



Exploratory Workshop Scheme

Scientific Review Group for the Humanities

ESF Exploratory Workshop on

**The Urbanization of Nature.  
Environmental narratives,  
technologies and power in the city  
(1500-2000)**

Darmstadt (Germany), 20-22 March 2014

Convened by:  
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and Michael Toyka-Seid<sup>③</sup>**

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# **Scientific Report**

## **1. Executive Summary**

The ESF Exploratory Workshop „The urbanisation of nature. Environmental narratives, technologies and power in the city 1500-2000“ was held at the Technische Universität Darmstadt (TU Darmstadt) over three days from March 20 – March 22 2014. It took place in the Conference Room at the Centre of Urban Studies at the TU Darmstadt, Bleichstraße 2, 64283 Darmstadt. After three cancellations on short notice because of illnesses participation numbered 27 people from 10 countries, two of them from outside Europe. The male/ female repartition numbered 17/ 10, the age range of the participants ranged from the early 30s to 60. All in all the workshop presented a good „mix“ of experienced scholars of urban environmental history and newcomers in the field as well as of the necessary regional diversity required when asking for European historical experiences.

The surroundings at the TU Darmstadt permitted ample opportunities for additional interaction, as coffe breaks and light lunch at midday were offered at the conference venue. All participants stayed in a conference hotel nearby, where exchange was not only permitted in the hotel bar and at breakfast, but also on the walk of approximately 15 minutes to the workshop venue enforced by a strike of local buses on the conference days.

The workshop presentation had been prepared for by short abstracts of up to 600 words, submitted in early January 2014, and by paper versions of up to 2000 words, submitted by March 10 2014. The conference sessions comprised of 2 to 5 presentations offering short summaries of the pre-circulated papers. Each presentation was followed by a short round of questions for understanding. The second half of each session gave space for discussion of individual papers and the overarching research question posed by the relevant session.

## **2. Scientific content of the event**

The main aim of the ESF Workshop was a reconsideration of the agency of the city in dealing with the natural environment. Participants were asked to bridge the premodern/ modern gap, and reconsider long-term historical contingencies and transitions in environmental discourses, practices and emanations of power in the city. However in order to fundamentally reshuffle scholarship on the past five hundred years of urban-nature interaction, the workshop challenged existing scientific divisions and paradigms not only by bridging the historiographical pre-modern/modern gap, but also by integrating methodological and conceptual progress in different fields of social and environmental sciences, including Actor-Network Theory, Science and Technology Studies and Political Ecology.

After welcoming remarks which highlighted ESF funding and the general purpose of the ESF Exploratory Workshop by co-convenors Dieter Schott (Darmstadt, Germany) and Tim Soens (Antwerp, Belgium) the workshop started with an introductory session

presenting thoughts and ideas about different concepts to approach the urban environment, derived from Science and Technology Studies, Actor Network Theory and Political Ecology. Particular attention was paid in this session to the concept of Socio-Natural Sites, presented by Martin Schmid (Wien, Austria). Other contributions in this session asked for the agency of water as an anthropological element of city-nature relations (Dorothee Rippmann, Zürich, Switzerland) or discussed free spaces in cities as ecological and aesthetic laboratories for future „urban nature“ (Matthew Gandy, London, Great Britain). The introductory session in the course of the workshop proved to be a helpful anchor for the more empirically based studies of the following sessions, offering a “selection” of red herrings for the workshop discussions.

In the first of six sessions which were organized along the lines of the urban metabolism, asking for the ecological consequences of feeding and fuelling the city, presentations dealt with the transformation of forests close to cities in medieval Brabant (Chloé Deligne, Bruxelles, Belgium), with the energy supply of minor cities in early modern Scotland (Richard Oram, Stirling, Great Britain) and with the political role of water-based infrastructures in Bavaria between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Martin Knoll, Darmstadt, Germany). Like her predecessors Sabine Barles (Paris, France) in her presentation on the socio-ecological transformations of the French capital as a consequence of industrialisation posed the question, in which way the relations between city and hinterland were remodelled when cities over the course of centuries increased their outreach into their rural environment.

Waste and recycling as well as air pollution and the manifold water problems of cities were aspects of the presentations of the second workshop day. Isabelle Parmentier (Namur, Belgium) stressed the importance of coal to secure the energy supply of Namur in the early modern period, but also the impact of the remaining scoria on the city's environment. Mechanisms of using and re-using products of all kinds were the subject of the paper of Georg Stöger (Salzburg, Austria), while Heike Weber (Wuppertal, Germany) analysed urban landfills and the at the time of their erection unforeseeable environmental consequences of this urban waste heaps. Her picture of the landfill as a „wild agent“ of the urban environment was controversially discussed in the following discussion, which however strongly stressed the agency of waste as an important part of the material remains of urban life. Another dispute in this session centred around the question whether solutions to the urban waste problem can be seen as long term transitions or whether urban environmental history should concentrate on identifying cyclical caesuras in this processes.

