# University of Cincinnati

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**I, Micaela Becker, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Architecture in Architecture.**

It is entitled:

**Non-Place (Making): The Big Box De-form-ed**

Student's name: **Micaela Becker**

This work and its defense approved by:

**Committee chair: Joss Kiely, Ph.D.**

**Committee member: Vincent Sansalone, M.Arch.**

UNIVERSITY OF Cincinnati

38091

# Non - Place (Making):

## The Big Box De-form-ed

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A thesis submitted to the University of Cincinnati,
Division of Research and Advanced Studies,

For fulfillment for a Master of Architecture
In the School of Architecture and Interior Design
of the College of Design, Architecture and Planning

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# ABSTRACT

An exurb is a district beyond the suburbs and well beyond the city center that can be characterized as a transitional zone from the urban fringe to the rural pastoral, fitting somewhere in between. The American exurbs originally emerged as growth centers that were the outcome of decades of suburban sprawl and the shift towards the aesthetic of the pastoral as people and corporations moved to the urban fringes. Exurbia displays settlement patterns and landscapes that at first glance seem very much a part of the city, but in actuality exist entirely car dependent and devoid of any central business district, making them distinct from their urban predecessors. Exurbia generally consists of architecture that is placeless, lacking any significant markers that make it specific to its site, location, or landscape. This placeless architecture that could exist anywhere in the U.S. is reflective of the global age of consumerism, seen in cookie cutter housing developments, big box retail stores, strip malls, warehouses, condo-block developments and more.

Few building typologies have had as much of an impact on the American exurban landscape and American mind than the big box store. The big box typology first emerged in the early 1970s, and when it did advocates of postmodernism saw the confluence of signage set against the façade as an opportunity to challenge its signifying potential. Through deformation, this thesis seeks to push back against the monotony of  form, materiality and organization of the big box store as a provocation of exurbia. The project seeks to challenge the existing form of the big box and present it as a productive element through its deformation and interaction with its surrounding topography to present a novel reading of its possible architectural expression of a non-place.

# PART 1

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## THE NON-PLACE ON THE URBAN FRINGE

Figure 01
Ryan Boatwright, *Exurbia*, 2005, photograph. Image Credit: Phases Magazine

# 1.1

# EXURBIA

There is somewhere out there beyond the urban fringe, loosely defined geographically, yet easily recognized for its generic architecture that stands as both a symbol and marker of American consumption and production. This loosely defined geographical area is somewhere you might know well and may inhabit often. It is both the geography of nowhere and anywhere that is visually recognized for its corporate campuses, office parks, cookie cutter communities, big box stores, distribution centers, and more, all loosely interspersed and intertwined between American highways, and interstates. While its architecture does not work for the specificity of its place, it is the place that works as a blank slate of space that can situate

the architecture anywhere. This loosely defined place is known as exurbia, it is both the child of suburban sprawl, and the enemy of the rural landscape (Figure 01). Exurbia is defined by the dictionary as the region beyond the suburbs and can be more broadly described as the recently developed suburbs beyond the suburbs.[1] One step beyond the suburbs, the exurban landscape exists as a threat to the rural landscape. Tristram Hunt points out in his 2005 article, "Nowhere Land," that "Currently, some 105 acres an hour of US farmland are being withdrawn from agricultural use. And over half of that acreage is going straight into new housing developments."[2] This historical shift in more land consumption per capita has led to the development of peripheral land that has turned urban, turning once agricultural land into exurbia.[3] This brave new exurban world is typically planned by competing developer groups and aided by federal subsidies and developer investments.[4] Exurbia captures the phenomenon of "room to grow". It captures the desire for low-density, leisure-seeking, post-industrial societal structures to exist in rural areas that are car dependent.[5] As America has undergone and is still undergoing this historic shift in its balance between the city and the rural, exurbia's architecture aids in this shift by helping the urban edges of a city extend into the rural more easily than ever before.

America's Exurbia presents an ideological change on the notion of place specificity within architecture as the architecture that makes up exurbia emits aesthetics of the productive age of global consumerism, possessing the ability to function anywhere. And because of this great ability to situate itself anywhere, the architecture of exurbia uniquely emits itself strictly as a service, not to place, but rather to the non-place, the space of circulation, consumption, and communication for the individual American in supermodernity.[6]

Supermodernity is a type, mode or stage of society that reflects an inversion of modernity in which the function of an object has its reference point in the form of an object. Supermodernity is a step beyond the ontological emptiness of postmodernism, and it relies upon more plausible truths. The touchscreen phone is an excellent example of supermodernism in action, as it allows the individual to live in super modernity in an intellectual, musical, or visual environment that is wholly independent of his or her immediate physical surroundings. Exurbia is unique in that it privileges and easily allows for the space of supermodernity. Exurbia contains architecture that act as non-places, spaces where concerns of relations, history, and identity that are unique to the era creating it are erased. Marc Augé presents the notion of the non-place in his work *Non-Places*, "the

Figure 02
Alex Maclean, *Housing Development at Different Stages*, 2005, photograph. Image Credit: International Business Times

non-place is the space of super modernity."[7] Supermodernity fits into the non-place in that it naturally finds its full expression in the non-place, the antithesis of place where people construct their daily life.[8] The great paradox of supermodernity is that people are always and never at home.[9] And by extension, people in exurbia are always and never at home, making the architecture unique as the make-up of the non-place. In his work, Augé describes the non-place as, "the opposite of Utopia: it exists, and does not contain any organic society."[10] Augé brings forth the idea that supermodernity produces these non-places, spaces which are not anthropological places and do not incorporate the earlier place (Figure 02).[11] The antithesis to the place, the non-place creates solitary contractility, where the space does not create singular identity nor relations for the individual, but rather solitude and similitude.[12] Auge points to the way in which the individual connects to their surroundings of space in the non-place through the mediation of words or texts.[13] The individual in the non-place can live in a visual environment that is wholly independent. Robert Venturi worked to illuminate the tangle of modern architecture in the urban landscape as a visual environment of signage. James Howard Kunstler highlights this in his work in *The Geography of Nowhere*, "American space had ceased to be about forms, [Venturi


Figure 03
*View from Walmart Parking Lot.* Image Credit:
https://elevation.maplogs.com/poi/ravenwood_dr_greensburg_pa_usa.467752.html.

and Scott Brown] said it was now about symbols – communication, advertising."[14] The architectural type that exurbia emits is a type that is highly visual, infusing signage of the non-place into its organization and the abstraction of its form (Figure 03). But while exurbia's type is highly visual, the banality of its architecture aesthetically operates unchallenged. This architectural type that exurbia emits depicts the larger desired and built aesthetics of the non-place. It is an aesthetic that is of and for the masses through mass construction techniques, the use of unspecific commercialized materials, and the effects of repetition, all amongst the notion of the pastoral. The exurban non-place's architectural type speaks to modernist beliefs where the building's function dictated the building's type.

And while exurbia emits the aesthetic of the detachment of place through the makeup of its architecture, it places the role of the architect in a non-place as well. Today's architect working within exurbia often functions like a decoder, decoding bits of architectural constraints rather than like an artist inserting their work within a specific context. And because of that, today's architect with a sense of agency may feel like they are locked out of this exurban landscape that is typically the creation of competing developer investments and federal subsidies. The architect Andrés Jaque highlights his own opinion about

Figure 04
Adam Cvijanovic, *Exurbia (New City)*, 2001-2012, painting. Image Credit: Flickr CCC Strozina

architectural agency and how it has shifted today. Jaque states in the article "Rearticulating the Social" that, "Architects cannot claim sole authorship over any project in today's world. It means that the issue of architectural agency cannot be absolute, rather architecture today embodies a certain form of agency that results from interactions with others."[15] Jaque continues that, "Intervention nowadays is also about producing the documents and mobilizing the knowledge that allows things to be reconfigured."[16] If we look at architectural agency in the same lens that Jaque is, it is not so much the loss of architectural agency that has occurred in roughly the last quarter century, but rather it is the re-configuration of it to involve other people, teams, technologies, and tools. This major shift within the field of architecture has also helped lead to new creations of American exurban non-places (Figure 04). Additionally, Jaque highlights how contemporary architectural intervention is not a solo process or undertaking, the architect today may act like a player working with others and being mediated by larger constraints that affect design.[17] This relationship structure is important because it speaks to a view of architectural agency that accepts the multi-faceted, highly meditated, globally connected environment today. As architects cannot claim sole authorship over any project in today's world, it points to a view of architectural agency

that works tangentially with other agencies and motives.[18] Today, the architect is in a world in which they work laterally as they ought to be able to function, work, and create anywhere and with anyone simultaneously. By situating the architect in a work landscape that is a non-place, it allows the conversation to shift from architectural agency to the actual events, objects, and patterns unfolding on the ground plane.

This brave new exurban realm is ripe for new attention and design speculation, it yet is an oft overlooked frontier for architectural inquiry where its frequent design tropes can be reinterpreted to create the vitality and novelty of a place in an otherwise placeless locale (Figure 05). This thesis seeks to break the established rules, and normative conditions of the current big box store to present a novel reading of its possible architectural expression. This thesis seeks to push back against the monotony in materiality, form, and organization of the big box store specifically through its own deformation, but it will start with an analysis of the geography of its site: exurbia and its foundational history.

