A Poetics of Infrastructure: Interview with Matt Coolidge

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STEPHANIE LEMENAGER

Matt Coolidge co-founded the Center for Land Use Interpretation (CLUI) in 1994 and serves as a project director, photographer and curator for the center. He has written several books published by the CLUI and others, including *Overlook: Exploring the Internal Fringes of America with the Center for Land Use Interpretation* (2006); *The Nevada Test Site: A Guide to America's Nuclear Proving Ground* (1996), and *Around the Bay: Sites of Interest in the San Francisco Bay Region* (2013). Matt received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship in 2004 and the Smithsonian Institute's Lucelia Artist Award in 2006.

Matt spoke with *Resilience* co-editor Stephanie LeMenager in June, 2013, at the CLUI's offices in Culver City, Los Angeles.

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STEPHANIE LEMENAGER (SL): I've heard people talk about the CLUI fostering a community of infrastructure geeks. When I took the CLUI's bus tour of the section of California Interstate 5 known as the Grapevine, I believe I heard you use the phrase "a poetics of infrastructure" to describe what you were hoping to produce with that tour, an exploration of a freeway which moves right through the heart of California's energy and water infrastructure.[1] Why do you think infrastructure has become such a crucial, magnetic concept?

MATT COOLIDGE (MC): Well, there's something very honest and necessary about it. Historically, it tends to be hidden, something we put out of the way. Engineers don't want you to see it, because it was considered

ugly. It's ironic—or maybe "paradoxical" is a better word—[that when] you're driving on a highway, looking at the scenery, you don't want to see the highway, but that's the thing that enables you to see the scenery. It's a real paradox that in order for us to enjoy our lives we have to consume and alter the planet, and the aesthetics of that have been based on a kind of nostalgic sense of a dichotomy between humans and nature, where you think that nature is something that doesn't see the hands of humans.

But I think that's changing. People realize that we are animals transforming our habitat, like all animals do. There is obviously a lot that could be improved about the manner in which we do it, to not be quite so wasteful. The alterations themselves aren't necessarily negative things, and to expose infrastructure in order to see how things operate, in order to see the effects of the things we create and enjoy, the positive things that we want to see, we should also see the connective tissue— meaning the strands, the pipelines, the aqueducts, the electric lines, all the way back through the reservoirs, the power plants, the coal mines. All of that is part of the same picture and should be seen, understood, appreciated, and aestheticized, even, if it means we're going to look at it and enjoy paying attention to it. We are visual creatures, and aesthetics are an important part of maintaining our attention and ascribing value to things. We need to value our landfills as much as we value the contents of our refrigerators. Both those things can have an aesthetic component in order to communicate to us in meaningful ways.

SL: And there's a liveliness, a reflection of our own species, in these things, whether they're ugly or beautiful, which is powerful.

MC: Aesthetics isn't always about beauty—it's about a kind of clarity. Aesthetic components can be preexisting—aesthetics is just a frame of evaluation. What CLUI does as an institution is provide a frame, a point of view, for the existing world. We've dematerialized the museumological process to the point where we're just providing a point of view, a frame, a context. It's not the only context; it's our context; it's our broadcast channel or our brand or whatever you want to call it. But it's that frame, that institutional structure, that holds up this material-less perspective. Rather than creating artifacts and managing them, we provide the view *of* the artifacts. We don't take things out of their contexts; we try to understand them in their contexts.

SL: I wanted to ask you about the collaborative aspect of the CLUI from the beginning forward. If you want, we can talk explicitly about the current exhibit ["Perishable: An Exploration of the Refrigerated Landscape of America"] and how that worked collaboratively, or we can speak more generally about how collaboration works for CLUI members.[2] One of the things that is exciting about this center is the way in which it has initiated a different kind of workspace.

MC: It works differently in different projects. The Coldscape ["Perishable"] Project emerged as an idea. We had been wanting to do something about agriculture and food for a long time, because of course a large part of land use in America is devoted to food production. We knew that our resources online and our exhibition history were missing a lot. It's hard to locate places; it took us a long time to figure that out. When it comes to crop production, how do you put your [latitude and longitude coordinates] on a field of corn? Why that field of corn and not some other field of corn? So it took us awhile to begin to imagine how we might work. Focusing on companies and headquarters and laboratories, we thought that it might be difficult to tell the story of food in a very site-specific way.

