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Urban Latency: Potential in the Suburban Retail Landscape

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Abstract

The contemporary suburban city dweller is dependent on and restricted to the infrastructural networks of transportation, communication, and consumption. These loose agglomerations have produced a landscape of dispersed meaningless non-places. The mall stands as the last realm of public space in this web and shopping as the last terminal human activity. Taking cues from the more informal networks of rapidly developing third world countries, the ever-increasing demand for individualization, and the changing cultural and urban landscape, this project proposes to transform the suburban mall into a viable piece of the urban fabric. A study of the interconnected economic, political and social networks of the neighborhood and the urban implications of existing actions will lead to a renewal of latent urbanism further encouraging social and economic interaction. Providing a dispersed, suburban neighborhood with a social center developed around a shifted notion of the urban and public space.
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1. URBAN AND THE EXURBAN
Urbanism and the City

“The Urban...is a promiscuous, evolving manifold, to be distinguished whenever possible from the term ‘city.’ The urban may, and often does exist at the scale of a piece of architecture and conversely may fail to exist in city-sized agglomerates.”

—Sanford Kwinter

This quote presents a unique view in a time when the issue of what precisely defines the urban is becoming more and more relevant. For the first time just a few years ago more than half of the world’s population was living in “urban” settings. Particularly in developing countries where urban centers are exploding in both population and area, the whole concept of urbanity is facing challenges. “Instant cities” in China and The United Arab Emirates are struggling to keep up with the exponential increase in demand for resources and the massive shift in the urban fabric. This is not a new problem however and is not limited to these ballooning cities. Urban areas in the United States are dealing with the reconciliation of new technology with aging infrastructure and increasingly diverse populations. Is the modernist masterplan or central control necessary to keep development in check or is there a viable alternative? The trend of landscape urbanism in the 1990’s,

1 Sanford Kwinter, Far From Equilibrium (Barcelona: Actar, 2008).189
which looked at the city as a field of flows and networks and to concentrate more on processes rather than form, was a first attempt at an answer. While this strategy was based on solid theories developed by Manuel DeLanda and others, it has unfortunately failed to produce many viable projects and today the diagram is seen as, “too abstract, the possibilities to many, structure too flexible and the outcome too open-ended.”² Current theory and architectural practice is in search for a middle ground. A way of working in an urban setting which can, “capitalize on the possibilities for the contingency and flexibility inherent in landscape urbanism, while reasserting some of the formal specificity of modernist urbanism.”³

To realize the ambiguity in the term city and the traditional urban planning systems so often tied to it, one need not look further than Lagos, Nigeria. Lagos represents the extreme of a rapidly developing West African city now populated by more than 7 million people and estimated to be able to support nearly 15 million. Despite its “near complete absence of those infrastructures, systems, organizations, and amenities that define the word city in terms of Western planning

methodology”⁴, Lagos continues to grow and develop but most importantly, it works. The lack of traditional infrastructure has led to alternatives, which break all concepts of traditional urban planning, and show the efficiency of “systems and agents considered marginal, liminal, informal, or illegal”⁵ based upon typical conceptions of the city. Homes, businesses, churches may all occupy a roadway or gain shelter underneath it. Walls and gates, used to define one’s property, and protect against crime have become places of shelter and commerce, supporting the establishment of whole new economies. Roadways are intentionally blocked and traffic diverted into the depressed surrounding neighborhoods, spurring economic activity. The author argues, “the material logic of Lagos is convincing” and “represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of

⁴ Rem Koolhaas et.al., Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000). 652
⁵ Rem Koolhaas et.al., Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000). 652
a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity.” In effect he suggest that Lagos may represent the coming condition of the Western city, and in doing so calls into question the concept of a “city” itself.

6 Rem Koolhaas et.al., Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000). 653
Urbanism at the Scale of Architecture

If the urban is able to exist, even thrive, within the disconnected infrastructure of Lagos, could it not also begin to manifest itself in the infrastructurally connected but social fragmented suburban periphery? Could the dispersed, multi-centric exurban condition subvert the restrictions of its infrastructure and use what latent urbanism is present to create viable fragments of urban fabric dispersed throughout the expanding suburban ring?

In his book, Delirious New York, Koolhaas, suggests that architecture was the generator of the urban condition of New York rather than the commonly held belief of the reverse. At its simplest he documents deliberate action taken to produce the condition of the bustling metropolis; the creation of what Koolhaas defines as the “culture of congestion”. In its simplest manifestation this is exemplified by the Barrels of Love at Coney Island, a simple machine to counteract the loneliness and isolation of life in the metropolis. “Two horizontal cylinders – mounted in line – revolve slowly in opposite directions. At either end a small staircase leads up to an entrance. One feeds men into the machine, the other women. It is impossible to remain standing. Men and women fall on top of each other. The unrelenting rotation of the machine fabricates synthetic intimacy be-
between people who would never otherwise have met.”

The creation of a condition of density and chance encounter, no matter how limited, simple or artificial, is pervasive through much of Koolhaas’ work and represents the basic ingredients for the creation of the “urban”. As he and others have argued, the urban may be “less a product of the city as a determined place or a particular size than it is of diversity of culture, thought, and material substance.” While the monotony of the suburban periphery seems ubiquitous, this is a mere façade reinforced through nondescript tectonics and the thin disconnected state of the urban fabric. Conditions of density and substance may well be generated in a limited but meaningful sense throughout this landscape.

“The Urban...is a promiscuous, evolving manifold, to be distinguished whenever possible from the term ‘city.’ The urban may, and often does exist at the scale of a piece of architecture and conversely may fail to exist in city-sized agglomerates.”

