

SPE Lecture: “It Don’t Exist”: The Impact of Sprawl and Suburban Build-out  
On Inner City America, March 28, 2009  
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I’ve been photographing the American cultural landscape for the past twenty years. This morning, utilizing different series I’ve done involving the everyday urban and suburban places we encounter, I’ll strive to make visual connections between these overlapping territories of American life while sticking to our theme of how Sprawl affected inner city environments.

Along with my other work, I’ve been specifically exploring inner city America since 1995, documenting urban landscapes impacted by racial segregation, white flight, and deindustrialization in the northeast. For many Americans these landscapes—mostly defined by abandonment, poverty and minority populations—don’t exist; they’re below our collective radar. Over this time-period I’ve come to believe that all photographs can have a social and political meaning when viewed within a certain context. Feeling kinship with the New Topographics Movement from the 1970s that documented the impact of the constructed suburban world on the natural one, I wanted to invert that premise—looking at the urban core instead of the periphery—and ask how suburbanization after World War II affected city centers. What were the consequences as we went from an urban, city-dwelling lifestyle based on mass transportation, high density living, and production—to a suburban, car-dependent, low-density lifestyle based on consumption?

## I. Transportation Modes

The first thing we’ll look at is transportation...

### The Rise of the Interstates

Prior to the 1930s there was no organized infrastructure of highways across America; unmarked roads and scarce services for the motorist were the norm. As automobile usage exploded in America a cartel of lobbying interests including the oil, tire, auto makers, insurance companies, land developers and the Federal Government—figured out that roads and freeways were a vital component of infrastructure that would help foster suburban development.

So, when Eisenhower signed into law the *The National Interstate and Defense Highways Act* in 1956, construction of a freeway system linking all major cities began, fueled by this idea of growth. In addition, Eisenhower’s experience as a young soldier during WWI informed his commitment to the freeway system. According to Phil Patton’s book *The Open Road* Eisenhower had witnessed how inefficient road systems hampered troop and supply movements, and reasoned that in the case of an impending nuclear attack—this was the Cold War era after all—urbanites could exit cities quickly with freeways in place. Essentials necessary to sustain them could be transported everywhere over these arterial roads as well. In this way, decentralization became a guiding principle for not only developers who owned land on the periphery they wished to sell, but for a federal

government who in the final analysis thought a low-density lifestyle, dispersed population and scattered infrastructure would be less vulnerable to a paralyzing nuclear attack.

Another factor to consider in our discussion today about sprawl: urban development between 1890 and 1930 had been characterized by centralization as Americans' moved from rural environments into cities. Crowding occurred and this, too, became a factor encouraging decentralization—movement of human beings, materials, capital, and goods away from the city center. So freeways, cars and trucks coupled with the aforementioned political theories and social relations were all important agents fostering this spatial rearrangement of the American landscape—a rearranging that would have devastating effects on the urban core.

Freeways also helped the trucking industry take freight away from railroads—railroads that couldn't deliver goods everywhere highways went. Freeways also fostered the growth of national chain stores ...chain stores that used the “freeway”—a form of cheap transportation across vast distances—as a circulatory system to distribute consumer goods. These eventualities fueled the growth of sprawl.

On an emotional level freeways would also have an unintended consequence on the American psyche and our way of life, contributing to an atomization and isolation of the population, making us a nation of lonely drivers...

...who perhaps wondered whether our passion for movement on these ribbons of highway made us free...

or simply enslaved us to a myth of upward mobility—

### The Demise of Railroads and Mass Transit

Railroads in the urban core were also impacted by sprawl's growth....

Railroad terminals around the country lay fallow, suffering at the hands of suburban build out, as more and more Americans moved away from the locked-in, scheduled routes of the passenger train and chose instead the supposed independence, privacy, and freedom of movement the automobile engendered.

Many inner-city urban freight yards now lay dormant after a 30-year decline in manufacturing. Line side industries previously generated boxcars filled with American products. No more. Freight trains today consist of containers filled with goods produced overseas. The container, loaded onto a ship in China, gets transported across the sea, unloaded onto a railroad flat car here, which is then moved to an inter-modal freight yard on the metropolitan periphery. Off-loaded as a truck trailer it's driven to a distribution center geographically situated in the middle of the country. Eventually it ends its journey parked at a Wal-Mart loading dock for its “just in time” delivery. All the freight forwarding and handling that use to take place in city centers has been eliminated. Thus

we see how mechanization, automation, rationalization and decentralization are primary forces shaping the growth of sprawl.

