



## Call for papers

# Infrastructures as urban solutions? Critical perspectives on transformative socio-technical change

20-24 September 2021 | International Roundtable Workshop | Limburg, Netherlands | Utrecht University & LATTS

Recently adopted global sustainability agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA) consider cities and urban regions as key sites and vantage points of societal transformations to more sustainable, low-carbon and resilient futures. Furthermore, government strategies for transformative urban change often have a strong infrastructural dimension, with policies targeting energy supply, water management, transportation systems and the development of smart infrastructure within and across all policy domains. Urban infrastructures thus become a powerful lens to critically explore the dynamic, relational and situated processes and controversies of urban change and to reveal the profound complexity behind infrastructure-based “urban solutions”.

Indeed, increasingly interdependent infrastructure systems mediate and constitute crucial pathways toward urban futures which go far beyond technical innovation, and involve questions of finance and investment, scales of governance, issues of organization and ownership, resource flows, user practices, and socio-spatial solidarities. They are laced with incumbent practices of public administration, production, consumption, and land use, while embedded in these systems are political interests and epistemic cultures. *But how are infrastructures actually being changed in practice and how can we critically analyse and advance our understanding of infrastructural futures and “transformative approaches” that address urban sustainability challenges?* Our aim with this workshop is to broaden our knowledge on systemic transformations and to bring into conversation empirical work in infrastructure, urban and transitions studies to critically reflect on emerging modes of governing and reshaping urban transformations through infrastructures.

Urban infrastructure scholarship has, for a long time, primarily interpreted urban transformations as being framed by infrastructural inertia and path dependencies. Over the last decade, however, the malleability of infrastructures and cities and the urban dynamics of socio-technical change have attracted increasing attention. More attention has been paid to how

actors trigger significant urban changes by challenging dominant technical designs, as well as established socio-technical orders of knowing, using, operating and governing urban infrastructures. While much of the debate has focused on ways to promote socio-technical transitions, understood as systemic “regime” shifts, recent scholarship in Science and Technology Studies (STS) has drawn attention to infrastructural change that results from many slow, gradual changes instead of from extensively planned system shifts. Rather than focusing on path dependencies or radical transitions from one system to another, scholars have thus argued for more focus on continuous and emergent infrastructural change and the incremental layering of “old” and “new” socio-technical components of infrastructures over longer periods, during which core parts of incumbent systems persist.

Since infrastructure choices have far-reaching impact on urban futures, they impose correspondingly high requirements in terms of transformative knowledge on how to introduce change and address vested interests, how to anticipate future risks and opportunities, and how to envision and enact pragmatic pathways to more desirable urban futures. Our explicit aim in this workshop is thus to *critically identify and explore potential ‘urban infrastructural solutions’ in the light of available accounts and analyses of important sustainability challenges*. By foregrounding socio-technical pathways that are claimed to enhance urban sustainability as an entry point, we seek to reflect urgency in the need for change, and to investigate the extent to which wider lessons for research and practice can be drawn from concrete ongoing examples of potentially transformative approaches to urban infrastructures.

**Contributions may focus on, but are not limited to:**

- **Construction of infrastructural and urban futures:** how are (un)desirable futures being constructed, e.g. through which socio-technical imaginaries or prospective approaches such as foresight, modelling, contingency planning, ‘future-proofing’ or ‘future-orientation’ and by which specific constellations of actors? How are the gaps between such desired futures and the anticipated, projected or observed change processes being discussed and addressed? Which rationales and epistemologies of urban infrastructural futures are at play in nexus, design, resilience, circularity or transitions thinking?
- **Progressive approaches and practices** of transforming infrastructures and cities: how can approaches such as experimentation, incrementalism and/or strategic governance approaches, new methods in assessing and co-designing transformations, innovative finance mechanisms, user-driven innovations contribute to urban change? How could such approaches and practices overcome or reshape path dependencies in order to accelerate/consolidate urban and infrastructural change?
- **Governance capacity and dilemmas, styles and practices:** how can governance capacity be increased or improved to accelerate urban change? Which pitfalls and dilemmas of sector governance need to be taken into account and how can “siloes” governance arrangements be addressed in different contexts? How can the coordination challenges of multi-sectoral interventions be addressed?

- **Politics of infrastructure transformations:** how do infrastructure networks and artefacts “come to matter” politically in controversies on urban development? What political rationales are implicit in unfolding urban transformations and how might they be mobilised practically? How do social movements, civil society or innovative entrepreneurs carve out spaces for progressive politics in infrastructural transformations?

We particularly invite empirical papers with conceptual, methodological and critical ambitions. We welcome case studies focusing on urban contexts in the global North or South, as well as studies of urban and infrastructural transformations in historical and contemporary contexts. We also invite **critical reflection on scholarly practice**, including shifting identities and roles of academic researchers as facilitators of sustainability transitions, and the search for ‘impact’ through these engagements and modes of knowledge production.

This international roundtable workshop will bring together scholars from different disciplines to reflect together on urban infrastructure transformations during 3.5 days, from 20 to 24 September 2021, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century country estate [Winselerhof in the Southern Netherlands](#) (near Maastricht and Aachen). The submitted papers will be distributed in advance to be discussed at the conference in a roundtable format with commentators and open floor debates (approx. 40 minutes per paper). Participants will not present their individual papers. Instead, the papers will be summarized and commented by a discussant in each session in order to allow for creative discussion. Participants are expected to have read all the papers prior to the workshop. The roundtable workshop will result in the publication of a selection of papers in an edited volume or a themed issue of an international peer-reviewed journal.

Please send us a **300-word paper proposal by 6 June 2021** for initial feedback and confirmation of attendance by mid-June 2021. The deadline for submission of **full draft papers is 10 September 2021**. Accommodation will be provided for all participants and the conference language will be English. In individual cases, we are able to offer travel stipends to early-career scholars.

If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to contact us:

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