

Thematic sessions

Modern 'comfort' in colonial/postcolonial settings beyond the 'centre/periphery' - framework

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This session proposes to investigate the largely untapped potential of the dynamic disciplinary field of construction history to broaden and deepen our understanding of the built production in colonial and postcolonial settings. Going beyond inquiries of tropical architecture as a design practice, we are particularly interested in papers that investigate aspects of building, technology and infrastructure in the provision of modern "comfort." We focus here on "comfort" in physical rather than moral terms, and, in line with the work of John E. Crowley (2001), as a notion invented during the eighteenth century that can be characterized as the "self-conscious satisfaction with the relationship between one's body and its immediate physical environment."

We invite papers to draw on and expand upon Crowley's material cultural basis of comfort in at least three ways. First and foremost, by expanding beyond the focus on Euro-American contexts to examine material comfort in the global south. This also means a shift from temperate to tropical social, environmental and technological conditions, which suggest a different set of building challenges to both the provision and attainment of comfort. Second, we do not restrict ourselves to the building and sub-building scales but are also interested in the urban and infrastructural scales of comfort provision. Finally, in extending the discussion of comfort to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we need to attend to the provision of comfort through what Reyner Banham (1984) calls "power-operated solutions" that include air-conditioning, artificial lighting and other technologies that are typically classified under building services. These are inextricably linked to the thermal, visual, olfactory and other bodily comfort of the inhabitants of modern buildings. Papers should preferably highlight very localized cases, yet embed the analysis in discussions of (transnational) circulation of expertise and exchange of ideas, models and practices, that go beyond the "center/periphery" dichotomy.