VOLUMETRIC URBANISM:
Charting new urban divisions

An International Workshop
University of Sheffield and University of Western Sydney
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In major cities around the world, councils and governments are faced with the problem and possibilities of ‘volume’: the stacking and moving of more and more people and things above, across and below tiny, interlocking sites within booming central business districts. Three trends are particularly notable here: first, the growth of improved mass public transport provision that now funnels many more people in and out of city centres than before, often underground; second, there has been a marked increase in tall building construction in cities, between 2010 and 2016 fifty ‘supertall’, or 300 metres plus skyscrapers were built; third, building and city management systems have now improved to a point where ‘utopian’ building projects based around new forms of enclosure and autonomous infrastructures are now being realized thanks to advanced materials and engineering technology.

This workshop has been organized to respond to what we see as the reinterpretation of the limits, porosity and nature of building ‘envelopes’ - the boundary between the notions of the interior and exterior and the placing and management of different kinds of atmospheres in city plans. These are being reworked according to a number of new technological, design and financial logics: architects, engineers, developers, bankers and other specialist service providers act variously to, quite literally, ‘push the envelope’ and ultimately reconfiguring the nature of these built spaces.

The core aim of the workshop is to understand through empirical analysis and theoretical frameworks how urban space is being made more malleable, with surface, airspace, and underground constantly subject to new logics of development. The workshop welcomes papers that address one or more of the following three objectives:

1. Genealogies of architectural and engineering approaches to the production of volumetric spaces, identifying key cities, prototypes, models, and movements, and their geographical spread and influence, including glasshouses, atria, skyscrapers, and underground/elevated walkways as they shift from experimental status to standardized, commercialized design solutions in various urban forms.

2. Identification of how global private and public actors and institutions are working with tools, procedures and products to operationalize vertical and horizontal movement, exclusion and security in volumetric spaces, including new property development and investment practices also the use of tunneling, elevators and escalators, and devices used to maximize safety and comfort, from fire escapes to air quality control, and their accompanying metrics.

3. Examinations of the socio-spatial consequences of volumetric urbanism, new forms of inequality and differential forms of (in)security. Many critics have noted the potential for ‘secession’ for affluent city users, through volumetric responses – enclosure, bubbles of security, depth and height, creation of microclimates, internalising energy and food production, conditioned air. How can we understand these new scales and forms and the encompassing of multiple functions that may become urban ‘assets’ in terms of threats like ecological and economic turbulence while engendering new and novels modes of social exclusion.

Please send 250 words abstracts to Simon Marvin at s.marvin@sheffield.ac.uk and Donald McNeill at d.mcneill@westernsydney.edu.au by December 1st 2016. The organisers may be able to provide support for some subsistence and travel costs for the workshop.