Politicizing the fabric of the city: rethinking material politics in urban studies

A double session for the Temple University Critical Geography Conference

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As our planetary condition is increasingly an urban condition, calls to rethink the ontology of the city are common (Brenner 2013, Merrifield 2014, Scott & Storper 2014). Indeed, references to our urban age have become "an all pervasive metanarrative" analogous to 'modernization' in the 1960s or 'globalization' in the 1990s (Brenner & Schmid 2014, p 4). Many of these attempts at reframing the definition of the planetary urban condition seek to re-engage with urban materiality, looking towards urban assemblages (McCann & Ward 2011), metabolisms (Heynen et al 2006), or networked ecologies/infrastructures (Graham & Marvin 2001). This work has produced innovative frameworks for re-thinking the territoriality of urban materials: spatial extension/concentration, translocal networking, (un)boundedness, and (non)contiguity. This session asks contributors to not only re-territorialize urban materialities, but also to politicize the 'fabric' of urban space: the multiple layers of land use, infrastructure, and technology which are co-present in the built environment (cf. Gandy 2014, McFarlane & Rutherford 2008). In doing so we seek to reframe interpretations of urban inequality. We explore the geographical-historical dimensions of land, infrastructure, and technology with recognition that the 'mega' projects and lasting material legacies which characterize the urban built environment are particularly adept at reproducing inequality at broad scales and over long temporal horizons. We seek to build conversations across critical geography paradigms, considering pathways by which political economic logics and drivers are assembled, performed, and reproduced through urban fabrics. We invite papers which explore strategies in pursuit of more progressive cities by engaging the urban fabric. This includes papers which consider topics like, but by no means limited to:

- The impact of translocal assemblages and mobilities on and through urban materialities
- The political economic logics and drivers which assemble/reproduce urban fabrics
- Politics of the more-than-human dimensions of the urban fabric
- Points of engagement between historical materialism of the city and the increasingly complex forms of urban territoriality
- Diverse, ordinary, and comparative geographies of urban fabrics

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Session 1:

Ruth Glass & a Messy Epistemology of the City

Sam Barton, Department of Geography, University College London

Ruth Glass is remembered for the term "Gentrification". This belies the great complexity with which she was able to instil her account of the city, while the term has been reduced to economic structure, constantly debated by its various guardians (Smith 2012 , Slater 2010 , Hamnett 2009). Critical urban geography has forgotten the complex materiality evident in the text in which the term was coined. Through a close & critical reading of Glass' introduction to *London Aspects of Change,* I will attempt to describe the city as a subject that requires an epistemology which can accommodate and preserve complexity, chaos, and messiness.

I will build this position through an engagement with John Law's *After Method* (2004), intersectionality theory (Krenshaw 1989, McCall 2005, Valentine 2007, Nash 2008) and notions of chaos & complexity (Hayles 1991). If the city may be considered as messy, and to be in the city - to encounter mess, how can social science preserve this? I will suggest in particular that attending to materiality can aid the researcher in navigating complex urban territory. I will contrast a tendency in social science, particularly gentrification scholarship, to 'tidy up' with the position I have tried to build and set out methodological challenges accordingly.

Taking my research in the Brixton neighbourhood of London as a case study, alongside work by fellow 'messy' researchers (Skeggs 1997, Gilroy 2004, Back 1996). I will argue that given a close interaction with the materiality & everyday the city must emerge with a complex ontology which resists taxonomy.

The Politics of Architecture

Renee Tapp, Graduate School of Geography, Clark University

Planetary urbanism's ubiquitous cloaking of the globe in the urban process allegedly fosters new possibilities for realizing urban politics (Brenner 2013, Merrifield 2014, Scott and Storper 2014). However, in the return to Lefebvre, Lefebvre's framing of urban politics—the right to the city— is conspicuously under-theorized and unimaginative. In the absence of a theory of politics, the planetary urbanism discourse forecloses politics proper, thus reinforcing the post-political city paradigm by conflating politics with public space.

This presentation challenges the use of 'politics' in the planetary urbanism discourse by countering it with an application of Ranciere's politics to the urban (Davidson and Iveson 2014, Iveson 2014). Unlike planetary urbanism, Ranciere's politics is not everyday or everywhere, instead it is found in specific sites of disruption aimed at destabilizing the dominant social order. Through this framework, I argue that architecture plays an important role in creating an insurgent polis (Swyngedouw 2011). Focusing on four examples of buildings in North America and Europe whose design is committed to altering social behavior and fostering political engagement, I demonstrate the ways architecture can give rise to new political subjects and provide avenues for politics. While the urban processes have extended beyond the bounded city, politics still occurs in specific places and can be facilitated by architecture.