## II. Industrial Zones

Today, besides giving you facts and figures about the socio-economic and historical relationships between city and sprawl environments, I also want to engage in a brief discussion about urban morphology...

### Warehouse Districts

...and reflect on what happened spatially and architecturally in and around inner city America as suburban build-out occurred. So first we'll look at a few specific industrialized and commercialized zones that were commonplace in many mid-west and northeastern cities.

Here are photographs from a semi-abandoned warehouse district in Kansas City. In the late 19th century as cities grew, different types of business activity like retailing, wholesaling, manufacturing, and office activities were confined to separate areas of the city. Warehouse districts were no exception and were usually located adjacent to transportation systems. In the early 19th century these systems of transport were river networks, which became railroad networks in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. So with the warehouse district being neatly integrated into rail lines...

... this kind of urban district was a classic railroad landscape characterized by ...

railroad spurs and mainlines directly adjacent to warehouses, factories, meat-packing districts, and stockyards.

Consumer goods had to be stored at, and shipped from, central warehouse districts because of this transportation configuration. With the advent of the Interstates and growth of sprawl freight shifted from trains to trucks as I've said ... trucks could deliver goods to more places more efficiently. All of a sudden distribution points became decentralized, could be located anywhere, and these types of multi-storied urban warehouse districts fell into disuse and were supplanted by long horizontal buildings on the periphery...which we now call big box stores.

As you can imagine freeways and railroads now mostly bypass urban warehouse districts.

### Grain Elevator Districts

Another common morphology in the industrial city was the grain elevator district like this one in Buffalo—which at one time was the largest grain port in the world. These terminal grain elevators fell into abandonment after the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in 1959, which completely cut Buffalo off in the shipping chain; the grain boats could bypass the city... much like the trucks bypassing the warehouses on the freeways ...

While the grain transshipment business was ending, Buffalo's animal feed industry was likewise declining; there are feed and cereal mills within this zone as well. Between 1955 and 1970, decentralization brought a virtual halt to animal feed ingredients being shipped to the large feed mills in Buffalo. Instead, smaller mills were being constructed within trucking distance of the regions in which cattle, hogs, and horses consumed the animal feed. With the feed industry gone, Buffalo suffered still another drastic decline and another round of severe job losses.

So as you can...ideas like standardization, economies of scale, mechanization, lower transportation costs, elongated supply chains, and the decentralization of manufacturing plants—which were all things that affected Buffalo's grain and milling industry too—were the same processes that informed the spread of Sprawl.

Here's a final image of another Buffalo grain elevator; notice the boarded up house to the right. With the demise of not only the grain trade, but the steel, auto and railroad businesses too, Buffalo has about 7,000 homes awaiting demolition in residential neighborhoods... former housing for workers who don't live there anymore.

This leads us to ponder other points about this inner city / sprawl dichotomy: Buffalo, along with Detroit lost 1/3 of its population between 1950 and 1970 with a similar increase in the suburbs; in 1959 33% of the American workforce was involved in manufacturing; in 2009 that figure is 12 percent. In the same time span, conversely, the percentage rise of service sector jobs increased by a similar amount. Many people who use to work in manufacturing are now employed as service workers out in the suburbs.

### Steel Mills

This is an LTV steel fabrication plant being dismantled in Cleveland in 2004. The demise of this plant and many others across the country are the result of outsourcing, globalization, corporate takeovers, and flagging unionism—all structural elements of a political economy that also informs sprawl. Two years after I shot this image, developers had reconfigured this part of the Cuyahoga Valley...

... into a shopping mall anchored by a Target and Home Depot. The name of the shopping center—The Steelyard Mall. Joel Garreau in his book *Edge City* called this tactic—"to name a place for what is no longer there"—typical of developers. It's also interesting to note that corporations like Home Depot and Target are now making incursions into inner city areas as suburban land becomes too expensive. So this image represents a flipside to the equation we're discussing: here the periphery is migrating to the interior.

