FlowCITY:
Changing the Nature of Our Inter-Local Transit Infrastructure

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ABSTRACT

Inter-local transit, or transit that operates in relationship to the interstate at the expense of local neighbhood concerns, contributes to the prevailing sense of placeslessness that threatens to overwhelm cities across America. Inter-local transit infrastructure connects downtowns to suburbs. It exists in the in-between, and it is destroying all types of neighborhoods along its path. This infrastructural system creates places of non-being. The issue of time or getting there supersedes issues of place or being there. It creates places of non- locality along its path. Given these conditions, the following questions emerge: What does inter-local transit mean as lived-experience? What influence does it have on our understanding of the contemporary city? What impact might it have on future zoning regulations?

MOTORZONING: FORCING THE FLOW AND SHAPE OF THE AMERICAN URBAN LANDSCAPE

> *The dense network of small streets out-performs the pattern found in suburbia. A network theoretician would explain this performance in terms of redundant routes, multiple intersections, and the uncooperative nature of traffic flow.*
>
> – *Walter* Kurash, *The Third Motor Age*

Zoning regulations accommodating the automobile has had the greatest effect on the built environment in the twentieth century. Freeways and automobiles have taken much of the blame for the despoliation of the centers of American cities. Conceived to solve health problems due to immediate and problematic juxtapositions between industry and housing, zoning became a powerful force in shaping the American urban landscape as we know it today. Zoning plans responding to the exponential rate of automobile production after World War II fostered distances between home and work to expand. With the massive deployment of highway contractors across America in the 1950's, the federal government directed billions of dollars in infrastructure that enabled even greater separations between home and work to become part of our daily lives. This process of deurbanization traveled at great speed with immense strength.

The rise in inter-state construction in the middle of this century charged local urban municipalities to reorganize their inter-local transit infrastructure. The dimension and order of our cities' interior circulatory system, namely the distance and route between our garage and the interstate, was altogether reconsidered. However, unfortunately, this reconsideraton was made all in the name of efficiency and convenience. This massive reorganization attempted to clarify transit typologies, including alley, road, street, avenue, boulevard, commuter street, superstreet, access road, on-ramp, car pool lane, interchanges and so forth. Nevertheless, this clarification was based on criteria of flow across the greater metropolitan region and little else. This bulky reorganizational effort was placed in the hands of traffic planners and highway engineers, technical disciplines schooled in technology and the problems of organizing massive quantities of information and automobile flow.

Education in the discipline of highway engineering focuses on technology and technological solutions. Little training is provided in the the field of urban design or community planning. The quality and sustenance of the neighborhoods below, above and beside these motorways are typically neglected by the engineers who design them. The concern of transit authorities are too often strictly utilitarian, concerned about flow in lieu of families. Their view of people and places are broad and overarching, seen from great heights and expansive maps. People appear as ants. flowing in masses, engaged in generic activities. Proficient means of movement supersedes all other affairs. Safety, flow rates and other functionalist concerns are the predominant driving criteria for transit design. This criteria generates transit zones in the middle of the city, creating innumerous problems and empty places.

These transit zones of non-locality permeate the American urban landscape. They interupt, biforcate, and displace our neighborhoods in ways that permanently separate us from the community around us. These large, expansive surfaces of

dark asphalt create unsightly conditions, unfriendly places and dangerous spaces. The street as traditional place for social gathering has been replaced with more cars and additional lanes to increase the efficiency of moving even larger amounts of people greater distances. These inter-local streets contribute to the prevailing sense of placeslessness that threatens to overwhelm our cities. The desire for personal mobility is unstoppable, but what does this mean as lived-experience? What influence does this have on our understanding of the contemporary city? What impact might this have on future zoning regulations in the city?

PEDESTRIAN-AUTO POSSIBILITIES

The possibilitiy for a new *pedestrian-auto* ecology emerging from the intersection between transit and local culture never seems to skid to the surface of the drawing board or the boardroom. The places between the traditional urban streetscape and the engineer's monumental higways with its sweeping interchanges are sites deserving fresh inquiry. What possibilities exist in *slowing* the flow, in working toward addressing the problematics of inter-local transit development? What form of resistance will serve to confront this banal condition or inspire change?

