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Aims and Scope

Mobility Humanities is a peer-reviewed, international and interdisciplinary journal published two times per year by the Academy of Mobility Humanities at Konkuk University, Seoul, South Korea. While seeking vibrant interdisciplinary discussions on the phenomena, technologies, and infrastructures of mobility and its ramifications from the humanities perspective, *Mobility Humanities* encourages papers that delve into their cultural-political, ethical, and spiritual and emotional meanings, focusing on the representation, imagination, and speculation that surround mobility. *Mobility Humanities* welcomes original articles that make an innovative contribution to the humanities-based mobility studies from philosophical thoughts, literary, cultural and communication inquiries, historical, geographical, and sociological research around the world. We especially welcome research from and about Asia and the Global South. *Mobility Humanities* consists of articles, creative/visual essays, book reviews, scholarly interviews or dialogues, as well as special issues. *Mobility Humanities* boasts a strong editorial board composed of respected scholars from across the globe. Also, the journal collaborates with distinguished scholars as guest editors.

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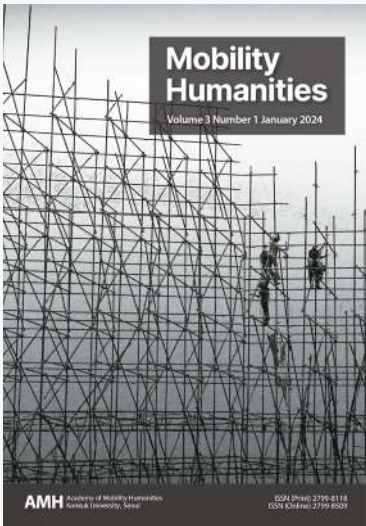
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SPECIAL ISSUE

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SPECIAL ISSUE

Shapeshifting as Infrastructural Storytelling: Comics about the Taxibot's Conflicting Narratives

Giada Peterle^a and Tina Harris^b

Abstract

What are the stories we tell about infrastructures and what stories do infrastructures tell (about) us? We propose a paper in a hybrid verbo-visual format, including comic-pages created by Giada Peterle and based on Tina Harris's keynote at the 2022 GMHC conference, autoethnographic notes, and visuals collected during fieldwork. Through experimenting with graphic storytelling, we highlight examples of infrastructural revelation and concealment, drawing on the figure of the shapeshifter as both a metaphor and a method for mobilising infrastructural imagination. What unites shapeshifters in many of the stories and myths we read is how they are taken up in different ways; how they simultaneously present both the potential to improve human lives as well as produce fear due to their unpredictability. By focusing specifically on the narrative of one shapeshifting infrastructure—the Taxibot, a vehicle designed to cut down on carbon emissions and improve efficiency at airports—we use comics as a research practice for exploring this metaphor and developing a broader understanding of how mobile lives and imaginaries shape infrastructure (and vice versa). We argue that paying closer attention to storytelling can generate new understandings of the uneven nexus between infrastructures and mobile lives, weaving in our understanding of infrastructural im/mobilities.

Keywords

Mobility Infrastructure, Infrastructural Storytelling, Shapeshifting, Taxibot, Aviation, Graphic Methods, (Auto)ehtnography

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Introduction: Logistical Nightmares and Imaginations

In the summer of 2022, Dutch newspaper headlines were focused on the chaos and interminable queues at Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands. After two years of Covid stagnation, civil aviation infrastructures began to rev up again with a massive increase in passengers ready to take to the skies again. As a result, many airports around the world—including Schiphol—had to deal with the repercussions of severe staff shortages. Fear was generated prior to arriving at the airport, with reports of four-hour long waits and cancelled flights, as well as online forums featuring tips for how to deal with piles of baggage at Heathrow or queues at Schiphol. And yet, on some days, airports operated smoothly with nothing out of the ordinary; just “business as usual.” Two separate, well-travelled friends had contrasting things to say about the situation: “I love Schiphol Airport, it’s so efficient, it’s an urban planning dream . . . it will be fully autonomous by 2050!” And, “Schiphol has become a miserable, broken airport . . . we waited forever and never left the ground.”

Mobility problems exacerbated by the pandemic have been referred to as “logistical nightmares.” This was made evident in the case of the “Ever Given,” the container ship that got stuck sideways in the Suez Canal. But as quickly as international shipping made the headlines, the spectacle of the stuck “Ever Given” became obscured by new news. These mobility infrastructures “recede into business-as-usual” (Chu and Harris 4). Even though we tend to think of infrastructures as stable, if not static configurations, these examples show that they are also more-than-human configurations embedded with affects, sometimes failing to meet expectations. In the social sciences, there has been such a lively debate to redefine the term “infrastructure,” that Amin has even called for a new “infrastructural turn” (Amin 138). Infrastructures are thus “conceptually unruly.” They are usually intended as built networks that allow the flow of goods, people, or ideas, and their presence or absence dictates the rhythms of mobilities and immobilities. Yet, as Larkin sustains in his paper on “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” “their peculiar ontology lies in the facts that they are things and also the relation between things” (329). Scholars from social scientific traditions such as Science and Technology Studies (STS) have further acknowledged the ontological and epistemological multiplicities of infrastructure, including John Law’s work on the “fractional coherence” of stories about the British Airways TSR-2 aircraft, Jensen and Morita’s attention to the new ontologies produced by human and nonhuman entanglements, and the collaborative approach in Mol and Law’s exploration of how complexities—of objects and of events—are enacted in practice and are always relational. Infrastructural relations produce an infinite series of individual (often contrasting) stories. And yet these stories often remain untold—or sometimes just unheard, overshadowed by the more official narratives recording either their successes or failures.

