

International workshop
The political materiality of cities
September 29, 2017
University of Amsterdam

Organizers: Rivke Jaffe (University of Amsterdam) and Francesca Pilo' (University of Amsterdam)

Anthropologists have long understood cities as important political arenas and as key sites in the formation of political communities that are not limited to systems of representative democracy. This work has shown how urban politics is located across diverse sites, from official government buildings to the space of the street, and in a range of everyday practices and more spectacular events. In recent years, increasing attention has gone to the role of non-state actors – from social movements and corporations to churches and criminal organizations – in urban governance and negotiations of citizenship.

This workshop seeks to extend this work by exploring the role of non-human entities in urban politics. Drawing on the “material turn” in anthropology and related disciplines, we are particularly interested in analyzing how citizenship is assembled through relations between humans and various forms of urban technology, infrastructure, housing, biophysical flows, nonhuman animals, and consumer products. We want to understand when, how and why urban matter becomes political, and urban politics become material. The workshop addresses the following questions:

What insights can be gained by directing ethnographic attention to the socio-material coproduction of urban politics, and the practices and norms that are central to this process? What role do different material entities play in enabling, limiting and mediating forms of political community? How are different objects – from walls and roads, to water networks and utility bills – central to political subject formation, both within and beyond the nation-state?

This international workshop brings together academics from anthropology and related disciplines working on the relation between the urban and the political, with the aim of showcasing a diverse range of examples in different cities in the North and the South in order to provide a fertile ground for knowledge exchange for the understanding of urban material politics in different urban contexts and discuss current and new directions in the study of the urban material politics.

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Program

Friday, September 29

Location: Room C.5.00

- 09:00 Rivke Jaffe and Francesca Pilo', **Introduction**
- 09:15 Gabriella Körling, Stockholm University
The political life of infrastructure in urban Niger
- 10:00 Laura Kemmer, University of Hamburg and Center for Metropolitan Studies, Berlin
Free riding Rio: Protest, politics and public transport
- 10:45 Coffee
- 11:00 Dorien Zandbergen, University of Amsterdam
Cities of light and air: The political objects of the smart city in Amsterdam
- 11:45 Francesca Pilo', University of Amsterdam
Electric politics: Materializing the customer-citizen nexus in Rio de Janeiro
- 12:30 Lunch
- 13:30 Nikhil Anand, University of Pennsylvania
Consuming Citizenship: prepaid meters and the Politics of Technology in Mumbai
- 14:15 Claudia Gastrow, University of Johannesburg
High-rise stories: Architectural politics in Luanda
- 15:00 Oskar Verkaaik, University of Amsterdam
The anticipated mosque: The political affect of a building type in Almere
- 15:45 Coffee
- 16:00 Closing discussion
- 19:00 Dinner

Appendix A. Participants

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Appendix B. Abstracts

The political life of infrastructure in urban Niger

Gabriella Körling, Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University

In this paper I set out to explore the relation between the material and the political through a focus on the ways in which infrastructure mediates everyday life and politics in urban Niger. The paper draws on work that conceptualizes infrastructure as both an outcome and a medium of social, political and economic processes, as well as a signifier of cultural meanings. In neighborhoods on the urban periphery of Niamey, the capital of Niger, infrastructure - or rather its absence - is a central concern for urban residents. Rapid spatial expansion and a lack of public investments have meant that the provision of infrastructures (water and electricity provision, roads and public services) have tended to lag behind the emergence of new settlements. The absence of infrastructure has engendered alternative solutions including both individual solutions (e.g. solar panels) and collective mobilizations for public services, including the assembling of financial and material resources and negotiations with local and state authorities. In this paper I focus on collective attempts to access electricity, education and healthcare infrastructure, as well as inauguration ceremonies, political appropriation and everyday experiences of infrastructure. The materiality of infrastructure and its creation, maintenance and improvement – for instance the building of temporary classrooms in straw, the transformation of such classrooms into classrooms in concrete – is especially significant in 'informal' neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, infrastructures represent a concrete means of becoming visible and of gaining recognition as legitimate urban residents in a context of uncertain land rights. This analysis of urban Niger's infrastructure elucidates its role in fomenting political processes and mediating political subjectivities.

