

Concept Note

## **Ambivalent Infrastructures**

Symposium of the Urban Knowledge Network Asia

**28-30 November 2019**  
**Dimapur, Nagaland, India**

Jointly organized by:

Ambedkar University Delhi: Center for Community Knowledge and School of  
Global Affairs (AUD, CCK and SGA)

Hong Kong University, Faculty of Architecture (HKU)

New York University Shanghai (NYUSH)

International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden (IIAS)

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### **Infrastructure and the Urban**

Large-scale infrastructure projects are materializing at an unprecedented rate across Asia. National road and rail schemes and cross-border corridors are transforming the physical, economic, social and cultural landscapes of the region.

The apex of the large infrastructure projects is the economic corridor, which sees spatially targeted investments in transport, energy, and telecommunications along a common route at the national, regional or international scale. The economic corridor concept in Asia originated with the Greater Mekong Sub-region initiative in the early 1990s (De and Iyengar, 2014). Today, economic corridors criss-cross the continent. The largest such schemes are planned as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, which seeks to revive intercontinental land routes and maritime links and "break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity". As part of a vast future network of railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border crossings it seeks to link China to Central and South Asia, and beyond (McBride, 2015).

Urban centers, large and small, are at the heart of these corridors and networks. Apart from transport links, corridor projects often involve the development of industrial and urban spaces. This connectivity has potentially major consequences for urban areas: those that are economically and

politically linked to corridors are more likely to respond to global and international factors than those delinked from corridors (Arakali & Koduganti, 2019). Smart cities, with their ambitions to connect physical infrastructure, ITC infrastructure, social infrastructure and business infrastructure to leverage the “collective intelligence of the city” (Harrison et al, 2010), arguably seek to transform the entire city into an infrastructure platform.

## **Ambivalences**

The logic of infrastructure is, at one level, utilitarian, to provide the physical basis for development and, in the process, to improve the lives of billions of people. The Asian Development Bank estimates that over 400 million Asians still lack electricity; roughly 300 million have no access to safe drinking water and 1.5 billion people lack basic sanitation (ADB, 2017). Governments and regional development banks put great faith in the ability of infrastructure to “better connect people, services and markets that over time will impact the lives of billions and build a better future”, according to the mandate of the new Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, established in 2016.

At another level, the logic of large and spectacular infrastructure may also be as a “worlding” practice, to attract speculative capital and offer itself as alleged proof of political power” (Ong, 2011).

Regardless of its underlying premise, however, large infrastructure can connect and disconnect, establish new centers and peripheries, and empower as well as displace and uproot millions. It is this power that we characterize as “ambivalent”: while infrastructure is desired by billions as a physical prerequisite for a better life, its very scale in contemporary Asia can be spectacular. in the sense that it can instill a sense of disorientation and placelessness among ordinary people (Ong, 2011).

## **What is at stake?**

Infrastructure developments across the continent are occurring at great speed. There is a need to interpret their functions, meanings and wide-ranging implications for cities and their hinterlands. Fresh thinking is needed about what the infrastructure boom tells us about Asian city-making, nation building, and the place of cities in the global political economy—beyond some of the dominant theoretical approaches in urbanism thus far, i.e. the idea of “planetary capitalism” and the search for “subaltern resistances” (Roy, 2011).

This symposium takes place in a tertiary city in a part of Asia (Northeast India) that until recently was very much on the “periphery”. However, there are advanced plans to connect this region to the rest of India and Southeast Asia. An urban center whose residents until recently moved around on

unpaved roads will soon find itself situated on one of Asia's economic corridors.

Most analyses of infrastructure projects focus on their strategic and economic aspects. Less is known about their relationship to residents and other associated changes as locals tackle its disruptive disorientation of life. It is commonly assumed that all infrastructure constitutes a public good, with the more infrastructure the better. But what kind of infrastructure is best, and how much is needed? And what role can or should residents and local interests play in shaping infrastructure projects?

## **Scope**

We invite contributions on the questions below (and related questions) from urban practitioners and scholars from a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities. Our focus is on large “critical physical infrastructure” projects, from new towns to interventions in the areas of transport, power, telecommunications (including digital), water supply and sanitation. We are also interested in smart cities, economic corridors and special economic zones as spatial hubs or platforms of infrastructure investments. The geographical focus of the symposium is South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia or West Asia. Comparative papers (illustrating examples from other parts of the world, outside Asia) are accepted, but must refer to contemporary Asian experience.

## **Guiding questions**

- Is there a precedent for the current infrastructure boom in Asia? Can we make a comparison with the ‘opening-up’ of other regions, such as North America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or the Amazon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and earlier?
- How do infrastructure corridors challenge our conventional notions of cities?
- How do infrastructure corridors challenge conventional notions of (national) sovereignty?
- How does digital infrastructure shape cities?
- What does “place” mean in the age of infrastructure?
- Who are the winners and who are the losers in the case of large infrastructure projects?
- How are large infrastructure projects (including corridors and smart cities) shaping gender relations?

## Confirmed panels

### **Panel 1: Experiencing Infrastructure**

Convener: Lovitoli Jimo, AUD

The panel will address the utilitarian and empowering logic of infrastructure by presenting voices that reflect the lived experience of being on or off the infrastructure grid. Locating the infrastructural within the regional and urban dynamic, the panel will present insights into consequences of infrastructure building and its socio-political impact. Drawing from history and the present, the panelists will describe after-effects of infrastructure building on gender, social hierarchies, human mobility and its economic consequences.