To address these quieter stories, this piece starts with a creative and narrative approach to

infrastructures, asking: What are the stories we tell about infrastructures? What stories do infrastructures tell (about) us? And how can we tell them? Here, we explore infrastructures through a reconfiguration of stories we have heard and collected—or simply imagined—, using graphic storytelling as a creative method to explore how im/mobilities come into being. As Kaya Barry et al. illustrate in their recent text, even though “creative practices have made a standing contribution that has shaped mobilities research” (350) through the use of a variety of methods, formats, and languages, in these works “creativity is often an afterthought, a methods or communicative concern, or a subject-matter to be engaged with in and after traditional scholarship” (370). Thus, in aiming to contribute to mobilities theory and infrastructural thinking, we enter the flourishing debate on creative methods for “researching and representing mobilities” (Barry; Murray and Upstone) by engaging with comics as a research practice. Our collaborative piece draws on the use of graphic storytelling as a creative methodology to tell im/mobile stories (Bissell, “Encountering Automation”; Dutta); furthermore, we think of graphic mobilities in practice (Peterle)—i.e., the use of comics to conduct mobilities research—to reconfigure ethnographic research materials through a combination of images and words.

Finally, through including comic-pages in the paper, we imagine the performative act of reading comics as a way to help readers both experience and, thus, understand, the complexities of infrastructural systems (Davies). In doing so, we harness the kinds of uncanny effects of infrastructure to think through infrastructure’s potential to facilitate unfettered movement, its spectacle of enchantment, and its potential to vanish, to harm, to fool, to produce illusions, and to generate (logistical) nightmares. By highlighting examples of infrastructural revelation and concealment through “infrastructural storytelling,” we use the figure of the shapeshifter as both a metaphor and a method to consider possibilities for developing a broader, cross-disciplinary understanding of how infrastructures (and infrastructural imaginations) shape mobile lives and vice versa.

Infrastructural Storytelling: The Stories Infrastructures Tell (about) Us

Even though there has recently been a flourishing debate about infrastructures, less has been said about the narrativity of infrastructures. If infrastructures cause complex affects, experiences and atmospheres, what kind of stories do they generate? And what do these stories tell (about) us? To answer these questions, we do not simply want to focus on the stories about infrastructures; rather, we attempt to adopt infrastructural storytelling as a methodological technique to explore their narrative potential. To do so, first a reflection on infrastructures’ ontological status is needed to explore their capacity to produce narratives and generate stories. In a seminal work on “The Enchantments of Infrastructure,” Harvey and Knox draw on Bennett concept of “enchantment” to speak of the divergent expectations connected to infrastructures. As they transform the environments that they traverse, infrastructures are both political tools and semiotic objects that come to hold promises

of social, economic, and even political transformation. Furthermore, as Di Nunzio reminds us, “building infrastructures is not a neutral endeavour” (1) and neither is telling stories about them. Despite some contexts where infrastructures build patterns of connectivity and movement, they can cause segregation, forced mobility, or immobility. Therefore, the narratives we both tell and are told about infrastructures are never univocal, rather they “hold competing and often quite divergent hopes and expectations together” (Harvey and Knox 522) that need to be further explored and accessed. If intended as a “public good,” as something that is lived, embodied, and imagined, infrastructure is always political and new ways to activate bottom-up processes of re-signification need to be found (Bertoncin et al.). Our creative comic-based approach to research on mobility infrastructures moves indeed in this direction (Cancellieri and Peterle; Kuttner et al.; Peterle): In this piece, storytelling is a method to explore the narrativity of infrastructure, and the shapeshifting metaphor is a way to access its intrinsic ambiguity.

A narrative approach to infrastructures observes how the formal matter of roads, highways, pipelines, rails, airports etc., affects our storytelling practices, making the peculiar “poetics of infrastructures” (Larkin) visible through a creative, mobile, and narrative perspective. This narrative approach can take place through both infrastructural reading/listening and writing/storytelling practices. By infrastructural reading/listening we recognise a narrative agency to infrastructures and explore their ability to generate stories and act upon both literal and literary mobility domains: For example, infrastructures determine our routes (and often the speed, rhythms, and even the absence of our movements) across space as much as the plots and existential rhythms of narrative characters inhabiting fictional spaces. They influence the stories we tell and, through their materiality, how we tell them.

By infrastructural storytelling, we mean a methodological technique that places infrastructures at the centre of narrative research practices: rather than using stories as an end-point to represent research, we are attempting to do research through stories (Cameron), interpreting stories “as the origins of thinking and feeling” (Bissell, “Encountering Automation” 369) about infrastructures. Paraphrasing Bissell’s work on automation (380), this piece acknowledges how the practice of “storying infrastructure” contributes to its production in an ongoing process of collaborative meaning-making. If, according to Merriman, “our focus should be on different practices of ‘infrastructuring’ rather than simple geographies of infrastructures” (87), we use this processual approach to move beyond the binary between mobility and mooring in the reading of infrastructures, and consider them as lively processes that move subjects, things, affective relations (84), and stories. In this view, the shapeshifter is not just a metaphor by which we visualise and narrativise the Taxibot, as an example of mobility infrastructures; rather the research itself can also be interpreted as a shapeshifting process, where our understanding of infrastructures is continually reconfigured through stories and new constellations of human and non-human relations.

