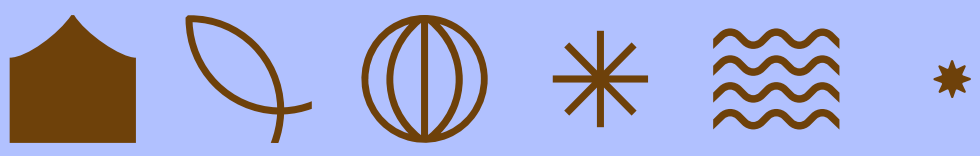
ec(*h*)otoning

research-based art

statement

Let us think of art as an expansive, filamentous platform for research – and not as a system for producing contemplative art-objects. Rather than focusing on finished products, this Commission believes in research-based art (RBA): a process-oriented and artistic thinking that is a form of knowledge production capable of overflowing, asking uncommon questions, and responding to our critical planetary times. Observation / reflection / practice come together in a vital experience that can be contagious – as a means not only to order, speculate, and transform, but also to disorder, destabilise, and challenge through a critical lens. Let us reinvent ways of knowing and co-existing in urban landscapes.

Let us think of this artistic platform as an ecotone.



From a strictly ecological definition, ecotones are known as transitional areas between two distinct ecosystems or biomes, such as the meeting point between a forest and a riverbank. They are regions that function as interstices, a *thick edge* that serves as a contact zone (Kahn & Burns 2021:201). From ecotones, we draw two key ideas. First, they act as spaces of uncommon assemblages, where fixed categories become blurred and mixed. Environments of coexistence between the more-than-human and their materialities. Second, they follow the notion of conceptual entanglements, zones of practicable interweaving.

This ec*(h)*otoning Commission explores wicked urban problems (WUP) – those that defy straightforward, linear solutions due to their multi-dimensional, contested, and evolving nature – based on the unusual concept of 'ec*(h)*otoning'. By converting a spatial figure into a verb, we also introduce a mixed methodological approach to RBA. We can then imagine this art platform as a space for diverse types of contact – not only between biogeographical systems but also within socio-environmental and conceptual fields. How can we filter through the cracks of disciplinary and knowledge boundaries, as well as geopolitical ones? We invoke the dissolution and intertwining of praxis and theory, subject and object. In ec*(h)*otoning, two or more types of knowledge, politics, and economies collide.

Thicknesses and viscosities can be interconnected through matter and energy, shifting our point of view and revealing our mutual affectivity; a tangled mesh of organic and inorganic life that creates complex, collective networks. The 'h' in ec*(h)*otoning reminds us about the constant echoes: connections and reverberations between human, more-than-human, and other material entities, between science and rituality, between past and future, between space and time. The 'h' is intended to encourage open dialogue that can be contagious and inspiring. In our project, the echo evokes multiple voices, beings, materialities, technologies, and a myriad of practices, absorbing, rippling, waving, and weaving together to generate subtle changes within a restless urban environment.

Let us also consider this artistic platform as contextualised, situated in a specific and singular space-time. Without ignoring complex socio-environmental phenomena like climate change and increasing extractivism, let us consider how *thick edges* produce unrepeatable biocultural geographies due to their topographies, as well as the life forms that inhabit them. How do we start working from embodied and empathetic knowledge towards convergent otherness, towards environmental justice and caring methodologies? How to address the migrations and displacements in urban ecologies – and the multiple violences these entail? What does it mean to develop spatial and sustainable inquiries from and within art, embodied and situated? What does research-based art propose that other modes of inquiry cannot uncover?

We are looking for proposals that resonate and connect with the themes proposed by the three distinct Asian universities below.

Finally, we consider the intersection between art, research, and environment as a powerful approach for other ways of living, for passion as a source of knowledge, for environmental awareness. From the wildness of the artistic field, how can we reshape the expanding environmental stagnation of our planet?

We invite proposals from artists who research and resonate with ecotones and ec*(h)*otoning: those who experiment with alternative, situated, and mixed methods, political and epistemic disobedience, intuition as a compass, speculative thoughtfulness. We are searching for thinkers who are open to recalibrating the doing, sensing, and being of what is plural and different. We seek responses to some of these questions, but mostly, to produce new ones. The key is to remain in the question, driven by constant curiosity.

Let us think, as Marxen and González propose in *Epistemologías emancipatorias* (2023), of knowledge that seeks to 'know with' rather than 'know about'.

