

SIGNS OF URBAN CHANGE

An Interdisciplinary Symposium

Birkbeck, University of London, 17 October 2019



Sponsored by:

**The Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities (BIH)
The Birkbeck Institute for Social Research (BISR)
Department of Applied Linguistics and Communication
Department of Geography**

Co-organisers:

**Jackie Jia Lou, Applied Linguistics and Communication
Melissa Butcher, Geography**

SIGNS OF URBAN CHANGE

Since the 1990s, urban scholars have turned their attention to the role of language and discourse in mediating urban change (e.g. Hastings 1999). Extending this 'linguistic turn' in urban studies, this symposium broadens the empirical focus to include semiotic objects and systems beyond language to include maps, visual facades, and social media platforms. It brings together cultural geographers, sociolinguists, urban historians, media and communication scholars to discuss how they approach these signs of urban changes from their respective disciplinary perspectives and explore common ground during the day. The event in the evening invites community organisers, public researchers, and urban artists to join the dialogue by presenting how they have each responded to urban change using maps, stories, and material objects. The symposium will conclude with a panel discussion regarding how academics could more effectively collaborate with community organisations and the public to contribute towards positive urban changes.

LIST OF SPEAKERS

Giorgia Aiello, Associate Professor in Media and Communication, University of Leeds

Melissa Butcher, Professor in Social and Cultural Geography, Birkbeck, University of London

Phil Cohen, Emeritus Professor at the Centre for Cultural Studies Research, University of East London and Co-founder of Living Maps

Matthew Davies, Professor of Urban History, Birkbeck, University of London and Executive Dean of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy

Johan Järlehed, Senior Lecturer in Languages and Cultures, University of Gothenburg

Jackie Jia Lou, Lecturer in Sociolinguistics, Birkbeck, University of London

Xiao Ma, Project Researcher and Coordinator, China Exchange

Les Morgan, Ex-docker Worker from Tilbury

Ali Pretty, Founding Member and Artistic Director, Kinetika

Scott Rodgers, Senior Lecturer in Media Theory, Birkbeck, University of London

Jazoo Yang, Korean-born Mixed Media Artist based in Berlin

PROGRAMME: DAY SESSION

- 10:00 – 10:30 Registration
- 10:30 – 11:00 Welcome & introduction
- 11:00– 11:30 Signs of urban change in Gothenburg: investigating segregation and gentrification from a linguistic landscape perspective (Johan Järhled)
- 11:30 – 12:00 Imagining the future, (re)imagining place: examining urban processes of place-making, creativity and social cohesion in east London’s Olympic redevelopment (Melissa Butcher)
- 12:00 – 12:30 Layers of London: mapping 2,000 years of change in London (Matthew Davies)
- 12:30 – 14:00 Lunch
- 14:00 – 14:30 The visual-material politics of urban change (Giorgia Aiello)
- 14:30 – 15:00 Social media platforms and the phenomenology of urban transformation (Scott Rodgers)
- 15:00 – 15:30 The impact of urban change on linguistic landscapes: a tale of two Chinatowns (Jackie Lou)
- 15:30 – 16:00 The Making of Chinatown: recording and sharing oral histories of London’s Chinatown since the 1960s (Xiao Ma)
- 16:00 – 17:00 Panel discussion: workshop themes and interdisciplinary collaboration
- 17:00 – 18:00 Evening break (tea, coffee, nibbles)

PROGRAMME: EVENING SESSION

- 18:00 – 18:15 Welcome and Introduction
- 18:15 – 18:45 Our kind of town?: citizen mapping and the re-
imagination of London (Phil Cohen)
- 18:45 – 19:15 Discovering, collecting, and 'stealing'? (Jazoo
Yang)
- 19:15 – 19:45 Local storytelling in global cities (Ali Pretty with
Les Morgan)
- 19:45 – 20:30 Panel discussion: cross-sector collaborations