Figure 05
*Aerial City View of the Lincoln M. Alexander Parkway.* Image Credit: Shutterstock

# PART 2

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## THE MAKING OF EXURBIA

Figure 06
*Boston, MA in 1870 – Bird's Eye View Map, print.* Image Credit: https://oldmapsoft-he1800s.storenvy.com/collections/1006920-birds-eye-view-map-united-states/products/11863779-boston.

# 2.1

# BORDERLAND EXPANSION

All urban growth in the U.S. can trace its existence back to one crucial action, sprawl, the expansion of the cities edge beyond itself through new construction. Like growth generally implies, it promotes creation rather than renovation. The earliest of America's reach to the suburbs starts in the early 1800s with the movement of people to the borderlands beyond the city, where the first notable expansion to the borderlands beyond the city in the U.S. began around 1820.[19] At that time, U.S. port cities such as New York and Boston, housed wharves, houses, shops, offices, factories, livery stables and markets tightly together for the convenience of people buying and selling (Figure 06).[20] Because of these dense, crowded districts within the city,

American middle-class families chose to move to and reside along the edge of the city where they would have more land and room to grow on versus in the city center. In her book, *Building Suburbia*, Dolores Hayden describes this borderland as a kind of in between urban and rural zone, "The periphery of the city in this era was not country. The edge was neither rural nor urban. It formed a distinctive gateway zone between city and country."[21] While this edge was neither rural and urban, it led to hostility between farmers who wanted the land to farm on and the newer residents from the city who still were working in the city but wanted to live in the countryside away from the crowded conditions.[22] This first push out of the city lead to the creation of new economic competition in the borderlands as transportation technology allowed competing groups of businessmen to re-establish the city's edges by pushing them out or pull them into fringe areas to maximize their investments in land.[23] Over time, this new way of life appeared set down in word as it was written in manuals of advice for homeowners and prospective owners wanting a similar new way of life that was the emergence of a suburban lifestyle. Middle-class families who fled the city and sought to live in the borderlands, had begun to define a new material culture and lifestyle that would arise out of these first urban developments in the borderlands.[24]

As the expansion to the borderlands beyond the city gained more of a footing, by the 1850s architects and landscape architects had begun to design picturesque enclaves (Figure 07).[25] This was an important shift because it allowed architects and landscape designers the autonomy to design an 'ideal' way of living in the borderland. Most significantly, it allowed them to add a sense of community to America's urban landscape that was only borderlands or rural countryside before. These early communities were designed as picturesque enclaves with winding roads that followed asymmetrical topography.[26] They were specifically designed to combine the aesthetic of the pastoral with the country home, where the country home was not a standalone, but part of a larger emerging community (Figure 08). This was, in part, to carry the underlying belief and intent that communal open space was crucial to a new way of life in the burgeoning urban fringes.[27] Such communities offered a new shared way of life and provided an alternative to the cramped cities and crowded inner city conditions if one could afford to live away from the city. But by the 1920s these early neighborhoods had become routinized and done before.[28] Developers across the U.S. traded their plans back and forth in a manner that aided the beginning of establishing a look of

homogeneity in the way communities were designed.[29] But the catalyst for further development in the urban fringe was not the routinized layout, but rather the advancement of the city into the formerly rural landscape as new industries and residents arrived. Underscoring this trend, Hayden remarks in *Building Suburbia* that, "Over and over, dwellers in the fringe reinvented themselves as advocates of a pastoral life, but again and again their landscape succumbed to the pressures of new development."[30] The borderlands' most advantageous trait, its proximity to undeveloped land, was perhaps later its most utilized trait; the fact that it could be developed.

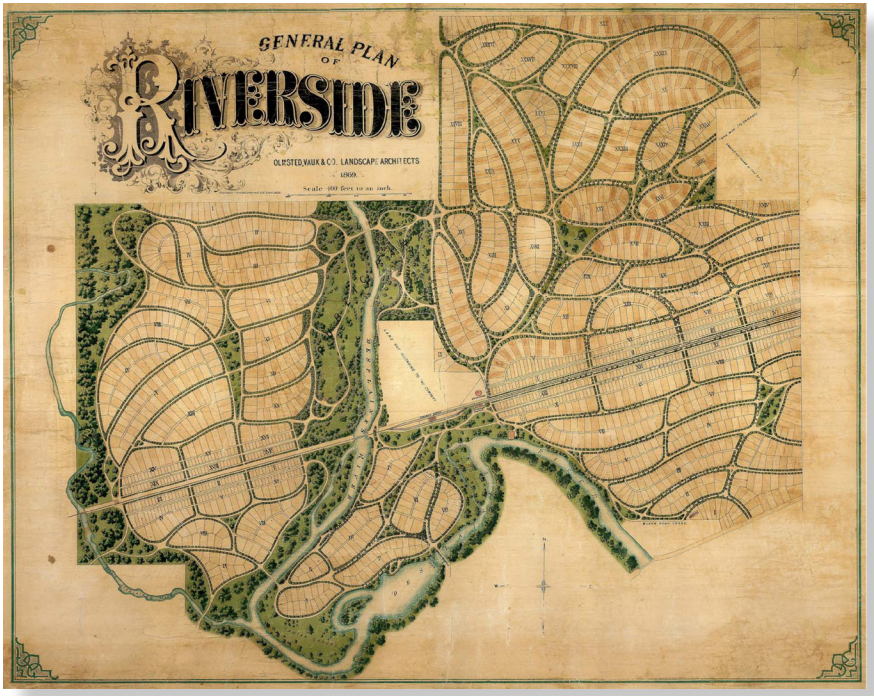


Figure 07
Olmsted, Vaux & Co., *General Plan of Riverside,* 1869. Image Credit: Federick Law Olmsted Society

Figure 08
Henry C. Gritten, *View of Barn*, Springside, NY, 1818-1873, oil on canvas. Image Credit: Springside Historic Site


Figure 09
*Levittown Sprawl,* New York. Image Credit: https://misfitsarchitecture.com/2015/02/12/functionalism/Levittown-sprawl/.

# 2.2

# POSTWAR SUBURBS

The advent of the suburbs in postwar America can be characterized by the emergence of similarity and standardization (Figure 09). The American urban landscape underwent a dramatic change after World War II, a result of new automobiles, the availability of gasoline, and new interstate highway systems that appeared strung across the U.S, both connecting cities and making it possible for more people to live further away from the city's center. Suburban developments grew from the city's edges, they promised a pre-scripted pastoral lifestyle and homeownership for the American family. Hayden describes the growth of the suburban development as emblematic of a culture of frenzy, suggesting that

although they were as large as many pre-war cities, "they looked and felt like overgrown subdivisions."[31] Former farmland became quickly homogenized, interrupted with the lines, forms, and colors of commercial interjection. New forms of prefabricated architecture followed the infinitely replicable developments such as gas stations, chain restaurants, industrial parks, and tract housing. On the one hand, the postwar suburbs were constructed at a great speed, but they were also deliberately planned to maximize the consumption of mass-produced goods and minimize the responsibility of the developers to create public space and services.[32] Hayden has noted that with this evolution in the speed at which the houses were built came a shift toward a populist architectural aesthetic preference, suggesting, "These places have not attracted architectural historians, because few well-known architects were involved, or planning historians, because they were usually not planned by noted practitioners (Figure 10)."[33] Additionally, as more Americans wanted to move away from the city, the introduction of mail-order catalog accelerated the rapid urban growth in the early 1900s, helping secure the aesthetic of rapid development of a style into the preferred taste of many Americans who flocked to this new edge condition (Figure 11). This process, fueled by standardization and consumerist trends, transformed what

was previously the literal fringe into the heart and every day of the postwar American psyche.


