LINES OF ENCOUNTER
Architectural Urbanism in the In-Between:
Speculative Prototypes for Travel Plazas

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"*What seems to bring us together in the new landscape is not the sharing of space in the traditional sense but a kind sodality based on shared uses of the street or road, and on shared routines. The trailer court does not last for many years and its amenities are scanty: but it is accessible, and the highway is accessible, and if somewhere jobs are accessible, we can look forward to something like a community held together and achieving identity by the short private road which everyone uses in daily life.*"

J.B. Jackson

INTRODUCTION

"*LINES OF ENCOUNTER* Architectural Urbanism in the In-Between: Speculative Prototypes for Travel Plazas" is ongoing research into prototypical design in everyday cityscapes and landscapes; particularly those monopolized by the automobile. Prototypical design has been a research interest of mine for several years in teaching and practice. Some of the prototypical

architectures and programs investigated by students in the design studios have ranged from bus stops, to drive-thru quick service restaurants, and in this particular investigation, travel plazas.

As contemporary culture continues to rely on *space* and *time* rather than *place*, how can architecture begin to tap into these phenomena? As we continually increase the extent of our nomadic lives in transit, what type of architecture can contribute to a traditionally attenuated and homogenous built landscape? Much of this landscape is vector spaces, but as the title of the studio suggests, these spaces also have the potential to be *lines of encounter* and create places through the *crossing points* of these vectors. Through speculating on the prototypical architecture of the travel plaza, the studio had to re-think the complex interrelationships of space, program, site and use; and how this in turn becomes realized in the form of a prototypical architecture and/or urbanism; particularly a prototype that is serial, yet flexible in an effort to create a sense of place and event within the vector space of the highway; as well as serve as a rebuttal to homogeneous mass produced architecture. The studio was also asked to re-think the relationship between the
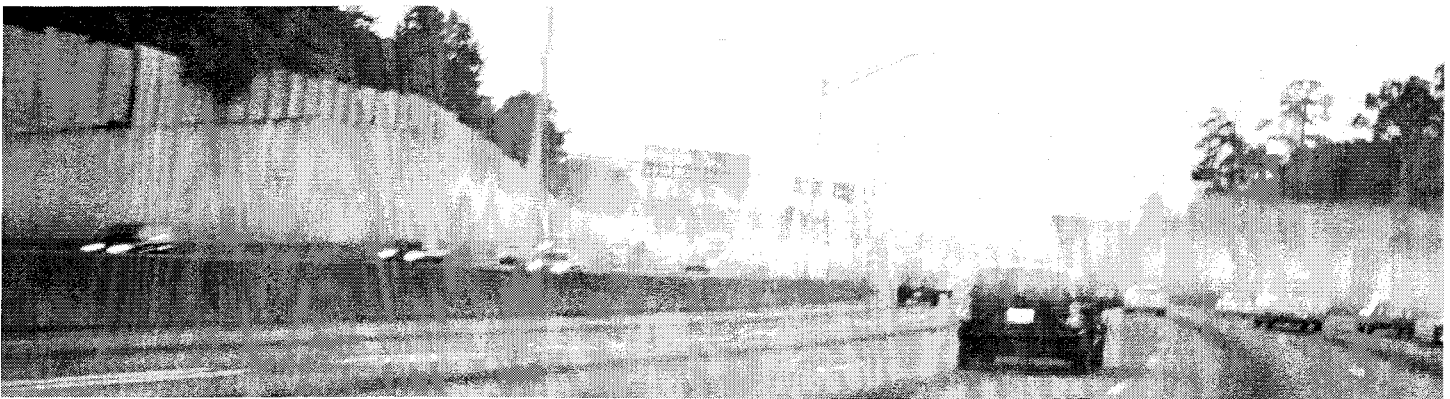

