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Route through Concrete: Employing cultural appropriation to restructure America's strip malls

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Route through Concrete:

Employing cultural appropriation to restructure the uniform envelopes of America’s strip malls

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on human appropriation into a transitioning retail structure of the American suburban neighborhoods. There is a current phenomenon of immigrants settling into suburban environments, and at the same time closely carrying their cultural heritage. How can an individual change their environment to fit their own needs and desires while only being one part of a larger whole? By studying the differing perceptions of political, social and physical boundaries, these small business owners will methodically implement a way to break the confines of the encasement of a strip mall. How these businesses grow and expand, diminish and contract, can influence how the building is restructured through time. By exploring the everyday, a method of implementing changes will be developed to continually alter the structure of the strip mall to better serve both the entrepreneur and the neighborhood.

The intention of this thesis is to reveal a method by which retailers of all cultures can express their identity through how they appropriate space within specified boundaries. To accomplish this, it will be necessary to explore means by which to express this difference in culture to the ‘outside’ to allow people to be more socially accepting and aware. These two objectives will in turn have a positive residual effect on the suburban community by improving the now declining conditions of the suburbs as well as empowering ethnic entrepreneurs to open and grow in their business ventures.
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Introduction

Six months in an unknown culture and location is definitely a life altering experience. During my most recent architectural internship in Makati (a municipality of Metro Manila), Philippines I was considered “ethnic”. Well knowing that the daily street greetings of “Good morning, Ma’am” were not offered to everyone as they headed to work, I found it difficult to explore and involve myself in my surroundings without feeling like I was in a place I didn’t belong. By accepting that, it was easier to play along and take in as much as possible of an unfamiliar standard of living.

Observing a world full of karaoke bars, street food, and jeepney transportation led to discoveries of how a system without strict building standards works for and against the occupants. According to the 2007 census data, Manila is the densest city in the world. While not much of my time was spent within the city proper itself, it was apparent that the people living in the residential portion of Makati were not afforded much room to move. Every available space is used and in constant transition. A continuous pink line on the sidewalk (Fig. 0.02) marks the furthest allowable extents of a built structure, yet transportable shops set up on the sidewalk are not considered an inconvenience to the pedestrians but just a way of life and even a place to get a quick bite to eat.

The title of this thesis, “Route through Concrete” is an interpretation of how people can form their own paths around systems that seem stationary and make them work towards their own needs. A former consideration was to use a homonym and spell the title with the word “root” to signify the strength of the individual to make their mark and alter the environment around them. This metaphor implies the ability of a tree root to break through sidewalks or crack foundations. While this was not implemented because it felt like an utterly cliché statement on the empowerment of an individual, this thought and experience was the main source of inspiration in which to situate a thesis question.
One goal of this thesis is to design a system that can be construed to meet the needs of the individual who will be working within boundaries already set in place: the appropriator. The system should provide necessary tools to the appropriator, but is otherwise flexible. It should be open to manipulation to fit the uses within a set of rules provided by the society, but also work for any “consumer” of that society: no matter what cultural background. Culture should show through the framework and display its colors, most likely through alterations of the contiguous spaces. Within these standards, the design should create an interesting environment that not only works for the owners of the venue, but also for those who come to use it. It should provide the users an opportunity to form their own signature within the context of what they are given to work with. The strip mall should become a place where displaced local cultures can be articulated in a new local level.

Another goal is to understand where the architect’s role is within this analysis and design. More specifically, what is the architect’s role when evaluating social questions regarding cultural influences in architectural design? Instead of taking an imperial stance and imposing a “perfect” solution, the architect should instead work as an anthropologist. The architect’s role might be to observe and apply their understanding without forming opinions or pushing the design toward a single conclusion. Through the designer’s humility, a mutual adaptation can arise out of the cyclical motion of the leasing and reuse of a strip mall.

There are two main objectives with this thesis. First, it aims to allow retailers of all cultures to express their identity through their appropriation of space within the boundaries set by a strip mall. Second, this thesis will explore ways to express these cultural differences to the ‘outside’ to allow people to be more socially accepting and aware. These two objectives will in turn have a residual effect on the suburban community by improving the now declining conditions of the suburbs as well as empower ethnic entrepreneurs to open and grow in their business ventures.
1.0 American Strip Mallitecture

“A city is more than a place in space, it is a drama in time.”

Patrick Geddes
1.1 Development of the Suburban Retail Structure

Shopping centers, including things such as malls and big box retail, did not become popular in the United States until after World War II, when automobile ownership greatly increased and a massive nationwide population movement to the suburbs took place. New highways and traffic patterns changed how the once primary arterial roads from the city were used. Because the methods of transportation and destination where changing, entrepreneurs responded by locating nearby to capitalize on their attractive forces. Small retailers joined together and put up strip malls: blocks fronting the main streets that placed many small stores and a generous amount of parking along these accentuated routes.¹ These “pirating” stores openly, but subversively, took advantage of the otherwise threatening competition of the shopping centers. They exploited the shopping center’s publicity, the pull of its bigger business, and the changes in traffic patterns due to its construction.

