

# Backyard Junk and Big Boxes: Inequality and Spatial Politics in the Rural South

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**Mid-size and small rural communities in the US are commonly acknowledged as safe and healthy places where life is simpler and it is easier, for example, to raise a family, without the insecurities and stress of urban life. Although in this perception the closer contact with nature appears as a source of health and life quality, we know that it is precisely in the environments in which such contact is more direct—small towns and rural suburbs—, where lifestyles are less healthy and poverty rates are higher, evolving since the housing market crisis of 2008 into what we now know as the ‘suburbanization of poverty’.**<sup>1</sup>

This paper studies the spatial dimension of the American rural south, where inequality, poverty and unhealthy lifestyles have progressively become part of a surprisingly accepted—and uncriticized—reality. In an effort to add an architectural perspective to the debate on spatial politics, which is usually driven by the social sciences, I will concentrate on the analysis and theorization of the interrelation between two architectural forms characteristic of the rural South: first, the carefully planned environments of retail big boxes as spaces for controlled consumption, and, second, the informal bricolage and looseness of rural domesticity, which, after the decline of the middle class, has abandoned the ideal images of suburbia to embrace the material logics of slums.<sup>2</sup>

Departing from Doreen Massey’s notion of spatial politics—understood as the set of relationships established between certain practices and the built environment where they take place—, this paper attempts to clarify on one hand, how much of the distinctive persistence of poverty and inequality in the Rural South is determined by its spatial organization, and, on the other, whether the architectural system created by the combination of these spaces works as a support or as a critique of the current lifestyles and everyday practices. By examining this reality through the lens of architecture, I will attempt to uncover new possibilities for a spatially articulated dissent, paradoxically born within the conservative heart of Neoliberal America. From this perspective, certain private practices that make use of what we could call big-box cheapness (e.g.

informal farming, backyard junk accumulation or self-built sheds) can be interpreted as tactical counteractions of the underclass against the bureaucratically controlled environment of the stores, conceived and organized by the establishment.

According to the 2014 Report of the Department of Agriculture, the average poverty rates in the non-metropolitan south are consistently the highest in the country. Furthermore, if we compare in this same report the rural south with its own metropolitan areas, such as Atlanta, Greenville, Charlotte or Dallas, we will discover that the gap between them is also the highest in the whole country: while in the Northeast the average difference in poverty rates between urban and rural areas is less than 1%, in the South this difference almost reaches 7%. Additionally, recent scholarship indicates the existence of a direct correlation between the presence of powerful retail stores such as Walmart—distinctively dominant in the Southern landscape—, and the increase of both countywide poverty and obesity rates in regions with very low urban density.<sup>3</sup>

While there is plenty of research on these questions from the social sciences, the usual response to them from design disciplines such as architecture or urban design is blatantly incomplete. When considering the relation between the social and economic problems in the south and its spatial effects, socially concerned architects usually concentrate on two different approaches. On one hand, on the practicalities of affordable construction applied to small-scale emergency housing, as in the widely recognized work of Rural Studio and Samuel Mockbee in Hale County, Alabama, or in the Project H Design build Program developed by Emily Pilloton in Bertie County, North Carolina. On the other hand, certain architects and urban designers associated with the New Urbanism movement, such as the scholar and architect Ellen Dunham-Jones,<sup>4</sup> rightly tackle the role of retail big boxes as a part of the wider issue of suburbia. Naturally, they propose what seems to be the universally accepted solution for transforming a suburban territory into a healthy urban area: retrofitting the less successful buildings, encouraging pedestrian circulation and densifying with high-end developments.



Figure 1: Alfred Lee Johnson's Backyard, Eutaw, Alabama.

