

DIS/ASSEMBLING CONCRETE'S ENVIRONMENTS

20–21 August 2026

20 Aug | National Gallery Singapore (In-person)
21 Aug | National University of Singapore (Hybrid)

Concrete transforms and disintegrates socio-spatial worlds across time and scales. It derives its existence from the blasted landscapes caused by limestone and sand extraction and inhabits the altered urban ecologies of concrete landscapes. Concrete is generated for and employed in construction—and the ensuing structures are maintained by labouring bodies along with the environments these bodies occupy. It finds its way into the polluted sites where construction materials are disposed. Yet, these interlocking metabolic dynamics of concrete environments are rarely understood in conjunction with each other.

This workshop employs the notion of 'concrete dis/assemblages' to explore the interrelated but discrepant socio-temporal dimensions and ecologies of concrete. It calls attention to how diverse and partially connected sites of concrete production, circulation, and disposal assemble and disassemble variegated environments. In doing so, the workshop seeks to provincialize the Anthropocene by highlighting the multifold processes of (un)making concrete in Asia.

Today, around two-thirds of cement production plants are located in Asia. China alone accounts for more than half of global concrete production and consumption. The proliferation of transregional urbanism and large-scale infrastructural projects, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative, has spurred the demand for and disposal of concrete in Asia.

As a compound made up of cement, sand, and water, concrete production creates different mining environments with lasting geological impacts. The production of cement is carbon intensive. The conversion of limestone into clinker, a key ingredient in cement, constitutes 4-8% of global carbon dioxide emissions. Concrete built environments have transformed hydrological and terrestrial landscapes, reconfiguring urban metabolic processes and cities' capacities to respond to climate futures. Meanwhile, processes of decay and disrepair open up new disposal time-spaces. The uncountable construction and demolition debris accumulates as enduring geological strata.

What does it mean to think about the dis/assembling processes of concrete environments wrapped in the intertwined temporalities and socialities of concrete making? How does the focus on concrete environments in Asia and beyond illuminate this very moment of planetary crisis, one that is deeply entangled with concrete? To what extent can we make concrete sustainable and/or actualize a world without concrete?

The workshop will discuss conceptual and empirical work that critically examines the socio-environmental lives of concrete from Asian perspectives, engaging with the following three themes:

- **Concrete's environments:** What kinds of environments emerge throughout the lifecycle of concrete? What are the environmental histories and scalar politics of producing and using concrete? How are natural landscapes in Asia, often tied to sacredness, transformed by concrete?
- **Concrete's socialities:** How has concrete been used to realize various visions of modernity and support social lives in Asia? What forms of expertise and labour are involved in adapting concrete to local needs? What socio-economic forces disrupt the maintenance of concrete, accelerating its obsolescence?
- **Concrete's temporalities:** How does concrete exhibit multiple temporalities from the linear progression of extraction to the cyclical time of rebuilding? What do such divergent temporalities tell us about the imaginaries and materialities of concrete? How might we re-imagine concrete's temporalities?

PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

DATE	TIME (SGT)	PANEL SESSION
20 AUG 2026 (THU) NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE	09:15 – 09:30	WELCOME & INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
	09:30 – 11:00	PANEL 1 – CONCRETE EXTRACTION
	11:30 – 13:00	PANEL 2 – CONCRETE EMPIRES/NATIONS
	14:00 – 15:45	PRACTITIONERS' ROUNDTABLE
	16:15 – 17:30	KEYNOTE ADDRESS
	18:00 – 20:00	WORKSHOP DINNER <i>(For speakers and chairpersons only)</i>
21 AUG 2026 (FRI) ASIA RESEARCH INSTITUTE, NUS	09:30 – 10:00	GRAND PROPOSAL SOUNDING BOARD
	10:00 – 12:00	PANEL 3 – CONCRETE FUTURES
	13:00 – 15:00	PANEL 4 – INHABITING CONCRETE
	15:30 – 17:30	PANEL 5 – CONCRETE EXTRACTION
	17:30 – 17:45	SUMMARY & CLOSING REMARKS

20 AUGUST 2026 • THURSDAY

National Gallery Singapore

09:15 – 09:30	WELCOME AND INTRODUCTORY REMARKS JIAT-HWEE CHANG <i>National University of Singapore</i> JUSTIN CHUN-HIM LAU <i>National University of Singapore</i> SAPTARSHI SANYAL <i>National University of Singapore</i>
09:30 – 11:00	PANEL 1 – CONCRETE EXTRACTION <i>Chairperson</i> JUSTIN CHUN-HIM LAU <i>National University of Singapore</i>
09:30	Quarry to Kiln: Scaling Mineral Landscapes of Concrete in Twentieth-Century South Asia MEENAKSHI A. <i>Yale University</i>
09:50	Spirits in the Sand: How Concrete Production Dismantles Spiritual Landscapes along the Mekong River in Cambodia PAUL CHRISTENSEN <i>University of Goettingen</i>
10:10	On Not Knowing: Where Supply Meets Site SARAH NICHOLS <i>Swiss Federal Institute of Technology</i>
10:30	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
11:00 – 11:30	MORNING TEA BREAK
11:30 – 13:00	PANEL 2 – CONCRETE EMPIRES/NATIONS <i>Chairperson</i> SAPTARSHI SANYAL <i>National University of Singapore</i>
11:30	Empire in Concrete: Housing and the Cartographies of Transpacific Imperial Formation, 1930s–1960s EUNJEONG KIM <i>Sungkyunkwan University</i>
11:50	Landscape in Translation: The Life and Afterlife of Gresik Cement Plant ANITA HALIM LIM <i>University of Amsterdam</i>
12:10	Contradictory Socialities of Concrete: Devaluation, Heritage, and Urban Redevelopment at the Former Huaxin Cement Factory since 2005 PENGLIN ZHU <i>Wuhan University of Technology</i>
12:30	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
13:00 – 14:00	LUNCH BREAK

14:00 – 15:45	PRACTITIONERS' ROUNDTABLE
<i>Chairperson</i>	JIAT-HWEE CHANG <i>National University of Singapore</i>
14:00	Practitioner's Roundtable SZE DAI PANG <i>National University of Singapore</i> KIAN HAU KONG <i>National University of Singapore</i> CHUNG WAN WONG <i>MAEK Consulting Pte Ltd</i> WENG HIN HO <i>Studio Lapis</i>
15:15	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
15:45 – 16:15	AFTERNOON TEA BREAK
16:15 – 17:30	KEYNOTE ADDRESS
<i>Chairperson</i>	PATRICK FLORES <i>National Gallery of Singapore</i>
16:15	The Arts of Rubble: Fragments of Concrete, Fragmenting Environments, and Fragmentary Politics in Thai Art ELI ELINOFF <i>Victoria University of Wellington</i>
17:00	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
17:30	END OF DAY 1
18:00 – 20:00	WORKSHOP DINNER (<i>For Speakers and Chairpersons only</i>)

21 AUGUST 2026 • FRIDAY

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

09:30 – 10:00	GRANT PROPOSAL SOUNDING BOARD
	Caring for and Repairing Concrete Worlds in Asia JUSTIN CHUN-HIM LAU <i>National University of Singapore</i> SAPTARSHI SANYAL <i>National University of Singapore</i> JIAT-HWEE CHANG <i>National University of Singapore</i>
10:00 – 12:00	PANEL 3 – INHABITING CONCRETE
Chairperson	SAPTARSHI SANYAL <i>National University of Singapore</i>
10:00	Concrete Discomfort in Singapore: Ageing in Heat among Other Things ANISHA DRALL <i>Duke-NUS Medical School</i>
10:20	Concretizing Profit: Creating Fixity in a Fluid Delta MEGNAA MEHTTA <i>University College London</i>
10:40	Concrete Compensation: Politics and Reparative Limits of Concrete in Hydropower Projects in Laos FLORAMANTE SJ PONCE <i>Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut Essen</i> KHANNAPHAPHONE PHAKHOUNTHONG <i>Humboldt University of Berlin</i>
11:00	Crumbling Concrete: Inhabiting Depotentialised Housing in Hyderabad VANSHIKA SINGH <i>Hyderabad Urban Lab</i>
11:20	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
12:00 – 13:00	LUNCH BREAK
13:00 – 15:00	PANEL 4 – CONCRETE IMAGININGS
Chairperson	JUSTIN CHUN-HIM LAU <i>National University of Singapore</i>
13:00	Indigenising Concrete: An Alternative History of Lime, Brick and Other Interlopers GAURI BHARAT <i>Anant National University</i>
13:20	Words and Worlds: Concrete Aspirations in Homemaking in Village India PARUL KIRI ROY <i>School of Planning and Architecture New Delhi</i>
13:40	Concrete Chronopolitics: Islands, Time, and Post-history JOSHUA COMAROFF <i>National University of Singapore</i>
14:00	Leviathans and the Concrete Pump: Engineering Landscape, Labor, and Management in Shanghai, 1979-1988 ZENGXIN WEN <i>Tongji University</i>
14:20	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
15:00 – 15:30	AFTERNOON TEA BREAK