At that time, the strip mall developments were described as having an “uncontrolled and chaotic” character, unlike the larger shopping centers that presented a “pleasant” appearance to the surrounding residences. They were also attributed with diminishing the nearby residential property values, the deterioration of the visual quality of the neighborhood, and the blighting of surrounding areas.² Because many of these opinions still remain, questions arise of how have these strip malls been able to last for so long, and why is the same model still being constructed along today’s roads? How has it come to be that this shopping plaza has been unofficially adopted as one of America’s quintessential archetypes?

Before people such as Edward Ruscha, these banal things on the landscape meant nothing more than convenience. But when photographed from a camera attached to a moving vehicle, these places transformed into something more. (Figure 1.12) Without any attention to situate a specific object in a frame, somehow this panorama of all the buildings on the Sunset Strip or rather a collection of facts is considered to be an influential critique in modern

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¹ Rick Bonus, Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2000), 75.
² Rick Bonus, Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2000), 76.
art of the everyday. Now we can see even gasoline stations as having “angles, colors and shapes, like trees”, as the artist has put it, capable, in his hands, of epic re-presentation.

Robert Venturi explained it the best in “Learning from Las Vegas,” stating “If it is so bad, then why is it so inspiring?” While they have been constructed as a non-place and an anonymous catchall, these strips represent what the population uses every day- a beauty salon, family dentist, ethnic restaurant, dry cleaner, grocery market, or any other small business. These utilitarian sheds are one of the most honest forms of retail, observing our consumptive nature by providing an architecture of convenience.

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1.2 Assessing the Current Situation

In March of 2008, Chris Leinberger, a professor of urban planning at the University of Michigan, coined the term “Slumburbia” after considering the paradigms that most U.S. cities have inadvertently been following. He reasons that Americans are undergoing a fundamental shift in where they want live, work, and play forming and it is not just a normal cyclical downturn in the suburban environment. Leinberger voices that the American people have structurally overbuilt retail, office, and housing, and have done so in the wrong places. In order to understand the full extent of the term slumburbia, it is necessary to review the events that began in the 1940s.

The suburban transformation took almost half a century to complete, as first people, then retail, then jobs moved out of cities and into new subdivisions, malls, and office parks. This move left behind vacant real estate, a financially poorer residential base, and rising crime. More recently, within the previous decade, the suburbs have continued to grow at a quick rate as the cities gentrified, but American metropolitan residential patterns and cultural preferences currently mirror what they were in the 1940s. “Most Americans now live in single-family suburban houses that are segregated from work, shopping, and entertainment; but it is urban life that is culturally associated with excitement, freedom, and diverse daily life.”

Just as in the forties, the real-estate market has begun to react and the future of suburbs lends itself to simple predictions. With their hollow doors, gypsum walls, particleboard floors, and asphalt-shingle roofs, these cheaply built and quickly constructed homes will not respond well to future restoration as older inner-city neighborhoods have allowed. By the time the housing market is again on the rise, these structures will already be in disrepair, but will not hold any architectural significance or historical qualities worthy of renovation.

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5 This statement is referencing events in Lee County, Florida where the suburbs are laden with drug violence, gangs pillaging half-empty subdivisions for scrap metal, skateboarders reclaiming the pools of abandoned McMansions, and whole streets of dead lawns spray-painted green.
With the U.S. unemployment rate hovering around 10 percent and the housing market still on a decline,\textsuperscript{7} it's only natural to wonder whether America’s recent economic decline is reversible. While many systems are in need of reform, thankfully the country has proven a cycle of crisis and renewal. The U.S. should realize this and nurture the economic forces that have renewed the economy in the past.

1.3 Future Considerations

With deterioration imminent, there is now a necessity to create a more appealing environment on these fringes of the city. While it is unwise to suggest that the mass public should denounce the car, or any facet of the ‘American dream’, certain models can be implemented, and have already begun to take place, to rejuvenate these suburban communities. Most are not yet lost to foreboding decay, and in order to reverse this path, a paradigm shift needs to take place rather than a paradigm paralysis. This is not to state that the strip malls are the only answer to reviving the suburban structure, but they have many of the ingredients to facilitate this evolution.

The shopping strips are not an enemy to the community or to the economics of the country. Some ways they may provide the opportunity for revitalization are:

- Space is affordable.
- This in turn attracts small businesses to be created and located within.
- These small businesses feed the local economy.

One example of this is the entry by the architectural firm Marlene Imirzian and Associate Architects in the “Flip A Strip” competition held in 2008. The project focused on a commitment to fortifying the local economy by “creating strip malls that provide an umbrella support system for locally owned, independent businesses, which generate an estimated 300% more money that stays in a community than national chains.” The project designed a kit of parts that could be easily franchised to pragmatically apply to any strip mall.

