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**Journal**

limn, 1(4)

**Authors**

Penders, Bart

Schleifer, David

Frohlich, Xaq

et al.

**Publication Date**

2014-02-11

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# PREFACE: Food Infrastructures

**XAQ FROHLICH,  
MIKKO JAUHO,  
BART PENDERS,  
and DAVID SCHLEIFER**  
*January, 2014*

**CONSIDER THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CATCHING A FISH AND** buying fish fingers at your neighborhood supermarket. We may fail miserably at catching a fish, but we can easily imagine how to do so. But what does it take to enable the act of buying fish fingers? What processes has a product gone through before it arrives as food in our shopping basket or on our plates? Who are the millions of people at work in these processes, and what systems do they operate to keep us reliably provisioned with fish fingers?

This issue of *Limn* analyzes food infrastructures and addresses scale in food production, provision, and consumption. We aim to move beyond the tendency towards simple producer “push” or consumer “pull” accounts of the food system, focusing instead on the work that connects producers to consumers. By describing and analyzing food infrastructures, our contributors examine the reciprocal relationships among consumer choice, personal use, and the socio-material arrangements that enable, channel, and constrain our everyday food options.

## **FOOD SYSTEMS AS INFRASTRUCTURE**

When we think of “infrastructure,” what usually come to mind are roads, electricity grids, telephone lines, and water pipes. Not surprisingly, the growing body of research on large technological systems and infrastructures has mostly focused on electricity, water supply, communications, and transportation. But what insights can be gained when systems of food production, provision, and consumption are approached as an infrastructure?

Infrastructures are those invisible, unappreciated, and often mundane arrangements that support the carrying out of everyday tasks. For example, shopping for food typically involves a retail space with a characteristic internal organization and products of standardized content, size, and packaging. Only when the organization is changed, or a desired product is missing, does the arrangement become visible to consumers. But infrastructures are visible to those who operate them. And they are exceptionally visible to end-users when they fail because they are essential to the smooth operation of society. They create conditions for economic activity, produce collective security, and introduce reliability and predictability into the world. In this sense they are vital systems, indispensable to the reproduction of contemporary forms of life and indeed to life itself. This also makes them vulnerable and in need of protection. The availability of food and its efficient distribution to the population is a case in point: nations typically have in place elaborate plans to ensure national primary agricultural production and food provision in times of crisis.

The various contributions to this issue indicate how food systems resemble and interact with other vital infrastructures like water, electricity, and transportation. However, the food system also differs from those other infrastructures. One example is its relation to markets. In many places, water, gas, and electricity have a long-standing status as semi-public goods only recently privatized and opened up to market competition. Food provision appears more thoroughly structured by markets and market devices.

But food infrastructures are not limited to market activity. They are undergirded by invisible systems of state funds and by overt expressions of hunger and pleasure. Foods are targeted to nationally and demographically specific market segments even as they constantly move across geographic regions. Individuals and families continuously purchase and prepare food within households while long-term continuities across lifespans, cultures, and millennialia shape what we eat for breakfast. Corporations operate production and delivery systems quickly enough to beat microbial growth and catch fashion cycles while corporations themselves grow, persevere, morph and die.

### INFRASTRUCTURE AS SCALE

Infrastructures are also about scale. Producing food for oneself or one's family, storing it, and eating it requires a modest amount of external interference, input, or inward and outward flow of materials and knowledge. But producing foods for a few dozen or a few billion people is a different matter. Foods produced on larger scales must be predictable in quality, quantity, content, safety, cost, flavor, texture and return on investment. Achieving that predictability requires many specific modes of organizing and creating the world: viable and authoritative standards, distribution models, labeling protocols, safety guidelines, business models marketing and end-users. Hence, infrastructures are composed not only of physical artifacts and natural resources, but also human labor, forms of knowledge, laws and decrees, organizations and institutions, tastes and interests. Together, these elements make the food infrastructures that feed us all and that are featured in this issue.

### INFRASTRUCTURE AS ANALYSIS

The authors in this issue of *Limn* use infrastructure to analyze food production, provision, and consumption. This approach enables the authors to look beyond consumer choice or business intentions and foreground the often invisible and implicit assumptions inscribed into the food system. Infrastructures embody tacit conventions of need and entitlement, which have a self-fulfilling character. They carry conceptions of proper use, thus inscribing a certain end-user or consumer. And because power is an outcome of establishing and operating the elements of an infrastructure, there are inherent ethical and political dimensions to food infrastructures and their study. Infrastructure as an analytic approach therefore offers a way to understand and critique the world of "Big Food," which is simultaneously varied and monolithic, indispensable and frightening.

Managing risk, avoiding disruption, nourishing families, and transmitting pleasure are sites of economic activity and also of governance, security, identity, morality, and mortality. This issue of *Limn* features contributions from a variety of scholars and practitioners devoted to transforming our understanding of food and of infrastructure, making us think twice as we traverse food production, procurement, preparation and consumption.

**limn**

is published as needed. This issue is set using Christian Schwartz' Graphik and Dino dos Santos' Leitura typefaces. Layout by **Martin Hoyem/American Ethnography**. The General Editors of *Limn* are **Stephen J. Collier, Christopher M. Kelty, and Andrew Lakoff**. Issue No. 4 Editors: **Mikko Jauho, David Schleifer, Bart Penders, Xaq Frohlich** || This magazine copyright © 2014 the Editors and Martin Hoyem. All articles herein are copyright © 2014 by their respective authors. This magazine may not be reproduced without permission, however the articles are available online at <http://limn.it/> and available for unrestricted use under a Creative Commons 3.0 unported License, <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/> || Cover Image: US Patent #7156635B2 "Multi-layer food product system and process" || Copyediting: **Michelle L. Treviño** ([michelle.trevino@gmail.com](mailto:michelle.trevino@gmail.com)) || Publication assistance provided by the Institute for Society and Genetics, University of California, Los Angeles. More at <http://limn.it/>