

The Infrastructure of Belonging

Reducing the Gap Between Services and the People They Serve

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ABSTRACT

Public institutions are often evaluated by the services they provide. Individuals experience them differently. They experience them through the distance required to reach those services.

This paper proposes that many public policy debates focus on the existence of services while overlooking the mechanisms that make those services reachable. Drawing from research on street-level bureaucracy, administrative burden, procedural justice, trauma-informed care, and service design, it argues that institutions are experienced through connectors and continuity mechanisms that reduce distance between need and participation.

Using election administration, homelessness services, and public transit as case studies, the paper introduces a framework called *The Infrastructure of Belonging*. The framework examines how institutional intent becomes lived experience through frontline workers, accommodations, navigation support, and operational continuity. It argues that institutions succeed not merely by providing services, but by reducing the gap between services and the people they serve.

1. Introduction

THE STRONGEST ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE

Two election observers visited our vote center during the June 2026 primary election.

By the time they arrived, they had already visited several other vote centers.

I expected questions about procedures.

Instead, they asked about people.

What accessibility resources had voters used?

What challenges had emerged?

What stories stood out?

The conversation lasted nearly thirty minutes.

I told them about an elderly Vietnamese woman who arrived worried about voter fraud. One of our native-speaking aides spent time answering her questions and helping her navigate the process. She left smiling. Months later, she still waved when she saw me in the neighborhood.

I told them about seniors who needed chairs at touchscreen voting stations. I told them about magnifying glasses, large-font settings, inverse display modes, pocket translators, and language aides.

I told them about unhoused voters.

One observer paused and remarked that few other vote centers had mentioned unhoused voters at all.

That surprised me.

Not because unhoused people had voted.

Because it had never occurred to us that they were unusual.

They were simply voters.

Eventually one observer offered an observation that stayed with me.

We had the strongest anecdotal evidence of any vote center they had visited.

Today I believe that observation points toward a larger question.

Why do some institutions feel accessible, welcoming, and navigable while others feel distant, confusing, or hostile?

Public institutions are often evaluated by the services they provide.

Individuals experience them through the distance required to reach those services.

This paper argues that the hidden work of institutions is often not the delivery of services themselves.

It is the reduction of distance.

Methodology

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AND QUALITATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

This paper combines autoethnographic observation with qualitative case study analysis. The case studies draw from direct experiences within election administration, homelessness services, recovery systems, and public transit in Santa Clara County between 2025 and 2026.

These experiences are not presented as representative samples of entire systems. They function as observational sites through which broader theories of administrative burden, street-level bureaucracy, procedural justice, trauma-informed care, and service design can be examined.

The purpose of the case studies is not to establish universal causality. The purpose is to identify recurring mechanisms that appear to reduce or increase the distance between services and the people attempting to reach them.

The case studies that follow are examined through a common lens. While services may exist formally, they can remain effectively unreachable in practice. To understand why, this paper categorizes distance into several recurring forms that appear across institutions, including physical, administrative, linguistic, cognitive, psychological, and cultural distance.

2. The Hidden Layer of Institutions

Institutions are typically described through visible structures.

Policies.

Programs.

Budgets.

Regulations.

Performance metrics.

Yet most people rarely encounter institutions at this level.

They encounter people, forms, waiting rooms, websites, translators, case managers, drivers, election workers, nurses, and counselors.

A service can exist while remaining effectively unreachable.

A treatment bed can exist while remaining inaccessible.

A transit benefit can exist while remaining unavailable.

An accessibility accommodation can exist while remaining undiscovered.

The challenge is often not whether a service exists.

The challenge is whether people can successfully reach it.

This paper refers to that challenge as distance.

PHYSICAL DISTANCE

Physical distance is the literal distance between a person and a service. It includes transportation barriers, location, travel time, and mobility limitations.

ADMINISTRATIVE DISTANCE

Administrative distance is the burden imposed by forms, referrals, documentation requirements, eligibility verification, and procedural requirements.

LINGUISTIC DISTANCE

The gap created when information is unavailable in a language a person can understand.

COGNITIVE DISTANCE

Cognitive distance is the difficulty of understanding what services exist, how they connect, and what steps come next.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTANCE

The gap created by fear, shame, distrust, stigma, prior negative experiences, or trauma.

