

**HISTORIES  
EROSIONS  
&  
FUTURES :**

ON  
THE  
**INFRASTRUCTURES**  
OF  
**DISSENT**

A  
CONVERSATION  
BETWEEN

**ALAN  
SEARS**

**&**

**ANTHONY  
YOUSSEF**



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Curated by Mitra Fakhrahrabi and Tara Bursey

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ON THE  
**INFRASTRUCTURES**  
OF  
**DISSENT**

**AN INTRODUCTION**

BY ANTHONY YOUSSEF

**The importance of third places** in organizing collective action is undeniable. The *third place*, a concept first introduced by Ray Oldenburg, refers to the idea that people need a non-home and non-workplace environment to engage in social interactions and community building. Cafes, bars, and community centres are among the many places that function as a vital gathering place for individuals to engage in informal conversations and form connections with others in their community.<sup>1</sup> These spaces play a central role in the *infrastructure of dissent*, a term coined by sociologist Alan Sears.

Sears defines the infrastructure of dissent as the means of analysis, communication, organization and sustenance that nurture the capacity for collective action. He considers the ways activists develop collective capacities to learn, remember, celebrate and act.<sup>2</sup> Sears points to Drouillard Road in early-20th century Windsor as the site of networks of solidarity, celebration and informal knowledge exchange that nurtured the militancy of Ford autoworkers. He explains that

taverns and halls acted as social spaces for sharing common struggles which would then lead to informal networks for collective actions.

More recently, and through suburban development, individualized leisure and waning of worker mobilization, the role of such spaces has receded, but not disappeared. While the COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted the ways in which people gather, for example, radical collective action has thrived.<sup>3</sup> The work presented by artists as part of the exhibition *Infrastructures of Dissent* offers ways in which this infrastructure can be rebuilt and community power can be fostered. I spoke with Alan about the history of the infrastructure of dissent, its erosion and its future. The transcription published here is meant to offer insight on Sears' research through the lens of the work presented in the exhibition.

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1. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Places* (New York: Da Capo press, 1999).
  2. Alan Sears, "Creating and Sustaining Communities of Struggle: The Infrastructure of Dissent," *New Socialist* (New Socialist Group, July 2005).
  3. Mitra Fakhrashrafi and Tara Bursey, "Infrastructures of Dissent Call for Submissions" (Toronto, ON, November 4, 2022).



# THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DISSENT

## & ITS HISTORY

**ANTHONY YOUSSEF:** *The artists in the exhibition draw attention to a range of public and domestic spaces that have played important roles in organizing collective action. Your writing points to the Ford Motor Company of Canada and Drouillard Road in Windsor, Ontario. Can you speak about this space and its importance to collective action?*

**ALAN SEARS:** What's interesting about Drouillard Road was the combination of Ford workplaces that employed thousands of workers living within walking distance of the factory. And so you had a residential neighborhood, next to these large workplaces, plus schools, plus shops, plus bars. And lastly, there were these ethnic community halls, the Ukrainian Labour-Farmer Temple being a very important one of them, that were places where people shared cultural experiences, but also political analysis and learned those things together. So you have this configuration of neighborhood and workplace, leisure activities and cultural community altogether, all crucial to that mobilization.

**AY:** *The exhibition features works that engage with issues of race, labour, and displacement that spans a variety of geographies - from Palestine and Guatemala - and historical moments - from the 19th century to current events. What impact does geography have on the infrastructure of dissent and whether*



**“ ...activism is not simply the brain. It's not simply about the workplace. It's not simply about a particular milieu, but it's about how all these things feed together... ”**



Fig. 1: Picket line in front of the two main gates of the Ford plant. November 5, 1945. (© Toronto Star / Getty Images)

*that infrastructure varies from one geography to the next?*

**AS:** As in other areas of life, migration creates diasporic knowledge and what happens in one place actually gets brought to others, and the lessons can travel at times. One of the things that Drouillard Road reminded me of, is that *the local matters* - the particular configuration of a local space. And yet the local is never separate from the global in part because of the kind of migration that you're talking about. The population that's there is not simply local, it brings memories, experiences and world-views that can come together in new ways in a new place. And again, the geography really matters for that.

## THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DISSENT

### & ITS EROSION

**AY:** *It's clear that Drouillard Road isn't what it used to be today and you do write that this infrastructure of dissent has now seriously eroded, both in Windsor, Ontario and elsewhere. What are some of the forces that have eroded this infrastructure?*

**AS:** What's complicated is that I think it eroded because of victories and defeats. And that's one of the things – people fight and when they win partial victories, they often want to carry on with life. Quite literally, many

auto workers could afford cars and moved away from Drouillard Road, and the residential configuration of work and co-workers living together began to shift a lot with greater worker mobility that was a result of union victories in some ways. It meant that people lived in much more mixed communities in terms of place of employment, and that the organic sense of unionization was undermined by that.

**AY:** *Can you talk to us more about the role of technology in the infrastructure of dissent?*

**AS:** I think sometimes people sometimes romanticize the kind of collectivity that happens through, for example, information technologies today. On the one hand, it can be immensely useful for mobilizing. On the other hand, there's something about embodied human contact that's also essential. And it's not to say technology is immaterial because it can be very material and can be very important for mobilization in all kinds of different ways. We need to remember the importance of human embodied presence, too, and the way that we feel that collectivity and learn from each other as humans and I think both are crucial.

**AY:** *There's definitely a sort of physicality to collective action. Technology can offer speed and effectiveness but with the rise of technology such as the metaverse, can technology ever replace the physical spaces that contribute to the infrastructure of dissent?*

**AS:** There's an implicit threat of people collecting in the streets or people using the streets in ways that they're not intended, and there's always a kind of an insurgent element to having thousands of people together that I don't think anything can replace. An online petition can be useful, but you don't have that kind of presence where people begin to see the world anew. The world looks



Fig. 2: Blockade along Riverside Drive. November 7, 1945. (© Windsor Star, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.)

**“ ...it eroded  
because of  
victories and  
defeats...And [it]  
began to rebuild  
in new ways. ”**

different when they're on the streets with thousands of people, you feel a boldness that you didn't feel before. In my view, that can be magnified, there can be really valuable reflections on it through different information technologies and through the metaverse but I don't think it can replace it.

## THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF DISSENT

### & ITS FUTURE

**AY:** *It seems that the infrastructure of dissent is much more inclusive of semi-public spaces, you write about halls, bars and taverns, yet Rana Nazzal Hamadeh's piece "The same place and time" and Hannia Cheng's short film "The FUTURES of SPACE" speak to the importance of public space in fostering collective action. What can public spaces offer in the service of eroding infrastructure of dissent?*

**AS:** The shift from the old fashioned main street to the mall is a very interesting example of something that's happened in the later 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century in a lot of places, which is the privatization of what had been public space. I think that there's something particular about spaces where we can gather and celebrate our collectivity without being told what to do. And so parks, streets, and various kinds of community

formations that can include everything from galleries to community centres to cultural community spaces, those are so essential as places where people can begin to build community that has radical potential.

**AY:** *Some of the work in the exhibition contrasts this by pointing to domestic spaces. Through their installation “Everything Comes Together at the Table”, Lynn Hutchinson Lee and Ingrid Mayrhofer argue that the kitchen table continues to play a significant role as the home base for activism. What are your thoughts on the role of traditional domestic spaces such as the kitchen in mobilizing collective action?*

**AS:** The history of Drouillard Road shows that food is incredibly political. The day-to-day activity of sustaining a family through food is essential during a strike. The activity of feeding families becomes overtly politicized at a moment of a strike. But that doesn't mean that it's not always political and always important. It takes a new obviousness during something like a strike where the normal pay packet roots are disrupted and you begin to realize how what such powerful spaces these domestic spaces are.

