Cycle of Infrastructure: Pedalling through Pasts, Presents and Futures

03.09.2025
Cycling and Society, Glasgow

Pauline Münch
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Presentation Overview

Introduction

Berlin Background

Bike Event

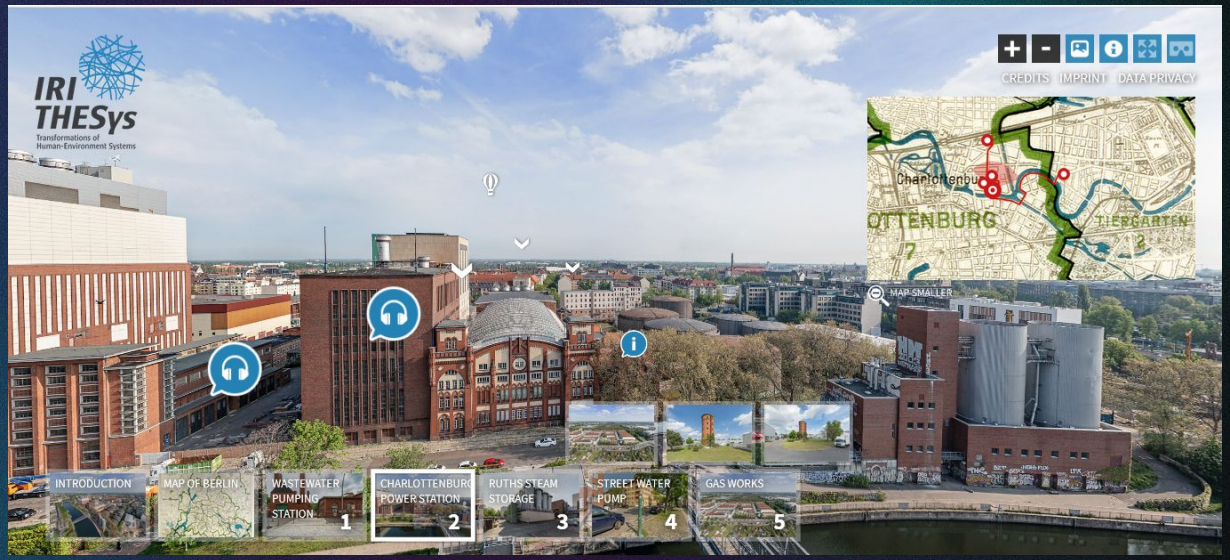
Feedback

Horizons

Questions

Introduction

- Science communicator focused on sustainability at the IRI THESys (Integrative Research Institute on the Transformations of Human Environment Systems)
- Shift dissemination to experimental forms of knowledge exchange with walking as method: e.g. river-art walks, history infrastructure walk



- Shortcomings of walking, experimentation with modes incl. Kayaking & cycling, e.g. bike ride on history of waste disposal in former East Germany
- Largely info tours - aim to continue evolving, deepening & expanding
  - Bring more voices, perspectives & exchanges
  - Making tours more reflective
  - Role cycling & embodied learning
  - Uniqueness of cycling to explore time and space in context of infrastructure histories





What can cycling reveal about the histories of (water) infrastructure?

What relevance can pedaling through history have for cycling and society?

