Shannon Mattern

Writer, researcher and educator; director of creative research at METRO

Shannon Mattern is an American writer, researcher, and educator who studies the places, people, and material arrangements through which knowledge becomes available. Readers of architecture and media scholarship know her for books about public libraries and the long history of urban communication, and for essays questioning the promise that a city can be managed like a computer. Her working world includes classrooms, library branches, archives, exhibition galleries, municipal information systems, and the everyday objects used to organize things. Since 2025, she has been Director of Creative Research at the Metropolitan New York Library Council, usually called METRO, after more than two decades in university teaching.[1]

Mattern has spent most of her adult life in and around New York. She taught at The New School, a university joining art, design, and social research, from 2004 until the end of 2022, moved to an endowed professorship at the University of Pennsylvania in 2023, and resigned in June 2025. At METRO she now coordinates the Cross-Reference Coalition, an experimental school that uses New York's libraries, archives, arts organizations, and other public resources as its classrooms.[2] The change involved giving up tenure and, by her account, accepting a 50 percent pay cut. It also brought her back to a professional community she had worked with for years.[3, 4, 5]

[External image / 外部圖片] Shannon Mattern smiling, with framed prints behind her.
Shannon Mattern in the photograph accompanying her Places Journal author profile. Places Journal; photographer not named on the source page · Rights retained by the source and respective rights holders; no open license stated. · Image source

Bellefonte: books, hardware, and people who knew how to make things

Mattern was born in 1976 and grew up in Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, a small town near Penn State University. Her father and his brothers ran Triangle Building Supplies, a hardware and building-supply business that began in the 1970s in a former lollipop-stick factory. By high school, she was familiar with its paint cans, tools, pipes, and fastener bins. She dusted merchandise and sorted small parts; the store's division of work also made gender visible, with women at the registers and men in the yard. In her later account, the shop could feel both wondrous and intimidating. It taught her that ordinary people could make, mend, and understand much of their material surroundings.[6, 7]

The practical expertise extended beyond the shop. In a 2018 interview with landscape-

architecture editor Jennifer Reut, Mattern described a father who made furniture, an uncle who was an architectural engineer, an industrial-engineer grandfather, and a contractor godfather. When her growing book collection needed another shelf, her father built one to her specifications. She remembered her surroundings as things that people close to her had shaped with care. This was a particular kind of familiarity with design: a bookshelf answered a real person's needs, and materials could be handled and altered by someone she knew.[8]

Her mother was a special-education teacher and a local organizer. Mattern credits her with starting a community Christmas dinner, a seniors' home-repair program, a youth soccer league, and a youth orchestra. A child could encounter public service through a rehearsal, a repaired house, or food prepared for neighbors. Mattern still names her mother's work alongside her father's craft when introducing herself.[9]

Her later hardware-store essay is partly a return to this setting. Published in Places in 2018, "Community Plumbing" investigated how shops combine retail, practical instruction, repair, and neighborhood relationships. She visited Crest Hardware in Williamsburg and spoke with proprietor Joe Franquinha amid the ordinary equipment of the business. She learned how another proprietor maintained a local institution, beyond the business she already knew.[10]

From chemistry to literature, and from books to buildings

Mattern entered Penn State intending to become a doctor and majored in chemistry. She loved laboratory instruments and the periodic table, yet kept taking literature courses. Reading also made her attentive to the physical page: type, white space, and paper.[11] After switching to literature, she imagined a job in publishing or advertising. A professor teaching medieval British literature urged her to consider graduate school shortly before applications were due. Her undergraduate thesis studied computer advertisements through feminist accounts of technology, including Donna Haraway and Rosanne Stone. She completed her bachelor's degree in 1998.[12] Even later, she applied to university, arts, publishing, and nonprofit jobs.[13]

At New York University, where she completed a doctorate in culture and communication in 2002, her subject changed. Taking a public course on church architecture at Saint Thomas Church on Fifth Avenue helped her reconsider a religious upbringing and possible dissertation subjects. Public libraries offered a secular setting for related questions. Neil Postman's humane approach to education mattered to her; work with W. J. T. Mitchell on landscape, and Andrew Ross's urban scholarship, helped her connect media study to buildings and cities.[14, 15]

In the Reut interview she also named Marshall McLuhan and Lewis Mumford as graduate-school reading. McLuhan studied how media forms affect experience; Mumford wrote histories of technology and cities. They helped her approach cities through

communication, extending media study beyond newspapers, cinema, and television.[16]

Her dissertation examined the development and design of Seattle's new central library.[17] The building was an especially consequential commission: a major public institution, designed by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture under Rem Koolhaas, within a city whose recent growth had made technology, global commerce, and civic identity unusually visible. Mattern followed the public design process rather than treating the finished building as an isolated architectural object. In a 2003 article, "Plurality in Place," she asked how competing groups could help articulate a city's needs and how those needs could enter a design. She examined the difference between publicity around a spectacular commission and substantive participation in shaping public space.[18]

