

Temporalities of Decolonization

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Decolonization in Africa and Asia has been often described, by historical actors and scholars alike, as a moment in which time accelerated and history sped up. This acceleration was measured against the schedules drafted by colonial administrators in London or Paris, who allocated decades to the steps in the transition to self-rule which African and Asian nationalist politicians wanted to measure in years or even months. That discrepancy alone reveals decolonization as a negotiation of conflicting temporalities put forward by various actors with competing agendas. Architecture, urban planning, and construction were often at the forefront of these negotiations, as they materialized in attempts to transform colonial cities into “modern” national capitals, in the reorganization of the everyday schedules of their inhabitants, and in the overarching acceleration of government investment programs across industry, education, culture, and housing.

Architects, planners, engineers, contractors, and administrators, both colonial and Indigenous, found themselves synchronizing development between the cities and the countryside, phasing investments across various governmental departments, and coordinating construction schedules with agricultural rhythms and indigenous religious practices. In their attempts to speed up the processes of political, social, economic, and cultural decolonization, they sometimes faced more fundamental questions, notably about the possibility of decolonizing time beyond its measurements, experiences, and expectations inherited from the colonial period. After introducing the concept of time as a political idea, in this seminar we will use architecture as an entrance point to debating how competing temporalities were put forward, interpreted, shaped, and negotiated during the processes of decolonization in Western and Eastern Africa, the Middle East and South Asia since the 1940s.