Berlin-Brandenburg

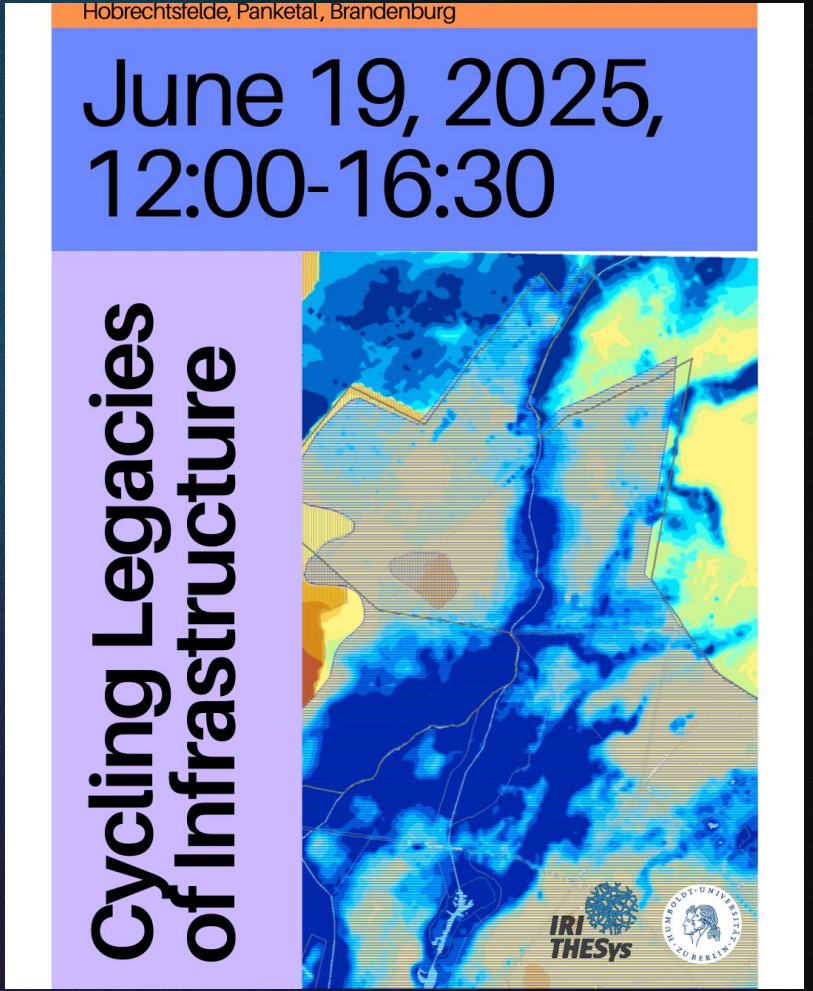
- 2025: Climate change too much, too little, too dirty water
- Role of infrastructure & combined sewer systems
- Adaptation & mitigation (e.g. Sponge City decentralised water management to capture rainwater)
- Driven by urban policy, planners, utilities - dependent on citizens' attitudes, motivation, determination (Rogdero, 2025)
- Role of science communication
- Current initiatives art/activist/digital campaigns
- But few ask: "how did we even get into this mess?"