—Sanford Kwinter
NL Architects: Basket Bar

A project by the same firm on the University of Utrecht campus brings many individual and seemingly contrasting aspects of campus life together in strikingly close proximity. The Basket Bar, as it is fittingly named, places a basketball court on top of a café and bookstore located in the heart of the campus. In the center of the court is a glass window, which looks directly down into the café. The winding entry down into the half sunken café doubles as an area for skateboarders to perform tricks. Once again embracing the push for individuality, the project brings a density and contrast of activity typically only found in urban cores to a remote campus. Programmatic juxtapositions such as this force us to break with traditional notions we have about our treatment and awareness of the space we occupy, how we use, and the people we share it with. Opportunities for this
programmatic juxtaposition abound in the suburban mall with the presence of personal and programmatic diversity. Alone, spaces for basketball, skateboarding, and sipping coffee would hold their ground well in the categorical non-places or “JunkSpace” of contemporary society. However, when placed in purposefully in close proximity they generate something larger than their individual use suggests, not to mention utilize space more efficiently. A basketball court is experienced in an entirely different manner when viewed from below. The altered perspective transforms what would be a nuisance in a café, into a subtle performance from above, casting dancing shadows. Transversing a skate park is nearly second nature on a board or bike, but walking through one makes one acutely more aware of our path, and of those around us.

1.05_Basketbar, skating area doubles as cafe entrance
Any-Space-Whatevers

In Lagos, architecture and what little infrastructure exists has been overthrown or even become a slave to urban forces. While this process/practice of infrastructural subversion has occurred in the third world, and expressed most distinctly in Lagos, the hyper-modernization in the western world has left us with an inverted condition. Urban sprawl has left the contemporary city dweller shackled to the limited and inflexible infrastructural network. The vast network has led to the development of an urban fabric so thin and disconnected it bears little resemblance to what can be conceived as a traditional city. This leaves few options for remediation using traditional planning techniques and requires as I will propose, a new understanding of public space and urbanism.

The dispersed and disconnected state of the suburban condition has left us with spaces devoid of meaning. Deleuze refers to these disconnected spaces as “any-space-whatevers”. As Gamble notes, “in terms of behavior, perception, and information, these ubiquitous spaces lead to no-where or what-ever.”9. Void of any particular significance to an individual or group they provide

no sense of place or foundation for social interaction. Koolhaas defines this space as “Junkspace” and argues that it goes well beyond the residual spaces in contemporary networks. Junkspace, most clearly articulated by the airport terminal, is in a constant state of repair, ever-changing, fake, and thin. Constantly changing but never improving. It is part of a contemporary society that wants “more and more”, where “more is more”.\(^\text{10}\) It has spread throughout the globalized world, and lives not just in architecture and infrastructure, but also has begun to move into ourselves with hair extensions, botox and callogen injections, and silicon implants. It is the clothes we wear, the food we eat, the places we work, live, play. Junkspace is everywhere but it is utterly meaningless.

In an attempt to fully understand the effect that these spaces have on contemporary suburban life, these spaces must

\(^{10}\) Rem Koolhaas, *Content* (Barcelona: Actar, 2004). 164
be clearly defined and categorized. What makes these “components of the fragmented remains of contemporary suburban life”\(^\text{11}\) so meaningful and ripe for intervention? These disconnected spaces, proliferated by restrictive zoning laws, are not naturally conducive to public gathering and interaction. These spaces are both caused by and enhance the isolation and detachment that arise from super-modernity.\(^\text{12}\) As such they are intertwined as part of the culture and collective memory of the exurban population. Their ubiquity is what makes them both detrimental yet central in suburban life.

**Changing Cultural and Urban Landscape**

The suburban resident sits at the forefront of a changing social landscape in which shopping “as much as we may deny or refuse it, ... has become one of the only means by which we experience public activity,”\(^\text{13}\) while communication technology has made it possible to connect to anyone at any moment in any place. Shopping has become so pervasive it has not only replaced


\(^{13}\) Rem Koolhaas et.al., *Mutations* (Barcelona: Actar, 2000): 149
the social aspect of urban life but has altered the space of the many other programs. “After centuries of developing it’s own typologies ... shopping has within the last two decades begun to expand into any program imaginable: airports, train stations, museums, military bases, casinos, theme parks, libraries, schools, universities, hospitals.”14 These institutions have repositioned themselves as retailer’s in order to attract people and increase revenue and while it is often looked upon with disdain, shopping has been used to revitalize these ailing institutions and even whole cities. In an attempt to bring about an urban density in the suburban landscape, the mostly likely place to find latent urbanism and the opportunity for increased social interaction is the mall.

Currently communication technology however, is making it increasingly difficult to encourage face-to-face interaction, to make someone pause for one moment, to define a place. Unhindered by limitations on movement or communication, urban dwellers’ perception of space has become completely distorted. McKenzie Wark in her essay “Telegram from nowhere,” details how space has been replaced with time. Because of the ease of transportation and communication, individuals are able to go anywhere, retrieve any information and contact anyone, all with remarkable immediacy. Beginning with the telegraph information now moves faster than anything in the

14 Rem Koolhaas et.al., Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000): 148
physical world ever could. Space no longer matters. Architecture, as the typical tool for defining space, is rendered useless. The vectoral has become the new paradigm. “In geometry, a vector is a line of fixed length but of no fixed position. It has definite dimensions, but potentially could start at any point whatever, and connect any point within its radius. With technology the vector might be the potential to connect one thing to another, a particular relation, but with no specific coordinates. The vectoral, in other words, is the technics of the open, of virtuality.”15 The need to enclose has lost all necessity whether it be the home, factory, mall, or whole suburb. Architecture then most move from creating enclosure to creating planes. Planes on which to move, and like communication technology, which “creates vectors that move information across space, architecture creates vectors that move information across time.”16 Communication technology has altered the way we communicate, work, and play to such a degree that interpersonal communication is in no way restricted by spatial proximity. In generating an urban condition it becomes necessary provide space for vectoral connection rather than spatial enclosure. Architecture, particularly in the suburban periphery must stand as a “hotspot” to broadcast from, not as a space of enclosure.

