

2 Postdoctoral Researchers for "Urban Delta", KU Leuven

KU Leuven, Department of Architecture (Faculty of Engineering Sciences, Heverlee Campus)

Application deadline: Mar 16, 2026

Merlijn Hurx

The Department of Architecture (Faculty of Engineering Sciences, Heverlee Campus, KU Leuven) has vacancies for two postdoctoral researchers (1.0 FTE 36 months) for the ERC-funded project: URBAN-DELTA: Metropolises in the Mud. Innovation in Delta Building Technology in Europe and China before 1800, directed by Prof. dr. Merlijn Hurx (PI) and is looking for internationally oriented candidates with an excellent research file.

Deltas are among the most urbanised and wealthiest regions of the world. Today, their very existence is threatened by climate change. Innovative solutions are urgently needed, and delta cities around the globe have joined forces to confront the climate crisis. The dependence on innovation for their survival is, however, not a recent phenomenon but has a longer history. Surprisingly, little is known about the specialised skills and knowledge shown by earlier civilisations in constructing and protecting these cities.

URBAN-DELTA hypothesises that major advances in the history of water-related engineering were not random but occurred at specific places and times. Several pioneering hotspots in the pre-industrial age seem to have existed. Therefore, the aim of URBAN-DELTA is to attain an entirely new, multidisciplinary understanding of technological innovations by tracing and explaining their historical emergence in the production of the built environment in Eurasian deltas before 1800.

This project is the first in-depth comparative study of construction techniques for marshy conditions. It examines three key deltas in Europe and China: that of the Po, the Rhine-Scheldt-Meuse and the Yangtze. The project questions how builders overcame technological limitations. Did innovation occur incrementally, or were there spurts at specific times and places? What were the dynamics of these processes, and what factors stimulated innovation?

URBAN-DELTA studies the built environment from a comparative perspective, combining approaches from Engineering, Economic and Architectural History. It tests hypotheses central to the debate over the conditions for innovation by examining a vital industry that has hitherto been ignored in scholarship. It aims to fundamentally rethink how architecture comes into being and to develop an entirely new explanatory framework for future research. In addition, it generates new knowledge urgently needed to preserve heritage threatened by climate change.

Within the project, we offer two 36-month full-time postdoc positions. The first postdoc will con-

centrate on the Yangtze Delta in China, while the second will focus on construction markets in deltas in Europe and China before 1800.

Profile

POSTDOC # 1: Construction Techniques and Knowledge in the Yangtze River Delta before 1800

As a postdoctoral researcher, you will identify what was considered building know-how specific to the Yangtze River Delta with its early 'megapolises' (e.g. Hangzhou, Suzhou, Yangzhou). You will trace the development of a range of techniques for building in marshy urban conditions, particularly in the Song and Ming dynasties. Much of the groundwork is still to be done, as literature on construction techniques and machinery is limited, and hardly any synthesis studies exist. Questions regarding which specialised building technologies existed and what building knowledge was developed remain largely unanswered. You will develop three distinct lines of study grounded in the rigorous analysis of primary sources, both written and material. The first consists of an in-depth study of techniques that negotiated difficult conditions by providing greater stability, in particular, the development of foundation techniques. The second line examines how architecture was built and focuses on the mechanisation of construction processes through the use of pumps, drainage devices, pile drivers etc. The third trend focuses on Chinese building manuals on architecture and hydraulic works and questions whether they merely recorded existing practices, enabled the emergence of a common language, or even stimulated innovation. Since innovations occurred not only in the Yangtze delta, this research will necessarily look beyond its confines and consider inventions for construction in other Chinese deltas (the Yellow River and Jin River) as well.

