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Integrating Place and Technologically Mobile Culture Through Architecture

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School
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requirements for the degree of
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Chair: Michael McInturf
Abstract

The speed and portability of modern technology contributes to a “de-distancing” of the world, emphasizing temporal experiences and reducing the reliance on physical place to inform identity. De-distancing can be attributed to the immediacy with which information is encountered and processed irrespective of place. As the popularity of and reliance on mobile networks increases, so too does the acceptance and satisfaction with a temporal, disembodied landscape. This departure from our physical sense of place threatens to damage and/or displace local identity and culture.

This thesis evaluates the present and future effects of the built environment on local culture through the frameworks of technology, architecture, and ontology. A new paradigm emerges from the relationship between these disciplines that informs our understanding of how we interact with mobile technologies in a space, and how that affects our place-bound identity. I will define these relationships and use them to create abstract models that will inform a methodology for future space design. How can place-making utilize experiential aspects of the technological systems outlined above to re-activate and empower a local identity?

A cultural community center that investigates the de-distanced virtual-scape will provide physical place where communities can engage with and confront the transience of their technological mobility. This space will be a place where technology and architecture merge to facilitate new legibility for local culture. Here, cultural identity can sustain in opposition to the rapid de-distancing created by mobile technology.
My investigation into mobile technology and place emerged from my own identity formation amidst a pre- and post-technologically mobile culture. Since the age of thirteen, I have relocated several times for various reasons. I did not own a cellphone until I was eighteen, rare for someone of my generation and socioeconomic class. This thesis is in part a reflection on the differences between how I acclimated to new surroundings before I had a cellphone, and after.

There have been developments in several communications technologies that altered my acclimation to new places. The cellphone enabled constant connectivity, allowing new acquaintances to reach me at any moment. Facebook provided a space where people could discover my existing network and a digital version of myself. Group identities were formed around shared pictures and public conversations. Entirely new relationship formations were made possible by these technologies.

To the degree that these technologies provided me with an extended social network, they also sustained established relationships with friends and family. My recent relocation to Cincinnati has been unique. Instead of joining established social networks, I was part of a large group of students who arrived to the city around the same time. Despite the ubiquity of cellphone and social networking usage among these students, adjusting to this move felt prolonged and awkward, and I came to see these technologies as a hindrance to the development and formation of a localized place-based culture.

My concern was projected back onto my home of New York City. In a place where the population is constantly changing and growing, is there any hope of sustaining a familiar place-based culture? Is local culture provided the ability to evolve and adapt, or is it repeatedly refreshed anew? This thesis is an investigation into the ability of architecture to address and to propose solutions to these issues.
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As social culture evolves around online networking and mobile communications, the ease and, in turn, the quantity and rapidity of communication has drastically increased. The primary focus of this thesis will be to discuss and analyze how this change affects place-making and man’s position in the city. In order to examine these issues, we must first understand the current state of three relationships: technology as it relates to socialization; identity formation as it relates to contemporary technological interaction; and space legibility as it relates to technology, socialization, and identity formation.

Today we are bombarded with more information than ever before. As well, our relationship to communications mediums has evolved from passively watching broadcast television, to producing our own content for an endless internet. We have ourselves become networked information creators, processors, and distributors. Our understanding of network as “an interconnected or interrelated chain, group, or system,”¹ or socially as “an informally interconnected group or association of persons (as friends or professional colleagues),”² has not been redefined by digitization. However, digital networks are evolved in their capacity to augment

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In his book “Global Technography: Technology in the Age of Mobility”, Grant Kien discusses the use of networks in establishing power. The network is a method of organization that provided people, cultures, and corporations the ability to build communication and establish magnitude. Today we are all networked, and there is no time or place that is considered inaccessible to us. This accessibility instills the networked user with an expectation to be connected at all times and, in being so, the user partakes in the great information exchange that is occurring.

The result is an information glut that is only expected to grow, according to Dr. Robert Hilliard of the Federal Communications Commission:

At the rate at which knowledge is growing, by the time a child born today graduates from college, the amount of knowledge in the world will be four times as great. By the time that same child is 50 years old, it will be 32 times as great, and 97% of everything known in the world will have been learned since the time he was born.

The speed at which this information is dispersed and consumed leads to a condition that Kien refers to as “de-distancing”. Our world grows with access to increased networks and information simultaneously devastating the relevance of the everyday environments that surround us.

“Now instead of us surfing the internet, the internet is surfing us,” said venture capitalist Harry Weller. Through social networks like Facebook and Twitter, and blogging platforms like Tumblr and Wordpress, we are more connected to our friends and

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4 Grant Kien, Global Technography: Ethnography in the Age of Mobility, (New York City: Peter Lang Publishing, 2009.)
6 Kien, Global Technograph.
the information they produce than ever before. Entire histories and datasets are compiled by thousands of contributors on “wikis.” Unending threads progress within public forums on limitless topics. Our relationship with today’s information environment is cyclical: after all, what is the internet but a compilation of information that we contribute? Do we surf the internet, or does the internet surf us?

The internet has been publicly accessible since August of 1991, but over the last decade it has become increasingly integral to our lives. Mark Lipton, head of the Media Education Project at the University of Guelph, pinpoints 2006 as the “tipping point” in so-called “web 2.0” adoption, when high-speed internet connections were widespread enough to allow for greater interactivity with the web. This shift saw the creation of such sites as Facebook, My Space, YouTube, Flickr, and many others. These web 2.0 brands were celebrated when Time Magazine named “you” person of the year in 2006, chosen in recognition of the millions of people who anonymously contributed user-generated content to the services.

The portability of technologies increases the experience of

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interfacing through screens. A relationship between the eye and the flat surface that displays information has been present since long before the internet. In early mediums, the moment recorded was separated in time from the moment of viewing, as with photographs and moving pictures. With the advent of television, images could be broadcast live. This began our relationship with the de-distanced world. From television we moved to the interactive desktop computer, then to the portable laptop computer, and now to the ever-present mobile phone. Along the way our interaction with the flat terrain of the screen became normalized.

For younger generations, interaction with the screen world is taken for granted. The separation between “online” and “offline” is indistinct. These generations “manipulate sophisticated software, search the internet, play games, and download information without being aware of the cognitive process involved.” The use of such technologies has become second nature.

Mobile networking and portable devices allow for constant and instantaneous access to the screen world. In a sense, a mobile device acts as a portal—allowing us to exit spaces and enter new ones without actually moving. “Screen culture inhabits neither place nor ground, it is fragmented and dislocated, it has a 4 second attention span.” This constant exposure to simultaneity has created a society of multi-taskers. Linda Stone, former Apple and Microsoft executive, coined the phrase “continuous partial attention” to describe Gen-Y users who juggle multiple information signals. This presents alarming implications for the static nature of architecture. If mobile technologies encourage users to seek simultaneity, is the function of place diminished in the creation of personal identity?


State of Identity

The digital networks of the technologically mobile age are outlets of expression. The optimization of information processing that is taking place is affecting our identity formation. Identity, “the characteristics determining who or what a person or thing is,” is what makes us feel unique. “Uniqueness is the sum of our being minus what is shared in common with others.” It is our differences from others that set us apart, and provide us a sense of individualistic identity. Our culture strives to accept difference, but differences are inherently feared because they are a source of potential conflict. However, conflict ultimately resolves to a decision making process based on shared values and beliefs, bringing us back to the core things we have in common. This is one way in which we start to build a group identity, and in turn, culture. The larger group is reinforced by broader characteristics like language, food, and performance of interactions amongst members of the group. These cultural groups ensure that differences are encountered

less frequently. Rather than having to define and defend a unique individual, culture provides a framework of identity and security for the larger group. “Having cultural systems in place frees us up from devoting mental energy to figuring out everything that is going on around us and allows us to move on to more mentally stimulating endeavors.” \(^5\) The characteristics of culture create cohesion, allowing groups to contrast “us” against “them,” rather than “I” against everyone.