CULTURAL DISTANCE

The perception that a service was designed for someone else.

These forms of distance frequently overlap.

A service can exist while remaining unreachable.

3. What the Literature Already Knows

STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY

Michael Lipsky argued that people rarely experience public policy directly. They experience it through implementation. Frontline workers become translators between institutional intent and individual experience. This matters because two institutions can operate under similar policies while producing very different experiences for the people who encounter them. [Lipsky, 1980]

ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

Pamela Herd and Donald Moynihan describe administrative burden as the learning costs, compliance costs, and psychological costs associated with accessing public services. Viewed through the lens of this paper, administrative burden functions as a form of distance. [Herd & Moynihan, 2018]

PROCEDURAL JUSTICE

Procedural justice research suggests that people care not only about outcomes but about how they are treated during the process. Voice, respect, neutrality, and trustworthiness shape perceptions of legitimacy. [Tyler, 2006]

Procedural justice asks a critical question: Was I treated fairly?

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Trauma-informed care begins with the observation that people do not arrive at institutions as blank slates. They arrive carrying previous experiences, fear, loss, distrust, shame, and trauma. [SAMHSA, 2014]

Together these research traditions point toward a common conclusion.

Services alone are insufficient.

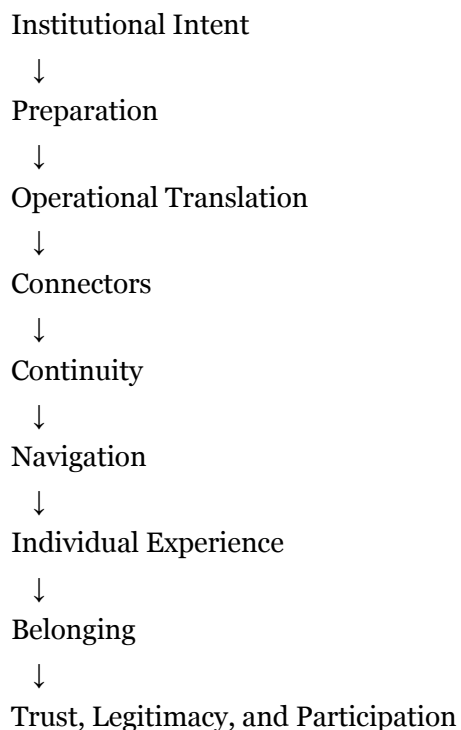
Navigation matters.

Access matters.

Experience matters.

4. The Infrastructure of Belonging Framework

The literature suggests a recurring pattern: institutional success depends not only on what services exist, but on how people move from need to participation.



Institutional intent reflects what organizations claim to value. Preparation reduces distance before a crisis emerges. Operational translation converts values into everyday practice. Connectors reduce distance. Continuity prevents distance from reappearing. Navigation helps people move from one step to the next.

Belonging emerges when a person perceives that an institution is available, navigable, and intended for someone like them. Procedural justice asks, “Was I treated fairly?” Belonging asks, “Was this institution meant for someone like me?”

5. Case Study I: Elections

POSTURE AND REACHABILITY

The Service Already Existed

Santa Clara County's election system provides an instructive case study because the underlying service already existed.

The voting machines existed.

The accessibility accommodations existed.

Language support existed.

Election laws existed.

The challenge was not creating a voting system.

The challenge was helping people successfully navigate it.

The vote center did not create voting rights.

It reduced distance between voters and participation.

A Different Huddle

Before the doors opened, our team held a brief discussion during setup.

We agreed on something simple.

We would be a dignity-first vote center.

No regulations changed.

No election laws changed.

Yet the experience of the institution changed.

The procedures remained identical.

The posture changed.

Physical Distance

Many voters arrived with mobility limitations.

Some could not comfortably stand for extended periods.

We provided chairs at touchscreen voting stations.

The accommodation itself was small.

Its impact was not.

A chair became low-tech infrastructure.

Similarly, magnifying glasses, large-font settings, adjustable touchscreen stations, and inverse display modes reduced physical barriers that would otherwise separate voters from participation.

Linguistic Distance

Language represented another form of distance.

An elderly Vietnamese woman arrived concerned about voter fraud.

One of our native-speaking aides spent time answering her questions and helping her navigate the process.

She left smiling.

Months later, she still waved when she saw me in the neighborhood.