Photography by: Vaughn Sills

Although they do it from opposite political positions, Mockbee from an explicitly subversive<sup>5</sup> one and Dunham-Jones favoring the idea of the city as a commodity of the market economy, neither of them seems to consider both phenomena –cheap rural houses and suburban big boxes– as interrelated parts of the same social and urban milieu. In contrast, the perspective that I would like to propose here starts with the idea that these forms are, indeed, elements of the same system, and share a complex network of spatial and political relationships, which configures what we could call following Doreen Massey<sup>6</sup> and others, the spatial politics of the rural south. My approach is henceforth not only wider and more theoretical than the ones I have mentioned, but also explicitly critical, in the sense of attempting to expose certain socio-political processes –such as those related to income inequality, race or social segregation– that are not explicit when we design or think about architecture, but that are absolutely decisive to understand the spatial organization of rural America.

## RURAL PRACTICES AND CAPITALISM

In order to frame the relevance of the politics of space in the rural south, we previously need to acknowledge the role that the sphere of the rural plays in neoliberal economy and, subsequently, in the production of space in the contemporary world. Along these lines and according to many contemporary urban critics, such as Neil Brenner,<sup>7</sup> the very distinction of urban and non-urban space might not be relevant anymore. Instead, if we follow Brenner, we should acknowledge global urbanization as a process that cannot be subdivided so easily using the traditional notions of rural and urban. The suggestion, made from a contemporary standpoint, that we cannot consider the rural as a sphere isolated from wider processes refers us back to two thinkers from the mid Twentieth Century –Henri Lefebvre on one side and Raymond Williams on the other–, who explicitly alluded to the essential significance of the rural world in order to understand the kind of global societies that emerged from modern capitalism. Lefebvre and Williams formulated separately –both from a Marxist perspective–, two complementary ideas about the relationship between the urban and the rural. I would like to lean on these two ideas to frame in which way we may rethink the American rural south as something else than just a grotesque



Figure 2 Interior of Walmart Supercenter Photography: Gunnar Rathbun

exception of what we assume to be the most shared contemporary urban ideals, in other words, the obsession for smart, walkable and dense cities.

For Lefebvre, the strongest response to the commodification of everyday life that characterized the evolution of modern capitalism in post-war France—as himself experienced—and that later reached its uppermost expression in neoliberal America, is to be found, precisely, in specific practices of rural life. As Amdy Merrifield puts it, according to Lefebvre, ‘the rural festival’ epitomizes the nemesis for all forms of radical modern alienation.<sup>8</sup> Festivals are a natural continuation of the routines of rural everyday life, they only differ from it “in the explosion of forces which had been slowly accumulated in and via everyday life itself”.<sup>9</sup>

While Lefebvre seems to recover his own romanticized memories from the rural life of his childhood to invoke a somehow humanist form of Marxism, Raymond Williams dedicates one of his most influential books, ‘The Country and the City’ (1973), to dismantle the idyllic image of the countryside as a pastoral Eden, which constitutes the opposite to the corruption of the city. The inversion of that fictionalized representation, as Williams articulates it, would be considering the rural as backwards, innocent and ignorant against the urban as advanced, sinful, and culturally experienced. In an intricate account of the representation of the Eighteenth century countryside by English poets, Williams explains how these fictions have been fed by literature during centuries, creating a nostalgic image of the lost rural life, while the reality was that, in an early capitalist society as the Eighteenth century England, the countryside was a fully exploited territory realizing an essential role in the political and economic system led from urban centers. Far from idyllic, the living conditions of a peasant in an English rural village were as hard as those of a city worker, so, essentially, Williams

From these positions we may extract two main conclusions that I would like to translate to the context of the contemporary rural south in the US. First, following Lefebvre we may conclude that the antidote to the alienation of urban capitalism might be found on a reconnection with certain rural culture, which opens the possibility for transgression and disorder within country everyday life. As Lefebvre explains very explicitly, the rural festivities he finds so significant would include great abundance of food, games in which men and women would compete together, mock tournaments comical taunts and insults and, more significantly, would usually end up “in scuffles and orgies”. While this position embraces the nostalgic recovery of rural representations, as Raymond Williams critically tackles on English poetry, the images of the rural world Lefebvre puts forward are excessive, realist and amoral, thus, essentially opposed to the harmonious and anti-urban innocence Williams exposes.