Figure 10
*Sears Modern Homes Fall 1914-Spring 1915*, Sears, Roebuck & Co. Image Credit: Internet Archive

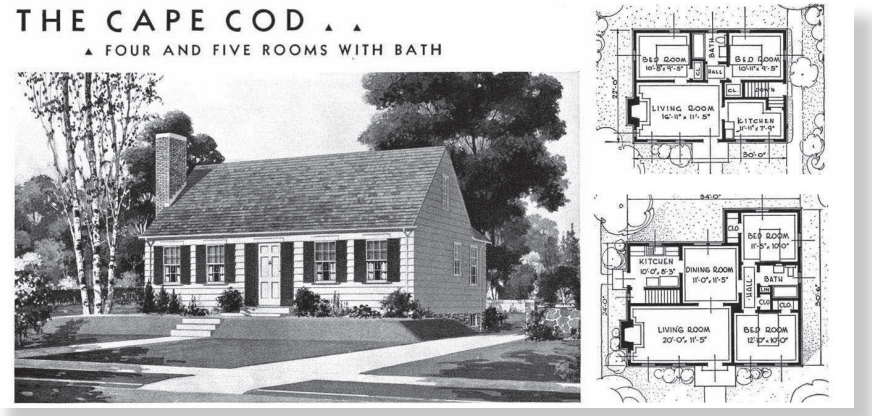


Figure 11
*Sears Cape Cod,* ca. 1933. Image Credit: Sears Archives

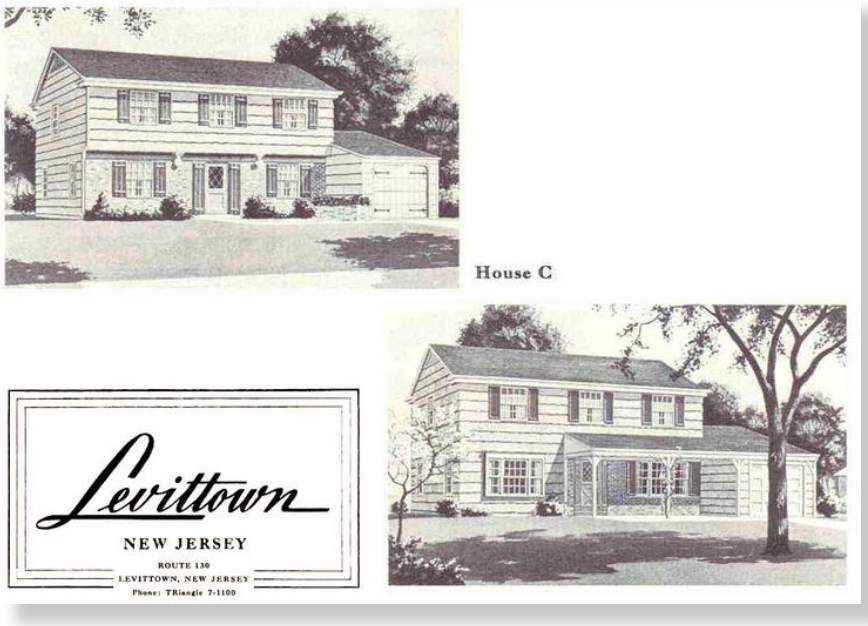


Figure 12
*House C Rendering*, Levittown, New Jersey ca. 1958. Image Credit: House & Home Magazine

As industrial development took off and the consumer nature of American citizens became more cemented, housing had become political, leading to the formation of the early National Association of Realtors to promote the buying, and selling of homes.[34] In response to pent-up demand, coupled with new federal support, groups of developer builders emerged and began to modernize home building to abet simplified mass production. These new builders, such as the Levitt's, were often creative, young risk-takers, many whom were the children of immigrants, but were not trained professionally as architects.[35] The story of the Levitt's' success begins with their father Abraham, a former lawyer asking his sons Bill and Alfred to work for him and join him in building one neo-Tudor house during the Great Depression, eventually leading to the creation of their proprietary firm, Levitt and Sons.[36] The Levitts, aided by the growth of mail-order companies that could sell and send standardized parts to be assembled in the house (Figure 12).[37] It was after the war when Levitt and Sons first added vertical integration of suppliers to maximize the standardization of the firm's practice.[38] This evolution in construction practices, specifically the standardization of parts and design significantly lowered the cost required to build a house. Hayden notes the Levitt's' shift to mass housing practices in their own words,

using a single design could lower the cost of houses.[39] Alfred Levitt said, as in your car, the parts in a Levitt house are standardized; each part will fit any house of the same model... the Levitt factory... is the land on which we assemble our houses.[40] The standardized house was reinforced by the building industry, and new developer-builders, who relied on techniques pioneered by prewar counterparts and refined their work on large construction projects with the advent of standardization of materials, such as lumber (Figure 13).[41] But these new practices did not always solve an ever-present demand for new construction, such as in the year 1945, the sixteenth in a row when new housing did not meet the demand.[42] Backed by the FHA and the VA banks gave loans for the construction of ten million new homes between 1946 and 1953.[43] The key difference between pre and post war American housing construction was that before the war, one-third of all houses were built by their owners and small contractors averaged another third.[44] But by the late 1950s it had shifted so that two thirds of the new houses in the U.S. were produced by large builders pointing to a shift in the architect's role and place that had expanded to include the contractor, builder and developer among others in the creation of the American urban landscape.[45]

Figure 13
*Levittown, New York under Construction*, ca. 1946. Image Credit: https://arrolgellner.blogspot.com/2020/07/why-american-homes-stopped-getting.html

While the shift in architectural aesthetics had a large part to do with the speed of scale of construction, it also had to do with new regulations and administrations that dictated the standardization and similarity of homebuilding construction methods. Specifically, the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) were the two main agencies responsible for regulating housing that established conservative practices in order to reduce the probability of another Depression.[46] FHA guidelines asserted "no flat roofs," and the HOLC published instructions that modern homes were a lending risk.[47] As well as the FHA and HOLC, deed restrictions heavily shaped the standardization of housing. The two most widely adopted land planning tools were zoning laws, which regulated the use, height, and bulk of buildings on urban land, and subdivision regulations, which imposed minimum standards of lot size, street width, and alignment.[48] As Marc Weiss in *The Rise of Community Builders* points out, "Subdividers who engaged in full-scale community development also performed the function of being private planners for American cities and towns".[49] But Weiss points out that, "Deed restrictions, by virtue of being voluntary private contracts, often went beyond the scope of public sector police power regulations," as they would often forbid owners from painting their

home a certain color, or choosing whether or not to erect a fence.[50] Mass produced housing also had to succumb to and obey industrial possibilities and limitations of the time (Figure 14). Housing that relied on anything other than wood frame construction, including most experiments in prefabrication, was jeopardized because prefabrication struggled to deliver its product in a cost-effective manner as defense industries received priority for steel and aluminum.[51] The interwar years witnessed the emergence of a real home building industry, one that aided the suburbanization of America in the postwar years, moving more people beyond the city to the urban fringes that would result in the eventual emergence of exurbia and architectural non-places (Figure 15).

Figure 14
William A. Garnett, *Plaster and Roofing*, Lakewood, California, ca. 1950. Image Credit: The Getty Museum

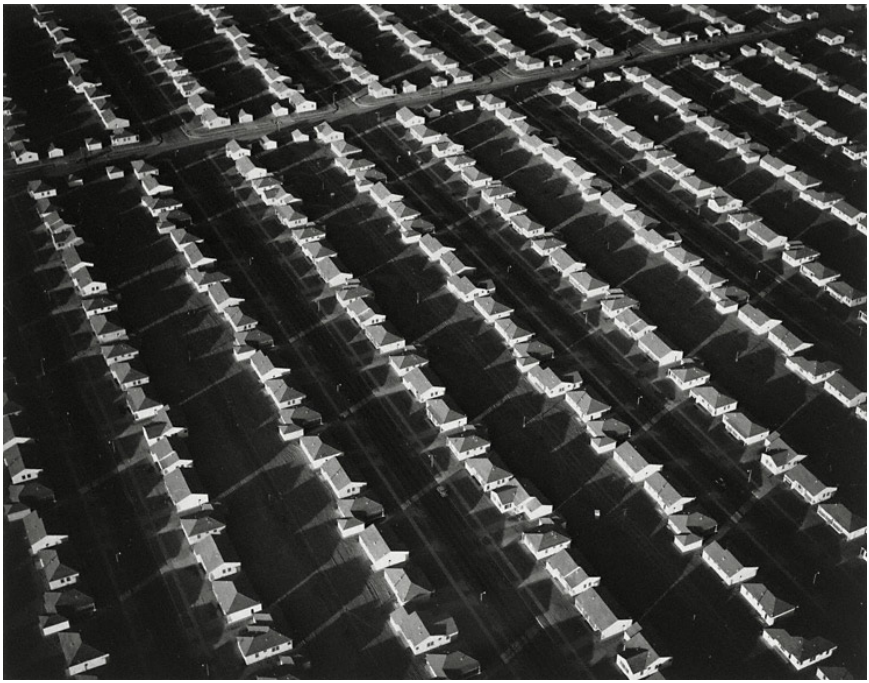

Figure 15
William A. Garnett, *Finished Housing*, Lakewood, California, ca. 1950. Image Credit: The Getty Museum

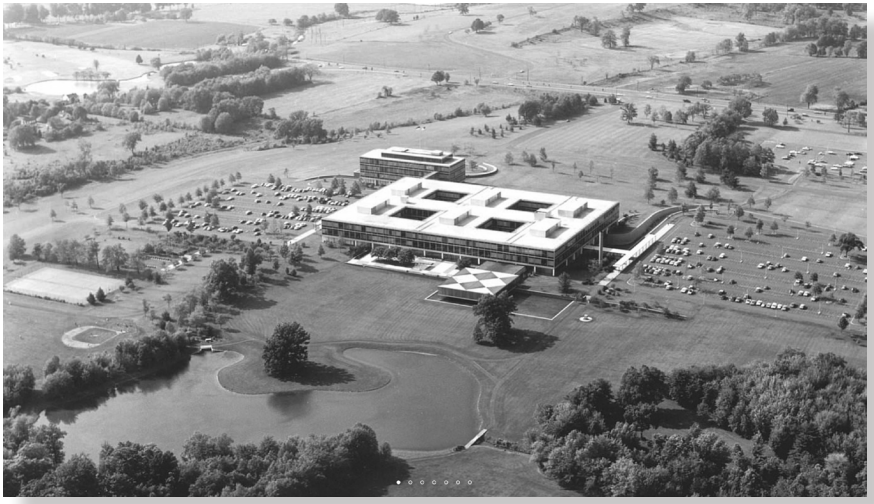

Figure 16
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, *Connecticut General Life Insurance Company*, Hartford, Connecticut, ca. 1957, photograph by Ezra Stoller, Image Credit: www.som.com.