What changed was not the voting system.

A connector appeared.

The distance between information and understanding decreased.

Psychological Distance

Not all barriers are visible.

Some voters arrived anxious.

Some arrived skeptical.

Some arrived uncertain about the process itself.

The most effective intervention was frequently patience.

Questions answered without hurry.

Time given freely.

Reassurance.

The reduction of psychological distance rarely appears in performance metrics, yet it strongly influences how institutions are experienced.

Cultural Distance

During a visit from election observers, I mentioned several unhoused voters.

The observers paused.

They explained that few other vote centers had mentioned unhoused voters at all.

That surprised me.

Because it had never occurred to us that they were unusual.

They were simply voters.

This moment highlights an important form of cultural distance.

A person may technically possess access to a service while remaining uncertain whether the service was intended for someone like them.

Belonging begins to emerge when that uncertainty decreases.

Connectors and Participation

Language aides.

Accessibility tools.

Election workers.

Translated materials.

Chairs.

Magnifying glasses.

None of these elements altered the fundamental service.

They reduced the distance between the service and the person attempting to use it.

The strongest anecdotal evidence was not evidence about voting.

It was evidence about reachability.

6. Case Study II: VHHP

CONTINUITY, THRESHOLDS, AND THE GLUE

Behind the Gates

Several months before entering treatment, I believed recovery services existed.

I also believed they existed behind gates.

The challenge was understanding how to reach them while experiencing homelessness, managing a chronic medical condition, and attempting to maintain sobriety.

At the time, life had narrowed into immediate questions.

Where would I sleep tonight?

What would I eat?

How would I remain sober?

How would I maintain access to medication?

The distance between a service and a person is not measured solely in miles, forms, or eligibility requirements.

It is also measured in the amount of instability a person must survive while attempting to reach that service.

The Referral

My path into treatment began through an existing relationship with the PACE Clinic.

Clinic staff proactively helped transfer my Medi-Cal coverage into Santa Clara County and establish continuity of care.

Looking back, this reduced administrative distance before a crisis emerged.

The next step was Gateway.

The first intake call went well.

Then nothing happened.

Only after calling back did I learn the referral had failed.

The connection had broken.

Without a second call, the process may have remained stalled indefinitely.

What makes this failure significant is not the referral itself.

It is what existed around it.

At the time I was experiencing housing instability.

Kolton had just left for treatment.

My vehicle was nearly out of gas.

I spent hours sitting outside the Target on Coleman Avenue because it offered access to a restroom, a place to sit, and a view of aircraft landing at San Jose International Airport.

The referral existed inside a larger environment of uncertainty.

Institutions often measure delays in days.

Individuals experience those delays inside the realities of their lives.

Three Days

The referral error delayed admission by approximately three days.

On paper, three days appears insignificant.

In practice, those three days existed within housing instability, food insecurity, uncertainty, and a vehicle nearly out of gas.

Viewed through an institutional lens, the delay was three days.

Viewed through a human lens, the delay existed within a much larger environment of instability.

Distance is measured not only by difficulty entering a system, but by the instability a person must endure while waiting.

Those three days changed how I think about administrative burden.

The burden was not paperwork.

The burden was surviving long enough for the paperwork to matter.

A delay that appears minor from inside an institution can feel enormous when housing, transportation, food, sobriety, and personal safety are uncertain.

Instability itself became a form of distance.

Scarcity research suggests that instability consumes cognitive bandwidth that would otherwise be available for planning, paperwork, appointments, and follow-through. [Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013]

Angela

At approximately seven o'clock that evening, I reached someone at Muriel Wright Recovery Center.

Her name was Angela.

She listened to my situation and promised to place my information in front of Dr. Ybarra the following morning.

She did exactly that.

A few hours later I was admitted.

The treatment bed already existed.

The critical intervention was a person capable of reconnecting a broken chain.

Yet Angela's importance was not simply kindness.

She possessed a pathway.

She could place information directly in front of decision makers.

She could compress distance.

The lesson is not that institutions need more heroes.

The lesson is that institutions need repair pathways when continuity breaks.

Connectors are most effective when institutions give them enough authority to repair broken chains.

Tell the Story Once

One of the most overlooked forms of administrative burden is repetition.

Many individuals navigating public systems repeatedly explain the same circumstances to different agencies and providers.