The Taxibot as “Shapeshifter”: Moving Imaginations with the Taxibot through Ethnographic Fieldwork

What is a Taxibot? While it may look like one of the vehicles used to tow or push back aircraft that move (“taxi”) to and from an airport runway, it is not the same. When an aircraft normally takes off or lands, it uses its engines to taxi. In contrast, the Taxibot is designed to cut 50%-65% of CO₂ and Nitrogen (NOx) emissions because the pilot shuts off the aircraft engines during taxiing. The labour used to operate the Taxibot is also different; the aircraft pilot steers it for the majority of the time—the truck driver only attaches it to the plane. Furthermore, the Taxibot has been manufactured by an Israeli defence company and is designed to eventually become electric and autonomous/self-driving. Thus, the Taxibot features very prominently in Schiphol’s website and social media, particularly in their plan to be “emission free by 2030” and for the airport to be a totally “autonomous airside” by 2050 (“Autonomous Airport” and “Emission Free”). This is the efficient, future—forward form of the airport infrastructure that is taken up by ministers, investors, and strategy departments. At the moment, however, the Taxibot still runs partly on diesel fuel.

Some pilots at Schiphol have mentioned this multiple nature in their encounters with it: “What is it?” one says. Another remarks: “The name taxibot is the worst name ever. Or maybe the best marketing ever. It’s not a bot! It was initially meant to be autonomous.” One team member says that it is much more accurate if it is referred to as sustainable taxiing.

Many different stakeholders are involved in its rollout: airlines, ground handling companies, air and ground traffic control, strategy departments—and their stories about encounters with the Taxibot are not the same. The majority of those involved agree that cutting emissions is crucial in order to meet EU and UN regulatory frameworks. For big airlines the incentive is also financial; they must cut labour costs, and the promise of future automation may appeal. For ground handlers, the Taxibot is yet another new top-down implemented system they need to get used to. Some air traffic controllers fear its potential to change longstanding safety records, since they will have to transform their standardised procedures of directing pilots along the taxiways and to the gates. One team member sees it as something that can be used to solve capacity issues. “It was never about sustainability to begin with,” they said. And yet, someone on the very same project claimed, “It was always about sustainability, it was never about automation.”

Through these sense-making stories, all of the people involved in its implementation and takeup are in fact shaping what it should be for the future: capacity building, or environmentally friendly, or modern, efficient, quicker, or even a safety concern. The comics pages included in the next paragraphs are, indeed, meant to make these conflicting—or at least contradictory or coexisting—narratives visible through creative infrastructural storytelling.

Shapeshifting: Metaphor as Method

Here, one metaphor and method that we propose for infrastructural storytelling is that of the shapeshifter. What the metaphor of shapeshifting can do is to allow us to see both the multiple forms and sides of mobility infrastructures. It asks us to highlight who sees it in which form, when they see this form, and why. It also allows us as researchers to take part in this shaping and imagining of future mobility.

The shapeshifter is a common trope in both ancient myths from around the world and in future-oriented science fiction. A shapeshifter is something or someone who can transform into something else. They can change their shape into a completely different form, and these forms have different functions, characteristics, powers, and attributes. They can do this, sometimes at will, at other times involuntarily. The werewolf, an ordinary person by day, triggered by the light of the full moon, can transform into a dangerous wolf. In mythology, there is the Japanese fox deity, the *kitsune*, who can turn into a sly woman—or in Korea, a similar creature is *Kumiho*—the even more sinister 9-tailed fox. But the shapeshifter exists not just in fantasy or science fiction and is not always sinister. For instance, the mimic octopus can shift its body and pretend to be a sea anemone, a jellyfish, or a lionfish. People, too, can be shapeshifters; in our own lives we may meet a genteel and charming person, who we discover later has radically changed their behaviour and attitude.

What unites all these shapeshifters in all the stories and myths we read is how they are represented—politically and ideologically—in different ways. How they simultaneously present potential to improve human lives, but also create fear; how they are misunderstood because their inner workings and origins are unknown, and are black boxed in a way; and how they all share a rather ambiguous morality. As mentioned above, when Bissell urges us to pay attention to storytelling, we cannot look at concealment alone. Instead, we need to focus on “encounters” to show that “different stories produce [infrastructures] differently” and thus different experiences of mobility and (im)mobility along these infrastructures (“Encountering Automation” 380).

By considering stories of infrastructures as encounters with shapeshifting, we pay closer attention to when and where they are said to deliberately conceal mobility and when and where they produce mobility spectacles. The reason why shapeshifting is apt for looking at mobility and infrastructure is precisely the fact that different forms have (and produce) different spatial attributes. The Taxibot may be perceived as an efficiency machine for airlines, but for air traffic controllers it is a barrier, slowing down safety procedures. And in contrast to some of the scholarly work on infrastructures as being either hidden and taken for granted, or visible due to breakdown or failure, the shapeshifting infrastructure is often both at the same time, and has been so since its inception. As Max Hirsh and Till Mostowlansky ask: “What if we begin with the idea that infrastructure has an autonomy of its own that can directly influence political outcomes, social attitudes, cultural practices, and ideological positions (Blau 1999)? As any infrastructure professional will acknowledge, once

a project is under way, things rarely go according to plan" (7). Why does it not go to plan? Perhaps because it was never one thing to begin with.

Graphic Mobilities for Infrastructural Storytelling

So how do we engage methodologically with shapeshifting infrastructures that have autonomies of their own, infrastructures that generate a multiplicity of stories and interpretations, both shared and refuted? One of the ways of telling shapeshifting stories of infrastructures is through graphic narratives. Not surprisingly, many popular works of graphic literature play not just with the shapeshifter metaphor but with infrastructure's multiple forms, whose changes affect the inner and outer everyday worlds of characters. For example—to mention just two widely known examples—whereas Charles Burns' graphic novel *Black Hole* narrativises the transition from adolescence to adulthood through the monstrous shapeshifting of its characters' bodies, in *Ghost World* Daniel Clowes makes this painful transition concrete through the story of a suspended bus stop inhabited by different ghostly presences. The deviation of the bus route is just a temporary infrastructural mystery, and once the former bus route is reactivated, the paths of the two protagonists, Enid and Becky, inevitably split into two separate lifelines. Examples like these inspired our graphic storytelling practice and the hybrid format of this paper, based on the combined use of illustrations and text.