Her concern was how a public institution could accommodate people with different needs, and whose views counted when a spectacular new building was being planned.[19] "Just How Public Is the Seattle Public Library?" appeared in the Journal of Architectural Education in 2003, placing her research before architectural readers.[20]

A postdoctoral fellowship at Penn, 2002–2004

After NYU, Mattern held a Mellon postdoctoral fellowship in Penn's History of Art department. The move put a communications scholar in an art-history teaching environment. Her public course archive records a freshman seminar, "Textual Form," in autumn 2002, and an upper-level seminar on space, place, and landscape in contemporary art in spring 2004. These were courses she built early in her working life, while the library research was becoming a book.[21, 22, 23]

The "Textual Form" syllabus makes her first teaching priorities unusually tangible. It begins with the premise that a text's arrangement, typography, margins, and paper affect its meaning. She moved from debates about speech and writing to scribal culture, printing, and digital information design. She assigned reading logs and an early paper for revision with her help. Johanna Drucker's work on experimental writing sat beside graphic-design texts and historical accounts of news. She placed printed materials on library reserve when color mattered or a book's price might prevent students from buying it. The syllabus joined a demanding reading practice to attention to the actual objects and costs through which reading happened.[24]

The 2004 landscape seminar similarly joined theory to encounters with art. Its schedule included site-specific work, public and private space, memory, tourism, surveillance, and exhibition design. Mattern offered a choice of final formats: an academic paper, a creative project with accompanying writing, or a proportionately scaled collaboration. Museum and gallery visits appeared within the semester's intellectual sequence.[25]

The New School: a first job with teaching and administration

Mattern joined The New School in 2004. It was her only job offer. Her first job combined teaching with academic advising: three-course semesters, admissions, and thesis supervision. Her workspace was beside a copier in a utility room; she prepared classes and graded at home.[26]

She directed graduate Media Studies from 2006 to 2009 and received the university's Distinguished Teaching Award in 2011.[27] The graduate program had roughly 600 students: administration was a substantial part of the job.[28]

Smithsonian Books canceled her completed manuscript's contract after changing its publishing plans. With her editor's help, she found another publisher and repeated peer review.[29] The New Downtown Library: Designing with Communities appeared with Minnesota in 2007.[30]

The book broadened the Seattle investigation to fifteen American cities, including Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Toledo. It examined the decisions behind new downtown libraries and the different demands those buildings had to meet. Architecture, library services, urban redevelopment, public discussion, and new media all entered the account. Published with photographs and addressed to designers and library workers as well as scholars, the book established libraries as a continuing field of practical engagement for Mattern.[31]

Building work with Elizabeth Ellsworth

Elizabeth Ellsworth, a senior colleague working on education and media, was an important collaborator during these early years. Together they co-directed Media Space | Public Space in 2005–2006. The initiative connected courses with panels, visiting practitioners, a sound program, and an exhibition. It gave Mattern a way to bring students' research and media production into a public setting, while making relationships across The New School and organizations elsewhere in the city.[32]

Their final report gives the resources and labor behind the initiative. It began with a $6,000 faculty-development award and accumulated help from several departments and administrators. A seminar used New York as an extended classroom; linked courses covered digital architecture, location-aware media, and exhibition design. The Lower Manhattan Cultural Council provided gallery space at 15 Nassau Street. Students in Mattern's exhibition-design course developed the floor plan, catalogue, wall text, publicity, and installation for a show of fifteen student and faculty projects in May 2006. The project involved visitors such as Antenna Design and the Center for Urban Pedagogy, which uses design and media to explain urban issues. Students encountered that professional practice while organizing work of their own.[33]

The $6,000 grant was supplemented by financial and organizational contributions from other departments and administrators. Ellsworth and Mattern assembled a program in which faculty, students, and an outside cultural organization carried different

responsibilities.[34]

The required “Media Research Methods” course supplied another part of her early job. Its archived description does not separate a research student from a media maker. Students learned to judge sources, generate information, choose methods appropriate to a question, and develop either a research proposal or a research-based production proposal. Topics ranged from historical research and discourse analysis to ethnography and quantitative methods, with funding treated as a practical subject. Research was something that could guide making as well as produce a scholarly paper.[35]

Finding a wider community for the work, 2007–2013

Library sound became another subject: Mattern published “Resonant Texts: Sounds of the Contemporary American Public Library” in The Senses & Society in 2007.[36]

In 2009, leaving the directorship, she imagined an administrative career. Adding a blog to her website changed that prospect. Short posts on teaching, gallery visits, and possible projects brought invitations from architects, librarians, curators, and scholars. Teaching could become a route back into research.[37]