### **Panel 2: Rethinking Himalayan Infrastructures**

Convener: Dr. Rohit Negi, School of Global Affairs, AUD

The Himalayan region is as important to environmental and climate scientists, given its globally-important physical attributes, as it is to social researchers, on account of unique cultural forms and relative autonomy with respect to states and economies. More recently, however, places across the Himalayas have witnessed critical but poorly-understood social-economic transformations that are refiguring built environments, ecologies and regional politics in fundamental ways. At the heart of these processes lie infrastructural developments. From rail and road networks to hydroelectric projects, and from real estate and construction-linked investments to telecommunications, infrastructures are reshaping people's relationship with each other, with the 'mainland', and with regional environments. Among other things, presenters will address the:

- Processes driving infrastructural expansion across the region;
- Differential impacts of such developments along lines of ethnicity, community, and gender;
- Reconfiguring of subjectivities with respect to local and national identities;
- Long-term environmental implications.

### **Panel 3: Transnational Approaches to Infrastructure**

Conveners: Juan Du, Associate Professor, Faculty of Architecture, University of Hong Kong; and Sony Devabhaktuni, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Architecture, University of Hong Kong

As infrastructure projects in Asia take on continental scales – with physical links leading to immaterial connections of capital, people and cultures – transnational questions have become increasingly relevant and complex. The panel seeks contributions that explore the implications of infrastructure development in Asia for connectivity and boundaries, the movement of populations, sovereignty and cultural identity. Case studies of Special

Economic Zones, development corridors and new urban centers that rely on transnational modes of financing or technical cooperation are welcomed, as are contributions on research methods for transnational questions. Presenters may also address:

- The immaterial connections created by transnational projects;
- The actors/agents implicated in transnational infrastructural development; and
- Cultural impact of temporary or long-term migration.

#### **Panel 4: Infrastructures in the Age of Global China**

Convener: Dr. Yifei Li, NYU Shanghai, New York University

The Xi Jinping administration's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) entails ambitious plans to restructure global trade, transportation, energy, and security networks in Eurasia and beyond, repositioning China at its center. With its focus on mobility and connectivity, the BRI is poised to redefine infrastructure on a continental scale. As the BRI folds an increasingly extensive geographical area into its purview, it is imperative to take stock of empirical research about the infrastructural implications of the BRI. The current panel seeks to bring together an array of social scientific research on infrastructures in the age of global China. Possible topics include, but are not limited to:

- Port cities and their roles in the BRI;
- Discourses of infrastructures and mobility;
- Grounded experiences of (dis-)connectivity; and
- Frictions along the BRI corridors.

#### **Panel 5: Infrastructure in the Future City**

Convener: Paul Rabé, Coordinator of urban programs, IIAS

The fifth panel considers different imaginations of the urban future in Asia, and the role of infrastructure in these visions. The past decades have witnessed a succession of approaches to improve the quality of urban life and the urban environment, including eco-cities, sustainable cities, digital cities, smart cities and green cities. Many of these approaches are based on new infrastructure "solutions" and are technocratic in nature, far removed from local needs and traditions. Some of these initiatives have not gone further than slogans. This panel seeks to engage critically with these infrastructure visions and their application to urban life in Asia—and to evaluate whether there are alternative infrastructure models for human flourishing and environmental well-being in cities in Asia.

Possible panel sub-topics:

- City planning and visioning: public sector; corporations; and residents;
- The role of technology;

- Social and environmental sustainability;
- Climate change and low-carbon transitions.

### Keynote Speech and Discussion

- Speaker: Kekhrie Yhome, Academician, Social activist, Politician
- Chair / Discussant: Vikheho Swu, Politician and Social activist, former Road and Bridge Minister, Nagaland
- Topic: The current 'infrastructure era', creating and connecting physical, information, social and business infrastructures, seeks to improve the lives of people by improving the physical basis of development. However, large physical investments by their very nature create a development gap – among centers and peoples, the rural and urban, and also rewrite notions of center and periphery among regions, depending on their location in, and access to, aspects of the infrastructural grid. The keynote discussion will address how policy makers engage with the consequences of infrastructure building.

### Format and Logistics

- Duration: The symposium will be spread over 3 days, with one day devoted to excursions in and around Dimapur, and two days devoted to panel presentations and discussions.
- Symposium time frame: Confirmed symposium dates are 28-30 November 2019.
- Location: The symposium will be held in Dimapur, Nagaland, India. Symposium venue to be confirmed.
- Organization: The symposium is a collaboration between several organizing partners linked to the Urban Knowledge Network Asia (UKNA). Each partner will organize 1 or 2 panels within the framework of the concept note and in collaboration with the other partners.
- Presenters: Each panel will accommodate around 4 or 5 presenters. Presenters will be scholars, students and faculty members associated with the organizing partners. In addition, several slots are open for externally recruited speakers, who will be selected on the basis of an open call for papers.
- Symposium outputs: Following the symposium, the best papers will be selected for inclusion in an edited volume, to be published in the Asian Cities series of Amsterdam University Press.

### References for Concept Note

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