

“The Planetary Bet” by Orit Halpern

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On Thursday February 7, 2019, Dr. Orit Halpern gave a talk entitled “The Planetary Bet,” drawing on work in ecology, cybernetics, design, finance and economics to consider the notions of resilience and speculation, and theorize “pessimistically optimistic computation” in the context of massive environmental degradation and anthropogenic climate change. Dr. Halpern was invited by the University of Ottawa’s Interdisciplinary Research Lab on Cities and Contemporary Urban Processes, directed by Professor Vincent Mirza, together with Professor Kelly Bronson, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Science and Technology. Halpern is an associate professor in the Department of anthropology and sociology at Concordia University.

Halpern’s talk built on her extensive research involving diverse global projects, initiatives, and sites, such as smart cities in South Korea, open pit mines in the Americas, and speculative exhibits in New York City. While the concept of resilience is often associated with hope, according to Halpern the term is deployed to focus on the ability to absorb shock and maintain function, highlighting a mentality that what we destroy today can be “reclaimed” tomorrow. Resilience tends to assume stability as the norm but, according to Halpern, stability is the inverse of resilience. In combination with smart cities development or extractive industry, the notion of resilience comes to naturalize precarity and exploitation rather than locate it as a particular form of governance.

Halpern also discussed how the ideas of ‘smartness’ and resilience produce speculations or visions of the future that are constantly evolving and never fully realized, and transform the planet into a prototype or a laboratory for the development of smart technologies. Drawing from work on derivatives in finance, which allow particular quantities of something to be traded in the future at an already agreed upon price, Halpern argues that ‘smartness’ bundles together and allocates risk as a form of globalized debt that is financial, social, and environmental. Using the concepts and language of economics and finance, Halpern’s work allows us to see the interconnections between ecology and economy, and probes the relationship between resilience, extraction, speculation, and hope.

Throughout her talk, Halpern drew on a variety of engaging examples to illustrate these concepts and relationships, discussing the smart city of Songdo, South Korea and the MOMA Rising Currents project. Specifically, Halpern discussed the Oyster-tecture project by Kate Orff which proposes using oyster reefs as ecological barriers to sea level rise, making Manhattan more resilient and incorporating the bodies of the oysters into the urban infrastructure. This example highlights key themes discussed by Halpern, including ideas of resilience in speculative planning, the trend of aestheticizing disaster, and the evacuation of humans from images of the future

Halpern's paper provoked a variety of questions and reflections from those in attendance, including: Is the future absent from contemporary notions of speculation? Are smart cities the Noah's Arc for the very rich? Why are visualizations of future cities evacuated of people? What will the impacts of climate change be in major urban centers? What has been the popular response to smart cities and speculative climate initiatives around the world?

More information about Orit Halpern's work can be found on her website (<http://www.orithalpern.net>), or those interested can take a look at her book *Beautiful Data: A History of Vision and Reason since 1945*, which is available in the Morisset library. Additionally, more information about the MOMA Rising Currents project and the Oyster-tecture project by Kate Orff can be found at their websites (<https://www.moma.org> and <https://www.scapestudio.com/projects/oyster-tecture/>).