EXPERIMENTS IN AUTOMATED MOBILITY: SHAPING URBAN FUTURES

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Autonomous vehicles – self-driving cars, shuttles, freight vehicles, delivery drones and the like – are garnering increasing attention for the challenges they pose to cities and urban life. Although cities in which everyday mobility is fully automated are yet to be realized, these urban futures are being anticipated in a proliferation of pilots, test beds and trials of autonomous vehicles, currently numbering 150 worldwide. Using the notion of experimentation and based on ongoing collaborative work with Pauline McGuirk, in this paper I begin to think through the practices and implications of these tests of automated mobility. I argue that, like other urban experiments, these trials test new technologies but in so doing negotiate and craft the material politics of the city, and the politics of urban mobility in particular. Using analysis of the automated vehicle trials currently being conducted across Europe, North America, and Asia, the paper develops a typology of these trials distinguished by their attributes in terms of institutional actors, spatiality, technological focus and transformational intent. The paper focuses on the urban materialities of these trials, asking how the specificities of urban processes and infrastructures articulate with these distinctive forms of automation, and the unfolding logics and practices of experimentation through which they are emplaced. Within each type, I argue, urban automation is being differently materialized in, and rematerializing, the city, and alternative futures crafted.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Robyn Dowling is Professor of Urbanism and Associate Dean, Research in the School of Architecture, Design and Planning at The University of Sydney. She is an urban geographer with an abiding interest in the contours of everyday urban life, brought together in her co-authored book Home (2006; Routledge). Her current research focuses on the transformations of cities in response to the disruptions of technology and climate change. This includes Australian Research Council funded research on the politics of realising smart city visions in Australian cities. Robyn is currently an Editor of Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers and has previously been on the editorial boards of Social & Cultural Geography and Geography Compass.