Society for the History of Technology
Annual Meeting: November 2021

Open session proposal: Constructing Energy Efficiency
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We are rapidly approaching the 50th anniversary of the 1973 Yom Kippur War and subsequent OPEC oil embargo. For many people, those events represent the start of the so-called energy crisis era, when the reality of finite energy supplies and debates about energy efficiency began to affect daily lives. Now is an appropriate time to consider the how the events of the 1970s affected the design and adoption of energy using devices, and on our social awareness of energy use.

As we investigate the theme of Environment, Infrastructure, and Social Justice, historical questions arise regarding definitions of energy efficiency, differing ways those definitions can be interpreted, and broader frameworks within which the definitions are crafted. Those questions, influenced by the intersection of culture, economics, politics, and technology, invite further questions about social inclusiveness. Who participated in adopting efficient technologies, and who could not? For whom were those technologies produced and marketed? Addressing those questions becomes vital as people consider how to improve the efficiency of energy infrastructures to mitigate global climate change, a different problem from that of securing energy supplies.

The papers for this session should discuss how responses to the 1970s energy crisis changed social and technical approaches to energy efficiency. Discussions of how those responses affected disadvantaged communities are especially welcome. Other possibilities include how ideas about energy efficiency were promoted in various ways, technical legacies of the events such as development of energy efficient appliances, and differences in adopting efficient technologies as a means to address energy shortages then, versus addressing climate change now.