track explores tactics as repertoires of agency, observing their deployment in socio-spatial settings, their socioecological outcomes, and their use as methodological approaches; focus is on diverse contexts, including the Global South.

**Stream 5: Materiality in urban future-making**

Dealing with the materiality of infrastructures, buildings, and urban spaces is at the heart of urban future-making. However, the built environment is made up of layers and assemblages of objects that come to us from the past: as products of past decisions, they are in need of constant adaptation, maintenance, and repair. In this track, we invite interdisciplinary contributions that deepen our understanding of how materiality conditions and influences urban futures, investigating how the material world is represented and abstracted in design and planning, how material objects facilitate decision-making and collaboration, and how matter itself can exert agency.

**Organization and programme:**

There is no registration fee. The conference will include plenary sessions and parallel streams with paper-based presentations. The keynote lecture on Monday, 5 May 2025, will be given by Prof. Dr. Maarten Hajer (Utrecht). For junior scholars or scholars without institutional support, costs for travel and accommodation can be reimbursed. Please notify us when applying if this is relevant for you.

**Deadlines:**

- Please submit an abstract of 500 words by **10 January 2025**.
- Notification of acceptance will be provided by **24 January 2025**.

**Further information and contact:**

For each stream, a short discussion paper provides the conceptual framework and specifies potential lines of inquiry. Please contact the hosts of each stream (as specified on our website) for further questions related to the papers and possible contributions.

Abstracts should be sent to: [urban-future-making@hcu-hamburg.de](mailto:urban-future-making@hcu-hamburg.de)

For questions, please contact our coordinator, Lea Mork: [lea.mork@hcu-hamburg.de](mailto:lea.mork@hcu-hamburg.de)

Further details are found on our website: <https://urban-future-making.hcu-hamburg.de>