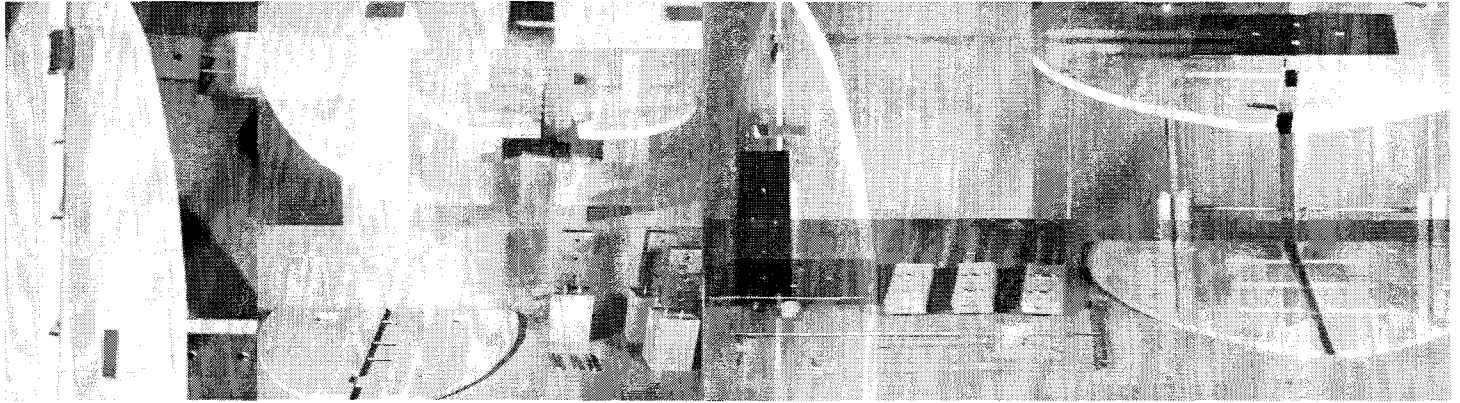
Fig. 1. Video Still of I-75, by Wanda Dye, 2002.

Fig. 2. Prototypical Table Series – Montage of Parts, Assembly and Adjustability, by Wanda Dye 1994.

automobile and the travel plaza through strategies of hybridization and integration. Integral to the studio's design process was the use of digital media; video and computer aided design were used as generative and iterative tools. Through the inherent multiplicity and reproducibility afforded by digital media, the studio was prolific in diagrammatic and time based techniques that explored, and even exploited iteration and spatio-temporailty in design.

PROTOTYPICAL DESIGN AS RESEARCH

> "To bring the most of the best to the greatest number of people for the least."
>
> Charles and Ray Eames

Why a prototypical design approach? Prototypical design has the potential to improve the quality of many places and the lives of many people through its inherent reproducibility; especially within the American built landscape. Of additional interest regarding prototypical design is that by definition, a prototype is a "working model". Through the concept of prototypical design, teaching and practice will always be research, experimentation and speculation through the re-thinking of existing models; always asking 'could this model or type be improved?'

Why responsive and flexible prototypical design? Can we question the rigid universality and homogeneity of more traditional prototypical design approaches? Can we extend the argument and design prototypes that are more responsive and flexible, rather than unresponsive and universal or 'one size fits all'? Can one in design achieve seriality, but at the same time specificity? And most importantly, can prototypical design begin to negotiate between the complex territories of contemporary cityscapes and landscapes; especially those monopolized by automobiles, freeways and parking lots? Thus attempting to make them places, rather than resisting, or even worse, ignoring them?

MEDIA AS A GENERATIVE AND ITERATIVE TOOL

> "They are not really films at all, just a way to get across an idea."
>
> Charles and Ray Eames

