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# ↳ ON MAINTENANCE AND CARE

# A CONVERSATION WITH SHANNON MATTERN

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Melis Uğurlu:

I would like to start the conversation with an interesting observation you made in your recent article, "Maintenance and Care," which portrays pieces of architectural work through their maintainers, rather than their users. You mention the 2008 documentary Koolhaas Houselife, directed by Ila Bêka and Louise Lemoine, which takes place in the famous Maison Bordeaux, and you beautifully describe the portrayal of the housekeeper Guadalupe Acedo: "poised on the platform, amidst a tableau of buckets, mops, and vacuum. She ascends to the tune of Johann Strauss…"[1]

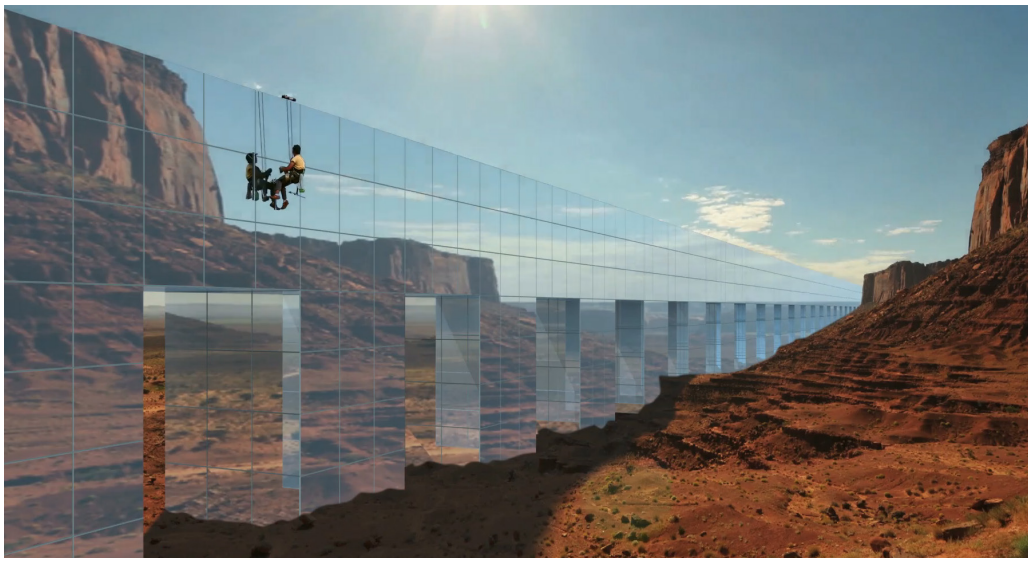
We see examples that foreground maintenance workers in other instances as well, such as in Jeff Wall's Morning Cleaning, which captures the cleaner of the Barcelona Pavilion. These moments and characters take us by surprise because, even though the act of cleaning is the most common and even mundane activity, once they're put under the spotlight, they suddenly seem so unfamiliar. Could you talk about the importance of making visible the acts and characters of maintenance for architecture and in general?

Shannon Mattern:

There has been a lot of work, in recent years in particular, about making visible the invisible. This approach has been sufficiently prevalent that it has elicited a backlash, with some wondering if the act of rendering visible is an appropriate methodology in all contexts. There are scholars in many fields—for example, black feminists and critical race theorists—who are arguing that in some cases, opacity, or invisibility, or refusing to be made visible, is a valid and politically potent choice. So, that's the context in which we're talking about the value of making visible. When we look at architectural history, we see that through certain periods, domestic labor has been explicitly put into backstage

1 Shannon Mattern, "Maintenance and Care," Places Journal. November 2018.

spaces: there is a separate backdoor entrance for the service staff or there are separate hallways, corridors, and wings where the scullery maids and cooks live. The servants always have to honor and recognize where they live to facilitate the existence of the homeowners. I think it is valuable for architects to recognize that maintenance workers and caregivers are a population on whom they depend for the smooth functioning and the longevity of their buildings—and to recognize that when designing a building or a city, this is a group of people whose needs have to be taken into consideration. That's one rather simplistic but really functional value of rendering visible a lot of maintenance work.



Nadia Hironaka and Matthew Suib, Routine Maintenance, 2014.



M.U.:

The fact that there is this obvious disconnect between architecture and maintenance is perhaps a result of the disconnect between the architect and the maintainer. Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift touch upon this gap, arguing that "architects themselves rarely consider or take into their designs the business of maintenance and repair [and]...see the people who do maintaining as blue-collar illiterates and the process of upkeep as trivial."[2] I want to follow up on this point and ask, where do you think this gap, or disconnect, is coming from? Is it simply a matter of assumed professional hierarchy (or class), as Graham and Thrift suggest, or are there other suggestive explanations, topics that heighten this gap, such as gender, in the way that certain feminist scholars highlight how traditionally the architect (as an artist) is seen as a singular, autonomous male genius-subject, while the "architect as a caregiver" is traditionally gendered as female, performing menial work?