As a second conclusion, I would like to follow Williams in the idea that rural structures should be described and studied as a part of the productive network of capitalism, not as an idealized image, an aestheticized exception to the system, or the representation of lifestyle. Indeed, the role of the political of the rural world has suffered significant changes, at least since the second half of the Twentieth century. As Lefebvre points out, the economic subordination exerted by urban power centers over rural areas is different in modern capitalism: “the old exploitation by the city, center of capital accumulation, of the surrounding countryside, gives way to more subtle forms of domination and exploitation.”

These two conclusions from Lefebvre and Williams will now serve us as conceptual tools to debunk the political peculiarities and architectural potentials of informal backyards and retail big boxes in the American rural south.

#### INFORMAL BACKYARDS AS A FORM OF TRANSGRESSION

In a parallel interpretation to Lefebvre’s rural festivals, the informality of rural southern backyards can be understood as a transgression of the socially regulated aesthetic system of American yards, born from within everyday practices. The historical opposite to such spaces, the clean and methodical suburban front-yard from the 40’s and 50’s—which still remains dominant in American suburbia—, not only epitomizes the typically alienating image of the ‘little boxes on a hillside’,<sup>10</sup> but it is also loaded with conservative political values. It carries the assumption that in order to be socially accepted we need to construct our own private spectacle—our own image—, through a uniform, trimmed lawn. As Georges Teyssot and others studied on the exhibition and book ‘The American Lawn’,<sup>11</sup> the relationship between the values of cleanness and moral righteousness and the image of a lawn that is typically used to embody suburban lifestyle, is deeply rooted in American culture, from far before the 1940’s. According to Teyssot as early as the 1840’s, we can already find city codes tightly defining the permitted image of a front yard: regulating from the length of the grass, to the presence of leaves (that had to be removed regularly), the general tidiness and emptiness of the



Figure 3: David Washington's Garden, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Photography by: Vaughn Sills

space around the main entrance or the quality of the painted surfaces of the house facades. Yards full of leaves, with long grass or unpainted doors were perceived as the sign of poorly socialized or impoverished families. Clean uniformity was an expected outcome and a social marker.

An intentional defiance to these rules, as we find on vernacular landscape practices all over the American southeast—especially on African American neighborhoods—, might be interpreted in this context not only as the manifestation of the richness and exuberance of everyday life, as Lefebvre discovered on the rural villages of southern France, but also as a political statement in itself. Let's not forget that the process of suburbanization was also a process of social and racial segregation. It was the white middle class who left the urban centers to move to the suburbs, while the lower classes and the black population remained within the inner city. The image of a clean suburban house was assimilated to the esthetic ideology of the ones that moved, in contrast with the chaotic diversity and the noise of the city center, associated to Black and Latino culture.

In contrast with this image, built as a symbol of wealth and as an unequivocal sign of domination and inequality, we can examine the richness of the tradition of African American yards in the rural south. Richard Westmacott has studied these traditions in detail in his book 'African-American Gardens: Yards In Rural South',<sup>12</sup> in which he shows how the physical structure and design of these informal gardens, much like in the rural traditions studied by Lefebvre, were the product of specific agrarian and esthetic practices intimately connected to the everyday life of black communities. As Westmacott explains in the book, the collage of textural and visual abundance we see in these yards, bursts only after the Civil War, when the first southern African Americans become landowners and are, at least partially, freed from slavery and oppression.

But these gardens are not just part of historical legacy. The photographer Vaughn Sills has documented, during the last decade, the existence of numerous recent examples of such contemporary African American yards in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina). In the different images that Sills compiles in her book 'Places for the Spirit. Traditional African American Gardens',<sup>13</sup> we may recognize, updated and more estheticized, what Richard Wesmascott contemplated as disappearing traditions. The contemporary southern gardens that Sills has photographed seem to have lost much of the productivity and the seasonal adaptability of the vernacular African American yards: where most of the surface was dedicated to cultivating vegetables, now we see abundance of ornamental species and, specially, the decorative repurposing of all kinds of everyday objects: car tires, metallic and plastic buckets, pots, bottles, bricks, glasses, egg cases and many other, are merged in complex accumulative compositions that we see attached to facades, porch screens or horizontal surfaces. A garden of artificial objects conceived from an undeniably contemporary sensibility that rebels furiously against conventional suburban landscaping. But, where does this aesthetic impulse come from? Is it just a reinterpretation of lost productive traditions, as Wesmascott suggests? Or is it, as Sills implies, mainly fed by a hidden repertoire of inherited symbolic images?