Another example of opportunities strip malls provide is explored in a social entrepreneurial model for commercial real estate set up by Ava Bromberg, a PhD student at UCLA. She is developing a new vision for small retail centers that would transform them into “engines of social and economic capital at the neighborhood level”.

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would be implemented on the strip mall and enable the value to the commercial real estate to cycle back into the neighborhood instead of going mostly to profit the building owner. (Figure 1.32) Through cooperatively owned businesses, community members can both teach and learn business techniques, and use that knowledge to continue the growth of the local economy. “The consumer would also be a business owner, property shareholder and decision maker.”

The Horatio Alger story of making good in the "New World" has carried on in the proliferation of family owned businesses. Recently there has been a resurgence of small business, which thirty years ago was in decay. Many researchers have suggested that US immigration has encouraged the entrepreneurial drive of the total population, significantly contributing to this transformation. Possibly because the competition for low-skilled work has intensified, a viable route up the socio-economic ladder has set entrepreneurship as an important alternative to wage labor.

It has been found that immigrant entrepreneurs tend to anchor their business within the ideal locations of strip malls. Immigrants have consistently played a role in America’s economic vitality and the growth of small and large businesses. A recent study by the Kauffman Foundation found that immigrants are 50% likelier to start businesses than natives. They bring with them new ideas and are able to capitalize on small-scale investment requirements. In fact, there are many professionals of the opinion that in order for the US to turn its economy back around, it must encourage this trend. It is one of the cheapest and surest ways to stimulate economy.

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11 The 19th Century American author, Horatio Alger Jr., is well know for his “rags to riches” stories of how people of humble backgrounds can rise to hold respectable middle class comforts. To achieve this American dream, he often encourages hard work, courage, determination, and concern for others as moral lessons in the stories.


Thomas Friedman, a columnist for the New York Times, says it well:

Dear America, please remember how you got to be the wealthiest country in history. It wasn’t through protectionism, or state-owned banks or fearing free trade. No, the formula was very simple: build this really flexible, really open economy, tolerate creative destruction so dead capital is quickly redeployed to better ideas and companies, pour into it the most diverse, smart and energetic immigrants from every corner of the world and then stir and repeat, stir and repeat, stir and repeat, stir and repeat.\textsuperscript{16}

While the previous text mainly focused on the economics of a suburban strip mall and how that relates to the urban context, the cultural implications held within these structures cannot be overlooked. One particularly apparent phenomenon that occurs is how these retailers are of an “ethnic” background, no matter if they are a first, second, or fifth generation immigrant, and it is necessary to study how these unique enterprises have been built within a repeated mass-implemented structure.

“A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence.”

Aristotle, ‘The Politics’
2.1 Depiction through various Scales

When the word ‘border’ is discussed, thesaurus results are as broad as abut, adjoin, approach, approximate, barrier, bound, boundary, brim, brink, brow, circumference, circumscribe, connect, demarcate, edge, enclose, encompass, envelop, extremity, flank, fringe, frontier, limit, line, margin, meet, near, neighbor, outline, perimeter, periphery, ring, side, strip, surround, touch, trim, and verge. Through these related words many ironic binaries and attracted opposites are revealed, such as circumscribe/connect, isolate/encompass, separate/meet, confine/approach, limit/touch. Words of this nature create and take sides, produce and occupy opposing spaces, and form many associated dichotomies such as inside/outside, inclusion/exclusion, we/they.

Borders can clearly signify many different things. This concept can refer to a country’s boundary drawn on a map, a physical entity like a river, the distance a house is set away from the road, or even just the implicit factor of how close one should stand next to a stranger. As illustrated in Negotiating Postmodernism, there are three main types of borders defined within the constructs of a nation. These include the territory of an administration and government, the economies, and the culture (which includes the education and language). A nation itself is not just a location, but also a social construct.

There are new and different forms arising at all geographic scales, which are reconfigured through the deterritorialization and reterritorialization of spaces. This action is also reorganization by debordering and rebordering areas. It is easy to think of these boundaries appearing only on a flat plane, but they extend into bodies of water as well as up into the air or down underground, taking place in multiple dimensions. There is a degree of permeability to the flow of people, goods, money, ideas and information across these lines.

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18 Wayne Gabardi, Negotiating Postmodernism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).
The social meanings of boundaries can be expanded to the perimeters of human life. The sociologist Georg Simmel emphasized their role in giving direction and location to existence, and as preconditions for their own transcendence. Without boundaries, social and cultural activity would have no form. Although Simmel was vague regarding explanation of where boundaries come from, this general viewpoint exposed the idea as a self-evident part of human life.²⁰

“Culture has always dictated where to draw the line separating one thing from another. These lines are arbitrary, but once learned and internalized they are treated as real.”²¹

Borders are constantly changing with the times. Through technological advances, the world has entered cyber times where ‘lines in the sand’ do not have much meaning and carry little impact. In the mass consumer based society, the production of knowledge, images, representations, and simulacra now carry more weight than geopolitical boundaries.²² There are obviously still borders, but the world is entering a time where geography does not matter as much as it has in the past.

²² Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer, B/ordering Space (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 1.
2.2 Converging Scales of Understanding

The phrase "Think Global, Act Local" has been attributed to the town planner and social activist, Patrick Geddes. Although the exact phrase never appears in Geddes' book, "Cities in Evolution," the idea is clearly evident: "Local character is thus no mere accidental old-world quaintness, as its mimics think and say. It is attained only in course of adequate grasp and treatment of the whole environment, and in active sympathy with the essential and characteristic life of the place concerned."\(^{23}\)

The portmanteau of globalization and localization, or "glocalization", stresses this idea of thinking global and acting local. This approach suggests that reconsidering frames of references and order schemas is useful for both global and local research and management. There is a connection between the changes and globalization of capital, labor and culture.\(^{24}\)

More than ever before, the reach of the city stretches toward a global scale. With this expanding scope, the metropolitan locality can no longer be defined simply by neighboring boundaries of daily commutes or media use or residential identities, since for any given city the locality is to a significant degree the world. "Every local activity or event, whether associated with production or consumption or exchange or leisure time choices is in some sense not just local but global as well."\(^{25}\) The city is no longer the product only of its immediate regional culture, but increasingly reflects all the cultures of the world.

Looked at in a different way, at the same time the globalized city-region reaches out to the world, the world also reaches into its internal enclosures. Cultures and people from every place on earth arrive and are forming the most culturally heterogeneous urban worlds that have ever existed.\(^{26}\)

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2.3 Proxemics: Interaction of a global people on a very local level

While global blends into local and vice-versa, individuals are not becoming any less unique. "Empowering practices themselves – both materially and mentally – have not lost their territorial ordering and bordering functions. On the contrary, notwithstanding the growth of global flows, the number of ordered and bordered (id)entities has not diminished."²⁷ The multiple layers of possible identification have increased, and have not been replaced by globalism.

By bringing this notion of boundaries to the surface, transgression is invited to inspire movement beyond such lines. "All borders and boundaries are socially produced and reproduced, and thus are always susceptible to being modified, transformed, erased, recreated, re-imagined, and transgressed."²⁸ Arijit Sen, a professor at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee School of Architecture, uses the term 'Ethnoscapes' and explains it as the global flow of cultural spaces, images and practices.

"Everything man is and does is modified by learning and is therefore malleable. But once learned, these behavior patterns, the habitual responses, these ways of interacting gradually sink below the surface of the mind and, like the admiral of a submerged submarine fleet, control from the depths. The hidden controls are usually experienced as though they were birth and national origin determine what we are like as subjects, while also giving us a native tongue, religious commitments, and gender/race structures. National origins often do predetermine ideological formations. In the contemporary world of migration, this leads to hybrid identities that do not easily fit into the conventional notion of identification with an explicit bounded space."²⁹

²⁷ Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer, Bordering Space (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 1.
Edward T. Hall describes the influence culture has on what a person is able to perceive through a contingent process. “Closely related to the high-low-context continuum is the degree to which one is aware of the selective screen that one places between himself and the outside world. As one moves from the low to the high side of the scale, awareness of the selective process increases. Therefore, what one pays attention to, context, and information overload are all functionally related.”

One of the functions of culture is to provide a highly selective screen between man and the outside world. In its many forms, culture therefore designates what we pay attention to and what we ignore. These screens protect from information overload and provide structure for the world.

Our bodies in themselves are the centers or nodes of mobile regions of personal space, and our lived experiences take place, literally contextualized in scale from the local to the global. At each of these levels of life, borders and boundaries distinguish the dynamic interplay between space, knowledge, and power and the more subtle performances of human subjectivity and sociality.

Situational frames made up of situational dialects, material appurtenances, situational personalities, and behavioral patterns occurring in recognized settings. Some common settings and situations are: greeting, working, eating, bargaining, fighting, governing, making love, going to school, cooking and serving meals, hanging out, and the like. How people interact with one another, and the space dedicated to this interaction is know as proxemic.

It is impossible to specify someone’s identity, so therefore, to predict a situational outcome would take the knowledge of the entire history and upbringing of an individual. Proxemic has become stereotypical and generalized, or else there would be too many categories of which to judge a person and their notion of spatial relations. An architectural design in which the focus is based on these interactions, a methodology needs to provide the path of management.

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“Patterns are those implicit cultural rules by means of which sets are arranged so that they take on meaning.”

Edward T. Hall
3.1 Palimpsest

A strip mall is only another type of boundary that encompasses a particular culture. While it is very literally walls that box a program in, what is contained is still somehow expressed to those passing by, entering in, and leaving. These incidents tell a person more about the environment than they probably apprehend.

