

The World Does Not Continue by Itself

On Maintenance, Dependence, and the Conditions That Remain

During a period in which my own life had lost much of its order, the city outside continued.

Trains arrived. Shops opened. Waste disappeared. Lights changed. People went to work. Nothing in the movement around me seemed to register that, for me, something fundamental had come apart.

At first, this continuity felt almost indifferent. The world did not need me in order to continue.

Only later did the observation begin to mean something else. The world may not depend on any one of us, but neither does it continue by itself.

Someone had opened the station, driven the train, stocked the shelves, checked the signals, cleaned the floor, repaired a fault, prepared a meal or answered a call. Behind every ordinary movement stood another movement that had already taken place.

I began to notice this while photographing cities. It did not appear as a hidden truth waiting to be exposed, but as a recurring difficulty of attention. I often arrived at places where the work had already withdrawn into its result. The road was open. The platform was ready. The lights were on. A door responded when someone approached. Goods appeared where they were expected.

The more reliably something functioned, the less it seemed to require an explanation.

A completed world conceals the work of its completion.

This is not because the work is always hidden. Much of it happens in public. Roads are repaired, buildings cleaned, shelves filled, vehicles serviced and cables laid. But once the result becomes reliable, attention moves elsewhere. What is repeatedly provided begins to appear naturally available.

We notice the lift when it stops. We notice the cleaner when the room is not clean. We notice the care system when no one is available to take responsibility. We notice the road when it closes.

Breakdown makes visible what normal operation allows us to forget.

Yet visibility through failure has a strange consequence. When maintenance finally enters our awareness, it often appears first as an obstruction. A construction site blocks the familiar route. A repair closes a platform. A software update interrupts a service. Work intended to preserve a shared possibility is experienced as the temporary removal of an individual one.

I have to wait. I cannot pass. My time is being taken.

That frustration can be justified. Not every delay is necessary, and not every repair is well organised. Institutions can conceal neglect or incompetence behind complexity. Years of postponed maintenance can later be presented as an unavoidable emergency.

Still, the underlying tension remains. A functioning society depends on activities whose success is often the absence of an event.

Nothing breaks down. No one is left unattended. The waste does not remain. The room is ready. The connection holds.

Some work produces an identifiable object, a completed transaction or a measurable increase in output. Other work preserves the conditions under which anything else can happen at all.

A machine is serviced. A child is taught. A patient is washed. A road is repaired. A room is cleaned. Someone is listened to long enough to remain capable of continuing.

The result can be difficult to isolate because it lies partly in what did not happen: no collapse, no interruption, no visible crisis.

This is one reason maintenance is difficult to value. Its reliability is gradually converted into expectation. Yesterday's improvement becomes today's minimum. What once appeared fast becomes normal, and any delay begins to look like failure.

The expectation is understandable. Time is not an abstraction. A missed train can mean a lost appointment, unpaid work or a chain of further difficulties. Delays do not affect everyone equally.

But neither materials nor skilled labour, money, attention and human energy become infinite simply because we have grown accustomed to their availability.

A system designed only around visible efficiency may begin to remove whatever appears unnecessary: spare capacity, alternative routes, time buffers and preventive maintenance. Under ordinary conditions, this can look like success. When something unexpected happens, the absence of those reserves becomes the system's defining feature.

Redundancy costs money even when it is not used. Maintenance competes with new construction. Resilience is difficult to celebrate because a prevented failure produces no spectacular result.

Perhaps this is one reason our culture remains deeply dependent on performance while directing much of its recognition towards visible outcomes.

Contribution and recognition do not follow one another transparently. A person can work with great care and produce nothing that appears exceptional. Another can become closely associated with a success made possible by the work of many.

This does not mean that individual achievement is false. Some people take unusual risks, create new possibilities or organise difficult work with exceptional ability. Nor does an overlooked activity automatically possess greater social value simply because it is overlooked.

The harder question is why functional importance, income, security, visibility and influence so often fail to coincide.

The people closest to the material conditions of a system may have the least power to shape it. A cleaner keeps a building usable but does not decide how it is managed. A delivery worker makes immediacy possible while being measured by a timetable they do not control. A carer carries responsibility for another person within schedules and budgets determined elsewhere. A technician may know where a system is fragile while having little influence over the investment that could prevent its failure.

Some people encounter the transformed city mainly through the services it provides. Others encounter it through the effort required to keep those services available.

The distinction is never complete. The same person can be a worker within one system and a user of another. We all move between dependence and contribution. But our distance from the material conditions of everyday life is unevenly distributed.

That distance has become easier to overlook in a world increasingly organised through interfaces.

I touch a screen and a route appears. I make a payment without handling money. I place an order and a parcel reaches my door. I enter a question and receive a formulated answer within seconds. The distance between a wish and its apparent fulfilment becomes very small.

The actual distance may be growing.

A delivery that feels immediate can depend on warehouses, roads, software, energy, packaging, vehicles and people moving through several countries. A digital payment requires devices, networks, institutions and trust. Artificial intelligence can produce a text, image or recommendation without displaying the familiar signs of effort. Yet it depends on data centres, electricity, cooling, semiconductors, specialised labour, accumulated knowledge and long material supply chains.

The interface shortens the experience of provision. It does not necessarily shorten what provision requires.

This does not mean that technological transformation is superficial. Digital systems change work, knowledge, communication and access. They can reduce physical effort, remove delays and make services available across distances that once made them impossible. Artificial intelligence will alter many tasks and may eliminate some. It may make forms of knowledge more widely available, accelerate research and create possibilities that cannot yet be fully anticipated.

