

America Town: Building The Outposts Of Empire

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In the name of the imperial project, space is evaluated and overlain with desire: creating homely landscapes out of alien territories, drawing distant lands into the maps of empire, establishing ordered grids of occupation.

– Jane M. Jacobs (1996: 108)

During this time of war, it is not difficult to realize that the US military is without question a significant agent used to implement the policies of the powerful. Not only do the armed forces implement multinational and increasingly unilateral political agendas, but those agents serving in the US military also export their sociocultural practices to their host countries. From the Persian Gulf to the Republic of Korea, US troops are serving in more than 100 countries as “liberators,” “peacekeepers,” and “nation-builders.” But there are unintended and unfortunate local consequences of this global agenda. From crimes to contamination, US forces stationed in these countries leave their indelible mark. Likewise, the built form of US military bases in these countries leaves an imprint that has received little attention. These bases consume vast amounts of land and follow a sprawling pattern of development, replete with low densities, isolated and single-use buildings, and auto-dependency. And the concern over built form is not trivial. In a December 2002 poll of 1,200 South Koreans living near US military installations, excessive use of land by US forces was the most frequently noted concern when asked about their attitudes regarding the US military (Kim 2002). Surprisingly, this concern overshadowed concerns about crime and undisciplined activity.

During the cold war, 3,000 bases were situated in one country but controlled by another (Enloe 1990). Even now, over a decade after the end of the cold war, the US leases land for almost 1,000 installations overseas in what Sandars (2000) calls the “Leasehold Empire.” These permanent installations, from small intelligence sites to large air bases, house a deployed population of 250,000 soldiers, civilian employees, and family members. The pace of deployments has quickened since

September 11. To support the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the US established or enlarged over a dozen new bases in that region alone. Moreover, in the larger “war against terrorism,” the US has substantially increased its presence around the globe. In the current Iraq War, nearly 300,000 additional US troops have been deployed to forward locations in the Persian Gulf and Iraq. The US will undoubtedly leave some type of permanent presence in Iraq – it seems that “to the victor go the spoils,” from oil contracts to base leasing rights. After all, the US left bases in Japan, Germany, and England following World War II, South Korea following the Korean War, and Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar following the first Gulf War. To support its permanent and temporary installations, in fiscal year 2002 alone, the US Congress authorized \$10.5 billion for military construction projects. And this does not include the billions contributed by the host nations and allied militaries.

Familiarity on the Frontlines. The United States is building “America Towns” across the globe in an effort to support its growing military presence. Because of the local Burger King, the neighborhood of split-level ranches, and the military equivalent of Wal-Mart, military personnel deployed overseas may not even notice they’ve left home unless they step outside the base gate, which surprisingly some never do. Underlying the familiar facades are familiar policies concerning planning, programming, design, and construction that apply equally to settings as diverse as Omaha, Nebraska and Osan Air Base (AB), South Korea. Osan is located 38 miles south of Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea (ROK), near the west coast of the Korean Peninsula. The installation is approximately 70 miles south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which divides North Korea from the southern republic. Located just six minutes by air from the demilitarized zone, Osan claims it is “the tip of the spear” defending the Republic of Korea. Osan is adjacent to Pyongtaek City, a densely populated business and service center for region surrounding the base. The base covers 1,661 acres, and employs 5,500 active duty, 130 US civilians,

600 Korean nationals, and is home to 4,000 dependents. Today, Osan hosts one of the world's largest military construction programs – with projects totaling \$210 million in construction, \$256 million in design, and \$1.6 billion in programming. The difference between the base and the local area in terms of built form is striking. The base is a low-density fortified enclave embedded within the high-density fabric of Pyongtaek City. Residential densities on base average less than 8 units to the acre while off-base they average over 40 units per acre. The average lot coverage on base is less than 10% and off base it exceeds 80%. The floor-area-ratio on base averages 0.15 and off base it exceeds 2.5.

But familiar planning strategies are in part the result of familiar planning policies that stress transportation rather transit, isolation rather than integration, and buildings rather than places. For instance, every base is required to develop its own *General Plan* that dictates appropriate land use zones, development patterns, and architectural styles. The irony is that these plans are produced under contract (about \$200,000 each) by a few planning firms from the United States that use one Microsoft Word document template for the entire plan.