The digitally networked public provides a great sense of belonging because less of the uniqueness of a person has to be compromised to join. Rather than adapt to groups dictated by regional cultures, one may seek out a very specific group of like-minded people unrestricted by distance. But if a culture based on place is supposed to free up mental energy for processing our physical environment, what happens when this culture is absent of physical place? Do we return to an overwhelmed interaction with space, acting as sole interpreters of all events and actions around us?

This thesis proposes that we look more closely at the emerging digital conceptions of identity to answer these questions. In an observation made of his two-year old playing with an i-Phone, David Carroll, Director of the MFA Design and Technology program at Parsons The New School for Design, notes that “young people can learn a well-developed sense of computer literacy well before mastering language skills.”\(^6\) If language is a key component to defining and maintaining cultural clarity then the fact that our technological literacy precedes verbal or written literacy threatens where we turn to for cultural definition. Where as language helps to


define “us,” technology encourages us to define “I.” We understand how to interact with the computer before we understand how to interact with each other.

Whether physical or digital those influences that impact our identity formation are actants in this process. French Sociologist and Anthropologist Bruno Latour introduces this theory of actants. An actant as he sees it is:

any individual person or thing, crowd, figurative or nonfigurative entity—that exerts a force in terms of an act or exertion. Actants gain strength by joining force... The dominant actants force is so because of its ability to translate to a broader network of relations.7

The internet is then the most dominant actant because of its ability to translate to the broadest group possible and in doing so exert its presence and interaction in our lives. Based on Carroll’s observation, this is occurring in our lives earlier than our own ability to communicate with people. In other words, the adoption and interaction with technology is capable of preceding the adoption and need for social interaction at a fundamental level. The networked environment becomes a more comfortable place for us to formulate our identities than in the physical, interactive environment, with the people who surround us.

7 Kien, Global Technography: 59.

In the same way that a teenager covers their room with posters to express themselves, social-networking platforms like Facebook are used to broadcast our conceptions of identity. The digital environment places more emphasis on the individual perspective than on conscious agreements amongst the group. Culture formed through digital networks, as opposed to in physical space, relies on cues and instructions that are more varied and less specific. Because of the neutral characteristic of these cultural cues, we actually enter into several different cultural networks when we enter an online network. We construct and broadcast a singular identity on Facebook, but the different people we are connected to will have different interpretations of the symbols and performances that we broadcast. Because of this, different perceptions of who we
are emerge and we simultaneously maintain different identities that we aren’t really aware of.

Psychologist Kenneth Gergen suggests that “rather than understanding ourselves as whole subjects with a clear sense of identity, we see ourselves as a series of often conflicting flows “one person becomes an ultra-marathon runner, scotch connoisseur, high school teacher, parent, straight but queer, displaced Floridian, desert rat on the weekends, half Thai, etc.” The network exposes us to more information and people than human beings previously encountered. We utilize these different labels to define ourselves amongst different groups of people. Identity then becomes the result of transactions between self and the digitized communication environment.  

Our identity begins as an individual construction of what makes us unique and then as a coping method for managing our existence with the rest of the world and the culture to which we connect. Culture establishes or identifies itself through values, symbols, and performances that communicate the group identity.

Today we explore our cultural community more and more through the internet. Our mobile devices allow us to transport our everyday performances and maintain a sense of self. When connected to the network through our mobile devices, performances occur in physical space without a relation to that space. The performance is not for those directly around us but rather for the community of actants that we broadcast to.

“Facebook and Twitter, seem to discard inhibitions and have people behaving in public as they did in private” This goes both ways: we engage our devices both for private correspondence in public space—text messaging in the mall; and public broadcast from private space—status updates from our bedroom. As Austrian Philosopher Ivan Illich puts it, we lack an ability to “identify with the untouchable landscape through which he is rushed.” The portability of our devices allows us to take the chat room with us. We no longer enter or exit. Now we are always present. Portability provides access. It provides us the ability to be physically present while being mentally and emotionally disconnected. As Geographer David Harvey sates in his discussion on absolute and relative space, which

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8 Nold and van Kranenburg, “The Internet,” 35.
10 Kien, Global Technograph.
12 Kien, Global Technograph.
I will discuss later on, “I know where everyone is in absolute space and time but I have no idea, as the saying goes, ‘where peoples heads are at’.” And so we see a growing compatibility with placelessness in our strides towards identity formation.

Structure of Generations

Throughout this discussion of technology and identity, pace and generation continue to come up. Because the discussion surrounds an emerging issue it only makes sense that we discuss how it affects those who have grown up with it and those who have not. However, it is also the pace of life that has been impacted by the development of the internet and the information exchange that occurs through it. People are not just divided by things like race, nation, religion, or ideology but also by their position in time and their access to technologies. As Alvin Toffler suggested:

This emergence of age-based subcultures can now be seen as part of a stunning historical shift in the basis of social differentiation. Time is becoming more important as a source of differences among men; space is becoming less so.

Because of this there has been an increased investment in the study of generations and their behaviors and characteristics. Every generation has its own fashions, fads, heroes and villains.

In “When Generations Collide” by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, a thorough analysis is given to the characteristics of generations and their interactions in the workplace. For the first time in our existence, four different generations are interacting everywhere, not just at work. The turnover of these generations continues to be compacted as major technological contributions have altered how we interact and communicate. The consistent element amongst all of these innovations is the ability to globalize our network Technology has had a huge influence on what defines these generational differences.

The oldest generation present in our culture is the “traditionalist.” These are people born between 1900 and 1945. This title actually combines two generations, the “greatest generation” and the “silent generation.” They are combined because they share very similar values and overlap in period. Their primary difference is that the greatest generation served in WWII and the Silent Generation was too young to serve. These two generations were the first to experience identity formation with an understanding of themselves as a global citizen, as the United States took on an international leadership role for the first time.

2 Toffler, Future Shock.
3 Toffler, Future Shock.
who learned how to do without. Growing up between two world wars and the great depression meant resources were slim. This instilled in them a strong sense of planning and saving for the future. They believe in a strong chain of command, and the personality of this generation can be defined by the word ‘loyal’.

The “Baby Boomers” follow. The “Boomers” were born between 1946 and 1964, and at nearly 80 million people, they were the largest generation to be born in this country. Coming off of the tragedies of the last generation, the boomers sought out escapism, fueled by the boom of consumer products they had access to. The most important consumer innovation of this generation was television. Television connected people and created shared experiences—not just with your neighbors or other people in your community, but with millions of people across the country who might’ve had nothing else in common with you. If the last generation saw the country take on an international role, this generation witnessed the events of the world as they happened. This was an optimistic generation. Their traditionalist parents had worked hard and saved and sought to provide their children with the idea that anything could happen. That optimism paired with the sheer quantity of members of this generation made them a naturally competitive generation. They wanted and believed they could do it all. The only thing standing in their way was one another.

The following is “Generation X”. Generation X were those people born between 1965 and 1980. This generation is greatly impacted by the 24 hour media that erupted with the invention of the television. This generation was exposed to more of the world than any other, not because of actual travel but because of television programming. Every generation is impacted by influences of people, places, events and trends. This generation was inundated with these symbols and saw them come and go. This generation can be summed up as skeptics. They saw every institution and role model brought into question essentially stripping any ideal perceptions one may have had. Because of this they are independent and resourceful. They rely on themselves and believe in self-command.

