

Chapter 6

Networked Compositional Ecologies: Infrastructure as a Model for Multimodal Writing

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ABSTRACT

Based on a description of the built and networked ecologies of urban infrastructure, this chapter reflects on how the interdependent and interactive elements of multimodal composition can be productively understood metaphorically and practically as infrastructure. The argument advanced here is that this framing of multimodal composition provides an adaptive theoretical model adequately flexible to adjust to emergent communicative modes and technologies and move beyond advocacy and rationale to a description of how multimodal composition, regardless of the specific media deployed, develops particular kinds of deployments and effects. It further suggests how infrastructure can help define certain characteristics of the multimodal text, in particular: (1) the linkage of rhetorical elements, (2) the location of the text, (3) the capacity for nonlinearity, and (4) the affinity for transdisciplinary ways of knowing. This understanding suggests heuristic approaches to multimodal invention and design and finally the relationship between composition and committed and imaginative knowledge.

INTRODUCTION

An even greater urban vision than the view of Los Angeles from Griffith Park Observatory is the view of Los Angeles on a clear day from a high-flying aircraft. Within its vast extent can be seen its diverse ecologies of sea-coast, plain, and hill; within that diversity can be seen the mechanisms, natural and human, that have made those ecologies support a way of life.

In his 2008 edition, *The Infrastructural City*, architectural historian Kazys Varnelis describes Los Angeles in terms of its complex underlying infrastructural systems. Referencing and undertaking to update Reyner Banham's influential 1971 study *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*, Varnelis identifies the infrastructure of contemporary Los Angeles as a matrix of "networked ecologies," a "series of codependent systems of environmental mitigation, land-use organization,

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communication and service delivery” (p. 15). Varnelis has in mind, of course, the overlapping and interconnected systems of highways, the electrical generation and transmission systems, water conveyance and management structures, airports and air traffic control, railroads, pipelines, telecommunication systems, cell phone coverage, and wireless networks that connect the region both to itself and to the global systems beyond. Although bearing some affinity for “the infrastructures of old,” this hyper-complex, networked infrastructure has not been executed by a unifying plan, he argues, but is instead “tied together with feedback mechanisms.” The underlying infrastructure of Los Angeles constitutes an “atlas” of “coexisting, overlapping networks . . . spanning industries and scales.” It is, Varnelis contends, “a local manifestation of global conditions” (p. 15).

The Infrastructural City has been influential both within the field of urban studies and within the continually developing body of literature from a variety of disciplines and genres that attempts to understand the phenomenon that is Los Angeles. Varnelis’ centering of infrastructural networks within the large-scale and complex social, physical, and cultural systems that comprise contemporary Los Angeles represents a fascinating gesture of gestalt focus. Of all the many things Los Angeles is--and has been called, for that matter—*infrastructural* might not be the one to initially leap out. To perhaps all but architects, urban planners, and engineers, characterizing the second largest metropolis in the nation as infrastructural, might not sound fully complimentary. In spite of the fact that Paris, for example, is knit together by the same kinds of systems, *infrastructural* would be an unusual way to describe that city. This notion of Los Angeles as open-air utility may in fact be regarded as at home within the small tradition of literary critique of the city, the persistent observation, for example, that its climate, way of life, entertainment industry, vernacular architecture and penchant for themes of all sorts make the city somehow “unreal” or perhaps merely an aggregate

of “advertisements for a city which doesn’t exist,” as Christopher Isherwood puts it (as cited in Ulin, 2002, p. 232). Indeed, Los Angeles represented in literature, often takes the form of lament, and describing it as a network of utilities in search of a city might be seen in that light.

All of this serves as context for the main purpose of this chapter, which attempts to put Varnelis’s account of the built environment of Los Angeles to use in understanding very different kinds of “built environments,” specifically those defined by what we have come to call—and to call for—multimodal composition. Specifically, this discussion explores how Varnelis’s thoughts on urban infrastructure might serve to suggest useful ways of understanding the processes and structures of multimodal composition and how we might frame a conversation about both its theory and practice. The goal will be to move through, but then past metaphorical comparison to discuss how multimodal composition can be regarded as built and theoretically defined through its own communicative infrastructures and how identifying those infrastructures might in turn be used to develop heuristic approaches to multimodal invention and design that finally enable a relationship between composition and committed and imaginative knowledge, a happy situation perhaps well-suggested in Reyner Banham’s notion that infrastructure has a surprisingly creative capacity to “support a way of life” (2001, p. 217).

THEORETICAL CONTEXTS

Results from the 2005 Conference on College Composition and Communication-sponsored “Survey of Multimodal Pedagogies in Writing Programs,” show that sixty-two percent of those writing instructors surveyed aligned themselves with one of the following two descriptions of multimodality, either (1) “texts that are designed with attention to several/many modes of communication,” or (2) texts that are designed using

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