

# Infrastructure Space

www.lafargeholcim-forum.org

Detroit, April 7 - 9, 2016



## 5<sup>th</sup> LafargeHolcim Forum for Sustainable Construction

Program and registration details at  
[www.lafargeholcim-forum.org](http://www.lafargeholcim-forum.org)

Infrastructure is the embodiment of long-term investments. Its impact in determining the organization of flows extends well into the future – for developed and developing countries alike. The international symposium “Infrastructure Space” including four concurrent workshops relevant to the scale of interventions takes place in Detroit from April 7 to 9, 2016 and seeks answers: Infrastructure for whom, to what end, where and how?

Keynotes: **Ricky Burdett**, UK; **Keller Easterling**, USA; **Stephen Henderson**, USA; **Carlos Lopes**, Ethiopia; **Henk Ovink**, the Netherlands. Moderator: **Reed Kroloff**.

## LafargeHolcimForum

## Synopsis

"Freeways are the cathedrals of our times."  
David Byrne, *True Stories*, 1986

Is infrastructure but the plumbing and wiring of the human environment or the true lifeblood of the spaces we inhabit? Infrastructural systems facilitate flows of anything from people and goods to resources and information. While engineered to perform an array of specific tasks, such networks also determine the structure of buildings and city regions, if not entire nations. Yet, these vast service armatures tend to be pushed to the background, remaining out of sight as long as they function. They are the products of generic protocols often applied irrespective of contextual specificities and their environmental consequences over time. Ubiquitous and anonymous, they have become so engrained in our lives as to steer the habits of collective behavior. Infrastructure, in this sense, could be considered a conduit of conduct, an underlying logic of space that perpetuates unchecked conventions of production and consumption.

Since infrastructure is the embodiment of long-term investments, its impact in determining the organization of flows extends well into the future, both for developed and developing countries. Whereas the former are confronted with the need to maintain and renew highways, electrical grids, sewage systems, and the like, the latter are scrambling to meet the needs of their own expanding populations. In both cases, massive investments for retrofitting or for new infrastructure are key to sustaining the human habitat.

Faced with the challenges of unsustainable practices on a world scale, infrastructure must be seen as key to reorienting our ways of inhabiting the planet. It must therefore be regarded as more than a mere servant to utility, become responsive to cultural and contextual distinctions, and be reclaimed as a truly public resource. For this to happen, infrastructural systems - whether centralized or decentralized - must be viewed as more than a technical issue alone and treated as equally social in scope and design, that is, as a common good in an ecology of interrelationships vital to furthering life. This is to say that infrastructure development and renewal is a powerful but greatly under-exploited agent for making and altering space. Having moved front stage as a social, economic, and political imperative, forms of physical infrastructure will also have to be considered in terms of their civic value and aesthetic impact if they are really to be 'the cathedrals of our times'.

The city of Detroit, where the 5<sup>th</sup> International Forum for Sustainable Construction will be held, evolved as a hub within a larger network of freeway, rail, and water transportation systems that fueled industrial growth and enabled social and economic integration across regions. Detroit became synonymous with the American automobile industry, if not with a culture of mobility in general. In more recent times, it has become a symbol of urban decline associated with deindustrialization, notwithstanding the belt of prosperity surrounding the core. But rather than dwell on Detroit's hardship, why not view this city as a site of opportunity? And here, the expanded roles of infrastructure will need to be renegotiated up front as both a technical and social matter of concern for all, claimed not only as the means for achieving more resilient forms of development, but moreover as a right to a sustainable way of life.