

Infrastructural Anxieties: An Introduction

Mona Chettri and Mikel J.H. Venhovens

Infrastructural anxiety represents a dynamic relationship between the tangible and intangible, where both play an equal role in creating, changing or disrupting lives and realities. Infrastructure is never just simply infrastructure, nor is it just a “neutral or technical facility” (Wu 2020: 322). As an assemblage of material forms and networks of ideas that mobilise legal, socio-economic, political and cultural meanings (Larkin 2013), infrastructure generates anxiety along with other emotions. Similarly, anxiety is also not just a by-product of infrastructural intervention. It is a powerful mobiliser and plays a significant role in the social and material life cycle of infrastructure. The relationality between infrastructure and anxiety is complex. Thus, in this issue, rather than simply thinking along the linearity of causes and consequences, we look at the cyclical relationship between infrastructure and anxiety, its manifestations, impacts and politics, specifically as a result of, and response to, developmental interventions.

Anxiety is a distinct feature of the human condition. Despite its universality, it varies in its impacts and manifestations. As both “a signal and a symptom,” it organises and disorganises human (Glick 1995: 2) and more-than-human worlds. Anxiety and fear often overlap and can be used interchangeably to describe triggers for emotions, sensations and actions. However, while fear is an immediate reaction to an event, anxiety is a lingering and prolonged sensitivity (Rachman 2019: 3). It is a future-oriented, physically embodied state involving both mental and emotional distress, combined with a more diffuse sense of unease about what might (be)come (Tyrer 1999; Rachman 2019). This nebulous, free-floating anxiety often anchors itself to infrastructure.

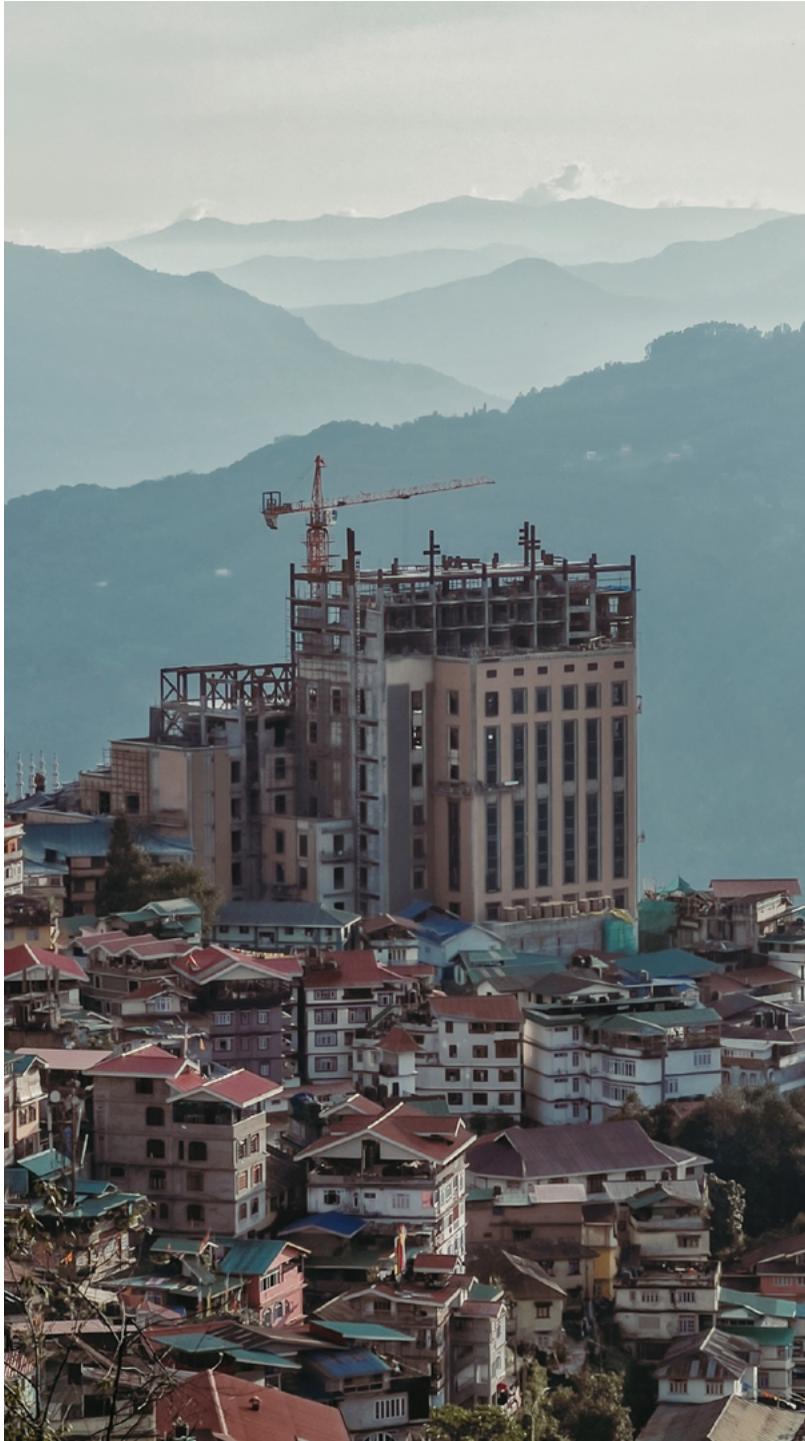
Infrastructures are imbued with socio-political meanings and affects; they are a part of complex assemblages shaped by the “dynamic relational forms” they share with people, things, organisations and the environment (Harvey and Knox 2015: 4). While considered as the tangible, visible expression of progress, development and modernity (Jensen 2017; Reeves 2017), they are simultaneously also a source of hope and fear, memory and desire – a materialisation of people’s “conflicted, changing and contextually disparate understanding of modernity” (Masquelier 2002: 837). All that is associated with infrastructure, therefore, carries the latent potential for anxiety.