S.M.:

Yes, I do think it is a gender distinction as well, as you pointed out, and performing care work has historically been gendered as feminine and performed by people of color. This is one reason why this type of labor has been either discounted or rendered invisible in many contexts. This work is also sometimes essentialized and lumped together as "support" work, yet seemingly synonymous terms such as care, healing, repair, maintenance, and mending, in fact, carry gendered connotations.

We can also find many examples in architectural history where architects have tried to distinguish themselves from people who perform other types of labor. For instance, one common argument several architectural historians have made is that architects became architects through the creation

2 Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, "Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance," Theory, Culture, and Society 24: 3 (2007): 1–25.

of professional organizations and publications, and through the cultivation of professional identity through training, particularly at the École des Beaux-Arts, that emphasized drawing. Drawing is essentially what sets apart the architect from the builder. There is already a class distinction there, meaning we've elevated one profession over another because of a distinctive capacity architects have that others do not. Similar class distinctions persist today, in the hierarchy between architects and builders or construction workers. Maintenance workers are slotted into that hierarchy, too.

M.U.:

Bringing up the nuances between these terms opens up the distinctions between maintenance and care, which can easily be considered synonymous. How would you differentiate these two terms?

S.M.:

That's a great question. Maintenance seems to be applied at a different scale than care is. Maintenance often happens in the public realm to infrastructural projects. Yet we sometimes apply this term to technology, too: we maintain our hard drive. There's often a hardness, a technological nature to maintenance; whereas care, at least in quotidian language, tends to have a feminized connotation and is applied to more interpersonal types of things. I'm not the only one to have noticed these kinds of gender distinctions of scale and application, and perhaps a further analysis might also show some exceptions, but they do tend to have different subjectivities and scalar applications.

M.U.:

How do their meanings shift, if at all, when their application is scaled up from the level of interpersonal relationships or buildings to issues of climate change and the Anthropocene?



S.M.:

There's actually a helpful distinction that María Puig de la Bellacasa, a feminist theorist of care, provides by using the (Bruno) Latourian concepts of "matters of concern" and "matters of care."[3] "Concern," again, has different gender connotations and epistemological implications too: if something is of concern to you, there's a certain affective or emotional dimension there. This is where we could apply some of these linguistic or semantic distinctions in a productive way when thinking about something like climate change. Do we want to feel disempowered and be concerned about it because it's so macro-scale and beyond the capacity of our everyday interventions—beyond our individual capacity to actually have some meaningful effect on it? Or, do we want to care about it in a way that implies, maybe, that there are small quotidian things we can do that can actually make a difference in tackling this macro-scale challenge—while also, of course, recognizing the need for systemic concern and, ideally, action?

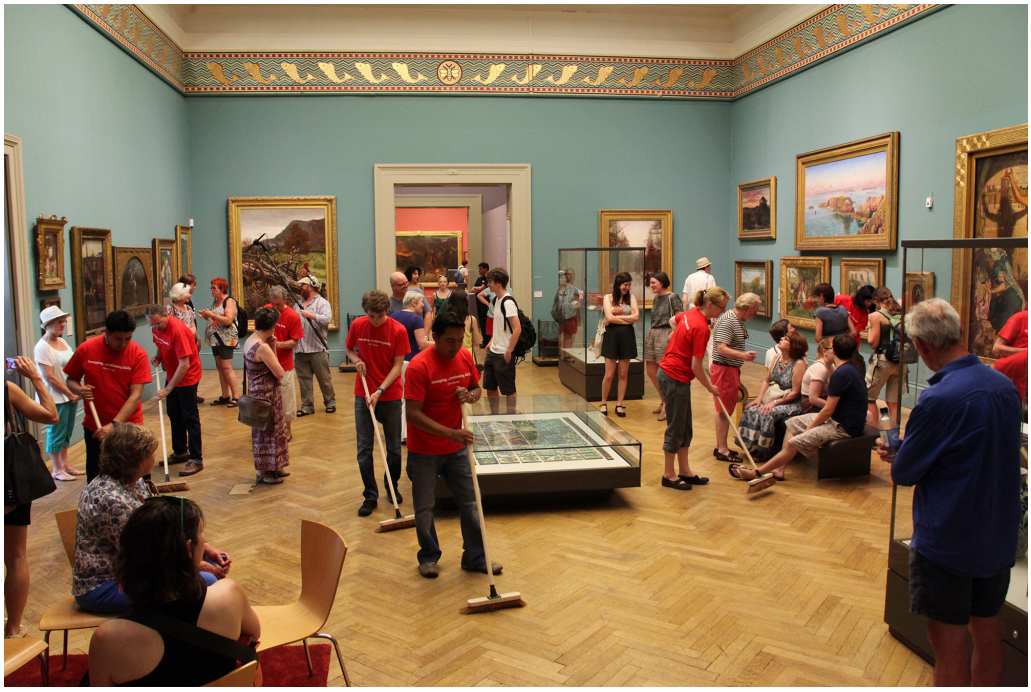
M.U.:

