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What a Cool paper: Climate Control and Air-conditioning in Asia

This presentation examines the climate-control paradigm of electronic air-conditioning (AC) in Asia today; a paradigm which has become integral to the built environment and emerged in tandem with evolving cultural norms, practices and expectations of indoor living. As we know however, the ubiquitous use of AC across the Asia region today consumes vast amounts of energy.

Air-conditioning proved to be a pivotal technology in the expansion of high rise architecture across the region. Indeed the prestige of occupying space in the sky, along with the unforgiving economics of real-estate footprints in urban environments were among the forces that negated the role of an earlier 'tropical architecture'; a style defined by high ceilings, courtyards, verandahs, shaded interiors, heat absorbent materials, porous screens and an underlying concern for air-flow. While in recent years areas like Southeast Asia have seen a number of 'tropical skyscrapers' commissioned, there are wider forces at play which serve to polarize how indoor and outdoor spaces are valued and perceived as spaces of comfort, risk and security. The unwanted externalities of fast paced urban growth, such as environmental pollution and the fear of transmittable diseases being notable examples. The politics of air, and how such discourses are mapped onto interior and exterior spaces thus warrants critical attention.

The paper argues that AC is not simply a single technology, but is better recognized, articulated and thus analysed as a socio-technical assemblage. AC cannot be understood only by examining the properties and capacities of the unit, nor even by exploring how it works within a building to create a certain 'objective' environment, rather we need to consider how this is incorporated and appropriated by actors, whilst effective upon the everyday lives of those who use the building, effecting modes of dress, daily rhythms of bathing, sleeping etc. Adopting an analytical approach of STS, the paper reveals how human actors' norms, values and beliefs, senses of comfort and daily practices/rhythms are regulated and disciplined by these technologies, their incorporation into the built environment and the politics of urban living.