

Conference Report | “Making the City: Transformative Processes in (Post)Industrial Urban Spaces”

From June 29th, 2023 to July 1st, 2023 the international conference “Making the City: Transformative Processes in (Post)Industrial Urban Spaces” took place in Chemnitz. Hosted by Cecile Sandten, Professor of English Literature, and Stefan Garsztecki, Professor of Central and Eastern European Studies, and in cooperation with the Industrial Museum Chemnitz, Dr. Jürgen Kabus, the conference was convened iteratively, that is, it was held in a different location each day and even throughout the day. Moving through the city of Chemnitz while engaging with the input of the different panels and keynotes, made the experience of actively being in motion in a (post)industrial city like Chemnitz very tangible and thought-provoking. Over the course of several days, scholars from across the globe presented their research on (post)industrial urban spaces and their respective transformative processes. With three keynote speakers and 17 panels with over 40 presentations by different scholars, many perspectives that came together made for engrossing days with the unique possibility to give and receive insight into (post)Industrial urban spaces from interdisciplinary perspectives. The panel presentations ranged from historical contexts to postcolonial cities, regional and rural transformations, real and imaginative infrastructures, literary representations, and many more.

After a conference warming on Wednesday, June 28th at the restaurant Tillmann’s, the conference officially started on the morning of Thursday, June 29th at the Industrieschule Chemnitz. With guests slowly arriving, there was time to walk the halls of the impressive building of the school, get to know each other, and find a place to sit in the imposing school auditorium on the 3rd floor. Following Cecile Sandten’s opening remarks, in which she expressed gratitude for the presence of both scholars and students, she introduced the first keynote speaker, Daniel Dubowitz. Dubowitz, Reader in Architecture and the International Lead for Manchester School of Architecture focuses his current research primarily on ‘Collaborative Urbanism’ or how tomorrow’s cities could grow out of the cities people live and work in today. Dubowitz’s keynote “Remaking the City” delved into four ambitious city-level initiatives and urban rejuvenation locations that, over the course of two and a half decades, progressively established cultural masterminding in the UK as both a transformative strategy and a method for reimagining urban reconstruction. The first part of the discussion revolved around city crafting driven by the public sector. Following this, he scrutinized city shaping propelled by private real estate developers, supported by alternate funding sources. By harnessing insights derived from each endeavor, Dubowitz adeptly showcased the various facets of cultural master planning, elucidating its intent, influence, and notably, its trajectory towards the pursuit of “reconstituting ‘your’ cities”. The fourth project, in particular, delved deeply into Manchester Mayfield, forging a connection to Chemnitz through a captivating slideshow presentation. The primary objective of the talk was to propose a spectrum of methodologies and guiding principles tailored for imaginative practitioners, which have the potential to set into motion a profound process of transformation. Following the question and answer session after the presentation, lunch was served in the Cafeteria of the Industrieschule, where attendees had the opportunity to follow up on issues presented during the talk, deepen the conversation, and enjoy their lunch.

Following a pleasant walk from the Industrieschule through the “Park der Opfer des Faschismus” (park of the victims of fascism), the panels were located at the historical RAWEMA building, a former office building from the 1960s, which was home to the administration of the so-called “Rationalisierung des Werkzeugmaschinenbaus” (Rationalization of Machine Tool Manufacturing) during GDR times. After the end of the planned economy, the building in the middle of downtown Chemnitz stood empty for many years until a hotel opened there in 2012. The building has been spruced up not only from the inside but also from the outside, with colorful light walls that adorn the façade of the building at night.

