Around the year 2000, a group of anthropologists coined the term “infrastructural turn” to account for a remarkable increase in attention towards infrastructure in academic studies. Drawing on the instability of its meaning, sociologist Susan Leigh Star prompted a historiographical revision of urban technological networks, focusing on aspects that were often overlooked, such as their urban symbolism or everyday forms of living with infrastructure (Star, 1999; Larkin, 2013; Gandy, 2014). Because the word infrastructure encompasses both objects and systems—that connect bodies to each other and to the spaces we inhabit—it does not settle easily in a disciplinary category. This ambiguity dates back to one of its earliest uses in the French Law of 1842 when, amid a debate over a model that would allow the State to expand its incipient railway network without the budget to build it, the “superstructure” (railways and stations, executed by private companies) was severed from the “infrastructure” (earthwork, tunnels, or property titles managed by the State). Strictly speaking, the concept comes not from engineering, but from its financing.

Given the historical instability of its meaning and its recent prominence in the social sciences, it seems relevant to ask about the current role of infrastructure in the disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, and urban design. The articles and projects in this issue shed light on how the structures that sustain society’s functioning, through connection, have historically been malleable, and how they can be subjected to analysis and discussion from the perspective of contemporary social practices and values.

Guillermo Guajardo Soto opens this issue with a history of the concept of infrastructure. Delving into the changing connotations of the term and the contexts in which it is employed, the author reveals a genealogy that weaves continuities with translations and transfers, a product of the trajectory of the word across nations, disciplines, and socio-political contexts. Chile’s Route 5, like many other highways, is imbued with narratives of modernization and development influenced by paradigms of the Global North. Reviewing three key moments in its history—construction (1920s), paving (1950s), and renovation (1990s)—Isidora Urrutia’s article also reveals dark nuances of progress, highlighting a complex relationship between infrastructure, landscape, identity, and exclusion.

Under the unconventional appeal of hydroponic crops and a floating jungle, Cedric Price’s proposal for the banks of the River Clyde in Glasgow (1970) introduced the concept of “design infrastructure.” Manuel Rodrigo de la O unpacks this concept, which combined theories of ecological subjectivity, human behavior, and sensory experience in urban planning. Today, as Big Data and the automation of urban management and decision-making processes seem to be gaining traction, Price’s rejection of the determinism of data in favor of delight reemerges as a key to forging dynamic urban systems and engaged citizens.

While water supply networks, electricity, and highways marked the cities of the 20th century and the era’s discourse of development, fiber optic networks, data centers, or dark stores seem to be cropping up at a moment of much less enthusiasm regarding the social role of technology in the era of “platform capitalism” (Srnicek, 2018). Diego Morera’s article raises the social and urban implications of the “spectral architecture” of dark kitchens and supermarkets in the largest food distribution platform in Montevideo. Behind inconspicuous facades, the everyday reality of the city and its traditional food industry are kept at bay while the spatial demands of this new digital infrastructure reign: unexpressive exteriors with “optimizable” and easily discarded interiors.

Katherine Vhymeister calls for not limiting the study of infrastructure to grand projects. Focusing on the municipal administration of Santiago after Chile’s independence, Vhymeister proposes a microhistorical approach, exploring how smaller-scale infrastructure projects, such as street paving and bridge repairs, shaped the urban and social fabric of the city as much as their more flamboyant counterparts.

In addition to articles, this issue includes a critique of the 18th Venice Biennale by Francisco Díaz, who urges us to pay more attention to the blind spots in the material and social processes that underpin our architectural production. Pabla Amigo discusses a missed opportunity to build collective space under the current management and construction system of metro tunnels. Paulina Bitrán reflects on the relationship between humans and more-than-humans in the pigeon lofts of Cairo, “suprastructures” that function above the traditional city horizon.

Through readings and projects (p. 60), this issue of ARQ explores the combination of objects, spaces, people, and practices that, following AbdouMaliq Simone, allow us to understand infrastructure today as a physical system inseparable from a social one, “a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city” (2004:408).

Bibliografía / Bibliography

Stephannie Fell
Editora ARQ
Profesora asistente adjunta, Escuela de Arquitectura.
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, Santiago, Chile