Her research increasingly circulated outside the conventional article and book. In September 2010 she edited a collection on notes, lists, and ordinary inscriptions for The New Everyday, an online publication associated with MediaCommons. Contributors included media historians Lisa Gitelman and Kate Eichhorn, as well as people working on archives, literature, and digital scholarship. The format allowed small, familiar records—shopping lists, handwritten notes, everyday marks—to receive sustained attention. Mattern was acting as an editor who convened other people’s work, alongside developing her own research.[38]

A growing set of colleagues at The New School made other kinds of work possible. With Jessica Irish, Jane Pirone, and Rory Solomon, she developed the Urban Research Toolkit, a project running from 2009 to 2013. It mapped historical New York media infrastructures, including newspaper circulation, telephone networks, electrical systems, radio, video arcades, pigeon communication, and zine communities. Its ambition was to let different networks appear together, so that their overlaps and succession could be examined. Mattern’s current project record also acknowledges that the interactive map proved difficult to preserve.[39]

A studio in which the map was part of the research

Mattern’s “Urban Media Archaeology” course, taught in successive autumn semesters from 2010 through 2013, gave students a related problem. Each student or pair investigated an urban communication system through historical and archival material. Their individual work then entered a collectively designed interactive map. Choosing the platform and showing relationships were parts of the research. The surviving course archive includes a

student-designed syllabus for the latter part of the 2010 semester. Students therefore participated in shaping the course as well as its final object.[40]

Here media archaeology meant recovering older layers of urban communication: routes, conduits, antenna sites, or publishing districts. Students connected particular systems to their supporting environments. The collective map made their accounts meet, exposing differences in evidence and scale.[41]

Other initiatives had a more explicitly organizational purpose. Sound@NewSchool, supported by the university's Innovations in Education Fund in 2012–2013, connected sound-related teaching, events, and projects across departments. Artist John Roach was principal investigator; Mattern worked in a larger group that included Julie Napolin and Jane Pirone. Democratizing the Archives, supported by the same fund in 2012–2014, linked university projects to local archives and their professionals. Historians Julia Foulkes and Claire Potter led that initiative, with New York Public Library's Thomas Lannon among the collaborators.[42, 43]

Writing for people who could use the research

Mattern received tenure in 2012.[44] In May 2012, Places, a journal of public scholarship on architecture, landscape, and urbanism, published Mattern's "Little Libraries in the Urban Margins." She looked at experimental libraries, temporary book spaces, and collections outside familiar central and branch institutions, drawing on interviews with nearly a dozen librarians. The essay did not treat all of them as one movement. Nor did it present a small, charming book project as a substitute for a public library's funded staff and services. It asked what these experiments could do within specific settings, including a period of budget pressure on conventional libraries.[45]

Her next Places work widened the geography. "Paju Bookcity: The Next Chapter," published in January 2013, followed a visit to the South Korean publishing development near Seoul. Mattern had imagined something close to a bibliophile's paradise; the place she encountered was also a working district of publishers, printers, and distributors. Her photographs and account attended to buildings, production, circulation, and the difficulty of creating a public cultural destination within a planned industrial setting. A field visit corrected the expectations with which she had arrived.[46]

Writing for Places became a substantial continuing part of her professional life. The venue placed her research before architects, planners, artists, and other readers who might never encounter a specialist media-studies article. Illustrated essays joined reporting to historical references and notes. She later described roughly thirty pieces as the background from which a book emerged: years of public writing had accumulated before another publication was proposed.[47]

Teaching the archive and studying its furnishings, 2011–

2015

Mattern began teaching “Archives, Libraries + Databases” in 2011. In a 2014 Library of Congress interview with digital-preservation specialist Trevor Owens, she explained that she had long researched these institutions but had initially hesitated to propose them as a media-studies course. Her field’s neglect of libraries did not make them irrelevant: their work involved collecting, classifying, preserving, circulating, and restricting access to media. She wanted students to encounter librarians’ and archivists’ practical literature alongside theory, and to recognize an exchange of expertise rather than assume scholars alone supplied the important knowledge.[48]

The archived course descriptions record field trips, visiting speakers, artworks, and the option of a research-based creative project. Students could write a paper or make a work in another medium, provided that research and theory informed it. The class subsequently drew invitations to the Library of Congress’s 2014 digital-preservation conference and a 2015 New York Art Resources Consortium event at the Museum of Modern Art. A public syllabus served people beyond the enrolled class and helped make Mattern’s teaching visible in professional communities.[49]

She also explained a revision to the course: scheduling had initially made it begin with libraries, but she and the students found that starting with archives worked better. “Databases” in the title attracted students interested in the contemporary; the semester then helped them discover the histories and continuing roles of the other institutions.[50]

What she meant by attention to form

In her 2014 essay “Embracing the Formalist Mantle,” Mattern looked back at reading McLuhan while preparing her undergraduate thesis on human–computer interaction in Wired. She had worried that caring about media forms might imply indifference to content or social circumstances. She came instead to use formal attention to investigate relationships among technologies, people, places, institutions, and political economy. An interface, a pipe, a shelf, or a page could be studied as part of a system through which people acted. She also linked McLuhan’s attention to different senses with her decision to include artworks and creative practice in teaching.[51]

