

## -ville: Not Rural but Micropolitan America: The Pedagogical Case of East and West Texas

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Young, instant and radically small, the american town operates as an extreme condition of minimal complexity and minimum urbanity. If America is the original version of modernity according to Baudrillard<sup>1</sup>, then the extremities of that vast internal American territory- understood here as a sequence of Greysvilles, Crossvilles, Maryvilles but also Moscows, Paris, Florences spread out in Tennessee, Texas, Louisiana or Arizona- offer us an insight to an accelerated end state of that modernity.

'-ville: not rural but micropolitan America' produces an alternative understanding of urbanism that studies the american town as an instant and autonomous urban setup, one that is simple enough to be broken down in primary and identifiable elements. The towns are seen through a lens of radical remoteness as sprawled, diluted and scattered nodes of a network that strives to conquer a vast territory producing a contemporary reading of the internal fringes of the United States by carving a mute-scaler, cross country section through

the rural, micropolitan American territory, radically positioned on only one colour of the post election map.

Deliberately within the lineage of traveling researchers and on-the-road produced architectural discourse- from Venturi and Scott-Brown's 'Leaning from series'<sup>2</sup> to Atelier Bow-Wow's 'Made in Tokyo'<sup>3</sup>, or Van Eyke's 'Trip to the villages'<sup>4</sup>, we set out to traverse the american landscape, stopping at and investigating scattered dots of built environment, developing a research methodology applied on the map and on the road. Through a series of road trips we follow a sequence of stops in places that no one wants to travel to; places that are not famous for anything, invisible from a certain altitude on a digital or physical map, places that we identify as "-villes"<sup>5</sup>.

In the suffix -ville hides a distorted application of an urban condition that selects from the structure of the city elements that in themselves theoretically cannot exist autonomously. The suffix -ville provides us with a selection system that is both arbitrary and organised. These names reflect the fledgling town's ambition of immediately becoming a city, either by calling themselves as one or by mimicking and thus borrowing the significance of another. Towns of such scale and type reflect the simplicity and straightforwardness that allows them to be interpreted, as the absolute minimum urban cell. The trip to the -villes is an attempt to revisit the origins of the city as a recent archeology of the notion of the settlement through its youngest and less complex manifestation.

Each town is coined on a territorial scale- usually found on an intersection of the jeffersonian grid, wedged in a pinch of the landscape, placed unapologetically on their specific location by forces from the industry or as intermediate nodes on larger infrastructural networks: a company town, a water stop, an oil field guardian. Stepping out of the car and getting closer to the dusty body of the town, the effortless identification of the main street or main square points to the more significant built component of the settlement. Close ups of the courthouse, jail, church, corner store, gazebo, school, post office, water tower and entry sign reveal anonymous yet radical acts of design<sup>6</sup>. An alternative history of the city is attempted in medias res.



Figure 1. Ozona, TX. A. Chen, C. Vigil.



Figure 2. Roma, TX. A. Benton, Z. Jones.



Figure 3. Presidio, TX. G. Archer, A. Davis.

The -ville becomes the unit of urbanity that cannot be further subdivided. In its radical smallness the -ville presents a version of the city that has purged and/ or actually never acquired further complexities. By examining the -ville we examine the most basic manifestation of an urban settlement- this inherently american condition that is neither suburb or countryside.

In the words of Lawrence Wright<sup>7</sup>, “Because Texas is a part of almost everything in modern America - the South, the West, the plains, Hispanic and immigrant communities, the border, the divide between the rural areas and the cities- what happens here tends to disproportionately affect the rest of the nation” The studio and seminars that operate from within the project look into the generic, the unseen, the overlooked, the irrelevant, the unfinished, the unwrought. Between the micro-urbanism of the Texan town and the hyper-context of the state, we deal with urbanism and architecture in a radically small and vast scale respectively. Students are asked to perform an in depth reading of the selected territory aspiring to generate an understanding of the region through the elemental notion of the town projecting a commentary on the state, nation, or eventually the globe.

Students come up with their own selection conventions and methodologies -their equivalents of the -ville methodology- to

identify the places they will visit, loosely defined as going after a network, a kind of topography, a policy, or a building typology. Having selected an analytical lens to examine the territory through, the students travel long spans visiting towns and cutting cross sections through the Texan landscape observing the extremities between the desert, countryside and the town. Returning from the road trip, the students are tasked with translating their observations into design interrogations acting on the latent potential of the town constellation. The objective is to loop design arguments hosted in an imaginary universe that exemplifies and challenges the current conditions as identified during the research. The aim is to be critical but not attempt to solve problems, rather hack the laid-out system and subvert it.

The studio emphasizes the importance of dealing with the context and the design innervation on equal terms in an attempt to elevate the existing architecture to an unprecedented level of detail and focus. Each student eventually develops a body of work identifying a thesis question around the chosen type and intervening in a microscale while consciously affecting a much wider context. Architecture can be vast and urbanism radically small in the context of the studio, allowing students to work at a diversity of scales and mediums.