These inert transit zones present themselves as new sites for architectural investigation. They are contemporary and everyday sites moving at variable speeds with awkward programmatic overlays and complex uses of habitation. These zones defy a single reading. They are inherently fragmented and imperfect, and demand a flexible response. They are ubiquitous, utterly generic, and forever here.

The following two projects present alternative strategies of *slowing* the flow. They are light in scale, but immense in idea and strategy. They both operate in relation to inter-local transit infrastructure. Both transit zones, or street-sites, are located in the inner city. They occur inbetween residential neighborhoods and the ever-increasing isolating effects of street widening. Both neighborhoods lie simultaneously in the center and in the margins as a result of two major transportation systems, namely the interstate and the railroad.

Two ideas have influenced the direction of these projects. First, in *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Michel de Certeau identifies two descriptions of space: the tour and the map. The map is a relatively recent construct that has come gradually. He explains that throughout history maps were narrative descriptions about what one does to get where and how one's experience varies along the way. He writes, "the question ultimately concerns the basis of everyday narrations, the relation between the itinerary, a discursive series of operations, and the map, a plane projection totalizing observations." De Certeau proposes an experiential understanding of space.

Second, in *The Third Motor Age,* traffic engineer Walter Kurash argues for altering traffic flow as a way of organizing an even distribution network and reclaiming local space. The effects of the first idea reinforce the qoal of the second.

PROJECT 1: LEAN-TO'S, PULL-UP'S, FOLD-OUT'S

Los Angeles, California

The urban form of Los Angeles is characterized by three predominant features. First, downtown; second, the massive and congested interstate system; and third, the rest of it. Up until very recently, land in L A has been abundant and reasonably affordable. Metropolitan L A has 11-13 million residents from all walks of life, and yet, beyond downtonwn, the city consists mostly of 1-2 story buildings.

The 10-mile stretch of the Santa Monica Freeway linking West Los Angeles to Downtown is reportedly the most heavily used highway in the world. The average speed during rush hour is 8 miles per hour, even with 5-7 lanes of traffic in each direction. People in L A are willing to commute up to 2-2 1/2 hours each way to work. The interstate system was built in the 1950's. Two major and opposing results came about after its completion. First, the displacement of tens of thousands of people and many once strong neighborhoods. Second, the development of massive residential subdivisions and urban strips outside the city, stretched thin with fast-food restaurants, gasoline stations, parking lots and long span shopping warehouses.

In the case of the first problem, the imposition of the interstate on existing communities created sites for industrial use in residential neighborhoods. Zoning changed. This created a decline in the quality of life in these neighborhoods, lowering the value of individual homes. The best results of the interstate on local conditions were a series of small interstitial urban parks and linear green spaces. Unfortunately, these places were not conducive to family gatherings or sports such as soccer or baseball.

This displacement factor on communities in the city cannot be underestimated. Crime in neighborhoods that abut the interstate has increased tenfold. Noise is unbearable, and smog has accelerated in these areas to a point where 3-5 days-a-year one is encouraged not to breathe the outside air. The interstate has pulled both people and resources away from the inner city.

Along commercial streets in the inner city remain pdor neighborhoods and empty street typologies, characterized by telecommunication lines, on-grade parking lots, gasoline stations, spotted advertising, wide unsafe streets and massive quantities of impervious surfaces. Along residential streets, early craftsman housing has been replaced by cheaply constructed 1-2 story housing projects where up to ten people will live in a single 2-3 room apartment. The quality of life has been reduced, and people living in these communities have to find inventive ways of making a living.

Lean-to's, Pull-up's, Fold-out's is a series of light mobile interventions sited along Vermont Avenue in South Central Los Angeles, a major commuter street linking various inner-city neighborhoods to the Santa Monica Freeway (I-10), among other transit corridors. Inter-local transit along Vermont Avenue offers access to the interstate, to go to work, to visit the beach or other parts of the city, or to approach other

connecting interstates (1-405). The street is also heavily used by those who live outside the city who might be attending one of several major nearby institutions, including the Coliseum, the University of Southern California or the Aerospace Museum.

Vermont is a four-to-six lane avenue that serves both local and inter-local uses in a multiplicity of ways. Local uses include spotted commercial activity stretching between the large corner shopping center with long-span outlet stores and the common mom-and-pop storefront operation. Even smaller scales of commercial enterprise intermittently take place on sidewalks along Vermont. This marginal activity is led predominantly by local immigrant working women making things in their homes or growing fruit and vegetables in their backyards. These hand-made or home-grown goods are then sold on the street, illegally. These goods include children's hand-woven sweaters, socks and gloves, bottled perfume, pottery, fruit, and jewelry.