# 2.3

# PASTORAL CAPITALISM

As the suburbs pushed further from the city center, they began to include more than just single-family housing. Dolores Hayden points to the fact that demographers still describe suburbs as "the non-central city parts of metropolitan areas,'" but she notes, "Describing suburbia as a residential landscape would be wrong, however, because suburbs also contain millions of square feet of commercial and industrial space and their economic growth outstrips older downtowns".[52] As the speed and scale of land development increased in the consecutive decades following the postwar years, it helped give way to the emergence of a new urban aesthetic that included the American corporation in the urban landscape (Figure

16). In *Pastoral Capitalism*, Louise Mozingo provides the argument for a new urban aesthetic, suggesting, "The new landscape of corporate work – what I call pastoral capitalism – is an American invention of the post – World War II period. Business management workplaces were the last of the center city land uses to emerge in the suburbs after housing, manufacturing, and retail commerce (Figure 17)."[53] Mozingo highlights the history of the emergence of pastoral capitalism starting with the rise of the move to the post-war suburbs on the urban fringes. She underscores that this move was unique in that it not only stemmed from the availability of land and travel with modern transportation, but also from the fear of atomic attacks, "A circumstance in particular called to the post war's period of dispersal to the urban fringes of major corporations: the pervasive context of civil defense helped fuel this great move outward as central business districts were considered more vulnerable to an atomic attack."[54]

Figure 17
Frank J. Aleksandrowicz, *Aerial View Looking Northeast at the Ohio Turnpike of the 1950's and the Interstate of the 1960's as the Highways*, ca. 1975. Image Credit: commons.wikimedia.org

Figure 18
Eero Saarinen, *John Deere & Company Administrative Center Buildings,* Moline, Illinois, ca. 1964. Image Credit: *Pastoral Capitalism* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2011), 124.

This move of corporations to the urban fringes was made primarily in the mid-twentieth century, fueled by large corporations wanting to distance themselves from what they considered the unpleasant social and physical condition of the manufacturing plants.[55] In the first decades of the twentieth century, industrial landscapes were once distinctively celebrated as emblems of progress and economic prowess, but the mentality had changed in the American people so that they were no longer seen as such. Further underscoring these notions, Mozingo argues that these new suburban corporate landscapes appropriated the suburb's aesthetics and moral code into what she calls the aesthetic of pastoral capitalism. The pastoral ideal helped play a role in the greater downtown exit where the corporation could situate itself in a picturesque setting in the countryside (Figure 18). And corporations promoted the suburban pastoral environment as conductive to the function of the corporate enterprise.[56] As postwar corporate leaders created the working environments of postwar management on the urban periphery, the familiar aesthetic of the pastoral allowed the corporation to reidentify itself as a conformist suburban neighbor.[57] In addition to its functional features, the corporation now appeared as sending a dual message of conformity, and uniformity, cleverly conveyed through its newly acquired pastoral

aesthetic (Figure 19).[58] The new corporate neighbor on the urban periphery presented an important shift in the history of America's urban landscape that would eventually open the door for other similar types of developments to join it on the urban periphery. Further accelerating the decentralization of the city, in *Building Suburbia*, Hayden notes "the private and public governance of cities acceded to the forces of accelerated decentralization, and pastoral landscape taste triumphed as an American ideal."[59] The American urban fringes had shifted from a community-based ideal to a decentralized pastoral landscape that welcomed and housed architectural non-places (Figure 20). Thus, the architecture of pastoral capitalism makes up the space of supermodernity before anyone knew it, that is space where concerns of relations, history and identity were erased.

Figure 19
Eero Saarinen, *Entry View of the John Deere & Company Administrative Center,* Moline, Illinois, ca. 1964. Image Credit: *Pastoral Capitalism* (Cambridge: MIT University Press, 2011), 129.

Figure 20
*Corporate Campus,* Cranberry, PA, ca. 2021. Image Credit: Taken by Author

Figure 21
*Las Vegas Suburbia HD Photo.* Image Credit:
https://www.pinterest.com/pin/405886985143822990/.

# 2.4

# THE PLACELESS NON-PLACE: EXURBIA

Suburban sprawl, neither an accident nor the vision of a specific urban form, continues to be the dominant American pattern of habitation and growth (Figure 21). Over time, this trend helped fuel the existence of the rise of the exurb.[60] The word exurb was first coined by Auguste Comte Spectorsky in his 1955 book *The Exurbanites*, to tell his story of the affluent communities thriving beyond the suburbs.[61] Exurban areas incorporate pre-existing towns, villages, and smaller cities, as well as strips of older single-family homes built along pre-existing roads that connected older population centers of what was once a rural area.[62] They are distinct from the suburbs in that the suburbs are specific in their forms and development, the

exurbs are not. Generated by random patterns of sprawl and growth, exurban areas arose from the desire to prevent through traffic and the idealized desire for gated communities to eliminate local business pushing every contact or interaction to the big box store and or the automobile. And while at first exurbia may all appear a natural consequence of the historical pattern of urban settlement in America, if you zoom out, it becomes clear that vast new exurbs are dotting the landscape and being carved out of farmland, or barren land, that allow people to live just as connected to their urban economic and social spheres and survive via telecommunications, cars, and air travel (Figure 22).[63] The exurbs that house architectural non-places are uniquely decentralized places or regions with no specific urban form, vision or community, continuing to thrive in our new digital age aided by larger networks of speed and connection. And because the exurbs will continue to grow and be built, it prompts possible considerations of latent potentials for the architecture it contains through a deeper investigation into the banality of architectural non-places. Like the exurbs, the ruburbs that surround exurbia are the topographical mezzanine between rural and suburban, containing architecture of the non-place as well. Perhaps the city's rural counterpart, they are small country towns barely within commuting distance of city centers

across the American landscape.[64] They differ from exurbia as ruburbs contain some semblance of a central business district or main street. But they provide another landscape of the non-place that that makes up the larger American landscape, one full of latent architectural potentials for the non-place that will continue to grow and expand in supermodernity.

Figure 22
Joe Wolf, *Aerial Photography: Exurban NW El Paso, TX,* ca. 2008. Image Credit: Flickr

