Looking down on empty streets, all she can see
Are the dreams all made solid
Are the dreams all made real
All of the buildings, all of those cars
Were once just a dream
In somebody’s head
—Peter Gabriel, “Mercy Street”

The strange and unexpected forms our cities take as they transit from imaginings to realization and back again have given rise to a vast toolkit for apprehending such metamorphoses. Jonathan Raban’s soft cities within the hard, where bricks and mortar are psychically remolded by those who move among them; Henri Lefebvre’s spatial triad of perceived, conceived, and lived spaces continually reproducing and elaborating one another; Michel de Certeau’s restless, transformative practices of everyday life.

Ultimately, though, these constructs are high abstractions, and must be grounded in the pragmatics of nuts, bolts, and human hands if they are to be of use in understanding the making of real cities. The recent release of two edited volumes, *The Infrastructural City* and *Everyday Urbanism*, provide just such concrete grounding.

*The Infrastructural City* is comprised of illuminating—and even delightful—chapters on the evolution of assorted infrastructures thought of as idiosyncratically contingent histories of personal and insti-
tutional practices. By way of example, in a handful of pages, one chapter deconstructs the very
notion of traffic, while providing an overview of the development of traffic control from a police-
man at every intersection to remotely sensing control rooms buried deep beneath our city halls.
Another standout is an account of pavement—and of gravel in particular—focused as much upon
the voided pits its mining leaves behind as its redistribution to form our hardscapes. And anyone
who has marveled at how L.A.’s streets are simultaneously de facto research stations for botanical
exotics will find much to absorb here, in the immigration histories and likely futures of eucalyp-
tus and palm trees (both the vegetal and the telephonically cellular variety).

At the same time, there are chapters that, while exploring novel and unfamiliar infrastruc-
tures, are weakened by insufficient sourcing and by polemical criticism of our more destructive
habits. Such criticisms at times appear as opaque phrased moral pontificating that blunts both
their impact and the accounts of the infrastructure to which they are saddled—as in an otherwise
perversely fascinating depiction of the super-distribution centers for retail giants like Ikea and
WalMart scattered about L.A.’s furthest nether-regions.

Nonetheless, the volume’s repeated observations that our infrastructures are reaching their
limits, or are well past them, are well-taken and provide something of a unifying theme. This
cautionary—at times verging on apocalyptic (we Angelenos, it seems, are never truly satisfied
until we’re seeing our own city fall catastrophically in upon itself)—thread runs through most
of the essays: the city’s infrastructure is devouring itself and everything around it, including the
urbane lifeways it is intended to enable. An important theme, to be sure, although many of the
authors are so intent upon telling the tales of their chosen piece of the infrastructural puzzle,
and telling them well, that they seem to run out of space for this message. In the process, it fre-
quently feels tacked on, sometimes only in chapter conclusions that are themselves little more
than afterthoughts.

While the essays in this volume concur on the larger picture, they often vary widely not
just in character but also in analyses that become, at times, glaringly dissonant. For instance, is
the grade-separated Alameda Rail Corridor, recently created to carry high volumes of container-
ized traffic unimpeded from the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, a new economic lifeline
for L.A.? Or was it obsolete as soon as it was completed? There seem to be as many opinions as
there are authors addressing it. Such disagreement underscores both the diversity of perspec-
tives and the larger point that even the most Pharaonicly planned and constructed infrastructure
yields uncertain outcomes. So it is that The Infrastructural City injects us from many points into
the kluged-together organs and systems comprising the Frankensteinian body of the L.A. hyper-
region, its ever-lengthening tentacles stretching the city’s paved plains and crumbling hillsides
into distant lakes and deserts.

Everyday Urbanism, a decade-old book now augmented with updated material, is a collection
of two sorts of essays. First, it is a compendium of thoroughly illustrated cases wherein the varied
conditions and responses of everyday life have remade the city adaptively, contingently, and mess-
ily. Such cases span a wide range of scales, from the signage on a chainlink fence and the social
ecology of a single alley to a typology of ever-metastasizing pod-malls. And, second, these cases
are conjoined to cautiously formulated and thoughtfully presented heuristics (never algorithms
or prescriptions) for how to work with such everyday dynamics. These heuristics are consistently
given concrete illustration, by such potential (and, in a few instances, realized) projects as street
vendors’ furniture, pocket parks that harmoniously accommodate existing neighborhood constit-
uents regardless of their officially sanctioned “desirability,” and retrofits of entire urban districts
sensitive to their initial conditions. Everyday Urbanism is thus a detailed recognition of everyday
lives as the vectors along which city planning and urban design should proceed; simultaneously,
it is an idea book for the objects and spaces such planning and design can create.

What *Everyday Urbanism* is not, *contra* some earlier critics, is anti-planning. Rather, it is critical of a particular, dominant kind of planning, whether in its High Modernist slash-and-burn or kinder, gentler, New Urbanist manifestation. Everyday urbanism objects to any planning that regards *what* is as a blight better replaced with a new, tidy, and commonly air-dropped master alternative—an alternative, it must be added, that is almost invariably exclusive in its realization. As such, while this volume is not committed to a countervailing planning solely for the poor and disenfranchised, it does give their concerns and practices at least equal weight. All urbanites, after all, are creators of everyday urbanisms.

These strengths, however, apply nearly as well to the original edition of the book as to the current version. More space given over to updated material, especially in the form of current commentaries on the older chapters, would greatly enhance this re-issue. Now that many of the realized everyday urbanist projects, new at the time of the original publication, have been in use for as long as a decade, it would be invaluable to revisit those projects and see how they have fared, lived up to expectations or not, and been transformed through their daily inhabitation. That, after all, is what an everyday urbanism is all about, and we can only hope we will not have to wait for a third edition in another ten years to find out.

If there is one overarching theme to *Infrastructural City*, it is that everything from watersheds to cellular phone towers have arrived at their ultimate dispositions through processes of everyday use and incremental transformation. This even in the presence of intensive, technocratic administration and despite planners' constant efforts—and all the more now that so much infrastructural production and maintenance is left in the unsteady, invisible hands of the market. Given which, it is long past time we accepted *Everyday Urbanism*'s admonition that messiness, happenstance, and the unintended consequences of history accreted upon our streets are not aberrant blights to be extirpated, but inevitable givens and even opportunities to revel in and build upon.

Further, while these volumes focus on Los Angeles, they are at heart books about the urban, broadly understood. Circumstances conspired to ensure that I carried them with me through roughly half a dozen cities over the past couple of months, reading all the way. In the process, it became evident that, while L.A. may be exemplary of the dynamics presented across these pages, it is in no way exceptional. Rather, the analyses and analects to be drawn from these books are no less applicable to London, Tokyo, and a host of cities in between. As such, these volumes yield inclusive and flexible ways of looking at, and grappling with, our densely packed and overstretched cities in general. Perhaps most importantly, they remind us of a vital truth too often lost amidst our naturalized urban environments and their domesticated technologies: infrastructure is people.