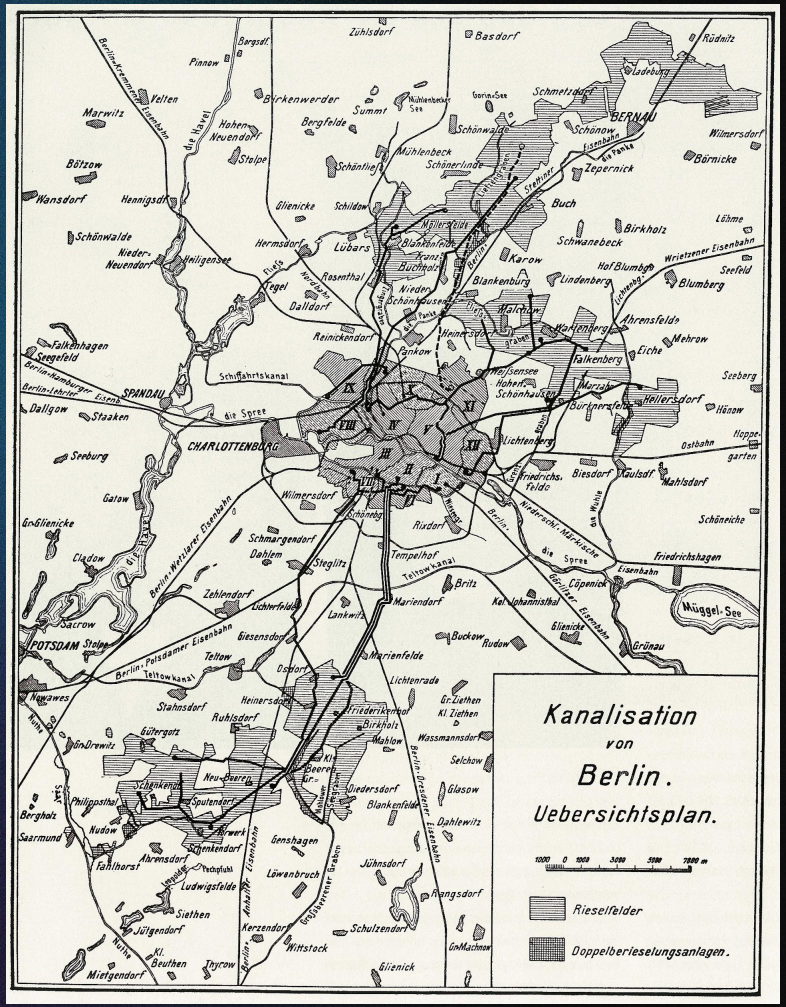
The project

- Timothy Moss “Past-proofing Infrastructure Futures”, funded by Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft (DFG) 2024-2025
- Develop research & outreach on “usable pasts” of water and energy infrastructure
- How and why infrastructure systems were built, and which lessons we can draw for current and future challenges…
- Co-creative process with project partners in utilities and museums
- Event to bike former sewage farm



The place

- Hobrechtsfelde: Origins of combined sewer system: historical lens for too much, too dirty water
- Path dependencies — Berlin's water management system not future-proofed for environmental challenges
- Infrastructure histories never linear tale of technical progression, constant interplay of continuity and change (Moss, 2020)
- Adaptability — Over 100 years of usage from leach field to recreation park
    - Landscape carries traces of pasts, presents and futures
- Excellent cycling



The route

- Transdisciplinary organisation: Science communicator, urban historian, data scientist, anthropologist, outdoor journalist/photographer
- Route POIs: highlight different perspectives from history, hydrogeology, ornithology, cycling etc.
- Group included academics and non-academics
- Encouraged encounters and exchanges
- Cycling to spark embodied and sensory forms of knowledge & learning