My experience differed.

I told my story once.

Information largely moved forward without requiring constant retelling.

For institutions, information transfer is administrative.

For people, information transfer is often emotional.

The system remembered.

This principle extends beyond healthcare.

Modern digital governments increasingly pursue what is sometimes called a once-only principle: information should move through systems more easily than people do.

The European Union's once-only principle is built on a similar idea: information should move through institutions more easily than people do whenever lawful internal reuse is possible.

[European Commission, 2016]

Viewed through that lens, reducing repetition is not merely an efficiency improvement.

It is a reduction in administrative and emotional burden.

The Glue

The most valuable thing VHHP provided was not treatment.

It was the glue that allowed treatment, housing, transportation, benefits, medication management, and recovery to occur in sequence.

People rarely experience programs independently.

They experience interconnected systems.

When those connections break, distance increases.

When those connections hold, distance decreases.

In practice, VHHP loaned organizational bandwidth during a period when my own bandwidth was consumed by survival.

Staff coordinated medication access.

They coordinated treatment.

They coordinated benefits.

They coordinated housing transitions.

The result was not simply service delivery.

The result was cognitive relief.

Stability as a Resource

Several weeks into treatment, I developed a rapidly growing infection that required medical evaluation.

What I remember most is not the infection itself.

It is that I delayed seeking care.

I was afraid that leaving treatment might somehow jeopardize my place there.

Looking back, that fear reveals how valuable stability had become.

For months, nearly every part of life had felt uncertain.

Food was uncertain.

Housing was uncertain.

Transportation was uncertain.

Safety was uncertain.

At Muriel Wright, many of those uncertainties had temporarily disappeared.

I had a room.

I had food.

I had structure.

I had safety.

The possibility of losing those things felt more threatening than the medical problem itself.

Eventually the infection was treated successfully.

What remained with me was a different realization.

Stability is not simply an outcome.

It is a resource.

People make decisions differently when stability is present.

They make decisions differently when it is absent.

The Infrastructure of Belonging is not only about helping people reach services.

It is also about creating enough stability for those services to matter.

Continuity and Thresholds

Planning for my transition out of Muriel Wright began weeks before discharge.

There was uncertainty.

There was anxiety.

There was no gap.

Continuity does not eliminate uncertainty.

It reduces the consequences of uncertainty.

A friend named Tav received the call many people hope for.

A treatment bed was available.

He never arrived.

Distance had been reduced.

Participation never occurred.

Institutions can reduce distance.

They cannot exercise agency on behalf of the people they serve.

7. Case Study III: Transit

MEDIATION AND THE INFRASTRUCTURE BETWEEN INFRASTRUCTURES

The Infrastructure Between Infrastructures

During periods of homelessness and recovery, transit was not merely transportation.

It was access.

It was mobility.

It was time.

It was connection.

Transit did not provide healthcare, recovery meetings, libraries, or social services.

It made them reachable.

Riding the End of the Line

During transitional housing, residents were required to leave the facility during weekdays.

Sometimes I traveled to the Martin Luther King Jr. Library.

Sometimes I rode Caltrain into San Francisco.

Sometimes I rode light rail to the end of the line and back.

The purpose was not always transportation.

Often it was occupancy.

Time management.

Safe existence.

Finding a place to be.

This experience changed how I think about transit.

Transportation planners often measure movement.

Riders sometimes need something else.

They need occupancy.

A climate-controlled place to exist.

A predictable environment.

A way to remain safe while the next part of the day arrives.

For people experiencing homelessness, transit may provide stability as much as mobility.

The value was not movement alone. It was the predictability of the environment through which movement occurred.

Support Infrastructure and the Geography of Stability

During periods of housing instability, I was not navigating destinations.

I was navigating support infrastructure.

My mental map of the Bay Area looked very different from that of a housed person.

I knew which transit stations had reliable bathrooms.

I knew which libraries offered seating, power outlets, and Wi-Fi.

I knew where I could spend several hours without being asked to leave.

I knew where I could escape the rain.

I knew where I could charge devices.

I knew where I could safely carry a heavy backpack for an entire day.

Sunnyvale Caltrain was valuable in part because it had a THRONE restroom.

The newer Caltrain trains had reliable onboard restrooms.

The Martin Luther King Jr. Library became an anchor because I knew I could use the restroom there.

The Ferry Building, 4th & King, and the Castro Country Club became important nodes within a larger network of support infrastructure.

Public restroom access has also been identified as a dignity, health, and criminalization issue for people experiencing homelessness. [Hochbaum, 2020]

These details may appear minor.

They were not.

Most transportation planning evaluates movement.

The experience described here suggests that support infrastructure deserves attention as well.

Reliable bathrooms, seating, climate control, charging access, and predictable public space can significantly influence whether an entire day remains manageable.

Research on homelessness in transit environments suggests that transit systems increasingly function as places where mobility, public space, shelter, and wellbeing intersect. [TCRP Research Report 242, 2023; UCLA ITS, 2021]

A housed person often navigates destinations.

A person experiencing instability often navigates support infrastructure.

The difference is significant.

Bathrooms, seating, climate control, power outlets, Wi-Fi, shelter from weather, and predictable public space become essential infrastructure when many of those resources are no longer available by default.

Transit connected those places together.

Without transit, each location became less reachable.

Without those locations, the city itself became less navigable.

Viewed this way, transit was not simply moving people through a transportation network.

It was helping people stitch together a temporary ecosystem of stability.

The Pass Already Existed

A case manager helped secure a transit pass through an unhoused services program.

The transit pass already existed.

The challenge was creating a connection to it.

Many riders likely qualified for assistance programs.

Qualification and access were not the same thing.

The service existed.

The pathway did not.

Connectors and Networks

Transit connected riders to libraries, healthcare, recovery meetings, food, housing services, employment opportunities, and social networks.

The bus was rarely the destination.

The bus connected destinations.

Transit functioned as infrastructure between infrastructures.

Healthcare depended on it.

Recovery meetings depended on it.

Libraries depended on it.

Housing services depended on it.

Employment opportunities depended on it.

When transit becomes unreachable, many other services become unreachable as well.

The Driver and Discretion

Some drivers simply waved riders aboard who could not pay.

Others enforced payment requirements more strictly.

The same institution produced different experiences.

From the driver's perspective the question may have been risk.

From the rider's perspective the question may have been belonging.

Transit illustrates how discretion can reduce distance or create it.

For the rider, unpredictability matters.

If a person does not know whether they will be welcomed, waved through, questioned, or refused, the institution itself becomes a source of anxiety.

Distance is created not only by rules.

Distance can also be created by uncertainty.

Mediation

Transit rarely functions as the final service people seek.

It functions as the service that makes other services reachable.

Its greatest contribution may not be transportation.

It may be connection.

This paper refers to that function as mediation.

Mediation is the active reduction of physical and cognitive distance between otherwise disconnected systems.

Transit mediates access to healthcare.

Healthcare may mediate access to recovery.

Recovery may mediate access to housing.

Housing may mediate access to employment.

People experience systems.

Governments administer programs.

The distinction matters because failures are often experienced across chains of dependency rather than within a single agency.

When transit fails, distance can increase across multiple systems simultaneously.

8. Failure Cases

WHEN DISTANCE REAPPEARS

Broken Continuity

The referral error that delayed admission to treatment illustrates how distance can reappear at every handoff.

Continuity is not a convenience.

It is infrastructure.

Every handoff creates a risk that a person will be forced to re-enter the system from the beginning.

When continuity breaks, progress is not merely delayed.

It is reset.

The impact of that reset depends heavily on context.

A three-day delay while safely housed is different from a three-day delay experienced in a vehicle, shelter, or period of housing instability.

Institutions often measure duration.

People experience duration inside the conditions of their lives.

Opportunity Without Participation

Institutions can create opportunity.

They cannot exercise agency on behalf of people.

Distance can be reduced without participation occurring.

The Missing Connector

Services frequently exist before people successfully access them.

The challenge is often not availability.

The challenge is navigation.

A transit pass may exist.

A treatment bed may exist.

A benefit program may exist.

Without a connector, the pathway remains hidden.

Services become unreachable despite remaining operational.

Uneven Discretion

Human discretion can reduce distance.

Human discretion can also create variation.

Angela reduced distance.

A strict transit operator may increase it.

The challenge is understanding where discretion improves access and where it creates systemic unpredictability.

When outcomes depend heavily on who happens to be working that day, individuals experience a discretion lottery rather than a consistent institution.