I think it was Nicola Twilley's idea a couple years ago—we'd been talking with her about all kinds of things over the years—to look at the food landscape through the cold landscape, the perpetual temperature condition that enables our food to operate on a national and international scale, cold being a kind of time machine, where you slow down the transformation of the objects, the food products.[3] All things slow down when you chill them; same with the ripening or decomposition of food. So by slowing down the decomposition of food by introducing cold temperatures, you increase the amount of space that you can cover to transport the products from one place to another. Time and space are related; it's kind of elemental. [Laughs] So we thought that would be a good way to narrow down the search and to look at the entirety of food consumption based on this national system of time machines, the Cold Chain.

It was about a two-year research program. Nicola's students at Columbia did a lot of research. Like with most things, we create a pile of information over some long period. Something ubiquitous as food, even cold food, is a huge subject. We had so much to learn, but we

forged ahead, and at a certain point the mountain of information began to sort out. There were players, large companies that dominated different sectors of the food economy. Once we decided to break it down into food types and regions, we could begin to understand that, for example, most apples come from Washington, so we have a limited area: What are the big companies doing up there? How does that work? Potatoes from Idaho, bananas from overseas ripening in these coastal ripening centers, et cetera. Then the ways in which things could be explained and described for the exhibit began to be clearer.

SL: A narrative.

MC: Exactly. We considered this project a research project with an exhibition as a component. Then we could begin to share the task of writing things up and creating information resources online. It's an ongoing thing for us—we're still putting it out on the Web. It hasn't been finished. It will probably have different versions over time, in the future. It will expand to cover other parts of the food system beyond the Cold Chain. We looked into that as well. It's really an initiative to do research on a certain subject, to feed the tree of information we have; it's an ongoing processing of information and getting it out on the Internet and providing it as raw material for doing other iterations, other kinds of projects.

SL: At what point does the visual image become important? Does photography or videography work as a means of ground-truthing early in the life of a project?

MC: Yes, as soon as you can and as much as you can. There are limitations, like the expense of travel and the networks of people that we have to take pictures. But going physically to visit the sites is crucial, because otherwise you're dealing with things of more of a representative and conceptual nature, unless the project is about other people's representations of a place. We do these independent interpreter projects where we basically choose somebody we think is doing interesting work to showcase their point of view of places.

Curiously—earlier you mentioned the postcards. We did that exhibit about Merle Porter, who photographed Arizona [and] California and died in the mid-'80s ["Territory in Photo-Color: The Post Cards of Merle Porter," 1999]. We featured his work, and his widow was in-

volved in that (she died a couple of years ago). We've been going back and rephotographing his perspectives. In that case, we *are* going back and revisiting. It's been really interesting. His historical records date to the '60s, '70s, and early '80s, but mostly a '60s and '70s view of a very quotidian landscape. He'd go to the national parks, too, but for the most part it was townscapes: downtowns, roads. So it's been interesting to do a rephotography project on his work. Some of that we have online already.

SL: That's a fascinating way of remapping, essentially. In the *Art Forum* interview that you did with Jeffrey Kastner, you talk about the New Topographics movement as being somewhat of an influence in terms of how you see photography. What would you say about that, or about photography as a mode of survey?

MC: We generally think of photography as a utilitarian device, a way of capturing the appearance of a place, a way of conveying some qualities of a place, just as a descriptive text provides another kind of snapshot. The photograph is a graphic representation of the place. We use live video if we can; mostly we do videotape of places, too, from fixed-camera positions. We've done entire exhibits that have been kinetic photographs, using video, which allows for an even more descriptive portrayal of a place. Photographs can't be too good, and they can't be too bad. I guess that in some ways New Topographics was an acknowledgment of a more boring photograph being interesting, but they're still incredibly composed and very photographic things. They are very much about the individual photographer's point of view of a place, which is interesting, and in the case of people telling stories through photographs, it is a fascinating historical period of photography. I guess it was influential in that they were telling stories about places through a particular lens. They still were—I think without exception—photographers, and then they were place people after that.

SL: Connected to cultural geography as a movement, but that was still a relatively new movement.

MC: And so we said, "Okay, just because you take pictures doesn't mean you're a photographer." If it is about the place, then capture the place through whatever medium: drawing, descriptive video, satellite photography, whatever. Whatever it takes, given your means and the curato-

rial limitations based on how you're presenting the material, in order to convey the sense of the place in the way you think you should.