"Given the nature and the characteristics of the contemporary city, and urban culture, the mode of its representation needs to be rethought. There need to be different modes of representation in order to account for the multiplicity of the contemporary city, the complex and fragmentary quality of the urban realm. Some aspects can be represented by a drawing, or even a model or a
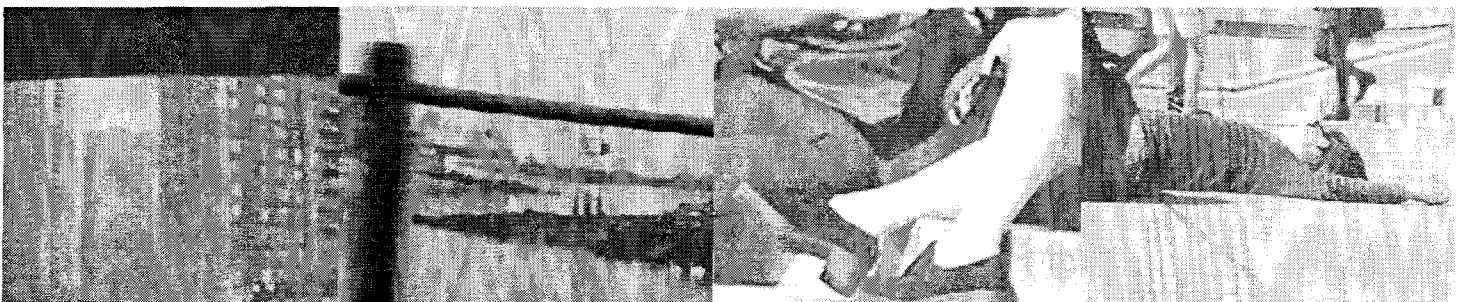

Fig. 3. Video Stills from "cityscape/landscape" and "Body/Surface," by Wanda Dye, 1997.
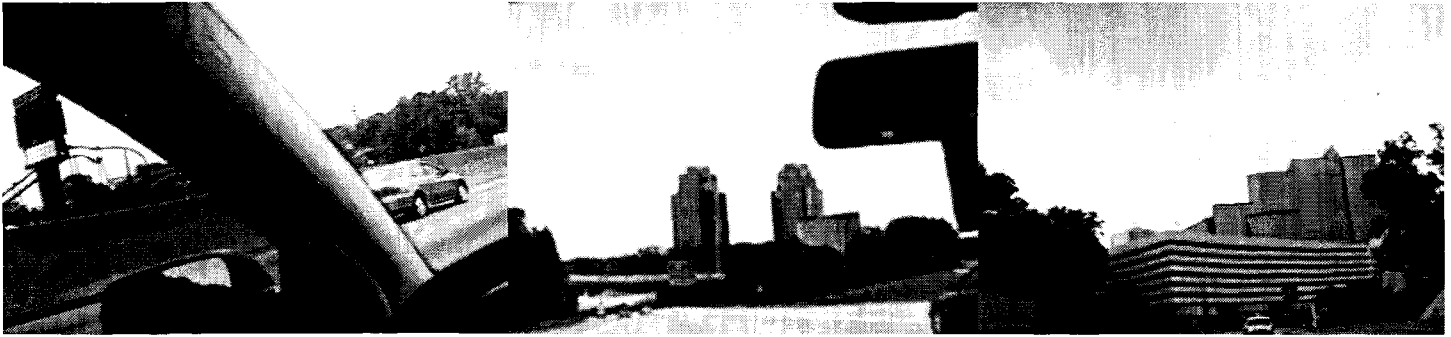
Fig. 4. Video Still of Highway Landscape, by student, Adam Stillman.

particular notation; other aspects require transcending the exclusivity of the visual, so that other media, like film and video, become necessary."

Diana Agrest

What tools are conducive to such investigations? Integral to these investigations are the strategic choice of media and its integral role in the design process: video and computer aided design enable one to explore temporal iteration through the inherent multiplicity and reproducibility afforded by these particular media. Just as the Eames used photography and film in the design process to understand and to generate ideas: video and digital media is used to explore design ideas addressing time, movement, speed, program, site, use and iteration.

SITES, PROGRAMS AND PHASES

The site is situated within the *urban/suburban geography* of the highway; a thickened median located on I-75. The location is both tactical and strategic through its accessibility to both northbound and southbound traffic: traffic comprised of many different itineraries. This particular location is about sixty miles south of Atlanta. The closest town is Forsyth, Georgia and existing travel plazas are located several miles north. The median is approximately 750 feet at its widest point and approximately one mile long. The traffic corridor of I-75 is six lanes all the way to Macon and the estimated traffic flow is @ 50,000 vehicles a day. The site is ideal because it is in-between Atlanta, Macon and Savannah. It is conducive as a crossing point demographically: [i.e. from truck drivers, to families and commuters traveling in-between the coast and Atlanta: as well as emergency traffic from hurricane evacuations.] The site as a median is also "prototypical", so the proposals have the potential to be repeated in many similar situations.

