

## Urban future-making: Professional agency across time and scale

Research Training Group (RTG 2725)

HafenCity Universität Hamburg (HCU)  
Technische Universität Hamburg (TUHH)  
Universität Hamburg (UHH)

### Profile

When it comes to the future of cities, it seems that much is currently shaped by an absolute imperative to act. The future seems to be everywhere, and, fundamentally, at stake. Major ecological and social threats to the future of human settlements, and for the planet as a whole, need to be urgently addressed. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has further heightened the prevalent sense of crisis. **Against this backdrop, urban areas have become crucial sites where aspired pathways towards desirable futures are imagined, forecasted and variously negotiated.** More specifically, experts, administrative staff and policymakers are compelled to, as soon as possible, take far-reaching decisions and conceive of appropriate strategies and interventions that can reduce carbon emissions, energy consumption and resource use related to the urban built environment. This urgency to act derives primarily from *prospects for the future*, with looming expectations of ever-larger threats and risks to urban societies that must be addressed. Yet, the pressing need to act pre-emptively to tackle difficulties expected in the future is intricately interwoven with the immediate requirements of maintenance and adaptation that the *physical materiality of existing buildings and infrastructures* constantly generates.

This research training group mobilises the concept of “urban future-making” to refer to the activities of experts and administrators who seek to respond to the expected threats to urban societies with measures related to the urban built environment. At its core, **we understand urban future-making to include purposeful decisions and actions that impact the urban built environment with the aim of engendering transformative change.** Engaging in such urban future-making, professionals take decisions based on their expertise while negotiating political demands and accounting for their decisions in respect to, or even collaborating with, civil society. In doing so, these professionals form a highly diverse group of urban future-makers, found in the state administration, private sector, non-profit sector and civil society initiatives. Even though their role is of strategic significance for the futures of cities amid multiple crises, little is known about their core values and motivations, about the ways they (can) act, fail to act, or legitimise their agency, or about ways to engage their experience in a more fruitful way.

The aim of this research training group is **to highlight the crucial role of professionals as urban future-makers and investigate their agency in the face of multiple crises.** We maintain that experts and administrators dealing with the urban built environment are facing profound uncertainty. The pressing need to act, combined with rapid digitalisation-induced technological change and radically shifting constellations of actors, is fundamentally challenging established professional routines and knowledges. As classic modes of urban future-making, which had served to reduce or negotiate uncertainty in the past, increasingly appear insufficient, experts and administrators respond with experimental, adaptive and flexible attitudes in conceiving transformative urban change. Yet, in the face of a global context of multiple interdependencies and unknown time horizons of climate change, the everyday need to deal with the *here and now* of the local urban built environment involves fundamental scalar and temporal tensions. Against this backdrop, we ask **how, or whether, reflexive and responsible professional agency concerning urban future-making can be possible under present conditions.**

The key contribution of the proposed research training group is its explicit focus on the physical materiality of the built environment as key to understanding these temporal and scalar tensions in urban future-making. We offer **an ambitious theoretical framework that goes beyond the prevailing disciplinary division and advances academic debates by integrating systemic, governance-related and materiality-oriented foci of urban change** which are usually discussed independently. Regarding empirical analyses, the proposed training group promises **novel insights regarding mobility systems, energy provision and material use as interdependent fields of**

**action.** In these fields, claims for transformative changes are currently most articulated and experimentation is most pronounced. This focus promises an in-depth understanding of how experimental – and essentially short-term and small-scale – approaches interact with or add up to longer-term and more broadly adopted transformations.

**The innovative research approach of the training group consists in establishing systematic interdisciplinary dialogue and cross-fertilisation between reflection-oriented and solution-oriented approaches,** a practice that is still rare in scientific as well as professional arenas. The project will join together scholars and doctoral researchers from the social sciences (sociology, political science, urban studies and economic geography) and from academic disciplines related to the built environment (design, planning and engineering). This will allow placing reflections on how professionals *should/could act* into systematic dialogue with empirically grounded insights and understanding on how they *actually* act. To provide for coherence and empirical common ground, three forms of phenomena, i.e. labs, architectures and infrastructures, will be studied. These are currently mobilised and addressed in urban future-making as key sites, objects and vehicles of transformative change, each marked by distinct spatio-temporal modes of action.

**The qualification programme is tailored to implement this interdisciplinary dialogue in an innovative way by organising the proposed programme into three tracks:** 1) *framings*, 2) *strategies* and 3) *interventions*. Each track mobilises specific conceptual lenses and methodological approaches to investigate the agency of professionals. Thus, whereas track 1 focuses on the perspectives of the social sciences and track 3 on those of the built environment disciplines, track 2 builds on systematic exchange between reflection-oriented and solution-oriented approaches and provides the grounds for cross-fertilisation. This will also comprise methodological aspects, allowing for novel combinations, e.g. of case study analysis with technical experiments or of modelling techniques with qualitative methods. A unique feature of this organisation is that participating researchers of each track assume rotating responsibility for curating collective activities. The resulting organisational matrix inspires dialogue and comparison across themes, methodologies and disciplines.

**The exceptional interdisciplinary composition of the team reflects the empirical focus of the programme and covers the scientific approaches needed to fully address the outlined challenges of urban future-making.** In particular, the social scientists have transversal expertise in research on urban development and construction. This is in terms of organisational (Grabher), planning-related (Thiel), historical (Grubbauer) and discursive (Manderscheid) dynamics and structures, but also in terms of climate governance and policy perspectives (Müller). The built environment professions involved each cover different functional and operational aspects related to the built fabric, infrastructures and mobility systems. These include expertise in structural engineering (Bögle), material science (Kapteina), architecture and urban design (Fusi) and transport planning (Gertz). All of the participating researchers have excellent research records and substantial supervisory experience.

The research training group aims for a strong international profile and will support investigations in and across different geographical contexts. In terms of organisation, internationalisation is implemented by establishing English as working language, by inviting applications from candidates with international backgrounds, by establishing a high-profile visiting scholars programme, and by giving participants the possibility to carry out research stays abroad. **The international profile will also meet strategic goals in further strengthening Hamburg's research profile around issues of sustainability, climate change and urban transformation, particularly in terms of international visibility.** Making use of the distinguished research profiles of the three partner institutions, the training group will explore research- and qualification-related synergies through joint academic and outreach activities. Thus, the proposed training group will serve to further institutionalise the cooperation between Hamburg's universities in supporting early-career researchers and addressing urgent questions around sustainable urban futures in the face of uncertainty.