URBAN KNOWLEDGE NETWORK ASIA

UKNA Call for Papers
Thematic Group 1: "Ideas of the City"

Urban phenomena in Asia raise concerns among academics, politicians, and professionals, as they cannot be understood through the well-rooted categories of urban analysis, that are becoming more and more obsolete to take full account of contemporary urban realities. Recent transformations are so radical that the very idea of the "city", as a recognizable spatial entity, seems to be challenged. In this context, we believe that it is necessary to produce a relevant knowledge on the ideas, the concepts, and the representations, which lie behind contemporary urban-making. In the long term, our objective is to produce adequate theoretical tools that address the complexity of the ideas of the city in Asia, with an historical perspective, and that give keys to understanding it.

Cities in Asia are entering the modern world through radical urban transformations. In a time when cities encroach into rural areas and give way to huge agglomerations connected by infrastructures, the research group "The Ideas of the City" will question how various agents imagine the urban futures, and in which directions the representations associated to the cities, as spatial, political, and social entities, are evolving. Are the notions, which have been long and extensively used to define what the city "is", and to distinguish it from what "it is not", (for example the couple "urbanity" and "rurality") still relevant? What are the new meanings, which are associated to these notions, and, more broadly, to the well rooted categories or urban analysis? Our research will look at the background and the ethics, which lie behind urban planning. How do the agents, who are involved in various ways in the process of urban-making, conceive of a "good" and "liveable" city? What are the new ideals pursued by the architects, the planners, and the politicians? Do the discourses on the city, which are disseminated worldwide by the international organizations, shape the reflection of these actors? We think, in particular, of the labels, (such as the "creative city" and the "smart city") which give voice to the aspirations of these actors and launch the international competition between the cities.

On the one hand, the research group will ask whether urban planning is reflective of various forms of future-oriented narratives, which are shaped on the cultural background of the planners and are embedded into ethics, politics, and philosophy. On the other hand, our research will explore how urban planning relates to the past. At the time of modernity, planning cannot escape from making explicit its relation to inherited models and traces, even if it does so in terms of denial. Does urban planning mark a sharp break with the past or, on the contrary, does it take source from it? Which and whose pasts are given value, and why? Our research will include but will not be limited to the politics of urban heritage: it will broadly look at the way urban planning is inspired or incorporates inherited references, and with the reasoning which stands behind them.

The research methodology will mainly consist of the analysis of spatial planning, considered in their relationship with their theoretical, discursive, and ethical background. Architectural projects, projects of urban complexes and neighbourhoods, as well as heritage programs, will also be examined if they encapsulate urban ideals and social aspirations, which are reflective of broader concerns.

Research proposals from a variety of perspectives and disciplinary approaches are welcome to join this group. We are particularly interested in contributions, which examine the reactivation of inherited (sometimes ancient) urban models; the contemporary uses of heritage and the manipulation of urban history; the role of heritage in urban strategies; discourse analysis concerning the representation of the city; contemporary utopias and urban ideals; as well as the "virtualisation" of the city, conceived as the backdrop for economic activity and the platform for technological innovation.

Main research questions

- Which ideas, concepts, and representations lie behind contemporary urban-making in Asia?

- How is the future of cities imagined by the agents who are involved in urban design?

- Does urban planning and design relate to the past? Which and whose pasts are given value and for which reasons?

- Are the traditional categories of urban analysis still relevant for describing the urbanization processes in Asia? Can we produce new theoretical and analytical tool that give full account of these processes and of the spatial configurations, which result from them?

Expected outputs

- The thematic group "The Ideas of the City" envisions academic outputs such as books and journal publications.