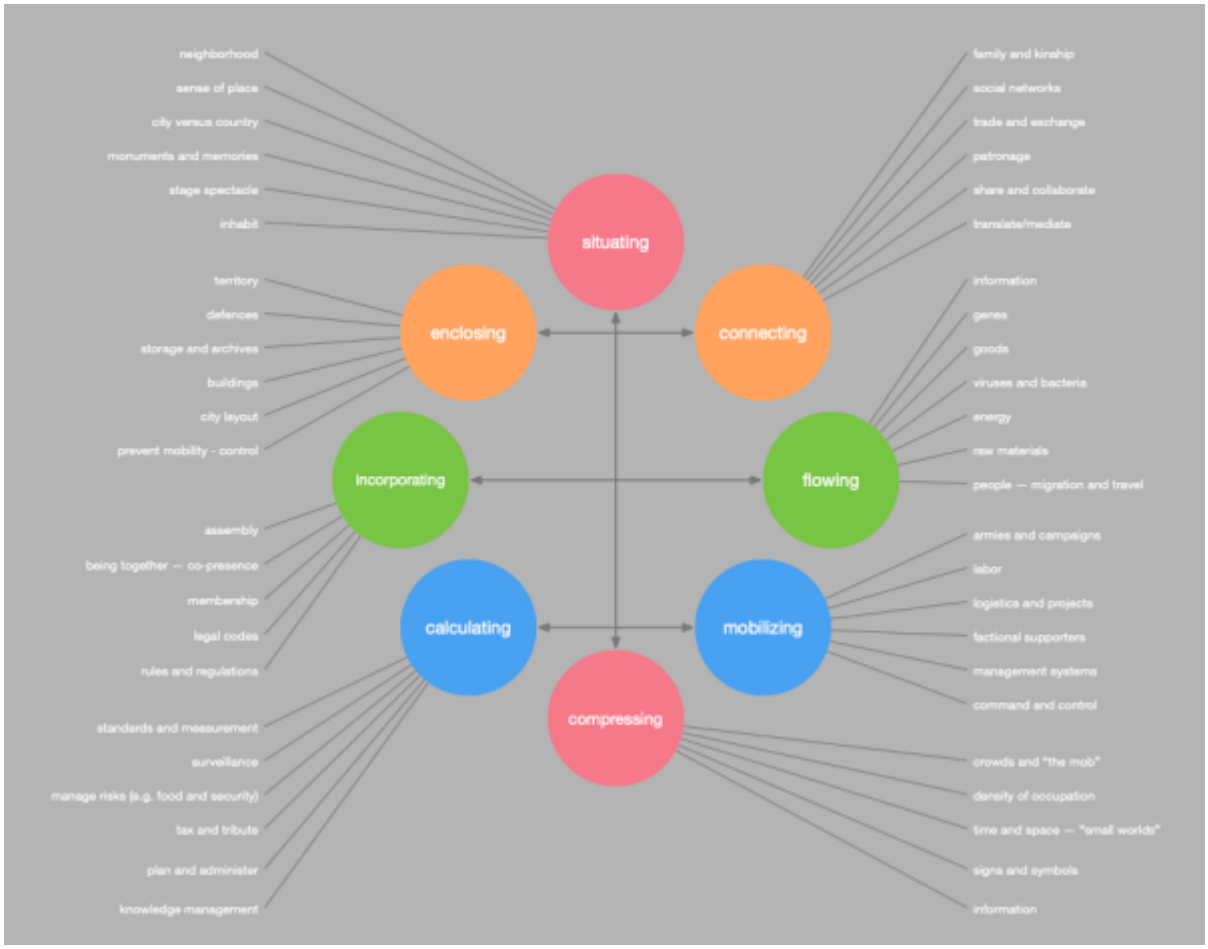
INFRASTRUCTURAL IMAGINARIES



Chris Ford and I are in a conference in Cambridge UK. The archaeological imagination applied to urban architecture, planning, design.

Hosted by the Department of Architecture at the University of Cambridge, this global conference on ***Situated Imagination and Imaginaries of Urban Futures*** brings together over 70 scholars, practitioners, and artists from around the world for a day to investigate how real-world conditions are shaping and contesting imaginations and imaginaries across politics and space – [Link]

Another exploration of the implication of the archaeological imagination in urban futures.

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
Department of Architecture

Register

A conference exploring how situated imaginations and imaginaries are formed, contested, and translated across politics and space towards urban futures.

Where

Department of Architecture
1-5 Scroope Terrace,
Cambridge.

