



Thematic Session

TS13. Historicizing Material Properties: between technological and cultural history

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The first official decree that sowed the seeds of the segregationist spatial politics of the former Belgian Congo –which would later pervade each and every aspect of everyday life in the colony– was a law on building materials. The law stipulated that “in every locality [of the colonial territory] one quarter had to be reserved for wood and iron constructions and another for huttes, paillotes et chimbèques [three different local construction techniques]”. Since the aim clearly was to segregate Europeans from Africans, it is highly remarkable that legislation was shrouded in constructive terminology. This racialized categorization of building materials continued to exist throughout Belgian colonialism. Numerous legal texts, books and colonial propaganda refer to durable and non-durable building materials, although a clear definition remained lacking. While these constructed dichotomies were always cloaked as an objective difference of physical properties, this example accentuates how in reality they introduced a racialized and cultural hierarchy of building materials that conveniently served the colonial agenda. Our proposed session aspires to understand exactly this discursive tension between the physical properties attributed to building materials and the cultural meanings underlying these processes.

If such stark discursive distortions of the properties of building materials may surface in their crudest form in the very specific colonial context of the Global South (as the still nascent scholarship on the material histories of its architectures demonstrates), they are far from limited to it. Narratives on the cultural meanings ascribed to building materials from across the globe may expose how building materials are imbued with varying cultural meanings in varying geo-political, socio-economic and cultural contexts, and reveal why particular actors construct, add layers to, or challenge the local and global definitions of the material properties through which these materials are classified.