Dis/assembling Concrete's Environments

20-21 August 2026 | Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore

15:30 – 17:30	PANEL 5 – CONCRETE ALTERNATIVES
<i>Chairperson</i>	BOSMAN BATUBARA <i>National University of Singapore</i>
<i>15:30</i>	Cast in Stone? Shifting Socio-temporalities and the Changing (built) Environment in Northern Laos ROSALIE STOLZ <i>University of Cologne</i>
<i>15:50</i>	Cracks in Concrete: From Speculative Learning in Shadow Places to Experiments with Post-Concrete Futures PRYOR PLACINO <i>University of Canberra</i>
<i>16:10</i>	Stabilized Earth: Urban Tropical Circulations in Search of Concrete Alternatives MARCUS YEE <i>Yale University</i>
<i>16:30</i>	Reimagining Concrete: Infrastructure, Decarbonization, and Material Transitions in Japan MAX HIRSH <i>Airport City Academy</i>
<i>16:50</i>	QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
17:30 – 17:45	DISCUSSION & CLOSING REMARKS JUSTIN CHUN-HIM LAU <i>National University of Singapore</i> SAPTARSHI SANYAL <i>National University of Singapore</i> JIAT-HWEE CHANG <i>National University of Singapore</i>
17:45	END OF WORKSHOP

**Quarry to Kiln:
Scaling Mineral Landscapes of Concrete in Twentieth-Century South Asia**

MEENAKSHI A.

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The calcareous terrains of limestone constitute cement and sustain concrete's vital organism. This paper examines how limestone was envired into infrastructure for cement manufacture during late-colonial industrialization, and how its multiscale topographies were made commensurable with the technological and industrial imaginaries of postcolonial planning. Such a temporal scope denaturalizes—or at least redefines—the entanglement of concrete with the 'Great Acceleration', foregrounding longer, contingent historical processes that shaped concrete's environmental infrastructures before the mid-twentieth century under colonial developmentalist projects and later amidst a crisis-driven 'late acceleration'. When the Portland cement industry emerged during interwar industrialization in British India, the reconfiguration of cement as a standardized industrial commodity suited to novel forms of concrete engineering—a consistent 'new material'—reshaped its relationship with mineral environments. In the interwar decades, when viable factories were believed to require at least a twenty-year reserve in their captive quarries, geologists and administrators prospected and 'proved' deposits to attract cement capital, binding mineral knowledge to industrial investment. Post-war reconstruction programmes and India's Five-Year Plans amplified demand for cement, nurturing large rotary kiln technologies and long-term mining leases to metabolize mineral reserves faster. Nevertheless, emergent legislative and technological categorizations of limestone—'major mineral', 'minor mineral', 'marginal grade'—reflected frictions between industrial logics of quality and the exigencies of a resource-scarce postcolonial state. These frictions intensified in the late 1970s, as the state turned to mini-cement technologies to render scattered pockets of limestone deposits 'mineable' in response to crises of freight, fuel, and capital. Unlike in China, where decentralized vertical-shaft-kiln mini-cement proliferated in the 1960s, in India this scalar shift represented a new exercise in planning that sought coexistence between decentralized and centralized production within a scarcity economy. Entangled histories of cement's mineral and industrial landscapes in twentieth-century South Asia thus reveal that no universal logic of scale contoured the history of concrete's hinterlands.

Meenakshi A. is a fifth-year PhD candidate in the Department of History at Yale University, working on the histories of environment, technology, and construction. Her dissertation, 'Concrete Landscapes: Environments and Infrastructures in Twentieth-Century South Asia', examines how new ecosystems of capital, minerals, and machinery reimaged cement as an industrial commodity, and how cement-concrete in turn reshaped the organization and conceptualization of engineering, public works, and housing. Her broader research interests include the twentieth-century emergence of global engineering firms and histories of waste. At Yale, Meenakshi has been an Environmental Humanities Fellow, co-convenor of the Asia History Working Group, and co-organizer of the New Perspectives in Energy History conference. She completed her MPhil and MA at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, and her BA (Hons) at Ambedkar University Delhi.

**Spirits in the Sand:
How Concrete Production Dismantles Spiritual Landscapes along the
Mekong River in Cambodia**

PAUL CHRISTENSEN

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The global demand for concrete has turned sand into one of the most extracted resources on earth. In Cambodia, industrial sand mining along the Mekong River has caused massive land loss, forced relocations, and ecological destruction. This paper shifts the analytical lens from the well-documented socioeconomic and environmental consequences of sand extraction to its effects on spiritual landscapes and religious knowledge.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cambodia's Mekong region (2012–2013, 2019, 2024), I examine how sand mining dismantles what I term "spiritscapes": spatially and materially anchored configurations of spiritual power that structure relationships between humans, non-human entities, and the natural environment. In rural Cambodia, rivers, riverbanks, and floodplains are inhabited by land spirits, water spirits, and ancestral presences whose authority regulates access to resources, mediates social conflicts, and sustains ritual practices. When sand dredging reshapes these landscapes, the material infrastructure that sustains spiritual authority erodes with the riverbanks.

The paper traces three interrelated processes. First, the physical destruction of sites where spirits reside destabilizes the ritual practices tied to those locations. Second, the market logic of sand extraction introduces a competing framework for governing human-environment relations, one in which spirits hold no regulatory authority. Third, communities respond to these disruptions in divergent ways: some mobilize spiritual knowledge as a resource for resistance against extraction, while others experience the loss of spiritscapes as a fundamental rupture in their cosmological orientation.

By foregrounding the spiritual dimensions of sand extraction, the paper contributes to the workshop's inquiry into concrete's entanglements with environments beyond the built. It argues that concrete production does not merely reshape physical landscapes but dismantles knowledge systems that depend on the integrity of those landscapes. The case of Cambodia's Mekong region illustrates how the global appetite for concrete reaches into the cosmological foundations of affected communities.

Paul Christensen is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Göttingen, Germany. His research examines the intersections of religion, politics, and ecology in Southeast Asia. He holds a doctorate in social sciences (University of Göttingen, 2020, magna cum laude) and a Magister Artium in Religious and Cultural Studies (University of Bremen, 2010), including fieldwork-based study at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. His dissertation, "Spirits in Cambodia – Existence, Power and Ritual Practice," analyzed the social, political, and material dimensions of spirit beliefs in contemporary Cambodia. His current project, "Sandsapes in Southeast Asia," investigates the impact of sand mining on spiritual landscapes and religious knowledge along the Mekong River. He has presented this research at the AAA (Seattle), EuroSEAS (Paris), EHESS (Paris), VANDA (Vienna), and DGSKA (Cologne). A co-edited volume on methodological challenges in sensitive research fields is forthcoming.

On Not Knowing: Where Supply Meets Site

SARAH NICHOLS

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For as much attention that has rightly gone to concrete's contribution to the climate crisis, the prevailing discourse—and quantitative models of it—draws a direct throughline from extraction to building. Largely overlooked, yet evident in practice, is how much gets lost along the way: as gaps in knowledge and responsibility and as squandered material. Where the domain of material production meets the ordering, selling, and delivery practices that bring materials to a construction site, assumptions are made and errors accumulate, and a significant portion of materials become waste, never becoming part of a building.

While standard bill-of-quantity accounting practices typically anticipate between one and three percent waste, the patchy existing data on the phenomenon suggest that the real figure is both highly variable and on average much higher—closer to five to ten percent of all construction materials. For the bulk materials in and supporting concrete—cement, sand, and gravel—the rate can be even higher, before even speaking of the soil displaced and frequently wasted by excavation. Given that as much as eight percent of anthropogenic carbon dioxide is attributed to the cement industry, and that significant public science funding has gone towards the difficult task of reducing cement's carbon footprint through material science, the question of on-site wasting opens a view onto the very real harm produced in the gaps between practice and research, site and data, supply and construction.

It is therefore worth asking why we know so little, and discuss even less, about a phenomenon documented on every inhabited continent. Working through civil engineering and construction industry publications from 1975, when the Building Research Station published some of the earliest work on the topic, to the present, this contribution traces around and critically interrogates the absence of knowledge on wasting, with particular attention on studies from East and Southeast Asia—especially Hong Kong, one of the few locales that, in the 2010s, launched efforts to systematically track and mitigate construction waste.

Sarah Nichols is an Assistant Professor at EPFL and director of the lab THEMA (Theory of Environment and Materials in Architecture) within the Institute of Architecture at EPFL. Prior to joining EPFL, she was an Assistant Professor of Architecture (tenure track) at Rice University in Houston. She studied architecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam and received her doctorate (Dr. Sc.) at ETH Zurich for which she was awarded the ETH Medal. Sarah Nichols's scholarly work examines the environmental and political entanglements of construction, particularly through building materials. Her material retrospective "Béton" was recently shown at the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel. She is currently working on a book manuscript *Opération Béton: Constructing Concrete in Switzerland* based on her dissertation.