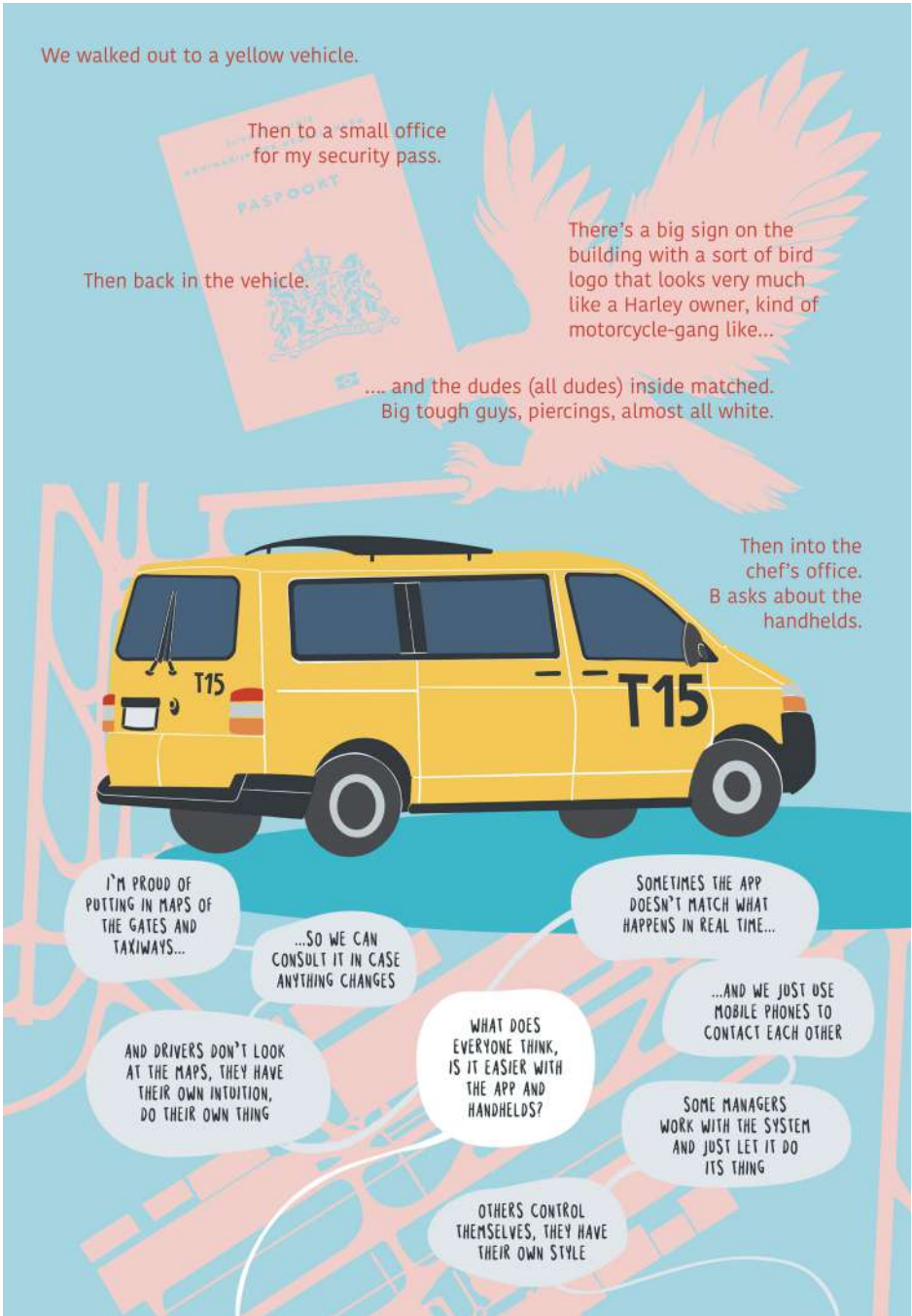
From a theoretical perspective, the coming together of comics and infrastructures is not completely new, since in his recent book on urban comics, Dominic Davies has already defined "urban comics as infrastructures." Comics are also infrastructures that activate new networks for the circulation of narratives or ideas and processes of change in urban contexts. Also, comics, as well as other artistic installations, are increasingly used to decorate building sites of new transport lines and mobility infrastructures. Here though, we move the other way around, and use comics to collect vernacular stories, imaginaries, experiences, and memories about mobility infrastructures and as a laboratory to start drawing the poetics of mobility infrastructures through the combined use of ethnographic fieldnotes, photographs, maps, charts, and illustrations. We use "graphic mobilities" as a creative and narrative method to give space to the "affective atmospheres and the sociality" (Bissell, "Passenger Mobilities") of infrastructures: in fact, graphic mobilities "move," because they "mobilise" infrastructural stories and generate emotional reactions, bringing individual and affective aspects of infrastructures to the fore (Peterle).