The generation entering adulthood and hence becoming the new decision makers is The Millennials. These are the people born after 1981, the cut off for where this generation ends is debatable, somewhere between 1991 and 1999. This is the generation to experience the innovation of technology that has allowed them to

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5 Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*. 
take it with them in their pockets. Rather than tuning in, in front of the TV set, this generation is always in-tune everywhere they go. The places that influence this generation are both virtual and tangible.\(^6\)

The advent of the internet during this generation has not just provided them exposure to the world but the real ability to interact with it. Their identity is affected by local and global interaction. Because of this they have been exposed to more diversity than any other generation and they are the first generation to expect diversity in their environments. This generation has benefited from exposure and interaction with the previous generations already discussed. Because of this they have picked up elements of character from each. They were raised by highly communicative, participatory parents and because of this they are creatures of collaboration.

The emerging generation is the Gen Z or i-Generation. They are the first generation of people born with the internet and digital networks already established. They are the generation that has utilized these mobile devices before being able to communicate with the people around them. These things will play a major role in framing their ontology. Gen Z is still emerging and it is difficult to validate their group culture and identity. However, the realm of

\(^6\) Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*.
Reactions of Space

Before making an argument for how space should respond to the ontological effects of technological innovation, it is important to clarify what space is and how the built environment has aimed to shape it. As Cultural Anthropologist Amos Rapoport points out, “The built environment, broadly defined as a human creation, involves the organization of four elements: space, time, meaning, and communication.”¹ These four elements contribute to the understanding of space in its three different conditions, defined by David Harvey in his essay “Space as Keyword”: absolute space, relative space, and relational space. Ultimately space does not define human behavior; rather, human behavior and interaction repeated over time write a set of rules and definition for space. “Processes do not occur in space but define their own spatial frame.”²

“Absolute space,” as defined by Harvey, is fixed, and we record or plan events within its frame. The name that we give a space, as Rapoport highlights, results from the characteristics of a group of people within that space. We give titles to space to demarcate boundaries: privatized and territorial designations such as home, church, and school, etc., are absolute. Similar to these boundaries are rules that control experience and interaction in these spaces. When we occupy absolute space, we introduce happenings over time.³

“Relative Space” is based on the understanding that relationships amongst individuals develop in space, and that all spaces exist in interaction and relation to other spaces. If absolute space defines the quantifiable aspects of space, then relative space defines the rules, mnemonics, and sequencing of experience that are imbued in space. Space and time are no longer separate concepts, but the inseparable concept of space-time. This concept informs us that spaces re-occur and are commoditized and distributed through our built environment. Space is networked.⁴

Harvey’s idea of “Relational Space” is that there is no space or time without the human practices that define them. Every human practice informs a set of rules that over time are accepted as definitions of space. That definition of space is then

²Harvey, “Space as a Key Word.”
³Harvey, “Space as a Key Word.”
⁴Harvey, “Space as a Key Word.”
commoditized into fixed and semi-fixed feature elements that are
designed and distributed elsewhere, with the intent to recreate a
similar experience. These space-defining practices are different
for each cultural group. For relational space, it is then important
to understand that different cultural groups are going to derive
different meanings from the fixed and semi-fixed design elements of
space. Harvey points out “Space is neither absolute, relative, or
relational in itself but it can become one or all simultaneously
depending on the circumstances. The problem of proper
conceptualization of space is resolved through human practice.”
Human practice, Rapoport argues, underlies any understanding of
human environment. For the purpose of this thesis, “space” is the
site in which human practice gives birth to “place.” My contention is
that if place is ultimately the result of our behaviors and interactions
in a space over time, technology’s impact on these cultural
constructions of identity will greatly impact our understandings of
place-making.

Whereas absolute, relative, and relational spaces occur
simultaneously, David Caroll suggests that mobile communications
“shift us away from a synchronous and simultaneous sense of
shared place and time (e.g., the classroom) toward an asynchronous,
discontinuous and individualized consumption of software (e.g., “an
app for that”).” Our constant connection to information that exists
within a timeless and placeless context—that is, within the context
of no context—has the affect of dematerializing space. Although our
mobile technologies cause a sense of placelessness, we nonetheless
interact with our devices it in a very tactile way: if nothing else, we
can quantify the square inches and confirm the boundaries of our
screens.

The use of cellphones in the public realm privatizes
public space. The user withdraws from contact by entering into an
interaction with someone or something that is not physically present.
Inversely, when a cellphone user engages in a conversation or any
process that communicates perceivable mnemonics, they publicize a

5 Harvey, “Sace as a Key Word.”
6 Harvey, “Sace as a Key Word.”:125.
7 David Caroll, “Mobile learning tools: A teachable Moment in the age of
the App.” : 125.
8 David Caroll, “Mobile learning tools: A teachable Moment in the age of
the App.”
9 a. Of or relating to the people as a whole; that belongs to, affects, or
concerns the community or the nation. OED
10 a. Restricted to or for the use or enjoyment of one particular person or
group of people; not open to the public. OED
private interaction. The interaction is perceived to be private because the other party is not physically present. The same is true of other mobile computing devices—laptops and tablets and E-Readers. Our interaction with mobile devices changes our perceptions of space by altering definitions constructed through years of repetitious human practice and imitation. Unlike the relative consistency of human practice in unnetworked spaces, mobile computing devices, in a constant state of innovation in form and interface, make human practice and the definitions of networked space less consistent and predictable. These devices dematerialize existing space without offering a reordering or redefinition of new space. Consider, if mobile computing devices dematerialize the meanings and mnemonics of space without reorganizing or redefining it, does place disappear?

Our embrace of mobile technologies also damages urban fabric, how Philosopher Michel de Certeau describes the experience of walking a city. Geo-locating and mapping technologies make a city walk less of a meandering experience with possibilities for discovery than a logistical exercise in transit. The ability to shop online for essentials like groceries removes common destinations that once oriented a city.

The danger of mobile technology is that concepts of distance and quantifiable space are hyper-mediated by asynchronous, discontinuous, and placeless digital environments. This reduces our ability to experience the universe on its own terms, and to understand our culture and ourselves. If the human environment is a composition of space, time, meaning, and communication, advances in communications technologies must alter how we apply meaning today. The connection of settings and experiences is increasingly linked to time. And the pace at which these experiences occur is increasing at a rapid pace.

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12 Kien, Global Technograph.
Mobile computing has drastically increased the quantity and pace of information that is exchanged and processed. As we simultaneously locate and dislocate ourselves from virtual communities, physical location becomes less of a factor in establishing identity. Local culture is diluted as fewer and fewer people establish themselves in a place long enough to be impacted by the practices of that place. They do not acquire distinctive regional or local characteristics. Space is removed of its culture. As mobile computer continues evolve, it does so indifferent to its effects on place.

Localities form through repetition of human activities that instill a code of symbols, labels, and boundaries, forming a spatial organization. These localities are then linked by various forms of transportation and communication, further establishing identity and boundaries. Today, the matter of the built environment is imbued with a third dimension: information. Although digital networking is not new, the ability of mobile technologies to augment everything with data is. Our linkage through digital communication has surpassed that of physical presence. Wandering physical space and leaving traces of ourselves is threatened by our desire to wander digital environments as global citizens active in a placeless community.

The acceleration of information exchange emphasizes impermanence and transience in our environment, changing the way we relate to other people, things, ideas and values. In an interview with Paul Virilio he states,

> Obviously, stability has become less important than speed today... Now today, that which happens is much more important than that which lasts... and also than that which is solid... There is a dematerialization that goes parallel to deterritorialization and decorporation.

Our environment dematerializes in exchange for a digital landscape that provides us the ability to be present for “that which happens,” and our attention is removed from “that which lasts.” Mobile computing devices exacerbate this trend.

