Urban Speculations: Cities, Technologies, Futures

Research conference, 4-6 February 2025, Lüneburg, Germany

Host: Centre for Digital Cultures, Leuphana University of Lüneburg

Organizers: Ilia Antenucci, Armin Beverungen, Maja-Lee Voigt, Randi Heinrichs, Ranjodh Singh Dhaliwal.

Deadline for abstracts: 1 July 2024

Confirmed keynote and keynote panel speakers: Lauren Bridges, Liza Cirolia, Constance Carr, Berlin vs. Amazon, Aris Komporozos-Athanasiou, Andrea Pollio, Niloufar Vadiati

More information on https://logistical.city/conference/.

Conference theme

Cities brim over with speculation. Urban futures are conceived, dreamt of and calculated through a wide variety of speculative practices and in their social, cultural, political, economic and technological dimensions. Finance banks on rising asset values; data brokers predict future traffic flows; security consultants claim to preempt crime; logistics companies prefigure demand; all the while the city's incessant sociality imagines and produces a multiplicity of urban futures.

Where finance has long speculated on cities (Komporozos-Athanasiou 2022; Leitner and Sheppard 2023), and the city has served as a playground for sociological thought (Amin 2013, Lefebvre 1996[1968]) and more recently data science (Townsend 2015), the city has also become a test bed in the register of smart cities and platform urbanism (Halpern et al. 2013). In disparate fields, such as the automated management of risk in a data-security calculus (Leszczynski 2016) or in autonomous driving where the very sociality of the city is put to the test (Marres 2020), speculation has become a technological practice, where futurity is calculated on the basis of data, and technologies are designed to remake the city.

At the same time, the actors involved in urban speculation have expanded, from urban planners to data scientists and smart city consultants to Big Tech. Consider Amazon's 'logistical city' (Rossiter 2016): its prediction algorithms map consumer desires along neighborhoods; its expansion of last mile delivery infrastructure speculates on present and future demand; and its patents conceive of an automated future populated with delivery robots, drones and flying zeppelin warehouses (Stewart 2018). Through tests and experiments, technology – married to financial speculations such as those of venture capital invested in platform companies – is deployed to speculate on cultural, social and economic life in the city, and thus puts a claim on cities' technoscientific futures.

In these and other ways, speculation – the technological, financial, legal and social capacity to act in the present against a set of future possibilities – becomes mundane. At the same time, the social, cultural and political implications of what it means that the city has in many ways become the basis for speculation remain to be enumerated. In particular, notions such as prediction, resilience or preemption structure much of the debate around techno-urban developments and operationalize the logics of platform urbanism nowadays. As technological speculation stakes its claim to shaping urban futures, how do cities respond and what is at play in letting companies like Amazon prototype (logistical) cities' futures?

Besides an applied focus of urban informatics or smart cities, science and technology studies, media studies and urban studies must grapple with the everydayness of the ways speculation remakes cities. To do so requires both methodological adjustments and conceptual developments concerning the speculative imaginaries of prototyping, testing, demoing (Halpern and Günel 2019), of patenting (Hlongwa 2020), and investing. How has Big Tech normalized and monopolized speculations on urban futures? What do these futures (potentially) look like? How do urbanites interfere in these mostly black-boxed prophecies and business models? And how are anti-speculations / speculative otherwises performed?

Based on and going beyond these trajectories, we invite contributions that empirically and theoretically engage with the expanded field of disconnectivity, its infrastructures, imaginaries and practices, its organization and politics. Submissions from a variety of disciplines and perspectives, and using different methodological approaches, are welcome.

Submissions

For this conference, we invite contributions that explore urban speculations from transdisciplinary and diverse perspectives. We seek to gather an interdisciplinary community of scholars of urban informatics and smart cities, science and technology studies, media studies, spatial and urban studies, critical data studies, organization studies and critical geography, to weave together empirical and conceptual insights on the many ways in which speculation is shaping urban space and politics. Contributions from feminist/queer/decolonial perspectives as well as early career scholars are particularly welcome. We also encourage methodological experiments and innovations for researching urban speculations ranging from media histories, to ethnographies of infrastructures and digital ethnography, to speculative methods and beyond.

Questions that we seek to address during the conference include, but are not limited to:

- How do practices of patenting, prototyping, demoing and testing reconfigure urban futures? What 'other urban intelligences' (Mattern 2021) are sidestepped in the process?

- What is the impact of computational urbanism (by corporations/Big Tech) on urban infrastructures, spatial form, or network topologies (Bridges 2021; Carr/Hesse 2022)?
- What kind of governmental techniques and politics, of ‘urban statecraft’ (Cirolia and Harber 2022), are emerging from urban speculations?
- How can technological speculation in cities be made subject to the hack (Maalsen 2021) and to questions of ownership (Sadowski 2021)?
- What possibilities of city making do counter-speculations or anti-predictions, in everyday practice or in terms of fabulation (Graham et al. 2019; Vadiati 2022; Berlin VS Amazon 2023), offer?

This conferences is organized by the research team of the “Automating the Logistical City: Space, Algorithms, Speculation” research project (https://logistical.city/), based a the Centre for Digital Cultures at Leuphana University of Lüneburg, and emerges out of a network on “Speculative Ordinaries” which also includes further collaborators.

Submission guidelines

We welcome proposals for closed panels and individual presentations. For *individual presentations*, please submit a 350-word abstract including title, keywords, name and affiliation of authors, references. For *panel submissions*, please submit a 500-word panel description (including title, keywords, name and affiliation of convenors, references) plus 500-word abstracts for individual contributions (as above). Limited spots for hybrid participation will be available (if you are interested in participating in a hybrid session, please let us know in your submission!).

The submission opens on 1 May 2024 and closes on 1 July 2024. Please submit your contributions to logisticalcity@leuphana.de. Notifications of acceptance will be provided by 15 September 2024.

Registration

Registration will open in autumn 2024. There will be no conference fee and we will provide free child care during the time of the conference. All further information regarding travel, accommodation, and child care will be provided at https://logistical.city/conference in due course.

References

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