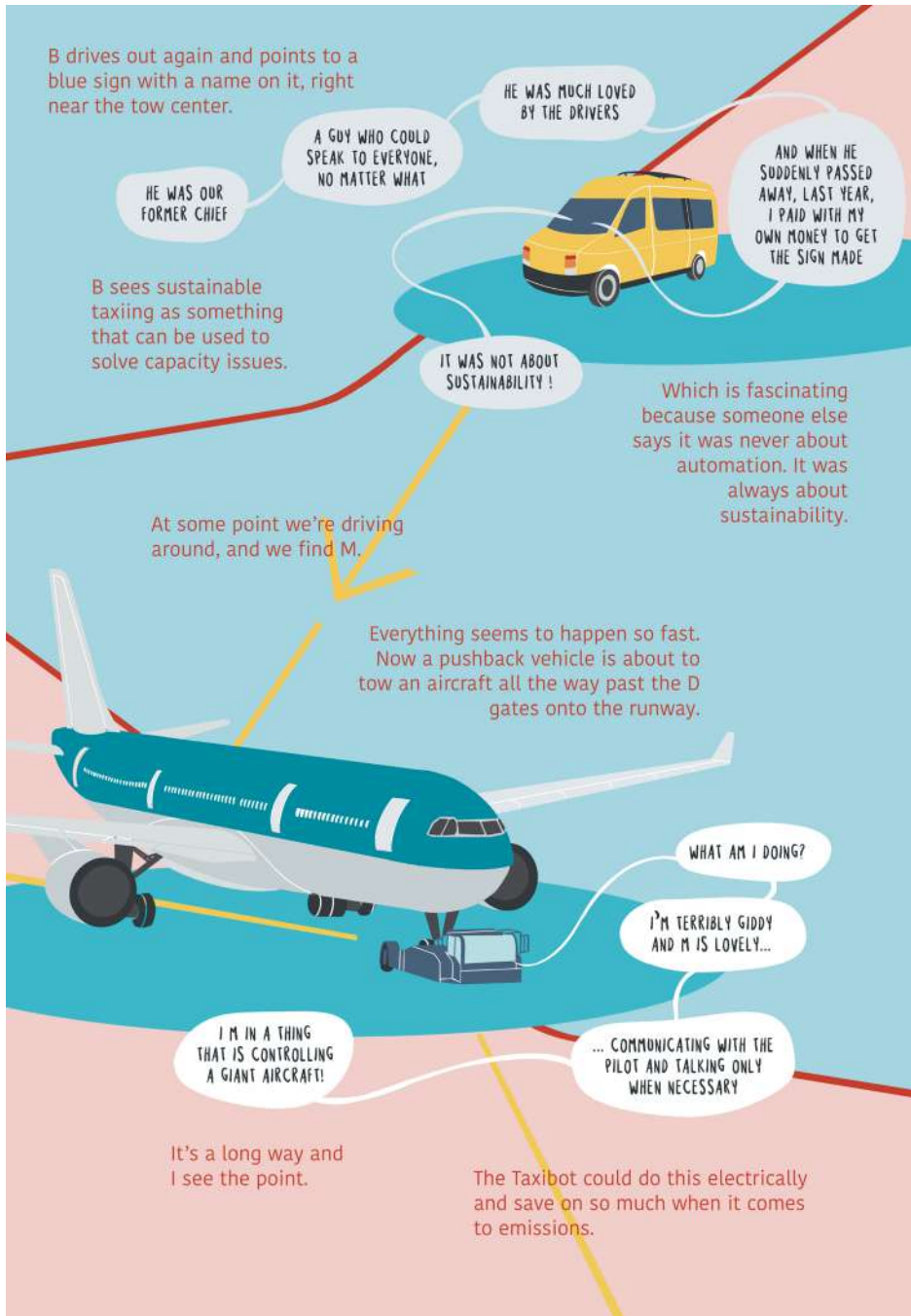
The result of this creative process of infrastructural storytelling are three separated yet interconnected graphic units, which bring onto the page interviews and dialogues, but also often submerged and invisible aspects of ethnographic research: Unit 1, *Runway Fieldnotes*, merges both events and imaginations about the practice of doing ethnographic research; Unit 2, *The Trial*, features the voices of those who have used the Taxibot to tow

a flight with passengers for the first time, giving space to their expectations and worries about the future of this infrastructure; Unit 3, *TT*, visualises the Taxibot as a Transformer and renders the shapeshifter metaphor more explicit in comic form. The graphic units can be read separately or in sequence, as they inform each other through unpredictable visual and narrative echoes, like the use of colours, of recurring styles, fonts, and actions. The thoughts, personal experiences, small comments, fears, emotions, and imaginations of the researchers and interviewees inhabit the pages with no clear hierarchy. All illustrations in Unit 1, 2 and 3 were created and drawn by Giada Peterle in 2023.

