Anxieties of Scale and Infrastructure Aesthetics

While we discussed briefly during Wednesday's seminar some of the epistemological distinctions between media archaeology and the digital humanities, our work in the afternoon seems to suggest to me a shared methodological concern: the need (real or imagined or both) for dedicated spaces, resources, and labor practices that enable and foster particular kinds of technological and imaginative work. The Residual Media Depot and the Milieux Institute more generally, both as physical space and institutional configurations, are our most immediate and tangible examples of this; Patrik Svensson's chapter also gives us a glimpse into the HUMLab at Umeå University as yet another. Svensson offers a substantial and considered response to a very straightforward question, though one that he wants us to think through as an occasion for transforming the humanities: that is, what do we really *need* in order to do what we do? And corollary: what do we, as humanists, even *do*? The answer to the second question seems to lurk always just out of the frame, though Svensson proposes that answering the first question, particularly when inflected on the level of *infrastructure*, will provide useful and illuminating answers to the second (14).

For Svensson, the concretization of the digital humanities as an institutional practice, one that makes the humanities legible to the larger funding organizations and practices that legitimate particular kinds of scholarship in the neoliberal era, provides a valuable opportunity for thinking through what infrastructure the humanities truly require, and indeed how infrastructure (if we do acknowledge it as such) shapes our ability to do different kinds of work. This, in my mind, is a useful though uncontroversial claim. What I want to probe deeper however, is what *shape and form* "infrastructure" takes

in Svensson’s imagination, particularly as it’s been executed in the HUMLab. What kinds of aesthetic tropes can we detect in these forms (some of which might be recognizable to us here around the Milieux Institute)? What claims do these infrastructural configurations seem to be making about the digital humanities, or media archaeology? And what (or who) gets included and excluded in these configurations?

But first, tables and chairs.

Translucence, Flexibility, Intensity

The tables are on wheels and so are the chairs. The walls are glass with frosted panes occupying the bulk of the middle, although from the outside you can occasionally see feet or fingertips or shadows. Walls that are not glass have white boards, or perhaps they have been painted over with blackboard paint, or perhaps they are still glass but covered in dry-erase marker. The predominant color palette: primary and saturated. There are plenty of screens and even more cable adapters. Clean lines contrast the tangles of cables that emerge either intentionally or through incidental use. There are minifridges and coffee machines and signs of recent catering. If there is a website corresponding to this room (and there is), it uses a sans serif font and ample white space.

Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, University of Maryland College Park, http://mith.umd.edu/

These are intentionally vague descriptions, to be sure. They might apply to any number of spaces, from technology start-ups to yoga studios. But they also accurately describe many spaces around the Milieux Institute, the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities at my home institution (and the image above, because I figured best to gently mock myself before others), the HUMLab at Umeå, the Trope Tank at MIT, and any number of other archetypal examples of "humanities infrastructure," at least on the level of architecture. This is a not a claim I make in order to be reductive, or to chastise anyone for insufficient creativity. Rather, I'm interested in what these emerging aesthetic languages of humanities infrastructure seems to claim about the kinds of work happening within these spaces.

HUMLab, Umeå University, http://www.humlab.umu.se/

I am also conscious of offering architectural space as the ür-text of humanities infrastructure. Certainly Svensson wants us to put pressure on the wide-ranging implications of the "infrastructural turn," which invites us to think through varieties of subsumed systems, from electrical grids to labor unions, up to more conceptual or immanent things like methodologies and hermeneutics. "Infrastructure" seems to include a dizzying array of systems. But I note that even Svensson returns time and again to space, particularly these humanities "labs" or "centers," as if not the center of humanities infrastructure then at least the field on which its values get hammered out.

Center for Humanistic Inquiry, Amherst College, https://www.amherst.edu/academiclife/colloquia/center-humanistic-inquiry/about

Svensson pitches these values as “design principles” that can then get played out in the aesthetic and architectural field. His core principles are “translucence (encouraging contact and having a sense of what other people are working on), flexibility (supporting many different kinds of meetings and technological platforms), and intensity (a space and endeavor that attracts engagement and interest)” (38). Taken together, these principles undergird the work specifically of the “big digital humanities,” by which he means for “big” to resonate with the “big tent” turn of an inclusive and plural digital humanities, but that cannot help but signify the “big” of “big data,” or even the “big” of “big grants.” To play these concepts out: digital humanities, after these principles, is a collaborative and epicurean enterprise. Unlike the imaginary (always already reliant on others’ subsumed labor) of the solitary professor, digital humanities happens in public and

across disciplines, and hence requires a space for disciplines to meet in mutually nonthreatening ways. It moves across multiple registers, from the vast and dizzying scales of big data—Svensson returns again and again to networked grids of ever-larger computing power as a shared infrastructural concern across the sciences and "big" humanities—down to the circuitry and microtemporalities more familiar to us in media archaeology. Big DH can't sit still: its chairs are on the move as much as its attention. Perhaps this is an epistemological anxiety behind the turn to infrastructure: a sufficiently modular and encompassing infrastructure can help theorize the work of the humanities as "that which occurs in such spaces," helping us by-pass how difficult the question of what humanistic inquiry is in this particular moment seems to be to answer.

What (or who) gets to be infrastructure?

I am being more than a little polemical here, of course. The notion of a humanities in crisis or at least at a crossroads requires that we accept that there is a pre-crisis moment of stability, and that the crisis affords the perfect opportunity to recalibrate either in a return to stability (revanchism) or towards new configurations (revolution). This is Wendy Hui Kyong Chun's argument, summarized by the equation "Habit + Crisis = Update" that crisis temporalities produce the necessary conditions for new logics and systems of control (69). (The truly dark version of the argument, which Chun does entertain, would see the infrastructural turn as akin to arranging deck chairs on the sinking Titanic—a moment for the humanities to "update" in an experience of "something like responsibility" that might move us "from the banal to the crucial" [75]. I don't know if I'm quite there yet, myself.) But there is something both useful and odd in how thinking with infrastructure forces us to acknowledge different scales

of humanistic work—and how easily, to conclude this probe, that labor slips out of focus in such discussions.

For if DH spaces are always on the move, those who do its labor are even more so: people moving not only on wheeled chairs from configuration to configuration but also from institution to institution in response to the sorts of soft-money short-term funding cycles that empower much of this work. Indeed, these funding cycles are precisely what Miriam Posner inveighs against when she asks DH practitioners to shift their focus to "people, not projects") (Posner). I can't help but notice that even though Svensson does acknowledge that labor must be thought alongside other kinds of material infrastructural forms, he stays fairly vague on specificities. We get paragraphs upon paragraphs of how specific lighting choices and furniture configurations evince different kinds of humanistic principles, but just one paragraph on pp. 49 on the labor that must staff these spaces—and even that paragraph is pitched more on the level of bringing in different scholars and students to do intellectual work within these spaces, rather than staff who maintain them, from IT professionals to administrative staff to janitorial and other maintenance staff. This probe has run long as it is, and I have absolutely no good answers, so I'll end with more questions: who should we center these different aspects of occluded infrastructure? What aesthetic possibilities can we consider beyond these tropes, if indeed they constitute coherent tropes at all? And how do we think through labor demands in/for infrastructure? Does it even make sense to think of people as infrastructure?

Some works cited

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