In 2014–2015 she was a faculty fellow at the Mellon-funded Graduate Institute for Design, Ethnography and Social Thought, based at The New School for Social Research. The institute put her into a setting where design practice and the study of social life could meet. Her November 2014 presentation, “Intellectual Furnishings,” examined bookshelves, desks, server racks, and furniture for managing digital devices as objects that shape both knowledge work and feeling. Her father’s shelves had answered a reader’s particular needs; the new research asked how furnishings organize such needs across different institutions and periods.[52, 53]

Another collective, Re/Lab, ran from 2014 to 2016 under Melissa Friedling’s leadership.

Mattern joined colleagues including Kate Eichhorn, Amir Husak, and Barry Salmon in an effort to recover the histories of older equipment in university laboratories, classrooms, and offices. Its project record proposed a collection of object biographies, linked teaching, and workshops. The object biography asks where a device came from, who used it, how it changed, and what replacing it obscures. Here the institution's own equipment supplied material for research and teaching. The project's stated plans should be distinguished from a verified complete surviving collection.[54]

A grant becomes an exhibition

Mattern's work with Orit Halpern and Brian McGrath on Emergent Infrastructures, a 2013–2015 university Cluster Grant project, connected media study, architecture, design, and the history of science. The team asked how infrastructures come into being and how judgments of their success or failure are made. Its members also included Irish, Pirone, and Solomon, colleagues with whom she had already worked.[55]

The group chose an exhibition as one of its final forms. Furnishing the Cloud, held at The New School's Aronson Gallery from 9 to 22 March 2015, brought in architect Kimberly Ackert and gallery director Radhika Subramaniam. Ackert's furniture students used Mattern's writing among their starting materials and made full-scale cardboard prototypes for reading, charging devices, and holding data-related equipment. Halpern's students prepared research dossiers; students from Mattern's archive course revised their own projects for the website. Laura Sanchez developed work on branch-library design, and Eishin Yoshida explored the books that pass through personal collections. Mattern helped curate the show and wrote its wall text; Daniel Udell developed the website and Nadia Christidi assisted the curators.[56]

She also recorded an unrealized plan for the entrance wall, distinguishing it from what the team made. The collaboration gave her writing about furnishings a role within students' design and exhibition work.[57]

Libraries as a professional community, 2014–2019

By the mid-2010s, Mattern was working with librarians and architectural organizations as well as writing about them. In 2014–2015 she helped organize Re-envisioning Branch Libraries, a design study by the Architectural League of New York and the Center for an Urban Future. She advised on the request for qualifications, joined research meetings, served on the jury selecting five teams from forty-five applicants, helped develop design challenges, and participated in reviews. A public presentation at the Japan Society in December 2014 brought designers together with library leaders and city officials; she moderated a further design forum at The New School in January 2015. Her involvement extended across the preparation, selection, discussion, and public presentation of proposals.[58]

The work also brought sustained contact with Nate Hill, a librarian and later METRO's executive director. Her subsequent "Middlewhere" essay, published by the League's Urban Omnibus in June 2015, followed library materials into BookOps, the shared technical-services facility of the New York and Brooklyn systems, and ReCAP, a research-storage consortium in New Jersey. She toured facilities, photographed operations, and spoke with staff. The resulting account connected shelves and catalogues with conveyors, trucks, storage climates, software, and resource-sharing agreements. Her acknowledgments named library personnel who gave time and contacts, alongside research assistant Steve Taylor.[59]

Her 2014 Places essay "Library as Infrastructure" offered a way to assemble those relationships. She treated a library as several interacting arrangements: a building, a technological system, a social organization, and a place for learning and preserving knowledge. The term infrastructure ordinarily evokes roads or utilities; she used it to ask what enables a library to serve people and what that service requires. Staffing, cataloguing, funding, and equipment belong in the account alongside architecture. The essay has remained one of her most frequently invoked statements of this work, including in later interviews with library professionals.[60, 61]

During a visit to the Netherlands in 2016, Mattern told information-professional scholar Frank Huysmans that she enjoyed joining humanities questions with design. His interview also recorded her semester as a senior fellow at Bauhaus University in Weimar. Their conversation addressed a practical disagreement within librarianship: whether remaining relevant requires copying Silicon Valley's vocabulary and habits. She considered innovation inadequate as an end in itself. A library could use digital tools while asking who governed data, how resources remained accessible, and what people could build together. She also defended involving affluent users in a public institution that served the whole population, rather than treating libraries solely as provision for people unable to buy books.[62]