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1 Beckmann, John ed. The Virtual Dimension: architecture, representation, and crash culture: 287.
3 Virilio, Paul “Architecture in the Age of its Virtual Disappearance,” In The Virtual Dimension: Architecture, Representation, and Crash Culture, edited by John Beckmann,
5 Virilio, Paul “Architecture in the Age of its Virtual Disappearance,”
The portability of technologies increases the experience of interfacing through screens. Screen culture is placeless; it occupies no space and creates a fragmented experience of simultaneous eruptions of understanding. The static nature of architecture is challenged by this. Our interactions become part of a social experience that lacks place. Our physical environment loses an identity of place and becomes simply a name: a label to mark a distinction amidst the massive network.

The danger of mobile technology is that concepts of distance and quantifiable space are hyper-mediated by asynchronous, discontinuous, and placeless digital environments. In his book Future Shock, Alvin Toffler writes:

Never in history has distance meant less. Never have man’s relationships with place been more numerous, fragile and temporary... Figuratively, we ‘use up’ places and dispose of them in much the same way that we dispose of Kleenex or beer cans. We are witnessing a historic decline in the significance of place to human life.  

As our information access and processing grows, so too do the technologies that seek to offer novel solutions to our social, philosophical, and personal problems. Our built environment is not at the same pace of development as these technologies. It remains static in the midst of growing fascination with speed and movement. Traditionally understood, architecture is not disposable but solid: it sustains. The built environment relies on structure to maintain form. The structure must be stable—it must sustain—or else the form collapses.

As definitions of self become less a matter of regional expressions of culture, differences are measured by generation. Those who can more easily adapt to, and keep up with, ever-evolving technologies are those who contribute most to the dilemma of placeless community. Clearly defined boundaries of community and cultural difference based on place have transformed through generations into porous network of information. “What results is a streaming chatter of short bursts of proscribed and impromptu information and ideas... a culture of collaboration and dialogue.”

The culture of collaboration, distraction, and transience is what architecture should accommodate. Despite the explosion of technological mobility, our conception of physical mobility has remained the same. We are still place-bound. We perform our new methods of expression within physical space.

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The reality is that the digital realm, no matter how ingrained in our daily lives it becomes, will never provide content that offers an authentic representation. The built environment must re-immmerge as a viable and authentic place of understanding for man. It must focus less on the static, solid, and quantifiable space, and more on movement and renewal of experience. More complex spatial organization can imitate the pace and flexibility to which we have grown accustomed. Heightened articulation of elements in the setting will provide increased legibility, freeing up mental energy amidst the deluge of information. Ultimately space cannot impose a social order; rather, people will adapt space to their existing social systems. The built environment can provide flexibility for a rapidly changing culture. The architecture should not become disposable like Kleenex, but the codes, symbols, labels, and boundaries can be. Digital networks cannot replace the authentic acquisition of information through physical space, but they are shaping the experiences that are had within physical space. We must be sure then that physical space can respond to this emerging culture.

8 Augustin, Sally, “National Culture and Place Experience”
Endless House, Frederick Kiesler

Figure 2.1
Endless House, Frederick Kiesler

Although digital networks and media are a fairly new occurrence in our culture, the issues they raise are not entirely new. The dawn of the industrial revolution introduced an increased pace and efficiency of production. The Second Industrial Revolution or rather the Technological Revolution utilized the efficiency and pace of production to introduce an influx of new services and technologies to enhance the quality of living. These innovations raised clear concern in the architecture community. In L’Architecte, a popular French architecture journal, an article discussed the woes of the future generation being raised amongst the changes being brought on by technological innovation. “Poor Creatures! What will they become in the midst of all this dreadful speed, this organization, this terrible uniformity?!” The modernist movement was largely a reaction to this concern.

Modern architects of the early 20th century were looking for an architectural response to the societal impacts of a rapidly developing industrial culture. Modern architects were exploring a variety of responses: ranging from an approach that would design every aspect of an individual’s environment, to an approach that would engage industrial technology as a means to create a universal solution applied to everyone. Several architects of this time rejected both of these extreme positions, favoring instead, an attention to the influence of the environment on the more meaningful and experiential aspects of individual’s lives.

Frederick Kiesler was one such architect who devoted much of his work to exploring concepts of spatial construction and organization. The Endless House, 1924-1950, was the amalgamation of

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1 L’Architecte, Paris, September, 1925

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Figure 2.2 Sketch analyzing perception and experience of space.
much of Kiesler’s theoretical investigations into spatial design. The
house is a biomorphic composition of flattened spheroids, raised off
the ground on columns. The theoretical basis for its design can be
found in a series of demands outlined in Kiesler’s manifesto.

We will have no more walls, armories for body and soul,
nor armored civilization; with or without ornament. We
want: 1. Transformation of the surrounding area of space
into cities. 2. Liberation from the ground, abolition of the
static axis. 3. No walls, no foundations. 4. A system of spans
(tension) in free space. 5. Creation of new kinds of living,
and, through them, the demands which will remold soci-
ety.”

To Kiesler cities were the obvious progression of planning, aided by
technologies such as mass transit and the car. Liberation from the
ground symbolized a departure from the static nature of architecture.
By disconnecting the space from the ground Kiesler saw limitless
possibilities in site. The departure from clearly defined walls and
foundation is what allows the house to truly be endless. The house
is a continuous plane wrapping around itself creating space. There
is no beginning and no end. The tension span construction as seen
in the geodesic and tensegrity domes were trends of the modernist
movement that would have allowed the endless house to take its

form. The final point was Kiesler’s intended outcome for this new
spatial organization.

Kiesler aimed to design elastic space. Space must provide
optimum response to very varied social conditions—-ranging from

2 Kiesler, F. Vitalbau-Raumstadt-Funktionelle Architektur, in De Stijl,
vol 6, nos. 10-11, 1925, p. 141.
individual small closed spaces to communal existence in large open spaces. He coins the term “Time-Space-Architecture” to refer to the possibility of changing the size and shape of the spaces in accordance with the functions allotted to them. This concept of Time-Space-Architecture not only provides a custom environment for the inhabitant but demands a more engaged user. The continuous surfaces of the house force a user to engage in more complex relationships with space. Without traditional distinctions between wall, floor, ceiling and furniture the occupants are drawn to participate in an active discovery of how their bodies truly want to occupy this space. Kiesler contributed his own phrase to discussion on form stating form does not follow function but rather “Function follows Vision. Vision follows reality.”

If the user of this generation of digital media broadcasted through mobile technologies is ever present in physical space and virtual space, the concepts that Keisler introduces in his endless house are valuable in their ability to design for the reality of the user. By doing so in the endless house we see that the house re-engages the user in a new way, invigorating their presence, understanding, and interaction in space. It is exactly those qualities that need to be drawn out of the user of today’s built environment in order to reintroduce the importance of physical place in our culture.


4 Kiesler, F. Vitalbau-Raumstadt-Funktionelle Architektur, in De Stijl, vol 6, nos. 10-11, 1925, p. 40.
Precedent Analysis

Seattle Central Library, OMA
Seattle Central Library, OMA

If Keisler sought to re-invent space to engage a user overwhelmed by the advent of the technological revolution then a contemporary example would be one that sorts out exactly this in OMA’s Seattle Central Library.

The Seattle Central Library by OMA is located in downtown Seattle, Washington. The main entrances are located at 5th Ave. to the North East and 4th Ave. to the South West. The site is steeply slopes between these avenues and is bound by Spring St. to the North West and Madison St. to the South East. Although this is the flagship branch of the Seattle Public Library system it really operates as a hub to the local community and is an excellent example of a contemporary work of architecture that thoroughly addresses space making in the advent of digital media and the affects it has on the urban fabric of the city.

Entering the building at the 5th Ave. entrance one walks into the living room which is actually the 3rd floor of the building. This space has no explicit library related tasks and is an open meeting place for people of the community to congregate and interact.