Bangkok, Thailand

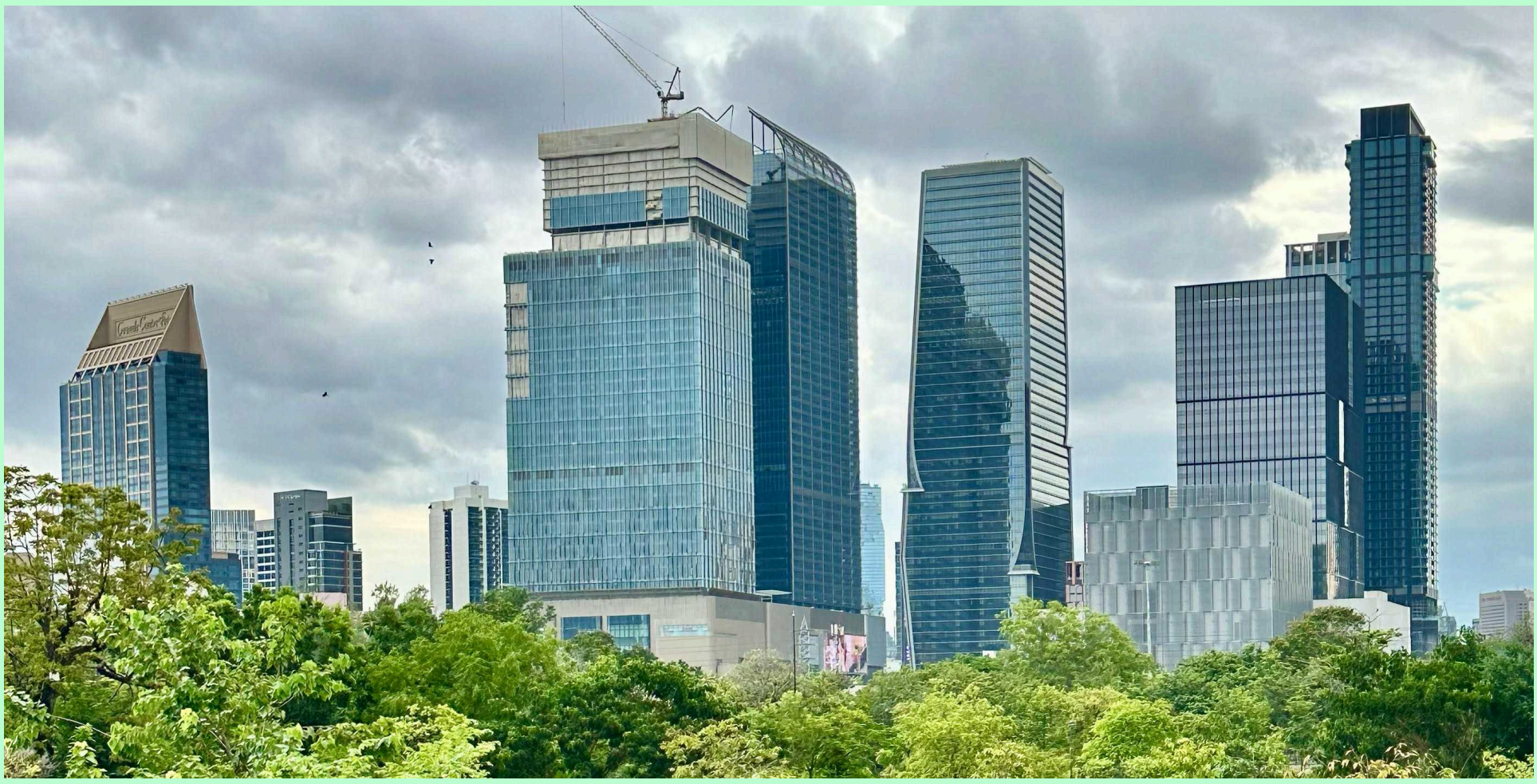
Chulalongkorn University

Bangkok's ec*(h)*otoning preoccupations crystallise vividly in the ongoing experiment of Benjakitti Urban Forest Park, where rewilding becomes more than ecological restoration; it becomes a living laboratory of urban reverberations. The park, emerging from the ruins of a tobacco factory, is not simply a green lung engineered to mitigate air pollution, urban heat, or flooding. It is also a zone where human and nonhuman voices, infrastructures and imaginations, resonate in unpredictable ways. In other words, Benjakitti is a site where ec*(h)*otones – of past industrial displacement, present ecological repair, and speculative futures – overlap, tuning and retuning the city's urban metabolism.

As Bangkok's wicked problems, flooding, air pollution, heat islands, and infrastructural fragility resist one-off solutions, Benjakitti Park exemplifies how ec*(h)*otoning might be practiced instead, promoting ongoing adjustments and negotiations. During torrential rains, the park's wetlands absorb overflow while pathways submerge, creating amphibious thresholds that dramatise Bangkok's precarious relationship with water. These moments are not failures but signals – ec*(h)*otonal reverberations – that reflect the fragility of urban infrastructures, both provoking irritation and opening up possibilities. They raise awareness, inviting the city's human and nonhuman, material and nonmaterial, residents to confront climate uncertainty collectively rather than deny it.

Yet the park is more than an ecological infrastructure. It is also a tone where socio-political contestations reverberate: questions of ecological gentrification, access, and the politics of who benefits from rewilding. Here, ec*(h)*otoning emphasises dissonance instead of harmony – between design and dwelling, between state-led urban visions and grassroots claims to the commons. By amplifying these frictions, Benjakitti embodies Bangkok as an urban 'uncommons', unsettled and unsettling, a site where futures are still in the making.

