

Occupying Infrastructure

Article by Dr. Dave Loder

Our contemporary planetary condition is one bound by coils and cycles, pulsing and writhing, hidden yet present, sustaining a stable and contiguous experience to the lived technological world. Multi-layered regimes of systems, infrastructure shapes and conditions the manner by which the everyday persists in the industrialised world, putting into circulation the matter essential for living, a cycle of energy, materials, data, and even excrement. Nation and planet-spanning networks, infrastructures mediate the distribution and territorialisation of space across a manifold of scales, with modes of inhabitation emerging at the intersection of macro and micro. Multiple cycles are moderated across a stratum of scales, from the seasonal diversion of flood waters to the half-time kettle boil that spikes the power grid. In the developed world, infrastructure is an eternally running behemoth that provides a seamless experience to everyday life, delivering the continuous and immediate present of modernity. In the less developed elsewhere it might be sporadic, distorting the capacity to subsist efficiently or with consistency, and for any reliable present to be dispersed across space and time. Increasingly, the coils of infrastructure enact a virtual dimension, further smearing and dislocating the spatial from the physical, giving rise to spaces that dilate or contract conventional temporalities.

The capacity of infrastructure to antagonise and distort the genealogical conventions of space and time awards infrastructure with a 'monumental' status. Not only are some infrastructural projects mammoth, planet-spanning enterprises

monumental in relation to scale and materiality, but the spatial and temporal conditions of the monument, as a discrete ideological device, are also motivated. A monument has a very particular temporal function. It operates like a type of time machine transmitting a version of the past into its future, into our lived present. Acts of memorialisation are imbued with an ethical and ideological status, through what is remembered, how it is remembered and how that remembering acts upon the present and the future-to-come. Equally, the continuity of the monument in time exerts a conditioning over the space in which it is deployed, attested by the inhabitants that endure it. This territorialisation, sustained through a relational milieu, exhibits a cartographic tendency in the occupation of space by social means. Monuments are specific territorial devices, annotating, marking and categorising space and its occupation.

It is due in part to the technical machinations of infrastructure to which the space-time functioning of the monument can be attributed. The effective performance of infrastructure is contingent on the organisation of a greater or lesser array of codices, lexicons and other technical practices through which the service 'works'. A variety of rules, procedures and workings out enables infrastructure to function effectively and retreat seamlessly into the background of the everyday. Such practices of classification and categorisation are complicit with the

making and ordering of social, economic and political structures, directing and manipulating distinct hierarchies of space and time for our occupation. Infrastructure asserts a regulatory condition that both constrains and privileges: "Telephones, electric power, television, and other basic infrastructures offer many services, but also ensnare subscribers in webs of corporate bureaucracy, government regulation, and the constant barrage of advertising" (Edwards 2002:191). Moreover, the temporalisation of experience advanced by infrastructure through the compartmentalisation, division and scalar manipulation of time, manifests a temporal authority with a distinct 'monumental' affectation.

Further ideological specifics to infrastructure permit it to be attributed the contemporary status of the monument in the construction and projection of (a certain flavour of) subjectivity: "To be modern is to live within and by means of infrastructures" (ibid:186). Propelled by the ideological conventions of modernity, infrastructure "can be said to co-construct society and technology while holding them ontologically separate" (ibid:189) and are embedded within systems of power and inequality. The tentacular character of infrastructure exemplifies it as a project of colonialism, the developed developing the undeveloped, colonisation by and through technological conditions and universalism of modernity. Through the erasure of diversity and the imposition of 'civilisation', "an idealised version of the world modelled on sameness and replication of the homeland" is driven forward (Davis & Todd 2017). More essentially, universalism spurs the distinction of culture from nature, most brutally featured where the indigenous was considered sub-human, part of nature, whose disposal was of no moral concern.

Conspiring with universalism is the notion of progress itself, both as lead architect and as a primary dimension. Temporality itself is homogenised under progress in the service of colonisation, (re)producing a space-time conditioning fixated on and by modernity.

However, the ongoing progress of modernity itself makes the conventions of (human) time unstable and fluid, evidenced through infrastructure as noted above. Where the expansion of the rail network during the Industrial Revolution demanded a consistency to clock time across town and country, the contemporary developments of technology spur an increasingly multi-layered complexity to temporality. Against an empirical fixity to time, temporality is emergent from the activities undertaken and the infrastructural landscape occupied at any particular moment. A plurality of overlapping and contradictory temporal cycles are s(t)imulated across the many milieu striated by infrastructure. With gas lighting, the monopoly on human time appeared to be the standardisation of labouring in abeyance of night or day. But the contemporary position more specifically draws attention to the smearing of micro and macro, with modern electronics operating at the speed of light (and potentially faster with quantum computing) yet contingent of a materiality plumbed from geological 'deep time' (Demos 2017; Parikka 2015). The rare earth mineralogy of tantalum, among many others, collides temporalities of the geologic and the quantum through contemporary communications infrastructures. The universalism deployed via infrastructure is the ungrounding of consistency for all emergent temporalities, to further

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decentre the human in routine modernity.