#### SPREADING WALMART ALL OVER THE YARD

At this point, it might be useful to notice the surprising familiarity of these African American gardens with certain informal organizations and practices used by white southern underclass to occupy their own yards. As Nancy Isenberg defends in her recent book about the history of class in America, many of the cultural specificities that have been assumed as the identity of the poor white –what we commonly know as 'rednecks' or 'white trash'–, are more related to a history of class oppression than to authentic cultural values.<sup>14</sup> As Isenberg puts it, once social class is understood in terms of ethnic heritage, as it happens for both white trash and blacks, the outcome is "the modern desire to measure class as a cultural phenomenon."

If the spatial nature of southern informal domesticity is more determined by social class and economics than by culture, it is only natural that it is equally present in the less affluent demographics of the rural south: African Americans and poor whites. This takes us back to the main idea that Raymond Williams proposed in 'The Country and the City': the understanding that, beyond its particularities, rural life is mainly shaped by capitalist forces. We must now remember that rural America is not a peripheral region in the global processes of production or consumption. In fact, the largest retail corporation in the world –Walmart– was created in the rural south and still has its main market in non-metropolitan areas. There is no doubt about Walmart as a global economic force: 2,2 million employees, \$288 billion of retail sales, exceeding Kroger, Target and Costco combined. Furthermore, according to the Wall Street Journal, it accounts for 25% of the total of groceries sales in the US but, significantly, in many rural counties in the South and the Midwest this number reaches the 50%, which means that in these



Figure 4. Branscombe beach after the shipwreck of the MSC Napoli.

places half of the food and basic goods are sold in a Walmart store.

But, which is the relationship between the informal forms of domesticity we have been exploring and companies like Walmart? To answer this question I would like to use a distant episode: the shipwreck of the MSC Napoli container Cargo in the English shore near Devon. The accident produced a unique situation of overlapping between the small scale, everyday life of the people in the little English town of Branscombe –with less than 500 inhabitants– and the large scale of global market logistics.

The containers that fell on the water after the shipwreck floated to the beach, and a few of them ended up broken and revealing their content. After a few hours, some people from the village came down to the beach, covered with all types of merchandise, and scavenging among the remains. As Alexander Klose describes, "the beach was said to be transformed into a 'supermarket', littered with gears, steering wheels, and other spare car parts, along with wine barrels, cookie tins, first-aid kits, perfume bottles, sneakers, diapers from Arabia, shoes from Cyprus, empty French barrels meant for South African wine, dog food, clothing, household appliances and toys. Even a tractor washed up."<sup>15</sup>

Suddenly, a hermetic reality that, despite being essential for global economy, consistently remains concealed, not only is fully exposed but also openly misused by groups of 'nobodies' in a carnival of free consumption. Similarly, in the practice of constructing and using southern informal yards, we witness all kinds of random objects disorderly spread on the ground, and used in inconceivable ways –esthetically, pragmatically, symbolically, but mostly ludicrously– by suspicious people. The same contrast we perceive between the organized complexity of the global container system and the MSC Napoli event, we see between the highly controlled spaces, designed for pure efficiency and perfect logistics by companies like Walmart, and the alternative tactics in which most of its customers and employees live and use spatially the products they purchase there. This contrast reveals an essential reality of our present condition: as Alexander Klose maintains, what the cheap products spread on southern yard, or what the containers open on the beach offered "was a cross-section of the present state of world culture, of global consumer capitalism."