Veneers of Compatibility. Despite the rather generic planning and design templates, some installations make attempts at compatibility. Aviano Air Base is good example. The base is located near the Alps at the northern end of the largest agricultural zone in Italy – the Po Valley. Aviano is only one of two NATO bases near the Mediterranean capable of sustaining operations in the Middle East. In support of the three most recent wars in the region, the base supports 170 aircraft on an airfield designed for 75. And with these airplanes come a host of personnel – from pilots to plumbers, and mechanics to medics. As a direct result of the mission growth required to support the US global agenda of peacekeeping, the base's infrastructure has grown considerably. To improve the situation on the ground, new housing, new airfield facilities, a new school, and numerous new support facilities have been built on and around the base in an endeavor dubbed *Aviano 2000*. All totaled, at \$530 million, this development is the largest Defense Department construction program in the world. But the base claims they don't have enough land. So, in the late 1990s, the base won approval from the Italian government to annex 210 acres of prime farmland adjacent to its eastern border. This was done in order to build many of these facilities, including the military's version of Target – the Base Exchange replete with Nikes, Nintendos, and nylons. The controversy over this annexation was severe and resulted in demands by some locals for the base to be shut down. It didn't help that the Base Exchange included a clock tower – which is usually reserved in Italy for Cathedrals of God not Cathedrals of Commerce. Tile roofs, arched arcades, and rusticated bases were superficial elements meant to connect with the built form traditions of the area. But the underlying morphological patterns were in direct

contrast to the dense, mixed-use character of Italian towns in the region.

Moreover, the Air Force is leasing over 500 homes recently built to its specifications in an effort to address some of the most severe housing requirements. Much of the leased housing follows the same sprawl-inducing pattern as suburban development in the United States. In one case, however, the homes are quite responsive to local customs since they were built without regard to US standards as part of a unique design-build experiment. Designed and built by Italians, the multi-level attached townhomes cluster around a common green and parking is underground, beneath the residences. And despite unsubstantiated concerns among some Air Force officers that American soldiers would not want to live in such “dense” housing (if 25 dwelling units per acre can be called dense), the Air Force awarded the project a design award and brought the designers to Washington DC for an elaborate award ceremony. But, living off base in locally designed and built housing may be a relic of the pre 9/11 era. Now, leaders at many overseas bases are now relocating their soldiers from off base housing to on base housing in order to reduce vulnerability to terrorist actions.

Policies of Fear. Overseas bases are increasingly closed environments due to terrorism concerns. The problem with this is that the US military does not consider limited land availability an impediment to its anti-terrorism planning philosophy. The military is dealing with its fear of terrorism in two ways. First, military planners are consolidating missions and trying to reduce the number of installations overseas. But this is complicated by “force protection” requirements and a continued desire to develop at extremely low densities. Many recent policy changes are in response not to 9/11 but to the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing at a US Air Base in Saudi Arabia where terrorists left a tanker truck about 100 feet away from a dormitory housing hundreds of airmen. The tanker contained 55,000 pounds of explosive material, which when detonated, sent a blast and shockwave that killed 19 airmen. Under the rubric, “Anti-terrorism/Force protection,” military police have crafted far reaching planning regulations that impact every new project built on every US military installation. Planners have ceded their domain to police. For this, Kadena Air Base in Okinawa is a good example.

Kadena Air Base is located on the island of Okinawa, about 900 miles south of Tokyo. The base is adjacent to Okinawa City and is one of the Air Force's largest overseas installations: it encompasses 11,200 acres. The annual lease of the land is \$200 million and is paid to 7,250 Japanese landowners. Massive protests against the military presence in Okinawa came in 1995 following the rape of a young Japanese girl by three Marines. An estimated 60,000 local citizens marched in the streets of Okinawa demanding the withdrawal of US forces from the island. The rally adopted by acclamation a resolution condemn-

ing the United States for an “occupation mentality” (Eckert 1996). Exacerbating the situation was an F-15 crash over water just days before the rally. Even the pro-military Governor of the prefecture, Masahide Ota, supported this call and refused to negotiate with landowners unwilling to extend their leases to the US military. During this period, the government was preparing to have nearly 2,900 Okinawan landowners renew their contracts before the leases to the United States expired. Interestingly, the day before Governor Ota’s decision, Japan and the United States signed an accord that increased Tokyo’s share of the costs of maintaining US bases in Japan from \$4.8 billion a year to \$5 billion. Now, ironically, not only were Okinawans being deprived of the use of their land but they were also paying more for the “privilege” of having US troops stationed there. One theme common among protestors interviewed during the street demonstrations was sacrifice. “We have been sacrificed by America and Japan before and after the war,” one protester said. And one high school student pleaded for the governments of the two countries to “give us back the tranquility of Okinawa, give us back the peaceful island without the military, without the tragedy” (Lee 2000). But the military is unlikely to leave Okinawa any time soon. In fact, Kadena Air Base is in the middle of a multi-million dollar building boom as a result of relocation goals aimed at reducing bases elsewhere on the island. And all of these new buildings must follow stringent setback requirements, which only leads to increased levels of sprawling development on the base.