“Shopping malls have replaced the parks and squares that were ‘traditionally the home of free speech’ ... The economic lifeblood one found downtown has moved to suburban shopping centers, which have substantially displaced the downtown business districts as the centers of commercial and social activity... The predominant characteristic of the normal use of these properties is its all inclusiveness. Found at these malls are most of the uses and activities citizens engage in outside their homes... Within and without the enclosures are not only stores of every kind and size, but large open spaces available to the public and suitable for numerous uses. There is space to roam, to sit down, and to talk.”

—New Jersey Supreme Court Cheif Justice Robert N. Wilentz
Wilding

The warped conception of space and time discussed by Wark is not in any way a new phenomenon yet it is gradually taking a stronger hold on our daily lives. Sanford Kwinter is his essay “Wildness” discusses the “wild” nature of animal societies or natural phenomenon such as storms and earthquakes. Despite their seeming randomness they are functional as highly complex adaptive systems and have become the study of cutting edge computer programming. The Vietcong, he notes, we able use this fluid logic as a military tool during the Vietnam war to counteract the “American techniques of waging war on a schedule and within a numbered, geographical grid”\textsuperscript{17} By constantly changing sides, moving through tunnels, and setting ambushes, they were able to fight a “tactical war in time, and so strategically rendered themselves undefinable in space”\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{17} Sanford Kwinter, \textit{Far From Equilibrium} (Barcelona: Actar, 2008): 187
\textsuperscript{18} Sanford Kwinter, \textit{Far From Equilibrium} (Barcelona: Actar, 2008): 187
This contrast between two distinct ways of utilizing space was brought to the forefront of the American media following the brutal attack of a jogger in Central Park by young gang from Harlem. The New York Times published a map of the crime showing “two converging vectors of entirely disparate character and movement”. The gang’s path followed none of the prescribed routes through the organ landscape of central park. They ignored or even avoided the prescribes routes through the landscape defining a distinct way of carving space in sharp contrast to the upper class jogger who adhered to defined programs and pathways. The gang defined their own free movement through the park defacing or hassling anything they crossed paths with as “wilding”. The publication of this article and the map in particular placed “wilding” as a “new and terrifying word for urban drift; for ad-hocism; for the col-

19 Sanford Kwinter, *Far From Equilibrium* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008): 186
lective, unstable phenomenon of pack, mass, and crowd; for the spontaneous emergence of epidemic and “stim;” for perhaps most significantly, for the unruly and uncontrolled emancipation of self-organizing social forces from the rigid geometries of socially and behaviorally engineered urban space.”

These self-organizing social forces also manifest themselves in far less violent situations. Adriaan Geuze of West 8 notes that while public space is normally considered to be limited to neatly articulated public squares, picturesque parks and to an increasing extent limited to the retail realm, the contemporary city dweller yearns for something entirely different. Bored by the restrictive, clearly articulated spaces set aside for public use, the new demand is for “a near empty space for the free expression of creativity. A place to turn anonymity into expression; spectator into actor.”

20 Sanford Kwinter, Far From Equilibrium (Barcelona: Actar, 2008). 186
21 Andriaan Geuze, “Accelerating Darwin,” Ibelings, Hans et. al., Artificial Landscape
als flocked to empty industrial wastelands to explore, and create there own activity in spaces never designed for public use. These leftover spaces became a draw as an area without predetermined function where exploration and improvisation were necessary.

This self-appropriation of space has been documented in Antwerp, Belgium in the small ring road highway surrounding the center town. New activities of sports, leisure, and entertainment brought on by mass culture have found their place in these residual spaces nested among the large scale infrastructural elements setting of a chain reaction of new typologies, styles and structures. Dutch firm Neuteling Riedijk studied these “reactor vessel for mass culture” in an attempt to develop a set of planning instruments for working in these new social landscapes (see page 50-51).


22 <http://www.neutelings-riedijk.com/index.php?id=15,71,0,0,1,0>
“A new and terrifying word for urban drift; for ad-hocism; for the collective, unstable phenomenon of pack, mass, and crowd; for the spontaneous emergence of epidemic and “stim;” for perhaps most significantly, for the unruly and uncontrolled emancipation of self-organizing social forces from the rigid geometries of socially and behaviorally engineered urban space.”

—Sanford Kwinter
West 8: Schouwbergplein

In their design for the Schouwburgplein or Theater Square, in the heart of Rotterdam, Netherlands West 8 takes a unique approach to urban space design, which allows the individual to define and appropriate the space. Covering an underground parking garage, little is done to define or divide the massive space. Rather, the entire square is left completely flat, spatially defined by the surrounding city skyline, creating a public stage on which “the visitor becomes an actor or spectator.” The plaza is raised slightly with defined access points, making an entry onto the plaza a conscious act. The surface of the plaza is covered in a variety of different textures allowing users to claim and

23 West 8, West 8 (Geneve: Skira, 2000). 72
A space to “discover their freedom and choose their own sub-cultures, appropriate their own environment.”
—Adriaan Geueze

define their own space. Red masts mounted with spotlights, operable by the public, extend over the plaza turning all activity on the square into a public performance. Patches of materials such as wood, perforated steel and epoxy define zones for individual programs and will wear over time showing patterns and record a history of use.

Illustrations for their projects suggest an understanding of the urban forces of the city as lines and planes, which they work to intensify and heighten. As clearly illustrated in Theater Square, these forces are not necessarily shaped through intrusive built form but rather the possibility that public activity can shape and define the space itself.
The WOS 8 heat-exchange station in Leidsche Rijn, Netherlands designed by the Dutch firm NL Architects is an exceptional example of infrastructure positioned as a piece of the urban and cultural fabric. At first glance, this structure is quite unremarkable, and not surprisingly. The building, a monolithic black box, functions as the hub for hot water distribution (a byproduct from power generation at a local utility plant) to homes throughout the community. What would seem to be a blight on the landscape of a developing suburban neighborhood actually has several interesting details with urban implications. Under the roof edges there are both nesting boxes for birds and a roosting area for

“A monument to the communal spirit of the neighborhood, while responding subtly to the demands of individualization”

—Bart Lootsma
bats. A basketball hoop’s glass backboard provides the building’s only window. The faced facing the road is dotted with reflectors, which spell the building’s name when illuminated by passing vehicle headlights. Another face has rock climbing grips for practicing bouldering, a growing sport in the area despite the extremely flat nature of the Dutch landscape. “Added to the function of the building as a distribution point for heat, these features make it into a monument to the communal spirit of the neighborhood, while responding subtly to the demands of individualization.”

