

“Questioning Urban Future-Making in the Times of Disrupture”

Thematic Workshop Organised by the Urban Futures at Risk research group,
Georg-Simmel Center for Metropolitan Studies, Humboldt University in Berlin.

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With Ayona Datta (University College London) and Matthew J. Spaniol (Roskilde University) as keynotes

This workshop aims to conceptually and empirically explore the notion of ‘making urban futures’ as both a top-down and bottom-up process that takes place in everyday life. We proceed from the need for more awareness of the necessity to think and act individually and collectively about urban futures resulting from times of disruption, as witnessed in war (in Ukrainian cities), ecological disaster and austerity (in most European cities), and democratic crises (in Russian, Turkish, and Israeli cities). We are planning to focus on the everydayness of future(s)-making, its diverse agency, and the positionality of the researchers studying urban futures. Based on the results of the workshop, it is planned to continue working on the publication.

We understand the urban future as neither linear nor single: its various trajectories are produced in different presents, rooted in different pasts, and are affected by multiple challenges and disruptions. Numerous possible futures are formulated in competition by different individuals, collectives and institutions. The progressivist understanding of the future is not relevant anymore (Datta 2019), since the idea of futures as based on improving today’s best practices is questioned by both collective and personal experiences. The ‘present future,’ the one to be created, unfolding from the past and present trends (Adam and Groves, 2007; Kitchin 2019), can be easily destroyed by global crises. Climate change, pandemics, food insecurities, democratic backsliding and localised wars affect urban futures by intensifying the migration flows, changing built-environment, political life of the cities and urban life per se. The ‘future present,’ when anticipations reshape today’s practices to get to the desirable futures, can also be questioned, since stakeholders may disagree on realities to come. Both cases require a discussion on “who or what owns the future?” (Urry 2016) and what actors have the power to decide on it.

Agency and agency-related issues are at the core of our workshop. Recent challenges questioned the existing geometry of power, undermining the ability of the states, corporations, and urban experts (planners, architects, and local governments) to determine urban futures. Some urban futures can be produced and negotiated in different everyday situations by various actors (Zheltnina 2022). Although these ‘everyday’ or ‘minor’ futures can be inconsistent, controversial (Kemmer, Simone 2021) or ‘wicked’ (Tutton 2017), they may affect different scales from individuals, families, neighbours, local communities, to the states or global institutions. We formulate the key question of the workshop as: who, how, and at which scales is involved in developing and implementing urban futures today in different cities and political systems?

Prioritising agency as a concept, we would also like to discuss the positionality of the urban scholars studying future making, especially those with personal backgrounds of dealing with global disruptions. We thus aspire to give the floor to scholars at risk and/or displaced scholars to make their position visible and acknowledged. Being displaced scholars ourselves, we support the multi-vocality in academic debates on urban futures and the representation of narratives that can be easily marginalized by dominant perspectives.

We would like to initiate discussion on urban future making using the following topics as thematic axes:

- 1/ Challenging agency and structure-agency relations in future-making at different scales in times of disruptions:
 - personal experiences of living through time in the city during disruptions, i.e., forced migration and catastrophes;

- agency at the city level, including how it is developed, manifested, and contested, as well as the arenas and methodologies (comprising but not limited to participatory planning, budgeting, foresight, etc.) that make negotiation and collaboration between different future-makers possible;
- the city agency at larger scales in times of disruptions, the ways cities are forced to develop and manifest their interests.

2/ Reconsidering expertise and raising ethical concerns in urban future-making:

- the city is an assemblage of materialities, technologies, and human and non-human actors
- how such agents as NGOs, activist groups, informal networks of the lay technical/digital experts, or academic scholars get involved in planning urban material and technological environments and implementing their visions at the city and larger scales;
- growing ethical concerns about urban development in the war-affected territories, rapidly developing and poorly regulated digital urban infrastructures and other urgent ethical challenges.

3/ Urban and global risks and uncertainties and their inclusion into urban future-making:

- changes in urban development trajectories in accordance with climate foresights;
- living through time in an urban context under the influence of new spatial dispositions and intensified social inequalities;
- planning and shaping the post-pandemic, post-war and post-disaster cities that will be flexible, resilient and 'safe' enough to enable new forms of social interactions;
- reconsidering local democracy and the citizen's right to the city as a democratic demand under authoritarian regimes.

Since the scope of the workshop is interdisciplinary and includes different thematic foci, we encourage contributions from researchers with various perspectives: social and political studies, urban planning, geography, anthropology, and other fields. We also welcome the participation of activists and practitioners from the civil society sector.

Abstract submission

Please submit your abstract of up to 300 words to ufar-at-gsz@hu-berlin.de by September 30, 2023. You will be informed about the acceptance by October 5, 2023.

Workshop format and fees

Participation in the workshop is free of charge. However, participants must arrange their own travel and accommodation. Limited amount of travel grants can be offered for scholars at risk by request: please, attach a Grant request letter including the explanation of the amount and type of costs that is needed to be covered and justification of being a scholar at risk (up 100 words).

References:

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- Kemmer, L., & Simone, A. (2021). Standing by the promise: Acts of anticipation in Rio and Jakarta. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 39(4), 573-589.
- Kitchin, R. (2019). The Timescape of Smart Cities. *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 109(3), 775-790.
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- Zhelkina, A. (2022). *Making Urban Futures at Your Kitchen Table: Temporalities of an Urban Renewal Controversy in Moscow*. City & Community.