**Empire in Concrete:
Housing and the Cartographies of Transpacific Imperial Formation, 1930s–1960s**

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Concrete's uptake in South Korea unfolded within a stratified historical field in which colonial legacies, Cold War aid regimes, and developmentalist aspirations converged through the reorganization of technical knowledge, finance, labor, and the built environment. Taking concrete housing as its primary archive, this paper traces concrete's movement from colonial instrument to Cold War medium to developmentalist export. Introduced under Japanese rule as a material of "colonial modernism," concrete gave form to the empire's technocratic imaginaries in the colony. Japan's defeat and the devastation of the Korean War did not terminate that history so much as recompose it: colonial concrete, reduced to rubble, re-entered postwar Korea under altered imperial conditions.

Within the U.S.-dominated aid regime, cement became an aid-dependent commodity whose circulation was governed by Cold War geostrategy, privileging imported surplus over domestic industrial capacity. Concrete-intensive projects, including housing, served U.S. objectives of security and stability more directly than South Korea's industrial autonomy. By the mid-1960s, however, the developmental state had recoded concrete as a nationalist sign of sovereignty and modernization, even as it remained reliant on Japanese construction technologies, imported materials, and Cold War circuits of finance and expertise. The export of Korean construction capacity to Vietnam and Guam under U.S.-led arrangements subsequently repositioned South Korea as a sub-imperial actor within transnational development circuits.

Concrete thus marks a historical process in which succession did not take the form of simple replacement, but proceeded through reactivation, displacement, and reassembly. Concrete multistory housing offers a particularly sharp site through which to follow this genealogy: built under Japanese rule as colonial settlements, reconfigured through U.S. housing aid to stabilize postwar political economy, and later appropriated by the developmental state as an emblem of incorporation into petromodern power. By placing four paradigmatic cases—Mikuni (1930), Homes for Korea (1955), and Mapo (1961) in South Korea, together with Barrigada Heights (1969) in Guam—within an entangled architectural genealogy, the paper charts a hierarchical yet multidirectional cartography of empire and brings into view the social relations that organized concrete's transnational movement.

Eunjeong Kim is a researcher and architectural historian at the Daedong Institute for Korean Studies, Sungkyunkwan University. She earned her Ph.D. in the History of Architecture and Urban Development from Cornell University in 2025. Her research examines architecture's entanglement with foreign aid regimes in South Korea and across Southeast Asia during the Cold War developmental period. Attending to the convergence of material, legal, fiscal, military, and epistemic frameworks, she conceptualizes this history as one of imperial translation, through which colonial expertise, material regimes, technological imaginaries, and capitalist orders were reworked within the developmental rationalities of the Cold War. Her research has been supported by a number of institutions, including Cornell's Einaudi Center and East Asia Program and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, and her work has appeared in *Architectural Theory Review*, *The Journal of Architecture*, and *Korean Journal of Urban History: History, Society, and Culture*.

**Landscape in Translation:
The Life and Afterlife of Gresik Cement Plant**

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Semen Gresik, the first state-owned cement factory in Indonesia, was opened in 1957. Since then, the country has successfully reduced cement importation and supplied the material to build the new nation. Almost all of the key architectural projects of the 60s and the 70s in the capital city were built with Semen Gresik. Hence, Fivez and Motylinska call the cement plant meta-infrastructure, infrastructure underlying infrastructure (Fivez and Motylinska 2022). Correspondingly, this paper will follow the establishment of Semen Gresik through the framework of infrastructural thinking. Seeing the Gresik cement plant as infrastructure – a spatiotemporal project – allows us to unfold multiple moments and uneven temporalities, and to see not just the technical and logistical aspects, but also the social and political implications of this infrastructure (Anand et al. 2018).

Reading through the textual and visual documentation, as well as the site itself, as the archive of the Gresik cement plant, I will construct a landscape biography in which the multiple actors of Semen Gresik conducted the translation between the cultural and industrial landscape of Gresik in order to consolidate power and legitimise the construction of the factory. Today, almost 70 years after its establishment, the plant has exhausted its resources, leaving part of its production and distribution facilities idle and another part undergoing a transformation into a different function. However, I would like to argue that even though concrete, infrastructure, and the infrastructure of concrete are all temporal matters, the promise of it has allowed a process of translation that is constantly replicating and has the potential to sustain and reinforce its own materiality.

Anita Halim Lim is a researcher, curator, and architectural designer, with a background in architecture and heritage studies. Her previous experience includes working as a project architect in the conservation of Jakarta Old Town. She was the co-curator for the exhibition “Indonesia and the Amsterdam School” at Museum het Schip Amsterdam (2022-2023) and Erasmus Huis Jakarta (2024-2025). Anita is also part of the curatorial team at Museum Arsitektur Indonesia. Since March 2025, she is a PhD candidate at Universiteit van Amsterdam as part of research project “Concrete Indonesia: Material Histories of Architecture and Heritage in Indonesia around Independence”.

**Contradictory Socialities of Concrete:
Devaluation, Heritage, and Urban Redevelopment at the
Former Huaxin Cement Factory since 2005**

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The paper engages the subtheme of “Concrete’s Socialities” by examining the transformation of the former Huaxin Cement Factory in Huangshi, Hubei. Founded in 1907, Huaxin was one of the first three cement plants in China. Located near limestone resources and Huangshi Port, it tied cement production to extraction, transport, and industrial labour. After economic reform in the 1970s, the company expanded into newer, larger plants with updated production technologies. From 2005, Huaxin gradually shut down its old wet-process production lines, and in 2007, it closed all production near Huangshi Port and relocated its headquarters to Wuhan. Yet the end of production did not mark the end of cement’s social life at this site.

The paper argues that the Huaxin case reveals the contradictory socialities of cement in contemporary China. In 2005, the company first devalued the wet-process production site in the name of corporate development and urban spatial adjustment. From 2010 onward, however, Huangshi Municipality revalued it as a resource of industrial heritage, public history, and urban culture. Since 2011, the municipality has advanced this transformation through successive legislative and administrative measures, including a proposal for the China Cement Museum, heritage designation, and later redevelopment schemes. Unlike many earlier concrete constructions that were demolished, this site of material production remained both physically and symbolically. The paper echoes Elinoff’s argument of understanding concrete’s compound nature as essential to making sense of its environmental, social, and political lives. Meanwhile, it extends Oakes’s argument that the Chinese government uses concrete to link ideas of progress with the material and political force of new projects.

Based on policy documents, heritage plans, urban planning schemes, and public materials, the paper shows that cement’s sociality in China is produced through processes of devaluation and revaluation shaped by shifting political agendas.

Penglin Zhu is Assistant Professor at the School of Civil Engineering and Architecture, Wuhan University of Technology, since March 2026. He earned his PhD from Delft University of Technology in December 2024 with a dissertation on the planning history of Daqing Oilfield. His current research focuses on how changing material flows, particularly water and concrete, have shaped urban form, architectural design, and everyday life in Wuhan, a major river port city in China.

PRACTITIONERS' ROUNDTABLE

The Technologies and Techniques of Greening, Maintaining, and Repairing Concrete

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The work of the four practitioners in this roundtable spans the entire material cycle of concrete: from the formulation of lower-carbon binders to the diagnosis, repair, and conservation of ageing structures. Their work asks what it means to attend to concrete's environments from within the building industry itself. The practitioners gathered here address both the past and the future. They start from the worlds that concrete has already built: the vast and aging stock of post-war structures and infrastructures whose embodied carbon, embedded labour, and accreted social value are squandered when they are demolished long before the end of their design lives. But they also address the current and future needs of building with concrete, not the least to respond to the climate crisis by building sea walls and green infrastructure. Maintaining, repairing, and greening are treated here not as discrete technical fixes but as overlapping practices of care that attend to the entire life cycle of the material.

This roundtable discussion seeks to cover a range of topics, such as the development of low-carbon and circular cementitious materials that utilize industrial waste; the assessment, retrofitting, and self-healing of deteriorating concrete; the forensic study of concrete to understand its material corrosion and failures; and the conservation of fair-faced concrete and other cementitious finishes in modern built heritage against prevailing industry norms of patching, painting over, and replacement. Across these topics, the panel considers how the expertise and labour of maintenance might be revalued, how knowledge moves between research and practice, and what a repair-centred ethics could mean for concrete's environments and their inhabitants in Singapore and beyond. In doing so, it asks how the care of concrete's existing worlds might be valued alongside the invention of new materials and techniques, in response to the planetary crisis.

