

The Research Group
Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research

has the honor to invite you to the public defense of the PhD thesis of

Nicola da Schio

to obtain the degree of Doctor of Sciences

Title of the PhD thesis:

**The Sky over Brussels:
Geographies, Knowledges & Politics of Air Pollution**

Supervisors:

Prof. dr. Bas Van Heur
Prof. dr. Kobe Boussauw

Members of the jury

Prof. dr. Nele Aernouts (VUB, chair)
Prof. dr. Boud Verbeiren (VUB, secretary)
Prof. dr. Didier Caluwaerts (VUB)
Dr. Anneleen Kenis (KU Leuven)
Prof. dr. Michel Hubert (USL-B & ULB)
Prof. dr. Gordon Walker (Lancaster University)

The defense will take place on

Wednesday, December 9, 2020 at 10h

The defense can be followed through a live stream: <https://bit.ly/35h8qfg>

Curriculum vitae

Nicola da Schio is researcher at the Cosmopolis Centre for Urban Research of the VUB. As a researcher and as an activist, his work focuses on the uneven geographies and knowledges of urban socio-ecological goods and bads, and on the nexus between science, state, and civil society. Before joining VUB, he worked with the United Nations Environment Programme on issues related to the urban environment and cycled through Europe to explore and promote ecomobility practices. Previously he also worked with different institutions in Western Europe, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. He holds degrees in urban governance, economics, and political science obtained in Paris, London and Padua.

Abstract of the PhD research

Researching and understanding urban ecological phenomena requires looking concurrently at two dynamic processes: the nexus between the state, science and activism as the place where the urban ecology is constructed as a social phenomenon; as well as the ways in which the urban environment and society interact. Based on these premises, the thesis focuses on "the Sky over Brussels", that is: the case of air pollution in Brussels. In particular, it includes a retrospective analysis, where the geographies, knowledges & politics of air pollution are looked at through an investigation of citizen mobilisations for cleaner air in the last forty years and an examination of the spatial relations between air pollution and geographic accessibility, taken as emblematic features of urban agglomerations. Building on this analysis and on the Citizen Science project "AirCasting Brussels", the thesis proposes a citizen science-based experimental approach to the analysis of geographies, knowledges & politics air pollution. First, Citizen Science is taken as an object of inquiry, with the research investigating its potential to address epistemic and procedural forms of environmental injustice. It is then used as a research methodology to explore when, where and why Brussels citizens are exposed to air pollution, and their room of manoeuvre to reduce exposure. Overall, the thesis illustrates how airborne contaminants interact materially and symbolically with the urban environment, and through this interaction they become air pollution. In light of the analysis of knowledge's influence on civic mobilization for cleaner air, the thesis concludes that knowledge is an important resource to empower those who hold it, whether they are institutional actors working to maintain hierarchical authorities or activists campaigning to challenge the status quo, but is not a determinant one in either of these cases. The thesis also illustrates the unambiguous and quintessential interconnection between urban air pollution and mobility, as a case of the socio-ecological nature of cities. This connection is systemic and its implications range from the collective organization of infrastructure and people in space, to the lived experience of individuals and communities.