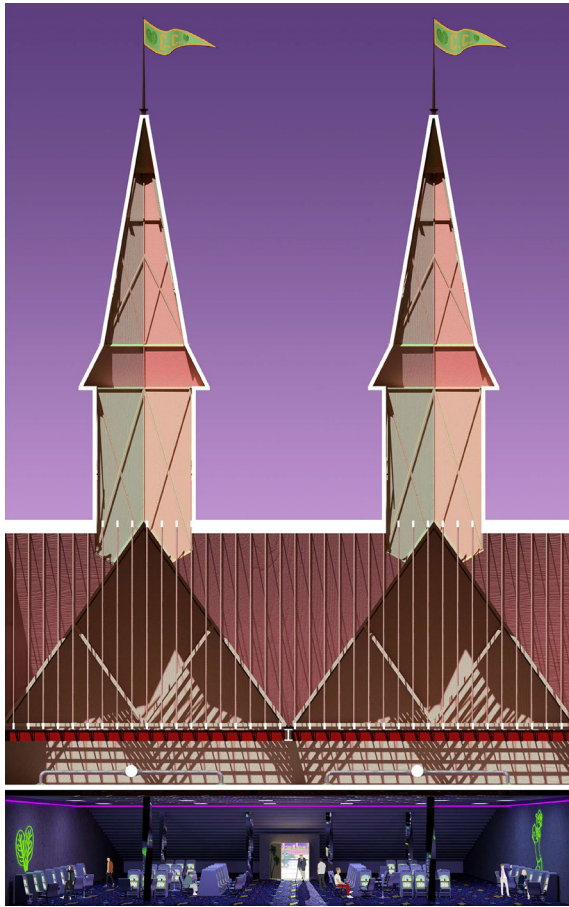


Figure 4. Crystal City, TX. E. Joyce, Y. Licciardi.

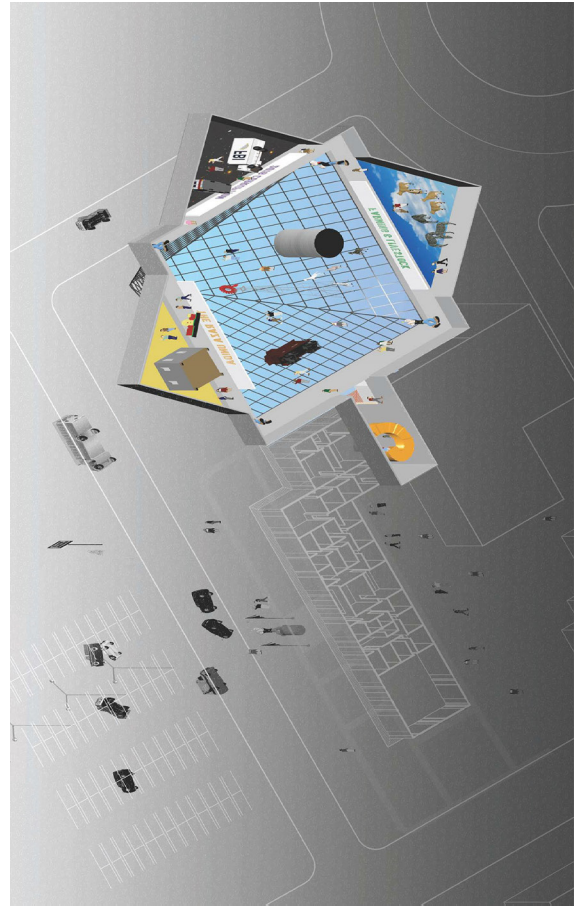


Figure 5. Crystal City, TX. E. Joyce, Y. Licciardi.



Figure 6. Eldorado, TX. I. Amen, P. Till.



Figure 7. Roma, TX. A. Benton, Z. Jones.

The arguments produced by each project are expected to invent a format specific to each case and challenge conventions of architectural representation. Consciously challenging the structure of the design studio and its conflicting historical heritage; we charge architectural representation with the weight and specificity of truly carry the developing arguments. Drawings in the studio are heavily scrutinized and challenged to contain more than three dimensions, they are visual narratives that can stand by themselves. How to draw becomes a parallel to how to think as an architect. Capturing the context is fundamental to the process as the initial design step, defining the parameters that merge an architectural discovery with an architectural intervention.

In all the projects presented here produced at UT Austin during the spring and fall semesters of 2019, the idea of the -ville, the town as the smallest possible city, becomes an organism that controls its fate and challenges its territory stimulating the ambition of the original settlements, while coming in contrast with the current state of depletion and abandonment observed in most towns. We argue for the latent potential of the American town to become our kind of -ville and the pleasure of learning from what we see but don't usually observe.



Figure 8. Roma, TX. A. Benton, Z. Jones.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Jean Baudrillard, and Chris Turner. *America*. 11. impr. London: Verso, 2000.
2. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour. *Learning from Las Vegas*. Cambridge Mass: MIT Pr, 1972.
3. Junzo Kuroda, Momoyo Kajima, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto. *Made in Tokyo*. Tokyo: Kajima Institute, 2001.
4. Aldo Van Eyck, Aldo Van Eyck: *Writings (Writings: vol. 1 : The Child, the City and the Artist, Vol. 2 Collected Articles and Other Writings 1947-1998)*. The Netherlands: Sun Publishers, 2006.
5. Steward George. *Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place-Naming in the United States*. New York, NY: NYRB, 2008.
6. Colin Rowe, John Hedjuck. *Lockhart, Texas*. *Architectural record*, Volume 121, No 3, March 1957, p 201-206.
7. Lawrence Wright. *God Save Texas: A Journey Into the Soul of the Lone Star State*. New York, NY: Alfred A Knopf, 2008.



Figure 9. Lampasas, TX. M. Bunke, D. Richardson.



Figure 10. La Grange, TX. F. Resendiz, C. Townley.