



Department of Geography --- Public Seminar Series

“Annihilating Urban Space in the Age of Rail”

Speaker:

Dr. David Schley

Assistant Professor (Department of History, Hong Kong Baptist University)

Date: 16th November, 2017 (Thursday)

Time: 2:30 – 4:00 pm

Venue:

Room AAB1312, Multi-purpose Room, Faculty of Social Sciences,
Academic and Administration Building (AAB), Baptist University Road Campus
Hong Kong Baptist University

ALL ARE WELCOME!

This talk examines public debates concerning the place of railroad infrastructure within the urban built environment at the dawn of the railroad age in the United States. The railroad was at the forefront of the nineteenth-century’s “annihilation of time and space”—tracks and trains cut travel times from days to hours and enlarged the cultural and economic reach of urban rail hubs. Yet even as the railroad accelerated the pace of urbanization in America, laying rails and constructing depots within large cities raised troubling questions about the future and meaning of urbanism. Fluid and frictionless, train travel meshed uneasily with existing traffic patterns and blurred the line between the spaces of the city and the countryside. If railroads ran straight through urban centers, what made a city distinct from other forms of settlement? If the railroad was to annihilate space, did it matter if that space was rural or urban?

Focusing on Baltimore, Maryland—the birthplace of American railroading—this talk reconstructs controversies over how or whether to accommodate railroad travel within the bustling urban streetscape. In these conversations Baltimoreans articulated competing normative visions for the street and the city. Track supporters contended that allowing mechanized movement within the city would, by accelerating the pace of transactions, position Baltimore at the center of a national economic system. To track opponents, though, this vision threatened the urbane way of life as they understood it, sacrificing public space and public safety for the benefit of a few. The outcome of this dispute would have profound effects on the production of urban space and the nature of urbanism throughout North America.

David Schley is an Assistant Professor in the History Department at Hong Kong Baptist University. He is currently preparing a book manuscript on railroads and urban space in nineteenth-century Baltimore.