PROJECT 2: ANCHORS, INTERVENTIONS, CROSS PROGRAMMING

Atlanta, Georgia

Throughout history, Atlanta has always been a point of confluence. Railroads rather than natural features or water borne transport inititated construction in Atlanta. The city does not have a seaport. It is a six-hour drive to the nearest ocean and six miles to the nearest river, the Chattahoochee, which is navigable only by kayaks and inner tubes until it flows much farther south toward the Gulf of Mexico. The Zero Mile Post of the Western and Atlantic Railroad, laid in 1837, marked the beginning of the city on an improbable landlocked site that had only been the intersection of wagon roads and Indian Trails. According to the Chief engineer of the railroad, the site, at first called Terminus, "would be a good location for one tavern, a blacksmith shop, a grocery store, and nothing else." For the railroad builders, the growth of Terminus into the "Gate City of the South," renamed Marthasville in 1843, after the Governor's daughter, and finally renamed Atlanta, was an unfortunate result from an oversight on their part. In that sense, Atlanta is an accidental metropolis.

Site of the civil war in the 1870's, Atlanta was completely burned to the ground by General Sherman and his troops, and rebuilt within fifteen years. Hence, the Phoenix is the city's symbol, representing the city's resurgence from the ashes of total destruction.

Unlike James Olgethorpe's Savannah, its neighbor to the south, and unlike Burnham's Chicago, its Midwest rival, Atlanta never made complete plans for itself, only plans for parts. San Francisco imposed a grid of streets and blocks that ignored topography and local circumstances, producing a framework that still relates one block to another, one street to another, one building to another, along with a dramatic landscape. Atlanta, like many contemporary Northern American cities, has no physical boundaries and no predefined framework to guide land subdivisions, only the circumstantial placement of trails and railroads. Instead of a rational development of connections across the growing city, each property owner built by negotiating local conditions, like the city's hills and valleys, its granite outcroppings, and the earlier pattern of rural trails and mill roads.

Excerpt's from Atlanta's land use plans between 1950 and the early 60's are quite telling, and illuminate the priorities that shaped transit infrastructure and zoning in the city. In the 1950's, land use plans in residential areas were segregated by race and class, according to the following statement written in 1950 in *Metropolitan Atlanta*, by the Metropolitan Atlanta Planning Commission(MAPC):

> "The redevelopment plan for the entire South Atlanta areas call for its ultimate division into three large sections. The area west of Windsor Street would be set aside for commercial and industrial development. The tract between Windsor Street and the new expressway would be marked for Negro development. The area east of the expressway would be planned for white residential development."

The policy of segregation that was in place during the bulk of the city's transit infrastructure planning compounded the effects of placelessness.

Two years later in "Up Ahead: A Regional Land Use Plan for Metropolitan Atlanta," written by the same commission, four qualities of "The Good Neighborhood" are described:

> 1) The good neighborhood is built to face away from the major traffic artery that passes by.
> 2) School children and shoppers on foot do not have to cross against traffic in their daily journeys.
> 3) The multi-family structures are segregated away from the single-family dwellings.
> 4) The greatest force for good neighborhoods in the future will be the force of zoning.

> "Like many global cities, the spaces of flows are now superseding the spaces of place."
>
> – Manuel Castells

Today, Atlanta is often described as an invisible metropolis or as a landscape, not a city. The contemporary urban form of Atlanta is characterized by a linear spine of office and highrise development protruding from a forest of southern yellow pine and wild kudzu along the 1000' elevation line marking the tail end of the Appalachain Mountains. Views from office buildings, hotels, apartments, the tops of ramps of interstate highway interchanges, and sometimes from a suburban road as it stretches over a ridge line, reveal a panoramic field of trees stretching to the horizon in all directions, broken only by high-rise buildings, glass glistening in the sunlight, or the golden hue of a highway interchange at dawn. The occasional interruption of this green carpet may be the bare dirt from new construction, the asphalt parking lot at the mall,

or the barren lawn-like spaces along a commercial strip where trees must be removed so motorized customers can see the signs of business establishments from 500 feet away.