Requirements:

- You have an academic university degree (PhD) in Architecture (architect and/or architect-engineer), Architectural History, Art History, Archaeology or Chinese Studies.
- Proficiency in reading ancient text, both Literary Chinese and written vernacular Chinese, as well as in writing academic English.
- Experience with archival research and (building) archaeological surveys.
- You can demonstrate excellent academic results or have distinguished yourself in a comparable way during your academic career.
- You are able to illustrate your research skills through peer-reviewed (journal) articles or a book publication.
- You are willing to contribute to the supervision of PhD students

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Profile

POSTDOC # 2: Construction Markets in Deltas in Europe and China before 1800

As a postdoctoral researcher, you will examine how markets structured the construction industry in the Po, Rhine–Scheldt–Meuse, and Yangtze deltas. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative sources, you will explore how and when competitive markets developed and identify the conditions that either fostered or impeded the commercialisation of building services and the trade in materials. You will trace the evolution of entrepreneurial practices in Holland and Venice and compare these findings with the organisation of construction in China, where building activity was long shaped by state bureaucracy. Did these delta regions follow divergent trajectories, and what

role did market forces play in driving innovation? To what extent did price competition stimulate process and product innovations, such as the mechanisation of construction tasks or the search for cheaper alternative materials?

Requirements:

- You have an academic university degree (PhD) in Economic History, Architecture (architect and/or architect-engineer) or Architectural History.
- Proficiency in reading Dutch and either Italian or Chinese, as well as in writing academic English.
- Experience with archival research.
- Experience with both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.
- You can demonstrate excellent academic results or have distinguished yourself in a comparable way during your academic career.
- You are able to illustrate your research skills through peer-reviewed (journal) articles or a book publication.
- You are willing to contribute to the supervision of PhD students.

Tasks of the Postdoctoral researchers:

As a member of the ERC project, you will work together with the international group members supervised by the PI. You are expected to come up with your own ideas, execute archival research abroad, and help to shape the project. You are expected to (co)author scientific articles, disseminate results at international seminars and conferences and support other activities of the ERC project and the Department. You will have the opportunity to pursue additional training to develop the skills you need for your research.

Working Conditions:

We offer employment of 100% for 12 months (extendable up to a maximum of 36 months, subject to a positive evaluation), with a planned starting date of June 1, 2026, although this can be negotiated.

Salary: approx. 5000 €/month, however the exact amount depends on the number of years of relevant experience.

You will be based at Heverlee campus (near Leuven), specifically the Arenberg Castle at the Department of Architecture. Arrangements can be made for some remote work and flexible hours to encourage a healthy work-life balance. All research-based travel expenses will be covered by the project budget.

Employees of KU Leuven enjoy a number of benefits, such as a wide range of training and education opportunities, a vacation allowance and end-of-year bonus, yearly accumulation of seniority with automatic pay indexation, compensation for public transport etc. For more information see: KU Leuven Jobsite, Academic Staff - Research & Education: information.

For more information about the content of the position, please contact:

Prof. Merlijn Hurx, contact person for History, Theory and Criticism (merlijn.hurx@kuleuven.be)

You can apply exclusively through our online application:
https://webwsp.aps.kuleuven.be/esap/public/ui5_ui5/sap/zh_erc_esol_go/index.html?sap-ui-language=EN&vacaturenummer=60620925&toepassing=LGH

If you have problems applying online, you can contact: solliciteren@kuleuven.be

Application:

Please include the following in your application

- a biosketch in which you demonstrate your added value for the project (maximum 2 pages);
- a file summarising your three most important publications or achievements (maximum 2 pages);
- a comprehensive CV (including a complete list of publications)
- a sample of what you have written (e.g. a chapter from your PhD, a peer-reviewed article)
- please indicate which project (PD1/PD2) you are applying for

Selection timeline:

- applications should be submitted on or before March 16, 2026
- all candidates will be notified by March 22, 2026 whether they proceed to the interview
- shortlisted candidates will be interviewed (virtually or in person) on March 30 or 31, 2026
- final candidates will be informed of the outcome by April 12, 2026

KU Leuven strives for an inclusive, respectful and socially safe environment. We embrace diversity among individuals and groups as an asset. Open dialogue and differences in perspective are essential for an ambitious research and educational environment. In our commitment to equal opportunity, we recognize the consequences of historical inequalities. We do not accept any form of discrimination based on, but not limited to, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, age, ethnic or national background, skin colour, religious and philosophical diversity, neurodivergence, employment disability, health, or socioeconomic status. For questions about accessibility or support offered, we are happy to assist you at this email address: hr.diversiteit@kuleuven.be

Website: <https://www.kuleuven.be/personeel/jobsite/jobs/60620925?lang>

Reference:

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