Time is an organizing culture in the American culture. “Time started as a natural series of rhythms associated with daily, monthly, and annual cycles. It is now imposed as an outside constraint and sends its tentacles into every nook and crevice of even our most private acts.”  

The industrial society alienated man from the natural rhythm of time and set a standard, which differentiates most of the western world from the rest of the global society. The industrial society would have been unknown without these manmade schedules.

The project “Fresh Pond Mall” by Tobias Armbrorst focused more on time than space. This Harvard GSD thesis project looked at both natural time and the schedules set through modern life and implemented needed programs to fill the empty holes so that this site would always be active. This project accentuated pieces into heterotopias. This intensified what was already there and “produces a new type of urbanism that enhances daily experience, building in a kind of ordinary magic that was absent in mall’s precious everyday life.”

With this consideration of how time changes perception, then a palimpsest could be an appropriate way to illustrate a strip mall. While this term generally describes a manuscript written over a partly erased older manuscript in such a way that the old words beneath can be read under the new, it can easily be applied to any constructed entity that goes through different iterations. The constant rewriting of what is located within a strip mall leaves shadows of what was there previously. Should the cultural appropriation within a space take more risks in how far they try to rewrite the structure that was already in place? How much

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Figure 3.11

Archimedes

But on the same pages as the prayers, experts using a high-tech imaging system have discovered commentary likely written in the third century A.D. on a work written around 350 B.C. by the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

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should the business owner rewrite and try to break from the boundaries placed by society they are within?

Currently the only way to really know what is past the glass façade is to read a sign denoting what is held within. Is there a way better extrude the contents of the culture and express it to those on the outside? Does placing the identity of something in a recurring masonry/steel framed box null the difference of what is located in this particular unit as opposed to the one next door? How can a person value the distinguishing factors within each division?

To be able to answer these questions, it is necessary to look at the components that make up the language of the current strip shopping plaza and then evaluate how these could be modified to better suit the needs of the ‘ethnic’ entrepreneur.
3.2 Vernacular of a Strip

In order to understand the parameters to work within, it is essential to attempt to devise a formula of the framework for every strip mall in the United States. More than at any other time in history, it is difficult to know where cities begin and end, what is urban (or even suburban) and what is not. The relationship of the suburb with the community, along with the placement of the local retail mall within those two frames, forms specific situations for the strip. How do these scales relate to one another as well as to the city and rural zones they are situated between?

Elements to provide the right conditions for a strip mall: (Figure 3.21)

1. Location on arterial roads
2. Vicinity to interstates
3. Relationship to intersection
4. Accessibility and convenience for user

Parts that make up the retail estate (in order of approach):

2-D Media/ Advertising

The advertising is situated on the visible approach to the site from the sidewalk or street. Normally the names of all the businesses at the site are located within a single two-sided sign perpendicular to the street. Each business hangs its own sign parallel to the street attached to the building itself.

Parking Lot

The parking lot is always in front of the stores between the street and the entry doors.

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Figure 3.21
This diagram pulls five configurations from typical strip malls. The poché block is the building, the white block is the parking, and the intersecting lines explore how the building is situated on the streets.

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Overhang

Retail buildings usually have a covered entry so the user is better protected from poor weather conditions.

Building Façade

The façade provides a look into what is held within individual stores and acts as a type of advertising themselves. The actual goods are on display as the customer walks along the façade to arrive at the entry door.

Divisions of Units

The divisions provide sequential experiences as you move past the structure. Because of the rigid structural agenda set in place, the depths of the compartments are only revealed as you pass each dividing wall. By being an asymmetrical analysis layered on the rigid foundation, the spaces are able to open up as the body experiences them while moving along a directional path. In this way, a person can only experience one unit at a time.

Back of house/service- furthest from the main access road

The service area is space denoted to accept deliveries, house employee parking, and waste management receptacles. This area sees traffic, but is inconspicuous from the commercial front.

The parts of the retail strips as noted through the transect methodology (Figure 3.22) is the panorama, front, side back parts, entrance, roof and parking. These categories only list the experience from the exterior. Strip malls are as much about the user experience once they arrive, so the threshold, merchandise area, sales, storage, service should also be included. The circulation and social gathering opportunities should also be involved with this statement as a place.

Figure 3.22
Learning from Las Vegas uses the transect methodology to dissect the parts of a strip mall as experienced from the street.
“Border objects are not relevant in themselves, as are the objectification processes of bounded spaces informing people’s everyday spatial practices.” An improved conceptual apparatus is needed, one that would shift the analysis and understanding of sociospatiality away from the static world of container-borders to the complex and varied patterns of both implicit and explicit bordering and ordering practices.

37 Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer, Bordering Space (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 3.
38 Henk van Houtum, Olivier Kramsch and Wolfgang Zierhofer, Bordering Space (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 2.
“First life, then spaces, then buildings - the other way around never works.”