Keywords: post-politics, architecture, Social Condenser, Ranciere

Class Monopoly Rent, Historical Preservation, and Chicago's Bronzeville

Matthew B. Anderson, Eastern Washington University

The objective of the paper is to rejuvenate interest in Marxian rent theory in urban political economy by identifying and deepening discussion of an important aspect of the contemporary neoliberal city: *class monopoly rent*. First introduced by Harvey in 1974, the concept of class monopoly rent has curiously evaded in-depth scholarly inquiry and has never been substantively elaborated or examined. But the conditions through which class monopoly rents are extracted from property have since evolved. Yet we know little about the relation between this standard institutional practice and contemporary urban landscapes, modes of governance, and processes of urban restructuring. The paper first reviews and identifies the concept of class monopoly rent as an important aspect of the urban process and discusses its limited scholarly engagement over the past four decades. It then discusses the implications of class monopoly rent in the context of current urban redevelopment policies and practices in Chicago, Illinois, particularly the historical preservation of the city's south side neighborhood of Bronzeville. It is suggested that a deeper examination of this concept could build a more robust and intricate understanding of the contemporary neoliberal city, particularly in the context of the post-2007 economic recession, as well as establishing further links between (Marxist) political economy and Foucauldian studies on governmentality.

Between capital fix and policy assemblage: a political economy of event-led development

John Lauermann, Graduate School of Geography, Clark University

As fierce competition to host sporting 'mega-events' like the Olympics highlights, many cities use events for planning development. Events play a key role in facilitating entrepreneurial urban governance: they are viewed as speculative interventions which catalyze long-term urban development. Yet events remain under-theorized, relegated to an instrumental role in two dominant interpretations of event-led urban development: First, events are read as a process of commodifying the urban – of producing capital fixes – by constructing and selling spectacles. But the event-as-fix is typically cast as a function of entrepreneurial regimes of accumulation, simply one more neoliberalization practice in contemporary urban governance. Second, events are read as inducing states of exception in urban politics: calling forth assemblages which allow a temporary state of developmentalism in the city. But event-as-assemblage is typically cast an isolated project, a temporary occurrence which facilitates a pre-defined governance objective but does not reflect back into it. I argue instead that events are better conceptualized as experiments. They are both fix and assemblage, both process and project: they experimentally draw on temporary and de-territorialized policy assemblages in order to produce durable capital fixes in urban land markets. Drawing on a comparative study of land politics surrounding sports mega-events, I show how 'temporary' interventions in the urban fabric are materialized into durable capital fixes in real estate markets. This is not a random process; rather, events-as-experiments are strategically deployed in order to produce these fixes. I contribute a framework for tracing temporal inequalities the politics of the urban fabric, showing how strategic deployment of 'temporary' experiments both abbreviates the contemporary democratic process and materializes vested interests through land investments.

Session 2:

Animals made me do it: A question of more-than-human urban governance

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In recent years, geographers and others working on the materiality of socionatures have cultivated theories of the production of space as a more-than-human project. From water to wildlife, more-than-human actants have been identified by scholars as significant factors in the formation of cities in particular. Such productive power is relatively easy to attribute to the non-human. It is a power to affect and be affected that does not require planning or intentionality; rather it functions through the actions and reactions of the properties of material existence. However, the non-human in this literature is not allowed to lay claim to other forms of power at play in urban areas. For example, governance—the representation of interests, the creation and implementation of policies, the avenues for redress—is understood as solely the purview of human societies. Municipal governance of the non-human would seem to be a top-down affair, and yet city governments find themselves compelled to be aware of and sensitive to the more-than-human elements in the city. This responsive awareness of the non-human in urban politics raises the question of whether urban governance is really as purely human as we assume. Animals, in particular, act on space and shape it according to their own criteria in an iterative process that alters political agendas. Grounded in an empirical study of urban ecosystem governance in the Washington DC Metro Area, this paper seeks to interrogate the significance of more-than-human spatiality in order to push the boundaries of our understandings of alterity and difference, power, and justice.