In this sense, the park is less a finished product than a dynamic process of tuning. Trees, water, concrete, urban wildlife, activists, and bureaucrats all become actors in a chorus of resonances that stretch beyond the park's boundaries into the wider city. The preoccupations of Bangkok thus come into focus as restless reverberations rather than stable solutions. Benjakitti Park, with its porous boundaries and unsettled ecologies, exemplifies how the city's wicked problems can be retuned, not resolved: through the echoes of human and nonhuman entanglements that continue to reverberate across its ecologies, infrastructures, and everyday life.



Semarang, Indonesia

Diponegoro University

The coastal area of Semarang City and Demak Regency is a neighbouring region that shares common environmental risks, such as rising sea levels, land subsidence, abrasion, and land use change. While Semarang City is characterised by its dense housing, growing industrial areas, and continuous urban expansion, Demak Regency shows a contrasting landscape where dense residential and industrial zones thrive along main roads, scattered settlements, fishponds, and waterways and where vibrant mangrove forests shape the scenery. In this coastal region, most of the population depends on fisheries, undertaking roles as fishers, labourers in fish processing companies, or entrepreneurs operating small to medium-sized enterprises within the fishing industry. However, many young people from coastal areas in Demak are now turning to industrial work in an effort to earn a higher income for supporting their families.

These coastal regions are an example of an ecotone in regions where terrestrial and marine environments converge to form a unique and dynamic ecological system. These ecotones also highlight the contrast between rural and urban activities, as both forms of land use often meet and interact in coastal zones. Thus, this meeting point makes the area highly susceptible to disturbances. Small shifts such as erosion, sea level rise, or land use changes can rapidly lead to significant consequences.

These wicked urban problems often emerge in ecotones when environmental stressors intersect with urban pressures and social dynamics. In the coastal areas of Semarang and Demak, wicked urban problems arise from rapid urbanisation and are further exacerbated by climate change. For example, a reclamation project in coastal Semarang for the development of Tanjung Mas Port has resulted in tidal changes that have led to abrasion in the adjacent area of Demak. Local communities then decided to extensify fishponds to increase aquaculture production, which in turn has disrupted the mangrove forests and put the coastline at an even higher risk of abrasion. The case of the Semarang-Demak coastal ecotones reveals how ecological and social transitions converge, producing both opportunities and complex challenges for sustainable management.

Kolkata, India

IIT Kharagpur

Kolkata's peri-urban interface, spanning 12,500 hectares of ecological infrastructures in the form of wetlands, contains complex histories of urban and ecological coevolution – manipulated by political economic trajectories – generating un/intended consequences that have shaped the urban environment.

These 12,500 hectares are only a small fragment of the soaking ecologies of the Bengal delta often designated as the 'ecotone' of Kolkata. The historical and geographical attributes of the wetlands to the east of the city are part of the larger intertidal basin of the River Ganga – the Sundarbans: the largest mangroves delta in the world. In Bengali, 'kol' means 'shore' or 'coast' and 'kata' means 'cut open'. These two words are joined to form 'Kolkata', meaning a coast or shore cut open by creeks and inlets.

The wetlands to the east of Kolkata are emblems of complex interplays among technical infrastructures, socio-economic arrangements, and more-than-human enactments. They are the outcomes of tamed interventions of colonial hydrology and untamed practices derived from local knowledge systems: frugal and flexible, experimental and adaptive. These wastewater infrastructures are the lifelines of the city and they thrive on a mutual-reciprocal relationship, reflecting 'sustainable flows' between Kolkata and the East Kolkata wetlands.

The city's towering skyscrapers and swarming population conveniently conceal the deltaic-estuarine-marshy-aqueous origins – the ec*(h)*otonal underpinnings where the origin story, the account of functioning, and the apprehension of survival of this delta city are rooted. This forgotten past haunts the city when rain gauge readings generate alarm and urban utilities are disrupted after a few hours of continuous rainfall, not to mention catastrophic cyclones such as AILA 2009 and Amphan 2020 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Kolkata and its wetlands as embedded identities have encountered threats from wicked problems: rapid urbanisation, the conversion of ecological infrastructures into concrete, loss of livelihoods, etc. Yet, they have survived various waves of 'development' interventions with catastrophic impacts on associated socioecologies. The secret to the city's survival is enmeshed in the collective wisdom and multiple changing responses, not only recognising and appreciating ec(h)otonality but also being accommodated within these muddy, messy, marshy materialities. These ec*(h)*otonal realities include fishers, cooperative members, female snail collectors, water hyacinths, algae, coliform bacteria, lock-gates, and sluices, as well as the human beings who regulate wastewater flows, the wastewater user associations that decide together how to allocate water, and the social movements organised by the citizens of Kolkata.

Thus, the 'living system infrastructure' are 'wicked urban solutions' iterative, collaborative, and adaptive dynamics and systems evolving to fight against and embrace uncertainty and advancing the notion of viability for amphibious urban spaces.

Fill Application Form

Submit your application to: echotoning.smus@gmail.com

If you have any questions, please feel free to **contact us at:**
echotoning.smus@gmail.com

The Global Center of Spatial Methods for Urban Sustainability (SMUS) is funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) with funds from the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)