But if the photos were snapshotty drive-bys, then it emphasizes the vehicular glance, which is interesting, but it limits the utility of the photographs. If they're too good, meaning too clever, too well composed, or too much about the medium, then they also are not so useful, because they cannot be used in flexible ways where you're telling the story of a place without too much of the language of photography getting in the way. But you do have to acknowledge that there is a language of photography, and that these are artificial things. They're not objective; they are composed. So how do you find the middle ground? That's the way we developed our photographic processes, and do our best to maintain that middle ground. It entails some technical awareness, but it's something that anybody can do. It is very much about photography, but it's not about people being photographers.

sl: One of the things I think is so interesting about the CLUI's projects is that often you're taking on macro-scale systems, this latest ["Perishable"] project being a great example, and yet you find a way to make them hit ground, to create a material, physical narrative from them. Is there anything that you've been conceiving as a future project that is so macro that at this point it feels almost undoable?

mc: Well, in a way that is our ultimate objective, to develop this portrait of the country, in its totality, and that's obviously impossible. And it would be useless. That would be that Borges's 1:1 map, where you've got a pile of information that is as big as the thing you're trying to decipher. [Laughs] Then you've got two piles!

You have to have your Platonic objectives. The horizon is always receding, because the planet is turning. It keeps you going, but you know you'll never get there. You could sort of liken it to GIS [Geographic Information System] layers, where the projects we do, they're all macrocosmic, meaning they're looking at a landscape that is too big for anybody with cognitive rationality to get their mind around. But still, they're using this analogy of GIS, where you provide the limits of your data set—for us, it is the borders of the USA—and say, here is one iteration of that, and here's another, and here's another, and they're adding up. We look at the legacy of the projects we've done from the beginning and think about where we're going, given where we've been in terms of

subject matter, in order to provide layers that aren't too much like ones we've done before, but also the ones that seem to be especially interesting or important given the trajectory of our culture and landscape.

It does add up. Everything is piling up on the Internet and shows no signs of going away. The pile is growing out there in the infosphere, and we're aware that we're adding to that. With all the different channels that everyone is creating for themselves in different ways, we're just one of those channels. It might be that things are becoming clearer as things add up, as long as you can have access to the information. As long as you're selecting the programming in ways that are interesting and have staying power, it is worth it to keep it all out there.

But we're also realizing that what we create is becoming historical. We don't update everything, and things do have a production date associated with them, so you can see them within the historical context in which they were created. Eventually we'll rephotograph—we have been—our own photographs to think about how they will evolve as technologies make managing information (hopefully) easier but also more accessible. Incorporating those historical layers into future ones is something we haven't totally figured out, but it's an exciting thing to contemplate.

sl: An exciting future project, and an ongoing one.

mc: Yeah, we think a lot about archives and about the perpetualization of information. A lot of people who are dealing with Internet-based technologies are also thinking very materially. There is a physical component to information, as we all know. Not just in terms of publications and resources printed on paper, but the materiality of memory storage. At some point there are limits for that, based more on energy than anything—energy and space, cooling and whatever.

sl: A different cold chain. [Both laugh]

mc: We're working on several exhibits right now and of course over the next few years. One of them is about information infrastructure. We'll see what form it takes, but it will be to some degree about the systems of conveyance, the linkages between places where information is stored. The concrete and cables of the "cloud."

sl: You're going to be descended upon by academics and librarians. [Both laugh] I'll personally be among them.

MC: We don't want it to be too hot a subject, in a way. But to provide some different kind of view of things is always a struggle, especially when things are changing and evolving so quickly.

SL: It will be interesting to see if you can, to paraphrase one of your stated goals as an exhibit designer, make that boring in a way that is interesting.

MC: Exactly. Even architecturally, information spaces are interesting.

SL: So now I'm going to ask a question for geeks, or for people who want to move through the USA like Matt Coolidge. One of our other editors, Julia Christensen, knows you, and she talks about how remarkable it is to drive with you, how your dashboard explodes with mapping devices. How does digital mapping, or print maps, affect your experience of where you are as you travel?

MC: These days you can track yourself on your cell phone or your iPhone while you're traveling, looking at Google satellite imagery—which is fantastic. The one thing that is lacking still is that you can't count on web connectivity when you're driving in remote areas, so even if you're using satellite imagery live as you travel, you lose your mapping ability if you go below a 3G connection. So having things running off the hard drive in a dashboard-mounted computer as you travel can be very useful. Things like the USGS Topos, which are really valuable tools for understanding where you are. Not in terms of navigating, but as an archeological resource. The USGS Topo set—those fifty thousand or so printed quads covering the country—have been digitized, and you can get the entire set for the whole country on one hard drive, so wherever you are you have that level of information. But they're old: some of the quads' most recent editions date back to the 1970s, so you're seeing a recent historical layer of the landscape. The resolution indicates building locations, old roads, and patterns, but because they are a little out of date there are things that aren't necessarily apparent in front of you, physically, that the maps enable you to find and see.

SL: You have a dashboard-mounted computer, but do you use print as well?