Entering at the 4th Ave. entrance one enters the 1st floor of the building and would encounter the reception desk and a children’s library and a learning center for the community where different classes are provided. A 275 seat auditorium makes use of the natural slope of the land and occurs between levels 1 and 3. The second floor houses staff functions. The 4th floor houses conference rooms classrooms and offices. The 5th floor is the mixing chamber which is another multi-programmed open tier containing the reference desk and computers as well as a 135 public, internet enabled computer lounge. The following four floors are a continuous book
spiral that houses the non-fiction collection in chronological Dewey Decimal run 0-999. This system allows the library to put out 75% of its current collection while also providing flexibility for different sections to grow and shrink. The book spiral ends at the 10th floor, which is the reading room. This floor is vacant of technology and is a space to contemplate and research while also providing excellent views to the surrounding context of the city. The 11th floor is the top floor of the building and houses administrative functions for the library. All of these shifting surfaces are connected through a various forms of vertical circulation articulated in chartreuse.

The conceptual organization of the program onto a series of planes allows them to be shifted and manipulated to impact the contextual scale of the city around it. If mobile technology threatens to detract from the pedestrians awareness of the city, the Seattle Central Library literally shifts reaching out and calling attention to itself. It makes itself a destination to arrive to within the fabric of the city. This shifting then continues to communicate the urban scale once the pedestrian is inside its walls. These shifting planes are extremely transparent to the exterior providing new captivating views of the city around it that one would not have in a typical building mass. For Koolhaas this was important in establishing itself as a very physical identifiable sense of place to stand in contrast to space absent of boundaries and place as experienced in the virtual mobile network.\(^5\)

Rather than simply utilizing surface decoration to draw visual stimulation, Koolhaas captures the attention of the de-dis-

\(^5\) Amy Murphy, “The Seattle Central Library: civic architecture in the age of media.”
tanced networked user by manipulating space creating a stimulating multi-sensorial experience. The shifting planes of program encourage a meandering experience lost in the regularity of the city block. The building lacks continuous verticals in its structure; this creates an open framework that visually connects the different plates. Use of escalators and ramped floors creates a continuous seamless experience form space to space further encouraging exploration. This continuity provides a concept of tailored flexibility. This is especially the case in the book spiral but can relate to the entirety of building program. Each section or program has the opportunity to grow or shrink without threatening another.

Paul Virilio said, “Any architect works with the mass and energy of a building and its structure. But in terms of information, architecture still stays somewhat behind the present development.” Surely Koolhaas was aware of this in designing the Seattle Central Library. Beyond infusing large quantities of the space with information accessing capabilities (the building contains over 400 computers) Koolhaas has created an environment where the community of Seattle must confront and negotiate issues of class race and gender. This environment is encouraged through the expansive open floor plates where everyone is welcomed to interact. This building does not cater to places of recluse or isolation from one group or another.

As we have previously discussed culture and identity emerge out of negotiating differences. By forcing the general public to encounter these differences in this environment Koolhaas is ensuring a progression and development of culture and identity.

Art of this Century, Frederik Kiesler

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ART OF THIS CENTURY, Frederik Kiesler

Figure 2.9
Art of this Century, Frederik Kiesler

Peggy Guggenheim’s *Art of this Century* exhibit, designed by Frederick Kiesler is a smaller built environment that further illustrates methods of increasing user interaction in space. In this exhibit Kiesler displaces the paintings from their traditional context by removing their frame and projecting them into the space as freely floating objects. By doing this Keisler says that the picture “ceases to be decoration on the wall and becomes a small solid island in space.” Kiesler thought art in a gallery should be integrated into space and not just an application to space. By projecting flat surfaces into the space, space becomes the unifying medium of the environment. It unifies as it defines everything else through its inherent absence. This generates a unique environment for each user as they are suddenly confronted with how to navigate the void.

Through the integration with space Kiesler created a “galaxy” and in the “galaxy” navigating the space between planets is just as important as the planets themselves. The analogy of the painting to planet arises out of the world that an artist creates on a canvas. Similar to the flat surface of a painting containing a world is the screen culture of our mobile devices. The mobility of the devices provides an opportunity for creating an even more dynamic relationship of planets in a galaxy.

Figure 2.10
Precedent Analysis

BMW Guggenheim Lab, Atelier Bow Wow

Figure 2.11
BMW Guggenheim Lab, Atelier Bow Wow

The BMW Guggenheim Lab by Atelier Bow Wow is “Part urban think tank, part community center and public gathering space...” I believe that this contemporary exhibit builds on concepts of space found in the Art of this Century exhibit. The lab is a traveling exhibit of sorts with the focus of bringing together cross-disciplinary discussions on urbanism. It was the desire of the Guggenheim to break away from their typical architectural interest in iconic form. The goal of this Lab was to create a simple space that centralized the focus on the people themselves and not the building.

The Lab is a lightweight carbon fiber structure approximately two stories tall. The ground level is completely open. The second level wrapped in a semitransparent mesh. This mesh conceals a series of rigging systems that allow for technologies, and furnishings to be lowered into the ground level space accommodating whatever the specific activity occurring requires. The ground space can become a formal lecture setting, a workshop space, or simply a blank space for celebratory gatherings. The lightweight carbon fiber, typical to airplane construction makes this an exhibit easy to disassemble and

7 BMW Guggenheim Lab

Images showing the different services stored in the second story space and the flexibility provided at the ground level.
Precedent Analysis

ship to different locations.

gathering, or a workshop with tables for hands-on experiments, explained the Lab.

The flexibility of the space provides the opportunity for multiple galaxies to occur over time. Where as the Kiesler exhibit utilized the flat surface of the wall as the defining container of a single galaxy arrangement, the BMW Guggenheim Lab utilizes the second story volume as a spatial organizer and container of multiple galaxies. The plan of the volume is what defines where the activity occurs below it. From the volume different furnishings emerge that demand the user to engage with space in different ways.

Figure 2.15
**Building Type**

The focus of the design proposal is aimed at reactivating physical place by providing a space that confronts the de-distanced landscape of our technologically mobile culture. The building, I propose, is a cultural community center dedicated to serving the residents of the Lower East Side with diverse backgrounds and interests, building on each resident’s individual story to inspire cultural endurance and community engagement. The Cultural Community Center develops and facilitates unique opportunities for interaction through community outreach, recreation, and education. These programs are dispersed through predominantly public space to encourage interaction amongst the different user groups. To further develop the program and the design Le Corbusier’s Cite de Refuge and Alvar Aalto’s Community Center of Säynätsalo Finland were analyzed for their program and design.

The Cite De Refuge was commissioned by the Salvation Army in 1929. The mission of this project was to “alleviate the physical misery and suffering of the most disinherited, degraded, and outcast members of society” through labor and religious conversion. Precedents that were referenced in designing the program for the Cite de
Refuge were that of asylums and shelters most typically found far removed from the city. The Cite de Refuge was unique in its proposal to place this project within the city, making these services more obtainable to their target audience. The programmatic vision to fulfill this mission within this site was complex because it contained such a range of diverse functions.

The siting of this project within the city meant that the Cite de Refuge needed to be a twenty-four hour facility, accommodating both a short term and long term use of services being offered. The primary components to the program were a place for rest, a place for nourishment, and a place for rehabilitation. To fill in those moments through the day where these services would not be relevant, numerous social and administrative services were also included. Meeting halls, lounges, medical services, laundry facilities, offices, and living quarters for staff became integral parts of the program. The range of program would serve the widest variety of human needs maintaining significance to those “disinherited, degraded, and outcast members of society” providing the Salvation Army time to make an impact these individuals.