When

17 July 2026
9:00 - 17:00

Details

Visit our website for further details:
situatedimaginationconference.cargo.site

situated imagination imaginaries of urban futures

Here are the slides from our talk.

The argument

We start with Chris's analysis of massive infrastructural failure in New York City in the wake of Superstorm Sandy 2012 – a story of (failure of) complex interconnected processes. Typologies of infrastructure systems (roads, water supply, energy systems) don't help deal with this, and miss out the human component – the people who live in cities.

How might we shift to a process-oriented human-centered approach (to urban infrastructures) that is design-actionable, that can guide action?

Consider archaeology and the archaeological imagination.

This conference asks how situated imaginaries become infrastructure – how collective visions of resilience, decarbonisation, circularity and equity might translate into spatial form, technical systems, and lived urban experience. We want to argue that this translation demands what can be called an archaeological imagination – ***a design sensibility grounded in temporal depth, process-relational thinking, and urban memory practice.***

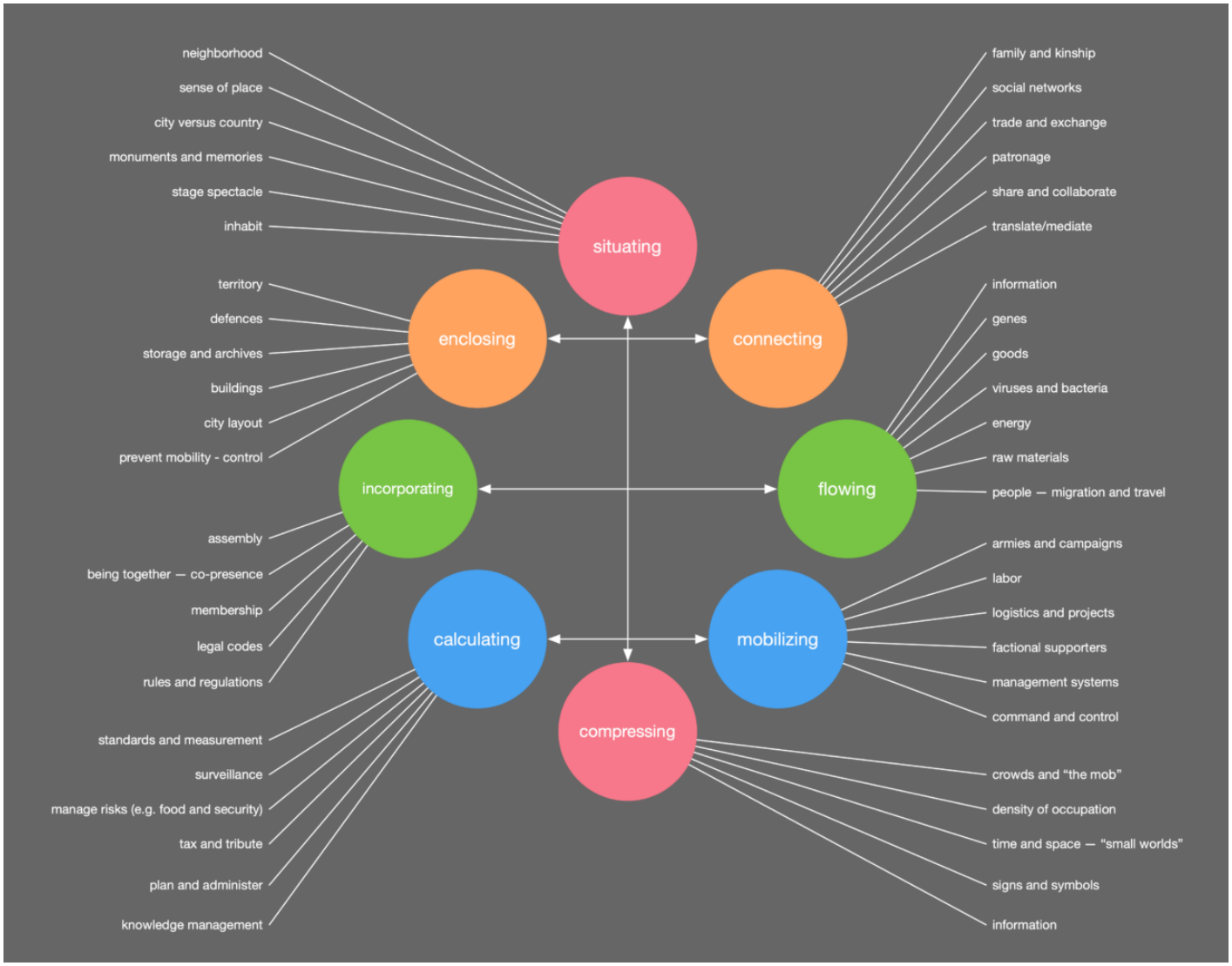
Now look again at the city Chris described. Every city is precisely what remains. The urban present is a palimpsest, percolated by many pasts: every pipe, cable, regulation and corridor carries forward earlier decisions – earlier imaginaries of governance, risk and collective life. Some of these decisions and dependencies go back thousands of years to the very beginnnnings of city life.