The following session, which had political and legal regulations of the urban-nature-relations as overarching theme, included papers on urban smoke pollution in England and France (Stephen Mosley, Leeds, Great Britain and Stephane Frioux, Lyon, France) and on land as an urban resource (Marjaana Niemi, Tampere, Finland). The papers asked, how those relations were perceived at different times and what kinds of political steering measures evolved from different and changing perceptions. The discussion showed, how pollution since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has become widely accepted as an integral part of the urban environment in urban debates. The importance of social reproduction in this process, which was the subject of the considerations of Tim Cooper (Exeter, Great Britain), met with doubts by some participants in the debate, which not for the first time at this ESF workshop centred around questions of periodisation and caesuras in the relationship between city and nature.

The relationship between city and water was the subject of the last media-based session. Five presentations sketched a wide research field of this nexuses, from water as the “last common” in medieval towns (Tim Soens) to the waterscapes of Stockholm and Gothenburg (Eva Jakobsson, Stavanger, Norway) and of cities in the Baltic (Simo Laakkonen, Helsinki, Finland), from the idealised quest for water-based “nature” in 19<sup>th</sup> century cities in the centre of Europe (Christian Rohr, Bern, Switzerland) to the “re-naturing” of the St-Lawrence River in modern Montreal (Michele Dagenais, Montreal, Canada). Common questions in all papers related to risk awareness and resilience and to the importance of experience-based knowledge – knowledge, which – as Genèvieve Massard-Guilbaud (Paris, France) pointed out in her comment – more than once was ignored in city-river relations. Another topic of the discussion was the relevance of the “Back-to-Nature”-postulate in the history of urban planning.

A view beyond the frontiers of the Western city, on processes of circulating practices and knowledge to the divergent urban ecologies of non-Western “colonial cities“ was the task of the concluding theme session on Friday morning. The post-colonial reflex not surprisingly popped up in the fierce discussions of the papers on colonial experiences of the urban environment by Karel Davids (Amsterdam, The Netherlands) and Michael Toyka-Seid (Darmstadt, Germany). The question how to address the challenge of the urbanisation of nature, of the correct historical “vocabulary”, which had been a red herring of the workshop discussions, here once again found its way into the debate.

A field trip to the suburb of Kranichstein, a satellite town of the 1960s, and to the nearby Kranichstein urban sustainable development area had to be cancelled because of the aforementioned strike. Instead the group went on a walking tour to the famous Art Nouveau buildings on the Mathildenhöhe in Darmstadt, guided by the local organisers.

### **3. Assessment of the results, contributions to the future direction of the field**

The discussions of the workshop were lively from the very beginning. Subjects like the relevance of European environmental practices in non-Western cities or the possibility to sketch a global picture of urban environmental experiences led to fierce, though always fruitful and constructive debates. All participants expressed satisfaction with the workshop concept of pre-circulating the extended empirical studies and concentrating in plenum on short, assumption-based statements with adequate time for debate and exchange. The participants also expressed their thankfulness to ESF for enabling the organizers to invite to this workshop at a rather early stage of this scholarly enterprise, thus allowing to indulge on methodological and far-reaching considerations first and then concentrate on the intense historical studies asked for at a follow-up workshop which has already been scheduled.

After three days of intensive debates and discussion a final session, organized as a round table, shed light on “Urbanization and the Anthropocene” (this was also the title of the final presentation by Chris Otter, Ohio, USA) and gave ample time for a round-up of the workshop debates and the discussion and planing of follow-up activities. As a start into the considerations of this concluding session Chris Otter, Dieter Schott and Bert de Munck (Antwerp, Belgium) tried to rephrase the problem of the “urbanization of nature”

from a historical perspective. In the wake of this participants suggested a couple of approaches to rethink the urban-nature-nexus in environmental studies, thereby also posing critical questions about the agency of cities in this context. Perhaps causality in the changing relationship of man and nature should not be sought in the concept of the city itself, but rather in processes emanating themselves mainly in cities, such as capitalism, the articulation of property rights or the rationalization of the human world-view? The participants were asked to have those considerations in mind when trying to write their finalized papers. After a follow-up workshop at the end of February 2015 the results of this ESF-workshop will result in a book-volume on “urban agency” in historical urban-environment relations, which will be part of a new four-volume book series directed to the role of cities in European history between 1500 and 2000.

#### **4. Final programme**

**Thursday, 20 March 2014**

14.00-14.30 **Registration/ Coffee and snacks**

14.30-14.40 **Welcome remarks by Convenors**

**Dieter Schott** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)/

**Tim Soens** (Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium)

#### **15.00-16.30 Session 1: Finding a common language to study the urbanization of nature and the political ecology of the city**

**Chair: Martin Knoll** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

15.00-15.15 **“Ways of approaching medieval urban environments”**

**Dorothee Rippmann** (Universität Zürich, Switzerland)

15.15-15.30 **“Power, energy, metabolism: Understanding a city through its transformation as a socio-natural site”**

**Martin Schmid** (Universität Klagenfurt, Austria)

15.30-15.45 **“Marginalia: aesthetics, ecology, and urban wastelands”**

**Matthew Gandy** (UCL, Great Britain)

15.45-16.30 **Discussion**

16.30-17.00 *Coffee / Tea Break*

#### **17.00-18.30 Session 2: Feeding, fuelling and (re-)producing the city**

**Chair: Michael Toyka-Seid** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

17.00-17.15 **“Limiters of Growth? Urban development and access to fuel in Scotland, 1500-1850”**