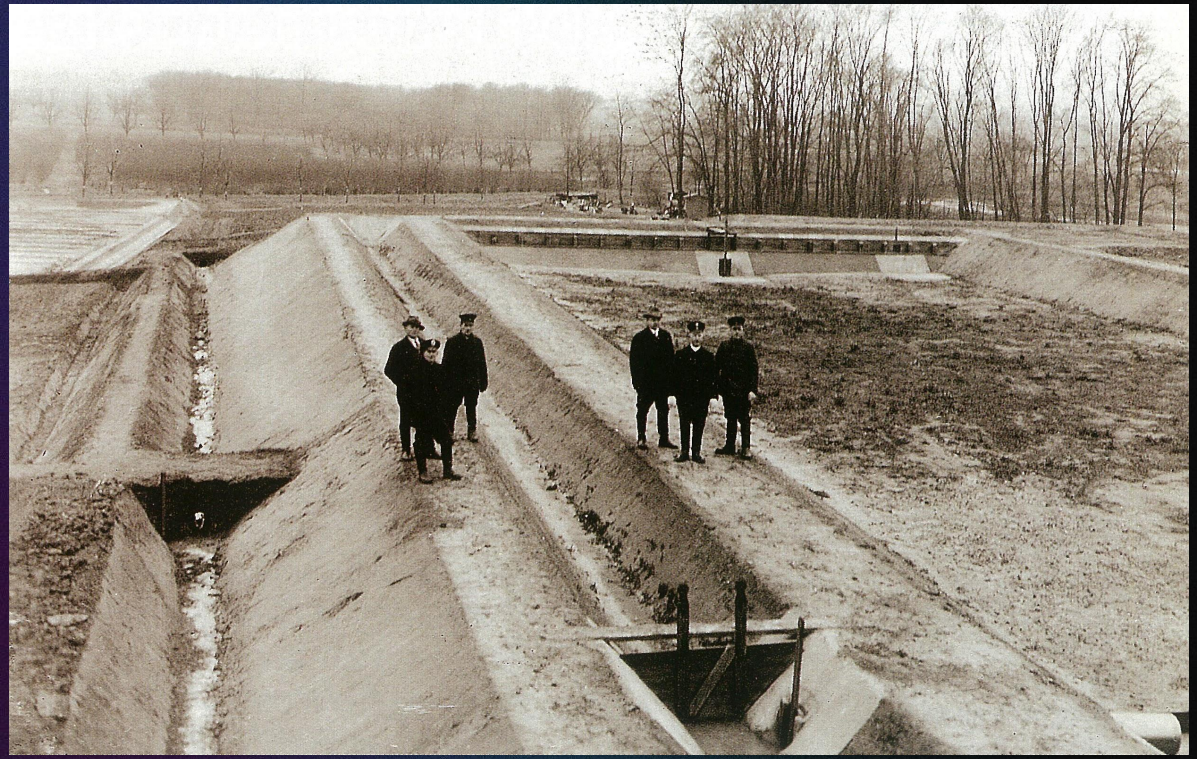




Stop 1: Museum

Photo Credits: J. Meissner (2025)





Stop 2: Complicated Pasts with Timothy Moss





- Sociotechnical imaginary of Berlin as fully networked city & Brandenburg into green belt of irrigation
- Political to structural gaps
- “Belt of stench”, pollution of soil and water, ignored by Berlin—which continued to benefit economically





Stop 3: Presents





Stop 4: Presents with Màrk Somogavarti





Activity: Futures with Joshua Meissner

The Reflection Round

- **Connections and relations**
  - Walking see patchwork of a place, while cycling became a *“tool to see places with different layers”.*
  - *“Noticed fences and borders, setting up artificial boundaries … Biking breaks up these boundaries to see cycles and connections”*
  - “*How city infrastructure impacts these rural landscapes”*

- **Temporality** of infrastructure
  - *“past blends with future and present through the movement of the bike”.*



- **Complex/ interrelated** challenges
  - Berlin's *"water has shaped the landscape, it is now invisible"*
  - Encountering water through groundwater station, accidentally riding through stream on the wayfinding activity
  - Seeing the *"continuous water now pumping through Hobrechtsfelde, creating a (new) dependency..."*

- Encounter infrastructure within broader **socio-political contexts**
  - *"you think you know it all, then you are physically moving and see the unknowns. The power of narratives to learn much more than with a single story..."*

- Instigate **emotional and affective reactions**, trigger **memories** of one's own pasts and heritage.
  - Reminded of growing up in East Germany in late 80's, early 90's and "*connected to childhood memories of former leach fields, which smelt really bad".*
  - *"Encountered smells which reminded and referenced Colombian palm oil fields where fertilizers are used ... Brought on speculations on whether this sort of transition (Hobrechtsfelde) could be considered in Columbia?"*

What can cycling reveal about the histories of (water) infrastructure?

What relevance can pedaling through history have for cycling and society, as a mode of research/practice?

Where do we go from here?

- Preliminary evaluation
- Follow up project …

Contact & links

- Past-Proofing Infrastructure Futures, www.u-pasts.com
- Digital Tour https://www.iri-thesys.org/outreach/art-science/remaking-berlin-digital-tour/
- Joshua Meissner https://joshuameissner.de/

STADTMUSEUM BERLIN

References

- Berlin.de. (n.d.). Rieselfeldgeschichte Hobrechtswald. Retrieved April 30, 2025, from https://www.berlin.de/forsten/walderlebnis/hobrechtswald/rieselfeldgeschichte/
- Moss, T. (2020). *Remaking Berlin: A history of the city through infrastructure, 1920–2020.* The MIT Press. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12141.001.0001
- Moss, T. (2025). Usable infrastructure pasts: Mobilizing history for urban technology futures. In Infrastructural times. Bristol University Press.
- Roggero, M. (2025). *Becoming sponge city Berlin: 'Planned scaling' vs. 'permanent experimentation'.* Journal of Environmental Policy & Planning. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/1523908X.2025.2497939

Questions, comments concerns?

Cycle of Infrastructure: Pedalling through Pasts, Presents and Futures

Pauline Münch, pauline.muench@hu-berlin.de
IRI THESys, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin