

# InfrastructureUSA

## Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

**Diana Lind, Executive Director & Editor-in-Chief, Next American City**

**Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA**

**Diana Lind:**

### **Next American City**

Next American City is a nonprofit media organization. Our mission is to connect cities and inform the people working to improve them. So we do that in two ways. We produce daily stories on our bog as well as weekly long form investigative reports, through a series called *Forefront*. And we also build the sort of next generation of urban advocates through a series of events around the country, including a contest called *Next American Vanguard*, which is a gathering of the 40 under 40 group from places all over the country who are working to improve cities. So we're really trying to build the knowledge of people in the field, focused on cities, as well as connect people around best practices.

### **Infrastructure and Cities**

I think for a lot of our audience, transportation is an integral part of what works or doesn't work in a city. Whether you're focused on urban revitalization or a particular commercial corridor, it's pretty likely that in terms of thinking about how to get more businesses to relocate to your corridor, you might have to think of transportation issues as a result of that. Likewise for a lot of people who are interested in moving back to downtown cities, a lack of good public transportation, cheap transportation options can often be an obstacle in improving a city. So, I think regardless of the perspective you're coming from, infrastructure is the foundation upon which all other aspects of a city are dealt with.

### **Talking About Infrastructure**

Well I think that people take infrastructure for granted. People assume that their highways are well funded and are just paid for out of thin air. They assume that this infrastructure is going to last for a really long time, that the kind of infrastructure that we have is static, that it can't be changed. So I think that there's sort of a problem in terms of people not recognizing that they have a certain amount of influence over the type of infrastructure that gets built in their city, or the region, and that we're at this particular moment when I think a lot of the country's infrastructure is becoming obsolete. You know there are many highways that are going to have to be redone essentially because they've reached the limit of their usable life. And so, I think in the coming decades we're going to have to grapple with the infrastructure that we've built and what kind of

infrastructure we want to have in the future. And I think that part of the issue of people not talking about infrastructure has a lot to do with the legacy of car culture that we've built up in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But now we're really starting to see many more people interested in a more walkable urban lifestyle. I think what hasn't really accommodated that is the bigger conversation about the types of infrastructure you would need to go along with that kind of lifestyle. As a result, the conversation around high speed rail has been one that has really been held among policy folks, people who are making the decisions about whether to fund high speed rail or not, and with the exception of perhaps California where they're building high speed rail, there hasn't been this sort of popular engagement around the subject. I think though that's a lot what Next American City tries to do: we're trying build a conversation for people who are professionals and focused on these kinds of issues, but as well your average person who's really interested in the community that they live in but wants more information about how to get engaged and also what the status is of topics like infrastructure in the US.

### **Infrastructure as Urban Asset**

I think in a city like Philadelphia, where I'm based, there's a great recognition that we have a pretty great transportation system that was built decades ago and that has enabled Philadelphia to thrive and especially come back in the past decade or so. That being said, I think it almost points to the fact that we have this, already this great advantage for our region and that could be leveraged so much further to really kind of better connect people to jobs and other kinds of opportunities, and connect them much more quickly than they are right now. So I think that to upgrade the infrastructure, upgrading the various different services that run on that infrastructure, whether it's transportation, even electric cars, what have you—I think that it's important to recognize that just because we have some decent infrastructure that was built decades ago, we should still be pushing past that. Because when you look at what Philadelphia has, compared to let's say other cities in the US that were built around cars and don't have good public transportation infrastructure, then Philly looks pretty good. But when you compare the way that the city's transportation looks to say European or Asian cities or even South American cities, the amount of investment they put into infrastructure is really staggering and I think it really shows how much—how far a city can go with that, if leaders and if the public are really engaged and focused on that.

### **Generating Infra Dialogue**

I remember I was at a conference a couple of years ago and we were talking about the emergence of DIY culture and the way that that was being used in everything from the internet to people making their own clothes and growing their own vegetables, and someone said, "Well, you're never going to have a DIY subway though." And we were all like, "Yeah, yeah you're never going to have

that.” But I do think that there’s actually a way in which, particularly with tools on the Internet and social media that you can really start to galvanize people around issues of infrastructure and focus some of their attention even on crowd-sourcing or crowd-funding for funding new transportation options in a city. Yesterday I was just at a *Hack-A-Thon* for SEPTA, our local transportation agency. And there are a dozen guys who are essentially taking data from SEPTA and building new apps to be used whether it’s on your cell phone or even applications that SEPTA itself can use to really kind of rethink the way that people interface with the transportation agency. So I think that there is this real opportunity for civic engagement around the issue of transportation and it could start with just issues of people having an app that lets them connect and find out when the bus is coming, but it could also eventually end up being a better way for people to ostensibly pay for service, better transportation service, or really kind of inform their local officials about what kinds of transportation issues really matter to them. And I think there’s a host of different organizations that are more focused on transportation than say NAC is and they’re really trying to gather people around bike shares, or even things like urban highway removal. These kinds of transportation issues I think have started to really captivate people at the grassroots level.

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