ABSTRACTS

GIORGIA AIELLO

The visual-material politics of urban change

This talk focuses on how the urban built environment is visually represented and materially fashioned to communicate the city as world-class—for example, through the adoption of globalizing urban regeneration formats like that of the ‘urban village’, and the selection of particular combinations of styles and textures in the (re)design of urban environments. With examples from Leeds, Seattle (USA), Bologna (Italy), and a number of second-tier cities competing for the title of European Capital of Culture, I discuss some of the ways in which these aesthetic agendas applied to urban form may ultimately exclude less profitable yet vital versions and visions of urban life. In doing so, this work focuses specifically on the visual-material and broadly multimodal dimensions of cities to highlight the importance of the urban built environment as a major form/force of mediation and mediatization in advanced capitalism. On the one hand, the urban built environment communicates specific discourses and ideologies, and therefore also quite literally mediates the performances of our everyday life. On the other hand, it is also often mobilized as mediatized and aestheticized currency for the remote publics found across powerful global marketplaces such as tourism, public communication, real estate, and commerce.

Bio

Giorgia Aiello is Associate Professor in Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. Her research focuses on the politics of visual, multimodal, and material communication. She is especially interested in how social, cultural, and political identities are formed, how both difference and diversity are negotiated, and how inequalities are maintained or overcome through digital imagery, the urban built environment, design, branding, material culture, and everyday lifestyles. Her work privileges a critical perspective on issues of cultural production, with an interdisciplinary approach rooted in social semiotics, cultural sociology, and cultural studies. Some of her recent projects include: the edited book [*Communicating the City: Meanings, Practices, Interactions*](#) (with Matteo Tarantino and Kate Oakley; Peter Lang, 2017) and a special section of the [*International Journal of Communication*](#) titled "Going About the City: Methods and Methodologies for Urban Communication Research" (co-edited with Simone Tosoni, published in February 2016)

MELISSA BUTCHER

Imagining the future, (re)imagining place: examining urban processes of place-making, creativity and social cohesion in east London's Olympic redevelopment

Differing urban imaginaries, such as the 'global city', the 'creative city', and the 'smart-city', have dominated planning thought and practice in European and North American contexts in particular. These ideas are reproduced and circulated via policy documents, consultancies and visualisations that depict future visions of how cities ought to be. Becoming consolidated as taken-for-granted ways of acting on the urban, such spatial imaginaries attempt to produce a common understanding of which places and urban processes are worthy of investment, imparting particular neo-liberal values in the process. Conversely, spaces and people outside this imaginary can be stigmatised. Partial and selective, crystallizing into accounts of 'reality' in simplified narratives, dominant imaginaries can limit the complexity and multiplicity of a place, rendering inaudible, invisible or unacceptable alternative interpretations. To explore these ideas, this presentation is a preliminary visual documentation of how urban futures are being imagined in the built environment of the present, using the re-development of the London Olympic zone as a case study; focusing on the use of tropes of modernity, longevity, heritage and community in the International Quarter, Here East and Hackney Wick. This is an area that has been demarcated as a site for creative industry and digital economy regeneration projects as a means of revitalising a post-industrial landscape.

Bio

Melissa Butcher is Professor in Social and Cultural Geography at Birkbeck, University of London. Using visual and qualitative methodologies, her research examines questions of identity and belonging within contexts of cultural change, often at the intersection between globalisation and contested urban space. Melissa is currently a co-investigator on the ESRC-ICSSR funded project *Learning from small smart cities in India* (2018-2020), and was UK Principal Investigator in the Asian-European collaboration, *SINGLE: Urban Space, Cultural Encounter and Gendered Identities* (www.hera-single.de, 2013-16), in Delhi and Shanghai. She also works in London, exploring the impact of urban change and gentrification particularly on young people (www.hackneyashome.co.uk). Recent publications include: *Defying Delhi's enclosures* (2018); *Re-working encounter: the role of reflexivity in managing difference* (2018); *Managing Cultural Change: Reclaiming Synchronicity in a Mobile World* (Ashgate 2011), and *Dissent and Cultural Resistance in Asia's Cities* (ed. with S. Velayutham, Routledge 2009).

