

(You know that we are living in a) Material World

Format	Article	Project	Making Cultural Infrastructure
Published	16 July 2019		
Author	John Bingham-Hall	Related	Theatrum Mundi to collaborate on Test Unit 2019 as a research partner
		Share	Twitter Facebook Email

[See](#)

You know that we are living in a material world?
And we are material girls.

We are also bodies which are infrastructures for minds, for processing food into energy, into thought, through the hand and back out into materials. We are tools for measuring and manipulating a world into a habitat, one of human proportions. Via food via stomachs via hands, knowledge is built into materials, materials are taught how to think as things, and with things we think and do again, round and around.

Which kinds of things, of materials, flow from one culture to another, and which stay within them? Cigarettes - sold and shipped for profit but shared as offerings of friendship. A contraband cigarette is an illegal immigrant in circulation, accepted from a new friend, breathed in, enjoyed even more for its flagrancy, the journey it has been on can be tasted. Cigarette butts stripped of identity, burned out and discarded on the steps, all equal and anonymous regardless of origin or legality. Accumulated as the traces of moments of sharing, or of meditation or retreat. Divided materials stand, united as dust, ash, and detritus they fall.

Materials are inserted into materials where there is a gap, a seam. Stuffing a cigarette butt in a crack in the concrete is a kind of care for the imperfection of the city, caring enough at least to notice the spaces it opens up. Butts in cracks, cracks in butts. What would we do without these openings that show us there is an underneath, a mutable unknown, and not just a known, finished surface? Peering into cracks and seams we know that the city was made and can be remade, should be. They 'allow reality to reveal itself'. Some materials are improved by cracks, and some are broken by them. Glass makes for a brittle city, a closed system: a smooth hard

THEATRUM MUNDI

surface; once made, final; only able to be renewed in tabula rasa. Cracks mean open systems: materials that allow in other materials, incremental acts of care and fixing, expansion and contraction. Tax demolition and incentivise maintenance.

So where and how do we make visible these seams? We look for infrastructures: always things involved in translation, transformation, the processing of materials between states or locations. Infrastructures are defined by their transparency, says Susan Star¹. We see through them to the things they enable us to do. Do we need another word then? They are not transPAREnt but transDOent, it is not about how they appear but how they work. We work through infrastructures to realise journeys, acts of making. Old infrastructures are some of the most visible forms in the city. The M8. New ones are not so much transparent as hidden, the infrastructures of data. Their joins might be the places they can be tackled, points of vulnerability where one slick surface ripples and bunches up against a different regime.

Infrastructures are tools and tools are infrastructures. If they are the means of material transformations then the workshop is as much a tool as the saw. Sharing tools is a starting point for changing our understanding of ownership. "A fun tool-based communism." Access to the means for transforming material into culture is a political right. Cultural infrastructure as the right to the city. An infrastructural city as a productive one, in which production is culture, rather than the spectacular. Production of energy becomes a social space within the city. Fire reclaimed from décor for utility. How could the infrastructures of heat and light become generators of social fabric too? Decentralised generation combats loss, of social and electrical energy. Mirrors for a solar commons - collectively redistributing the source of all life. Reflective material democratises access to the sun by extending and amplifying its resource, so let's think always about what materials do rather than how they appear.

Tools, infrastructures (let's say they're interchangeable) endure beyond any single act of creation, unlike materials which are consumed. How to break that cycle? When conceived as standardised units the materials become the tools. Not inert substances to be shaped, but active forms with built-in knowledge, affordance, that participate in the making rather than resist it, and can flow from one object to another. Could our thinking hands be part of the tool library? My body offered up as a tool for you - a communism of bodies. Sounds something like improvisation, a space of indeterminate performance, where bodies are made available to one another as an expanded system of thinking in movement.

Where can this improvisation happen? Speirs Lock as Tarkovsky's Zone² - a place 'hollowed out', robbed (or freed?) of determination. Is Speirs Lock inherently more improvisatory than unhollowed places in Glasgow? Where does its improvisatory quality live? In its

THEATRUM MUNDI

material form (grass, earth, broken paving and water), its morphology (sparse, fuzzy-edged), its ownership or land use mix? Or is it in a kind of cultural field that emanates from Civic House as it now asserts itself? Do material changes to the internal space of this building (which change its affordances, which changes the social configurations and textures that coalesce around it) ripple out into its environment? When does something inert, hollowed become something improvisatory? When bodies that are predisposed to improvisation enter into it.

Can we think of the Zone like a quantum field? It doesn't have a state until it is observed. Once we observe it, it becomes something, then we become something in response to that something, and in that new state we act back on the field. Anna and Lawrence Halprin's RSVP cycles: resource, score, valuation, performance.³ Performance as a way to reveal how infrastructures choreograph us, and choreography (of actions, improvisations, processes of making) can re-determine infrastructure.

Some boys romance
Some boys slow dance
That's all right with me
If they can't raise my interest then
I have to let them be⁴

Written by John Bingham-Hall for the Test Unit 2019 newspaper as part of Theatrum Mundi's role as research partner., thinking through and with Aude-Line Dulière, Anna and Lawrence Halprin, the Tool Library, Madonna, Susan Star, Richard Sennett, and all of Test Unit's participants and facilitators. Test Unit is coordinated by Agile City and takes place annually at Civic House in Glasgow. The topic of the 2019 edition was Material Flows.