The programmatic elements are suggestive. As part of re-thinking and speculation, the studio was encouraged to even question what the program of a travel plaza is or could be.

- Gas @ 8 islands per side – 16 total

- Restaurant @ 10,000 S.F.
- Lounge @ 5,000 S.F.
- Drive Thru Services @ 1,000 S.F.
- Motel [50 – 100 Rooms, Can Vary in Size] @ 16,000 S.F.
- Car Repair @ 3,000 S.F. [8 cars 4 per side]
- Car/Truck Wash @ 3,000 S.F.
- Professional Services [Banking, Postal, Internet] @ 3,000 S.F.
- Fixed Retail @ 3,000 S.F.
- Flexible Retail Kiosks @ 3,000 S.F. [6 @ 500 S.F. each]
- Personal Services [Hair Salon, Shoe Shine, Laundry, Gym, Showers, Lockers] @ 5,000 S.F.
- Restrooms @ 2,000 S.F.
- Indoor Recreational @ Varies
- Outdoor Recreational @ Varies
- Mechanical @ As Per Required
- Parking @ As Per Required

PHASE I-IMAGES AS IDEAS: MEDIA AS A GENERATIVE AND ITERATIVE TOOL

As a way of generating ideas for the Travel Plaza, the studio produced a movie of images, [moving or still] using adobe premiere movie editing software. The software afforded experimentation dealing with time, movement and seamless sequencing either through video or still montages. The subject matter could be about the culture and program of the travel plaza, the landscape of the highway, the views and speeds from the car, a critique of existing homogenous landscapes, and so on: essentially, anything one found unusual or fascinating about the existing conditions: and the potential and possibilities embedded within those existing conditions. The studio also looked at photographers, film makers and architects who use images from everyday landscapes and cityscapes as inspiration for their own work. These works found "uncommon beauty in common

things" or make the familiar unfamiliar through mediation. Readings on photography and film as ways of documenting and describing the physical and psychological space of the highway were also assigned in parallel with the investigation. Some of the photographers, filmmakers and architects researched were: Charles and Ray Eames, Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Martha Rosler, Andreas Gursky, Wim Wenders, Wong Kar Wei, Jean Luc Godard and LO/TEK.

PHASE II-DIAGRAMS: ORGANIZATIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATIONS

"Diagrams do not themselves produce form, but rather [ ] emit formative and organizational influence, shape-giving pressures that cannot help but be embodied in all subsequent states of the given region of concrete reality upon which they act. This activity represents a very complex play of hybridization because every component of what I am calling concrete reality is itself the expression of many previous diagrams that have only temporarily been resolved [or 'tested,' as in an experiment] and lodged in form. The diagram gives us the power to program historical becoming, as well as to hack the programs currently in place. Diagrams must be conceived as songs as well as hammers."

Sanford Kwinter

"Recently there has been renewed interest in examining the potential of the diagram as an analytical device and as an indicator of the emergence of a new epistemological condition for architecture. Although the descriptions of how diagrams function vary, nearly all interpretations agree that one of its most productive attributes is its capacity to organize and suspend diverse kinds of

information within a single graphic or set of graphic configurations. Given this performative characteristic, as well as the understanding that diagrams are provisional articulations of information, some argue that diagrams offer a logical and abstract means for 'representing', thinking about and explaining the complex dynamic and information dense conditions we confront. From this point of view diagrams can act not only as means of organization, but also as conceptual tools that approximate our experience of the real."