Public information and public privacy

In November 2016, Mattern's "Public In/Formation" responded to New York's LinkNYC kiosks, whose web-browsing function had been disabled after complaints about use. She asked why a major public internet initiative had failed to draw on librarians' experience with shared access and competing users. Her research included conversations with data-infrastructure scholars Tracey Lauriault and Rob Kitchin about preservation, provenance, and municipal records. It brought library and archive expertise into a debate dominated by technology suppliers and city government. The argument concerned what these professionals knew how to do, and the consequences of excluding them from planning.[63]

The 2018–2019 exhibition Privacy in Public moved related questions into nine New York branch libraries. Mattern co-curated it with Greta Byrum of The New School's Digital Equity Laboratory. METRO, all three city library systems, and the Mayor's Office for the

Chief Technology Officer were partners; Davis Erin Anderson and Hill managed the project. Artists including Mimi Onuoha, Salome Asega, Tega Brain, and Taeyoon Choi created works for particular branches. Ingrid Burrington designed a guidebook that visitors could use to record their journeys. The exhibition treated privacy as something shared by communities, rather than a burden managed solely through an individual's passwords and settings. Librarians and branch staff were participants in bringing that discussion to their local publics.[64]

Helsinki and a different library commission

With media scholar Jussi Parikka, Mattern also became a MOBIUS fellow of the Finnish Cultural Institute in New York. Their collaboration, developed from 2017 to 2019, commissioned work by Samir Bhowmik, Tuomas A. Laitinen, and Jenna Sutela for Helsinki's new central library, Oodi. The Library's Other Intelligences opened in January 2019 and ran until March. The Kone Foundation supported the fellowship's international professional exchanges.[65, 66]

Bhowmik's Memory Machines, made with 00100 ENSEMBLE, was a performative tour through ordinarily concealed parts of Oodi: climate-control and power systems, checkout infrastructure, data, storage, and distribution. Sutela contributed an invented-language artist's book and video derived from her experiments with machine learning and interspecies communication. Laitinen's Swarm Chorus combined generative composition, voices, and a sound installation. These commissions brought their research and the artists' work into contact with visitors to a working library.[67]

Back in New York, Mattern helped organize the March 2019 symposium "Code, Craft & Catalogues: Arts in the Libraries," another collaboration between METRO and the Finnish Cultural Institute. The symposium extended the Helsinki project into conversation with New York's library and arts communities. Neta Bomani and Cybernetics Library provided live documentation; a zine designed by Johanna Lundberg extended the event into print.[68]

Writing longer urban histories, 2015–2021

While these collaborations developed, Mattern published two books that gave her urban-media research a longer historical span. Deep Mapping the Media City, issued in March 2015, was a compact, illustrated volume in Minnesota's Forerunners series. The series provided a form for ideas still being worked through, between an initial argument and a large completed study. Mattern proposed investigating cities' material communication histories through excavation, mapping, and attention to different senses. Her teaching had already made these methods into collective projects; the short book brought a wider account of them to readers.[69]

The 2017 Code and Clay, Data and Dirt: Five Thousand Years of Urban Media was a larger undertaking. Its chapters moved across waves and wires, sound, steel and print, writing

and mud, and the voice. The title's materials make the scope visible: communication has shaped urban life through more than electronic networks. The book connected media scholarship with architectural and archaeological histories, tracing ways that cities stored, transmitted, and organized knowledge. Minnesota's edition contained sixty-seven illustrations across 288 pages. The Media Ecology Association's Dorothy Lee Award recognized it in 2018; her own biography also records the Society for Cinema and Media Studies' Anne Friedberg Innovative Scholarship Award.[70, 71]

The city-as-computer argument in public

Mattern's 2015 essay on the urban dashboard examined the interfaces through which decision-makers view a city. She followed precedents in mission control and managerial information systems into contemporary municipal displays. A dashboard condenses a great deal of activity into selected indicators. Her question was what becomes legible in that reduction, who selects the measures, and what remains outside them. She was examining an actual design instrument used in governance, with a history and institutional assumptions.[72]

The February 2017 Places essay "A City Is Not a Computer" addressed technology companies' ambitions to design or optimize urban life. She read proposals for new cities alongside the histories and forms of knowledge they tended to overlook. Calling a city intelligent could refer to much more than its data-processing capacity: residents, workers, public institutions, and the accumulated arrangements of urban life possessed knowledge that was difficult to express as a metric. The title supplied a memorable public statement of an argument developed through her earlier books and library work.[73]

Her reporting remained attentive to particular projects. For "Post-It Note City," published in February 2020, she visited Sidewalk Toronto's workspace at Quayside. The room presented a technology-driven development through rough models, comment cards, plywood, and the apparent informality of a workshop. She observed the materials and talked with a Sidewalk Labs representative. The essay asked how invitations to participate actually entered decision-making, and whether the look of collaboration could stand in for public power over a project. Her account of the visit returned to problems she had studied in Seattle, while recognizing a different corporate and technological setting.[74]