PHIL COHEN

Our kind of town ? : citizen mapping and the re-imagination of London

London has a long history of struggle for democratic rights. It has been the birthplace of many campaigns for social justice and sustained a political culture in which refugees and immigrants have made vital contributions to the intellectual and cultural life of the city and the nation. However, the current disconnect between the everyday experience of many Londoners and the increasingly complex and disorganised systems of governance to which they are subjected, the widespread withdrawal from civic engagement into privatised spheres of personal fulfilment, the weakening of urban bonds which enabled diverse communities to flourish, and the vastly accelerated flows of people, goods and information - all these factors have put in question what exactly it means to be a 'Londoner' today.

In this talk, Phil Cohen will discuss a number of political, conceptual and methodological issues which have arisen from the research and development of *A Citizen's Atlas of London*. This project, initiated by the Living Maps Network, is setting out to train and support citizen mappers located in regeneration hot spots across London, enabling them to use a variety of participatory mapping approaches to explore and represent their own alternative visions of the city's past, present and future.

To what extent can participatory action research be considered an effective tool for doing citizen social science? How far can an ethno-cartographic approach succeed in releasing the sociological imagination of groups who find themselves marginalized in the political and planning process, disqualified by the educational system, and condemned to an increasingly precarious economic existence? To address these questions Phil will present and discuss a video about the project which features map making sessions with a senior citizen's group and with a mixed ability group of children and young people, both drawn from working class and minority ethnic communities in East London's docklands which have suffered historic neglect by the civic planning authorities, but now find themselves caught up in a process of accelerated gentrification.

Bio

Phil Cohen is Emeritus Professor at the Centre for Cultural Studies Research University of East London. He is the co-founder of Living Maps, a network of academics, artists and activists concerned to develop a creative and critical approach to the social mapping of the city and editor -at- large of its online journal Living Maps Review. Further information@ www.philcohenworks.com

MATTHEW DAVIES

Layers of London: mapping 2,000 years of change in London

The Layers of London project (www.layersoflondon.org) seeks to uncover and map thousands of histories of London, working with individuals and groups across the city. It uses crowd-sourcing in conjunction with digitised and georeferenced historic maps of London and its boroughs, showing how the metropolis has developed over the centuries. This presentation will introduce the project, and discuss its evolution and the technical and methodological challenges involved in building maps of London's changing physical, social and cultural histories.

Bio

Matthew Davies is Executive Dean of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy at Birkbeck, University of London, and Professor of Urban History. A historian of medieval and early modern London, he is director of the 'Layers of London project' which is based at the Institute of Historical Research and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the IHR Trust.

JOHAN JÄRLEHED

Signs of urban change in Gothenburg: investigating segregation and gentrification from a linguistic landscape perspective

In my talk, I will present an ongoing research project on the role of language in segregation and gentrification processes. The project aims to clarify how segregation and gentrification processes interact with each other, and how they are (re)produced in the linguistic landscape. In three interconnected working packages - signs in place, experiences of place, and texts about place -, we develop a multi-sited, embodied and mobile linguistic ethnography in order to investigate the visibility of specific languages in different neighbourhoods, explain how these languages are used for different functions, and how people's lived experiences of language values and usage affect their actions and patterns of movement. The project centres on four Gothenburg neighbourhoods with different socioeconomic, linguistic and spatial characteristics and in this talk I will present preliminary data from two of them. Drawing on our initial findings, I would like to share some thoughts on, first, the dynamic of language, gentrification and segregation, and second, on methodological issues related to the perception and study of visibility-invisibility, presence-absence, centre-periphery, sign-density and social status of languages and ethnicities.

<https://www.researchgate.net/project/The-role-of-language-in-segregation-and-gentrification-processes-Linguistic-landscapes-in-Gothenburg>

Bio

Johan Järlehed is a researcher and teacher at the Department of Languages and Literatures at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. His research centres on the interaction of language, images and space in processes of social change. To investigate this, Johan works primarily with social-semiotic, discourse-analytic and ethnographic concepts and methods.

