Rethinking Intimacy and the City

Alexandra Pereira-Edwards

Cities are complex and evocative sites of transformation, with infrastructural networks and intimate connections constantly shifting bodies and things into new social, material, and affective constellations. The ongoing infrastructural turn across disciplines has implicated a wide array of contemporary concerns within the city, in many ways addressing space and structure through understandings that the architectural discourse has not yet become fully attuned to. While infrastructures may often be thought of as physical entities like overlapping highways or buried sewage systems, contemporary theorists strive to imagine infrastructure in more relational terms, seeking to both assess the infrastructural object and to dissolve it, mapping where and how its particulates land. Understood within city space, infrastructure becomes both a tool and a weapon, carving out new forms of intimacy while simultaneously limiting others. For architecture to adequately address these uneven consequences within the urban condition, the role of intimacy must enter the conceptual orbit in fresh, infrastructural terms.

By implicating infrastructure and intimacy—two concepts whose loose and fluid definitions have only recently been addressed in theoretical conjuncture—within spatial understandings of the city, the physical imprint of intimate relations can be traced to expose deep webs of power and the violent and exclusionary potentials that they actualize. Intimacy can be seen as the factor that imbues space with meaning, enabling conceptions of place through intimate association, and its weaponization is what often reinforces stigma and socio-spatial division. Infrastructure's role in social formations is often visible, with more obvious signs like roads, telephone lines, and fibre optic cables forging affective networks in physical and virtual space. While these palpable and traceable cues have potent capacities to realize discord and disconnection, it is the immaterial forms of infrastructure such as zoning ordinances, laws, and policing structures that are of particular interest in mobilizing intimacy as a theoretical lens. The violence of scales enabled by these immaterial systems, in which a governing body in one geographic location can make decisions that reverberate deep within individual bodies in another, has always been central to the formation of the urban fabric and the furthering of hegemonic standards of intimacy amidst city life.

In probing the city's spatial politics in her book *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*, Keller Easterling posits a pertinent consideration of architecture's role amidst ongoing shifts in understandings of built

form, noting that the presence of infrastructure space within the contemporary city could seem to harken to the "death of architecture."[1] While she quickly points out the fallacy of this logic, noting that in fact this presence only further establishes architecture's active role, her hypothetical scrutiny has a particularly sticky effect. Architecture must be consistently reassessed in the face of ever-evolving responsibilities in order to adequately respond to the demands of the present day, and can begin to do so through a recognition of the feedback loop between infrastructure, intimacy, and space as foundational to the formation of the city.

Built form often draws a conceptual line between private and public spaces, a division that innately separates the interior from the exterior, the domestic from the civic, and the personal from the political, severing the body of collective life through binary opposition. As noted by Ara Wilson, this division is easily enabled by the understanding of intimacy as something private, proximate, and embodied[2], offering a rubric for both deepening and suturing the divides of urban life at various scales and with varying degrees of intensity. While intimacy does exist within this personal ontology, it is also expansive and ambiguous, bouncing off of form and figure to create multi-scalar shifts. Architecture may at times claim to perforate the boundary between public and private space, to blur its limits, yet it is still inherently tied to the regulation of intimacy in one form or another. The ideologies that it bolsters remain visible from the scale of the house to that of the city as it establishes its shape.[3] In this way, intimacy can be considered as an intangible ethos through which space comes into being and societal norms become crystallized. Understood as existing within a vast spectrum, intimacies can range from familial to estranged, banal to erotic. Queer and feminist scholarship—which has been at the root of the infrastructural turn since Susan Leigh Star wrote her seminal article "The Ethnography of Infrastructure" in 1999—has also delved deep into the ways that intimacy is shaped by power, seeking to dismantle the systems of oppression that maintain normativity as heterosexual[4], white, and able-bodied. The thread of dominance that weaves the tapestry of the city implicates all forms of bodies, whether individual, collective, or political, into patterned articulations, creating entrenched hierarchies and regulating acceptable forms of connection.