Mary Lou Lobsinger

As a way to organize and conceptualize the complexities of sites, programs and structures of the travel plaza, the studio produced a series of diagrams. Diagramming enabled the studio to translate organizations and conceptualizations into prototypical architecture and/or landscape urbanisms: not rigid universal prototypes, but flexible, responsive prototypes performing as open ended systems and instruments, not lodged in an overarching stylistic form; prototypes that are repetitive, reflexive components or 'abstract machines;' prototypes that perform dispositionally versus compositionally as per different programmatic desires, site and structural conditions. The diagrams could incorporate texts, charts, graphs, maps, drawings, montages or models. Given the complex and multiple space-time conditions embedded within the travel plaza programs, sites and structures, the computer was used conceptually, analytically, generatively and iteratively rather than as a final presentational and/or rendering tool. Adobe Premiere was still used as a time based medium to show the diagrams' performances through time. In parallel to this phase were readings and discussions of architects who employ diagrammatic techniques. Some these architects were: Cedric Price, Alison and Peter Smithson, Archigram, Bernard Tschumi, Stan Allen, Ben van Berkle and so on.
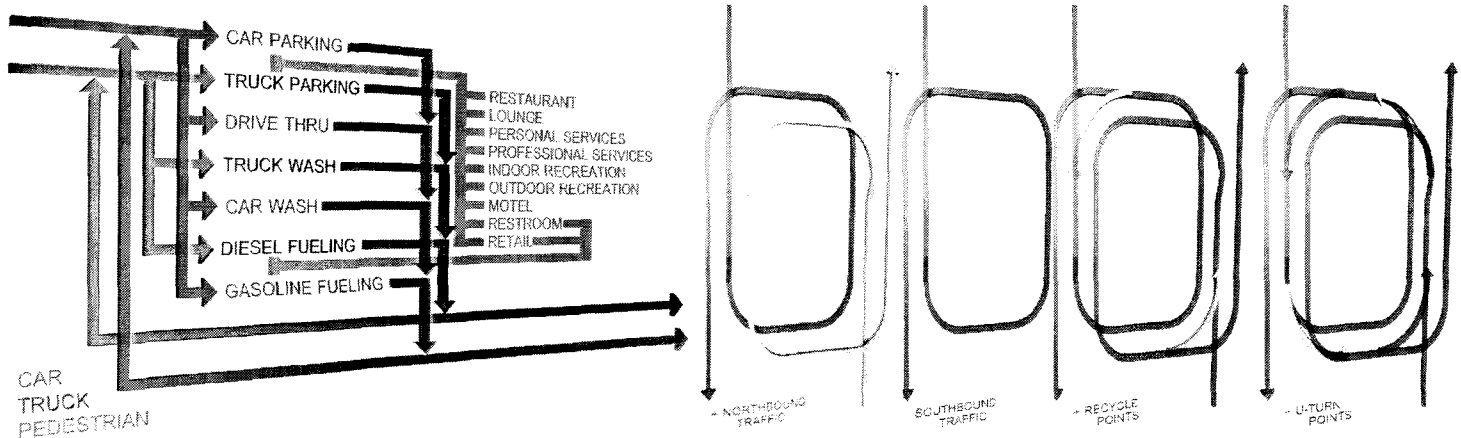