However, the United States government is not the only agent requiring sacrifices among Okinawans. Given its mix of ethnicities, which is unusual for Japan. Okinawa has historically been neglected and even maltreated by the rest of Japan. Okinawans, for example, earn about half the wages of workers in the rest of Japan and unemployment is twice as high (Lee 2000). Moreover, the distribution of US military installations across Japan is strikingly uneven. All totaled, U.S. forces in Japan take up a land area nearly the size of Delaware. But 40 of the 94 facilities (43%) in Japan solely controlled by the United States are on Okinawa, taking up nearly 75% of the land used by the US military in Japan and fully 20% of the land on the island. Additionally, of the 43,885 U.S. military personnel in Japan, 63% are stationed on Okinawa.

While fears of locals protesting against the presence of expansive military facilities is driving down the number of overseas bases, the fear of terrorism is driving up the size of bases that remain. In a classic example of what seems to be “fighting the last war,” new planning directives applicable to all bases worldwide focus on increasing stand-off distance from buildings and perceived threats. These policies, based on the Khobar Towers blast, stress stand-off distance of 140 feet from a base perimeter and 80 feet from streets or parking lots. The “science” is based on a study that found that at Khobar Towers a detonation at 80 feet caused considerable damage, but if detonation would have been at 170 feet the damage would have

been less severe, and at 400 feet the damage would have been minimal. When fully implemented, the only conclusion will be increasingly sprawled-out compounds with longer perimeters that will only be more difficult to defend. These policies contradict current thinking as articulated by advocates of crime prevention through environmental design and they will jeopardize the ability of bases to accommodate new or relocated missions, which is an essential element in the strategy currently underway that aims to reduce bases by consolidating missions on select bases. For example, as part of the joint Korea-US Land Partnership plan the US intends to give up leases on 30,000 acres and 15 major installations and receive just 600 additional acres on which to relocate the affected troops. But with all the required setbacks, there may be no more room for these missions on existing bases, even with 600 additional acres. In fact, at Osan, the base recently needed additional acreage to build a new housing complex that met the anti-terrorism setback requirements. So, at the request of the US military, the local government, in a controversial move, demolished a small collection of homes standing in the way of this project.

Spillover. In the *Ugly American*, published in 1958, there is an apropos quote about Americans living abroad: “A mysterious change seems to come over Americans when they go to a foreign land. They isolate themselves socially. They live pretentiously. They’re loud and ostentatious” (Lederer and Burdick 1958). Over 40 years later, the behavior of many American soldiers stationed overseas still perpetuates this unattractive image. This behavior is on nightly display in the bar districts outside every base’s gates; districts that are filled with rowdy troops looking for a good time and a cheap drink. At Osan, for example, the Songtang district is home to 92 bars all within 1,200 feet of the main gate. And despite the presence of three or more two-member patrols of armed security police from the base charged with maintaining order, rambunctious behavior goes on until the curfew, which on the weekend is usually midnight. These patrols are allowed by the Status of Forces agreement between the US and the Republic of Korea, which authorizes US security police, known locally as the town patrol, to protect the interests of US military members in the immediate area of the base. According to Senior Master Sergeant Andy Eskew, the superintendent of operations for the 51st Security Police Squadron at Osan, “the Korean National Police allow up to a 10 mile radius around the base for us to patrol, which isn’t necessary here since our activities are limited to a five or six block radius. We’re here to keep the peace by preventing an assault or fight. This is a unique part of being at Osan... if there’s a confrontation, we’re there to take custody of the US person so they don’t get stuck in a Korean jail; we’re here to protect them from themselves” (Norgen 2000).

