

URBS277
2/22/21
Sample #3

Infrastructural Ethnography

As I reflect upon the infrastructure on which I rely in Philadelphia, my conception feels incomplete.

Other than Philadelphia, I have only lived in one other place: San Francisco, California. In San Francisco, my relationship with infrastructure is rather profound. I grew up spitting distance from Golden Gate Park, where I learned how to ride a bike, took walks my dog, played hundreds of soccer games, fed ducks with my parents, went to music festivals with my friends, ran hundreds of miles, had calls with my therapist, and listened to hours of podcasts. And that's just one park. I was educated in public schools, transported to those schools on public buses and trains, drank Hetch Hetchy tap water. My public library was around the corner from my house, and I first walked there by myself at age five. I did homework there almost every day until I was 17. I even live with someone responsible for maintaining a significant portion of the city's infrastructure—my father, who runs the city's parks department. San Francisco's infrastructure has been inextricably woven into the fabric of my upbringing. I may have even shed a tear or two while writing this reflection.

I do not have the same relationship with Philadelphia's infrastructure. This may be an unfair comparison; I did not grow up here. But I feel particularly disengaged with Philly's public spaces, and that is not because Philadelphia is not a great city, or because I don't care. Rather, my engagement with Philadelphia infrastructure has been tainted by Penn, Penn student culture, and Penn's engagement with West Philadelphia. Throughout my day of infrastructural journaling, I put my finger on why Philadelphia's infrastructure feels different to me: Penn as an institution facilitates and sponsors our disengagement from the rest of Philadelphia. Penn has implemented systems that allow students to completely circumvent public infrastructure, rendering my understanding of Philly's public systems incomplete.

This morning, I went to take out my garbage. I live on Delancey Street, notorious for a trash pile-up that accumulates when we go two, three, or even four weeks without garbage collection. I came outside with two bags— one with trash and one with recyclables— even though I knew the City of Philadelphia would mix them the moment it was collected. Just a few moments after I set the garbage into the bins, I noticed a garbage truck. But as it drove down my street, I was puzzled; it didn't look like the typical garbage collection truck that made its rounds whenever it felt like it. It became even clearer once the truck passed my front stoop without collecting any of my trash and I saw the logo on the vehicle's rear. It was a private garbage collection service. I later learned that one of my neighbors had hired them to collect their trash out of frustration with the city's neglect to do this job themselves, something I never would've thought to do. I thought about the hundreds of West Philadelphian residents with trash pileups, for whom chartering private trash collectors is entirely outside of the realm of possibility. I thought about Penn students calling the University, or worse, the City, to complain about the lack of service, and who would be prioritized the moment these collection delays were resolved.

After taking out my garbage, I had to go to Trader Joe's. My friend and I did not SEPTA there. We took PennRides, a private Penn transit system that conveniently drops students off at

22nd and South, just a few blocks from the grocery store. As I sat there, I wondered why I didn't just take SEPTA. But Penn made it easy. This was free, guaranteed to be COVID-safe, and fast. But it wasn't long before I indicted that excuse. Why was it easier? Was it easier because Penn made it that way? Why does Penn need to give students an alternative to public transit? What would happen if Penn took this option away? I am not afraid of public transit; it was practically my only way to get around for the entirety of my childhood. But I am also a college student, on a budget, and often pressed for time. And Penn made this more convenient on purpose—the University needs commodities to attract and maintain the tuition-paying student body.

When I got home, I had several hours of class. I did it from the comfort of my apartment, with wifi that I pay for, heat circulating through my house, and plenty of technology at my disposal. I started thinking about electricity, which, thankfully, I hardly ever have to think about beyond Venmo charging my parents for the month's bill. I recently saw a viral TikTok about the deteriorating US energy infrastructure and the power grid's inevitable impending failure. In the event of that failure, Penn will be able to circumvent public infrastructure yet again with millions of dollars of resources to purchase back-up generators, supplies, food, and water. I would be a recipient of those resources. I would be fine. Those who rely on Philadelphia's resources, though, likely would not.

I started feeling restless as the late afternoon hit, so I decided to go for a run. I ran down Locust, through campus, and did a loop in Penn Park. Home in San Francisco, it would be virtually impossible to exercise without passing through at least one public park. But here, I managed to log four miles without stepping foot onto property managed by the Philadelphia Park's department. Not only would this disappoint my public parks-managing father, but I was disappointed in myself. What had I internalized about Philadelphia's public space? Did I feel safer running through private property? Or, had Penn's sprawling campus erased most of the green space available in West Philadelphia, encouraging students to utilize the outdoor areas Penn built just for them? I wondered how Penn facilitates the privacy of these green spaces and whether or not they were made available to West Philadelphia residents.

This incredibly disjointed and incomplete conception of public infrastructure in Philly is not a coincidence. Not only does this university attract a student body that is largely disinterested in engaging with public services, but it is in Penn's best interest to be the primary provider of those once-public goods. With every private library, outdoor space, building, and transit system that Penn accumulates, the University expands its capacity, attracts more tuition-paying students, and can charge even more for that tuition. They can regulate the quality of the infrastructure for their students, rather than leaving it in the hands of the city and the state. And most importantly, private infrastructure is exclusive. Penn can dictate who has access to their services, ensuring a sense of elitism, superiority, and status to the university's community.

The privatization of space has dire implications for those not included. Space is not finite. Every square inch of land Penn claims is a square inch of land lost for Philadelphia residents. And every square inch of land and infrastructure privatized by Penn leads to greater urban disinvestment, fewer public resources, and fewer choices for those who already have so much less.