Archive:
An Introduction

Alessandro Rippa

In January 2021 I found myself looking for old postcards inside a large wooden trunk in the empty house of my long-deceased grandparents. I was looking for 1960s or 1970s images of the Italian Alpine village where they grew up, and in which they spent most of their lives. This is the time when most of the fields were being abandoned, as local villagers moved to more comfortable jobs in nearby cities, or relocated abroad. Leading to rapid reforestation, the abandonment of mountain agriculture had left visible signs in the valley's landscape, and I was trying to find a way to visualize it.

Instead of postcards, however, I came across an old picture book from 1925. The book contained eighteen photographs, with no text. It depicted construction work on the valley's first aqueduct, which took place in the years prior to the publication of the booklet, as well as images of the fountains built throughout the villages dotting the valley's landscape. Up until then, as some of the pictures revealed, each village had had its own well, but water was seemingly difficult to get hold of. The aqueduct was thus a major development for the valley, and the small booklet I held in my hands was clearly meant to commend such accomplishment. The people in it were smiling, celebrating the arrival of water.

I immediately asked my father where the picture book came from. All he knew was that his mother had brought it with her when she married my grandfather and moved in with his family. How she got hold of it, he did not know. With my grandmother and all of her siblings and close friends dead, and no written record whatsoever, I quickly realized that there was simply no way to trace the history of this object. Of course, the picture book itself told a particular tale, an *infrastructural* one, through its various images. But the social life of the object itself was lost forever.

I start with this small, inconsequential story, as it speaks to many of the issues that emerge in the contributions to this fifth edition of *Roadsides*. Centred around the theme of the archive, authors approach different infrastructure projects through experiences of loss, hope and belonging, engaging with key concepts of temporality, (dis)connectivity and memory, among others. Experimenting with hybrid narrative forms, the articles illustrate the vast possibilities offered by a creative and open-ended co-exploration of objects, practices and places at the nexus of archive and infrastructure, and which work in multiple temporal and spatial scales, epistemological regimes and conceptual frameworks.

While I hardly need to point out for readers of *Roadsides* the growing interest in infrastructure across the social sciences, the concept of the archive has become an increasingly prominent subject of debate in its own right. Similarly to infrastructure, the archive can be approached as a place, an object of inquiry, as well as a method – and is ultimately caught up in manifold social and material relations. Indeed, several anthropologists have recently troubled commonsensical understandings of the archive as a written and solid past (Stoler 2002; Mueggler 2011) arguing that archives – and archival research – should not be understood merely as sites of knowledge retrieval and extractive activity, but as a locus of engaged critical ethnographic research. Archives, to be sure, are both source and subject, thing and practice, and thus need to be approached "critically and cautiously" (Schwenkel and Rippa, this issue). Infrastructure scholars, on the other hand, are ever more concerned not only with the decaying and the unfinished, but also with the non-built – that which was promised but ultimately put aside. Rather than forgotten, such archived, yet still possible futures are often capable of mobilizing people, resources and ideas. They constitute a "shadow history" (Carse and Kneas 2019: 15-17) that shapes the present through its material absences.

If these sorts of conversations informed the outset of this issue, our authors have further pushed the boundaries by approaching archive and infrastructure in tandem, and in their intertwining. What emerge are multiple and complex understandings of archives as both repositories for specific knowledge, practices and imaginaries, and unsettling points of departure from which to inspire new visions, worlds and futures. Infrastructure and archive do seem to meet and overlap quite frequently, as in the photo book I described at the beginning, with encounters that are brief, disrupting and which can be deeply creative.

In this issue, Allen frames these encounters as *conversations* – with particular places and infrastructure of mobilities and communication, but also with his own visual journey: a personal archive of sorts that opens up reflections over planetary

conversions. Unsurprisingly, urban space – that hyper-built and human landscape par excellence – becomes a privileged location from which to observe the unfolding of archival and infrastructural visions, whether in particular architectural forms and elements (Aragüez), as possible futures unlocked by certain "infrastructural archives" in a process of continuous remaking (Gonzalez), or in how such archives-from-below can help to inform, recast and orientate social critique (Mögenburg). If infrastructure can be approached through its archival qualities, archives are also contentious sites that shape and are shaped by social relations of temporality and belonging. This becomes clear when approaching museums as archive, understood as relational knowledge infrastructures that engage and mobilize – and do not simply display – Indigenous concepts, frameworks and visions of the future (McCarthy, Schorch and Thomas). In turn, such an understanding of the archive can also be appropriated to offer alternative, feminist takes on predominantly masculine infrastructure projects, with the aim to disrupt and reconfigure dominant understandings of development and modernization (Thakur and Tashi Palmo). In this process, the visual approach foregrounded by *Roadsides* is not just a narrative device but a key feature of the encounter between infrastructure and archive. Hence, 360-cameras and binoculars can induce "an archival stretch of the imagination," bringing into focus the out-of-sight and recasting the unfinished, both in the sense of materializing losses and contemplating futures (Clarke and Yazdani). Photographs, here, become entangled with the material records of specific infrastructure projects, and ultimately contribute to their own archive (Rahman and Boyle). Furthermore, as in my grandmother's photo book, pictures are a productive lens through which we can not only think multiple temporalities, but also the materialities that inform these particular objects as archival, ethnographic and artistic devices (Martinez and Agu). This issue of *Roadsides* offers a window onto these different perspectives – one that is sure to be productive for future explorations, critiques and conversations.

Colonial-era and modern buildings in today's Manila. Essays in this issue show how the city infrastructure can be seen as an archive of sorts. Photo: Alessandro Rippa, 2016.

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