Though practiced under different pretences from the infrastructural subversion in Lagos, the natural social forces at work in Antwerp do not differ so greatly from the infrastructural subversion for shelter and economic gain seen in the former.

Kwinter suggests that the logic of wild systems that permeates natural phenomenon, military strategy, and social behavior, can also be applied designed systems. This application has been studied extensively since the mid-1980’s to create extremely intricate system that are “build up messily, in steps and layers, from approximate rather than in one fell swoop of assembly. Indirectness, it appears, is actually the secret to achieving a robust adaptive, flexible, and evolving design.”\(^{25}\) These systems are derived from the bottom up rather than from a determined whole. These “subsumption architectures” mimic the natural universe with their lack of central control and all contain a degree of wildness. This multiplicity and interconnectivity of parts inherent in these systems is central to the creation of the “urban” Kwinter argues. This “combined with the critical presence of a “thick time, allows for the open-ended interactions of parts – the hybridizations, blendings, and conflicts – that effectively destroy a structure’s determinism and that feed its wildness.”\(^{26}\) In this way, as was

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\(^{26}\) Sanford Kwinter, *Far From Equilibrium* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008): 189
mentioned at the opening of this thesis, these conditions may be met at the scale of a building and yet fail to exist at the scale of a city. Their largeness in a qualitative rather than an absolute sense is their key characteristic. As Kwinter notes “they are large in that they are complex (generated from an indeterminate number of distinct sources, distributed through many, or \( n \) dimensions), and fundamentally open (i.e., wild) and unfinished.”

**Control Space**

Despite the shifting order and natural fluid nature of social forces, and the new demand for individual expression, the mall is held in a stranglehold by its own systems of organization. Here the creation of space is driven by consumer and market forces, a hidden yet far more pervasive organization that shapes the retail landscape, one that, while built upon the information and actions of individuals, is under strict central control. These systems define and shape consumer space, both the space we experience and the infrastructure that supports it. These systems generates, as artist Sze Tsung Leong terms it; control space. As he defines it, control space is not consciously designed but rather a “computed, calibrated, assessed, predicted, optimized” landscape gener-

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27 Sanford Kwinter, *Far From Equilibrium* (Barcelona: Actar, 2008): 189
ated from information. It is the result of the desire to keep up with the ever-changing demands of the modern world. Control space attempts to make architecture as flexible as possible to accommodate the constantly changing needs of the market. It attempts to be as accessible as possible with computer programs that allow retailers and developers to strategically map their developments. It is driven by “their need to understand, quantify, record, regulate, manipulate, and coerce the processes, circumstance, and flows that influence and determine sales.”29 Control space is meant to be as inconspicuous as possible and functions most efficiently when the consumer views it as the natural order.

Based on its organizational underpinnings control space could be considered to be a derivative of the subsumption architectures as defined by Kwinter, but they are far from

29 Sze Tsung Leong, “Control Space,” Rem Koolhaas et. al, Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000): 189
it. While seemingly controlled by a myriad of inputs built from the bottom up, adaptive in nature, and with an unknown end result, they are severely limited in their breadth and rely on a constant back and forth check between consumer input and the retailer’s bottom line. Rather than generating a working system derived from individual input, control space is a slave to individual demand and in turn, the consumer is a slave to control space derived from outdated information based upon selectively chosen input parameters. Control space is derived from incomplete and selectively limited information, which leads to a wasteland of residual spaces “interrupted at times by moments of consumer saturation and activity.”

Might there be a way to work with or around this present system? Leong himself asks, “how totalizing is control space? Since it is mainly engineered to optimize and maximize

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Sze Tsung Leong, “Control Space,” Rem Koolhaas et. al., Mutations (Barcelona: Actar, 2000): 193
profits at minimum expense, at the most rapid rate, and under the most voraciously competitive conditions, its focus is inherently short lived, inherently desperate, inherently capricious.”31 For this reason control space is in constant search of new ground. However, due to its imperfect nature gaps certainly exist in the system. It is simply a matter of indentifying them and exploiting them to the greatest degree possible.

Reaching a Critical Mass
The shopping mall has become a ubiquitous presence in the lives of suburban city dwellers and in its many forms is one of the last terminal human activities. It is often the primary and sometimes the only commercial hub individuals will use. Due to the disconnected nature of the suburban condition, malls are often the only place where individuals experience a concentration of people outside of the city center. They therefore present a prime situation for urban intervention. Despite the quantity of residents, many malls and their halo of parking are of too great a scale to allow for any viable public density. The open pavement, devoid of structure except for the minimal \textit{paint lines}, is strikingly similar to a public piazza, although because they are sized for maximum

\footnote{Sze Tsung Leong, “Control Space,” Rem Koolhaas et. al., \textit{Mutations} (Barcelona: Actar, 2000): 195}
occupancy needs they are often only partially utilized or are stratified by lines of cars. Yet in some cases public life is still able to thrive on this “astral plane.” Individuals participating in boondocking look to the comforting uniformity big box stores offer and choose to call their parking lots home for the night. In less transitory cases teenagers will meet at the mall lot after a movie or a family will congregate after Sunday mass. In some rare cases the concentration of people becomes great enough to reach a critical mass where interaction no longer occurs between individuals but between these groups. In other instances people will organize specific activities to be held in the parking lot, inserting their own program into the space and completely reorganizing it for their own use. Activities as diverse as tailgating, car-top picnics, boondocking, skateboarding, drug deals, car tuner club meetings, after church family gatherings, break dancing, Go-cart racing, and car washing have been witnessed. A retail zone with an existing population density such as this provides the greatest material and opportunity for the creation of a density of program and interaction and in turn the generation of a unique urban condition.