Fig. 5. Diagrams of Programmatic Adjacencies and Durations, by student, Adam Stillman.
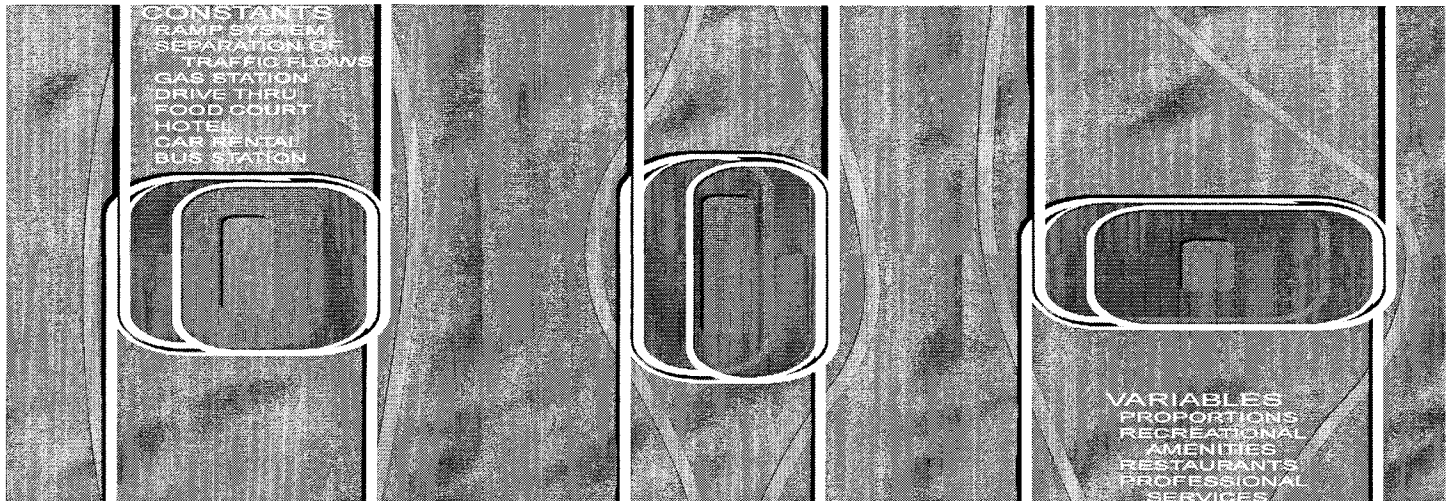
Fig. 6. Prototypical Possibilities, by student, Adam Stillman.

PHASE III-TECHNIQUES: COMPONENTS, COMPOSITES AND CONFIGURATIONS

As a way to articulate the ideas and strategies of a *responsive* and *flexible* prototypical travel plaza, the studio dissected the "designs" into components. different structural assemblages/composites. [architectural and landscape], as well as the multiple configurations the prototypes could perform. Some of the questions solved and in some cases readdressed in this phase of the process were as follows:

* *How can the prototype be flexible?*

* *How does it negotiate change?*

* *How does it respond to outside forces, such as times, ecologies, economics, densities, programs, users?*

* *What materials will be employed and why?*

* *What technologies could be embedded within them?*

* *What different scenarios and situations can the prototype accommodate?*

* *How is the prototype repetitive, yet different?*

* *How can it act locally and globally?*

In this final phase the computer was still used to foreground notions of iteration through generating the multiple configurations. material choices and variations, time-use scenarios, detailing, as well as sensory perceptions through different views, movements, speeds, orientations and durations.