MC: Yes, still. We still draw on maps and have state maps with circles around things. For the logistics of planning trips, certainly you can do

it online, but again you're depending on connectivity if you use online resources. Nothing, so far, seems to beat paper for national coverage, where it is not just a project centered around urban centers. We do paper for our database in file cabinets. The paper things we store in there—newspaper clippings, articles, even a lot of stuff printed out from the Web—are organized according to state, then category, and then site, where each site has a manila folder with its name on it. It's not so much that we're building a paper archive; it's a printed record of information about the places we've been looking at, a base of raw material and information on places that we draw from to do projects.

SL: You went online pretty early, with the digital Land Use Database, which has become such a signature project, a groundbreaking way of doing the archive. What inspired that? It was pretty early in the '90s to be going online.

MC: Well, it was just sort of the timing of things. We incorporated in 1994, when the Web was just beginning. Our first big project was the Land Use Database, and at that time, in 1994 or 1995, we would send out letters—bulk mail—soliciting information, asking corporations to describe where their locations are or to provide their annual reports—their 10KS, which tend to describe the physical characteristics of corporations. Government entities. The military. We canvassed the nation for information: maps, imagery. It was a big bulk-mail project. We got thousands of things through the mail slot, which we then processed and extracted the sites [from] and then filed away. As '95 became '96 or '97 these companies began to put themselves online a bit, and then soon enough, in the late '90s, you could get annual reports as PDFs, or proto-PDFs, on the Internet, so our research methodology transitioned pretty quickly from physical- to Internet-based research.

But at the same time, we wanted to put resources online to provide a digital map of the country with clickable sites and scalable maps. We designed that several times in different ways, starting with Esri GIS software that was cumbersome. Esri—they're out in Redlands—is the master of GIS: they kind of invented it, in a way. A landscape architect from Harvard created the first initiative that became this software company. Their software is used internationally by governments, by companies, by scientists, by everybody, to provide the infrastructure for the GIS layers, to understand where buried utilities are, street networks, scientific

data, demographic information, everything you can imagine that can be mapped is usually turned into some kind of GIS layer for managers and scientists and government officials, et cetera, to use. Esri has been the company at the center of all that. They've been very generous in giving us software to use to get our comparatively meager resources online, through the early versions of clickable, scalable, diagrammatic maps where they had done that.

So we worked with them, and we worked with individual, independent database designers. Then of course Google came along and opened up their system, so when that happened we transitioned to their platform, which is so far still working out. Maybe something else will come along some day, but they are on top of the game in terms of creating things that you can import and export and customize; and certainly the ease for people using it to understand all the iconography and how it works. That makes it so much better, on the end user side. That is still what they do better than anybody.

So, yes, we have always seen the organization as physical sites—ground truthed, as we mentioned earlier. All the resources we provide, in terms of imagery, are taken by people working for the organization, so that represents a kind of ground truthing, a primary layer of information, not like a clearinghouse of stock photography. These are images taken by people within the organization. There is a physical component, an understanding that every single site we look at has a lat-long, is locatable, you can point to it, whether or not—in terms of permissions—you can physically go to it. That is another issue (though in many cases you can).

The point is, there is a corresponding place on the planet that has physical qualities that *are* that site, and anything else is a layer built on top of that, all the way up to the scalable interactive maps on the Internet that represent this informational layer floating above the physical, geographical layer. The organization [the CLUI], developing with the Web in that way, has in its DNA the interaction—the space—between those two things, between the informational or representative, and the actual or physical.

SL: When it comes to receiving permission to display images of sites like corporate campuses or utilities plants, it is impressive how many stakeholders you've drawn in, how many corporations and government entities say yes. Diplomatically speaking, how does that work?

MC: It varies. But like anything else, everything is on the Web. If they want to figure out whether it is worth it to open up to us, they can just look on our website and see everything. It's all out there, in terms of our attitude and approach and methodology and the information we have. There is no Trojan horse. They can make up their own minds about our objectivity or whatever they might be concerned about.

SL: I like how you make it possible to structure a dialogue with entities that the public might not feel were accessible.

MC: I think there is a tendency for people to fear things they don't know, and people who are aware of that—aware that communication can be very helpful for community relations or having a broader public understanding, they might be sympathetic to your interests in understanding more about what they are and do. Because we aren't out to get anybody, we might be a better risk than some other avenues for passing on information. That's a subjective determination that they make.