_1.1 The medium for control space is information. Control space reduces space to a mere receptacle for numerical quantification

_1.2 Space is evaluated through an entirely modernized vocabulary: no longer is it geometrically composed or visualized but computed, calibrated, assessed, predicted, optimized

_2.1 Control space is the paradigm by which shopping understands and shapes the city

_2.5 It operates most efficiently when the consumer perpetuates it subconsciously, when it is seen as the natural course of modernization

_2.6 Control spaces is inherently flexible
3.1 Control space deforms what used to be considered the urban

4.1 In spatial terms, much of the city is generated by default rather than intent... comprised of control and residual spaces.

4.3 It permeates New York’s 42nd street as much as it does Walmart

5.1 Control space inevitably produces gaps, contradictions, perhaps even moments of freedom situated not so much outside but alongside and within control

5.2 To what degree are the complexities and unpredictabilities of city beyond its control?

—Sze Tsung Leong
3. SITE CONTEXT
Shady Lane Plaza

Unique in its scale and location, the site of the project was chosen due to the level of latent publicness observed. A critical mass as previously detailed was long ago reached. Located approximately 10 miles from downtown Cincinnati, Shady Lane plaza is located at the intersection of State route 264 and Shady Lane in Miami Township. First constructed in 1975 it has been expanded twice to accommodate the vast increase in suburban development with the area and subsequent demand for new retail space. Containing less than 30,000 square feet of retail space in two separate buildings it is not of a scale or dimension to warrant a comparison to the typical “strip” or mega-mall which may contain one hundred thousand to well over one million square feet of conditioned, interior space. While too often lumped under the general moniker of the “strip mall”, retail development occurs in three primary
typologies; the mega-mall, the strip, and the mini-mall. The mega-mall is entirely encircled by a parking lot and is composed of many small chain outlets bookended by large anchor tenants all linked by an interior conditioned space. This interior mixing chamber is the last vestige of social space in the mall. The strip is composed of a variety of retail stores along both sides of a large vehicular thoroughfare, which can stretch for miles. Each store often has its own parking lot and pedestrian links between stores is uncommon. Here, the notion of shopping as a social activity is abandoned in favor of efficiency.\textsuperscript{33} Strip developments often have a combination of autonomous, big-box stores and mini-malls. The mini-mall houses several small independent businesses and typically has one or more anchor stores with all units sharing one mass of parking. Due to their geographic isolation these mini-malls are sometimes referred to as island malls. In all of the typological forms, the actual retail structure is set back from the street in accordance with zoning laws and the spaced between is filled with the no-man’s land of parking.

Shady Lane Plaza falls into the mini-mall category and along with a few other businesses surrounding the intersection forms an island of commercial development surrounded by a zone of ever-increasing residential development. Over the past 20 years as more local residential subdivi-

\textsuperscript{33} Lola Sheppard and Mason White, “Flatspace: Exurbanism and Infrastructural Landscape,” 306090 09: Regarding Public Space (2006): 128
sions are built, the mall has seen a dramatic increase in traffic. Its relative isolated location to other retail outlets has also been beneficial to this trend. It lies over 3 miles from the nearest mini-mall, nearly 5 from the nearest retail strip, and over 10 from the nearest mega-mall. However, this does not seem to fully explain why this mall has seen such an influx of activity. An analysis of traffic patterns in the surrounding area show that unlike many retail malls this one is not passed by many of the users on a day-to-day basis. While it is on a primary road, more than ¾ of the local homes within 3 miles of the mall use other roads to access the highway and other primary roads to travel out of the community. This means two related thing, first that much of the traffic along the main road is due to people coming directly to the mall, and second that most of the people are treating the mall as a specific destination rather than a through-point of travel.
While there are homes within walking distance, and inter-business pedestrian traffic, nearly everyone arrives to the mall by car. No matter the distance of their trip, purpose of their visit, or duration of their stay, each person must maneuver their vehicle through the parking lot and procure a spot. One cannot avoid the restrictions and opportunities presented by the interaction of automobile and pedestrian traffic in a parking lot. The addition of static elements presents a tri-fold relationship between the body, the vehicle, and the architecture. The use of an automobile as an extension of oneself to progress through an architectural setting is also not new particularly in the suburban condition. Many businesses from fast food chains, to banks, deli’s, pharmacies and video stores have drive up windows. Also common in the surrounding area are drive through convenience stores, which allow vehicles to pass through the heart of the structure. Drive-in-Theaters and drive-in diners are far less common but play strongly into the memory of older residents and are still very much a part of the then new suburban automobile culture of the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Malls often have a variety of retail outlets irrespective of their relative size and this mall is no exception. The mall itself is composed of two separate buildings and the surrounding area has many other commercial buildings. The primary mall building is “anchored” by a moderately sized grocery store and deli with an in-house dry-cleaning service. The next two largest tenants are a
Pizzeria and Bakery. Both have areas for sit down dining, but utilize a great deal of space for food production for off site delivery. A hair salon, sports bar, Subway sandwiches and Chinese food fill the remaining spots. The smaller two-story building on the mall site has a Buffalo wing and burger restaurant along side an ice cream parlor. The upper floor houses more office related functions such as an accountant’s and doctor’s offices, and a small drug addiction research and treatment center. Across the street is a fire station, HVAC repair service, and an auto repair service which also has an auto-racing team. As we move further away from the mall, particularly along the primary road, we find that many of the homes have been converted to support a variety of business enterprises from insurance companies to dentists, and home remodelers. This is due to a concerted effort by the township to develop a light commercial buffer between residential homes and the primary mall.

