

Fiona Williamson – *Weather, Public Health and Governance in George Town, Penang: an historical perspective*

This seminar will explore urban planning, public health and the weather in George Town, Penang. Weather, urban planning and public health were (and still are) integrally connected. The framing of this relationship has undergone significant shifts in thinking and appearance over time. One lens into these processes is the situation and expression of health and climatic concerns within governmental structures. Flood management, meteorological research, ideas about climate and public health, water supply, drainage and sanitation were linked, essential facets of urban development dealt with by local and central government. Over the period in question however, scientific knowledge, the general public's expectations of government, the direction of planning, and the structures of local governance, shifted. Their study therefore offers insight into the processes of knowledge making and social expectation over a long period. This seminar will start by exploring the situation facing the settlement's inhabitants, in terms of specific climate and health challenges. It will then consider how these challenges were addressed, why and by whom, and how these elements were repositioned over the period in question.

Katrina Proust – *The Changing Dimensions of Urban Health*

Through the 19th century a major cause of death in George Town was malaria. The miasma theory was the accepted (but deficient) explanation of the way in which this and other diseases spread. How the town dealt with health issues was constrained by these prevailing worldviews. This situation prevailed until global advances had been made in theories of disease transmission, and generally in understanding human-environment relationships. During the 20th century the steady growth in understanding of the aetiology of disease led to further improvements in public health. I will discuss how evolving worldviews affected the state of urban health in George Town in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Stories will illustrate worldviews that operated in different parts of the human-environment system, and directly and indirectly influenced urban health. As these worldviews continue to evolve, they are changing the dimensions of urban health in the present century.

Barry Newell – *History, Silos and Systems*

Cities are complex adaptive systems. When management action is taken in such a system, the intended outcomes might occur, but a number of unexpected and unwanted outcomes will always occur. If we want to minimise these unwelcome 'policy surprises', then we need to improve our intuitions about the operation of cause-and-effect in complex human-environment systems.

As a human settlement grows, and becomes more complex, there is a strong tendency for 'governance silos' to develop. Taken together the silos represent a 'common sense' division of the urban system into manageable fragments. However, this fragmentation acts to hide the wider system, and so increases the incidence of policy surprise. This happens because, while managers can think in silos, they cannot act in silos. Actions taken in one part of a complex system will always have the potential to affect other parts of the system, and to feedback to amplify or undercut the original action.

Given that policy surprise can take many decades (or longer) to appear, historians have a key role to play in studies of urban dynamics. Historians who wish to contribute to such studies need to be aware of the existence of governance silos, and to understand their effect on written records—feedback effects will not be apparent to people who do not "see" the wider system. In this talk I will suggest several approaches to this challenge.

There will be discussion time after the three talks.

10.00 – 11.30 a.m. Monday 11 December 2017

Historical Perspectives on the Interplay between Public Health and Urban Planning in Penang, Malaysia – A project funded by a Wellcome Trust (UK) Seed Award in the Medical Humanities

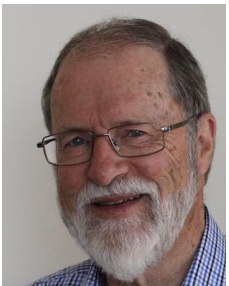
Speaker bios



Fiona Williamson is a Research Fellow in the Asian Urbanism cluster of Asia Research Institute (ARI) and a Visiting Research Fellow at the UNU-IIGH. Her published and forthcoming work examines a range of issues connected to flooding, public health, historical climate (and climate change), and the history of meteorology in British Malaya and Hong Kong.



Katrina Proust has a background in environmental and applied history, and complex human-environment systems. Her work focuses on the historical factors and the feedback dynamics that shape relationships between humans and our environment. Her particular interest is in the interconnected systems that comprise urban communities. She is affiliated with the Fenner School of Environment and Society at the Australian National University in Canberra, and with the UNU-IIGH in Kuala Lumpur.



Barry Newell is a physicist with a focus on the dynamics of human-environment systems. He is involved in the development of practical trans-disciplinary approaches to the analysis of complex systems. This work has led to the systems thinking and modelling approach called Collaborative Conceptual Modelling (CCM) that he has developed in collaboration with Katrina Proust. Barry is co-author, with Robert Dyball, of the textbook *Understanding Human Ecology: A systems approach to sustainability*. He is an Honorary Associate Professor in the Fenner School of Environment and Society at The Australian National University, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the UNU-IIGH.

Venue: UNU-IIGH Building, UKM Medical Centre, Jalan Yaacob Latiff, Bandar Tun Razak, Cheras, 56000 Kuala Lumpur

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