Infrastructure is both archive and instrument: a material memory practice that also does work in the present. Consider those East River seawalls, built to the high-water mark Hurricane Donna set in 1960. Superstorm Sandy overtopped them. That was not a failure of engineering. It was a failure of temporal imagination – an archive misread as a guarantee.

The archaeology of cities. Cities are not built; they are performed. A city is not a stable object but something done, generation after generation – a dynamic constellation of interacting energies. And no city was ever invented from nothing. The Mediterranean city-state of the first millennium BCE emerged as a re-

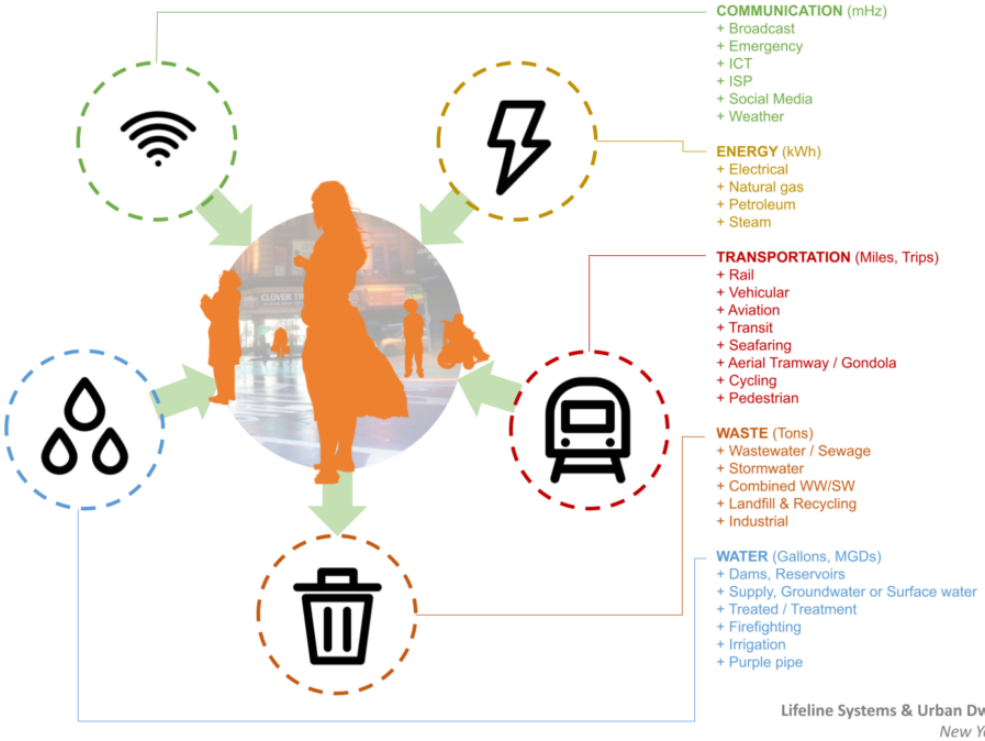
articulation of two inherited machines — Near Eastern urban institutions and European configurations of group membership — a recombination that, incidentally, gave us politics. Urban futures too. The generative design question is never: what shall we build on empty ground? It is: what do we have, and what new combination is latent within it? The stratified section read as repertoire, not constraint.

Cities performed — in a repertoire of processes. We rolled out a guiding diagram of ours that summarizes such a view of urban dwelling.



A constellation of processes associated with what gets called urbanism.

How might we share this approach? Teach it? Chris rounded off the talk with studio-based learning, project-based learning by doing, with the *studio a l**aboratory for infrastructural prototyping.*** Just as presented in our book last year — *Creative Pragmatics for Active Learning in STEM Education* [Link].



Lifeline Systems & Urban Dwellers
New York NY
Walk-through of expanded lifeline systems