Free riding Rio: Protest, politics and public transport

Laura Kemmer, HafenCity University Hamburg and Center for Metropolitan Studies, Berlin.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork on the struggle for re-installation of the oldest electric tramway of Latin America, this article explores the relation between residents and infrastructural materiality. Concentrating on the temporary suspension of a centenary tramline in Rio de Janeiro between 2011 and 2015, I argue that new forms of political collectivity emerge beyond the representative register

of “favela” versus bourgeoisie. Against a background of mass protests against fare rises in major Brazilian cities in 2013, and the violent infrastructural transformations of pre-Olympic Rio, the tramway is politicized in unexpected ways. Throughout its 120 years of existence, it has become a “free-riding” device, allowing residents to jump on and off the footboard without having to pay for the journey. I draw on filmed accounts of embodied memories of footboard-riding to show how urban matter acquires affective force, both as object of desire and as mobilizing protest for affordable public transport. A second politicization of the tramway is documented in samba songs, graffiti poems, and t-shirt prints which populate the streets along the old railway lines. Here, the footboard is referred to as “prolongation of the sidewalks”, as bringing together urban dwellers across racial or class-based differences. Instead presenting infrastructural reforms as panacea to socio-spatial segregation, I show how ordinary affective attachments to specific material elements lead to the emergence of unexpected alliances and the articulation of alternative claims for free and truly public urban transport.

Cities of light and air: The political objects of the smart city in Amsterdam

Dorien Zandbergen, Department of Sociology, University of Amsterdam

The imaginary of the “smart city” comes with the fantasy of urban dematerialization, of urban life without material friction, and of environments with distributed, responsive, real-time intelligence. The smart city is supposed to configure human bodies, cars, bikes, energy, mental moods, financial transactions and other forms of urban interaction and movement as “flows” that can be governed through distributed forms of behavioral “tweaking.” Despite this cybernetic imaginary of immaterial data and flows, material objects play a crucial role in the ways in which the smart city is established as a dominant paradigm for future urban life. “Smart lampposts,” 3D printers, Do-It-Yourself air quality sensing kits, smart watches and urban screens and so on are critical forms of matter that allow public and private actors to assert their capability to shape these emergent digital urban environments. Such urban things are increasingly key in legitimizing the authority of urban governance actors. In this paper, I critically assess the depoliticizing effects of these objects as they materialize the dematerializing promises of the smart city. Based on multi-sited ethnographic research on smart city objects in Amsterdam, I focus on the mechanisms through which specific objects are performed as not quite fixed in their materiality, and as permanently open to yet unknown experimental futures. In particular, I zoom in on the political ramifications of this open-ended multiplicity of matter, which allows stakeholders with widely disparate values to understand their interests – ranging from governmental control to corporate profit to environmental sustainability – as compatible. Smart lampposts (lampposts fitted with multiple informational sensing, recording and analytics devices), for instance, enable both police surveillance and self-expression. I explore how supposedly flexible and open-ended objects impact our ability to recognize and critique the politics of the smart city, even as these objects reproduce unequal urban landscapes.

Electric politics: materializing the consumer-citizen nexus in Rio de Janeiro

Francesca Pilo, Centre for Urban Studies, University of Amsterdam

In Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, citizenship is a socio-political challenge that is continuously being redefined at the urban level. Starting with a concept of citizenship that goes beyond the legal-formal definitions, this article explores the political implications of producing ‘regular electricity customers’. Since 2008, the private company Light has begun to regularize electricity access in ‘pacified’ favelas, dismantling illegal connections and re-establishing a contractual commercial relationship with ‘irregular’ users. Together with state actors, Light has targeted these neighborhoods, which are under permanent occupation by UPP (Pacifying Police Unit) forces, with a discourse suggesting that the integration of favelas into the urban fabric relies on their residents becoming ‘good citizens’. This discourse of citizenship blurs the boundaries between ‘commercial’ and ‘political’ behavior, norms and values. This article explores this emergent consumer-citizen narrative, focusing on the forms of

political recognition that are enabled by a technical-administrative production of customers. I show how politics become material by analyzing residents' everyday uses of their electricity bill, including in job applications and opening bank accounts. I discuss how this administrative document becomes the material support for discussing conflicting visions of consumer-citizen solidarity, for organizing protests, and negotiating rights. Such uses and discourses are central to the renegotiation of morality, respectability and difference. I argue that although this normative discourse of consumer-citizens is framed by political opportunism, these material and market-oriented processes concretely reshape favela residents' social recognition and the way they conceive of their political position. Accordingly, I suggest that taking seriously the materiality of non-human entities allows an understanding of how political and commercial logics work together in reshaping both urban inequalities and political positions.