Sze Dai Pang is a leading figure in sustainable construction and structural engineering, widely recognised for his contributions to low-carbon materials, resilient urban infrastructure, and circular economy solutions. At the National University of Singapore (NUS), he is Dean's Chair Associate Professor and Deputy Head (Academic Matters) of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering. He also serves as the Founding Director of the Centre for Resource Circularity and Resilience (CR²), Co-Director of the Built Environment 4.0 Initiative, and Research Associate at the Sustainable and Green Finance Institute. Dr Pang's research has advanced the frontier of carbon sequestration in waste mineralisation, high-performance lightweight composites, modular construction technologies, and resilient structural systems, particularly on ageing buildings and infrastructures. His translational work has shaped building standards and industry practices in Singapore, with applications adopted by agencies such as BCA, JTC and LTA. As co-founder of Circrete — a start-up transforming marine clay into durable, low-carbon

cement — he has demonstrated how academic innovation can drive industry transformation and support national decarbonisation goals.

Kian Hau Kong is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (CEE) at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He obtained his B.Eng (Civil) with 1st Class Honors and a PhD in Civil Engineering from National University of Singapore (NUS). Dr Kong is also a practising qualified engineer who specialises in Buildings & Infrastructure Projects (including Bridges). He is a Chartered Structural Engineer (MIStructE), International Professional Engineer (UK) and a Professional Engineer (CIVIL) registered with PEB Singapore with more than 15 years of experience as a Site & Resident Engineer, Senior Design & Project Engineer, Design & Project Manager, Associate (Team Leader) & Senior Associate Consultant for many residential, commercial, institutional, industrial, infrastructure and civil engineering master planning works in Singapore and Overseas. In the Academia with CEE, NUS, Dr. Kong has successfully completed the following R&D projects as Principal Investigator (PI) for SMI "Characterization of Ultra-High Performance Cementitious Materials and Optimization of their Gel Transition Period at High Temperature/Pressure for Applications in Plug and Abandonment (P&A) of Oil Wells" and also as PI of MOE AcRF Tier 1 FRC Project "Development Of Sustainable Self-Healing Concrete By Use Of Recycled Materials". Dr Kong served as a Member of Working Group (WG) for development of SS EN 13670: 2022 (Singapore Standard for Execution of concrete structures) from 2020-2022. Since 2022-2025, Dr. Kong has also served as a Member of WG on review of SS 544, SS EN 206 and SS EN 12620, for review of inclusion of mineralisation of carbon dioxide for concrete and aggregates in the following Singapore Standards Code. In 2026, he was awarded as Fellow of the International Association of Advanced Materials (FIAAM) in recognition of his contributions to Smart Construction Materials and Self-Healing Systems.

Chung Wan Wong has more than 30 years of extensive experience in materials consultancy, building envelope, building diagnosis and audit consulting works. He has undertaken a large number of projects providing third party advisory and consulting services in building pathology, conservation and restoration of historical buildings, materials evaluation and environmental studies. In the course of this work, he has addressed numerous issues on durability and sustainability in both the design and construction stages such as service life prediction, durability study, maintainability, life cycle assessment (LCA) and conservation and restoration of buildings. Chung Wan obtained his BEng (Civil & Structural Engineering) and MSc (Building Science) from National University of Singapore (NUS). He is a Recognized Professional of the Association Preservation Technology International and an Expert Member of the International Scientific Committee on the Analysis and Restoration of Structures of Architectural Heritage. He is the Technical Director of MAEK Consulting, an innovative third-party specialist consultant providing technical services to ensure sustainable management and development.

Weng Hin Ho is co-founder of Studio Lapis, an award-winning architectural conservation specialist consultancy based in Singapore with local and overseas projects, whose work has garnered accolades such as the Singapore Urban Redevelopment Authority Architectural Heritage Awards and the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation. He is the founding chapter Chair of DOCOMOMO Singapore, and a founding board director of the Singapore National Committee of ICOMOS, an advisory body to UNESCO on heritage conservation. He is also Expert Member and Bureau Vice President on the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee on Twentieth Century Heritage (ISC20C). Weng Hin serves on government advisory committees on heritage policy and planning. As adjunct faculty at the DOA, Weng Hin was convenor and co-organizer of a number of hands-on Conservation Field Schools under the auspices of the NUS Tun Tan Cheng Lock Centre for Asian Built Heritage, and co-leader of the UM-NUS Joint Studio in Cultural Heritage Studies in various historic towns of Malaysia. An ardent advocate for Singapore's built heritage, Weng Hin is co-author of several books including *Our Modern Past: A Visual Survey of Singapore Architecture, 1920s-70s*, a ground-breaking book commissioned by the Singapore Heritage Society. He was also former co-editor of *The Singapore Architect*, the professional journal of the Singapore Institute of Architects.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

**The Arts of Rubble:
Fragments of Concrete, Fragmenting Environments, and
Fragmentary Politics in Thai Art**

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In the past fifteen years, concrete and its constituent components—limestone, cement, sand, and aggregate—have become a common medium and subject for Thai contemporary artists. Concrete appears in images of completed, half-built, and ruined infrastructures. It is also displayed on its own, as contextless fragments, replications, and fractures of larger built forms. Sometimes, artists use concrete dust as a means of image-making. During the same period, the country has also experienced profound political and environmental upheaval—floods, coups, protests, air pollution, building booms, earthquakes, and demolitions. What do these developments have to do with each other? Does the emergence of concrete as a material for Thai artists tell us anything about Thai politics? What can Thai politics tell us about the proliferation of artworks cast in concrete? What can both tell us about the fate of this ubiquitous urban material in a time of climate change? In this talk, I explore these questions through a close examination of the work of several artists who use concrete to probe the limits of our precarious present. I suggest that these artists use fragments of the urban environment to say something about the convergence of spatial transformation and political change, on the one hand, and shifting ecological and moral worlds, on the other. By bringing these themes together, I aim to consider both the works themselves and the affective worlds that urban materials educe.

Eli Elinoff is an Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington. His research focuses on the intersection of political and environmental change in urbanizing Southeast Asia. He is the author of the book *Citizen Designs: City-Making and Democracy in Northeastern Thailand* (University of Hawaii Press, 2021), the co-editor (with Dr Tyson Vaughan) of *Disastrous Times: Beyond Environmental Crisis in Urbanizing Asia* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), and, most recently (with Dr Kali Rubaii), *The Social Properties of Concrete* (punctum books, 2025). He has published work in a range of outlets including *American Ethnologist*, *the Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, *Roadsides*, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, *CITY*, and *The New Mandala*. His ongoing ethnographic project, “A Kingdom in Concrete: Urban Thailand in the Anthropocene”, was awarded a Marsden Fast Start from the Royal Society of New Zealand in 2017.

GRANT PROPOSAL SOUNDING BOARD

Caring for and Repairing Concrete Worlds in Asia

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Concrete is a ubiquitous material essential to modern life, yet its production and use are also unmaking the very modern worlds it helps build. This project proposes to rethink the knowledge-practices that underlie our socio-ecological relationships with the lifecycle of concrete through the framework of care and repair. It seeks to cultivate sustainable and liveable worlds for both human and more-than-human beings by reconfiguring the "Concretocene"-the vast anthropogenic web of concrete landscapes and relationships that exacerbates the present planetary climate crisis. As the second most consumed resource globally, concrete will soon outweigh Earth's total biomass (Elinoff and Rubaii, 2025: 16). The production of cement, one of concrete's key components, is a fossil-fuel intensive process, contributing an estimated 8% of global carbon emissions (Irvine and Bevan, 2022: 190). In addition, the extraction and processing of raw materials like limestone, sand, gravel, clay, and iron damages ecosystems and jeopardizes human and more-than-human communities (Nichols, 2024; Placino and Rugkhaman, 2024). Moreover, the construction of concrete buildings intensifies urban heat island effect and disrupts hydrological systems, resulting in massive waste when structures are demolished prematurely to further capital accumulation (Abramson, 2016; Allais and Meggers, 2021; Elinoff and Rubaii, 2025; Oakes, 2025).

This project brings three methodological innovations to the research, breaking away from this expanding body of literature that tends to either provide empirically-rich explorations of specific sites of concrete's lifecycle or treat the entirety in an abstract manner. First, it adopts a multi-sited approach that connects the entire lifecycle of concrete, from extraction and production to inhabitation and demolition. Doing so renders visible the oft-hidden connections between urban centres, where concrete is primarily consumed, and their resource and waste hinterlands. Second, the project calls attention to concrete's environments in Asia, a region that accounts for three-quarters of the world's concrete consumption. Through case studies in China, India, Cambodia, Thailand, and Singapore, we bring together a transnational, collaborative network of scholars to develop an Asian narrative of the rise of the Concretocene. Third, the project identifies ways to care for and repair our inherited socio-environmental worlds of concrete. By exploring an array of knowledge-practices, such as the restoration of extractive landscapes, the research of alternative cement blends (Fishman, 2024), and the retrofitting of concrete structures (Croft and Macdonald, 2019), this research will address the pressing decaying concrete environments.

