



Universiteit Leiden

Overhead, Underfoot, On Site: Understanding Infrastructures through Art

Applicants

Eligible proposals must have at least two applicants from Humanities, preferably with an interdisciplinary approach.

Supervisor Name	Discipline
Steven Lauritano	Architectural History, Urban History
Karin de Wild	Contemporary Museum Studies, Collection Studies, Digital Heritage

Project description

Provide a brief description of the project (max. 300 words)

In a 2015 episode of *Last Week Tonight*, comedian John Oliver defined infrastructure as “our roads, bridges, dams, levees, airports, power-grids – basically anything that can be destroyed in an action movie.” You can imagine the ensuing montage. Infrastructure, however, is no laughing matter. The tubes, tracks, and webs that shape our individual experience also make interpersonal interactions possible. One could say that infrastructure forms the very substrate of culture. Yet most of the time it is taken for granted. Perennially underfunded, infrastructure goes unnoticed until it breaks down, or succumbs to disaster. This fundamental lack of visibility is built into the word itself, since the prefix *infra-* denotes structures hidden “below,” “beneath,” or “within.” In short, infrastructures envelop us; we pay for their expansion and maintenance; we experience their ecological consequences; but we barely see them, let alone understand them. This project argues that artists have a special role to play in changing this situation. When it comes to visualizing infrastructures, and critiquing their impact, artists are ahead of the game. Diverse practitioners have installed their works within infrastructural systems and reclaimed the leftover spaces carved out by these networks as they weave through cities and landscapes. Historians of the built environment, media scholars, and environmental humanists have much to learn from such artworks. The disruptions and displacements that characterize every infrastructural system, disproportionately impact marginalized groups and precarious communities. This project analyzes these situations, but it also aims to celebrate the artists drawn from these communities who have devised creative methods for responding to failures, resisting incursions, and spotlighting the social impact of infrastructural networks. Carolina Caycedo’s geochoreographies (in response to the El Quimbo dam) and Patricio Larrambebere and Javier Martínez Jacques interventions (in the Argentinian railroad) are two powerful examples. But there are many others awaiting attention.

Research Trainee Profile

Each proposal requests two Research Trainees. Describe the general tasks of the research trainees, how these tasks are academically challenging to the research trainees, whether they need any preliminary knowledge (regarding the topic and/or research methods) and which skills the research trainees should have. Also specify which type of students are eligible to apply (3rd year Ba, Ma, ResMa).

The research trainees will be tasked with finding, analyzing, and documenting specific case studies related to the project theme: site specific artworks that respond to infrastructural systems, draw attention to their functionality, critique their performance, or otherwise provide opportunities to increase the public's infrastructural literacy).

To bring further specificity to their tasks, the trainees will be asked to focus on one of six sub-themes (water, food, waste, transportation, communication, or energy). Some expertise in contemporary art, or the history of architecture and engineering is desirable, but the most important prerequisites are: 1) a passionate commitment to the project; and 2) a willingness to work and collaborate across disciplines.

As part of the research, trainees will be expected to conduct advanced collection research, make a selection of proposed artists/works, develop display models, review literature, compile dossiers of relevant media, and interview subjects ranging from artists, to engineers, to industry professionals. They will also be asked to carefully analyze the contexts (social, historical, material, cultural, environmental) of the case studies they find.

Given the strong research skills, writings skills, and interviewing skills required, the project is only open to Ma and ResMa students.

Collaboration

If applicable: Describe how your research improves collaboration and cross-pollination between the disciplines involved (max. 300 words)

Research on infrastructure is inherently cross-disciplinary. This is a consequence of the object of study. Infrastructural networks transcend local, state, and international boundaries. They snake through public and private spaces and are often financed through public-private partnerships. They take shape in response to specific technical demands and a range of geographical, social, and economic considerations. Accordingly, the literature assembled to execute this project draws on the history of cities, the history of technology, media studies, sociology, climate science and ecology, among other fields.

The two project supervisors have experience working across several fields of study, but they each bring a distinct disciplinary background. Steven Lauritano trained and practiced as an architect, before turning to the historical study of the built environment. Karin de Wild has extensive experience working with museums and private collections, alongside her research on digital heritage and the infrastructure of digital collections. Researchers of digital infrastructures and civil engineering infrastructures rarely cross paths. Even though the underlying logics do vary, this project argues that there are problematics inherent in both systems that would benefit from mutual study. The distinct specializations of the two supervisors support this comparative approach.

Deliverables

Enumerate intended project results: papers, research proposals or otherwise. (max 200 words)

The project has two main deliverables for the research trainees:

- The first is an individual paper in which they develop an analysis of a specific case study (or related set of case studies) while also reflecting on the broader intersections of infrastructure and art, and the methodological specificities that this line of research requires.
- The second is a collective deliverable to be developed by both trainees in conjunction with the supervisors. This will be a detailed exhibition proposal devoted to the subject of infrastructural artworks. The proposal will include a research question, a status quaestionis, an exhibition narrative, a display strategy, a preliminary list of artists and works, and sample wall texts.

Planning

Provide a breakdown of the project into phases with tentative timing (max 150 words)

Phase 1.0: Project Launch

Early February

- Meeting to introduce the theme.
- Discussion of the images and bibliographies submitted in the trainee's applications (see below).
- Discussion of existing case studies.
- Clarification of expectations for the final deliverables.

Phase 2.0: Exploratory Research

February-March

- Broad literature review.
- Generate long list of case studies (15-20).
- Clarify research methodology.

Phase 3.0: Focused Research and Writing

April-May

- Selection of the primary case study.
- Develop research question for academic paper, along with an abstract and preliminary outline.
- Read relevant primary sources and secondary literature.
- Conduct necessary interviews.
- Gather visual documentation and other relevant media.
- Rough draft of final paper.

Phase 4.0: Finalize the Case Study Paper

June

- Respond to comments on draft.
- Finalize research.
- Finalize text of the case study paper.
- Submit to peer-reviewed journals.

Phase 5.0: Exhibition proposal

July-August

- Synthesize existing research.
- Formulate exhibition proposal.

Student Application

Provide information on how to apply e.g. required documents for application (resume, motivation letter etc.) and an email address where student applications should be sent to.

To apply for one of the research trainee positions please submit the following to Steven Lauritano (s.m.lauritano@hum.leidenuniv.nl):

- A brief letter of motivation (maximum 500 words). The letter should specify which infrastructural sub-category (water, food, waste, transportation, communication, or energy) is of interest, and why.
- One image depicting an infrastructure of interest.
- One bibliography of 8 sources which help elucidate that infrastructure of interest.