Figure 23
*Exurban Aerial, Baton Rouge, LA.* Image Credit: Google Earth

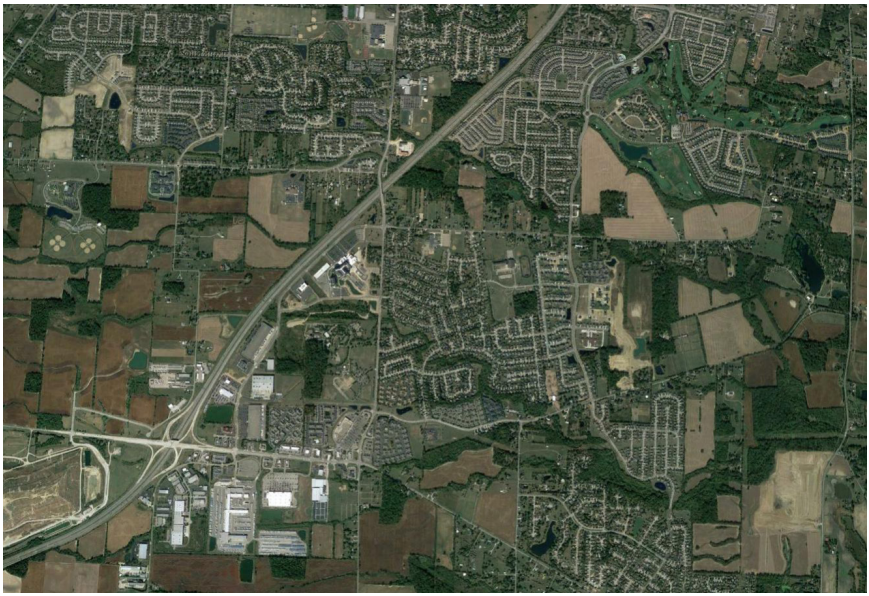

Figure 24
*Exurban Aerial, Columbus, OH.* Image Credit: Google Earth

Figure 25
*Exurban Aerial, Charlotte, NC.* Image Credit: Google Earth

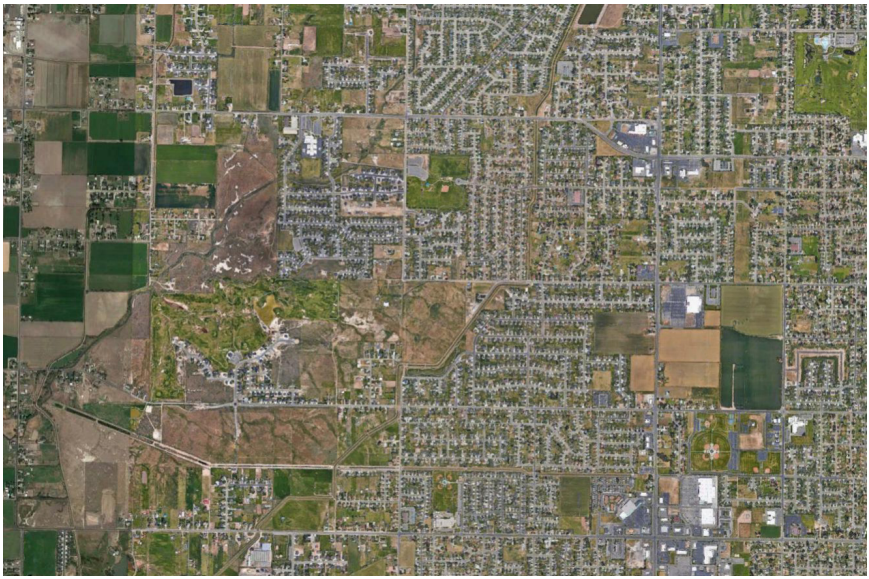

Figure 26
*Exurban Aerial, Salt Lake City, UT.* Image Credit: Google Earth

Figure 27
*Exurban Aerial, Savannah, GA.* Image Credit: Google Earth

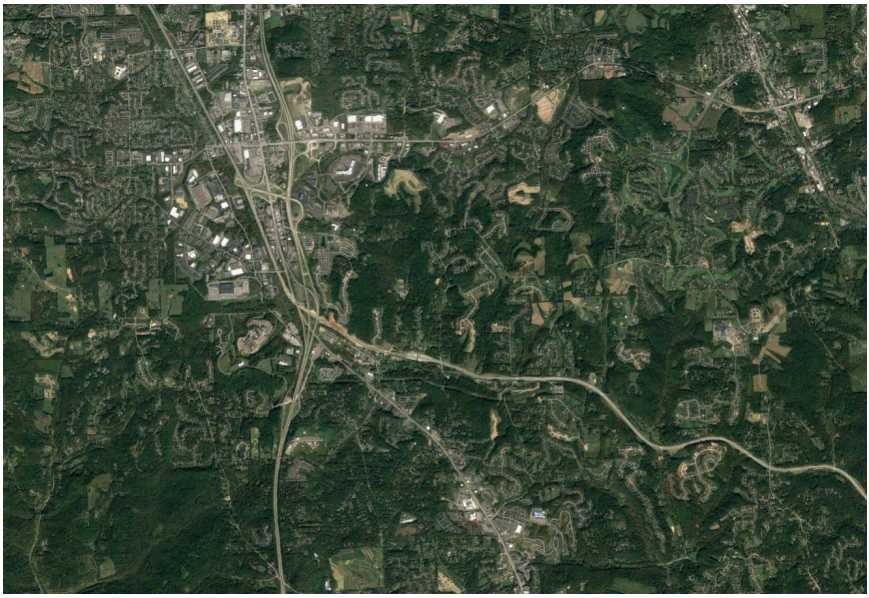

Figure 28
*Exurban Aerial, Pittsburgh, PA.* Image Credit: Google Earth

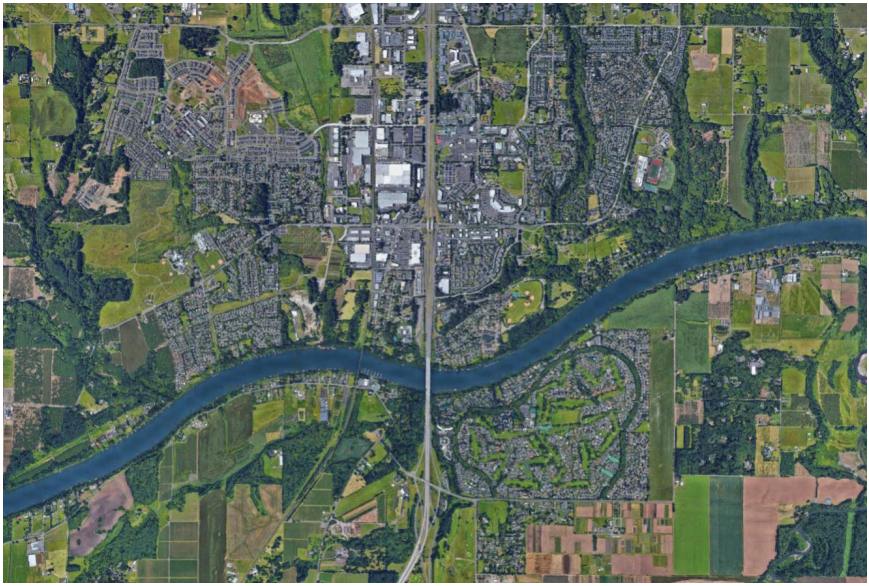

Figure 29
*Exurban Aerial, Portland, OR.* Image Credit: Google Earth

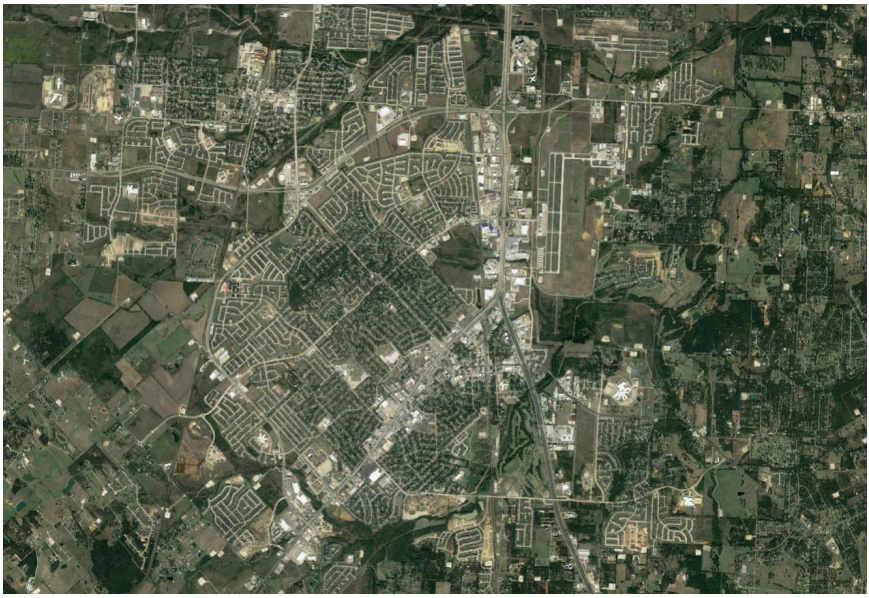

Figure 30
*Exurban Aerial, Dallas, TX.* Image Credit: Google Earth

# PART 3

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## EXURBIA'S BIG BOX


Figure 31
Venturi and Scott Brown, *BEST Products Catalog Showroom*, Langhorne, Pennsylvania, ca.1979, photograph by Tom Bernard. Image Credit: Archdaily.com

# 3.1

# THE POST-MODERN BIG BOX

Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown shattered the banality of the modernist box, rejecting the rigid austerity of modernism before it and producing a vision of architecture that drew back to contradictions. The chain store BEST started out as a catalog retailer in the 1950s – selling general consumer goods but is in some ways best known for its investment in its uniquely designed stores that appear abstract and sculptural. While the store was building their vast commercial network however, they employed the work of architects as a way to shape the company's architecture. In 1978 Venturi and Brown were commissioned to design the façade for a big box store for the store BEST. The architect duo outfitted the building in a

façade of porcelain steel panels in a red and white flower pattern, essentially wrapping the store in oversized imagery (Figure 31). As the company employed the work of architects for their stores, the result often appeared as an examination of the boundary between art and architecture where the starting point was the form of the familiar big box store. Uniquely, the architecture ascribed a sense of freedom in terms of the façade of the big box compared to the banal conformity of the others. One of the most well-known designs was called the Peeling Building in Richmond, Virginia, and was the first collaboration between BEST and the architectural firm SITE (Figure 32). The architect James Wines as part of the architectural group SITE took the big box store and turned it on its side, extruding its façade, making it appear to crumble as a move of deconstruction. The result was a visual point of reference; in effect it was a paradox, the non-place looking to be a place recognized for its unique surface treatment. In *The Geography of Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler describes Venturi and Scott Brown's overarching aims where "Venturi and company declared that rather than struggle against this stuff, the correct strategy was to "illuminate the mess... by first participating in it."[65] Kunstler points out that American space had ceased to be about forms, pointing out that the postmodernists declared it was

now about symbols, communication, and advertising.[66] Working to camouflage the inevitable banality of the architectural form of the big box, their work on the BEST stores facades departed from the often rigorous austerity of modern architecture while using the big box typology to challenge its generic aesthetics (Figures 33, and 34). While both Wines work and Venturi and Scott Brown's work challenged the non-place of the big box through its façade, the interior, the way the content arranges itself in the big box was left alone – leaving it still open to new spatial possibilities.