Jiat-Hwee Chang is Dean's Chair Associate Professor of Architecture and Research Leader of the Science, Technology and Society Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is an interdisciplinary researcher working at the intersections of architecture, environment, and STS (Science, Technology and Society). He is the author of *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Colonial Networks, Nature and Technoscience* (2016), which was awarded an International Planning History Society Book Prize 2018, and the co-author of *Everyday Modernism: Architecture and Society in Singapore* (2022), which was awarded the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain's Colvin Prize 2023. Jiat-Hwee is currently working on a book manuscript on the socio-cultural histories and techno-politics of air-conditioning and climate change in urban Asia.

Justin Chun-Him Lau is Postdoctoral Fellow with the Science, Technology, and Society (STS) Research Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He obtained his PhD in Anthropology from the Australian National University. As a social anthropologist, he focuses on the culture of disposal and environmental anthropology. His primary research interests include discard studies, feminist STS, and disability studies. Currently, he is developing a research project that explores limestone mining and critical minerals in Asia. This project specifically examines the relationship between extractivism and conservation in a limestone mountain in Cambodia. More broadly, it investigates how limestone resources may influence contemporary climate politics and the quest for “sustainable” cities.

Saptarshi Sanyal is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore. He is an architectural historian who examines spaces and buildings as processes rather than mere objects in historical narratives. His research questions ideas of modernity, traversing postcolonial studies, construction history, production studies, and the framing of architectural authorship. Saptarshi's current book project adopts a connected histories approach to uncover novel spatial imaginaries and experimentations within architecture during South Asia's colonial rule in the twentieth century. It foregrounds how interpersonal empathies and contacts, exchanges of personnel, knowledge and materials across cultures and geographies translated into and transformed modes of producing buildings and inhabiting space.

Concrete Discomfort in Singapore: Ageing in Heat among Other Things

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Rising temperatures and a rapidly ageing population present twin challenges in dense urban Singapore. Heat, however, is not equally felt across the city – it is mediated by financial and social access to differentiated environments. With the most disadvantaged older adults bearing a disproportionate burden, this paper asks: how does concrete configure expressions of discomfort toward climate change? How has concrete shaped the materialities of vulnerable older adults in Singapore?

Drawing on in-depth interviews across 3 studies from 2021 to 2025, we argue that older adults understand rising temperatures in tandem with urban development – that ageing and its accompanying discomforts are constructed in concrete, which serves simultaneously as the material of the changing city and the physical matter underpinning everyday suffering. We illuminate this through three articulations of ‘concrete discomfort’, each mapped onto the workshop’s core themes. First, temporality of discomfort traces how older adults narrate environmental change across their life course, entangling personal memory with the dis/assemblage of Singapore’s concrete city – foregrounding how urban renewal is experienced as rupture and loss. Second, the sociality of discomfort reveals how routine and social lives are shaped and interrupted by construction, ambient heat, and the built environment – and how redevelopment disrupts the place-making practices through which older adults have built belonging and meaning over time. Third, the environments of discomfort are felt through concrete as a paradoxical boundary in public rental housing: simultaneously too permanent and not permanent enough – trapping heat and air while remaining permeable to surveillance, noise and infestation. For older adults whose housing is subject to continual lease renewal, concrete is less a foundation than a contingent and precarious ground. This paper provincialises the anthropocene from an intimate, embodied scale – measured not in carbon emissions or geological strata, but in breathless nights, aching joints and the perpetual uncertainty of home.

Anisha Drall is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Ageing Research & Education (CARE), Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore. Her most recent work, studying relocation experiences of public rental flat tenants, was published in *Cities*. She graduated from Yale-NUS College with a major in Urban Studies. Her research interests sit at the intersection of the built environment, community development, and class relations in South and South-east Asia.

Ad Maulod is a cultural anthropologist (PhD, Purdue University, USA) and Principal Research Scientist at CARE, Duke-NUS Medical School. Ad’s research focuses on translating cultural concepts of health and ageing into effective programme and policy interventions. Ad believes in the empowerment of our elders by amplifying their stories and advocating for an inclusive, compassionate and just society for all-ages.

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Zahirah S. is an environmental anthropologist (PhD, University of California, Santa Cruz, USA) and Research Fellow at the Centre for Ageing Research and Education (CARE), Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore. Zahirah studies how people's relationships with their environments shape ideas about health and ageing, informing more responsive policies and programmes.

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Malcolm Ravindran is a trained nurse and social worker who had formerly worked as a qualitative research assistant for 5 years at the Centre for Ageing Research & Education, Duke-NUS. He begins a Masters Programme in Geography at the National University of Singapore in August 2026. Across his work and volunteering experiences, he has worked extensively with older persons to provide and refine medical & social care services across a wide spectrum of settings. His research experience includes numerous programme evaluations, conceptual understandings of loneliness, as well as how the lived environment plays a part in older persons' well-being and sense of place.

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Rahul Malhotra is the Executive Director of the Centre for Ageing Research & Education (CARE) and Associate Professor of Health Services Research & Population Health at Duke-NUS Medical School, Singapore. The primary area of his research is ageing, at the individual and population level. Key projects that he has led/is leading include (1) national longitudinal surveys of older Singaporeans, studying predictors and outcomes of change in physical, psychological and social health of older adults, (2) longitudinal quantitative and qualitative studies of older Singaporean-family caregiver dyads, assessing patterns, correlates and consequences of changes in caregiving-related outcomes over time, and (3) a health services research project on older person-centred prescription medication labels. He has published over 240 peer-reviewed papers in the medical, public health and social science literature. He received his basic and advanced medical training at the University of Delhi, India, and public health (MPH) training at Harvard University, USA.

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**Concretizing Profit:
Creating Fixity in a Fluid Delta**

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In the Sundarbans islands of the Bengal Delta erosion and accretion are a feature of what make and unmake land. In the year 2015, through World Bank funds, mud embankments were replaced by concrete and cement Dutch-style dykes that imposed fixity on a fluid landscape. I witnessed this transition in material realities from mud to concrete through the course of my long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the region. Since 2015, I have also returned to these islands each year. In 2020 and 2021, when the region was struck by two super cyclones, several of the newly built concrete embankments had cracked in a region that is endemic to cyclones. In 2024, some of these broken and cracked concrete embankments had been rebuilt, only to have cracked again. Following the making and unmaking of these mega infrastructural projects of concrete in the Bengal Delta, this paper reveals the ways in which the materiality of concrete—with its varying qualities—concretizes not just spaces that are otherwise amphibious and defy these coastal lines but I also reveal the ways in which such infrastructures concretize profit making.

Megnaa Mehtta is Assistant Professor in Social Anthropology at the Department of Risk and Disaster Reduction (RDR), UCL, London. Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans, her manuscript in progress *Conserving Life: Political Imaginaries from a Submerging Forest* argues for a more expansive notion of what ought to be conserved beyond biodiversity. Her current research project, tentatively titled *Centring a Household in a Climate Emergency* funded by AXA-IOC UNESCO research fellowship, is interested in relations between land-water and people, mythology, ethics, migration, informality, health, marriage, social reproduction and broader ideas of well-being and risk as these themes intersect with conservation, climate adaptation policies, dispossession, and long-standing vulnerabilities in the Bengal Delta.

**Concrete Compensation:
Politics and Reparative Limits of Concrete in Hydropower Projects in Laos**

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Recently, social studies on the vital role of concrete in bringing about urban and social transformations have proliferated, thanks to the infrastructure turn and new materialism in social sciences. In the context of hydropower and other development projects, within or outside Laos, research has focused largely on various socioecological and economic damages inflicted by newly built hard infrastructures, such as dams, roads, power lines, etc. Concrete structures aimed at repairing what these projects impinged upon have received less attention, however. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in communities affected by two large hydropower projects in northern Laos—Xayaburi Hydropower (a dam on the Mekong mainstream) and NNua1 Hydropower (a pseudonymized Chinese dam under China's Belt and Road Initiative)—our paper bridges the gap by theorizing concrete compensation, the mechanism through which project developers and state authorities govern dam construction's disruptions by converting different types of losses (cultural spaces, home, livelihood, etc.) into noticeable and legible concrete substitutes. Here, concrete is conceptualized not simply as a hardened admixture of different elements, but as material assemblages that attempt to restore and stabilize altered ecologies, which, in turn, have political purposes and implications. In the Xayaburi case, we examine how the project compensates for the disappearance of the 'natural island' owing to dam-induced changes in riverine systems by building the 'Moungkhoun sand island' in Louangphrabang. Occupying an awkward position in the river, this concrete is viewed by authorities as a material repair to a compromised heritage.