The Invisible Person

Certain populations can become institutionally invisible.

A person cannot participate in a service they do not believe was designed for someone like them.

Belonging begins with recognition.

This is ultimately a failure of institutional imagination.

When institutions fail to imagine a population, they rarely design for that population.

Distance begins before the person ever arrives.

9. Designing for Reachability

PRINCIPLES FOR THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF BELONGING

Principle 1: Design for Reachability, Not Availability

The first question institutions should ask is not what services they offer, but how easily people can reach them.

Principle 2: Reduce Distance Before Crisis

The best distance reduction often occurs before the distance is encountered.

Preparation is infrastructure.

Principle 3: Build Connectors Into the System

Connectors are not supplemental.

They are infrastructure.

Principle 4: Treat Continuity as Infrastructure

Every handoff creates risk.

Helping people remain connected is as important as helping them enter the system.

Principle 5: Tell the Story Once

Information should move through systems more easily than people do.

Principle 6: Measure Reachability

Institutions should ask who never arrived, who stopped halfway, who disappeared during a handoff, and why.

They should also examine the conditions surrounding delay.

The practical impact of waiting is often shaped less by duration than by the instability experienced during that wait.

Principle 7: Design for the Invisible Person

People cannot belong to systems that fail to see them.

Beyond Services

Institutions do not merely provide services.

They provide pathways.

The Infrastructure of Belonging is ultimately the infrastructure of reachability.

10. The Infrastructure We Rarely See

The idea for this paper began with a conversation at a vote center.

Two election observers visited during the June 2026 primary election and asked an unexpected question.

They did not ask about procedures.

They did not ask about ballot accounting.

They did not ask about voting equipment.

They asked about people.

At the time, the conversation felt unusual. Looking back, it revealed the central question explored throughout this paper.

Why do some institutions feel reachable while others feel distant?

The case studies examined here suggest that the answer is rarely found in the existence of services alone.

The voting machine already existed.

The treatment bed already existed.

The transit benefit already existed.

Again and again, the critical variable was not service creation.

It was reachability.

Across Elections, VHHP, and Transit, the same pattern emerged.

Distance separated people from participation.

Connectors reduced that distance.

Continuity prevented distance from reappearing.

Mediation made other systems reachable.

When these mechanisms functioned effectively, belonging emerged.

Across all three case studies, another pattern emerged.

Distance reduction created stability.

The vote center reduced uncertainty about participation.

VHHP reduced uncertainty about survival and recovery.

Transit reduced uncertainty about how an entire day could function.

Stability made participation possible.

Belonging, as defined in this paper, is not merely a feeling.

It is the perception that an institution is navigable, reachable, and intended for someone like me.

The central argument of this paper is therefore straightforward.

Institutions do not merely provide services.

They provide pathways.

The quality of those pathways often determines whether participation occurs.

Many institutional failures are described as failures of service delivery.

The evidence presented here suggests a different interpretation.

Many failures occur after services already exist.

A referral breaks.

A handoff fails.

A connector disappears.

A person becomes invisible.

Distance reappears.

Viewed through this lens, the work of public institutions changes.

The challenge is not simply creating programs.

The challenge is reducing the distance between need and participation.

The infrastructure responsible for that work is rarely visible.

It is found in the case manager, the election worker, the transit operator, the language aide, the accessibility accommodation, the referral process, and the countless acts of coordination that help people move from eligibility to participation.

This is the infrastructure we rarely see.

It may also be the infrastructure that matters most.

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Appendix A: Working Definitions

DISTANCE

The gap between a service and a person's ability to successfully reach it.

CONNECTOR

A person, tool, process, or accommodation that reduces distance.

CONTINUITY

The preservation of connection across institutional handoffs.

REACHABILITY

The practical ability of a person to access and participate in a service.

BELONGING

The perception that an institution is navigable, reachable, and intended for someone like me.

POSTURE

The signals an institution sends about who belongs.

MEDIATION

The ability of one service to make other services reachable.

OCCUPANCY

The use of a public service or public space not primarily to move from one destination to another, but to safely occupy time, maintain stability, or remain connected to other systems.

INSTITUTIONAL IMAGINATION

An institution's capacity to recognize populations that may be absent from its default assumptions and design accordingly.