Projects as Institutions
17th-20th Centuries

Projects have become ubiquitous in the last decades, in various realms of human activities – arts, science, technology, education, *etc.* From this point of view, they may appear as a relatively recent phenomenon, linked to the spread of management discourses and tools in new social contexts. Yet, projects, understood as ways of organizing future actions, involving multiple participants, prior examination and decisions, have obviously been around for centuries, especially in technical fields.

This conference will initiate a long-term history of projects, to identify projects as precise socio-historical forms, context-specific and subject to historical developments.

Projects (plans, programs, *etc.*) are rarely studied as such. Scholars usually focus on one project or another, without seeking to understand it as a *modus operandi*, with a logic and procedures that apply to all similar projects. The literature, especially in the history of technology, usually favors two trends. One focuses on the individual figure of the designer, on his creative activity and the tools he uses, thus minimizing the collective, social and political, dimensions of the project. Another trend considers the project as a process, typically the process of birth of a technological object. In that case, scholars emphasize institutional and technological innovations, the singularity of the situation, the technical and social arrangements that made this new object possible. Focusing on innovation, however, tends to minimize the professionalization of project-making, its inclusion in regular forms and procedures.

This conference will focus on the collective nature of projects and their increasing formalization and regulation. It will pay attention to the ordinary functioning of projects, to stabilized social forms, norms and standards, rules and procedures, be they implicit or explicit, that regulate participation in a collective action. In short, it will consider projects as institutions.

Subjects to be considered might include the links between the development of new forms of project and changes in relationships (often asymmetric) between the actors involved. For the modern period in particular, it might be asked how new forms of projects emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries, seeking to guarantee a certain

control, a certain trust between the actors, addressed problems posed by the ambivalent figure of the projector, a figure synonymous with great uncertainty about the realism and morality of the proposed undertakings. More generally, one may study the models and counter-models, be they of moral, political, economic or technical nature, the governmentality underlying different forms of projects. One may look at how the future was considered, planned or directed, the organization of temporalities, what the project left open (and for whom), what it sought to close, whether and how it introduced irreversibility. One may also examine the dissociation (in fact or in principle) that projects introduce between different roles or activities – for example between designers and implementers – the meaning one may give these separations, the organization of work that they introduce and their possible impact on project authorship or ownership by the various participants. One may study, finally, the importance played by review and decision-making procedures in projects.

These are some issues that might be raised. Economic history and the history of technology are obviously the most relevant fields for these inquiries, but contributions in other fields will be welcome.

The conference will be held in French and English. Talks may be made in either of these languages. Travel expenses and accommodation will be supported.

To propose a contribution, please send an abstract of 500 words and a one-page CV to projectsasinstitutions@gmail.com before **September 20, 2011**.