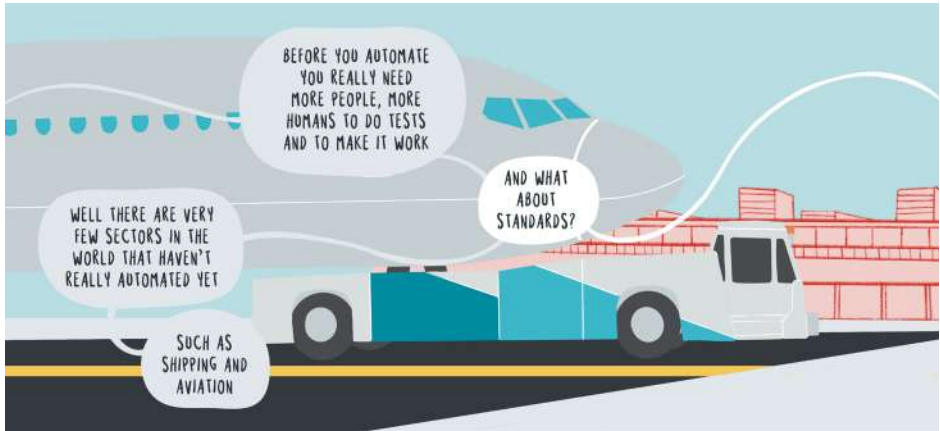
Unit 1. Runway Fieldnotes







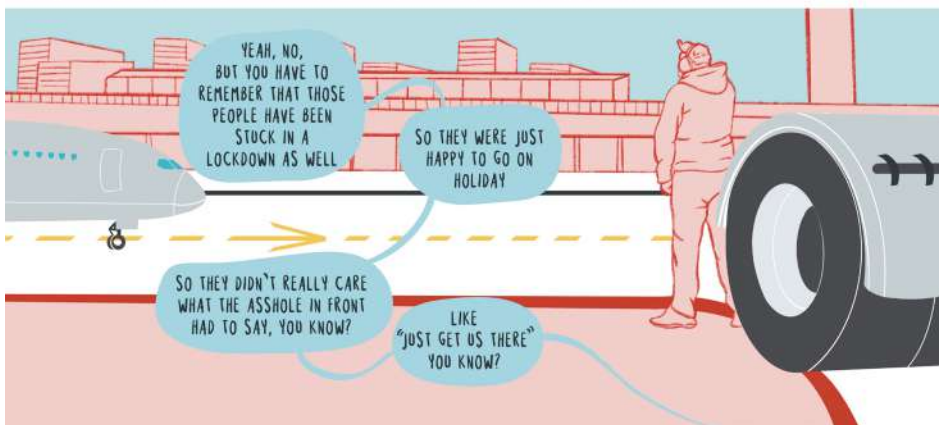
Unit 2. The Trial.



This is partly for safety reasons but perhaps more because of international standards.



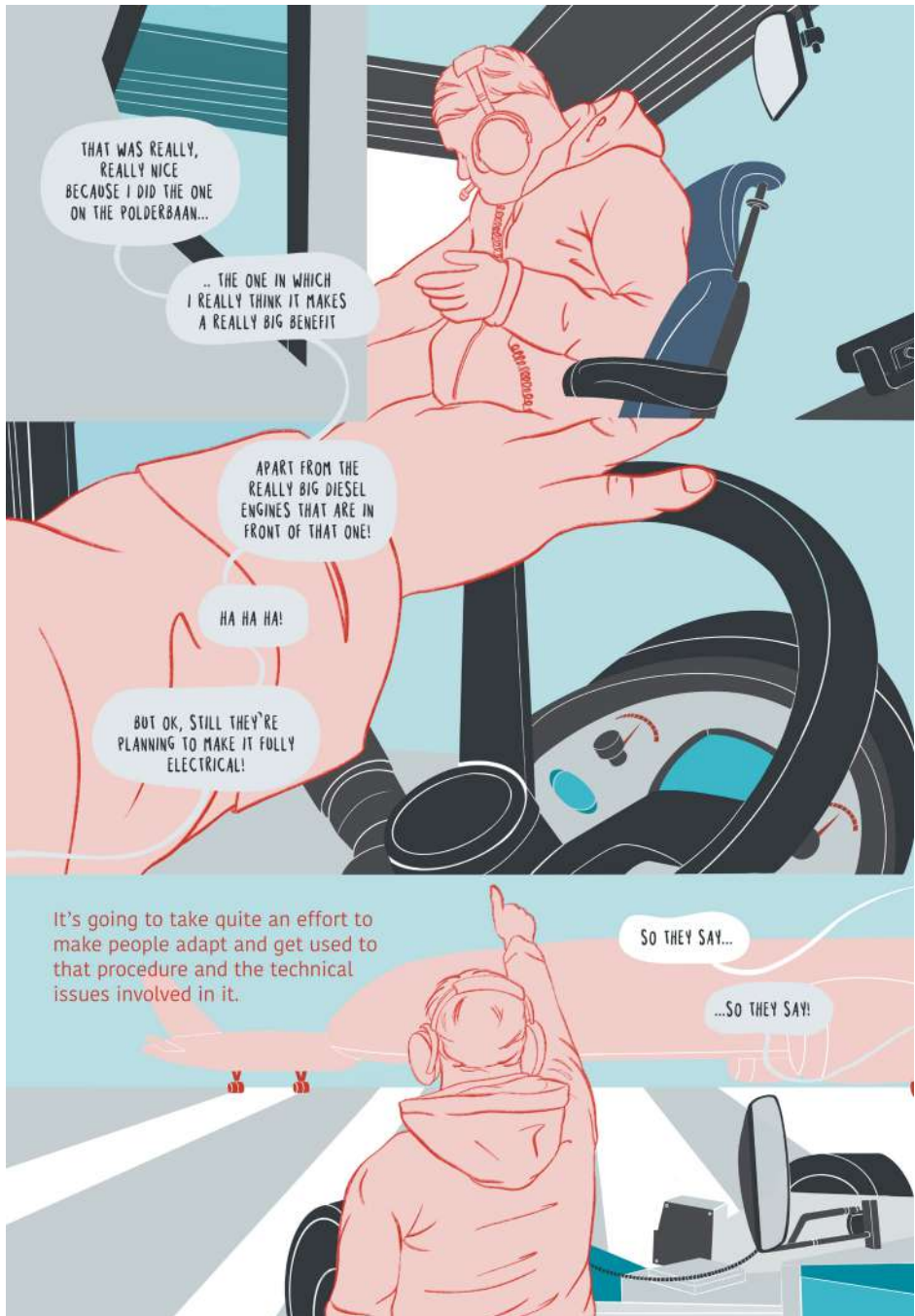
Big changes to the infrastructure require a very broad adaptation from all the parties involved.