Perhaps another semantic nuance lies in the meanings of the terms maintenance and repair. We perform repair work to fix the broken, and then there's maintenance work that we do to simply maintain, to preserve the existing state. Have you looked into these term's distinctions as well?

S.M.:

Repair implies brokenness in many cases. Something has to be brought back to what you regard as some normative zero-state. There's an assumption that there is a state of good repair that we've all agreed upon; it's the ideal state in which it should exist, so you want to return it to that condition. Whereas maintenance in many cases might involve small acts of repair: if you're

3 Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).



Suzanne Lacy with Meg Parnell, Cleaning Conditions: An Homage to Allan Kaprow, in the exhibition do it 2013, curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Manchester Gallery, England, 2013. [Photo: Alan Seabright.]

maintaining a building, you'll be repairing the boiler and the HVAC system, and fixing toilets, for instance. But maintenance is, in some cases, more broadly encompassing and seems to imply not only fixing something when it's broken but preventing breaks from happening in the first place. In other words, you're maintaining a status quo, a ground state, which might involve, as I said, these small acts of maintenance.



M.U.:
I would like to also discuss maintenance and repair in relation to failure and error, and consequently the opportunity to learn from them.

S.M.:
I think this may be a scalar issue as well. We tend to be more comfortable with the presence of failure, and its eventual repair, if we are in a more controlled environment. If it is a controlled experiment in which the repercussions of failure don't extend beyond this prescribed space of a kitchen, or a computer program, there's then a delimited set of variables that you need to examine in order to troubleshoot what could have possibly gone wrong. When we are talking about something at a much larger scale, like a bridge, a public housing development, or an entire city infrastructure, being able to isolate variables to determine the actual cause of failure or error is so much more complex. There are so many forces entangled in the operation of an infrastructure or urban system. The number of people and the areas of specialization, the tools and apparatus involved, and the various temporalities in which they all operate are all factors that essentially complicate the act of fixing and retrofitting. It's quite unlike fixing some code in a program, for instance. It's challenging to model a fixing mentality at a macro-scale: it involves recognizing the complexity of a system and reverse-engineering it so that an assemblage of individual repairs could add up to a systemic fix.

M.U.:
Architecture, due to its scale, performs differently from other things, and maybe that goes back at its roots to the idea of a disconnect between architecture and maintenance that we discussed earlier. There also seems to be a separation between the process in which the building is built and the rest of its life, the afterlife of the constructed building.

S.M.:

Right. It's also something that scholars like Hilary Sample have spoken about: thinking more creatively about the post-occupancy report, or assessments of building lifespan, including the varying lifespans of different operating systems within each building.[4] Thinking more creatively and, again, long-term and at a macro scale, and applying some systems thinking to this type of assessment, expanding the timescale at which we do post-occupancy reports—a lot of these could make for exciting new areas of architectural pedagogy and practice. When you're designing a building, you're also thinking about all of these modes of assessment, retrofitting, and self-fixing that might be incorporated into the design process itself.

M.U.:

I would also like to talk about the labor aspect of maintenance. Going back to Maison Bordeaux, you briefly mention the housekeeper Acedo's great dedication to her work of cleaning the house and that she even spends more time there than her own home—in a sense, she lives there. This kind of relationship to the site of one's work is different for maintainers and caretakers than it is for other kinds of workers, bringing up difficult questions around domesticity and exploitation. How do you see the conditions of labor when it comes to maintenance workers?

S.M.:

Well, that depends in part on the conditions of different organizations. For example, if you're an individual housekeeper, often someone from the Global South who might have come to the Global North to perform labor, you're essentially a unit of one, operating with very few people overseeing the conditions

Still from the film Moriyama-San, by Beka & Lemoine (2017).

of your labor each day. You are beholden to the whims and capricious managerial demands of an employer. However, if you look at maintenance workers like elevator repair professionals or HVAC maintenance specialists, there's a greater likelihood that some of these laborers will be organized in a strong union. In that case, you're more likely to enjoy more humane conditions of labor—including conditions that are more clearly defined and monitored, like the start and end of your day. So, the conditions of labor depend in large part on its sociality: whether one is alone in a home, or digitally networked with other laborers, or practicing labor amongst a larger group of people who can look out for one

4 Hilary Sample, Maintenance Architecture (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011).

another. Organizations like The Architecture Lobby are considering a lot of these important concerns.