No attempt is being made here to suggest that the situation presented at this mall is in some way an isolated incident. The increase in population density that has occurred around this mall is in no way unique. The local population in no way prefers an urban social setting more than another. Yet its location and scale have led to the development of an urban condition that has not developed elsewhere. In this way this site alone and the project presented here can act as a
model for retail development throughout the suburban periphery. The social and urban theories presented in previous chapters could be applied in the design and development of a mall at any scale. Certain opportunities could be afforded with at a larger scale that are simply not feasible here yet, large malls with vast conditioned, interior environments provide greater population density but the generation of an urban condition is superficial at best. These almost sterile environments of artificiality are so engulfed in systems of control that a re-design would seem near impossible. The larger scale also demands far more infrastructural support and community and business acceptance. However, if developed from scratch with the theoretical concepts presented here, these large malls become more viable social centers. The scale, and most importantly, the latent publicness that exists at this mall have led to its selection as the site for this proposal.
4. DESIGN METHOD
Architect/Planner as “Ghost Writer”

Drawing heavily from Interboro’s work, rather than formulating an entirely new mall typology or a redesign of the suburban condition, documentation of the site was done including all activity that currently takes place there. Not just limited to documenting individual action, the project looks at the specific scale and programs surrounding this mall, and the larger urban context to determine what conditions set it apart from the typical retail strips. Questions of whether or not this condition is unique and possibly be recreated under different conditions must be addressed. Not only can the actions of individuals and their reappropriation of the mall space act as an example but also the conditions surrounding the mall as a canvas for this action can serve as model for future development.

This portion of the project documents what latent publicness exists and serve to show that these exurban places can be formulated as viable pieces of the urban fabric through a strategic repositioning and overlapping of suburban public programs.
**Interboro Partners: Blot Project**

Interboro’s work is particularly pertinent in this study of suburban culture and organization in light of their research focus and design methodology. Their self-described “anti-heroic, sober” design approach is grounded in rigorous observation and analysis. Their project, Improve Your Lot!, documents the slow expansion of Detroit landowners onto adjacent vacant property. This, New Suburbanism, as they call it is changing the face of Detroit’s dense urban fabric. Rather than being purchases by developers for mega projects, adjacent homeowners have snatched the lots progressing a slow bottom-up approach to urban redevelop-

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Interboro is clear to define their work here as simple documentation, as The New Suburbanism is not a proposal but rather a process, which they hope to promote. They advocate the notion of the urban planner as simply a “ghostwriter”, the autobiographer of the suburban condition. The urban planners role is not to rewrite the story or dictate the ending, but rather to make the story heard and get others excited about practices that occur on a daily basis.

Interboro Partners: Life With Landbanking

In their proposal for the Dead Malls Competition Interboro documented Dutchess Mall in Fishkill, NY and all the activity that occurs in its surprisingly not-so-dead state. Despite the loss of over 90 percent of the tenants, the mall is still used for a variety of unusual and illicit activities. The original landlord is currently sitting on the property in the hopes that he will be able to sell in the future for a large profit, a practice known as landbanking. In the meantime, taking inspiration from local residents and businesses, Interboro proposes to “accumulate an endless number of small proposals out of the specifics of the place and the demands of the region, with the hope that some degree of urbanity
will emerge. Interboro employs extensive documentation of the site, including tenant history, parking patterns, circulation patterns, current businesses, photography of people and activities, and personal interviews to highlight the true nature of the mall and potential it holds with little need for intervention. As in Detroit, the notion of a master plan is rejected with a focus rather on drawing from emergent urban conditions and clarifying and intensifying their implementation.
Cast of Characters

In order to define areas for programmatic use, whether distinct or ambiguous, stated or interpreted, we must first understand the types of people that use the mall and their individual reason for arrival.

Despite its central location in rolling woodland-turned McMansion subdivisions, the mall sees a myriad of different personalities from older women exercising at Curves to young skateboarders idling about. Each of these individuals has a unique way that they view, occupy and appropriate the space and likely has a personal opinion on its current state and future development.

The township is currently executing a plan to develop the intersection occupied by the mall into the “city center” of the township. This plan shows an implied understanding of the urban forces at work in this periphery neighborhood if only at a superficial level. This also highlights a unique alignment between social, political, and economic interests surround this mall.

In this way this mall in particular serves as a much better landscape for the implementation of the earlier addressed social theories and urban conditions. Any large mage-mall, with its large program and massive customer population could be designed from scratch with certain conditions of wildness, space for expression, and the opportunity for control space manipula-
4.06_Mall Citizen Profiles
tion taken into account, however this mall provides the added benefit and challenge of the inclusion of existing infrastructure and social conditions. These not only provide a more specific design parameters but also allow for the exploitation of the overlap of common interests, which in the end will generate a much denser urban condition. The limited extent of this mall's customer base will allow for a deeper understanding of their personal use of the mall and while it may have a relatively small immediate impact on an urban scale, it can act as a model to a far greater extend for easy implementation across a range of conditions.

Space for Expression/ Experimentation

As Adriaan Geuze notes when referring to designing for this new demand on urban space, “the real challenge is to create space and textures for city dwellers to colonize in their
turn.” Early observation of the site shows a great deal of both individuals and business appropriating objects and space for their own use. As mentioned before, most individuals drive to the mall and some rather than eating inside gather around there automobile or define a space with it to eat, congregate, and socialize. Some businesses wish to break from the banal homogeneity of the retail structure and define a new image. The encouragement of this spatially, programmatically and visually will promote an urbanity to develop.

The primary hindrance to this goal of self-colonization is the ever-present control space. Overlaying the knowledge of control spaces with the current activities of different user groups as shown before, interventions will be proposed that give residents the freedom and incentive to intervene in this environment without drastically disrupting other economic, social and political systems.