But transformation does not free us from dependence. It reorganises it.

Work disappears from one place and emerges in another. A visible task becomes hidden infrastructure. Someone who once performed an action may instead monitor a system, correct its errors or deal with the consequences of its decisions. Material requirements can move farther away from the point at which a service is experienced.

The user sees the result. The conditions move elsewhere.

We still need food, water, shelter, energy, movement, care, knowledge, safety and time. These needs are no longer met as they were fifty or five hundred years ago. Their organisation changes. The distance between those who need something and those who provide it changes. Forms of ownership, payment and control change.

Something still has to be made, carried, maintained, judged or renewed.

Artificial intelligence makes this unusually visible because its results can seem detached from labour and matter. An answer arrives without the ordinary signs of production. Yet the system does not stand outside the world. It draws energy, capital, infrastructure, training material and human judgement from it. It may remove one form of work while increasing another elsewhere. It can make expertise more accessible while also increasing dependence on systems whose decisions are difficult to inspect.

AI changes what must be done by a particular person. It does not remove the need to decide what should be done, who benefits, who carries the consequences and which material conditions make a result useful.

A generated plan may shorten part of a building process. It still has to meet materials, regulation, weather, labour and the people who will inhabit what is built. A technical system may

improve a diagnosis, but care does not end with diagnosis. An answer can be made available almost immediately. The ability to judge it cannot.

The question, then, is not whether transformation should occur. The existing world is not sufficient simply because it already exists.

Some forms of work are dangerous and should disappear. Some systems function reliably while preserving exclusion. Some inherited structures continue to create possibilities; others survive largely because the cost of changing them is borne by people with little influence.

Maintenance is not good in itself. Something can function exactly as intended and still need to change.

It is easy to praise the people who keep things running. It is harder to ask what should continue to run.

Which systems deserve repair? Which forms of work should be made safer rather than merely faster? Which forms of access exist only formally, and which can actually be used? What kind of dependence does each transformation create in return?

A transport network may exist physically, but the opportunities it promises are not equally available to everyone. A job can remain unreachable within the time someone has. A building can be open and still inaccessible to a particular body. A digital service can be efficient for someone who possesses the device, language and confidence it assumes, and almost closed to someone who does not.

The presence of a possibility is not the same as the ability to use it.

What societies distribute is therefore not only money or goods. They also distribute conditions of action.

Time, health, mobility, education, housing, safety and access influence what people can make of the world around them. These conditions are not separate from creation. They help determine who becomes able to learn, invent, care, build, organise or take risks in the first place.

Creation, distribution and maintenance are not opposing movements. Distribution can enable creation. Creation can expand what becomes distributable. Maintenance preserves the ground on which both remain possible.

None of this guarantees justice. A productive society can distribute possibilities narrowly. A well-maintained system can preserve an unequal order. An efficient city can move goods quickly while leaving many people with very little control over their own time.

The point is not that everything that exists should be preserved. It is that nothing continues without conditions.

Perhaps this is why the question of my own place eventually returned in a different form.

The world continued without me. That remained true. It continues without almost any single person.

But I had confused not controlling the whole with having no effect within it.

Complex societies distribute power unevenly. Some decisions alter thousands of lives; others barely reach beyond a room. It would be dishonest to pretend that everyone possesses the same capacity to act.

Still, limited agency is not the same as powerlessness.

Someone teaches a child. Someone decides whether to repair or postpone. Someone hires under one set of conditions rather than another. Someone opens a door, interprets a rule, shares knowledge, accepts responsibility or refuses it.

No single action explains the city. The city nevertheless accumulates such actions until they become streets, habits, institutions and expectations.

We inherit a world shaped by decisions we did not make. We then make decisions within it that others will inherit.

This offers a different kind of orientation from the promise that everyone must become exceptional.

To matter is not the same as being indispensable.

A meaningful contribution does not require the world to stop in one's absence. It requires that something within one's actual reach becomes different because one was there.

That difference may be small. It may depend on conditions one did not create and on people one will never meet. This does not diminish it. It places it.

The city I began to photograph existed before me and will continue after me. Its roads, thresholds, routines and systems contain no single meaning, and they point towards no single political conclusion.

But they have changed the questions I ask when something appears self-evident.

Who made this possible?

Who keeps it available?

Who can use it?

Who can change it?

What kind of dependence does it create?

And what disappears from view when the answer arrives too quickly?

The future will not need every form of work that exists today. It will not need human beings in exactly the same ways. That is not necessarily a loss.

The more difficult question is what every transformed society will continue to require: material limits it cannot negotiate away, forms of care it cannot reduce to output, infrastructures that must be maintained, and people capable of judging what should be carried forward.

The world does not depend on any one of us.

But it does not continue by itself.

Notes

[1] The International Labour Organization's 2025 global assessment concludes that transformation rather than wholesale replacement is the more likely effect of generative AI on most exposed occupations. The International Energy Agency's 2025 and 2026 analyses examine the growing electricity, grid and investment requirements associated with data centres and AI.

[2] The Foundational Economy Collective describes material networks and services such as transport, energy, health, education and care as infrastructures of everyday life rather than secondary activities outside the “productive” economy. Research on social reproduction similarly connects the production and maintenance of human capacities to employment, productivity and long-term economic development.

[3] Stephen Graham and Nigel Thrift, “Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 2007.

[4] OECD research on urban accessibility distinguishes the existence of transport infrastructure from people’s practical access to employment, services and other opportunities. The capability approach likewise distinguishes available resources from the substantive freedoms people can actually realise under their personal, social and environmental conditions.