Infrastructure and Anxiety: A Cyclical Relationship

Contrary to common perceptions, infrastructure and anxiety are mutually generative: neither is the endpoint but each often leads to other affective states or tangible transformations. This issue illustrates how this cyclical relationship is not always negative or disruptive, but can pave the way for collaborations, innovation and action. Additionally, infrastructure (its absence, evolution, breakdown) has a compounding effect on pre-existing anxieties that may originate from other sources. And in turn, as the case studies in this issue show, seemingly ordinary things like fences, radio towers and even toilets are paradoxically rendered “dangerous things” (Ellis 2020), brimming with possibility to disrupt human and non-human lives.

Infrastructures condense the past, present and future into their materiality. In many parts of the world, and especially in the Global South, infrastructure is seen as a conduit for development and modernity. However, this modernity is riddled with ambiguity and uncertainty. It entails a breaking away from a past, which was stable, recognised and where communal identities were “safely anchored through the ordering of physical space” (Masquelier 2002: 833). Infrastructures also exist and operate over long timescales and across multiple temporalities, and this creates opportunities for the emergence, growth, decline and re-emergence of different affects, including anxiety (Davies 2023: 12; also see Martinez and Pikner 2019). While the visible degeneration and disintegration of infrastructure can provoke anxiety (Chettri forthcoming), prolonged uncertainty regarding the future also materialises in the present through anticipatory ruination of the social landscape, livelihoods and the environment (Paprocki 2022). Combined with infrastructure’s inherent capacity to connect and disconnect places, communities and cultures (Murzakulova 2021; Plachta 2024), all this can engender yet more anxiety about what is to come. So, anxiety imbues infrastructure with temporality, thereby extending its impact and affect beyond the present.

Seemingly mundane infrastructures are always thick with cultural meaning, shaped by and shaping what is possible for us to feel, think and imagine (Davies 2023: 11). As Cowen (2017) notes, just as we build infrastructure, it builds us. Although anxiety is often future-oriented, as infrastructures coalesce and distribute resources over time, they can also replicate past histories of injustice and realise them anew (Anand 2017), re-igniting dormant anxieties.



West Point Mall, Gangtok, Sikkim.
Photo: Karchoong Diyali, 2023.