Consuming citizenship: Prepaid meters and the politics of technology in Mumbai

Nikhil Anand, Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

In November 2007, the Assistant Municipal Commissioner of Mumbai announced *Sujal Mumbai*, a new program to upgrade the city's water infrastructure. Among several initiatives was a proposal to connect new settlements to water lines regulated by prepaid meters. Rights activists, many of whom had strong relations with housing rights organizations in South Africa (where prepaid meters were previously introduced), quickly mounted a strong critique of prepaid meters as dangerous and subversive technologies of political subjectification, through which rights bearing citizens would be refigured by the state as water consumers. Yet not always did this critique reach its intended audience. In this paper I focus on the surprising and unexpected politics of the prepaid water meter, following its introduction in Mumbai. While activists quickly made a sophisticated critique of the technology, they did not account for the ways in which prepaid meters were unexpectedly popular among settlers that, under current laws, were ineligible to access city water services. Recognizing that unrecognized settlers were already consumers paying high prices for water, state officials, on the other hand, proposed the prepaid meter as a technology that would increase settlers' access to subsidized state services (without recognizing them as citizens). As proponents and opponents of prepaid meters made their arguments drawing on traveling imaginaries of rights and commodities, in this paper I show how the political debate obfuscated the ways in which the materialities of prepaid metering technology troubled the formation of both citizens and consumers in the city.

High-rise stories: Architectural politics in Luanda

Claudia Gastrow, Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg

How does the materiality of cities produce critique of the political powers that shape those same cities? During Luanda's building boom (2004-2014) the city's colonial-era center was rapidly remade through the construction of a series of new high-rises. Glass-plated, centrally air-conditioned, and dwarfing the existing colonial-era modernist apartment blocks, these high-rises indexed the desire for Luanda to embody the stereotypical "world-class citiness" to which many African national governments aspire. Beginning with a discussion of the infrastructural shortcomings of the city's new high-rises and moving to residents' concerns about the potential destructiveness that their materiality and form suggest, this paper examines the high-rise as an architectural form that engenders a conversation about political legitimacy and belonging. New high-rises raised concerns among residents about which architectures were truly "Angolan", that their construction threatened the existing urban materiality, and produced a struggle over who had the capacity to materially territorialize the city. Drawing on ethnography and media analysis, and engaging with aesthetic theories and literature on new materialism, the paper investigates how a focus on materiality sheds light on the political realm as something produced through form and objects rather than seeing these

merely as reflections of power. In particular, I focus on people's understandings of the relationship between new constructions and old ones, everyday interactions with the material effects and breakdown of new high-rises, and the territorialization of the city through high-rises as older buildings were demolished for their construction. I show how these processes forced a discussion about what a desirable city was and who could claim a stake to that city. As such, this study allows for a deeper examination of the desires and politics underpinning material aspirations for and rejections of the "world-class city" in order to understand how architecture mediates political conversations between citizens and the state.

The anticipated mosque: The political affect of a building type in Almere

Oskar Verkaaik, Department of Anthropology, University of Amsterdam

This article focuses on a new mosque building in the Dutch city of Almere and its aesthetic, affective impact on a number of involved parties, drawing comparisons to similar cases in other European cities. The article makes two related arguments. First, since the controversy about the building emerged and reached its climax before the mosque was even built, I ask to what extent a plan can be said to have material form. This is a pertinent question because the anticipated mosque building already affected a number of interested groups before it was actually constructed. With the help of Bachelard's work on space and memory, in combination with Venturi's work on building types, I argue that the anticipated mosque evoked memories of a building type that has material form and affects the various groups involved in different ways. That is to say that the anticipated building is already in our memory and our body before it is in the world. Second, I explore how the anticipated mosque impacts upon a number of involved groups: the mosque community itself, local bureaucrats and politicians, and protesting neighborhood residents. I will discuss how the aesthetic memory of a building type influences the design process, political alliances at the local level, and neighborhood residents' protests. I will argue that the anticipated mosque raises a number of aesthetic-political controversies that contextually politicize and depoliticize new mosque buildings, and in doing so pose new questions about the aestheticization of the secular and the architectural imagination of a European Islam.