### Auto Plants

This is an abandoned auto parts plant in a mixed-use neighborhood in Detroit... The same forces shaping suburbanization (and later globalization) began to impact Detroit's auto industry in the early 50s. Many car manufacturers started to decentralize operations, moving front offices to the suburbs. Also, in an effort to destabilize the power

of the unions (with a divide and conquer strategy), Ford and General Motors started moving parts of the manufacturing process out of urban areas to the rapidly suburbanizing Sunbelt regions of the US. Not only did cheaper land exist there to expand operations, but these regions also had a more compliant labor force—often hostile to unionism—willing to work for less pay. Some things still hold true: you’ll notice little union membership at your suburban Denny’s, Wendy’s or Wal-mart.

And now looking at another characteristic of urban morphology: In the first half of the 20th century industrial plants located in the city had a vertical orientation which later shifted to a horizontal one as plants moved to suburbia. The brilliance of Henry Ford’s philosophy—Fordism—was the centralization, rationalization and integration of all operations under one roof. However, as corporations grew, and industrial processes became more complex, companies compartmentalized their operations at different locations and moved from the city because there was no room for expansion...

... they shifted instead to horizontal building configurations as it became less expensive to produce and ship goods in one-story buildings. This is why so much of sprawl has a horizontal look ... it’s a very efficient building form.

### III. Commercial Zones

#### Active Main Streets & Central Business Districts

Now we’ll look at a few commercial zones...

These next few slides are from local downtown central business districts. They illustrate a commercial business atmosphere, as it existed prior to the growth of national chain stores—chain stores that brought with them a homogenizing influence on American consumer culture and the American man-made landscape. These slides will provide a contrast to our next section on strip malls.

These business districts were vernacular “everyday” landscapes grounded in an economic reality having to do with simple utility and function, instead of rampant consumerism. At least that’s how I remember it. This universe, unlike the suburbanize one that supplanted it, was at a pedestrian scale and not necessarily centered on the automobile.

And lets also think about the human costs of sprawl for a minute: a completely different social dynamic existed between customer and owner at one of these downtown businesses back in the day unlike what we might encounter today at a chain store. The owner and customer probably knew one another, perhaps established a long relationship. Compare this dynamic to walking into a Wal-mart today.... will you have a conversation with the checker? Will he or she ask how your family is doing?

In addition, we need to think about financial and taxation issues. Back in the day locally owned downtown businesses paid local taxes; money generated from that business stayed in town and re-circulated there. With sprawl and the growth of multinational chains the

majority of what you spend at Wal-mart today gets sent back home to a out-of-state home office or funneled through tax shelters in Michigan, Delaware or Nevada—states that charge no corporate income tax.

The big box store has also gotten tax subsidies and rebates from local and federal government, meaning they don't contribute to local tax rolls or the maintenance of local infrastructure in any meaningful way, but you can bet the owner of this local downtown coffee shop once did. You can see how corporate sprawl negatively impacts community networks and makes a mockery of civic responsibility.

### Suburban Strip Malls, Big Boxes, and Fast Food

So eventually ...we got here. As the suburbs grew in the 1950s and 60s along with a burgeoning consumer culture, Americans decided that they didn't need to go downtown anymore. The suburbs became cities unto themselves, were predominantly white, and offered many of the same amenities as the city but without the congestion, crime and poverty.

The price we pay for all these shopping centers and outlet malls is that every day in America 5000 acres of undeveloped land—mostly agricultural—disappears under concrete and asphalt ... this means about two million acres of open space are gobbled up by development every year in the United States.

This is a new Superstore, by the way, going up on former farmland in Indiana...

And more farmland adjacent to the superstore that eventually gets converted.....

to this

and this....

and this.... and so on. Built space often expresses a society's material and political priorities.

I also wanted to throw these abandoned drive-in movie theaters into our discussion; the land many of these sat on got converted into big boxes or shopping malls, which shows you how land use changes over time. A viable business supplants a failed one. This process is called “creative destruction.”

Then here are some more images of what I've termed the “franchised landscape” of sprawl. I've included them as a visual contrast to the older downtown environments you saw a few slides back and the other abandoned retail venues we'll see in a few moments.