Infrastructural anxiety can also be strategically manufactured to create and/or reinforce anxiety among those socio-economically or politically more vulnerable, making it a conduit for political control. However, the impact as well as the response to anxiety generated by infrastructure is contextual, and the same infrastructure can generate different reactions over time. For instance, even when infrastructure such as walls, fences or checkpoints is constructed to combat certain anxieties, it usually gives rise to a different set of anxieties for a different group of people, depending on whether they stand to benefit or are disadvantaged by it (Venhovens 2024).

According to Star (1999: 380), infrastructure is invisible, a part of the background required for other things to work. A functional infrastructure is therefore one that is unremarkable; however, infrastructure continues to generate effects, even when it malfunctions, breaks or is ruptured (Orlova 2021). Such failing infrastructure may lead to new collectivities, alliances and outcomes. It can also reveal how class, race, gender relations and more intersect to produce certain socio-political landscapes and effects.

Infrastructural anxiety exists on a spectrum. It can take on different forms and change over time, and not all anxieties lead to action. Response to infrastructural anxiety is mediated by the socio-economic, cultural and political structures and processes that are in place at a particular time in history. Decoding the origins of infrastructural anxieties, a reverse-engineering of sorts, can therefore be instructive as to what is considered important, valuable or at risk by an individual, community or an organisation. Hence, instead of seeking a singular, universal understanding and experience thereof, the case-studies in this issue bring to light the lived experiences and diverse contexts in which infrastructural anxiety exists, persists and proliferates.

In the first article, Sindhunata Hargyono illustrates how long-term, albeit passive, infrastructural violence is heightened by the arrival of a base transceiver station in Kayan Hulu, Indonesia. However, it is not the absence of infrastructure that causes anxiety here, but its dormancy, and the new emotions of helplessness and inequality that this engenders, as experienced by the border residents. Infrastructure can also lead to the spatio-temporal disruption of both humans and non-human actors. Focusing on dust and air pollution in the industrial suburb of Bargny in Dakar, Senegal, Charline Kopf discusses the impact of “affective infrastructures” on citizens as well as the natural and spiritual landscape of Bargny. This case study reveals how anxiety can trigger different cultural and spiritual ways of generating agency, and of addressing change and ambiguity. Similarly, Yuan Zhang’s reflections on China’s Toilet Revolution address affective and cosmological tensions in the everyday spiritual lives of rural Chinese citizens brought on by improved sanitation. While modern toilets are seen as disrupting the traditional geomantic principles of feng shui, this cosmological anxiety also leads to creative negotiations and infrastructural adaptations by local residents.

In the next article, Kirsten Nielsen considers the tensions and anxieties brought about by the promise of infrastructural modernity related to electricity and exclusion in northern Uganda. This case shows the emergence of new anxieties for the future and highlights the symbolic value of infrastructure even when it fails. Illuminating further the productive and generative capacities of infrastructural anxieties, Afra Foli’s examination of flood-prevention infrastructures in Accra, Ghana, shows how flood

anxiety leads to novel collaborations. Albeit temporary, these temporal relations and ad-hoc technological innovations also map onto and shape urban politics in the city. Jiraporn Laocharoenwong's study on Mae La refugee camp in Thailand demonstrates how anxiety can mobilise community action. For many long-term residents, the camp has a veneer of permanency through infrastructure built by the refugees themselves. With the fate of the camp unknown, however, their situational anxieties are transformed into worry about the future.

Annika Pohl Harrison and Michael Eilenberg's case study of a Danish citizen living on the Danish-German border shows how the past, present and future can coalesce in infrastructure to generate real – and at times painful – affects. Structures such as fences can bring back memories which generate trauma and anxiety, thereby forcing a reflection on the cyclical relationship between infrastructure and anxiety. Similarly, Robert Deakin's article explores anxious belonging in the urban landscape through the perspective of Jimmy, long-time resident of a housing estate in east London. Redevelopment triggers Jimmy's anxiety about the future and renews past grievances and injustices, illustrating the temporal and generative capacity of infrastructural anxieties. Finally, Aditya Kiran Kakati looks at "airy infrastructures" on the North-East Frontier of India in 1945 and 1962, two pivotal moments in the history of Indian state-building. His article investigates the paradox of cartographic anxieties and minimal infrastructure in a highly contested borderland, and how state anxieties can shape the outcome of wars as well as the histories of marginalised peoples by withholding infrastructural development.

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