Neutelings Riedijk Architects

An urban study of the expanding use of interstitial zones along the ring road surrounding European cities, particularly Antwerp Belgium, the project presents development models and typological studies in ways to engage this expanding use of these open non-places for modern social activity. The project presents a phenomenological study into the changing urban, social and economic dynamic that is occurring in European cities as the suburbs expand, separated by the ring highways from the old city centers. Most interesting is the observation that building density is not the result of programmatic density, as is the case in the city center. Rather, in this ring zone, “a minimum
of spatial facilities can activate a maximum of mass events. A field roped off is sufficient for a mammoth spectacle, a few letters on the side of a shed can pull a vast crowd, a section of raised motorway can become a market kilometers long.

The positioning of new social activities, brought on by mass culture, concentrated within this separating band serves several purposes. It first fills these void spaces with activity, creating a modern city gate which links the dense city center with the dispersed suburbs. They thus become not only more accessible to the public but become a spectacle, activating this cinematic driving experience, as they are highly visible along the steadily traveled ring highway.

Program Collection and Combination

Taking further inspiration from Interboro Partner’s observational strategy programs proposed for the site are an agglomeration of activities and spaces located throughout the suburb which could be transposed into this retail landscape. Many programs, due to zoning and space restrictions, are dispersed throughout the exurban landscape despite the possible benefit, both economically and urbanistically, of its proximity to more dense retail development. Branch libraries, swim clubs, playgrounds, and community centers, if positioned alongside retail development could work to the benefit of both and with controlled overlap, could generate space for the other activities that occur in an ad hoc manner in empty spaces, or in residential settings throughout the exurban landscape. These activities such as street hockey, barbeques, and tailgating, if given the proper forum could occur collectively in the public setting of the mall rather than dispersed through private setting.
The collection and overlap of these programs and activities with retail will work to generate the programmatic density desired. Their juxtaposition will cause chance interactions between differing user groups and generate a unique urban condition.
“The real challenge is to create space and textures for city dwellers to colonize in their turn.”

—Adriaan Geuze
Proposal

Combining the two contrasting natures of economic driven control space and social “wild” processes is the challenge and opportunity presented by this site. The strategy is to first break with the existing conventional stratification of three zones of parking, circulation and infrastructure to allow the site and program to breathe. The traditional hierarchy of parking, retail and back of house zones no longer exists, causing greater interaction among individuals and programmatic overlaps will generate a greater urban density. Dispersed among this new organization are “free” zones, lightly defined, compartmentalized areas for varying activities. These spaces link to one another and generate a variety of pathways through the new retail infrastructure.

While a number of strategies were studied based on this general concept the once which presents the most
potential based on inherent pragmatic restrictions of retail development is a strategy which simply breaks the duality of surface parking and building mass. The use and experience of the space is immediately altered once a simple movement from automobile to retail store is no longer possible. The street itself is wrapped into the site making a bypass of the mall no longer possible; rather the space must be deliberately navigated whether the intention is to stop or simply pass through.

One strategy is to turn the existing mall and surrounding parcels into a vast zone of parking. Giving into the control of parking over the mall an oversaturation occurs which allows This parking plane is then put through a series of transformations depending upon the varying programmatic, topographic, and contextual needs. The parking field is cut, folded and lifted to turn what was once an empty roofscape or a nondescript lot, into occupiable space for parking and other uses. Every space
and surface is considered accessible to automobile, and/or pedestrian.

The changed position of parking breaks the traditional path of an individual who arrives at the mall. Customers must now navigate the parking landscape more consciously, rather than mindlessly idling through row after row to find a spot near their destination. The movement of the automobile becomes just as control as that of pedestrians. The procession from the car to the store is also changed. A customer must now navigate now a sloped parking plane, or pass from one plane to another. This transition will take place at key points where program overlaps occur, turning all pedestrian movement into an event.
Concluding Remarks

The ways in which we communicate, interact, and express ourselves is dramatically changing. The traditional platforms of interaction are no longer viable. A new strategy which embraces new technologies, the increased demand for individualization, and architecture’s changing role in defining space is needed. This thesis presents a model which could generate a network of urban hot spots throughout the suburban periphery turning a monotonous landscape into a multi-centric condition.

In determining a viable strategy for the implementation of an urban strategy for the suburban periphery one must always keep in mind the suburban dwellers themselves. This thesis argues that despite the exponential expansion of the suburbs, often coinciding with an exodus from the urban core, suburban residents value their privacy and even the degree of isolation that can come with it in their private residence but are still social beings. One can lament the detrimental environmental factors of urban sprawl but it is simply not an issue for the vast majority of those who perpetuate it. The social isolation however is an issue that is of growing concern at the individual and community level. The connectivity found in the urban core exists in the exurban, it has simply undergone and expansion in space and compression in time. The suburban mall provides
the last remaining point of connectivity for social interaction for many residents. Rather than per-
sisting with superficial attempts at defining urban centers, we must simply embrace the generic
model of the mall. Allow the mall to be the catch-all as more and more programs fall under the
umbrella of consumerism. Formulate it to be the nexus for the social and communication vectors
in space; to be both a forum for a say in the consumer marketplace and a place to broadcast ideas
and share information.

However, the pragmatic issues facing this goal are complex and would require a fundamen-
tal shift in the position of the mall owner, customer, and community as to the relationship of eco-
nomic consumption and social interaction in their neighborhood. Currently, the consumerism that
drives the mall’s existence also holds it in a stranglehold dictating its development strictly by the
numbers. But this inherent weakness can also be its strength. Playing into this system of control
can lead to a widening in control gaps and the development of “free” space for individual action
and community interaction.