Jan Gehl
4.1 Psychogeography

“Culture is subtle and complex in nature, its concepts are fluid and abstract, and there is a lack of understanding of suitable techniques and approaches for accessing and incorporating detailed and qualitative cultural knowledge in planning. Yet, culture expresses like nothing else the connective in life.”

There are many different layers of information when viewed from various scales. The world scope includes how people from endless backgrounds have different concepts of use and appropriate methods. This is the broad range that is the indefinable cultural aspect. There may be generalizations devised from customs rituals, beliefs, but this is missing what truly matters in the application of the project at the individual level or rather the everyday common actions that a person doesn’t think twice when they do something specific to a minority of people.

There are four characteristics that can be found in many everyday practices: the field in which the action operates, how it effects an appropriation, its existence relative to a time and a place, and also how it conceives a contract in a network of relations. The relationship of the individual is broken into the appropriator and the user of that appropriated space. The appropriator needs to modify the space to fit the scope of necessary uses and in doing so creates something that no one else could accomplish in the same way, whether that be the conceptual thought process or the actual physical arrangement of the space. The user interacts with the changed space that may be different in any number of experiences than what they expect.

The everyday does not happen within the form as an “authorized order of culture”, but as affecting its own forms and histories. The everyday life is not organized and can’t be positioned in a quote or citation yet the foundation of “cultural studies” feels the need to

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Figure 4.11
Frank Dresmé of 21bis created this work, “Project 360 degrees”, where he creates transect maps of the paths he made through Amsterdam. With an assemblage of drawings and photo collage of the physical materiality of the city, he emphasizes signage and infrastructure. The emphasis of the journey is a continuous physical tracing of the material pedestrian environment.

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organize everyday occurrences into writing. Contextual frames of reference aid the mind’s construction of meaning within the realm of culture. While there are many cognitive frames of reference they mainly include cognitive, sociocultural, organizational, and situational.

Psychogeography was defined in 1955 by Guy Debord as "the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." Another definition describes it as having inventive strategies for exploring cities or rather just about anything that takes pedestrians off their predictable paths and jolts them into a new awareness of the urban landscape.

Most people just follow a small set of preprogrammed instructions as they wander through the day: office, day care, grocery store, home. If your own path is tracked through a typical day, it will soon be revealed that the journey is habitual, and that a personal canyon is slowly being worn through the same streets, the same sidewalks, day after day. Psychogeography encourages people to follow a new logic that lets them experience the landscape anew and forces to truly see what most would otherwise ignore.

Henri Lefebvre stated “there are material and physical dimension of borders but there is more to it than just what a map or our own eyes can tell us.” This could be one method to approach understanding a culture held within strip malls. If there was more care in understanding the multisensory characters provided by the ethnic establishments and other cultural enterprises, then it would become easier to not necessarily spatially plan a design by sight alone, but through smell, sound, taste and touch.

Figure 4.12
The project site documented in a style similar to a situationalist, in attempt to map the site through experience and actions rather than a stagnant plan.

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4.2 Economic Standpoint

It is necessary to look at the reality of a strip mall and see it as an economic hub that meets the needs of the consumer, advances the interest of the entrepreneur, and still makes money for the building owner. The main goal of any retail is to make money and the strip mall does so with unequaled economic efficiency. This basic character of the strip mall is already perfect and abject. The building it is housed within, while although fitting these characteristics, can also show the wear of the everyday and eventually is incapable of housing these activities.

Because a building is showing signs of disrepair and decay, soon the owner will have to decide what to do with the structure. It would not be worth repairing the separating concrete masonry structure (or whatever the particular construction method) and the owner would much sooner tear the building down to start anew than restore. Why would he just not demolish and start new? These buildings are nothing special and hold no historical impact as explored in section 1.2. They are ephemeral objects on the suburban landscape. (Figure 4.21) The only thing holding the owner back from demolishing the units is the fact that there would be no income during the time of transition.

What will the tenants do if the owner decides to move toward a new building in the same location? One choice could be to already have moved out because of the poor building conditions. If the entrepreneur stays at the location until the building is ready to be demolished, then they need to either relocate their store to a new location or place their belongings and goods in storage until the new building is ready to occupy.

The role of the architect layered. First they should enhance the environment around the transactions that occur naturally on the site. To amplify the function will express the units over the structure. Another role of the architect’s duty is to implement a method that attempts to solve the problems of transitioning to a new structure. Instead of demolishing and then starting anew, the strip mall lends itself to continually evolve over time into a new concept of the retail strip. By situating a new structure around the old in which businesses can be built
upon, the old strip will not have to shut down during the construction process. Those businesses can remain in the old structure until they can resituate in the new confines.

Once the original building has deteriorated to the extent that the spaces are uninhabitable, it can be removed and replaced with parking infrastructure. The original parking can be molded into other spaces the community is in need of such as a farmer’s market, community park, or outdoor space in which to sit and eat a lunch bought on the premises. This will in turn enhance the quality of the once desolate and unappealing parking lot.