Figure 32
SITE Architecture, *The Peeling Building*, Richmond, Virginia, ca. 1971. Image Credit: https://culturalghosts.blogspot.com/2013/03/best-products-and-site-showrooms-part-1.html.


Figure 33
SITE Architecture, *BEST Tilt Building – Main View of Façade*, Towson, Maryland, ca. 1976.
Image Credit: siteenvirodesign.om


SITE Architecture, *BEST Façade Brick Pile – Main Façade View from Parking Lot*, Houston, Texas, ca. 1975. Image Credit: siteenvirodesign.com

Figure 34

In many ways it appears that Rem Koolhaas's essay "Junkspace" revolved around his disappointment with the banality of modern architecture. Koolhaas offers up the opinion that the production of space in modern times has led to the making of banal architecture and at times has made it quite irrelevant. Rem's critique of modern architecture starts with his studying the problem of the phenomenon of "bigness" that he argues has become a definitive trait in contemporary architecture. He points to the standardization of new buildings emerging that appear as both faceless and characterless. Though Koolhaas never outright states the problem of modern architecture in his eyes as the problem of architecture of the Non-place, it appears that Koolhaas offers a descriptive analysis of architecture that are Non-places. That is architecture that is bland, faceless, standard, and characterless. Specifically, in "Junkspace," Koolhaas offers up the critique that shopping malls and business centers devalue architectural contexts. In "Junkspace" the places of production and consumption grow to reach the climax of modernism, leading Koolhaas to question, "If space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, junk-space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet."[67] Koolhaas's critique makes the argument that architecture as the space of supermodernity is a form of junkspace left as a mark

of modernization on the planet. Koolhaas's critique is a critique of modern architecture that points to the exemplification and rationality of the banal, faceless, and standard that is shaped to please or sponsor economic gains, yet it does not challenge the architecture to do more.

James Wines, Venturi, Scott Brown and Koolhaas challenge the generic in different ways that acknowledges its history and is indicative of the society to which they belonged. While Venturi, Scott Brown and Wines fail to address the interiority of the big box and the possible agencies that the interior could take on, Koolhaas addresses the interior of modern generic architecture, essentially calling it 'Junkspace' but does not provide a solution or counter to what its possible transformations or qualities might be. As a result, there is still great room for the big box as a non-place, the space of supermodernity, to be designed, to engage the exurbia through the design of its form that could proliferate the landscape rather than its proliferation throughout exurbia.

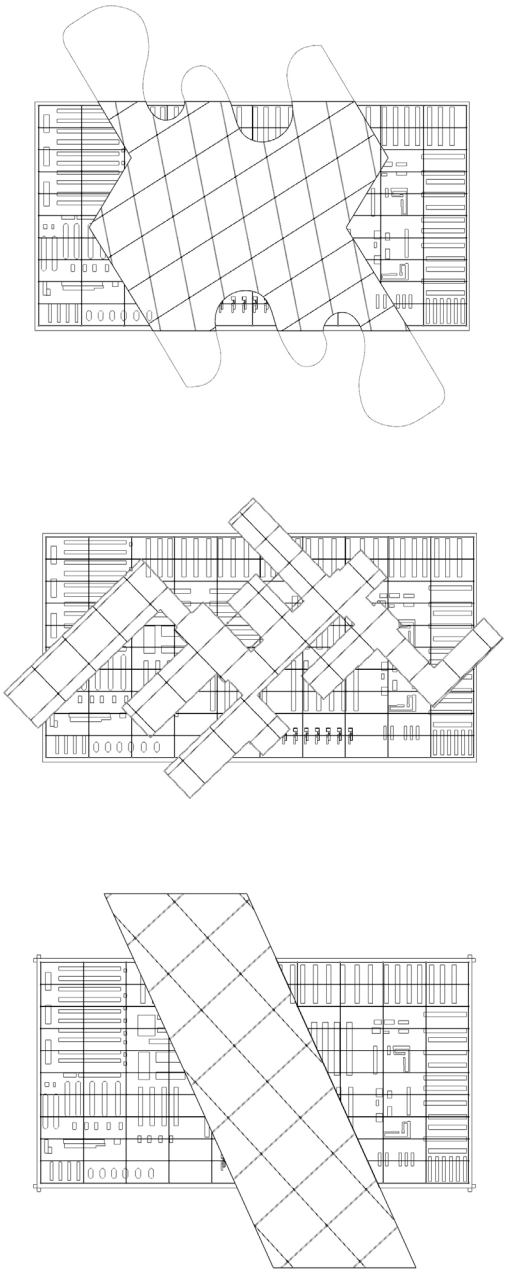

Figure 35
*De-form-ed Big Box Plan Diagrams.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author

# 3.2

# THE DE-FORM-ED BOX

The landscape of exurbia contains architectural forms that are indicative of the post-industrial landscape – one of them being the big box. Significant to the modern period that it arose out of is that the architectural signifier often relates to the form it is trying to signify, the big box is an enclosure, a box meant to contain the territory inside that is organized and driven for the efficiency of logistics and the optimization of time and space. In its dictionary definition, the big box is defined a very large store which sells goods at discount prices, particularly one specializing in a particular type of merchandise.[68] The big box De-form-ed in terms of this thesis describes the big box as a productive element in its deformation. As seen in Figure 35, the

big box De-form-ed looks to a form that is driven by the action of deformation that comes from the box's change in shape and plan - extruding out from itself. Additionally, material treatments of the De-form-ed box's surfaces and the spatial and experiential agencies of its interactions with exurbia and the surrounding landscape make up its deformation (Figures 36 and 37).

The big box De-form-ed interacts with the non-place that is exurbia through the De-form-ed box. By acknowledging the possibilities of a form that extends beyond the box, outside of its enclosing walls, the deformation comes from engagement with the exurban components of exurbia outside of the big box, parking, single-family homes, roadways, and landscape. Manifesting the supermodernity of exurban space, the big box De-form-ed exists for a society that is completely manufactured. The Big Box's deformation into the surrounding landscape allows it to be completely manufactured and constructed without an organic society that previously inhabited it. Using architecture to take on the exurban experience of consumerism on a large scale, it extends the spectacle of consumerism beyond just the store, invading and interacting with housing, and exurban features through the De-form-ed box that forefronts the experience of space that is for pleasing or sponsoring economic gains through design.

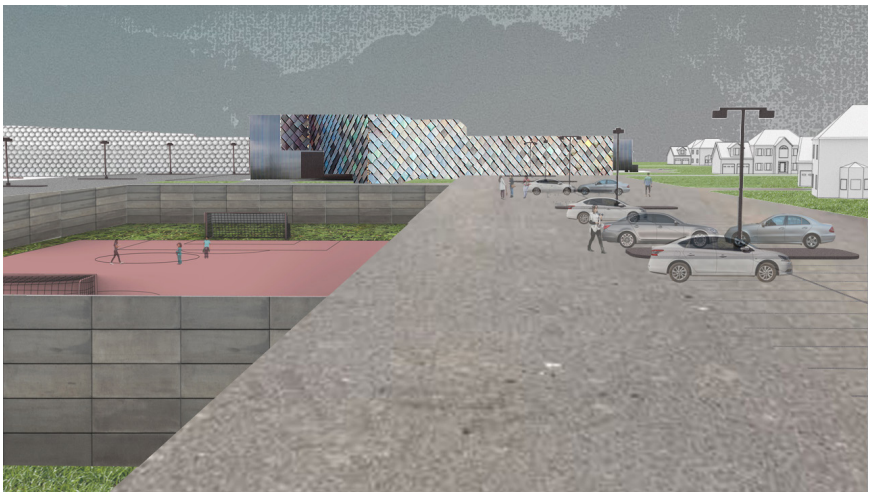

Figure 36
*De-form-ed Big Box Scene 1.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author

Figure 37
*De-form-ed Big Box Scene 2.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author


Figure 38
*Big Box Store in Dallas, TX.* Image Credit: Google Earth

# 3.3

# BIG BOX TYPOLOGY

The generic, unremarkable form conforms to the non-place as it is universal across the U.S. Typically, its' typology consists of a structural grid that is framed by concrete or metal clad walls under a flat roof with little to no fenestration. The big box store is often interchangeably referred to as a supercenter, megastore, or a superstore. As a typology, it fits well in exurbia as it is often only reachable by car, as is most other architecture in exurbia. The big box store suggests specific attitudes towards architectural form. Large, free-standing, and cuboid, it is generally a single floor structure built on a concrete slab. Like its' name implies the architectural form the big box is generic and box like (Figure 38). Historically, the big box store as a typology

has been one that architects, and architectural engineers play safe and or do not get to experiment from or with because its typology is often dictated by the larger organization and company that owns it. Jesse LeCavalier, in *The Rule of Logistics (2016)* makes the argument that the focal point of the big box is one of form that includes its logistic infrastructure with the data center and distribution center rather than typology stating, "With large-scale urban transformations like the ones being wrought, in part, by logistics, the question is not one of typology (continuity and stable references) but one of topology (levels of organization and contingent relationships). It is not a question of image but one of form."[69] LeCavalier points to the idea that the form of the Big Box's larger network between big box, data center and distribution center is something to be questioned rather than focusing on an image of territories because its form is both dynamic and elusive. While LeCavalier focuses on the form of the big box's logistical nature, its architectural form – it's makeup of space, zones, and materials can play an important role in manifesting the consumerist ethos of exurbia through its spatial arrangement. Additionally, by challenging the architectural form from the generic single floor under a structural grid framed by concrete or metal clad walls to the form that has been "De-form-ed", it reflects that the big

box is a place for and from consumerism that streches beyond its extant boundaries. As Figure 39 presents, it shows a possible new architecture that challenges the big box's current typology through its deformation into the surrounding exurban landscape.