But Osan isn’t the only base that supports a bustling bar and brothel district. About two miles east of Kunsan Air Base in southwest South Korea, is a little patch of land known as A-

Town. It is a mix of bars, nightclubs, cafes, shops, and homes specifically built to cater to the American troops stationed at Kunsan. It is perhaps best known for the dance clubs, where “juicy girls” will dance with patrons throughout the night. And for a bar fine of \$50 to \$100, these young women, many of whom are forced into the business from Russia and Thailand, will entertain a soldier in private. Built in the late 1950s, commercial establishments in the little village had been seeing a steady decline in revenue since the base had been slowly contracting as a result of the end of the cold war. The base was in line for imminent closure. However, following September 11, two major changes occurred. First, the US and the Republic of Korea decided to keep the base open, which resulted in additional personnel and a major expansion in planned construction totaling \$535 million, of which almost \$200 million will be funded by the Korean government. At the same time, ostensibly for security purposes, the base leadership instituted a policy that placed off-limits all commercial establishments with a three-mile radius of the base, except for A-Town. In addition the base established a security presence at A-Town, mapped its buildings, and even occupied a small building as a security command post. This occurred despite the fact that A-Town is not within the limits of the base’s legal boundary. The social tolls and the gendered politics found in places like A-Town and Songtang have been well documented by Cynthia Enloe, Katherine Moon, and Sandra Sturdevant and Brenda Stolfus. The presence of US military installations does have tremendous seen and unseen social costs. As Ramon-Jimenez and Chiong-Javier (1998:ix) note, the “presence of U.S. military facilities has generated extensive socioeconomic benefits, on the one hand, and tremendous social costs, on the other.” What has been missing from this analysis is the spatial component of the critique.

Exporting suburban settlement patterns has unforeseen and far-reaching spatio-political spillovers. At one level, there is an obvious loss of local control. Planning policies are largely negotiated at the national level and rest on host-nation agreements and international treaties. Despite local resistance, the U.S. military has successfully expanded missions and enlarged land holdings at the expense of local planning concerns like the preservation of agricultural land, the control of traffic, or the maintenance of coastal access. Ironically, the locals, typically living in developments significantly denser than those found on the installations, are burdened by the expense of subsidizing American sprawl through their own country’s tax policy and defense budget.

Concluding Thoughts. What does this research tell us about Americans living and working at these overseas outposts? In this era of globalization, the cultural production of identities is increasingly important. This research sheds new light on how issues of identity and difference are spatially mapped at U.S. military bases abroad. We can see how Americans are using built form to create the familiar in unfamiliar terrain. The work

of Benedict Anderson (1987) provides a very useful anchor for this research. His concept of the nation as an imagined political community is quite relevant here. “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (1987: 6). Anderson shows that languages and labels, signs and symbols worked together to support the conception of nation-ness. And as Woodward (1997) notes, identity formation helps establish these imagined communities even across national borders. It seems that American GIs living abroad are attempting to reestablish and reconstruct their own identity by reproducing the built form symbols of their interpretation of an American identity. But reconstructing any version of an “American identity” may be complicated by the particularities of the local context. Viewed from the outside, bases are indeed gated enclaves. The gates and fences are intentional and provide a security buffer that is increasingly relevant in this age of international terrorism. As Bauman (1998) suggests, a key physical manifestation of globalization is paradoxically progressive separation, exclusion, and segregation. Nevertheless, despite the presence of rather imposing gates and fences, one cannot assume a complete divorce between the base and its adjacent city. As Doreen Massey (1994: 129) argues, “localities are not internally introspective bounded entities. They have to be constructed through sets of social relations which bind them inextricably to...other places.” At military bases, built form joins social practice in the production and performance of identity. Base planners have chosen a simulacrum of suburbia in their search for identity. In terms of design, the regular ranks of dwelling units, the strict hierarchy of architectural forms, and the standardized building styles represent order and control. Deviations are not to be tolerated. Even lawn care is monitored; with “prizes” awarded to the lawn that best conforms to the base’s standards. But, as Woodward notes, the cultural production of identity is bound to be a “...site of struggle and contestation” (1997: 18). The unchecked spillover that can be attributed to the planning practices employed at these installations will indeed continue to foment strife and discord. Unfortunately, the resulting violence aimed at Americans and their property is yet another manifestation of what Johnson (2000) calls “blowback.” Packed in the trunks and duffle bags of American soldiers are their own personal possessions. When they arrive at their new base overseas, they not only unpack these items but they also unpack their ways of thinking, planning, and designing. They bring with them their Burger Kings and Big Boxes. The flow of people and resources in and out of every military base is clearly linked to larger transnational processes. By analyzing the way these transnational flows and accompanying planning processes shape patterns of design and construction at America’s overseas outposts, this project demonstrates that cultural identity can be performed through and embedded within the production of space.

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