My research investigates these designers and their work—DIY infrastructure—through the lens of digital media studies, a comparative practice in which digital media artifacts are identified and analyzed according to different frameworks. In spite of increasing interconnection between digital and material objects and systems, digital media studies often ignore material artifacts and the built environment. The study of DIY infrastructure design, and infrastructure more broadly, exposes the role of digital media in shaping these overlooked aspects of modern life. There is an invisible relationship between digital media, infrastructure, and political authority, and it includes the interdependence of infrastructure and the contingent nature of our ongoing reliance on socio-technical systems.

In my talk I will discuss two of these projects. The first, Feral Trade, involves the transportation of physical goods over social networks, and demonstrates the way that the social component of infrastructure has become a design consideration. The second, Cloacina, is the project of two designers who are leveraging the affordances of digital media to build a waterless portable sanitation system. Cloacina shows us a process by which DIY infrastructure projects might scale up and effect lasting socio-technical change.

The designers of DIY infrastructure present an expansion of the scope of design coupled with a nuanced understanding of infrastructure as an intractable and exceedingly complex problem. At the same time, their work reveals the extensive social and political effects of existing design decisions—the far-reaching consequences of the design decisions that formed existing infrastructure. These decisions are in play across a variety of scales of time and space, affecting individual bodies as much as continental ecosystems, and shaping personal behavior as much as global commerce and trade.