

Urban future-making: Professional agency across time and scale

Research Training Group (RTG 2725)

HafenCity Universität Hamburg (HCU)
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English Summary

In the face of urban growth, climate change and natural resource exploitation, the future of cities is currently shaped by an absolute imperative to act. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has further heightened the prevalent sense of crisis. Against this backdrop, 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”, the proposed research training group investigates the activities of experts and administrators who seek to respond to the expected threats and risks to urban societies with measures related to the urban built environment. The central question is how, or whether, reflexive and responsible professional agency with regard to urban future-making can be possible under present conditions, in which multiple crises have fundamentally heightened uncertainty and put professional routines and established solutions into question. We recognise built environment professionals as a highly diverse group of urban future-makers, operating in public administration, the private sector, the non-profit sector and in civil society initiatives.

We maintain that urban future-making is shaped by two key tensions. On the one hand, we see a temporal tension, as demands for transformative change clash with maintenance requirements of the existing urban fabric. On the other hand, we see a scalar tension, as the urgency to act requires taking into account a global context of multiple interdependencies whereas the urban built environment is place-bound and local. Against the conceptual backdrop of these temporal and scalar tensions, the proposed research training group will investigate strategies and interventions related to the urban built environment which address mobility systems, energy provision and material use as interdependent fields of action where claims for transformative changes are currently most articulated. The project will join scholars and doctoral researchers from the social sciences and from academic disciplines related to the built environment. By employing the expertise of scholars from both reflection- and solution-oriented fields of research, we seek to place reflections around how professionals should or could act into systematic dialogue with empirically grounded insights on how they actually act. By doing so, the training group will foster innovative and productive crossfertilisation across social sciences and built environment disciplines.

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