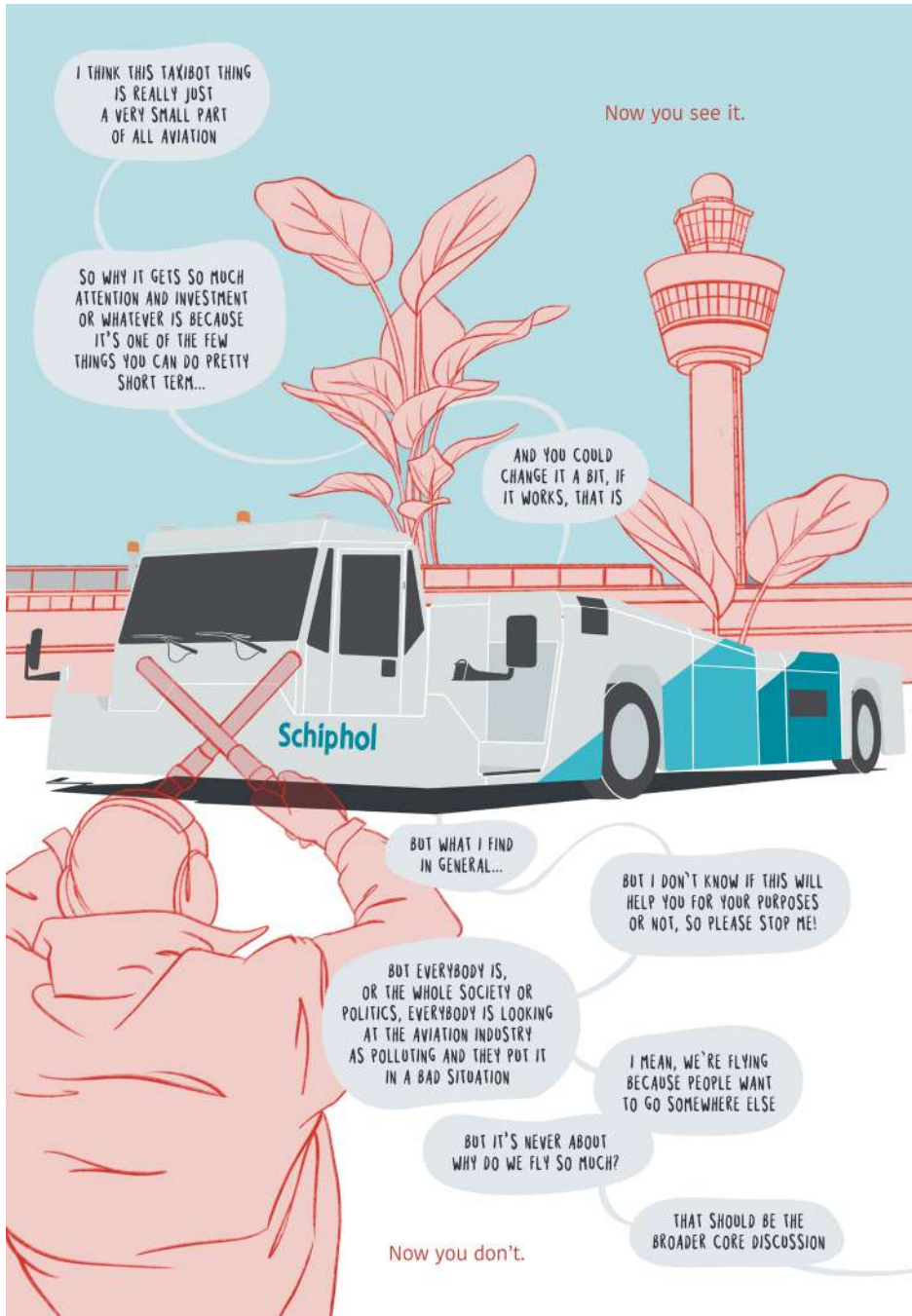


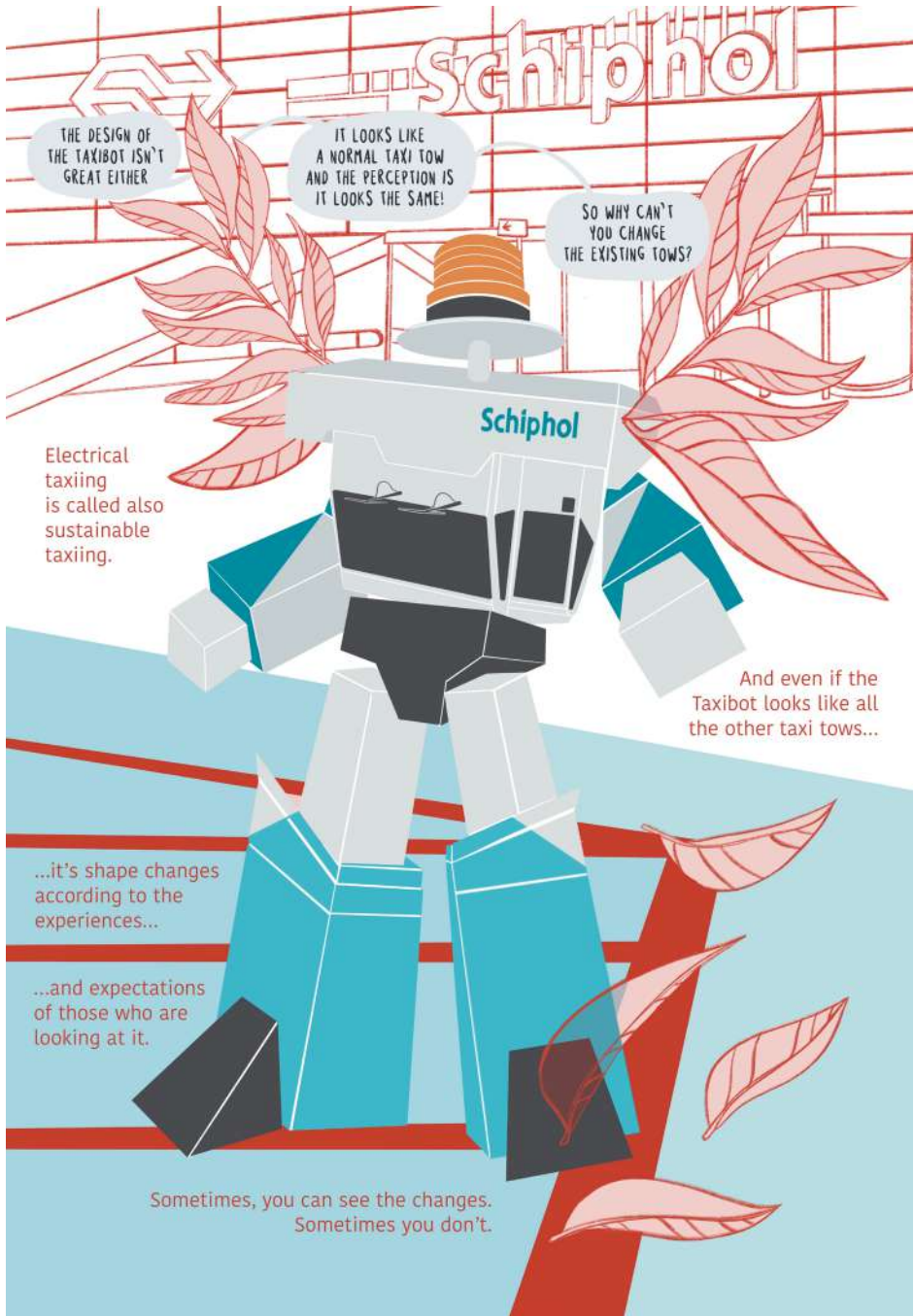
It can take more than fifteen minutes to taxi from there to the terminal.





