Brian Ulrich  Chicago, Il. from the series Copia/Retail  2002  chromogenic print
Flatspace
Resurfacing Contemporary Public Space
2003–2007
Lateral Architecture
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Traditional exurban settlement has been increasingly overtaken throughout the last two decades by massive retail corridors and their asphalt networks: big box stores clustered in power centers and their associated access roads, buffer zones, and parking lots. Whether we like it or not, this exurban condition represents our contemporary public realm as North Americans spend more and more time within these spaces negotiating a highly controlled, familiar, and homogeneous environment. The result is a flattened experience of place. The possibilities of intervening in this exurban condition, or what we call “flatspace,” on its own terms remain overlooked.

Composed of entirely autonomous components—big box, parking lot, landscape lining—flatspaces are driven by economy and functionality, and lack any articulation of social, cultural, or material specificity. In their subordination to the car and the comfort of mobility, flatspaces are places of sterile transit, or what sociologist Marc Augé terms “non-places.” The intent of our interventions, however, is not to make them contextual or regionally specific, but rather to invite more open-endedness and serendipity in people’s encounters and to create indeterminate spaces that enhance the public realm. Rather than reconfiguring the fundamental economic logic that determines and drives this type of environment, we thought it seemed more apt and opportune to concentrate on recalibrating the experience itself.

In its current format, public life in exurbia is composed of fleeting encounters of drivers jockeying for parking spaces, utilitarian dialogues at drive-thrus, and perfunctory exchanges. How can we transform this environment to respond to its unlikely status as an essential contemporary public space? This question inspired several design proposals that reconfigure the “ingredients” of these landscapes, forging new connections, experiences, and definitions of public space.

We selected three key elements of flatspace to modify: program, parking, and landscape. A generic case-study site—five hundred forty-five acres of retail corridor in Columbus, Ohio—was examined. Rather than introduce new elements, each scheme tests the modification of existing ones. With these strategies, we also seek to recognize elements of the absurd in the current conditions of exurbia—its size, efficiency, manicured landscape—and use these as a means for disrupting the uniformity of experience.
Confetti

The shopper seeking a haircut and the shopper in search of a quick bite may pass each other in their cars in search of closer parking spaces, but the space does not encourage their meeting or interaction. The confetti proposal intervenes in this system through the insertion of a new program generated by “cross-breeding” shopping activities. The new program, located at the intersection of these shopping-pattern movements, is made up of a blend of the programs: food and automobile merge to create parking-lot cafés; automobile and fitness combine to form exercise spaces in the parking lot; or automobile and home hybridize to provide overnight parking for recreational vehicles. By marking the space of collision, the confetti program allows an opportunity for connection among isolated citizens.
On Off-Ramps
The exurban condition is accessed by highway off-ramps; these threads allow directional change with a speed and smoothness not found at typical intersections. In this scheme, we have incorporated the search for a parking space with a secondary road that is inspired by the smoothness of the off-ramp. These tangentially linked loops offer circumferential parking and concentrate the typical dispersal of landscape buffers into larger wetland parks at the heart of each loop instead of parking lots. Shoppers and park-goers may intermingle in their search for a parking space. By collapsing the ritual for finding parking and road infrastructure into one system, buffer zones are eliminated. The vast area afforded by this synthesis is given over to public space.
Flatspace

Pixelscape

A pixel in digital terms is composed of three colors that oscillate between varying degrees of purity. In our scheme, pixel types correspond to surface types of building, parking, and landscape. The pixel scheme begins by reading the current landscape as a series of pixels or surface types. Zones of pixel corruption are introduced where the potential exists to hybridize or cross-breed the surface of building, parking, and landscape. The resolution is then “turned up” again, revealing a new “impure” landscape of hybrid conditions, with a mixing of programs and landscapes such as orchard parking, parking-lot greenhouses and markes, rooftop solar panels and wind generators, and parking-lot play surfaces. These hybrids encourage unlikely encounters that contribute to the public sphere.
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