The next session was filled with parallel panels in three different rooms with the themes of “German Cities”, “Industrialisation and Town Making I”, and “Media Representations”. The panel “German Cities”, for example, concerned itself with different examples of (post) industrial spaces in two West German Cities, Gütersloh and Mülheim. Tim Zumloh offered insights into the questions of what (post)industrial cities can offer, and what they are supposed to offer. With a case study of “die alte Weberei” in Gütersloh, he illustrated where an old industrial space was turned into a socio-cultural center, which now hosts a beer garden, a movie theatre, two clubs, areas for creative movement, and a youth center. It is also used as a space for concerts and theatre. With this example, he highlighted that the making of post-industrial urban spaces also has to do with class struggles. The ‘Right to the City’ movement of the 1970s and 80s was the beginning of a reclamation of these spaces to create room for community and togetherness. In the next paper, Tazalika M. te Reh engaged with the concept of morality in (post)industrial urban spaces from an architectural point of view. Her presentation raised the question of how architecture can be discussed through the lens of the relationship between architecture, space, and race. With this approach she referred to, for example, Nazi buildings in Germany, Apartheid buildings in South Africa, or segregation architecture in the United States. With colonial exploitation at the base of Western society, she emphasized the importance of ‘remembrance culture’ which she suggested can be a part of modern cities and architectural structures. Instead of overwriting and silencing the stories and narratives of the places where, for example, exploitation took place, she pointed out that remembering and acknowledging can and must be part of modern cities through their architecture.

After a coffee and refreshment break, the second round of parallel panels started with the themes of “Manchester Imaginaries”, “Industrialization and Town Making II”, and presentations in German on “Urbane Palimpsesträume: Tilgen und Überschreiben”. In “Manchester Imaginaries”, Ivan Wadson presented on “Community Co-design In Manchester” which includes, e.g. The Festival of Libraries, Community Champions, and The Stories of Gorton with notable impacts of this multi-strand program. Followed by David Gledhill, who examined the recent history of artists’ studio provision in Manchester, drawing on his 27 years of experience as a member of Rogue Artists’ Studios CIC. The panel “Industrialisation and Town Making II” listened to Vasiliki Fragkoudi about the impact of heritage-led urban regeneration on destination marketing and Maria Gunko about uncovering the changing relations between people, place, and interrupted infrastructure.

In the evening the attendees met at the “Weltecho”, a community art facility with performance spaces, artists’ studios, and other multi-purpose rooms. There, Shamshad Khan and Anthony Rowland, both poets from Manchester, gave a very impressive reading that met the conference topic from a creative perspective. This was followed by a wine reception.

On Friday morning, the conference started in the smac, short for the “Sächsisches Museum für Archäologie Chemnitz” (Saxon Museum of Archaeology, Chemnitz), located in

downtown Chemnitz. With a permanent exhibition on state archaeology, it covers 300,000 years of human history in Saxony, ending with the period of industrialization. Lieven Ameel from Tampere University delivered the conference's second keynote, titled "Cities Beyond Redemption? Literary Approaches to Urbanization from Romanticism to Contemporary Climate Fiction". In his presentation, Ameel examined literature's relationship with urban landscapes, exploring historical unease with cities and their potential collapse. He traced these sentiments over the past two centuries, emphasizing how fossil-fueled modernity transformed cities into symbols of unchecked modernization hurtling toward an uncertain future. Ameel noted that the city became a stage for humanity's internal struggle and alienation. He integrated contemporary discourse into this narrative, discussing the "renaissance of the city" and its inability to dispel concerns about urban challenges. He also highlighted the impact of current events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and remote work practices, on critiques of cities. The 21st century presents pressing challenges within urban environments, including socio-economic disparities and climate threats. Ameel, however, found hope in these urban landscapes. Through literature he explored the delicate balance between urban guilt and the potential for personal and collective urban redemption. Ameel's presentation offered insights into the interplay between literature and urbanization, sparking contemplation in subsequent discussions.

Once again, the attendees of the conference moved to the RAWEMA building on foot, with the possibility of getting a coffee to go. The panels that day focused on "Real and Imaginative Infrastructure", "American Manchesters", and "Literary Representations". The panel "Real and Imaginative Infrastructures" listened to Timo Müller talk about "Early Road Narratives and the Imaginative Infrastructure of the Automobile City". His talk illustrated how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries automobiles had been perceived differently in the United States. As the 1930s marked a major shift in the U.S. towards more cars, road space was given and extended. As roads were then *only* for cars, rural driving became important for 'outskirt' cities. Cities became 'scenic views', a gaze for tourists to look at and people were able to visit them on their own terms. As cross-country driving concealed the unintended burden of noise and water pollution, Müller's presentation also highlighted how this development led to a sense of 'placelessness'. By obscuring the problematic consequences of automobility for city life and by praising new experiences available only to car drivers, Müller set out to highlight how these narratives help build what could be called the imaginative infrastructure of the automobile city. Following this, Irina Redkina gave a talk on "Rethinking Future Through Modernist Urban Planning". She investigated how the past, present, and future are expressed in material objects in the example of Bokaro Steel City in India, where she conducted her research. She argued that stories of the past and future can be told by material structures. The panel "American Manchesters" heard from Bridget Marshall about Lowell, "The Manchester of America", exploring how writing by and about industrial workers employs the Gothic to convey some of the horrors of industrialization, which hide beneath the surface of the acclaimed industrial city. This was followed by Sebastian Berg's talk about "Transforming Cities Through Community Wealth Building" and Nilak Datta's paper about "Touristic Modernity, Industrial America, and European Heritage".

