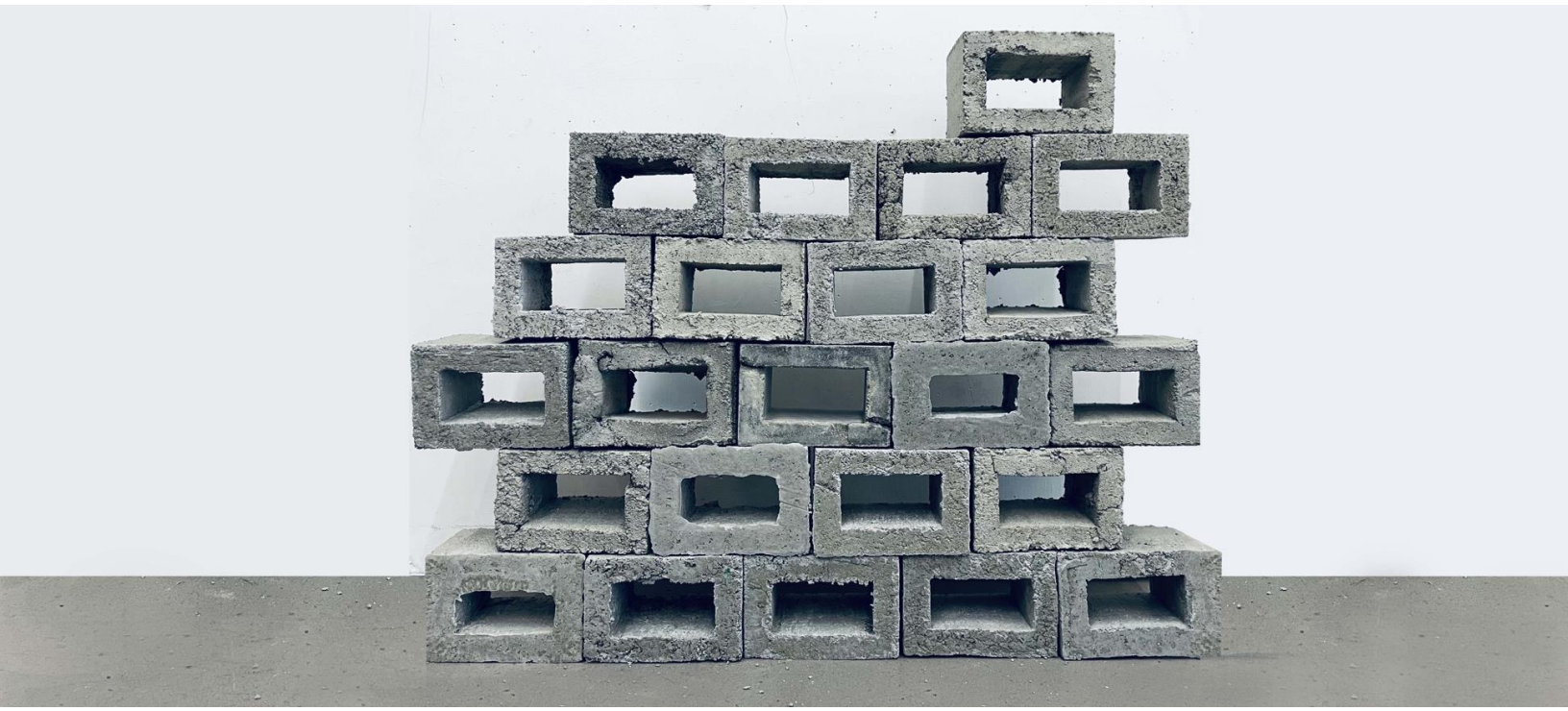
Building Technology and Culture in the Asia-Pacific Region: Histories and Projects

International joint Symposium co-organised by:
School of Architecture, The Chinese University of Hong Kong
Sustainable and Built Environment Research Group & Department of Architecture and Built Environment, University of Nottingham Ningbo China



Hong Kong/Ningbo – June 24th-25th, 2022

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Over the centuries, gradual advancements and sudden breakthrough in building technology have transformed architecture to respond to a variety of novel human needs while at the same time stimulating new ones. After the great transformations of the 19th and early 20th century, however, innovations in building technology have stalled. More in general, in the second half of the 20th century, the pace of innovation has consistently slowed down, even though sectors like ICTs had rapidly grown (Gordon, 2017), significantly changing our daily lives and transforming our cultures. As a result, technological development is seemingly creating more opportunities than in the past if we observe the ever-changing technology-driven design and building practice.