Corbusier’s own personal interest in social reform through architecture made this a very captivating project for him. He used this project to experiment with methods of mathematical rationalizing of space and design. He also attempted to implement technologies and building innovations that were influenced by concepts of wellness and hygiene. Rather than rely on natural ventilation, Corbusier implemented a hermetically sealed curtain wall paired with a central air conditioning system to circulate air and heat the building. No cooling systems were incorporated to cool the air in the summer. Spaces
were designed to encourage collective living as well as provide very distinct interactions with light and air.

The building was a great success in reaching the intended population. After opening, the center was very quickly filled with the “tramps, vagabonds...unwed mothers, former convicts,” making it a functioning institution. Just as quickly the building revealed its failures. The air-conditioning system was a newer technology and had not been appropriately designed to support this twenty-four hour living space. Although the combination of program in this new urban context was successful, the building was not inhabitable. Uncomfortable living conditions discouraged people from staying and made them generally unresponsive to the efforts of the Salvation Army. The philosophical investment made in this project ultimately failed due to its lack of practical function.

In Alvar Aalto’s Community Center of Säynätsalo Finland, we see a much more pragmatic approach to design. The building was Aalto’s demonstration of superiority of civic building over commercial building. Because of this, Aalto made moves that contrasted the trends of the modernist movement yet achieved a clear legibility to the local community. This center exceeds simply being a town hall complex and becomes a local beacon to community strength and empowerment. Aalto stated “I was able to help these people find their own values, pushing them to strive toward a better estimation of themselves. The environment must be liberated; it should not be overdeveloped according to unfamiliar values.” To do this Aalto utilized the requested program as well as local cues to form this center.

The building is sited at the highest point in the community. To emphasize this prominent position Aalto creates an artificial hill surrounded on all sides by building. This part turns into two built
forms, a U shaped form and a bar at the open end of the U. The hill is then flattened within these boundaries creating a raised outdoor patio. The composition and diversity of scale applied to these built forms with the raised patio makes it an urban environment unto itself. Each volume takes on a different programmatic component like neighborhoods in a city. The west block is reserved or accommodation, to the south is the library with an entrance at ground and from the courtyard. The library is then linked back to the administrative wing to the east through the buildings main entrance.

Both these precedents make it clear that place based culture should be a highly valued contributing factor to the design and organization of program for a community center. Through provision of services that nurture a local culture, residents can develop a sense of pride and freedom to be themselves. In order to truly provide this a thorough site analysis must be done.
Site Analysis

In *The Image of the City*, Kevin Lynch sets forth to explain those elements that create legibility within a city. Legibility as Lynch defines it, is “The ease with which its part can be recognized and can be organized into a coherent pattern.” This coherence leads to a relationship between the environment and the user, where the user selects and organizes the elements and implies meaning on what he or she sees. Lynch acknowledges that the image that the user composes will vary greatly, however there should still remain substantial agreement amongst the users of that environment. Through an investigation of the socio-historical context of The Lower East Side, it is clear that since the arrival of the twenty-four-hour media circuit powerful players in the New York City developer scene have used this media exposure in an attempt to reinvent this place.

This reinvention threatens the lived experiences of residents who maintain authentic local cultural attachments to place to be falsely branded and commoditized. Doing so would re-organize and falsify the coherent pattern damaging the legibility and culture of this place. Since the 1960’s this pattern has occurred in different areas of the site several times, each time culture was damaged and ultimately discarded in favor of a higher income resident. The Seaward Park Urban Renewal Area site is the largest undeveloped piece of land in New York City south of 96th street. The development of this site will ultimately decide weather the legibility of this neighborhood is provided adequate support to adapt and evolve incorporating new residents or simply be wiped clean left to be re-written by the new tenants.

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Figure 4.1
Site Analysis

Figure 4.2
Site Analysis

Formal Analysis

The Lower East Side is a neighborhood in the southeast portion of the New York City borough of Manhattan. The exact boundaries of this neighborhood today are debatable, however historically it was the area bordered by, 14th street to the North, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Drive and East River to the east, The Manhattan Bridge and Canal Street to the south and Broadway to the west. The neighborhood is predominantly residential with a typical condition of small local business occurring at the street level of much of the built area. This neighborhood is home to several landmarks and institutions such as The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, Katz’s Delicatessen, Tompkins Square Park and Sara Delano Roosevelt Park. The neighborhood is accessible by a plethora of bus transportation as well as the B, D, F, J, L, M, Z subway lines.

The Lower East Side is largely composed of a regular grid whose axis rotates southeast slightly below East Houston Street. The eastern periphery of this site abandons the traditional city grid in favor of a tower in the park typology, which is the result of a series of housing projects constructed during the 1950’s and 1960’s. Both the Williamsburg and Manhattan Bridge touch down in this neighborhood making it a gateway to Manhattan for the southeastern borough of Brooklyn. As well, The Franklin Delano Roosevelt Drive is a six-lane freeway, three lanes in each direction, that runs along the east river throughout the entire length of this neighborhood. This infrastructure guarantees that the east edge of the site and its two points of entry for these bridges are densely populated with car traffic during rush hour.

The specific site proposed for the design of this thesis is part of the larger Seward Park Urban Renewal Area, which is currently five vacant lots, owned by the City of New York. The specific block targeted for the proposal is Lot 5. This lot is bound by Broome Street to the North, Clinton Street to the east, Grand Street to the South and Suffolk Street to the west and is 200’ x 300’. Lot 5 contains a former fire station with a commercial tenant, an abandoned building and a small tenement building with 7 occupied residences. The Lot to the north is surface parking. The block to the east is loosely developed, with a mix of tall residential towers with one-story commercial buildings at their base. Most notably this block is home to St. Mary’s Church, built in 1832, which is the third Catholic Church to be established in New York City. The area south of the site is one
portion of the Seward Park Housing Cooperative. Each Cooperative building is a 20 story composite of three residential towers. In all there are four buildings with roughly 1700 units. This area south of the site is also home to Seward Park, a New York Public Library a supermarket and a single story commercial building. This area to the south is a mega-block designed to accommodate the Tower in the Park typology and de-maps Suffolk Street and Norfolk Street. The block directly west of the site has the Hon Ning Senior Citizen apartment Building managed by the Chinese-American Planning Council. This block is also home to a synagogue building, which was home to the Beth Hamedrash Hagadol, the first eastern European Orthodox Jewish congregation in the United States.

Lot 5 falls within a specific area of the Lower East Side that has yet to be re-branded and developed. A series of mental boundaries exist around Lot 5 making it part of a sub-neighborhood within the Lower East Side. To the West the Sarah Delano Roosevelt Park is a boundary of parkland that has created a centralizing node and in doing so created a mental barrier keeping the affluence of the west village and soho from spreading towards the Lower East Side. Just a block north of the site is Delancey Street, which grows in width at this point to accommodate access to the Williamsburg Bridge. The width of the street paired with busy traffic flows that occur at the site turn this street into a mental and physical boundary to the area south of it. These two boundaries have created a southeast pocket within the Lower East Side neighborhood that has seen reluctance from business and development to occur.

The goal for the development of the 5 vacant lots is to transform these underutilized city-owned properties into thriving, financially viable, mixed-use developments\(^2\). The aim is to do this through a program that is sixty percent housing and forty percent commercial, including a public market, public open space, parking space for 500 cars distributed throughout and hotel accommodations at around 100,000 sf.

