Abbott Payson Usher Prize

Recipient 2020
Daniel Williford, Indiana University Bloomington
For “Seismic Politics: Risk and Reconstruction after the 1960 Earthquake in Agadir, Morocco,” Technology and Culture 58:4 October 2017, 982-1016

The Usher Prize Committee unanimously chose Daniel Willford’s article, “Seismic Politics: Risk and Reconstruction after the 1960 Earthquake in Agadir, Morocco,” as the recipient of the 2020 Abbot Payson Usher Prize. We found this well-written article impressive in its scholarly ambitions and execution. It deftly brings together wide-ranging concepts and literatures in a fascinating examination of technology, natural disaster, and Moroccan history. The committee found that the article’s central argument – that international experts’ redefinition of Agadir as seismically vulnerable shaped the subsequent material and moral trajectories of post-earthquake reconstruction – was compelling and valuable for our understanding of Morocco’s early independence. We further appreciated how Willford tracked the interactions between seismologists, who rendered the area around Agadir as spatialized nature, and engineers, who rendered the space a laboratory that transformed material inequalities into normative categories of difference. Imaginative in its use of sources and deft in its critical methods, this article holds important insights for the intertwined histories of disaster, seismicity, and technology, while providing a fascinating contribution to our knowledge of technology and infrastructure in Morocco’s postcolonial history.