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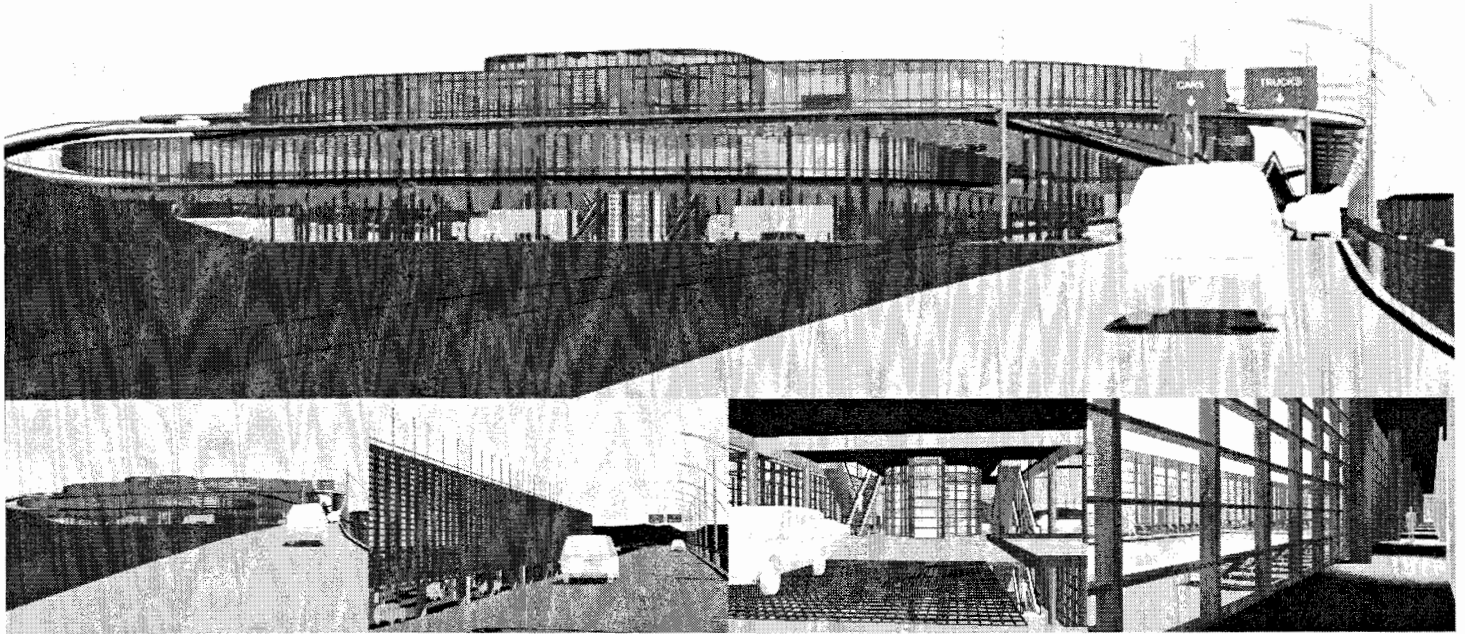
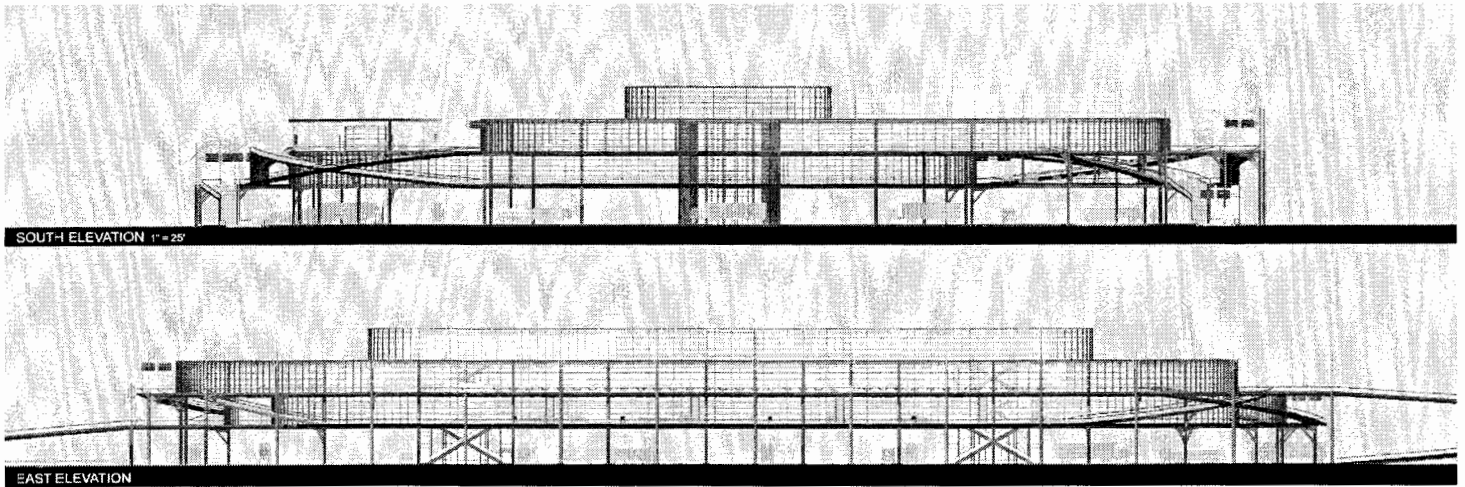Fig. 7. Perspective Views of Travel Plaza. by student, Adam Stillman.

Fig. 8. Elevations of Travel Plaza, by student, Adam Stillman.