Keynote: David Gilbert (Royal Holloway, University of London):
"A short history of modern London in wrought iron: Art, empire and social exclusion on Hungerford Bridge"

Abstract:

In September 1899, Claude Monet established himself in rooms at the new Savoy hotel, overlooking the Thames in London. Monet stayed for around a month, and was to return to the hotel for lengthy periods in the two following years. In all Monet painted around 95 large canvases of the city during this period. These included substantial series of the Houses of Parliament and Waterloo Bridge, but the first of the Savoy paintings were of a rather more prosaic subject, the iron railway bridge that brought the commuter lines from South London and the Kent suburbs across the river into Charing Cross Station (known both as Hungerford Bridge or Charing Cross railway bridge.) The bridge is a key element of Monet's London aesthetic, one that encompassed nature, pollution, technology and architecture to create what he described as being much more than experiments in atmospheric conditions, as a search for 'London-ness'. Monet was neither the first nor last to represent Hungerford Bridge; other notable artists of the bridge include James McNeill Whistler, Oscar Kokoschka and C.R.W.Nevinson, and the view from the Savoy has become one of the iconic London cityscapes.

This lecture uses the Hungerford Bridge as a route into the core debates of the conference, concerning urban modernity and imperialism. The iron bridge, built in 1864, and almost immediately decried as an uglifying intrusion into the city, opens up questions about contested visions of the city. Monet's search for 'London-ness' is a part of a wider search for a coherent aesthetic of the modern city. At the same time, Hungerford Bridge became the bête noire of those who were seeking to make London a more fitting imperial capital. Whether seeking a new Rome on the Thames, or searching for a distinctively British form of imperial urbanism, architects, planners, politicians and other contemporary urbanists were agreed that the bridge had to go. The plans for the bridge's replacement, and the implications of its removal for the wider geographies of London, show the close relationship between the modernism of the new town planning movement, and the culture of imperialism. Calls for the removal of the bridge reached a peak the 1920s; but the bridge survived (largely for the very British reasons of cost and conflict between different levels of government.) The Hungerford Bridge has also figured prominently in debates around another dimension of urban modernity – the socially divided city. From Jack London's reports of rough sleepers beneath the bridge in the 1900s, in *People of the Abyss,* to panics about 'cardboard city' in the 1980s and 1990s, Hungerford Bridge, and particularly its narrow, smelly, noisy pedestrian walkway, was repeated understood as symbol of the exclusionary and polarizing effects of modern urbanism.

The lecture ends in our own times. The railway bridge as survived into the twenty-first century, but has been transformed by dramatic white steel walkways by the architectural company Lifschutz Davidson, know as the Golden Jubilee bridges. These can be seen as a final resolution of the problem of Hungerford Bridge, and the triumph of a

new London aesthetic that speaks to a global city of neo-liberalism, consumerism, tourism, surveillance and spectacle. They have been described too as ‘Blairite’ bridges, a triumph of style over substance, and of ‘window-dressing’ for the city. More sympathetically, we might treat the Hungerford Bridge as it now stands as a palimpsest of modern London -- a site where the layers of the modern city can be seen and experienced.