Notes on contributors

Nikhil Anand is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. His research focuses on the political ecology of cities, read through the different lives of water. His first book, *Hydraulic City* focuses on the everyday ways in which cities and citizens are made through the everyday management of water infrastructure in Mumbai. Articles based on this research have also been published in *Antipode*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Ethnography* and *Public Culture*. With Hannah Appel and Akhil Gupta, Dr. Anand is co-editor of a forthcoming volume, *The Promise of Infrastructure* (forthcoming with Duke University Press), that focuses on the ways in which infrastructure provides a generative ground to theorize time and politics. His new work attends to the ways in which urban rivers and seas are key sites for the making and management of difference in India and the United States.

Claudia Gastrow is lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Johannesburg. She is a socio-cultural anthropologist with research interests in urban studies, political anthropology, material culture, Lusophone Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa. Her work focuses specifically on questions of political belonging and urbanism in Luanda, Angola. She is currently working on a book investigating the role of the built environment and urban aesthetics in mediating political concepts and practices in post-conflict Luanda, Angola. She has two new planned research projects. The first investigates life during Angola's oil bust, and the second explores urban informal governance in Luanda.

Rivke Jaffe is Professor of Cities, Politics and Culture at the Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development Studies and the Centre for Urban Studies within the

University of Amsterdam. Her anthropological research focuses primarily on intersections of the urban and the political, and specifically on the spatialization of power, difference and inequality within cities. Rivke is PI of a five-year research program on public-private security assemblages in Kingston, Jerusalem, Miami, Nairobi and Recife. This research, funded by an European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grant and a Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) VIDI grant, investigates to what extent security assemblages function as hybrid governance structures, and the implications this has for how different groups enact and experience citizenship.

Laura Kemmer is PhD fellow in Urban Anthropology at the Graduate School "Loose Connections. Collectivity in Digital and Urban Space" (University Hamburg) and associate fellow at the [Center for Metropolitan Studies](#) (Technical University Berlin). Her current research draws from the case of the oldest tramway of Latin America, in Rio de Janeiro, to explore how transport infrastructures transform urban collectivity. Laura is combining Deleuzian Assemblage Theory with Feminist studies of Affect to study processes of "[Bonding](#)" - a notion that helps her understand what holds "the city" together, dis/connecting its residents, materialities, and imaginaries. Laura holds a M.A. degree in International Relations from the Free University Berlin and has previously worked with the UN-Habitat organization in Rio, and the research network [desiguAldades.net](#) "Interdependent Inequalities in Latin America" in Berlin.

Gabriella Körling is a researcher at the Department of Social Anthropology, Stockholm University. She holds a PhD in cultural anthropology from Uppsala University. Her research interests include the state, urban anthropology, politics and decentralization, and more recently infrastructure and mobility. Her PhD research addressed the everyday construction of the state in urban Niger through the study of public health and education services focusing on people's daily experiences of and expectations on such services. Her current project sets out to explore the construction of Niger's first railway line as an entry point for exploring political and historical processes in relation to infrastructure and mobility in a town situated alongside the future railway tracks.

Francesca Pilo' is a post-doctoral researcher in the Department of Human Geography, Planning and International Development at the University of Amsterdam. She holds a PhD in Urban Planning (2015) from the University Paris-Est and the Fluminense Federal University, Brazil (joint-supervision). Her research interests involve urban infrastructure, power and space from science and technology studies (STS) perspectives. She did extensive research on the material and discursive processes that support the regularization of electricity access in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, and how they reshape forms of belonging, practices and politics. She's currently part of the SECURCIT research project where she brings insights on the materiality of urban politics and the entanglement between electricity infrastructure, security and space.

Oskar Verkaaik is associate professor of anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. He is especially interested in the Anthropology of religion and politics. He has previously worked in Pakistan where he conducted ethnographic fieldwork on religious-ethnic violence. The monograph that came out of this was published by Princeton University Press. More recently he has done research on citizenship ceremonies in the Netherlands in the context of new culturalised regimes of citizenship. Currently he is engaged in an ethnographic study of contemporary religious architecture, particularly mosques and synagogues, in various parts of Europe.

Dorien Zandbergen is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands. She studies digital culture as manifesting at the cross-overs of popular culture, corporate culture and transnational politics. Her recent publications include the documentary *In search of the Smart Citizen* (with Sara Blom, Creative Commons 2015), "From data fetishism to quantifying selves" (with Tamar Sharon, *New Media & Society*, 2016) and "We Are Sensemakers." *The (Anti-)politics of Smart City Co-creation* (*Public Culture*, 2017). She also founded Gr1p, a non-profit dedicated to broader public understanding of the material politics of the digital society.

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