1. Star, S. L. (1999). The Ethnography of Infrastructure. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43(3), 377-391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955326>
 2. <https://openspace.sfmoma.org/2009/04/penetrating-the-zone-andrei-tarkovskys-stalker/>
-
1. Halprin, L. (2014). The rSVp cycles: creative processes in the Human environment. *Choreographic Practices*, 5(1), 39-47.
 2. <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/madonna/materialgirl.html>

Test Unit Events Programme

Monday night
Aude-line Dufrene
— ROTOR DC

Pecha Kucha

Chris Strachan & Lizzie Abernethy
— Glasgow Tool Library

Laura Hainey
— Architecture & Design Scotland

Will Jenkinson & Aaron Cook
— STILL LIFE

Lizzie Malcolm
— Rectangle

Nell Mcquire
— Test Unit

Miles McClaughlin Croesling

Misty Donald & Nick Millar

John Bingham-Hall
— Theatrum Mundi

Ewan Atkin
— Good Waste

Keynote Lecture:

Richard Sennett
Amica Doll
John Bingham-Hall

Theatrum Mundi is a research centre aiming to expand the crafts of city-making through collaborative production and thinking between artists and urbanists.

They acted as research partner to Test Unit 2019 by presenting their own work as part of the Pecha Kucha, co-presenting Richard Sennett's lecture and developing a reflection on the theme throughout the week. [theatrum-mundi.org]

You know that we are living in a material world? And we are material girls.

We are also bodies which are infrastructures for minds, for processing food into energy, into thought, through the hand and back out into materials. We are tools for measuring and manipulating a world into a habitat, one of human proportions. Via food via stomachs via homes, knowledge is built into materials, materials are taught how to think as things, and with things we think and do again, round and around.

Which kinds of homes, of materials, flow from one culture to another, and which stay within them? Cigarettes - sold and stripped for profit but shared as offerings of friendship. A contraband cigarette is an illegal immigrant in circulation, accepted from a new friend, breathed in, enjoyed even more for its foreignness, the journey it has been on can be tasted. Cigarette butts stripped of identity, burned out and discarded on the steps, all equal and anonymous regardless of origin or legality. Accumulated as the traces of moments of sharing, or of meditation or retreat. Divided materials stand, united as dust, ash, and detritus they fall.

Materials are inserted into materials where there is a gap, a seam. Stuffing a cigarette butt in a crack in the concrete is a kind of care for the imperfection of the city, caring enough at least to notice the spaces it opens up. Butts in cracks, cracks in butts. What would we do without these openings that show us there is an underneath, a mutable unknown, and not just a known, finished surface? Peering into cracks and seams we know that the city was made and can be remade, should be. They 'glow really to reveal itself'. Some materials are improved by cracks, and some are broken by them. Glass makes for a brittle city, a closed system; a smooth hard surface; once made, final; only able to be renewed in *tabula rasa*. Cracks mean open systems: materials that allow in other materials, increase but acts of gaps and fixing, expansion and contraction. Not demolition but successive interventions.

So where and how do we measure these things? We look for infrastructures, always things involved in translation, transformation, the processing of materials between states or locations. Infrastructures are defined by their

transparency, says Susan Star. We see through them to the things they enable us to do. Do we need another word then? They are not transPA Rent but transDene. It is not about how they appear but how they work. We work through infrastructures to realise journeys, acts of making. Old infrastructures are some of the most visible forms in the city. The M4, new ones are not so much transparent as hidden, the infrastructures of data. Their limits might be the places they can be tackled, points of vulnerability where one slick surface ripples and bunches up against a different regime.

Infrastructures are those surfaces, one infrastructures. If they are the means of material transformations then the workpiece is as much a tool as the saw. Starting tools is a starting point for conceiving our understanding of ownership. "A not tool-based communism." Access to the means for transforming material into culture is a political right. Cultural infrastructures are the right to the city. An infrastructure city is a productive one, in which production is culture, rather than the spectacular. Production of energy becomes a social space within the city. Fire reclaimed from decor for utility. How could the infrastructures of heat and light become generators of social fabric too? Decentralised generation conducts bits, of social and electrical energy. Nurturs for a water commons - collectively redistributing the source of all life. Reflective material democratises access to the sun by extending and amplifying its resource, so lets think always about what materials do rather than how they appear.

Tools, infrastructures (let's say they're interchangeable) endure beyond any single act of creation, unlike materials which are consumed. How to break that cycle? When conceived as standardised units the materials become the tools. Not inert substances to be shaped, but active forms with built-in knowledge, affordance, that participate in the making rather than resist it, and can flow from one object to another. Could our thinking hands be part of the tool library? My body offered up as a tool for you - a communism of bodies. Sounds something like improvisation, a space of indeterminate performance, where bodies are made available to one another as an expanded system of thinking in movement.

Where can this improvisation happen? Spains Lucha as Tarkovsky's Zone - a place 'followed not', ruled (or freed?) of determination. Is Spains Lucha inherently more improvisatory than unfollowed places in Glasgow? Where does its improvisatory quality live? In its material form (grass, earth, broken paving and water), its morphology (sparse, fuzzy-edged), its membership (or not) or use mix? Or is it in a kind of cultural field that emanates from Civic House as it now asserts itself? Do material changes to the internal space of this building (which change its affordances, which change the social configurations and bodies that circulate around it) flow out into its environment? When does something inert, followed become something improvisatory? When bodies that are pre-occupied by improvisation enter into it. Can we think of the Zone like a quantum field? It doesn't have a state until it is observed. Once we observe it, it becomes something, then we become something in response to that something, and in that new state we act back on the field. Anna and Lawrence Halprin's RSVP cycles: resource, score, valuation, performance. Performance as a way to reveal how infrastructures choreograph us, and choreography (of actions, improvisations, processes of making) can re-determine infrastructure.

Some boys remance
Some boys slow dance
That's all right with me
If they can't raise my interest then I
Have to let them be

John Bingham-Hall (Theatrum Mundi),
thinking through and with Aude-Line Dufrene,
Anna and Lawrence Halprin, the Glasgow
Tool Library, Madonna, Susan Star, Richard
Sennett, and all of Test Unit.