Vital Infrastructures of Trash in Dakar, Senegal

Rosalind Fredericks, New York University

This paper examines the infrastructure of municipal garbage collection in Dakar, Senegal as a critical site of contestation around urban citizenship through probing the material relations between urban infrastructure and labor. The last thirty years in Dakar have seen numerous institutional reorganizations in the city's trash collection system which have effectively devolved the central burdens of garbage infrastructure onto labor. This has meant that municipal trash collectors and the countless other citizens informally managing garbage in the home, community, and garbage dump are called upon to serve as the backbone of the city's waste collection and disposal architecture. The paper explores the practices of government performed through differentially ordering spaces and disciplining residents via the burdens of dirt, microbes, and abjection associated with laboring in filth. At the same time, it shows how workers' strikes, neighborhood dumping, and appeals to the religious value of cleaning subvert ordering paradigms through disrupting the proper flow of waste disposal and inverting its negative associations. It highlights the messy possibilities provided by this intimate, low-tech labor infrastructure for staking claims to the rights and rewards of the city. The analysis pays particular attention to the specificity of waste's material and discursive dimensions as an illuminating window into the material politics of urban citizenship and urges for a reconsideration of how forms of urban infrastructure are composed of laboring bodies. Attention to the vibrant

materiality of labor in infrastructural systems demands an ethical engagement with such assemblages and the full range of their political possibilities.

Infrastructural urbanism and new cartographies of risk in West Africa.

J. Chris Mizes, Department of City+Regional Planning, University of California, Berkeley

Debt-financed infrastructure development is a long-held development strategy in the global south. Increasingly, however, municipal governments are building the capacity to participate in international financial markets themselves. Dakar, Senegal is the site of the first municipal credit rating program in West Africa, and its favorable rating foreshadows an opening up of municipal finance to international capital markets. Municipal bonds, an increasingly popular urban development policy, are anticipated to allow long-range, debt-financed planning for large-scale infrastructure. This fiscal instrument has the potential to change the temporality and spatiality of infrastructure development in West African cities. It provides insight into a series of social and spatial re-organizations on the Dakar peninsula that have implications for cities across the continent. First, the policy engages with produce forms of post-independence administration that are producing a new territory—the "region"—alongside the inherited forms of decentralization. Second, it requires the standardization of infrastructure development and an imaginary of the modern African city that is at odds with the material realities of comparatively small, always changing, fast-paced social alliances of the irregular city. Third, regionally specific "cartographies of risk" for investments in municipal government will create a new map of financial openness for West Africa that marks the potential waning of now-normalized forms of Western institutional investment and developmental care on the continent. Dakar, Senegal and Abidjan, Côte D'Ivoire are the seminal experiments in this project and are its bellwethers for programmatic success. Should the policy continue to travel, it will have significant impacts for the type, form, and rationality of urban infrastructure development in postcolonial cities.

Keywords: policy mobility, territory, municipal finance, infrastructure, urban planning, development, West Africa

Smart city rhetoric and digital materialities in Philadelphia

Alan Wiig, Temple University

Smart city initiatives have been adopted by cities worldwide, proposing technological solutions to urban problems big and small. These policies are indicative of the digitization of the planetary urban condition, where social and economic exchange rely on globalized telecommunications networks, and governance strategies follow suit. Propelled through events such as IBM's Smarter Cities Challenge, the smart city is a data-driven ideology of widespread benefit to a city and its residents that masks the utility of these policies to further entrepreneurial economic development strategies. The rhetoric of intelligent, transformative digital change works much more to "sell" a city in the global economy than to actually improve on urban inequalities.

Through a case study of IBM's consultation in Philadelphia, I argue that the promotional capacity of the smart city worked to drive economic growth in specific, already-well-off areas of globally-oriented enterprise. Philadelphia proposed an online application (app) for training up to 600,000 low-literacy residents for jobs in the information and knowledge economy, while at the

same time highlighting as "smart" everything from the city's relative location in the megalopolitan Northeast United States to the ready potential for establishing and growing new industries in the region. By tracing the smart city initiative into the fabric of the city itself, this presentation highlights the inconsistencies of a policy aimed at reducing inequalities, but doing so through zones networked to the globalized economy, oriented away from the city at large, and spatially removed from the de-industrialized areas of the city most in need of generative change. A critical lens must be applied to the role of digital technologies in facilitating the planetary urban condition and in enabling the ongoing, splintering characteristics of the urban landscape itself.