



High-resolution property: Digital enclosures on the urban frontier

Speaker: Associate Professor Tom Cowan
University of Nottingham

Chair: Professor Tim Bunnell
Department of Geography, NUS

Date/Time: 1 October 2026, Thursday at 12:00pm

Place: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Geography Earth Lab, AS2 #02-03

Abstract:

Over the past decade there has been a wave of digital experimentation explicitly aimed at securing the extended assetization of peri-urban land and integration of land data into new digital public infrastructures. In India this charge toward land's digital enclosure and datafication is being curated by a new configuration of state and private sector actors, seeking to consolidate land onto algorithmic market platforms and governance systems. Utilising new property technologies –the drone, algorithm and GIS platform – the state has aggressively sought to reorganise urban lifeworlds into visualizable, bankable land assets. Concurrently, clusters of geospatial and textual property data are being algorithmically sorted, linked and actioned, producing new ways of seeing the social, new subjects of property, and new avenues of accumulation. In this paper I draw on five years of fieldwork on the government of India's flagship digital land titling programme, SVAMITVA, to explore the emergent technological politics of drone enclosures on the urban frontier. In doing so, the paper explores both how projects of digital enclosure remain reliant upon the localised institutions, bureaucracies and moral economies in order to refashion common lands into "high-resolution" private property, and how this reliance cedes power to local actors and residents to distort and pixelate processes of enclosure and the broader datafication of propertied citizenship. The technopolitics of enclosure are thus understood as an emergent terrain of contestation on the urban frontier.

About the Speaker:

Tom Cowan is an Associate Professor of Urban Geography in the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham. Tom is the author of *Subaltern Frontiers: Agrarian City-Making in Gurgaon*, published by Cambridge University Press in 2022, and his recent work on the technopolitics of land on India's urban frontier has been supported by a British Academy Wolfson Fellowship in 2023 and the award of the Philip Leverhulme Prize in Geography in 2025.

Light refreshments will be served 30 minutes before the seminar.