JACKIE JIA LOU

A tale of two Chinatowns: exploring the impact of urban planning policy on linguistic landscape

Recent and ongoing transformations in Chinatowns around the globe have concerned sociologists, historians, geographers, sociolinguists as well as journalists, community activists, and urban planners. This talk explores how the linguistic landscapes of Chinatowns are shaped by the urban planning policies of the cities where they are located. Drawing on an extensive ethnography of Washington, DC's Chinatown and a current project in London, I first compare these two neighbourhood's shop signs in terms of language varieties, script choices, and visual and material designs. The observed differences in the linguistic landscapes are then traced back to the divergent discourse trajectories of urban planning policies in Washington, DC and London since the 1980s. The comparative analysis shows that, despite their best intentions to preserve cultural heritage, some urban planning policies might inadvertently led to linguistic and cultural misrepresentations, while others could contribute towards a changing yet dynamic space which encourages linguistic and cultural diversity. The talk concludes with some practical implications of this comparative study for urban planning professionals and community groups who are concerned with the future of Chinatowns.

Bio

Jackie Jia Lou is Lecturer in Sociolinguistics at Birkbeck, University of London. Her research focuses on the relationship between language, space, and place, particularly through the empirical lens of linguistic landscape. Her work about Washington, DC's Chinatown has been publishes in several journal articles, a research monograph, and featured in community newspaper and on public radio. Her current research project 'Navigating the linguistic landscapes of London Chinatown: Spatial narrations of urban change' examines intergenerational perceptions of Chinatown through walking interviews.

XIAO MA

The Making of Chinatown: recording and sharing oral history stories of London's Chinatown since the 1960s

China Exchange, a charity based in the heart of London's Chinatown, has developed *The Making of Chinatown*, a large-scale project to gather, document and share the history of London's Chinatown from the 1960s to the present day through an exhibition. With funding awarded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund, we worked with volunteers and our communities to develop and archive the tangible and intangible heritage of Gerrard Street and the surrounding area.

Through our work to develop *Chinatown Stories*, our community-led walking tours, we found that there are very few documented histories on the development of what is now an iconic part of the London cultural landscape, Chinatown. As a charity that works to encourage an interest in China and the heritage of London's Chinatown, and [research by our CEO Freya Aitken-Turff into Chinatowns around the world](#), we know that we needed to create a focal point, a place where London-wide visitors and locals could come to understand Chinatown better and in an accessible way. Since April 2019 we have interviewed 26 people from a diverse range of culturally ethnic backgrounds, age, professions, and connections to Chinatown to help us understand how this area developed into what it is today. These oral history stories were shared in an exhibition *The Making of Chinatown* (14 June - 30 August 2019) along with materials from both formal and family archives showing how Chinatown was made and what it means to the people who have contributed to its development.

In this talk, I will share more details of the project, highlight personal stories reflecting the changes in Chinatown in terms of businesses, people, food and languages, and explore what the future holds for Chinatown.

Bio

Xiao Ma is a Project Researcher and Coordinator, China Exchange. Xiao has a passion for promoting cultural understanding and has experience with cross cultural facilitation in different fields. As a former London-based journalist, she had been writing about UK arts and culture for a Chinese audience for two years before exploring the art market with work experience at Christie's and leading British Asian art dealers. She later joined China Exchange where she enjoys sharing the vibrant Chinese culture, both old and new, in engaging ways.

ALI PRETTY WITH LES MORGAN

Local storytelling in global cities

Ali Pretty is the artistic director of Kinetika, an internationally renowned arts organisation that creates artistic projects engaging local communities to share stories in ways that encourage conversations between groups that wouldn't normally interact and to change perceptions of place and explore the possibilities for the future. Kinetika moved from East London to Thurrock in 2014 and has since then developed a strong relationship with the community of Tilbury. The connection has been made through and in collaboration with ex dock worker Les Morgan. Together Ali and Les have gathered support of the Tilbury on the Thames Trust, the charitable arm of the Port of Tilbury, Thurrock Council, the Arts Council and The Windrush Foundation to support the revival and development of the Tilbury Carnival. In 2018, Kinetika worked with local secondary school Gateway Academy to design and make a 4m high Docker puppet, that became an icon for Tilbury. Following that in July 2019, over 400 local people took part in the new Tilbury Windrush carnival. They will share the story of how this has come about, why it's timely, who has engaged, the impact to date and their vision for the future of the town.