This works for the business owner, but do the entrepreneurs benefit as well? Because the entrepreneur is given a specific framework to situate their store within, through a type of modular design, they can build to fit their own needs as required. The idea of cultural expression will be implemented into the unit constructs, the advertising and signage viewed from the street, as well as their presence into the public space created by these changes.
4.3 Architecture as Armature

The site does not change the construct of the project. It will need to be retrofitted for any strip mall site. These strategies should not be site specific and should work for a range of building construction types. They should allow the entrepreneur decide what is necessary to change.

David Sucher lists three rules to solve some of the blights of a strip mall that are good suggestions to keep in mind:\(^4^4\)

- Build to the sidewalk (i.e. property line)
- Make the building front permeable (no blank walls)
- Prohibit parking lots in front of the building

The analysis should not be based on the spatial aspects of the social conditions, but rather on the activities that constitute the socio-spatial relations.\(^4^5\) It should move from evaluating space to instead evaluate the actions to understand the culture.

Space $\rightarrow$ Action (Small Moves)
Geographies of things $\rightarrow$ Geographies of subjects

It is almost impossible for an architect to design for all cultures spatially. It works against the idea of the strip mall’s make up to only choose one. This realization then implies that the “design” should become a decorated shed. The architect forms the framework in which the entrepreneurs can fill in with their specific needs and colors.

Some original problems with Strip Malls:
- Parking in front of the building.
- Building removed/set back from the street.
- Only designed for automobile traffic and there is no easy pedestrian access.


Conclusion

"Postmodern social and cultural theory emphasizes the rise and importance of values, difference and diversity in cultures. In an era such as this, planning has a critical role in recognizing and responding to the diversity of all the ways of life as they evolve and are made manifest."  

Boundaries are social symbols and institutions, which are instrumental in creating meaning and interpretations of the world. Foucault explains that while they are socially produced, they activate a peoples’ consciousness on representations of space, knowledge and power. Borders can trap and liberate socio-spatial identities. Currently the boundaries of postmetropolis’ are melting as the cities stretch toward a global scale. They are no longer the product of immediate regional culture and it becomes ever more difficult to define where the ‘city limits’ extend. It is not only an outward motion, but the world also reaches into the internal enclosures. In a sense moving inside out and outside in simultaneously creating a double inversion.

Smith studied in the book, *Nations and Nationalism in a Global Era*, “We are constantly being reminded that the globe we inhabit is becoming smaller and more integrated… In short, our world has become a single place. This ‘compression of time and space has fundamentally changed the ways in which human beings relate to each other and to their social networks.”

There are many sides to cultural globalization. An increase in diversity, heterogeneity, multiculturalism, differentiation and new forms or resistance to homogenizing cultural imperialism was implemented by this change. Some view this global idea as a threat to

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national, racial and religious identities. Globalization can be a source of creative advantage and economic opportunities that bring innovative fusions and hybridities that could not be conceived before this overlap.

While it is nearly impossible to define what constitutes a specific culture, by observing activities within the everyday and providing small instances of interjection, the development of strip malls can be encouraged to move in progressive ways. This can inform how a space adapts for the changing needs and environments, but doesn’t establish a system that only works for specific cultural backgrounds. The awareness that these bordered lines are socially produced also means that they are not eternally set. They can be moved and changed, creating new possibilities for social mobilization.

Bibliography


Appendix A: Definitions

cognitive-frames of reference
Cognitive frames of reference explore the dimensions of world-view by studying the culturally conditioned perspectives, filters and environment.

Sociocultural frames ask why we do things a certain way and review the constraints of "custom".

Organizational frames explore the right and responsibility of allegiance. Nationalism in a global era and where an immigrant places their identity.

Situational frames are the communication that takes place between individuals in different circumstances. An action chain, borrowed from ethnology, is closely linked conceptually. Action chain. Is a set sequence of events in which usually two or more individual's participate- dance to reach common goal. How space is used reveals failure to get detailed data on the action chains and the situational frames in which they occur can result in breaking the chain.

context- high
High context refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other. Your family is probably an example of a high context environment.

ex. More knowledge is below the waterline--implicit, patterns that are not fully conscious, hard to explain even if you are a member of that culture

context- low
Low context refers to societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave.
More knowledge is above the waterline: explicit, consciously organized.