Numerous villagers, however, give more prominence to the sandbank resurfacing beside the artificial island as the productive locus of ritual, memory, and belonging. It consequently reveals the reparative limits of this concrete compensation as a proxy for the inhabited environment. In the NNua1 case, we investigate over 500 displaced families in Bokeo who received new houses, whose quality is graded by the types of concrete used in construction. As these houses serve as compensation for the destruction of former dwellings, they also create new power inequities and notions of modern homes that fail to meet material needs and ensure safety. These two cases reveal how concrete can function as a governmental technology of repair that helps project developers not to commensurate with the lived worlds they destroy, but rather to substantiate their political and moral claims of fulfilled responsibilities.

Floramante SJ Ponce is a social anthropologist with extensive experience in development-induced displacement, actual and spiritual forms of energy, and Chinese infrastructure in Southeast Asia, particularly Laos. He published his works in journals such as *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale*; *Asian Anthropology*; *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology*; *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*; *Southeast Asian Affairs*; and *Population, Space, and Place* (Forthcoming). His book-in-progress examines the subjects of Chinese hydropower projections. When Dr. Ponce started his postdoctoral fellowship at the ULB's LAMC (Belgium), he shifted his interests from electrical power to cosmological and spiritual forms of power. He specifically investigates how the external power that Lao amulets can muster helps fix Lao people's broken interiorities, which are caused by post-pandemic economic shocks, societal and digital transitions, and ecological disruptions. Dr Ponce has recently joined the 12th Cohort of the KWI International Fellowship as a postdoctoral researcher in Essen.

Khannaphphone Phakhounthong has been completing her PhD in Southeast Asian studies at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Her dissertation scrutinizes the socio-spatial transformation, including hydropower development, in the historic town of Louangphrabang, a World Heritage site in Laos. She successfully completed her Master of Arts in heritage and urban studies at BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg in Germany, where she analyzed how the state's modernization visions have been imagined and contested by the residents of Louangphrabang.

Crumbling Concrete: Inhabiting Depotentialised Housing in Hyderabad

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This paper examines how concrete is inhabited and reworked in a VAMBAY housing colony in Hyderabad, a form of state-led housing for the urban poor instituted in the late 1990s and materialised locally after a devastating fire in 2005. Conceived as a technology of rapid rehabilitation and a vision of modern urban housing, VAMBAY (Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojana) relocates residents from self-built settlements into standardised, one-room vertical tenements and enacts a state-market compact that privileges the speed of construction over the time-space of settling. Drawing on oral histories, archival records, and interviews with residents, local leaders, and officials, the paper situates concrete as a medium through which urban worth is allocated.

Yet, this built form is actively depotentialised. Beyond the initial quickness of construction, the withdrawal of repair and maintenance operates as a material practice of "letting die", where concrete is left to weather, seep, heat, and fracture. Attending to the fallout of construction and breakdown, the paper traces how deterioration produces an affective and environmental geography of abandonment, showing how concrete becomes a lived micro-ecology in which abandonment is not absence but a produced environment. In doing so, it shifts attention from landscape-scale accounts of concrete to its interior, intimate, and inhabited disassembly.

Rather than framing these practices as adaptive improvisation, the paper asks what it takes to maintain habitability when maintenance is withdrawn as a strategy of holding populations in the city rather than sustaining them as citizens. Through an inventory of tactics of making live, including managing storage, seepage, crafting extensions and ventilation, and creating barriers, I trace a method of dwelling that makes it possible to live with unreliable concrete. Here, concrete's disassembly is not only material but social and temporal, unfolding through abandonment, labour, and the reorganisation of who stays and who moves. These practices reveal continuous, materially constrained labour and an internal geography of difference between "original allottees" (zaati gharwale) and "migrant tenants" (kirayadar).

Two decades after construction, deterioration shapes both the labour of staying and the conditions of leaving. Concrete demands work to sustain habitation while enabling movement elsewhere, revealing how the slow unmaking of built environments aligns with state logics that render populations available for displacement and, increasingly, disposability.

Vanshika Singh recently completed her PhD at the Department of Geography, National University of Singapore. Her dissertation, 'Tactics of Waiting: Youth Improvising a Lawaris Basti', examines how young people navigate and inhabit conditions of urban precarity in neighbourhoods marked by suspension and abandonment in Hyderabad. Over the past decade, her work has engaged with multiple neighbourhoods in the city, focusing on questions of urban citizenship, lived environments, and essential infrastructures. Her research explores how materials and infrastructures mediate relationships between residents and the state, particularly in contexts of breakdown, repair, and abandonment. As an extension of her doctoral work, she has incubated a Water Observatory with the Hyderabad Urban Lab through philanthropic grant-making, foregrounding repair tradespersons in the city and developing retrofitting strategies to make everyday engagements with water and allied materials more enabling. Her broader research examines how infrastructures are inhabited, negotiated, and reworked in everyday urban life.

Indigenising Concrete: An Alternative History of Lime, Brick and Other Interlopers

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The arrival and spread of cement concrete across colonial Asia, at first glance, appears as a straightforward narrative of inevitable and linear technological modernity. By the mid 20th century, concrete gradually supplanted the wide range of building materials that had been practiced for centuries. But a closer look at the building worlds of the 19th and 20th centuries challenges the idea of concrete as a universal material that arrived and modernised everything. The first large-scale use of Portland Cement for casting concrete blocks at Karachi Harbour around 1870 followed British specifications, but improvised and economised with local stone, and depended on the services of local masons and other labourers. The idea of concrete had arrived on the subcontinent's shores but cement had to be imported, which made it expensive. The next two decades saw extensive efforts to standardise local limes to produce cement through the formation of the Cement Experiments Division within the colonial Public Work Department. Meanwhile, engineers and local builders simply started using lime to make concrete. By the early 1900s, scientific knowledge of reinforced concrete gained currency. While metropolitan regions witnessed an uptick in reinforced concrete, builders in other provinces and rural locations across traditional brick producing geographies such as the Indo-Gangetic plain took to reinforcing masonry structures, producing the somewhat unusual system of reinforced brickwork which remained popular well into the 1940s. In yet other situations such as the mass housing in the model towns of Punjab, cement was added to earthen construction to produce soil-cement or soil-concrete.

Given the temporal and geographic spread of these forms, I argue that they cannot be dismissed as mere variations or aberrations. Rather, they persistently carry alternative epistemologies of construction - be it labour, ecology, craft, or local agency - into colonial and modern concrete. But their historiographic absence in dominant histories of concrete erases not only the materials themselves, but also the labouring hands and minds behind the practices. In this paper, I explore two threads. First, I show how lime, brick and soil, in complex ways, entangled with, existed alongside, and arguably even resisted colonial hegemony as persistent local threads within an apparently universal technology. Second, I explore the interactivity between these materials and the emergent qualities of concrete at the different moments in time to outline how their properties operated within but also transformed the very idea of concrete itself. It was precisely their properties and histories of existing use that drew lime, brick, and soil into the processes of concrete construction. It became evident then that concrete thus was almost never singular or stable. It was continuously reimagined and 'recast' through encounters with local materials and practices. Most importantly, these material 'interlopers' in the history of concrete signal the possibility of alternative ecological futures as well, where concrete may employ materials with lower embodied energy, reparability, and the better engagement of local resources and human practices.

Gauri Bharat is an architectural historian who works on material cultures, construction history, and the everyday built environments of indigenous communities in South Asia. She is the author and editor of three books with Routledge, Bloomsbury, and SAGE-Yoda Press, and has received research grants from the Graham Foundation and the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme. Gauri engages actively with non-academic audiences through initiatives such as the Young Heritage Explorers Programme with the Centre for Heritage Conservation, CRDF. Her pedagogic work has been recognised with the Berkeley Prize Teaching Fellowship and the Erasmus Teaching Mobility grant. She is currently researching the history of concrete in colonial South Asia, and serves as Professor and Dean of the School of Architecture at Anant National University, Ahmedabad.

**Words and Worlds:
Concrete Aspirations in Homemaking in Village India**

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This research forges connections between evolutionary metanarratives of change found within post-colonial histories of Indian modernity and microhistories that represent the nature of ongoing material transformation in rural habitats in India. Concrete becomes integral to the developmental imagination of independent India as the quintessential material of modernism (Ferro 1980), manifesting itself in dams termed as 'Temples of the Future' (Khilnani 1997). The growing hegemony of industrial capital led to increased production, making cement as readily available as a bag of chips! Taking a qualitative approach, I analyse semi-structured interviews with the inhabitants, drawing upon narratives from the field across three regions, Poonch in Jammu and Kashmir, Birbhum in Bengal and Barmer in Rajasthan, foregrounding how cement and concrete become emblematic of 'becoming modern' in village homes in India.