Bio

Ali Pretty is best known as the founding member and artistic director of the international outdoor arts company - [Kinetika](#).

Kinetika is an internationally renowned company with a 21-year track record of combining world-class design with community projects to produce spectacular outdoor events that engage diverse audiences wherever they work. Founded by Ali in 1997, and inspired by her training in carnival arts in Trinidad and India, Kinetika now has an unrivalled reputation for working with local communities on projects that change the way people feel about where they live. From local community events in shopping centres, ceremonial boulevards and local high streets, to the Great Wall of China and the heart of Kolkata.

The charitable arm, Kinetika People, is known for its high-quality community engagement work, running participatory programmes, workshops and artist training schemes, which aim to nurture new artistic talent and engage communities, raising aspirations and building a sense of place. The commercial arm, Kinetika Design Studio, has been commissioned to create work for ceremonies at high profile events including FIFA World Cup 2009, the London Paralympic games/Team GB Parade in 2012 and the European Games 2015.

Ali has collaborated with and led teams of artists to deliver large-scale events to diverse audiences all over the world since her first experience as site designer and workshop coordinator for WOMAD (1985 – 1991). Her artistic direction and her hand-painted silk designs are renowned for their

quality, both in their individual style as well as their ability to engage and leave lasting legacies in communities and individuals alike.

In recent years Ali has been developing her practice as an artist in her own right. She creates transformational walking arts projects with diverse communities. Through these projects Ali brings people together by walking, talking and painting large-scale silk creations. She created 12 large-scale silks for the [Royal Opera House](#) that hung in the ROH Paul Hamlyn Hall during the Deloitte Ignite 2015 Festival.

Her most recent project, [Silk River](#) linked communities in London along the river Thames with those along the Hooghly, in West Bengal, as part of the 2017 UK/India celebrations. It is an international development of the pioneering place-making model that Ali has established since 2012, leading walking arts projects for festivals in Wiltshire, Isle of Wight, Lincolnshire, Essex and Thurrock, where she has established a new walking arts festival [Thurrock 100](#). (2015-18)

Les Morgan is an energetic, infectious good humoured 67 year-old ex-docker worker from Tilbury. Born to a Welsh father who was working on at Tilbury Riverside Station as a porter when he met Les's Mother at a dance in Gravesend, Les has strong, traditional working-class roots. His father was working the day the Empire Windrush arrived in 1948. Les has had a varied working life from a plumbing apprenticeship at ship repairs Green and Silley Weir in the 70s to selling ice creams, cleaning windows and working on plumbing and heating for the GLC. Through it all, singing has been very important to Les: as a choir boy until he turned 17 to playing in a duo. Morgan and Dean for 23 years. He played the Die Another Day after party having been spotted playing in a pub near to where the film was being shot. He is now in a band called No Nonsense. Since being made redundant in 2009. Les has thrown himself into the community in Tilbury. He says he has always wanted to do things for the town and most especially for the children. His natural enthusiasm and easy-going manner get him a long way. He loves to talk to people and connect them to each other.

He got involved with Kinetika in 2017 during the Silk River project and speaks with great pride and wonder at the walk-through Trafalgar Square and walking down Southend Pier with the silk flags. His wife also took part which he says was quite a feat as she is naturally shyer and retiring than him. Of Kinetika he says he has never known an organisation so good at bringing people together, especially in the close-knit but rather set in its ways town of Tilbury, where people can be hard to approach. He is immensely proud to see the different groups brought round the table for the Tilbury carnival project this year and delighted that so many children have the opportunity to be involved in the carnival and in making the flags. He is a tremendous ambassador for the company and a huge support for any project. Les is involved in Kinetika's T100 walking festival and last year, sang with the Chilean Theatre Company who brought their pop up public kitchen to Tilbury for the T100 culminating celebrations.