We're interested in all forms of land use—which is basically everything [laughs]—but also places that are well known, we try to understand them in a different way, to recontextualize them. Places that are under-known, to describe them helps to balance this general awareness of the way that everything is connected in the landscape. Some people say that we often look toward the things that are hidden, but I think that's the notion that there are certain things you are used to seeing, certain things that cry out for attention. But there are other things that are just there as byproducts or collateral spaces that just don't have the organization or the reason or the desire to call attention to themselves, and that is maybe the majority of places. So by that logic, I guess we do look toward things that are less noticed.

SL: Hidden in plain sight.

MC: Yes, exactly. As you noted we joke that we try to do boring exhibits—the more boring the better, because "boring" means that people gloss over it, don't really notice it. It hasn't become interesting. By stopping and pausing, the boring places end up being terrific resources for exploration, understanding, and storytelling.

SL: For me it makes it possible to love parts of the world that I would normally write off. When you incorporated back in 1994, what did you imagine would happen with this project? When you think back to the

beginning of the CLUI, what was the idea of the trajectory, of how long it would last, of where you would be located?

MC: We founded the institution up in Oakland. When you incorporate and become a nonprofit, there is a lot of paperwork involved; it's not something you do lightly. And so it came at the end of a process of exploring different ways to do something that seemed meaningful and useful and interesting. It was a leap into the future, which you do a little heedlessly. We're not trying to sell the world any particular ideology. We're not out there trying to convert minds or take over people's psychological spaces. We just decided we'd do this, and that we'd be here essentially forever, or as long as we could, to do what we do, and we'll provide avenues where people can find us and avail themselves of the resources that we provide. But there was no campaign to publicize and grow the organization, in terms of its influence. It was really just we'll do what we do, and if people pay attention, fine, but we'd probably do it for ten people or just for ourselves. [Laughs] We think it's interesting and are glad that other people do, too, but it is not something that is conceived in order to broadcast in a wide way. It's just there, and if people find it interesting and useful, then great. But we're not very good at publicity and stuff like that. I guess part of the reason we're not is that there are so many voices out there screaming for attention, for your mindshare, from advertising to nonprofits: everybody's got some kind of something they're trying to push forward.

We wanted to follow a different kind of strategy, to just be there and allow people to come find it. We're not hiding, but we're not trying to proselytize or convert anybody to anything in particular. We're not activists in that sense. So there was no projection on how influential or large or whatever we were going to be. When we founded the organization, it was just, we're going to do this and hopefully sustain it for as long as we can. We learned early on not to get too big, in terms of office staff and payroll and all that stuff. We'd love to grow if we had the resources to pay people better, but so far that's not all there. But we have a small, agile group of people who are doing things not for financial benefit but because they're interested in the content and in providing resources. We started out with the same kind of goals and objectives, in terms of setting up a structure for programming and research and resources for the public that we've maintained consistently since the beginning. We're doing the same thing we started doing almost twenty years ago.

SL: It's still working.

MC: It's still working, meaning we're still able to do it and still feel like it is an effective methodology.

SL: If you had to describe—and this could come from just your experience—a typical user of these resources, what is that person like?

MC: We don't really follow up on who uses the resources in a systematic way, but you hear things anecdotally. One exception is when we're doing a public tour that involves a visit to a secure facility, and we have to furnish the site managers ahead of time with everyone's Social Security numbers, residences, and occupation and all that. Collecting that information from the people who've signed up for the tour gives us a very good idea of who our audience is, in that case! [Laughs]

But in general I don't know. We have no target audience. We operate, in some ways, at a very basic level. . . . When we did the show about the steel industry a while back, we got people who worked in the industry commenting on it and seeming to enjoy it; they were happy to see a broad view of something that is usually looked at minutely or regionally. Specialists hopefully can get something out of it, as well as a general public—anyone who's interested in "What's that in front of me? What's it connected to? How did it get there?" Almost a childlike way of looking at the world: "What's that? What's that?" [Laughs]

SL: David Macaulay's *The Way Things Work*, blown out into the world.

MC: It's true. Or Richard Scarry's *What Do People Do All Day?* Maybe those were influences. [Laughs]

NOTES

1. For more on the CLUI's "Through the Grapevine" exhibit and tour, see the CLUI website at http://www.clui.org/newsletter/winter-2011/through-grapevine-exhibit.

2. The *Perishable* exhibit closed in the CLUI's Culver City gallery in September of 2013. A record of it can be found on the CLUI website at http://www.clui.org/section/perishable-exploration-refrigerated-landscape-america.

3. Nicola Twilley is author of the blog Edible Geography (http://www.ediblegeography.com), co-founder of the Foodprint Project (http://www.foodprintproject.com), and director of Studio-X NYC, an urban futures network run by Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Preservation, and Planning (https://twitter.com/studioxnyc).