

SURFACING

CAMBRIDGE TALKS 2026 APRIL 24–25

In his 1993 essay on “The Topology of Environmentalism,” anthropologist Timothy Ingold critiqued the concept of “the global environment.” The image of dwelling upon a solid globe, upon the “surface of the earth,” he wrote, was predicated on a colonial idea of nature as fundamentally separate from human existence and thus, implicitly, an object of intervention. In framing *globe* thinking as *surface* thinking, Ingold reminds us that the very notion of the “earth’s surface” is imbued with normative assumptions about how we relate to the world.

As students of the built environment, we revisit Ingold’s critique to call for the historicization of surface-making or *surfacing*. After all, the design disciplines are bound up in working on the surface of the earth and in the physical and discursive production of surfaces more generally. From architectural cladding, street paving, and ground cover to the drawings, plans, and maps that represent them, surfaces mediate and condition our engagement with the world. What would it mean, then, to view surface-making as a unifying (albeit uneven) ground between architecture, landscape architecture, and urban planning? Thinking through the common ground of practice as *surfacing* may be a way of suturing the baggy concept of “environment” to its social and material dimensions.

Surfacing, as a methodological frame, entails a shift in focus from objects to processes. In the project of uncovering colonialism’s lasting legacies, historian Ann Laura Stoler has called for the study of ‘ruination’ rather than ‘ruins’; similarly, we are less interested in surfaces as such than in historical processes of surface-making and surface-breaking. We invite scholars, therefore, to consider the physical production of surfaces and their role in mediating our relationships with each other and with the environment. In historicizing surfaces as sites of intervention and management, we ask: How are surfaces physically produced? With what materials and what tools? What costs do these practices exact, socially or environmentally? Who builds surfaces, and to whose benefit or detriment? How are surfaces remade over time? What modes of maintenance or preservation are involved in doing so? And what happens when surfaces give way — to friction, mold, burst pipes, erosion, social unrest, or archival irruptions?

We welcome abstracts from doctoral students in architectural, landscape, urban, and environmental history, as well as in geography, the history of science and technology, art history, media studies, comparative literature, and related fields. Paper topics might address:

- Histories of landscape and architectural construction sites
- The geopolitics and/or environmental costs of sourcing and fabricating surface materials
- Histories of representational media as surfaces
- The use of surveying and mapping to document, produce, and manage surfaces
- Social, migration, or labor histories of making, breaking, or maintaining surfaces
- Histories of surface preservation (monuments, properties, landscapes, etc.)
- Alternative or counter-hegemonic practices and processes of surfacing

Date

Friday, April 24 –
Saturday, April 25, 2026

Location

Gund Hall
48 Quincy Street
Cambridge, MA 02138

Submissions

Please submit a 300-word paper abstract, paper title, and 2-page CV via [this form](https://bit.ly/surfacing26) (bit.ly/surfacing26). Abstracts are due by Friday, January 2, 2026. Authors of accepted papers will be notified via email by the end of January.

About

Cambridge Talks is an annual conference organized by students in the PhD program in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Planning at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design.

Contact

Please direct any questions to surfacing.gsd@gmail.com.

