

Seeing Green: Speculative Urbanism in the Green Economy

Speaker: Dr Sarah Knuth
Environmental Studies Program, Oberlin College

Chair: Prof Jonathan Rigg, Department of Geography, NUS

Date/Time: Friday, 30 January 2015, 3.30pm – 5.00pm

Place: Earth Lab (AS2 02-03), Department of Geography, NUS

Abstract

As cities face global environmental change and other 21st century transformations, scholars must ask how neoliberal era urban restructuring has, and has not, equipped them for the epochal challenges of achieving sustainability and resilience. The research presented here examines San Francisco's green building and retrofitting efforts after the 2008 financial collapse as a window into how neoliberal developments continue to shape the character and priorities of early 21st century greening. During the Great Recession, San Francisco joined many other cities, the US government, and other powerful national economies in articulating ambitious visions of "green" economic recovery, an ecological modernist vision for the production of technologically advanced manufacturing jobs in renewable energy, energy efficient materials, and other environmental industries. The actual experience of green development has been far more checkered. The talk argues that today's green economic "success stories" like San Francisco's green building boom since 2008 demonstrate the ongoing influence of neoliberal processes, and how green urbanism is rearticulating them: inter-urban competition; the ongoing financialization of real estate development and the local state; the deepening, yet highly uneven, globalization of real estate development; and, critically, the creation and financialization of markets for novel kinds of "natural capital." Even as renewed urban financial experimentation and speculative real estate development promise badly needed resources for climate change mitigation needs like the rebuilding of energy-intensive urban landscapes, this mode of city-(re)building threatens to make greening increasingly exclusionary and volatile.

About the Speaker

Dr. Sarah Knuth completed a PhD in the Department of Geography at the University of California, Berkeley in May 2014 and is currently employed as a Visiting Assistant Professor in the Environmental Studies Program at Oberlin College. Her research investigates connections between cities' competitive strategies in an evolving global economy, new ideas in green economic development and environmental commodification, and ongoing transformations in the global financial system. Her work aims to advance discussions in critical urban studies, geographical political economy, and political ecology. She also draws on a longer-term academic and professional engagement with the human dimensions of climate change and urban climate change mitigation efforts, including a BS in Earth Sciences and an MS in Geography from the Pennsylvania State University. She is currently working on a series of articles on green real estate development, green gentrification, approaches in urban political economy and urban political ecology, the role of finance in global land grabs, and the legal geographies of finance. She is also co-editing a special issue of *Environment and Planning A* on legal-financial geographies. She has published or has articles under review in journals including *Antipode*, *The Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, *Applied Geography*, and *Local Environment*. Sarah's current or recently taught courses at Oberlin and Berkeley include Urban Political Ecology, Economic Geography of the Industrial World, Energy and Society, Environmentally Responsible Investing, Environment and Society, and Food and the Environment.

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