Unit 3. TT.





Conclusion

In the composition of these three narrative Units, or short comic stories, we experimented with the creative use of graphic storytelling to see if it could become a means to make the complexities of infrastructural thinking visible and accessible through comics. Indeed, we went through Tina Harris's fieldnotes to individuate key passages in her ethnographic interviews and autoethnographic reflections, in search of possible storylines now organised in three short, interrelated episodes. The use of comics enabled us "to make complex connections between multiple sources through a spatialised composition rather than a linear textual argument" (Barry et al. 360). The use of creative methods, and in particular visual and graphic storytelling, is not new in mobilities research. Indeed, the non-linear combination of images, illustrations, and words has been used by artists and researchers "to produce a different understanding of the multiple interdependent factors" (Barry et al. 360) at play in im/mobile social contexts. We also sustain that, more than other modes of telling stories, graphic storytelling "also catalyses thinking and feeling through its performative dimension" (Bissell, "Encountering Automation" 369). Throughout Unit 1, for example, readers move at different speeds and scales—from the full-page-sized cup to the small portrait of a Taxibot—performing through reading how much even small details (the name on the Starbucks cup) can become narrative triggers and aspects of great importance to access the intimate worlds of interviewees and researchers. Similarly, Unit 2 apparently decentres the Taxibot as a symbolic means for a sustainable future to focus on its micro-materialities and the experience of those who ride it: As the different panels show, through a series of zoom-ins that focus on small gestures and material details (the wheel, the touch-screen, the symbolic meaning of the thumb upwards), the Taxibot as an infrastructure is made of an assemblage of human bodies and non-human materialities.

Another reason for experimenting with graphic storytelling is the possibility to make complex infrastructural metaphors accessible through verbo-visualisation: Indeed, whereas in her project *Pandemic Airport*, Clare Booker developed the idea of using a collage—of different graphic styles—as "a metaphor for the assembled nature of airport life" (Barry et al. 359), in our piece the shapeshifter metaphor had a role to play in the whole creative-research process of infrastructural storytelling. On the one hand, it was an opportunity to visualise in the comic pages the hybrid and multiple essence of the Taxibot—which changes its shape and even becomes a Transformer in Unit 3, with green wings made of leaves that symbolise its role in imagining a more sustainable future for the aviation sector. On the other hand, it has become a conceptual tool, a metaphor by which we have tried to make sense of the manifold sides of infrastructure as it is lived, understood, and signified differently by different people who engage with it.

If "stories are becoming understood as the process through which bodies make sense of their experiences, where experiences become thought" (Bissell, "Encountering Automation"

369), the collaborative practice of infrastructural storytelling through comics has revealed new possibilities of understanding the shapeshifting essence of infrastructures, and of the Taxibot. The reconfiguration of interview excerpts into a broader assemblage—including the researchers’ imaginations, memories, and affects—has produced a kind of infrastructural storytelling where the borders between facts and affects, ethnographic recordings and autoethnographic re-imaginings blur the usually fixed borders between research and fiction. In fact, shapeshifters are also known for escaping from confines, a way to change for just purposes, a way out. A bit like Donna Haraway’s cyborg, the shapeshifter has lurking revolutionary potential. Infrastructures as shapeshifters always have the potential to be something else. In the same way, infrastructural storytelling allows mobilities research to be something else in its form, practices, and outputs. In this sense, the Taxibot “transforms” its own shape (like a Transformer) and has transformed our imaginations of the future of infrastructure as well as our way of conducting research on infrastructures. This permits our research “to be something else” through comic stories. Finally, the new “anthropology of infrastructure” (Di Nunzio) reflects on “the liveliness of socio-technical systems” (Amin 138) through considering the entanglements between human and nonhuman associations and the ways in which roads, wires, and pipelines are at the foundation of our aesthetic experience of the built environment (Amin 139). We do not know yet if the Taxibot is going to reshape our experience as passengers, or the daily routine of many people working in aviation: Yet, we hope these comics will help you to imagine the contradictory and coexisting possibilities that such encounters can generate.

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Competing Interests

The author(s) reported that no competing interests exist.

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