Dolores Hayden makes no distinctions about sprawl having to be in metropolitan areas—it can be in rural settings too. She derides policy-makers that have no consideration for either the aesthetic or socio-economic costs of sprawl. You can also see how the shift of

retail trade from urban areas to the periphery caused the desecration of some very pristine natural landscapes—which the New Topographics addressed. Here in a narrow Colorado canyon with the Rocky Mountains all around, a group of big box stores had colonized the valley.

For the last 12 years, I've been actively incorporating sprawl's everyday monoculture landscape into my work along with my inner city material. The garish semiotics of corporate America are the visual trademarks of sprawl...

...but they also bear a direct relationship to these skeletal remains of signs from once thriving inner city businesses that have been supplanted by chain stores out on the edge of town...

### Abandonment in the CBD: Zone of Discard

Now we'll look at a few inner city downtown areas...

When we see abandoned central business districts like this one in East St Louis, Illinois, we ponder the impact the 50-year build out of suburban shopping malls, freeways and national chains has had on commerce in older city centers. In 1954 downtown retail sales accounted for over 50% of the nationwide metropolitan total; by 1977 that number had dwindled to less than 5%. It's something like 1% now. Sprawl without a doubt sped the erosion of downtown retailing.

This is an abandoned streetscape of Gary, Indiana's former business district on Broadway. Urban geographers call this a "zone of discard."

Here's a neighborhood scene in Detroit that represents the disparity of how tax dollars are spent in cities and suburbs—by the way suburbs usually get the lions share of federal subsidy. You'll also recall Bush's infamous LEAVE NO CHILD BEHIND program—public policy reduced to a slogan.

Revenue for education is directly derived from local tax bases. In the inner city with its low-income population, depressed property values, and little to almost non-existent manufacturing or commercial activity... there isn't much of a tax base. In fact the city of Detroit, where this image was taken, is looking at a projected 200 million dollar deficit for fiscal 2008-2009. Interestingly, nearby white municipalities, like Ferndale and Grosse Point, both seven miles away, don't have deficits.

Another commercial street in the blighted Ravenswood ghetto north of downtown Detroit.

And here's another scene of Gary. Dolores Hayden again reminds us that although sprawl may be most obvious to the eye at the periphery of a metropolitan region—where speculative new construction is common—older downtowns also reveal sprawl because in an economy organized around new construction and rapid obsolescence, existing

places are often left to fall apart.

Many inner city mom and pop stores succumb to the forces of sprawl and disinvestment; abandon storefronts and small businesses abound in inner city areas.

#### IV. Residential Zones

##### Suburbia

New suburban housing construction in the 1950s also had a huge impact on inner city areas, fostering white flight from the urban core...

This is Daly City, California. I've included this section for contrast as well. This was a suburb built by Henry Doelger beginning in the late 1940s. Doelger adopted industrial rationalization techniques: he graded his own land; employed in-house architects; milled his own wood; used standardized floor plans; and had an organized workforce based on assembly-line concepts. These technological innovations in mass production used for building homes for mass consumption were Fordism concepts applied to the housing market. In addition low-interest government-backed FHA loans, which came into existence in the 1930s, also paved the way for the creation of suburbia. People for the first time could buy a house on time and pay it off in 30 years.

Notice the garage integrated right into the design of the house; this type of home reinforced individual automobile usage and discouraged pedestrian activity...people could drive right into their home without interacting with their environment ... totally different than living in the city.

US population doubled between 1910-1960...so it's understandable why suburbia happened ... there was a need to house all those people.

Home ownership increased in the US by 50% between 1948 and 1973; again there's a direct correlation to these figures when we look at population loss in our cities over the same time span.

This is Dyer, Indiana, which is 15 miles from Gary, Indiana ... shown a few slides back ... these two places show the blatant economic and racial inequality that exists spatially in our country even in locations close to one another. Dolores Hayden thinks sprawl causes social injustice in America as it intensifies the disadvantages of class, race, gender and age by adding this spatial separation.

So much of the built environment of suburbia seems to be about order, uniformity and safety: the antithesis of inner city America ... a place that seems to be about chaotic liveliness... Federal Housing policy actually favored whites over African-Americans when the FHA mortgage program was inaugurated in 1934. This policy had devastating effects in terms of segregation, as you can imagine...

... given the fact that mostly white families could afford to move out of crowded urban

areas to the periphery, essentially abandoning the inner city to African-Americans.