**AY:** *Tings Chak's installation “His House” reflects on the precarity of living conditions and the continued desirability of cheap labour. It seems that this hasn't changed since the Canadian Pacific Railway project. The Canadian agriculture industry, for example, relies heavily on migrant workers who are housed collectively. What potential is there in collective housing for collective action?*

**AS:** It's one of those things where there's certainly the potential for it and at the same time there can be a kind of an immiseration that goes with it, that people are just so exhausted they're so absorbed in simply stay-

“ ...people learn by experimenting, by learning from each other’s experiments, and by evaluating those experiments... ”



Fig. 3: Motor Products Corporation workers picket Ford of Canada in support of United Auto Workers Local 200, 1945. (© Public Archives of Canada)

ing alive that it can be very hard to use the potential that's there in that kind of collectivity. [Migrant workers'] position is legally often so precarious. On the one hand, collectivity has radical potential. On the other hand, if it goes with substandard conditions that essentially rob people of any kind of autonomy, it can undermine those capacities too. And I think it's one of those things where it's a complex balance.

**AY:** *Your work also emphasizes the need to rebuild the infrastructure of dissent in new ways that respond to the challenges of the present moment. Hannia Cheng presents the future possibilities for public space through the Chinatown Anti Displacement Garden. What are your thoughts on how communities can rebuild and maintain the infrastructure of dissent in the face of challenges such as suburban development and individualized leisure?*

**AS:** Art pieces and installations are really important explorations. People learn by experimenting and by learning from each other's experiments, and by evaluating those experiments. And it seems to me that there's a lot of learning and creativity going on around migrant rights, around Black Lives Matter, in solidarity of Palestinian struggles, around trans rights, that involves reinvention of communities in new ways, and it often also involves the rebuilding of radical solidarities in important ways. It's about that openness to being surprised to learn, to recognize that human creativity is at the core of the infrastructures of dissent and that that creativity can be nurtured in many different ways.

**AY:** *How might different generations contribute to this rebuilding or maintenance?*

**AS:** One of the things that I find about movements at their best is that, when I think of how I've learned as an activist, it's often been through the combination



of actual mobilization and informal conversation. And I've learned so much from informal conversation with elders and youngsters. But the idea that there's a lot that we can learn from each other in these spaces of exchange, and that the healthiest movements, whether that's political parties or social movements or unions or whatever, actually create that space for the dialogue. It's a question of learning from each other, and it's absolutely essential if we're going to reinvent these strategies for the future.

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Figure 1: *Ranks Swollen by Sympathetic Workers from 28 Windsor Area Plants, 8,000 Pickets Marched in Front of the Two Main Gates of the Ford Plant Today*. November 5, 1945. Photograph. *Getty Images*. <https://www.gettyimages.ca/detail/news-photo/ranks-swollen-by-sympathetic-workers-from-28-windsor-area-news-photo/499323197?adppopup=true>.

Figure 2: *Hundreds of Cars Form a Barricade around the Strike-Bound Ford Motor Company Plant on Riverside Drive on Nov. 6, 1945*. *The Windsor Star*. Postmedia Network Inc., May 8, 2013. <https://windsorstar.com/life/from-the-vault/from-the-vault-ford-blockade>.

Figure 3: *Workers from Motor Products Corporation Picket Ford of Canada in Support of UAW Local 200, 1945*. 1997. *Windsor Public Library*. <https://projects.windsorpubliclibrary.com/digi/sar/part6.htm>.

**ALAN SEARS** is Professor of Sociology at the Toronto Metropolitan University. Alan has written and co-written three books and a number of articles and chapters focussing on social change, inequality and ways of knowing. His academic research is connected to his activist engagements in movements for social justice.

**ANTHONY YOUSSEF** is a Lebanese Canadian research-based artist whose practice focuses on the intersection of politics and material culture with a focus on architecture. Anthony holds a Bachelor of Architectural Science from Toronto Metropolitan University and a Master of Architecture from Carleton University.



The transcription published here is an excerpt from Alan Sears and Anthony Youssef's conversation. To listen to the full conversation, scan the QR code.