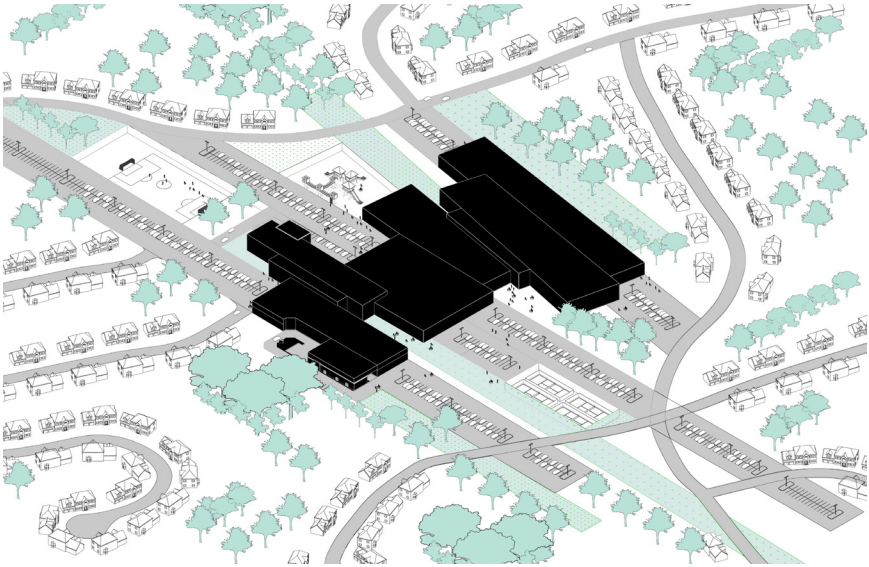

Figure 39
*Axonometric Iteration Drawing of De-form-ed Box.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author


Figure 40
*Interior of Walmart.* Image Credit: Taken by Author

# 3.4

# BIG BOX ORGANIZATION

The big box is the antithesis of community, though it has great productive and consumption power for a community. The big box contains and organizes goods and commodities, but often overlooked is the fact that it contains and organizes people through their patterns of movement. As a site, it is unique in that it is a non-place, where there is the absence of place in the banality of the structural gridded box. It is organized systematically for the consumer as an individual and for the act of consumerism, in departments or zones of different products and goods separated categorically for their consumer aim (Figure 40). Yet besides perhaps a sign denoting an aisle, or a shelf rearrangement, there is relatively little difference between one department to another

in the organization of the big box store. Possibly it is a reflection of the preference of current American aesthetics as Knox in *Metroburbia* points out, "American culture has always seemed more materialistic, more disposed toward casual vulgarity and kitsch, less sensitive to aesthetics."[70] Today's commodity culture functions similar to the spectacle in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Debord describes the spectacle as being a true reflection of the production of things, while relying on the false objectification of the producers.[71] Like the Society of the Spectacle, the big box reflects the aesthetics of excess through consumerism that has become commodity.

The architecture of the big box presents a unique organizational pattern in its interior in the fact that it is pre-dictated and often pre-determined around the act of consumption. LeCavalier opens up the dialogue to include the corporation's collection of supercenters, data centers, and distribution centers making the argument that the supercenter must be viewed in the context of the entanglement with the retailer's transmission circuits and information systems.[72] In analyzing the supercenter, distribution center, and data center together as an infrastructural feature of Walmart's logistics network, LeCavalier makes the claim that "this collection of operational buildings suggests ways of thinking about architectural form as

something much more contingent, a looser and lower-definition of architecture."[73] This 'looser' 'lower-definition' of architecture that is subject to change as LeCavalier suggests, presents a dynamism where the architectural objects can operate dependent upon variable conditions. Furthermore, architecture developed by logistics, versus for logistics, produces epistemological changes brought about new ways of seeing and thinking about information, time and space.[74] The big box can be seen as part of the history of architecture developed by logistics, as it is driven by topological conditions and constraints that drove its large-scale operation (Figure 41).[75] Additionally, logistical architecture is territorial, entangled with larger networks and territories in which it exists that it is difficult to distinguish logistical buildings from their surroundings. In this view, LeCavalier makes an important point that the big box cannot be seen without being an architecture that is entangled with the larger networks and territories it operates within – all with the main goal of consumerism. As a result, Walmart is thus part of a larger logistical network of its data centers and distribution centers and this undermines the singular characteristic of architecture to foreground its larger role in a hybrid system.[76] LeCavalier undermines the often singular nature in which the big box is understood and viewed, bringing attention to the fact

that it is a part of a larger network and territory, though often not seen. The big box De-form-ed continues with LeCavalier's argument that the big box is not a singular entity as it reimagines the big box's architecture as a spectacle of consumerism that is networked into exurbia and creator of its urban fabric.

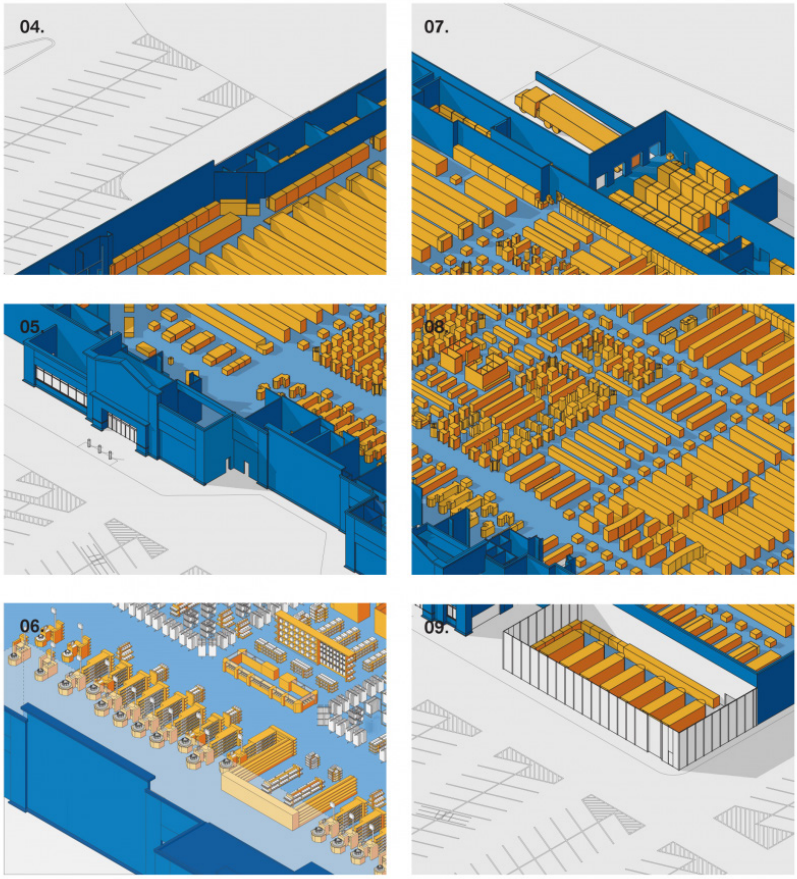


Figure 41
Jesse LeCavalier, *Plate 6 Supercenter: Content but No Form.* Image Credit: The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2016).


Figure 42
*Interior of Walmart Checkouts.* Image Credit: Taken by Author

# 3.5

# BIG BOX MATERIALITY

Signage makes up the space of supermodernity. In the big box it reveals and alters the reality and spectacle of consumerism. The big box is tied up with signage, placing the emphasis on the commodities the architecture works to organize and present (Figure 42). Paul Knox highlights this aspect in *Metroburbia USA* as he states, "Signs and symbols 'reflect and refract reality. Social life is impregnated with signs that make it classifiable, intelligible, and meaningful.'"[77] Additionally, Marc Augé makes the case for the importance of signs in *Non-Places*, arguing that the real non-places of supermodernity are defined partly by words and texts.[78] Signage may be prescriptive, prohibitive, or informative – as seen in the case of the interiority

of space of the big box. Uniquely, signage establishes conditions of space and even at times the arrangement of space. Augé makes the argument that supermodernity makes the old (history) into a specific spectacle, as it does with all exoticism and all local particularity.[79] Supermodernity aligns with what Guy Debord calls "the Society of the Spectacle" as it makes up the space of contemporary society that is highly commoditized. The spectacle and profusion of signage in the supermodern space of the big box make spaces classifiable, and it points to the notion that the space of supermodernity must be understood as both abstract and concrete in its character.