She also edited How to Run a City Like Amazon, and Other Fables with Mark Graham, Kitchin, and Joe Shaw in 2019. Meatspace Press offered the volume for sale in print and freely as a digital download. From September 2019 through January 2020, she guest-edited eleven installments of Urban Omnibus' s "Digital Frictions," working with editors Mariana Mogilevich and Josh McWhirter. These were opportunities to convene other researchers' accounts, using smaller publishers and architectural editorial institutions as well as university presses.[75, 76]

A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences appeared with Princeton University Press in 2021. In a later interview with Elliott Montpellier, Mattern explained that the

project grew from her substantial body of Places essays and an invitation from the journal and the press. She asked readers whether a book would be useful, given that so much was already available online. A bound volume could collect and rework the arguments for another audience, but it also entered an academic economy in which a monograph often counted more than public digital writing. She wanted an accessible book while recognizing that unequal valuation of formats.[77, 78]

A teacher’s expanding responsibilities, 2018–2022

Mattern continued to build courses that connected research to the making of a project. “Designing Methodologies,” offered in spring 2018, treated the research process itself as something designed: a question, method, medium, and intended audience needed to work together. Students developed proposals through several smaller assignments, with possible final forms including writing, documentary film, and an exhibition. The course required them to choose techniques for a specific inquiry, rather than adopt one method simply because their field usually used it.[79]

Her teaching also reached smaller experimental schools. At the School for Poetic Computation’s summer 2018 “Code Societies” session, she offered “Sorting Things Out” with Jonas Voigt. Participants examined classification through shelves, folders, forms, and computational models. The workshop connected apparently mundane sorting to decisions about what counts, who gains access, and how identities are represented. It placed Mattern in a setting shared by artists, programmers, and other practitioners, where theory could be approached through exercises and discussion outside a university degree.[80]

In 2019 she moved from Media Studies into anthropology at The New School. Anthropology studies social and cultural life through such approaches as fieldwork and ethnography, but her invitation concerned a particular meeting with design. Between 2019 and 2022 she designed, launched, and directed a graduate minor in Anthropology and Design spanning The New School for Social Research and Parsons. Its institutional curriculum linked critical social inquiry with making: students could examine the effects of designed systems and use creative practice within research. Mattern’s role involved building a route across divisions whose students and requirements did not automatically meet.[81, 82]

Her earlier proposal for a practice-oriented, multidisciplinary doctorate had failed to secure funding.[83]

Maintenance, care, and her own family

In “Maintenance and Care,” published in Places in 2018, Mattern assembled research on the labor of sustaining technologies, buildings, cities, and lives. Her account moved among software maintenance, public infrastructure, domestic work, and art. It also questioned the romance of caring occupations. The essay drew attention to workers whose commitment could be used to justify low status, low pay, and expanding responsibilities. Librarians’

service, for example, should not make every additional social obligation seem costless. Mattern was bringing public knowledge work into conversation with other forms of upkeep, while asking how the work was organized and supported.[84]

A later essay became much more personal. In 2021's "Concealment and Compassion," she described her mother's Alzheimer's disease and the narrowing of a previously active life. Her mother had retired in 2004 after thirty-four years in special education, yet continued helping former students, organizing local services, and mentoring younger teachers. Mattern wrote about her mother's habits of gathering and sorting things, and the family's attempts to understand what the changing household meant. The essay then investigated how built settings could provide dignity and care for people with dementia. The opening family account explains why these questions had become urgent for her; it was also a public act of writing about someone she loved.[85]

In January 2021, Mattern joined M. E. Luka and Annette Markham to teach an undergraduate "Digital Ethnography" intensive linking The New School with RMIT's Digital Ethnography Research Centre in Melbourne and the University of Toronto. The first two weeks required about five hours a day of meetings and asynchronous work. The intensive was followed by independent fieldwork, with a documentary or field guide to a digital environment or community as the final assignment. The collaboration gave them an international group of teachers and peers while examining how digital technologies shape everyday relationships and institutions.[86]

Her graduate elective "Mapping the Field," also offered that spring, combined critical discussion with map-making. The design included a cartographer teaching assistant, map critiques, and research-based atlases using analog and digital methods. Mattern encouraged them to use the work within a thesis, dissertation, or other project: the class could support research already important to its participants.[87]

When her partner left his New York legal career during the pandemic, they moved to Hudson. Mattern learned to manage a weekly six-hour commute.[88]

Her spring 2022 workshop "Redesigning the Academy" placed the university itself under examination. Its syllabus brought together critical university studies, educational anthropology, radical teaching, alternative schools, and art concerned with institutions. Assignments asked students to examine admissions, evaluation, learning spaces, and publishing, then make speculative curricula, syllabi, manifestos, or other pedagogical materials. Field trips and design workshops were parts of the plan. A teacher who had spent years organizing academic programs was asking students to investigate how those programs and institutions might be made differently.[89]

Julia Foulkes and archivist Wendy Scheir interviewed her in December 2022; the catalogue records institutional activism and the part-time-faculty strike.[90]