The antagonism of temporal inconsistency bestowed through infrastructure is veiled by the stable consistency of everyday monotony. It is the failure of infrastructure that renders it visible, when everyday order is interrupted or suspended. Power blackouts, traffic jams, a broken water main or a downed server suspends the contiguity of the everyday, giving attention to the essential conditions of infrastructure and disconnecting us, and our co-construction, from the modern world. As infrastructure seeks to heal itself, the ontological distinction and maintaining of separation is sharpened. The rupturing water dam draws to it a swarming of specialists and specialisms, summoning a cloud of alienation where experts collide and distract in a cacophony of codification, splurging out strategies of restoration in oblique and coded jargon. Implicating a sense of superiority of man over natural forces, such as the capacity to divert rivers, infrastructure structures nature as 'other', to be commanded, controlled and colonised. Conversely, the interruption of infrastructure brings into focus the continuum of the modern human condition with nature – "natureculture" (Haraway:2003) – or perhaps more specifically, contextualises infrastructures capacity in the mediation of nature with culture – "mediaculture" (Parikka:2011). Most essentially, the distance, or pointedly the distancing condition, is rendered visible as an ontological paradigm that gives further allocation to the 'monumental' status of infrastructure as well as exposing the spaces and environment in which nonhuman relations emerge.

In an arrangement that gives texture to the monumental status of infrastructure, the role of interventionist or parasitic strategies can be acted upon

to investigate alternative ontological events. Fernando Abellanas' covert studio slung beneath a concrete bridge in Valencia presents a situation where occupant is drawn into an intimacy with the infrastructural apparatus to which it is attached.[1] In this semi-private bonding, the dweller of the steel and plywood device is united with the pulse of the traffic above, the module of the concrete bridge transmitting a vibrational and sonic event as cars, long buses and longer articulated lorries measure a rhythm of movement. Inhabitation is activated across a multiplicity of scales as individual events of movement might occur with the local, national or international, as vehicles cycle their separate routes across the conduit. Modulating a dynamic temporal praxis with a distinct materiality, an entanglement of people and goods distributed via a (predominantly) petroleum-based technology conducted through the concrete and steel structure, a monumental condition is made present which exerts a specific subjectivity. However, the concealment of the intervention and its withdrawal from conventions of the everyday, troubles the simplicity of this patterning. The retreat proposes the opportunity to enter into a stable relation with the artefact and its monumental status, and a location where its particular dynamics can be aligned to, a being-with. Moreover, the provision of a studio, as a place for a specific mode of occupation, asserts a making-with, which further asks what types of practices and objects might emerge from this parasitic structure. The dynamic and unfolding status of the intervention embodies an agency allowing for the reconfiguration of infrastructure's universalising capacity,

a discrete monumental condition for an alternative world(ing) to transpire.

Looking elsewhere, clinging to street lampposts, Milo Ayden De Luca's Excrescent Utopia proposes parasitic shelter for homeless in the centre of London. This speculative project appears to offer a circumstance of being-with as anticipated through Abellanas' studio, but as a dispersed model for a particular demographic. The cycles of light and darkness mediated by street lighting appear to describe a much simpler modulation than the bridge, modestly retelling a daily order. In addition, the nomination of the specific demographic reiterates a classification imperative that might further emphasise, and spotlight, an existing ideological position. However, in ascribing the parasitic intervention an agency of reconfiguration, it is not only that the infrastructure is rendered visible when reconfigured as a dwelling, but the potential occupant, as un-seen, is also made seen; their being-with the street light. Furthermore, the temporal paradigm of the street light points to the universalising construction of time, conceived through the invention of artificial lighting. The standardisation of the lived everyday and the allocation of labour in service to capitalism through the structuring of clock time, demands specific contemplation on the circumstances by which one might be subjected to homelessness.

These examples and other potential events for the occupation of infrastructure exemplify strategies to decolonise the decentring impulse of infrastructure, and the activation of an agency with a monumentalising dimension. They are events which 'glitch' the universalising capacity of infrastructure, modulating distinct temporal rhythms that motivate alternative subjectivities. As parasitic

structures, they provide exemplars for being-with that might be adopted as an emergent (counter)monumental architecture that authenticate contemporary planetary conditions.



SOURCES

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