While signage is linked to the space of the non-place, another facet of the interior organization of the non-place is its treatment of surface. The treatment of surfaces in the big box help determine the organization of the store, and work to enclose the store through its outer walls. LeCavalier scrutinizes Walmart's architecture through its' surface treatment, noting that while Walmart's architecture places the emphasis on surfaces, it does so more specifically on the front vertical surface where the other three surfaces perform service roles.[80] These blank surfaces can become significant in their treatment as they currently have no surface obligations, nor do they communicate through architectural symbols.

In space that makes up supermodernity, the notion of surface has become detached from its symbolic obligations in the non-place, and all of its genericism, freeing it to express an architecture that embraces ornamentation through materiality and the possibilities of abstraction. The big box De-form-ed embraces the materiality of generecissim, that is materials typically found on façades of exurbia that emit the aesthetic of the banal, because the perpetuation of this aesthetic demarcates the materiality of the non-place. The big box De-form-ed desaturates the colors of consumerism come that play a significant role in the space of commodity. By desaturating the colors, it inverts the highly visual and colorful interioty of the box that is typically found through the goods it displays and sells, and it plays to the muted color pallette exurbia emits. The big box De-form-ed creates an exurban environment that is shockingly muted and subdued in its tonality, displaying the aesthetic of genericissim that permeates the non-place.

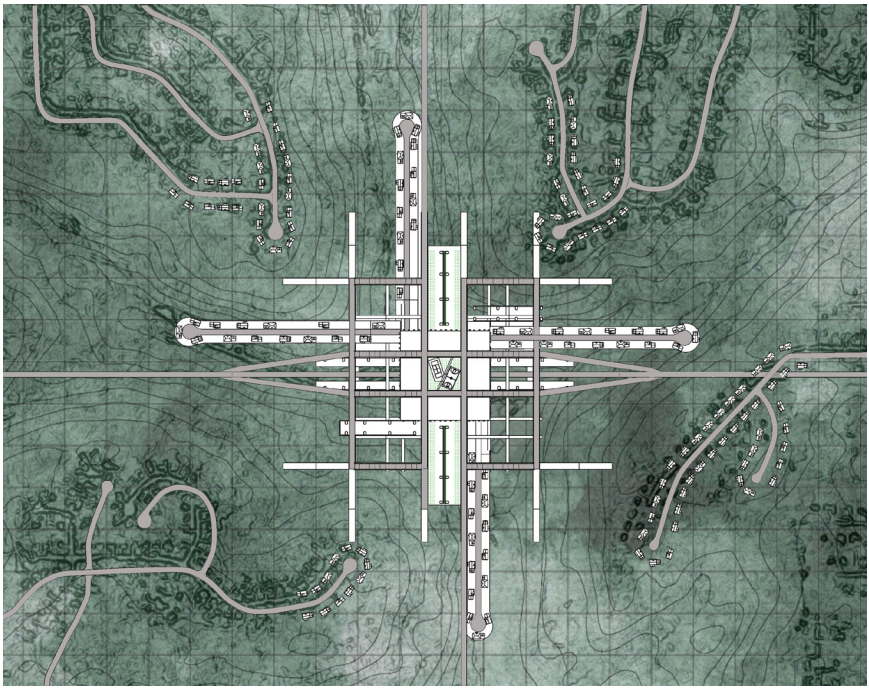

Figure 43
*The Big Box De-form-ed Plan.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author

# 3.6

# TOWARDS A NEW EXURBIA

This thesis is a large-scale urban vision that reflects the breakdown of traditional exurbia through the big box's own deformation. It is a cultural criticism of the exurban non-place through a radical design that recognizes the agency of the American exurban landscape. The big box is distributed as a low relief across the landscape that reaches beyond its normative means as simply a box. And through its own deformation that can be seen as an overextension, it highlights the core exurban issues of access and excess in supermodern space (Figure 41). Through deformation, the project reassembles its organization through its architecture, creating a new spatial arrangement of the big box and its parking, roadways,

greenways, and neighborhoods of single-family housing that becomes a system of layered topography (Figure 42). The big box's architecture becomes a theater of the spectacle of consumption and exurban life that extends out of the big box. Using the material of the exurbs as design material that is non-place (making), the big box de-form-ed occupies more territorial agency through its deformation. As the big box de-form-ed comes to fruition, its edges between the extant exubia and the new big box De-form-ed become blurred (Figure 43). This blurred reality emphasized through drawing works to emphasize that the big box De-form-ed lies in the non-place, spaces of transcience where the human beings remain anomynous and that it is not significant enough to be classified as a proper "place".

This project is a provocation, recognizing that exurban landscapes will continue to persist and be a dominant feature of the American landscape as the digital age allows one to function more independently of their immediate surroundings. The provocation of a future exurbia depicts the big box De-form-ed as having spatial agency through the territory it covers through its deformation, and it leans further into the spectacle of consumerism then we are in today. By engaging with the non-place as the space of supermodernity, this design project recognizes the agency of exurbia's architecture. Exurbia

is unique as a non-place as it posseses significant agency now as a dominant American urban form and has the potential to continue to be a lasting and dominant urban form for America as it makes up supermodern space. The architecture reinforces the spectacle of consumerism and commodity that makes up the non-place as well. Through its deformation, the big box De-form-ed overextends itself into the exurban landscape. Ultimately, this thesis is a provocation surrounding the current and future spectacle of commodity that is present in exurbia, having arisen out of America's urban past. And it is a way to prompt further discussion around the latent non-place that is exurbia, because it possesses crucial agency today as a provoking urban form and environment that patterns the larger American landscape.

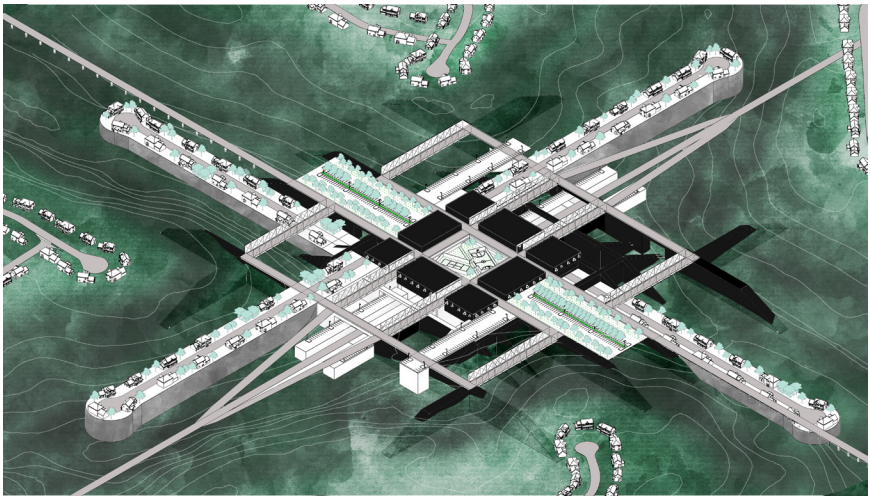

Figure 44
*The Big Box De-form-ed Axonometric.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author

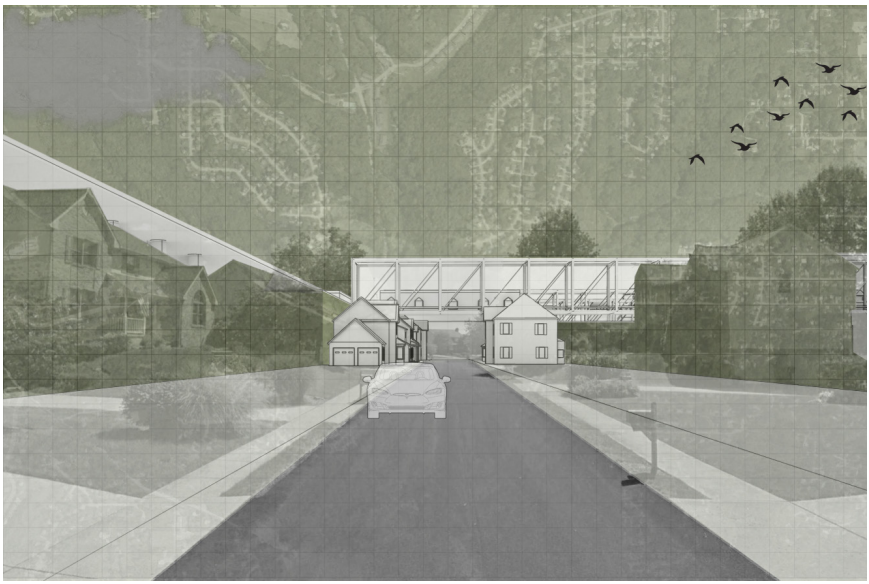

Figure 45
*The Big Box De-form-ed with Extant Exurbia.* Image Credit: Drawn by Author

X.

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Figure 46
*Thank You Plastic Bag,* ca. 2019. Image Credit: https://newbritainherald.com?NBH-General+News/374363/fee-for-singleuse-plastic-bags-coming-back.