**Richard Oram** (University of Stirling, Great Britain)

17.15-17.30 **“Into the wild? How did cities transform their neighbouring woodlands during the Middle Ages (12th – 16th century)?”**

**Cloé Deligne** (Université Libre de Bruxelles, Belgium)

17.30-17.45 **“Fuelling in a transition phase”**

**Martin Knoll** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

17.45-18.00 **“Urban metabolism and socio-ecological transitions: Paris, 18th – 19th century”**

**Sabine Barles** (Université Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, France)

18.00-18.30 **Discussion**

19.00 *Dinner "Ratskeller"*

**Friday, 21 March 2014**

**09.00-10.30 Session 3: Urban Waste, removal and recycling**

**Chair: Dorothee Brantz** (Technische Universität Berlin, Germany)

09.00-09.15 **"The use and re-use of coal and scoria in the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century city (Belgium)"**

**Isabelle Parmentier** (Université de Namur, Belgium)

09.15-09.30 **"Re-using and recycling in Urban Europe (16th-19th century)"**

**Georg Stöger** (Universität Salzburg, Austria)

09.30-09.45 **"Waste matters: 20th century landfill as an untamed urban legacy"**

**Heike Weber** (Bergische Universität Wuppertal, Germany)

09:45-10.30 **Discussion**

10.30-10.45 *Coffee / Tea Break*

**10.45-12.15 Session 4: Negotiating urban environments**

**Chair: Genèvieve Massard-Guilbaud** (EHESS Paris, France)

10.45-11.00 **"Coal, Smoke and the environment in urban-industrial Britain"**

**Stephen Mosley** (Leeds Metropolitan University, Great Britain)

11.00-11.15 **"Managing urban air pollution in France from the 1900s to the 1970s"**

**Stéphane Frioux** (Université Lyon 2, France)

11.15-11.30 **"Land as an urban resource"**

**Marjanaa Niemi** (Tampereen Yliopisto, Finland)

11.30-11.45 **"Wasting, urban rhythm and everyday environmentalism in Twentieth-century Britain"**

**Tim Cooper** (University of Exeter, Great Britain)

11.45-12.15 **Discussion**

12.30-15.30 *Guided Walk to Art Nouveau-buildings on Mathildenhöhe (incl. light lunch)*

**16.00-18.00 Session 5: Water, the blue print of a city**

**Chair: Dieter Schott** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

16.00-16.15 **"The Last Common: Water in medieval cities. The Low Countries as an example"**

**Tim Soens** (Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium)

16.15-16.30 **"Stockholm and Gothenburg waterscapes"**

**Eva Jakobsson** (Universitetet i Stavanger, Norway)

16.30-16.45 **"Urban water protection in the Baltic Sea Region"**

**Simo Laakkonen** (Helsinki Yliopisto, Finland)

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16.45-17.00 **“Conquering the riverside in the 19th century: Urban expansion, bourgeois villas, and the search for ‘nature’ within the city”**

**Christian Rohr** (Universität Bern, Switzerland)

17.00-17.15 **“Renaturalizing the city: Montreal and its rivers in the postindustrial period”**

**Michèle Dagenais** (Université de Montréal, Canada)

17.15-18.00 **Discussion**

19.00 *Dinner (location tba)*

**Saturday, 22 March 2014**

**09.00-10.30 Session 6: Adaptation and Circulation**

**Chair: Sebastian Hauman** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

09.00-09.15 **“Innovation, experts and circulation”**

**Karel Davids** (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

09.15-09.30 **“Public health and urban environments in European colonies”**

**Michael Toyka-Seid** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

09.30-10.30 **Discussion**

10.30-11.00 *Coffee / Tea Break*

**11.00-12.30 Final Session – Roundtable**

**Chair: Bert de Munck** (Universiteit Antwerpen, Belgium)

11.00-11.15 **“Urbanisation and the Antropocene: A History of the Technosphere”**

**Chris Otter** (The Ohio State University, USA)

11.15-11.30 **Comment**

**Dieter Schott** (Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany)

11.30-13.00 **Discussion, planning follow-up activities**

13.00 *Lunch snacks*

14.00 *End of Workshop and departure*

## **5. Final list of participants**

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## **6. Statistical information on participants**

The ESF workshop assembled 27 scholars from 10 countries, two of them from outside Europe. There were 7 participants from Germany (4 male/ 2 female), 4 from Belgium (2/ 2) and Great Britain (4/ -), 3 from France (1/ 2), 2 from Austria (2/ 0), Finland (1/ 1) and Switzerland (1/ 1), 1 each from Norway (-/ 1), The Netherlands (1/ -), Canada (-/ 1) and the USA (1/ -). The male/ female repartition numbered 17/ 10, the age range of the participants ranged from the early 30s to the early 60s. 8 participants were in the age group 30-39 years, 8 age group 40-49 years, 9 age group 50-59 years and 2 age group 60-65 years.