The site has great potential for development. It is already an extremely diverse area with a dense population. The sites location is on a future proposed second avenue subway line extension. This means that site would be accessible by every mode of transportation New York has to offer. Presently the site is very inactive. These vacant lots have been present for the past half-century and the local population does not currently incorporate this area into their use of the city. There is minimal pedestrian traffic for simply cutting

\(^2\) SPURA Development Plan
through the site. If the site is not planned well it may only see the 
addition of new residents without creating invitation to the existing 
community to begin incorporating this portion of the city into their 
routine. The housing portion of the proposal looks to add nearly 
200 new units to the area. It is important that in planning for new 
business and residents the atmosphere and culture of the existing 
environment stay in tact and be provided the opportunity to adapt 
and grow with this new development. The opportunity arises here 
for a public facility where member of the community can collaborate 
and interact. A meeting of old and new residents who communicate 
cultural influences and utilize all aspects of this newly developed 
area.
Socio-Historical Context

The history of the site dates back to the Lenape Indians who inhabited the Island of Manhatta before its discovery by the French in 1524. However, the contemporary history that has shaped the current environment began in 1811 when the Manhattan’s land use plan divided the city into the grid. This organization and proposal for infrastructure made the northern portion of the island a virgin, airy, spacious alternative from the increasingly crowded, diverse population of Lower Manhattan. The wealthy fled north to build their mansions. As this occurred Lower Manhattan was rezoned into twenty-five-foot by one-hundred-foot plots of land to promote tenement development, accommodating the rapidly increasing immigrant population.

It is important to note that even when these tenements were new the living conditions were awful. These narrow buildings partied against one another, making them dark, crowded, poorly ventilated spaces. The typical tenement consisted of 7 apartment units. Each unit had a bedroom, kitchen and sitting room, all of which were very small spaces. At the street level there would normally be one or two commercial units. The owners of these tenements invested as little as possible in their maintenance and upkeep in order to earn the greatest profit. The tenement never provided immigrants the opportunity to lead healthy productive lives. Because of this, the immigrant populations were always organizing to find ways out of these dismal environments. However, just as soon as one group managed to leave newly arriving immigrants with no other options would move in.

3 New York Historic Society
4 Christopher Mele, Selling the Lower East Side: culture, real estate, and resistance in New York City, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.)
5 Mele, Selling the Lower East Side.
Site Analysis

The New York State Tenement House Act of 1879 aimed to improve living situations by mandating the tenements provide “plain air” to every room. The dumbbell plan was seen as the prime solution to this mandate. With minimal investment airshafts were added to each of the one-hundred foot sides of the building. Ultimately this didn’t prove much help as these shafts quickly filled up with waist and created a more toxic environment. The landlords were not concerned with the quality of living conditions as long as their property met legal requirements, and a tenant was willing to move in. This was the case until 1924 when the Immigration Act, limiting immigration form any given country to only two percent of that nations population, was passed greatly slowing the rate of new immigration.6

As development to the north and outer boroughs expanded the Lower East Side was quickly becoming obsolete and falling into collapse. Although immigration slowed down and the population of the area decreased it was still a very culturally rich and diverse environment as many immigrant businesses remained in operation attracting former residents to return to the area. The visit was an important method of staying connected to their culture, and also a

6 Mele, Selling the Lower East Side.
means for showing off that they had accomplished “moving up and out.” With decreased Immigration the tenement was no longer a profitable option. With the growing success and establishment of Wall Street elimination of the ghetto to create high-rise white-collar housing developments became the popular proposal.

The 1929 Multiple Dwelling Law required landlords to fix and upgrade their tenements or demolish them. Demolition was the popular choice and during this time the number of vacant lots in the neighborhood tripled freeing up space for white-collar developments. Two major obstacles stood in the way of this proposal manifesting. Even though entire blocks were now vacant, the property had been divided into twenty-five foot by one-hundred foot lots making it difficult to track down and purchase enough lots to construct a project at the scale of a high-rise. The second issue was the strong ethnic presence that remained as well as the reputation of the immigrant ghetto. The reputation surrounding these people was nothing that an upper-middle class person would associate with. Ultimately two projects succeeded in being built; displacing the population who previously occupied their location, and then the depression hit and any plans that were in the works came to a halt.
With the depression in full swing New York passed the 1937 housing act which only allowed public housing to be built were low-income or slum housing previously existed. This was their method to ensure that in dismal times the ghetto, poverty, and fringe of society behavior would not spread beyond the places it was already present. This housing act ensured that the Lower East Side would remain a lower income neighborhood for some time. In 1940 the New York housing authority purchased the land that had been intended for middle class housing to build low-income housing projects. In 1949 the definition of public housing was formally changed from temporary to “permanent housing for people who were more or less separated from societies main stream.” By 1950 the Lower East Side contained the largest concentration of government sponsored low-income housing south of 96th street. And with the implementation of permanence in the definition these projects would forever remain low-income housing.

It is clear by the late 40’s that the poor immigrant conditions historically present in the Lower East Side have permanently impacted the site to remain a location for serving economically disadvantaged residents of New York. Regardless of that, there were still many private property owners who saw the profitability of their property in targeting the Middle class. The post World War Two environment marked many unique developments to the Lower East Side neighborhood. The Displaced Persons Act of 1948 aimed to help victims of persecution by the Nazis by removing restrictions set forth by the Immigration Act of 1924 and providing citizenship to European displaced persons. This act reintroduced white ethnic immigrants in numbers that had not been seen since the beginning of the 20th century. As well, Puerto Ricans who had been given provisional citizenship in 1917, were imported from Puerto Rico to take over the labor and factory jobs vacated by those men fighting the war. This introduced the Puerto Rican immigrant to the Lower East Side. In the post war economic boom of the 1950’s Puerto Rican presence in the neighborhood increased dramatically as airfare was now a fast affordable method to make the move. The increased immigration from both displaced Europeans and Puerto Ricans re-introduced a density of economically disadvantage immigrants to the neighborhood.

Simultaneously, The 1950’s saw the emergence of the New York school, an unofficial group of painters, sculptors, musicians, poets and dancers. The publication Possibilities was the collaboration

7 Mele, Selling the Lower East Side.
of painter Robert Motherwell, French-Architect Pierre Chareau, musician John Cage, and literary Harold Rosenberg. This collaborative publication truly established the New York school but more importantly officially Establishes New York as the center of the art scene, stripping the title previously held by Paris. Many of these artist participated in a sort of artist colony that emerged in the Lower East Side on east 10th street. Although the art and work being produced was new and inventive it received acclaim and recognition from the established art institutions like the Museum of Modern Art. This meant that suddenly the poor immigrant slums of the Lower East Side were now home to one of the most significant areas of high culture.

The 1950’s also saw the invention of the television and with it the 24 hour media circuit. In 1952, four million television sets could be found in American homes, by 1960 that number had jumped to fifty-million. This gave Americans unprecedented access to the happenings of the time. This paired with the emerging art scene provided Landlords the perfect opportunity to attract more profitable residents to the Lower East Side. Whereas it had previously been considered the land of poverty and fringe society, a sub-neighborhood branding strategy had been formed to specifically advertise the area around 10th street where this artist community had arisen. The 1960’s saw the emergence of the “East Village” and by the late 60’s this moniker completely replaced the Lower East Side when referring to the area north of East Houston Street. It was amongst this period of re-branding that the Seward Park Urban Renewal Plan, acquired the 5 lots of land south of Delancey Street and cleared them in preparation for an Urban renewal. Those lots have remained vacant and undeveloped ever since.

The re-branding may have provided the opportunity to attract a wealthier tenant and provided hope of redevelopment at a larger scale, as seen in the SPURA site, but ultimately the neighborhood remained unchanged. A 1968 survey of the properties revealed that 78.4% of the housing stock was low-income tenements, and only 6.3% were middle-income cooperative and rental units. Furthermore, a 1971 land use study commissioned by the city found that 50% of the housing stock was in need of replacement. That same report concluded that the lower east side was no longer functioning as the “spawning ground for poor people who later

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9 Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide.*
achieved economic success.”¹²

The emergence of the art scene in the 1950’s paired with the ever-growing media outlets sparks a reoccurring system within the site. Although the Lower East Side remained largely impoverished the national attention garnered by the New York School made it a continuous settlement of creative and alternative life styles. There were the hippies in the 1960’s the Punks in the 1970’s and Queer culture of the 1980’s. These movements continue to provide real-estate investors motives for re-branding in attempts to turn the neighborhood into a wealthier environment. This is done through the commoditization of these lifestyles and mass marketing them with a pop-cultural appeal.

