

**From:** Kazys Varnelis <kazys@varnelis.net>  
**Subject:** Infrastructure  
**Date:** January 27, 2005 9:40:10 PM EST  
**To:** Barry Lehrman <blehrman@dolphin.upenn.edu>

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Hi Barry,

This may be the worst time to ask you about this... But your work on the Owens Valley is intriguing and I'd like to suggest the following ... I also have to get you a copy of Forum Annual. Will try to put it in your box next week.

Best,

Kazys

**Los Angeles, Infrastructural City**

Edited by Kazys Varnelis

Published by ACTAR in collaboration with  
the Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design

Prospectus

This book sets out to map the nodes or lines of infrastructure that shape contemporary life in the Los Angeles region, urban systems whose existence remains largely invisible to the public. Necessary for the functioning of the city, like the subconscious, these infrastructural elements are themselves subject to drives and desires, being bound by highly developed bureaucracies, answering to powerful competing interests as well as the mass psychology of the populace, shaped during long political histories, and limited by the their own complexity.

During the modern era, infrastructural intervention was the foremost strategic instrument of the master planner, the means by which the city's dominance over nature would be assured and the chaos generated by the metropolis could be mitigated. Los Angeles was the greatest American example of this modern city served by infrastructure, sustained by water and power from hundreds of miles away, its inhabitants commuting vast distances smoothly, riding from home to work to beach on the freeway grid while a hostile natural world was kept at bay through the operations of the city's engineers. What other metropolis would name its most romantic mountain drive after the head of its water department?

Today, however, Los Angeles's infrastructure is in perpetual crisis and rarely responds to the plan. Instead, the city plays an endless catch-up game to keep the system at a steady state of near-breakdown. Infrastructure just barely works: traffic is always backed-up, the cell phone never connects, the sewer perpetually floods whenever there is a storm as water shortages and rolling blackouts give rhythm to our lives. Faced with this condition of permanent systems overload and the general futility of proposing new plans to a public fragmented into micro-constituencies, engineers now understand failure as natural and regard congestion as an integral part of the system. But if a populace determined to fight on for its own self-interest reigns in infrastructure's natural tendency to grow, infrastructure has its revenge too: it is not the limitless possibilities of infrastructure but rather its limitations that increasingly determine our lives.

Infrastructure has also ceased to support architecture's quest to plan the city. Instead, it has dominated and subordinated it. Unlike architecture, contemporary infrastructure has little need for visibility and generally prefers to disappear. In this light, the city's recent bout of formalist monumentalism does not so much represent the city's aspirations as it serves as an alibi for a city virtually wiped clean of architecture. Buildings themselves become less objects of fantasy and more the byproducts of building and zoning codes, draconian design review boards, the need to maximize the building envelope, and construction of the lowest common denominator. No longer the subject behind planning, architecture is now its object. But whereas architecture believed in the virtues of the plan as the great expression of rational and humanist thought, the plan it is now subjected to is blind and mad, produced by systems gone amok. It is as if we live in a post-apocalyptic movie set in which the ants and the cockroaches have taken control, rebuilding the world according to their own inscrutable, DNA-driven logic, but we are the insects as well as their victims.

If infrastructural systems answer to a higher authority, it is to the cultural logic of late capitalism, a logic itself all pervasive and theoretically unmappable. Indeed, in a networked world increasingly organized by flows of objects and information, static structures avoid being superfluous only by joining that system to become temporary containers for the people, objects, and capital that flow in and out of them.

In response, *Los Angeles, Infrastructural City* sets out to take measure of the site we inhabit so as to gather knowledge about our predicament, thereby taking seriously Fredric Jameson's demand that cognitively mapping our place in this unmappable world is the central task of postmodern culture.

The Forum is actively soliciting proposals responding to the above prospectus. The following projects, all currently underway for the book, should give an idea of the project's scope, but potential contributors should not feel constrained by this format.

AUDC: a study of how AT&T's Long Lines program reconstructed the telecommunicational infrastructure of both Los Angeles, dubbed

"the Capital of Ether" by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, and the American continent during the Cold War. This project also explores the fall of the Long Lines network with the rise of broadband telecommunications and the re-use of those facilities by newer technologies.

Lane Barden: three sets of aerial photographs documenting the full-length of the Los Angeles River, the Alameda Corridor, and Wilshire Boulevard together with an accompanying essay on the role of these lines in the landscape.

Jack Burnett Stuart, Frank Escher, and Alan Loomis: an large-scale exploration of the complex and evolving relationship between Los Angeles and the watershed that it occupies. As a device to clarify this complex topic, data will be organized around a series of maps in which information about different aspects of the watershed will be superimposed on the map of the existing city.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation: a survey of the Port of Los Angeles and Long Beach.

The Center for Land Use Interpretation and the Institute for Advanced Architecture: an investigation into the reengineering of the city's traffic through the embedded feedback loops, surveillance cameras, computers and remotely operated traffic signals of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's Automated Traffic Surveillance and Control (ATSAC) Control system.

Debbie Richmond: an essay on the Alameda Corridor, the freight route for consumer goods that connects the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach with the city and country's consumer infrastructure.

Debbie Richmond: an examination of the very large soundstages currently being built in region, utterly generic structures devoid of any architectural quality except for size within which Hollywood constructs its fantasies that are exported for consumption worldwide.

Robert Sumrell: an analysis of the role of prop houses in Hollywood, the relentless circulation of everyday and exotic objects they create, and the lessons that this teaches us about contemporary culture.

Kazys Varnelis: a paper that acts as a theoretical foundation for the book, exploring infrastructure under late capitalism.

**Timeline:**

Proposals for projects due

1 March 2005

Proposals sent to [kazys@varnelis.net](mailto:kazys@varnelis.net) give an idea of the scope of the project in under one page.

15 July 2005

Projects due

30 August 2005

Final edits due (after editor's response in late July). Any images must be either the author's or have prior permission to publish.

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