Culture
Culture, defined as ‘the arts and media’ in society, is not, and should not be considered only or even primarily in these terms – reduced to the role of a weapon for winning people’s consciousness. The arts and media do have the potential for enhancing people’s consciousness, but they are about far more than that. The point is not to negate aesthetic pleasure, unless this selves to provide specific propaganda for particular political causes. Culture has also been defined in the wider sense – culture as ‘a whole way of life’, a ‘design for living’. In this sense of the term, culture is centrally important for agendas of empowerment and social transformation. From this wider definition, it follows too that cultural strategies are not usefully separated from economic strategies, political strategies or social strategies, let alone substituted for them. Culture as a way of life was defined as including both values and norms and the material goods produced, a society’s patterns of work as well as its customs, its social relations as well as its leisure pursuits. Strategies for empowerment need to address each aspect and the ways in which they interact, both locally and beyond.\(^5\)

Cultural contact
Cultural contact is what occurs when two or more cultures come in contact with one another through images in the mass media, trade, immigration, or conquest so that they affect one another. With assimilation (also known as acculturation), a dominant group imposes its culture on subordinate groups so effectively that these become virtually indistinguishable from the dominant culture.

glocalization
“Glocalization” is a process whereby localities develop direct economic and cultural relationships to the global system. It is usually used to describe a product or service that is developed and distributed in the global market, but also accommodates the user or consumer in a local market. This means that the product or service may be tailored to conform to local

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\(^5\) Marjorie Mayo, Cultures, Communities, Identities: Cultural Strategies for Participation and Empowerment (New York: Palgrave, 2000).
laws, customs or consumer preferences. Products or services that are effectively “globalized” are, by definition, going to be of much greater interest to the end user.

In contrast, “globalization” is often used as a term to suggest the historical processes leading to a more one-way relationship between the “global” realm (inhabited by multinational corporations, the entertainment industry, the Web, etc.) and a subjugated "local" realm, where the identity-affirming senses of place, neighborhood, town, locale, ethnicity, etc. struggle to survive against the global assault of capitalism, media, and network identities.

Wayne Gabardi writes:

“[Glocalization is marked by the] development of diverse, overlapping fields of global-local linkages ... [creating] a condition of globalized panlocality.... what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai calls deterritorialized, global spatial ‘scapes’ (ethnoscapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes).... This condition of glocalization represents a shift from a more territorialized learning process bound up with the nation-state society to one more fluid and translocal. Culture has become a much more mobile, human software employed to mix elements from diverse contexts. With cultural forms and practices more separate from geographic, institutional, and ascriptive embeddeness, we are witnessing what Jan Nederveen Pieterse refers to as postmodern ‘hybridization.’”

Wayne Gabardi, Negotiating Postmodernism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 33-34.
Appendix B: Precedent Notes

"Un-strip" by AEDS- Ammar Eloueini of New Orleans
  • “Flip A Strip” Competition entry
  • unlikely to abandon cars to embrace new urban ideas
  • reorganizes in phases
  • revising current parking, enhancing present retail, adding loft housing, robotic vertical parking structure
  • increases footprint of retail and green, reduces parking footprint

"divert" by Marlene Imirzian and Associate Architects
  • “Flip A Strip” Competition entry
  • kit of parts
  • support system for the local economy

"Container Mall: 42nd St. and 5th Ave., NY" by Lot-Ek
  • improvised typology of a mall
  • shipping containers to configure vertical malls

"In the Meantime, Life with Landbanking- The Dutchess Mall" by Interboro
  • entry for competition to find a dead mall, discuss the history and invent a future vision for it.
  • Dutchess Mall in Fishkill, NY closed in 1998
  • found through research- not quite dead
  • owners were landbanking (sitting on the property until market changed, redevelop)
  • documented how the community uses mall and parking (car show, flea market, prostitution pick-up, dumping, truck storage, driver testing, bird watching, dog walking, UFO sightings)
• deploy small, cheap, feasible interventions- city matures and then influences developers’ program
• former service yard- add hotbox core (toilets, copy room, conference, kitchen) that makes it possible for program to fill in toward closed stores from the back in.

"Hudson 2+4" by Estudio Teddy Cruz
• US/Mexico border
• considers the cultural appropriation aspect
• engage recycling flowing across border- InfoSite ephemeral wooden armature that lives a life on both sides of the border.
• portable public space- the program is a critique of rigid zoning practices and politics of land use
• "The house’s frame is absorbed and altered by its residents into a fresh scenario."
• nomadic piece (ready-made infrastructures and off-the-shelf material systems such as pallet racks, tents, truck beds)

"Fresh Pond Mall" by Tobias Armborst (Harvard GSD thesis project)
• focus on time more than space
• natural time( night/day, cycles of year, seasons, weather) and modern life (working day, weekend, vacation, holidays)
• Fresh Pond mall, Cambridge mass- ordinary but ambiguous
• At edge of the “city” -public transit
• Public TIME not public space
• accentuate pieces into heterotopias (what is present, but what is missing?)
• not less fragmented, or coherent, not new urbanist mode, but “intensifying what was already there produces a new type of urbanism that enhances daily experience, building in a kind of ordinary magic that was absent in mall’s precious everyday life.”

Appendix C: Project Site and Design
STRIP RETAIL ANALYSIS ALONG READING ROAD

- Parking Lot directly adjacent to Reading Road
- Multiple Retail units within one building
- Each Retail unit has its own storefront
- Strip does not have defined anchor stores
- Excludes Big Box retail and Single Store retail configurations