The existence of a latent urbanism and the desire for a suburban social “urbanism” on the
chosen site is clear and is surely present elsewhere. A ground up approach rooted in the observa-
tion of the surrounding community and their personal, economic, and political interests can lead
to a renewed place within non-places of the suburban retail landscape.
“There is no central control, and the ‘design’ does not come from the whole and trickle down to the parts, but rather travels in the opposite direction. “

—Sanford Kwinter
6. Key Texts
Documenting the process of the slow transformation of the dense residential Detroit neighborhoods, Interboro’s design process is of key value here. While many designers and government organizations struggle to decide how to deal with vacant lots dispersed throughout Detroit, which are depleting the city’s tax revenue, individuals have begun to acquire adjacent lots whether through legal purchase or other means. To date, little attention has been paid to these individuals improving their situation through “blotting” and who are dramatically reshaping the urban landscape. Through a great deal of on-site research throughout suburbs combined with individual case studies of different blots as they are called, a story begins to emerge. Interboro’s stance is to simply make this story heard. The individuals who are reshaping the urban fabric do not have the voice to make their story known. In fact, on a case-by-case basis, their story and use of adjacent lots is not glamorous and mildly interesting at best. Collectively, however, they have unknowingly developed a system of urban renewal and are dramatically altering the landscape for the better. Interboro seeks to document and disseminate this process so that it may be encouraged and implemented further.

In his essay Geuze describes the dynamic change that has occurred to the urban city-dweller across many scales. At a societal level a new culture has emerge that is more independent, able to travel great distances at ease, has unlimited access to technology and mobility. This culture allows people to “discover their freedom and choose their own sub-cultures, appropriate their own environment.”

This new culture is in a constant state of movement connecting the fragmented urban landscape, under a constant barrage of images. Information, communication, gratification are instantaneous; space has been replaced with time (the subject of an essay by McKenzie Wark I have yet to discuss). For Geuze, this culture has expressed itself most clearly in the Maasvlakte, a huge piece of land used for a variety of industrial processes. Despite a nearby area set aside specifically recreation, people drive out of their way to dogseld, hand glide, and deep-sea dive among the oil refineries and industrial harbors. Geuze argues that this culture yearns for new places to experiment rather than romantic or eclectic spaces. This notion plays strongly in West 8’s design for the Schouwburgplein (Theatre Square) in Rotterdam. A near empty space for the free expres-

sion of creativity. A place to turn anonymity into expression; spectator into actor. Although far removed from the Dutch landscape geographically, the mall and parking lot in particular provide a similar blank slate for free expression so cherished by contemporary city dwellers.

Sheppard and White focus on the systematic redevelopment of the big-box shopping mall through a process of specific design strategies. Through the adjustment of existing conditions in this wasteland they hope to foster new activity. Accepting the control of functionality and economic needs on these exurban “flatspaces” and therefore the impossibility of creating a cultural or regional identity, the goal is to utilize existing local patterns to increase their uncertain and volatile nature.

They organize their design within three filters of program, parking, and landscape, each with three strategies, although it is unclear whether each filter or strategies is meant to be cross-bread or applied exclusively based on individual patterns and conditions. They are clear to define the strategies as merely tactics rather than fully developed design proposals.

Their proposed interventions, rather than inserting something new entirely, generate “new relational patterns between pre-existing components. The ensuing conflict between the tactical interventions and the intuitive efficiency of the retail corridor provides provocative impulses for emerging anecdotes.”

The first two program arrangement strategies devise ways of program re-alignment to promote greater cross-breading or collision between different user groups. The third accepts

the ubiquity of the automobile and proposes a slow transformation of the mall into a giant drive-through. The parking strategies disperse the parking and generate a greater interface between parking, retail, and the landscape. The landscape strategies take this interface further, placing parking and program within landscape elements and vice-versa.

Michael Gamble as part of an ongoing research into the “fragmented remains of contemporary urban life.” While working toward the same goal of increasing social interaction in these non-places as Sheppard and White, Gamble views these spaces as open to the construction of social identities. In order to do so he examines the social, political, economic and cultural layers of this segment of the suburban condition. The article in 306090 draws from his personal documentation, research and the design studios used to further these. In an essay entitled “Spaces of Momentary Encounter in the Generic City: Cross Media Analysis,” he focuses on spaces and structures generated from the widespread culture of commodity consumption in post-modern development. Analysing these spaces directly and as they are portrayed in media, he presents them through the filters of time, space, memory, and gender. In the studio, a catalog of these spaces is created and grouped into the strip-joint, parking lot, and public infrastructure and existing re-appropriation techniques are used as inspiration for new implementations. Also part of the studio, though not well documented in the article, is a series of readings concerning differing concepts of public space, democracy, and control.


Both Gamble and Sheppard and White note the issues of control in these generic retail spaces. Sze Tsung Leong clearly defines the conditions of control space and its ubiquity and contradictions. It is a completely modern creation computed through the input of data to generate not “space” as traditionally conceived, but statistics that can be highlighted, manipulated, or suppressed. For retail, control space is governed by the need for efficiency and battle for sales and is easily accessible through computer programs to allow businesses so discover how often, why, when, and at what price people purchase goods. This process of space creation by default rather than intent he argues has a residual effect; an apparent dichotomy of residual and control spaces, which shape the entire urban landscape. Because input conditions are always in flux and the focus is constantly, rapidly shifting, these spaces become interchangeable an even indistinguishable, leaving gaps of freedom. It is the discovery and exploitation of these gaps that is of interest here and which has already been documented. The ubiquity of these systems I also call into question. At a smaller scale, where individual and community interests play a larger role over the corporate, are control spaces restricted and, their grip loosened; can they be manipulated to a greater degree?

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Wark discusses the impact that technology has had on the public realm and the conflict with traditional theories of spatial control and enclosure. She argues that the clear definition of space is no longer achievable and architecture should thus be less concerned with the creation and enclosure of space. Rather, the process of vectorization that has occurred increasing communication connections and breaking down traditional means of public spatial control should drive architecture to create planes on which individuals can make connections across time rather than space.
Books/Journals:


**Web:**


[http://www.interboropartners.net/2008/however-unspectacular/](http://www.interboropartners.net/2008/however-unspectacular/)
UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI

Date: 9-Apr-2010

I, Ryan W Roettker, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Architecture

in Architecture (Master of)

It is entitled:

Urban Latency: Potential in the Suburban Retail Landscape

Student Signature: ________________________________

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee Chair: Michael McInturf, MARCH

Rebecca Williamson, PhD

5/7/2010

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