However, continued economic downturns like the economic recession of the 1970’s ultimately postpone much development from occurring. Because this area is historically impoverished, in hard economic times, legislation continued to pass to try and keep poverty contained to this area. The 1976 program of “planned shrinkage” and again the 1987 50/50 cross subsidy plan are both examples of such legislation.¹³ The economically disadvantaged immigrant population remains and sustains their presence but is continually ignored in any attempts to revitalize the area. This cycle results in protest and confrontations that erupt between the true residence of this neighborhood and the investor ideals. The theme for development became the symbolic accommodation of cultural differences. Yet no authentic understanding or care for these subcultures ever actually existed. The neighborhoods that emerged in the Lower East Side exists as brand names and commoditized symbols, of subculture to create appeal amongst a middleclass consumer.

12 Mele, Selling the Lower East Side.
13 (Describe these two plans in more detail)
In *Who Governs?* Robert Dahl analyzes whom the governing body is composed of and whom they are governing. Our government functions as a secondary democracy. Rather than the public voting on every decision, all citizens (and this has not always been true), can vote to elect an official who they feel will best represent them in government. This would imply that the people indirectly govern themselves. However, Dahl points out that the knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed within our cities and hence, create an uneven opportunity to elect an official who truly represents you. Based on this understanding Dahl opens the argument that it is those people with the greatest access to those elements, wealthy business owners, who elect and who are governed. This can clearly be seen in the policy decisions that have governed immigrant living conditions and real-estate development over the last century.

Although The Lower East Sides magnetism for immigrant groups has typically left it one of the poorest neighborhoods in Manhattan, it is surrounded by some of the highest real-estate and income levels in New York. Because of this it has been under constant contest for development and the ability to create high profile real-estate. The re-branding methods developers have used attempt to wash away the appearance of immigrant life and poverty, in order to clearly demarcate areas of trend and prestige. Prior to the 1960’s the broad area bounded by 14th street to the north, the FDR and East River to the East, The Manhattan Bridge and Canal Street to the South and Broadway to the West was simply known as the Lower East Side. Since then successful attempts at re-branding have chipped away at these boundaries creating new culture, ideas and perceptions of these sub-neighborhoods. The present day boundaries of what a New Yorker would consider the Lower East Side is bounded by East Houston Street to the North, The FDR and East River to the East Pike Street to the South and Allen Street to the West. The fact that the boundaries of this neighborhood have shrunk shows the disdain developers have had for a culture that was present, continually marginalizing its area and shrinking the physical location in which this culture sustains.

As explained before in “Space as Key Word” David Harvey addresses the question “What is Space?” To answer this he divides
space into three types, absolute, relative, and relational and space is never just one of these and potentially can be experienced as all three. The important observation he makes is that space is defined by human practice and experience. The shifting of boundaries of the Lower East Side is a manipulation of its absolute space. Boundaries quantify space creating something absolute. However, these boundaries are perceived through cultural expression and so they are simultaneously relative. As well, since the cultural expressions have changed different people on the sites have memories connected to spaces they no longer participate in, making the spaces relational.

Although the boundaries may be relative they manifest in a very absolute interaction and so those spaces that have been re-branded and made more economically profitable are not welcoming spaces to the less wealthy population that once inhabited it. Harvey explains that space is a constructed order made through the walkers experience of it. If the walker no longer accesses the space, than it disappears form their selection and constructed order. The result is a fragmenting of space in relation to the experience of the occupant. Because place no longer remains a constant, especially in the circumstances of this neighborhood, than man places more value of the experience as opposed to the place. The identity of place becomes nothing more than a label. For many of the residents of the Lower East Side this experience did not just begin in the 1960’s when the Lower East Side became fragmented in several periods of re-branding, the fragmentation of place came when they immigrated to the U.S. The U.S was not home to them, but they connected experiences of culture and family to re-create home. Since their settling into the Lower East Side place has been defined much more strongly by experience than by name. “Home is not a place, but a composition of fragments.”

So if home is not a place, if no place really exists but is really just a definition of experiences than the emphasis is not on location but on time. Experience is fleeting; the only real space it occupies is the space of time. This experience of displacement by immigrating compacted with the general disregard of the impoverished immigrant population creates a group of people who rely more on time and experience than they do on place. If everything becomes about the now is there any room for here?

15 Harvey, “Space as a Key Word.”
Included in this discussion of physical displacement and abandonment creating a reliance on experience and time, is the discussion of technology which has amplified these very same sentiments. The threat is not that they will be displaced. The majority of these people now live in the projects. Any displacement that was going to occur happened in the re-branding of the 60’s. The threat is that you will have an isolated island of projects, housing people who no longer welcomed or able to interact with their immediate environment.
The program combines community outreach, recreational, and educational services to create purpose and attraction to the site. The element of the market is a purely public program devised to weave these different program pieces together in a culturally rich urban environment.
Considering themes investigated in this thesis such as:

- Actants in a network or cultural group
- Public versus private performance
- Static versus Simultaneous Experience
- Generational Interpretations
- Duration and Pace

Program elements were cross categorized and analyzed through these lenses to improve their organization and layout.

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**Figure 5.1**

**Figure 5.2**
Generational Mapping of program looks at the different people grouping by generation and how frequently they would utilize different programs.
Figure 5.4
Schedule Mapping Highlights the daily duration of the facility and how different programs can potentially overlap spatially.
Based on the analysis of technology, identity, and space paired with the site analysis it became clear that place bound identity must first be preserved through bringing those present in the neighborhood together. This was the primary influence to the urban design strategy. 3 options addressed this. Option one would be an intervention that physically runs through the entire Lower East Side neighborhood bringing together all peoples and sub-branded areas of the site. This is not a feasible option because of the dense urban context already present on the site.
Option two would be scattering the proposed program throughout the neighborhood. This approach presently exist on the site as outlined in Figure 5.3. The result of this has been isolating. While services are presently distributed through the neighborhood based on need, they do not draw in a diverse user group and keep those people of that immediate area from venturing further out into the neighborhood.
Option three proposes condensing the program to one specific location in the neighborhood making it a destination. This has been the approach of all the precedents discussed in this thesis. The goal of this project is then to create a destination where space behaves as a bridge from our networked environment to our physical environment.
Multiple schemes ranging in scale and placement on the site were considered. Once the program was clearly organized it became clear that the design would be a destination nested in the larger built context of the development scheme for the site. The winning scheme is a long elevated bar running north to south communicating the gesture of the Urban Proposal 1. Additionally street frontage is added to the south end of the block to give the building the largest presence in the face of the neighborhood who needs it most.
Figure 6.7 Schematic Site Plan
The building utilizes many of the techniques discussed in the precedent analysis to activate space. A series of ramps faceted to slabs make this a continuous spatial experience where the user is constantly forced to evaluate their purpose in that space.
Schematic Design

Figure 6.9 South and SouthWest Elevations

Special moments within the continuous spatial experience jut out capturing views of the neighborhood but also disrupt the experience of the pedestrian giving them visual access and interest to the activities going on inside.
Figure 6.8 North and NorthWest Elevation
Figure 6.10 West Elevation
The cuts and folds in the slab provide visual access that precedes physical presence into that space. This aims to provide a stimulating environment that feels less static. The facets of slab to ramp provide surfaces that interrupt the space. Here information specified to the neighborhood and activities at the center can be displayed or projected. The de-distanced information provided by the screen becomes an inhabitable spatial environment that informs the visitors of their physical surroundings.


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