Atlanta is commonly promoted as the "City of Forests." Unfortunately, according to a recent article in the Atlanta Constitution, the compounding effects of transit development and urban sprawl is destroying this forest city at a rate of 30 acres per day. In fact, in preparation of providing television coverage of the 1996 Olympic Games, NBC found itself having to colorize some of its panoramic images of Atlanta in order to maintain this picture-perfect portrait of this forest city.

Like the city's initial subdivisions, today each fragment - neighborhood, mall, college campus, office park, public housing project - follows its own needs. Only flows connect them: the railroad, the highway, the airport, and today, digital signals and microwaves, and sometimes pedestrians. The city has been restructured by its expressways. The forest alone gives Atlanta a visible civic identity. Unfortunately, this landscape, beautiful but fragile, substitutes for much of the traditional public realm in other cities: pedestrian-friendly streets and boulevards, parks and parkways, plazas and civic centers.

Over the last couple of decades the city has grown in relation to its ability to function as a regional and national distribution point - first as a union of rail lines, second as a nexus of highways, and finally, as a hub of international airline traffic. Atlanta is a palimpsest, revealing a metropolis of fragments in a city of flows. The city has a history of maximizing flow and access.

Anchor's, Intervention's, Cross Programming is sited along Memorial Boulevard in Southeast Atlanta, in a turn-of-the-century residential neighborood called Reynoldstown. The population of Reynoldstown is approximately 3,000 and the average income is less than $15,000 a year. Ninety-five percent of the population is African-American, The area has a high proportion of children and young people, with 45% of the population under 20 years of age. Thirty percent of the population is enrolled in primary and secondary school, while only 2% is enrolled in College. Forty-six percent of the population over 25 years of age received high school diplomas. Night crime is high and frequently the subject of the eleven o'clock news.

Once alively, light commercial and retail street, Memorial Boulevard has become a major thoroughfare through Reynoldstown. Memorial is a six-lane boulevard that has been widened to the point of severing a once lively inner-city neighborhood. Buildings have been abandoned and poor lighting occurs at night. Street lamps designed to the scale of pedestrians walking along the street has been replaced by looming light poles widely spaced, casting unsightly light across the surface of the street, sidewalk and pedestrians. Reynoldstown has been split and fragmented. The concern of maintaining an efficient inter-local transit system as apriority has interupted a number of important local uses along Memorial. Services such as grocery stores, banking, and storefront retail that once served Reynoldstown has fallen into decay and abandonment.

This project operates at multiple levels and scales. Three major design strategies are employed. First, the reinforcement or introduction of anchor institutions, framing a particular locale along the span of this boulevard. Second, the installation of a series of light urban interventions between these two anchoring institutions. And third, the introduction of cross programming tactics encouraging pedestrian traffic to circulate back, forth and perpendicular to Memorial Boulevard. All of these strategies collectively combined register a resistant force against the intermittent flow of high-speed automobiles that dominate the current use and character of Memorial Boulevard.

The first strategy, anchoring, is carried out within the context of two community-based buildings. One of them is existing, while the other is proposed. The concept of *reinforcement* is applied to the first building, a neighborhood church that is in need of repair. The second building is a neighborhood social hall with a performance stage. Perpendicular to the position of the stage, this room also functions as a basketball court. The second strategy employs a variety of lightly-scaled urban interventions along the street. The first intervention replaces those small, difficult to see bus signs attached to telephone poles with colorful bus shelters that extend themselves as street paintings with integral speed bumps across the street. A second intervention replaces the ominous light poles with pedestrian-scaled light fixtures and integral colored canopies at 20-foot intervals for waiting or meeting. A third tactic treats the sporadic blank surfaces along the fronts or sides of vacated buildings as canvases, painted with bright colors that are dramatically illuminated at night.

The third strategy incorporates cross-programming tactics that situates complementary building programs across the street from one another. Specific examples of cross programming include locating a laundromat across the street from a neighborhood market; a weightlifting gym across the street from a health food store; an auto repair garage across the street from a metal shop; an appliance store across the street from a business machines repair shop; a paint store across the street from a hardware store; a music/video outlet across the street from a burger joint; and, a computer software store across the street from a video arcade.

CONCLUSION

This paper accepts the fact that there will always be places where local and larger-scale modes of transportation collide. The "problem areas" are abundant in Los Angeles and Atlanta, and many other cities across the country. They are also places of great potential. They are what J.B. Jackson calls new American vernacular spaces.

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