Penn: a return that did not become a permanent home,

2023–2025

Mattern began her new appointment at the University of Pennsylvania in January 2023, returning to the institution where she had been a postdoctoral fellow. Her title, Penn Presidential Compact Professor of Media Studies, marked a substantially different position from the first advising-and-teaching job she had accepted in 2004. She held an endowed chair and a secondary appointment in History of Art. Yet the move did not settle the question of where she could do her best work. Within two and a half years she would leave the university.[91, 92, 93, 94]

Her Penn teaching continued the habits established earlier. The spring 2024 undergraduate seminar "Collecting Media" considered why people and institutions collect, store, organize, and grant access to information. Students encountered libraries and archives alongside other kinds of assemblages. The syllabus combined readings, screenings, field visits, guest lectures, design exercises, and a written or creative final project. It was a course in which a collection's uses and politics could be examined through its actual objects and practices.[95]

"Local Media," also offered in spring 2024, asked students to investigate communication rooted in a particular place. Newspapers and broadcast outlets were part of the subject, but so were bookshops, libraries, printers, record shops, performance spaces, post offices, community networks, public signs, and less formal exchanges. Mattern proposed small papers, a low-pressure presentation, design exercises, and a shared publication. She wanted a wider view of local communication than a count of surviving newspapers, while giving students manageable ways to investigate it.[96]

The semester's website records a progression from mapping the local through news, public-access television, radio, digital community networks, the post office, and local data, followed by publication workshops. The resulting Philadelphia Local Media Field Guide credited the student authors, designer Elaine Lopez, type designer James Hultquist-Todd, and Fireball Printing. Mattern was one contributor and the teacher who had organized the course. The finished publication required local professional production as well as the students' writing and research.[97, 98]

Work, health, and deciding to leave

At the end of 2023, Mattern underwent emergency abdominal surgery at NYU Langone in New York. In her December 2024 essay "The Limits of Refusal," she described the following hospital week as a rare period protected from academic demands. Her partner, Andy, traveled from Philadelphia to be with her. She reported having worked eighty- or ninety-hour weeks and feeling unable to keep accepting institutional demands. The interruption and recovery made changing her working life feel urgent.[99]

She connected that experience to research on gendered faculty service and the professional costs of declining requests. Conversations with women colleagues provided support as she

tried to understand the pressures that remained within a senior, secure position.[100]

She also published a collection of teaching testimonials in December 2024. It reported more than forty self-designed courses, roughly seventy graduate theses and dissertations advised, and a large share of her work devoted to teaching, advising, and mentoring. The selected student messages emphasized clarity, thorough feedback, accessibility, demanding standards, and continued support. Mattern selected the messages herself. She also reported a nomination for Penn’s Lindback teaching award in her second year.[101]

In June 2025 she resigned. Her public statement named health and service pressures, difficulty finding collaboration, and conflicts over institutional values. She acknowledged supportive Penn colleagues, staff, and students, yet sought another home for teaching and creative public scholarship. Accepting lower pay, she relinquished the security of an endowed, tenured position for different working conditions.[102]

METRO: teaching and research within the library world, 2025–2026

Mattern’s new employer was familiar. METRO is a nonprofit, member-supported network connecting libraries, archives, and other knowledge organizations in the New York metropolitan region. She had served on its board for a decade, including as president, before becoming Director of Creative Research. Hill, with whom she had worked on library projects, was executive director. The appointment placed her within an existing set of professional relationships; it did not require creating a library community from scratch.[103, 104]

The Cross-Reference Coalition, launched in 2025, is the main new educational structure she coordinates. Mattern is its faculty member and Becca Quon its program manager, with an advisory group drawn from libraries, archives, arts organizations, and design. Courses bring working professionals and other participants together for weekly visits and study. Their projects are meant to serve METRO’s member institutions as well as have a public life. METRO supplies the institutional setting.[105]

The Misfit

The first course, “The Misfit,” met from September to December 2025 with seventeen participants from libraries, schools, universities, city agencies, and arts organizations. Mattern organized visits to the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library, the community arts space ABC No Rio, the artists’ book organization Printed Matter, and the Center for Book Arts. The subject concerned things that do not fit easily into shelves, boxes, classifications, or institutional norms. Readings brought different fields into conversation, while the eventual publication was intended to reflect the course’s unusual collection of parts.[106]

Her published explanation of the syllabus also tells participants how to use it. Its

annotations provide context, questions, and suggestions about where to focus. Some resources are invitations to browse; some are recordings that can be listened to while walking. Nobody tracks completion. She commits to giving advance notice of changes and to maintaining or reducing the workload.[107]

