

Thematic sessions

Transnational exchange in the construction worlds of 19th and 20th century Asia: the diffusion of materials and processes in the Global South

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The construction history of modern Asia is inextricable from its colonial history. For the most part, however, scholarship in this field has focused on the production of architecturally conspicuous buildings and major infrastructure, and how such developments were supported by transfers of materials and expertise from the 'metropolis' to the colonial 'province', or from a Western 'centre' to an Asian 'periphery' in postcolonial contexts. Shifting the focus to the more mundane aspects of everyday building production, another thread of scholarship has explored the routine production of anonymous actors working within the organizational frameworks of Public Works Departments and similar institutional forms of agency. Whilst shedding light on the "historically specific rationality" of these technocratic modes of production, the still very limited work in this area has also examined the "pervasive normative tendency" of such construction processes, and how these may persist beyond the original colonial situation. Still, the conventional limitations of scope that typically constrain such studies within the aegis of national boundaries has also tended to constrain and to conflate such interpretations of 'departmentalism' with a Foucauldian conception of 'governmentality', critical theorisations of knowledge/power relationships that nevertheless privilege the Western 'centre' in the guise of critiquing its instrumental interventions in the colonial periphery.

This session invites authors to re-consider the history of construction in 19th and 20th century Asia from a multi-lateral perspective focussing on transnational exchanges of materials and processes across the political and geographic borders of modern Asia, and the former colonies that defined these. This process of exchange within the Global South (including Africa and South America, where the exchanges with the Asian building world were substantive) may include direct transfer of building processes and techniques, or unintended transfers through exchange of labour and material agents. The session aims to supersede the understanding of construction in 19th and 20th century Asia as a "techno-scientific culture" shared exclusively with the former colonisers, and offer a picture of a broader and less predictable story of diffusion, where localised norms and rationalities may have transcended the artificially developed boundaries of power and knowledge to inform practice across the region. Participants are invited to explore narratives of transfer and diffusion that highlight direct or indirect exchange of materials, labour, construction techniques, building regulations, or management processes, offering a heterogeneous genealogy of South-South cooperation within the Asian building industry.