M.U.:

Another interesting angle is that window cleaning, for instance, is a task that is immediately associated with being the female's duty, or a feminine act, in the home. But once that task moves from the domestic setting to the industrial—the windows of tall high-rise buildings, for instance—its connotation changes, and the assumption is that it is not very likely for a woman to be performing this cleaning task. Where do you think this change in perception comes from?

S.M.:

Yet, this is another case of gender distinction, but it's also, and maybe more significantly, the distinction between interior and exterior. When you go outside the building, when you leave the immediate domestic realm, it becomes a masculine task. These are seemingly arbitrary distinctions, but they are also historically ingrained distinctions that we've made in terms of the specialization of different kinds of labor, the professionalization that might or might not be required for them, and the degree of organization of the laborers who work in those different contexts. All of these play into the subjectivities built around who the people performing this type of labor are or what we assume about these people.

M.U.:

You write about how maintenance is an exciting area of inquiry precisely because the lines between scholarship and practice are blurred, and that many disciplines are involved. Rather than seeing technology purely as "innovation," maintenance has the potential to bring about alternative imaginaries. I am thinking here the work of the Maintainers Group.[5] Perhaps we can think of maintenance as a theoretical framework that can help us better understand the relationship between scholarship and design



S.M.:

Maintenance, even though it is an age-old practice, has been an exciting new area of inquiry for a lot of different fields in recent years. Fields such as civil engineering and architecture have been thinking about maintenance for a long time, but I think it's more recently come to consciousness in fields such as media studies, anthropology, sociology, literature, and the arts. It's a productive term in helping us realize that things have value even if they're not new or novel; it breaks the assumption that something has to be novel to make a new contribution, break new ground, be pioneering. So many of these problematic colonizing metaphors that we use to talk about the new are often based on a willful ahistoricism anyway. We conveniently forget precedent in order to make claims of novelty. Validating and elevating maintenance, repair, mending, and similar activities can hopefully move us out of this "disruptive" mode of achievement.

Regarding the Maintainer's Group that you mentioned, what is particularly significant is that they are building connections between fields and professions that often work separately. They've collaborated with scholars and practitioners who focus specifically on transportation, or software, or information management, for instance—but they're also trying to get these folks in the same room to create opportunities for cross-pollination. After all, there's a great deal of interdependency between these various fields: transportation planners rely on information resources, for instance.

M.U.:

I would like to come back to the relevance of the concepts of maintenance and care in relation to the climate emergency. In the chapter "Architecture and Care"

5 A group of historians of technology who are trying to redefine the writing of technology through the concept of maintenance. See Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel, "After Innovation, Turn to Maintenance," Technology and Culture 59, no. 1 (January 2018): 1–25.

of her co-edited book titled Critical Care, Elke Krasny talks about how, especially right now, we need more attention on care for "the survival of [our] exhausted planet."[6] Considering our time, how do you see this urgency entering our conversations around maintenance?

S.M.:

I'll be writing a new piece connecting some of these ideas to the Green New Deal in the United States, which argues that we have to build new public services and reinvest in maintenance in order to avoid climate collapse. I'm specifically interested in how the Green New Deal could productively address issues regarding the maintenance of information resources. How should we invest in the maintenance of archives, the maintenance of databases, the maintenance of repositories of local knowledge in unorthodox formats? How will all of these knowledge maintenance activities prove central to the performance of other types of maintenance—and to the promotion of resilience more broadly? I'd also like to integrate relevant work from artists and designers into the discussion.

We also see a growing recognition that care is not solely a human concern. There is a lot of work on more-than-human ontologies or thinking about how humans are not isolated, exceptional entities extracted from their environments. We have microbiomes living inside us; we live in symbiotic (and sometimes parasitic) relationships with other species and environmental conditions. This could be—and in fact, already is—a productive line of thinking about design for architects, too: recognizing that they're not just designing for human clients. Extending the concept of care beyond the human realm can compel us to rethink care-ful design.





6 Elke Krasny and Angelika Fitz, Critical Care: Architecture and Urbanism for a Broken Planet (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2019).

## About the author

Shannon Mattern is Professor at The New School for Social Research in New York. Her writing and teaching focus on media architectures and infrastructures, and spatial epistemologies. She has written books about libraries, maps, and the history of urban intelligence, and she contributes a column to Places Journal. You can find her at wordsinspace.net.