Search and Discovery

The spring 2026 "Search and Discovery" course extended the city classroom from a bookshop and Poets House to Google, WFMU radio, Pratt Institute Library, Mount Sinai's Levy Library, and Brower Park. Participants could compare several kinds of finding: following a catalogue, browsing, listening, bodily investigation, and exploration outdoors. The course announced a collective scavenger hunt, map, or field guide developed after the weekly sessions. Its public record distinguishes the taught semester from the subsequent production work.[108]

It also records a revision based on the first cohort's wishes. The initial design had tried to keep work outside class minimal because participants had full-time jobs and family responsibilities. The Misfit group asked for more opportunities to reflect, so Mattern added optional discussion and informal gatherings. Project ambition was to be calibrated to people's time, interest, and energy. Learning how much a group could usefully do was part of the school's development.[109]

The CRC's general structure includes digital course materials, optional gatherings, and a privacy-conscious Zulip discussion platform. After each weekly course ends, participants work with design and production expertise toward a shared public outcome, scaled for completion within six months. The school gives studying together and producing a publication separate schedules.[110]

Museums, a national library, and a third course

The move to METRO did not end Mattern's work with other cultural institutions. In 2025 she was Kluge Chair in Modern Culture at the Library of Congress. The appointment is confirmed in METRO's subsequent program materials, alongside her own biography. She also spent summer 2025 as Design Indexer in Residence at Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum. There she investigated indexes and catalogues through the museum library's collections, from information design to architecture. A September public event with head librarian Jennifer Cohlman Bracchi invited participants to handle and discuss selected books, journals, and artifacts.[111, 112]

For autumn 2026, METRO announced "Public Study," taught by Mattern across New York from September through December. Its subject is the city's history and present ecology of popular, alternative, and radical education, including the roles of libraries and archives. Participants are to develop a shared project after the weekly meetings: possible forms include a guide, atlas, catalogue, or curriculum. The announced fee is $125, with member discounts and solidarity rates. The later publication remains a plan in the available

record.[113]

Mattern now lives between New York City and Columbia County upstate, and names art, music, and dogs among her interests. She continues to advise organizations concerned with libraries and cultural infrastructure while teaching and researching within a professional community she knows well.[114]

Chronology and source qualifications

Date / Documented stage / Source distinction

Date: 1976; 1998; 2002
Documented stage: Birth; Penn State BA; NYU doctorate
Source distinction: Archives biography.[115]

Date: 2002–2004
Documented stage: Penn postdoctoral period
Source distinction: Contemporary author biography and dated syllabi.[116, 117, 118]

Date: 2004; 2006–2009
Documented stage: New School appointment; Media Studies directorship
Source distinction: Archives biography.[119]

Date: 2005–2006
Documented stage: Media Space / Public Space
Source distinction: Project record and contemporaneous final report.[120, 121]

Date: 2007
Documented stage: The New Downtown Library
Source distinction: Publisher’ s bibliographic details; some site headings show 2006.[122]

Date: 2009–2013; 2010–2013
Documented stage: Urban Research Toolkit; Urban Media Archaeology courses
Source distinction: Project and course dates, not later website-migration dates.[123, 124]

Date: 2012 onward
Documented stage: Regular work for Places
Source distinction: Dated publication record.[125]

Date: 2014–2015; 2015
Documented stage: Branch-library study; Furnishing the Cloud; Deep Mapping
Source distinction: Separate project and publication records.[126, 127, 128]

Date: 2017–2019
Documented stage: Code and Clay; Helsinki commission; New York privacy exhibition
Source distinction: Publication and partner records.[129, 130, 131]

Date: 2019–2022

Documented stage: Anthropology and Design minor
Source distinction: Mattern’s record of her responsibility.[132]

Date: 2021; 2022
Documented stage: A City Is Not a Computer; Redesigning the Academy
Source distinction: Publication and course records.[133, 134]

Date: January 2023; spring 2024
Documented stage: Penn appointment begins; Philadelphia teaching and field guide
Source distinction: Departure statement, official newsletter, and course/publication records.[135, 136, 137]

Date: December 2023; December 2024
Documented stage: Hospitalization; later published reflection
Source distinction: Dates distinguished in the first-person account.[138]

Date: June 2025
Documented stage: Resigns from Penn and moves to METRO
Source distinction: First-person statement; current organizational biographies corroborate the new role.[139, 140]

Date: 2025–2026
Documented stage: CRC’s first three courses; national-library and museum appointments
Source distinction: Dated course and institutional records. Public Study’s later collaborative project is prospective.[141, 142, 143, 144]

Research accessed public sources in October 2026. Retrospective essays give Mattern’s own account of work, health, and institutional choices. Course documents, contemporary reports, and project credits establish the practical details of many collaborations. The New School oral-history catalogue was read; its audio is unavailable online. Earlier descriptions of her as a current Penn professor are superseded by her resignation and current METRO records.

Exact salaries, royalties, and engagement fees are not established by the consulted public sources. The reported pay cut is Mattern’s statement. Project records sometimes describe proposals or outputs still in preparation; the chronology distinguishes these from documented completed work.

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