Pivoting on the everyday words 'kacchā-pakkā' (raw-cooked or temporary-permanent) to enter the dialectics of tradition and modernity (Madan 1977, Lahiri 2025), it analyses matters of materiality used in home building. The study further elaborates on the correlation between the lifeworld of the communities, indigenous ways of building/keeping and the natural materials from the locale used to build traditional houses. Focusing on concrete's effect on sociality and culture, I examine how construction with cement-concrete led to a shift not only in the architecture of the house but also in the lifeworld of the inhabitants, community ties and ecological worldview. Issues of building-rebuilding, renewal, labour, gender and social aspiration are foregrounded. These perspectives, I argue, reveal a political agency embedded within building materials that alters human decision-making, social relations and power structures. Concrete use in village homes in India becomes more than a building material and transcends to be an actant in human lives, allowing a 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2004).

Parul Kiri Roy is an architect, academician and architectural historian, who primarily engages with the idea of architecture as an outcome of occupied space, of people's needs and experience of the built environment. Currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture, School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, she explores the correlation between education and the practice of art and architecture in our country. Haunted strongly by the holy spectre of modernism, her pedagogical practice of teaching 'studio' and her research involves a continuous engagement and contestation with terms such as the vernacular and the modern. She has completed her PhD titled, *The Kacchā- Pakkā Transformation: Modernisation of the House in Rural India*. The research focuses on tracing the genealogy of everyday terms to their institutionalisation within official building taxonomies, role of materiality and material perception in the changing experience of the rural dwelling and how the house becomes a mode of representation of the self. Parul is also actively engaging with marginalised communities through several social initiatives and is the Head of Delhi Chapter for the Council for Art and Social Practice (CASP) and the Founder of INDES; Investigating Design.

Concrete Chronopolitics: Islands, Time, and Post-history

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Islands, imagined and realized in Western and colonial imaginaries as enclosures and intensified theatres of power, have long served as a means to disrupt or restructure time itself. Colonial prisons, like progressive utopias, were understood in the mold of what anthropologist Marshall Sahlins termed “islands of history”: that is, as spaces outside of time. Despite indigenous epistemologies that cast islands within open and archipelagic networks of sociality and exchange, the fantasy of isolation as removing subjects from collective temporalities lives on, in built projects as well as speculative media.

Present examples mirror J.G. Ballard’s *Concrete Island*, in which the median of a London motorway becomes an inescapable condition (and in which the narrator becomes a high-modernist Crusoe within his own city).

This paper analyzes this condition in the contemporary, and the ongoing role of concrete in producing varieties of contradictory or paradoxical experiences of time: at once instantaneous and geological. It will explore this phenomenon via the “concrete” examples of Guantanamo Bay, and Jurong Island in Singapore. Here, material and constructive technologies complement legal and cartographic taxonomies to restructure the cycles of nature and inhabitation, and the tempi of inter-tidal conditions or seasonal migrations of beach sands and other materials. Ultimately, I argue that this “war on time” not only underpins a collective experience of the “end of history,” but a re-articulation of the real itself.

Joshua Comaroff is Assistant Professor of Architecture at National University of Singapore. He is a cultural geographer and designer. Joshua has published writing about architecture, urbanism, religion, and politics, with an Asian focus. He is the author of *Spectropolis: The Enchantment of Capital in Singapore* (University of Minnesota Press, 2025) and co-author of *Horror in Architecture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023). Joshua is a prior recipient of Harvard University’s Wheelwright Fellowship, and his work with Lekker Architects (with Ong Ker-Shing) has twice won the President’s Design Award, as well as SIA Design of the Year and URA’s Architectural Heritage Award.

**Leviathans and the Concrete Pump:
Engineering Landscape, Labor, and Management in Shanghai, 1979–1988**

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This paper re-centers engineering technology in China's post-reform economic and urban transitions. While construction histories of China primarily focus on Mao-era hydraulic projects, I extend the materialist approach to the early Reform-era construction boom. Moving beyond institutionalist and human-centric narratives, I examine how the concrete pump—a postwar German technology first deployed at scale in 1979 Shanghai's Baosteel—reengineered both built and economic landscapes during the first post-reform decade. I argue that everyday engineering practices served as an infrastructural yet overlooked crucible where the socialist state and multinational corporations—the “Leviathans”—negotiated their objectives and instruments to produce a new techno-economic regime.

Through micro-historical analyses of internationally financed architectural projects between 1979 and 1988, this study demonstrates how the concrete pump reframed urban development as a set of technical imperatives: it produced new urban spaces through the radical reorganization of construction sites and logistics; it transformed labor relations by replacing Mao-era mass mobilization with a human-machine hybridity that subordinated the worker's sensory experience to mechanical pace and calculable parameters; and it necessitated new forms of engineering and managerial expertise to stabilize automated material flows. Through the routinization of vertical material conveyance, the concrete pumping technology instantiated a new regime of temporal and economic efficiency. I foreground how the city's “pumped transition” established new forms of authority that bypassed centralized economic protocols while forging new technocratic hierarchies, revealing the mediating role of engineering technology in reshaping the governing and spatial logic of contemporary China.

Zengxin Wen is a PhD Candidate in architecture at Tongji University and was a visiting graduate fellow at MIT (2023–24). His research intersects 20th-century architectural histories, urban tech governance, and the political economy of design. His current work focuses on how transnational architectural projects capitalized the built environment in post-reform China. His work has been published in *Architectural Journal* and presented at interdisciplinary platforms including the Harvard Kennedy School, the Fairbank Center for Chinese Studies, the Association for Asian Studies, and the Society of Architectural Historians. Zengxin has also worked extensively as a historian-curator for exhibitions at the Venice Biennale, the Curitiba Biennale, Aedes (Berlin), SUSAS (Shanghai), the MIT City Science Lab, and for the Centre Pompidou X West Bund Museum Project.

Cast in Stone?

Shifting Socio-temporalities and the Changing (built) Environment in Northern Laos

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The construction boom that is currently transforming the (built) environment of northern Laos manifests in various forms – from larger infrastructural projects expanding, extraction sites or limestone, sand and gravel puncturing the upland landscape, shops for building materials lining up at the roads around provincial towns, but also in a rising number of concrete aspirational houses changing the face of rural locales.

Building in concrete – instead of timber and bamboo – goes along with manifold socio-environmental changes – some of which can be expected while others may be unanticipated and unfold insidiously. The latter relate especially to concrete's temporal features and effects: signalling modernity and progress, concrete entails the promise of permanence, appearing to be 'cast in stone'. Yet, how do socio-temporal processes, so far accommodated by temporally more flexible building materials such as bamboo, respond to the changing temporal horizon associated with concrete?

Taking a closer look, however, concrete does not live up to its promise of permanence. In contexts of autoconstruction, variations in the production of the notoriously idiosyncratic mix that concrete constitutes and contingencies of the construction process enhance concrete's obsolescence. Other than bamboo and timber left overs from decomposed structures, concrete rubble has limited potential for re-use and re-cycle and will be a new arrival, after plastic, in the increasingly anthropocentric landscapes of rural mainland Southeast Asia.

The proposed paper will explore the processes of dis/assembling of concrete's environments based on long-term and ongoing ethnographic research, with a focus on the interlocking of concrete's environments but also socialities and temporalities.

Rosalie Stolz is a postdoctoral researcher at University of Cologne's Global South Studies Center where she leads the project *Construction Pioneers: Building Innovation in Upland Northern Laos* funded by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (project blog: <https://blog.uni-koeln.de/construction-pioneers/>). Before starting in Cologne, she held a Guest Professorship at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin. Intrigued by the manifold implications of the pertinent concrete construction boom in northern Laos, she currently explores the entanglements of materiality, house transformations and socio-environmental change. She is the author of the book *Living Kinship, Fearing Spirits* (NIAS Press, 2021) and co-editor of the volume *Houses Transformed* (Berghahn, 2024). Her work was published in various journals including *American Anthropologist*, *Ethnos*, *Social Anthropology*, *Social Analysis* and *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* among others. Earlier this year, she co-edited the volume *Being Present. Emerging Ethnographic Perspectives and the Study of Laos* was published by NUS Press.

**Cracks in Concrete:
From Speculative Learning in Shadow Places to
Experiments with Post-Concrete Futures**

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Since the mid-20th century, rapid urbanization across Asian cities has driven extensive concrete construction, making concrete the second most consumed material after water. However, recent studies reveal that while modern concrete is preferred by builders, architects, planners and citizens for its material advantages, the environmental and social entanglements that concrete encounters along its commodity chain remain a critical concern. For one, concrete produces 'shadow places' or the distant sites where precarious livelihoods and neighborhoods struggle against the environmental and social ills of concrete. In earlier papers (Placino & Rugkhapan, 2024; 2025; Placino & Gibson, 2022), I opened up the cracks of concrete to argue that shadow places in the Philippines, for example, are not only sites of intense insecurity but also spaces of livelihood diversification. Peri-urban producers of concrete inputs (informal aggregate miners) and urban housing consumers (middle class residents) offer strategic resistance to the concrete industry as they continue to suffer from and counter uneven urban development. In this paper, I explore a range of speculative thoughts and creative collective actions aimed at addressing these socio-ecological concerns, ones that prefigure a post-concrete world. I trace a travel-learning activity conducted with a hybrid research collective of informal mining households and diverse building materials. I argue that the experiments, materialities, and organisational forms presented are not one-size-fits-all models for transformation but sources of inspiration for livelihood and urban transition. Framing them as such underscores the contingency of prefigurative practices in the place specific contexts from which they emerge.

