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DIFFUSE CITIES

International Seminar, 10-12 April 2017

Rationale

Urban spatial expansion has become over the last decades a primary concern in urban studies. A now well established, albeit plural, body of work has emphasized the importance of sprawl (Gottman), suburbia (Fishman), desakota (McGee), città diffusa (Indovina), exurbia (Nelson), ville émergente (Dubois-Taine and Chalas), post-suburbs (Phelps and Wu), the horizontal metropolis (Vigano') or urban explosion and planetary urbanization (Brenner), to name just a few. Indeed the bulk of urbanization worldwide (still) occurs in previously unbuilt space and in predominantly unplanned and scattered ways, generally leading to relatively low-density land use (when compared to the cores of the larger urban agglomerations) and raising major issues of types of infrastructure provision. And on a more theoretical level, studying urbanization and the urban

condition from the perspective of suburban and periurban areas has proved fruitful in (re)conceptualizations of the urban, as the above (non exhaustive) list of concepts suggests.

Building on this literature, this international seminar brings together, and confronts, studies of diffuse urbanization in Europe and Asia. Its ambition is to produce theoretically informed and theory-informing comparative empirical knowledge on how these peripheral urban areas and regions develop and transform, how they are practiced and lived, and on the use of resources (land, energy, water...) involved in these processes. Studies of the production and transformation of, and ways of life in, urban environments abound, yet these two issues are usually analyzed separately. Above all, a vast majority of these studies disregards issues of urban form and materiality broadly conceived. Conversely architects, urbanists and geographers have described or advocated variegated land use patterns, built area layouts and building designs, but in these studies, analyses on how built environments are produced and lived generally remain either superficial, oversimplified or normative.

Building on comparative studies in European and Asian contexts, this international seminar seeks to contribute to bridging the divide between these two largely independent bodies of work. The phrase “diffuse urbanization” is used to emphasize the importance, for the authors, of architectural and urban forms and of the materiality and spatiality of urbanized areas – embedded within larger natural-artificial environments, in which the region and the territory become the operative scales of “projective ecologies”. But urban environments are not studied in isolation from the political, social, cultural, and economic processes through which urban spaces are produced, perceived and used. Rather we argue that a thorough understanding of these processes is essential to go beyond normative and often ineffective assumptions about how urban space should be used, or hypothetical and often erroneous assumptions as to how it is actually used.

In emphasizing the notion of diffuse urbanization, however, we do not wish to suggest that all contemporary urbanization is necessarily diffuse. Examples to the contrary abound. And we adhere to a relational understanding of urbanization dynamics in which, using Brenner’s terminology, “implosion” (transformations in core urban areas) and “explosion” (developments in peripheral areas) are two closely interrelated patterns of urban development, connected in particular by land use and land rent issues. Besides, we acknowledge that “diffuse urbanization” can, and indeed does, mean vastly different things in different social contexts and configurations of human settlements.

But we do argue that taking seriously the spatialities and materialities of contemporary urban areas and emphasizing the importance of urban “peripheries” and extensive regional urbanization makes a substantial difference in how the urban condition is apprehended and accounted for; in what can or should be considered worthy of attention, and in the research strategies that should be preferred.

This international seminar questions established meanings of notions of urbanity, of centrality and peripherality; previously entrenched distinctions between urban and rural areas, as well as between planned and unplanned urbanization; normative assumptions between allegedly virtuous (compact) and deleterious (dispersed) urban configurations; etc. In short: while the international seminar is concerned with periurban or exurban areas and hybrid urban-and-rural forms of all sorts, it offers new insights, raises novel issues and hopefully contributes to the aggiornamento of urban theory.

Building on the ongoing post-colonial critique of, and the so-called “southern turn” in urban studies, the international seminar develops a comparative approach between Europe and Asia. This approach is aimed to facilitate the distancing from dominant notions and theories (e.g., sprawl, planetary urbanization...) mainly emanating from observations in Western (and more specifically North American) contexts. Drawing on case studies from the two continents, it contributes to move beyond the entrenched North-South divide in urban studies. It suggests that the use of theoretical resources that have been developed with reference to specific geographical contexts (e.g. *desakota* for Southeast and East Asia) might help unearthing limitations of established theorizations and methodologies in other contexts.

The seminar on DIFFUSE CITIES is organized by:

Labex « Urban Futures » & Research Departments UMR AUSSER, LATTTS, Lab’Urba

with the Research Department LESTARI, Universitas Kebangsaan Malaysia and
Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS)

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with Antoine Brès.

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