Despite a growing literature dealing with the "social construction of technology" (Bijker, Hughes, Pinch, & Douglas, 2012) and the recent launch of a comprehensive and ambitious projects like the New European Bauhaus (European Commission, Joint Research Centre, 2021), the disciplinary debate on the relationship between technology and culture in architectural theory and practice appears to languish, as this interrelation is often neglected, or worse, seen in oppositional terms. For these reasons, we agree with Katie Lloyd Thomas' warning about those positions that merely consider the question of technology(-ies) in technical terms and enhance the division between conceptual form-finding and its materialisation: "The very method we use to develop architectural proposals – orthographic drawings – describes only form, and relegate material to the empty spaces between the lines" (Thomas, 2007, p. 2). To this point, we would also like to restate the situatedness of technology within a specific cultural context through its interaction with the local environment in agreement with David Leatherbarrow and Mohsen Mastafvi's (2002) call for a counter-reaction to the comprehensive propensities of technological objects.

To put forward a concrete example, the upcoming demolition of one of the Metabolist masterpieces, the Nakagin Capsule Tower (1970-72) designed by Kisho Kurokawa, offers multiple points for consideration. For this Symposium, the case is remarkable for reminding us once again about the connections between culture and technology, as the Metabolist's theoretical appraisal of technology was specifically rooted in the local context of Japan with an explicit reference to the traditional construction system used in the Ise Shrine. It is thus becoming an urgent task to investigate to what extent building technology, while inevitably shaping the design production, enhances and incorporates cultural/social/economic conditions grounded in a specific context. Such research may develop according to multiple perspectives. The first one entails how contemporary architecture reflects this mutual relationship; secondly, it could be relevant to explain how designers have tried to and succeeded in incorporating technological conditions and solutions according to multifaceted contextual constraints; finally, assuming a more theoretical approach, it is worth questioning how we can further develop a fertile dialogue among these dimensions.

To discuss the impact of the social and cultural dimensions on building technology in contemporary architectural practice and the history of architecture, this Symposium attempts to reconcile technical exploration and social dimension in spatial imagination, recognizing that "technology is culture", and

"constructive choices" are always "historically determined" (Picon, 2012, p. 24). Accordingly, as construction history responds to two main concerns, one "doctrinal" and one "professional" (Picon, 2012, p. 14), this Symposium develops along two lines of inquiry. It interrogates the history of building technology and its relation to the history of technology and cultural history (Theme 1); It looks at the current architectural practice questioning how dominant social forces and conventions define and direct technological and material choices in design (Theme 2).

The Symposium, therefore, aims at bringing together and establishing a dialogue between practitioners and historians. While we acknowledge construction history as a discipline focusing on "how" projects are built (Huerta Fernández, 2011), we are interested in a broader perspective on the relationship between culture and technology. We invite contributions discussing these questions and focusing on the Asia-Pacific region since the 1970s, and we encourage to look not only at high-tech, industrialised solutions (steel, reinforced concrete, glass, etc.), but also at how low-tech materials and techniques (bamboo, mud, compressed earth, etc.) participate in the contemporary discourse about architecture, technology, and society. For proposals fitting into Theme 1, we invite papers that either investigate specific case studies based on original sources or attempt to historicise and discuss lesser-known cases and trends and how they can contribute to a critique of mainstream, Euro-centric historiographic narratives. For Theme 2, we expect proposals that investigate recently built projects, especially if analysed from the perspective of their designers.

References

Bijker, W., Hughes, T. P., Pinch, T., & Douglas, D. (Eds.). (2012). *The Social Construction of Technological Systems. New Directions in the Sociology and History of Technology.* Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

European Commission, Joint Research Centre. (2021). *New European Bauhaus.* Retrieved from https://europa.eu/new-european-bauhaus/index_en

Gordon, R. J. (2017). *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War.* Princeton, NJ, USA: Princeton University Press.

Huerta Fernández, S. (2011). Historia de la construcción: la fundación de una disciplina. In J. Mascarenhas Mateus (Ed.), *A História da Construçao em Portugal. Alinhamentos e Fundaçoes* (pp. 31-48). Coimbra, Portugal: Almedina. Retrieved from https://oa.upm.es/7465/1/Huerta_2010_Historia_de_la_construccion.pdf

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Abstract/ Full-paper submission

To submit your proposal, please send a 500-word abstract to btcsymposium@nottingham.edu.cn by 31st March 2022 along with a short CV of all the authors (no more than three), specifying if the paper fits into the Theme 1 (Histories) or 2 (Projects). Notification of acceptance will be sent by email to the authors and a final draft of the paper, 4,000 words maximum in length (references included), will be sent to the panel chair no later than 17th June 2022 for comments.

Due to the ever-mutating condition related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the difficulties in travelling, the Symposium will be held in full online mode. A registration fee of CNY 500 (approx. € 70) for speakers will be requested unless further funding will become available to waive it.

After the Symposium, we plan to publish selected contributions in a peer-reviewed miscellaneous book/special issue of a relevant journal edited by the organisers of the Symposium. Authors will be contacted with further details in early July 2022.

Key Dates

Submission deadline (abstract): 31st March 2022
Notification of acceptance: 15th April 2022
Submission of full paper: 17th June 2022
Symposium: 24-25th June 2022

Symposium organisers

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