Pryor Placino is an economic and development geographer with extensive experience in qualitative research and community capacity building across the Philippines, Australia and Thailand. He is a Postdoctoral Researcher for the Sago+ Project at the University of Canberra and recently concluded a research fellowship at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University. His research focuses on livelihood practices for surviving well together, the political ecologies of technological and social innovation, and (post)development strategies for strengthening resilience and wellbeing in agricultural and periurban communities. Pryor's paper on the shadow places of concrete has recently been translated into Spanish and published in *Medio Ambiente y Urbanización*. His other publications appear in *Environment and Urbanization*, *World Development*, *Buildings and Cities*, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, *The Handbook of Diverse Economies*, and *Future Cities Laboratory Indicia 03*. Pryor sits on the Board of Directors of the Community Economies Institute.

**Stabilized Earth:
Urban Tropical Circulations in Search of Concrete Alternatives**

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Asia was faced with an urban crisis in the aftermath of the Second World War and continued decolonial conflicts. As cities ballooned with refugees and squatters, housing became a key concern for newly self-governing states, many of which requested for technical assistance from the Commonwealth and the United Nations. International urban experts, aligned with officials from counterpart countries, were concerned with lowering the prohibitive costs of modern building and making “low-cost housing” accessible to all citizens. To do so, they set out to find local material alternatives that could replace expensive cement, sand, and steel imports. This paper follows the trajectory of stabilized earth (also called “rammed earth” or “landcrete”) construction, a technique that uses existing soils to create sturdy walls, as promoted by the UN and the Building Research Station (BRS) in Britain during the late 1940s and 1950s. This paper traces the itineraries of two Georges: George Anthony Atkinson, colonial liaison from the BRS, and George Frederick Middleton, an Australian expert from the Commonwealth Experimental Building Station, who consulted for the UN across Israel, India, Ceylon, Singapore, Pakistan, and the Philippines. Both experts were embedded within a global circulation of urban experts invested in their experiments in concrete alternatives. However, the short-lived career of concrete alternatives reveals firstly the isomorphisms of continued imperialism, postwar international aid, and postcolonial aspirations that undergirds the movement of urban expertise in the postwar “tropics”— itself a geographical category drawn from colonial parlance. Next, the material’s career illuminates the manifold paths that were considered but ultimately not taken by postcolonial states, suggesting that the pursuit of concrete was not the only possible path leading towards urban modernity. This paper proposes that any history of concrete’s sociocultural ecologies in Asia has to be appreciated against a virtual history of building material experimentation.

Marcus Yee is a doctoral candidate at Yale University writing an interscalar history of the urbanizing planet situated in postwar tropical Asia. His multisited and transdisciplinary research focuses on urban historical interconnections between India, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Thailand, while bringing history into conversation with climate research. His work is supported by the Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Innovation Fellowship and the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale. He received a BA from the University of Hong Kong in Earth Systems Science and History with a minor in Thai, and was awarded the Centenary Prize in History, Wang Gungwu Prize for Undergraduate Students in History, and the HKU Foundation Entrance Scholarship for President’s Scholars. At Yale University, he was a Whitney Humanities Center Fellow in the Environmental Humanities. His academic publications can be found in the *Journal of Asian Studies* and *Urban Climate*.

Reimagining Concrete: Infrastructure, Decarbonization, and Material Transitions in Japan

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This paper examines how concrete is being reconceptualized by Asian infrastructure operators under pressure to decarbonize. Focusing on airports, I investigate how planners, policymakers, and engineers are reimagining the future of concrete—both materially and politically. Airports provide an insightful lens: representing one of the most concrete-dependent infrastructural typologies, yet increasingly expected to project low-carbon futures.

The paper develops this argument by investigating material innovations at Japan's busiest aviation hub and largest construction firm. The first case focuses on a new terminal at Tokyo Haneda that deploys a hybrid timber–steel structure to advance the airport's decarbonization strategy. The second case studies Kajima Corporation's efforts to introduce reduced-cement mixes that use recycled cement and blast-furnace slag substitution. Taken together, these cases show that concrete is not simply being displaced by “greener” alternatives. Instead, its role is being reworked through two parallel strategies: selective subtraction, in which concrete retreats from visible and/or substitutable building elements; and selective reformulation, whereby concrete remains central to the construction process, but in lower-carbon or recirculated forms.

I argue that this dual movement marks an important shift in the material politics of infrastructure. Concrete is no longer the unquestioned medium of expansion; increasingly, it is a substance whose continued use must be justified environmentally, technically, and rhetorically. Yet this does not amount to a post-concrete condition: rather, it produces new concrete dis/assemblages in which timber, steel, slag, recycled cement, and operational needs are recombined into revised infrastructural practices.

By reading airports as sites where concrete's legitimacy is being renegotiated rather than simply undone, the paper contributes to broader debates on concrete's environments and temporalities in Asia. In so doing, it reveals how climate adaptation is being pursued less through concrete's disappearance than through its strategic redesign.

Max Hirsh (PhD, Harvard) is Managing Director of the Airport City Academy and a leading expert on airports and urban development. His current book project, tentatively titled *The Life Cycle of Infrastructure*, focuses on sustainable building technologies, life-cycle planning approaches, and pathways of infrastructural expertise. Max is the author of *Airport Urbanism* (Minnesota, 2016) and *Infrastructure and the Remaking of Asia* (Hawaii, 2023). His research has been published in *China Quarterly*, *East Asian Science, Technology, and Society* (EASTS), *History and Technology*, and *South East Asia Research*.

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Bosman Batubara is Research Fellow in the Asian Urbanisms Cluster, Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. His research interests are uneven and speculative relations of capitalism (and urbanization) within and beyond the city, in horizontal and vertical direction, involving human and non-human, above and below ground, and encompassing the dimension of time. His works have appeared in *Antipode*, *Geoforum*, *WIREs Water*, *Human Geography*, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, and *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*.

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Jiat-Hwee Chang is Dean's Chair Associate Professor of Architecture and Research Leader of the Science, Technology and Society Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He is an interdisciplinary researcher working at the intersections of architecture, environment, and STS (Science, Technology and Society). He is the author of *A Genealogy of Tropical Architecture: Colonial Networks, Nature and Technoscience* (2016), which was awarded an International Planning History Society Book Prize 2018, and the co-author of *Everyday Modernism: Architecture and Society in Singapore* (2022), which was awarded the Society of Architectural Historians of Great Britain's Colvin Prize 2023. Jiat-Hwee is currently working on a book manuscript on the socio-cultural histories and techno-politics of air-conditioning and climate change in urban Asia.

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Justin Chun-Him Lau is Postdoctoral Fellow with the Science, Technology, and Society (STS) Research Cluster at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. He obtained his PhD in Anthropology from the Australian National University. As a social anthropologist, he focuses on the culture of disposal and environmental anthropology. His primary research interests include discard studies, feminist STS, and disability studies. Currently, he is developing a research project that explores limestone mining and critical minerals in Asia. This project specifically examines the relationship between extractivism and conservation in a limestone mountain in Cambodia. More broadly, it investigates how limestone resources may influence contemporary climate politics and the quest for "sustainable" cities.

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Patrick Flores is Chief Curator of the National Gallery Singapore. He is the Director of the Philippine Contemporary Art Network. He was a Visiting Fellow at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1999. Among his publications are *Painting History: Revisions in Philippine Colonial Art* (1999); *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia* (2008); *Art After War: 1948-1969* (2015); and *Raymundo Albano: Texts* (2017). He co-edited *The Modern in Southeast Asian Art: A Reader* with T. K. Sabapathy (2022). He was a Guest Scholar of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles in 2014. He was the Artistic Director of Singapore Biennale 2019 and Curator of the Philippine and Taiwan Pavilions at the Venice Biennale in 2015 and 2022. His work focuses on the art and curatorial history of Southeast Asia and Philippine colonial and modern art history.

Saptarshi Sanyal is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Architecture at the National University of Singapore. He is an architectural historian who examines spaces and buildings as processes rather than mere objects in historical narratives. His research questions ideas of modernity, traversing postcolonial studies, construction history, production studies, and the framing of architectural authorship. Saptarshi's current book project adopts a connected histories approach to uncover novel spatial imaginaries and experimentations within architecture during South Asia's colonial rule in the twentieth century. It foregrounds how interpersonal empathies and contacts, exchanges of personnel, knowledge and materials across cultures and geographies translated into and transformed modes of producing buildings and inhabiting space.

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