In the article "Cities and Sexualities," the authors delve deeper into these hierarchies by addressing the role of sexuality within the city, noting many of the ways that these standards are simultaneously furthered and transgressed. They cite the city as "a battleground where those with non-normative sexual orientation or proclivities seek to territorialize space, producing neighbourhoods which normalize and promote their identities."[5] The grouping of those with so-called non-normative sexualities is just one example of a geographic and largely temporal disposition. While the space of the 'gay village' is now commodifiable within many contemporary cities, areas historically developed through other normatively-divergent groups such as sex workers do not often receive the same celebrated treatment, and intangible infrastructural systems continue to disadvantage those whose expressions of intimacy do not fit neatly within deeply-rooted societal norms.

This infrastructural discrimination can be clearly seen through New York's anti-loitering law known to many as the 'Walking While Trans' ban. While supposedly in place to regulate sex work by allowing police officers to arrest and detain individuals essentially at will, it has been seen to disproportionately target trans women for simply existing in public space. The effect here is twofold: in one sense, the ban attempts to censor public expressions of intimacy within the self, targeting personal identities as in violation of the law if they do not

1 Keller Easterling, Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space (London and New York: Verso, 2014), Introduction, eBook.

2 Ara Wilson, "The Infrastructure of Intimacy," Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 41, no. 2 (January, 2016): 249.

3 Kim Dovey, Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form (London, England: Routledge, 2008), 45.

4 Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Sex in Public," Critical Inquiry 24, no. 2 (January, 1998): 548.

5 Phil Hubbard, Andrew Gorman-Murray, and Catherine J. Nash, "Cities and Sexualities," in Handbook of the Sociology of Sexualities, ed. J DeLamater and R.F. Plante (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2015), 288.

conform to hegemonic realities or dominant standards. In another sense, the ban—as well as the criminalization of sex work more generally—has a viscerally spatial implication, relegating sex workers to more marginal, secluded, and dangerous locations through surveillance and policing. This attempted marginalization is also enabled through zoning, as establishments associated with sexuality are continually relegated to areas far from housing, schools, or religious establishments[6] in attempts to control what constitutes acceptable forms of desire and intimacy while maintaining the fragile invisibility of acceptability's breach. Under the guise of guarding against 'public nuisance', legislations carve a thick line in the sand in attempts to uphold rigid heteronormative values. In many cases, infrastructures of the law seek to control not just transgressive intimacies, but transgressive existences in general.

To these ends, there is also a productivity in thinking of intimacy as infrastructure, working to regulate connections much in the same way that a highway works to connect two cities but divide a landscape, or a pipeline is capable of transferring either water or waste. Intimacy is real and felt, but it is also ephemeral, shifting, and binding. Its powerful dispossession makes it something widely coveted and also widely guarded against, and it becomes a particularly powerful tool when invoked within spatial contexts. In Brian Larkin's assertion of infrastructures as political and poetic devices, he posits them as "objects that create the grounds on which other objects operate, and when they do so they operate as systems."[7] Intimacy as infrastructure thus enables care and collectivity to operate in systemic confluence, mingling within atmospheres of place to build the space of the city. By considering the ways that infrastructures create the backdrop to everyday realities, enabling movement, lighting, electricity, plumbing, and environmental comfort for some while halting these actions for others, intimacy becomes the intangible currency of daily life and personal affect. Building on understandings of intimacy, Lauren Berlant asserts that to "rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living."[8] Intimacy as an infrastructure, as a spatial determinant and an affective structure, thus has direct implications on the practice and poetics of architecture. The pressing task of the discipline must become how to generate spatial commons that confront the binary division between public and private spheres, rethinking intimacy not only as localized but as diffuse, inclusive, and multi-scalar, instrumental in creating the space of the city and in striving toward futures that embrace the intimate in its many forms.

6 Hubbard, Gorman-Murray, and Nash, "Cities and Sexualities," 295.

7 Brian Larkin, "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure," Annual Review of Anthropology 42, no. 1 (October, 2013): 329.

8 Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy: A Special Issue," Critical Inquiry 24, no. 2 (Winter, 1998): 286.

Alexandra Pereira-Edwards is a designer and current Masters student at Carleton University's Azrieli School of Architecture & Urbanism, where she also currently teaches undergraduate studio. She is involved in an ongoing project at the Canadian Centre for Architecture titled Toward Unsettling that highlights the continuous effects of settler colonialism while questioning architecture's role in its proliferation. Her current research explores the dynamics of power, infrastructure, and affect as they relate to space, with a focus on spatial justice and the politics of visibility within the built environment.