## CHEAPNESS OR SCARCITY

As a brief conclusion I would like to associate the two spatial realities that triggered the main theme of this article –Backyard Junk and Big Boxes– to a particular twofold vector in which post-crisis architectural theory might evolve. By now, the need to bring politics back to architecture is a, somehow, accepted issue. When we are being told that the financial crisis has finally ended, we are witnessing, all over the world, a sequence of political crisis whose end doesn't seem near. In this scenario it appears unlikely the return of the times, before the crisis, when formal and material experimentation were the most ambitious horizons any architect could hope for. The social and political tensions of our times have inevitably impregnated the way in which architecture as a cultural and creative practice is conceived, although the response from architectural theory is still timid. Among all the different ideas that have been proposed in this context I would like to explore a twofold direction that, just like the context we have been describing during this article, depends almost entirely on a tactic acceptance of a lack of resources as a creative approach.

In his article from 2011 'No Frills and Bare Life: Cheapness and Democracy', Alejandro Zaera sees a promising potential for a new politicized architecture on contemporary business models built around the notion of low-cost.<sup>16</sup> For Zaera, there is an implicit political agenda on the business and marketing models implemented by global firms like IKEA, EasyJet, Zara or Microsoft, among others. Such agenda is implemented by providing products or services at very low prices thanks to the optimization of supply routes, which provoked, according to Zaera, that "the political ideology of equalization was replaced by a strategy of cheapness". In this context, cheapness is politically articulated as the substitution of the ideal of a more equal society, by the actual access to products and services by much larger sectors of the population. This is, as we all know, the very strategy behind a company like Walmart, specifically aimed to low-income customers and to the specific attraction of low prices.

On clear opposition to Zaera's proposal for a repoliticization based on technology and consumption rather than on ideology, we find Jeremy Till's proposal for an architecture based on the acceptance of scarcity as a creative condition.<sup>17</sup> According to Till we need to challenge the common assumption that "the discipline of architecture should be defined solely through the act of building — that architectural progress is necessarily signposted through the addition of new stuff to the world". Instead, Till proposes 'scarcity thinking' as the examination of new possibilities for redistributing what already exists, as we constantly see on many southern informal yards: the radical recognition of recycling techniques as a legitimate form of design, which transgresses core values of neoliberalism –such as the hope for an unstoppable growth–, while it makes use of its residues.

As a final concluding statement, I would like to emphasize the productivity and promise that the exploration of the local processes of spatial politics in the American rural south might have—beyond this article— for a more general redefinition of architecture as a contemporary practice. The close consideration of non-architectural

spaces and institutions as the ones examined here, becomes essential if we intend to recognize architectural space as a politically charged condition.

## ENDNOTES

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3. Stephen Goetz and Hema Swaminathan, 'Wal-Mart and County-Wide Poverty', *Social Science Quarterly*, Volume 87, Number 2 (June, 2006)
4. See: Dunham Jones, Ellen and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia, Updated Edition: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2011)
5. Samuel Mockbee, 'The Rural Studio', *Constructing a New Agenda: Architectural Theory 1993-2009* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010)
6. Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005)
7. See: Neil Brenner (ed), *Implosions/Explosions: Towards a Study of Planetary Urbanization* (New York: Jovis, 2014)
8. Andy Merrifield, Henri Lefebvre. A Critical Introduction (New York: Routledge, 2006), 14.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of the Everyday Life Volumen 1* (London: Verso, 1991),
10. The song Little boxes was composed and recorded by songwriter and singer Malvina Reynolds in 1962, and became a hit on 1963. The lyrics describe satirically the uniform urban image of an American suburban neighborhood and its inhabitants.
11. See: Georges Teyssot (ed.), *The American Lawn* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 1-39.
12. Richards Westmacott, *African-American Gardens: Yards In Rural South* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992)
13. See: Vaughn Sills, *Places for the Spirit. Traditional African American Gardens* (Trinity University Press, 2010)
14. See: Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash. The 400-year Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Penguin, 2016)
15. Alexander Klose, *The Container Principle: How a Box Changes the Way We Think* (Hamburg: MIT Press, 2009), 3.
16. Alejandro Zaera-Polo, 'Cheapness: No Frills and Bare Life', *Log*, No. 18 (Winter 2010), 15-27.
17. Jeremy Till, 'Scarcity contra Austerity. Designers need to know the difference', *Places* (October, 2010)