The panels following lunch and another coffee break dealt with "Regional and Rural Transformation", "Art Historical Perspectives", "Movement and Alternative Flânerie", "Postcolonial Cities", and "Creative Cities". The panel "Regional and Rural Transformations II" saw Erika Rushton present her most recent explorations with "When Women Take Space". She introduced 'Women in Space' – a network of creative women from across the

UK who have taken over and run spaces that no one else wanted. Her talk provided practical route maps on how community-led redevelopment can scale a city or regional level, by drawing on her extensive experience of supporting communities to imagine a different future. The Friday ended with the conference dinner at the Restaurant Malula where attendees were able to deepen their discussions of the many talks and remarks of the day.

The last day of the conference, Saturday, started in the “Industriemuseum” (Industrial Museum) Chemnitz, which holds an extensive collection of Saxon industrial history. The exhibition is located in a former foundry hall of the former machine tool factory Hermann and Alfred Escher AG. Getting there took the participants a bit more out of downtown Chemnitz.

Daniela Zupan delivered the final keynote of the conference, titled “Politics of Industrialization: City and Subject-Making in Contemporary Hungary”. In her presentation, Zupan shifted the focus from the conventional narratives surrounding post-industrial cities to a focus that would reveal a deliberate trajectory pursued by European governments — one characterized by conscious industrialization strategies (in line with right-wing governments’ ideologies). Using examples from urban developments in Hungary, Zupan presented a narrative that extended beyond the establishment of industrial parks, delving into the nuanced government interventions that shape not only physical infrastructure but also societal subjects. Her talk explored the cultivation of a labour culture aligned with contemporary governmental goals, showcasing how urban architecture becomes a stage for enacting transformative ambitions on the side of the state.

Zupan’s analysis spanned the past decade, highlighting Hungary’s (re-)industrialization narrative through initiatives like the ‘Modern Towns Program’ and the family housing benefit CSOK. Her presentation demonstrated how these seemingly distinct programs contribute to reshaping Hungary’s urban landscape and societal dynamics. Central to this transformation is Victor Orbán’s vision of a “work-based society”.

Zupan navigated the political underpinnings and strategic rationale behind these programs, peeling back the layers to reveal the intricate mechanisms used to leverage urbanism as a tool for societal governance and (re-)industrialization in contemporary Hungary. Her lecture shed light on the intersection of urbanism, governance, and (re-)industrialization in Hungary, encouraging critical examination of the symbiotic relationship between urban development and governmental aspirations. Her scholarly journey left the audience with a perspective that transcends surface-level urban development, unveiling the intricate threads that shape societal transformation in light of a specific ideology engendered by the government.

After refreshments and coffee, attendees had the choice to join another round of panels with the themes of “Art and/in City Making”, and “German Cities: Berlin”. Participants also had the opportunity to join the Book Launch of Giovanni Picker’s “European Cities: Modernity, Race and Colonialism”, held in between the museum’s exhibition and turned into an intimate and emotional talk about race and what it means to move and live in Europe as a black person.

After a tour of the museum, a closing discussion with Barbara Holub and Suzanne Lacy, a contemporary American artist and activist renowned for her projects in art and social activism, took place. Lacy introduced some of her work which explores themes of gender, feminism, social justice, and community engagement. Her gripping presentation demonstrated revealingly, how urban spaces and art projects can be fruitfully combined to voice critical social concerns. After lunch, a guided city tour was offered to spaces of

transformation in Chemnitz. Although some attendees had to catch their transport back home at this point, the conference opened future dialogues that will undoubtedly further illuminate the intricate tapestry of evolving (post)Industrial urban spaces.

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