SCOTT RODGERS

Social media platforms and the phenomenology of urban transformation

In this paper, I will outline conceptual, epistemological and political orientations for approaching platforms, and specifically social media, as emergent 'environments' for experiencing urban change. Drawing on recent research into the relationships of social media and local political controversies, I will argue for a practice-oriented, phenomenological perspective on social media platforms as experienced urban media infrastructures. Contrary to occasional framings of phenomenology as apolitical, this approach offers an alternative form of platform critique, founded not on suspicion or the critical exposure of platforms as such, but rather understanding the possibilities and openings platforms might create as indefinite environments of and for articulating the politics of urban transformation.

Bio

Scott Rodgers is Senior Lecturer in Media Theory in the Department of Film, Media and Cultural Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. His research specialises in the relationships of media and cities and the geographies of communication. He also has interests in media production, journalism, urban politics, media philosophy and ethnographic methodologies. Scott is currently exploring the convergence between digital platforms and the making of contemporary urbanism, locality and publicness.

JAZOO YANG

Discovering, collecting, and 'stealing'?

In this talk, Berlin-based Korean artist Jazoo Yang will share two series of her art projects responding to the impact of urban change.

From 2015 to 2017, Yang worked on an art project in Busan, the second largest city in Korea. At that time, more than 100 towns in Busan were being redeveloped or planned to be redeveloped. In the old towns that were disappearing due to redevelopment: Gamman-dong, Choryang, Oncheonjang, she scraped, gathered and re-assembled remnants of flaking paint, old wallpaper, rusted metal and the flotsam and jetsam of demolished and vacated sites, reconstituting them in the studio in acts of remembrance, sealing time and memory in resin.

This 'Materials series' is an amalgamation of the diverse, the distant, and the disregarded. Formed of the lost fragments of urban life that Yang rescues before their inevitable disappearance – remnants of a building's outer walls, scraps of wallpaper from an interior, the remains of antique tiles – these often silent, ignored objects are here magnified from the mundane, framed to acknowledge the immensity of the intimate. Yet what we see in Yang's works could easily have been taken from the space in which they hang. Yang's works, however, show how the past, present and future are fused in the very materiality of walls.

The "Dots" series, which is one of the most representative among Yang's work, started in Busan in 2015, when for the first time she covered the entire outer wall of an old empty house with her fingerprints alone and that house was due to be removed because of redevelopment. Then, she involved the local people and refugees, migrants in the next project in Russia and more recently in France.

In St. Petersburg during the exhibition *Crossing Borders/Crossing Boundaries*, the theme was extended to the subject of European migrants and refugee issues, including the situation in Korea. Yang imprinted fingerprints on the outer walls of the Street Art Museum with six illegal migrant workers in St Petersburg. While imprinting their fingerprints, they talked about their lives and memories as individuals, apart from the history or existence as refugees, migrants or artists.

In Besançon, France, more than 200 people, including refugees, immigrants, tourists from many different cities and countries, and local residents voluntarily participated in the production of this mural. If the works with Dots series in South Korea and Russia were still about her own experiences, the mural in France was purely about other people, about citizens. She talked with them when they were imprinting their fingerprints. Perhaps this work seems to have a different meaning depending on where it is done and with whom. In the same act of taking fingerprints as a record of the moment, Yang hopes that the memories of people across the border will be left on the walls.

Bio

Jazoo Yang is a Korean mixed-media artist based in Berlin. Her work often distorts public spaces to profound ends. With a mixture of concept-focused art and an intriguing visual palette, Yang's work questions the relationship between ourselves and the spaces we inhabit. Her more recent practice has focused on the transformation of housing in cities and the gentrification that is pushing local residents from their homes.