## Inner City

Many urban areas were redlined—meaning no bank would loan money to buy businesses or homes, and no insurance company would insure the property. Because of these discriminatory practices it was harder for blacks to get home loans or buy businesses. This redlining in turn affected upkeep—absentee landlords who saw property values fall because of red-lining wouldn't bother to maintain their properties...so began the long, slow decline of inner city America...

.... a location filled with minority residents who lived in substandard dwellings, endured declining employment opportunities and faced severe housing shortages. This image and the next are from Detroit.

So one of the solutions to the inner city housing problem, or so thought the government, was to erect public housing, like the Robert Taylor Homes here in Chicago. This was low-income public housing based on Corbusier's *Radiant City* concepts. These concepts, when interpreted by city planners in the 1940s and 50s to house the urban poor, produced results that were the opposite of his intentions: the high rises were horrible and dangerous places to live.

Here's a group of the Robert Taylor Homes.... and this photo really visually speaks to sprawls impact on the inner city.... social engineering factored into freeway construction in metropolitan areas during the 1950s. The freeway, by its mere creation, became a barrier to cordon off one part of the city from the Other. Freeways also played a key role in urban renewal: many slum areas in cities (usually housing the urban poor) were systematically chosen as the pathways for the new Interstate system. This in turn also fueled inner-city housing shortages, which further enhanced white flight to new homes in suburbia.

Public housing came in several forms...this is in Atlanta

And some abandoned public housing in Cleveland...

These next few images are from Detroit where it's estimated there are 16,000 buildings awaiting demolition.

But I want to point out that it's not all bleak... here's some demolition going on in the Hough district of inner city Cleveland, Ohio as a part of a revitalization program...

This is also a picture from the same Hough neighborhood undergoing redevelopment. Here's an interesting story that relates quite well to our conversation today about the relationships between suburbia and the inner city. James Rouse, who grew up in Cleveland was a principle developer of suburban shopping malls in America, building his

first shopping mall in 1958 in Maryland. His intention was to create new town centers with these shopping malls, but instead his work hastened the build-out of suburbia across America, draining city cores of their retail trade and civic life while initiating white flight to new housing in the suburbs. So feeling deeply responsible for the unintended consequences of his development activities—and it's nice to see a developer with a moral compass—he and his wife formed a non-profit organization in 1979 in Cleveland and raised millions of dollars, seeding partnerships with other community developers addressing the need for affordable housing in inner city neighborhoods. His legacy continues today.

.... this is in the same Hough area that shows a brand new home going up next to an abandoned, boarded up public school.

... and this is new single-family housing in a renovated ghetto area in Buffalo, New York. The photo is also an homage, by the way, to the great British photographer Paul Graham.

This is a new fortified home made out of cinder block in inner city Detroit in the middle left there. Erected in the last few years, you'd term the owner an urban pioneer. As demolition takes place in the inner city more open space emerges and nature reasserts itself—a “green ghetto” develops, which was a term coined by Camillo Vergara.

## V. Further Impacts of Sprawl on Urban Morphology

### County Jails

Often disguised as office buildings, they're sometimes hard to detect. As you can imagine suburbanites often take a NIMBY or LULU position on this issue, not wanting anything to adversely affect local property values. NIMBY by the way stands for NOT IN MY BACK YARD and the lesser-known acronym LULU stands for LOCALLY UNWANTED LAND USE.

Placing jails and prisons in impoverished urban municipalities—where open land due to white flight and deindustrialization is plentiful and cheap—seems to be the new trend. Many struggling rust belt cities such as Youngstown, Ohio, have actively courted companies like the Corrections Corporation of America, which has built three prisons there.... all to boost local tax revenue and create jobs—but that's a head fake too...many of the prisons are so automated it takes few people to run them. Social justice advocates call this siting of jails in inner city areas “environmental racism” because these kinds of industries are usually placed in lower-income neighborhoods where residents have little political power to block their construction.

## VI. Creative Responses within the Inner City Environment

Then here's our last section...

Having photographed in inner city environments for over 15 years it dawned on me recently that—despite all the destitution and abandonment—there was liveliness there that’s missing in the more regimented suburban environments we encounter every day. In fact it is was a landscape filled with political and vernacular artistic expression.

I just want to show you a few examples....

The first time my wife and I went to Detroit we found ourselves in the Ravenswood neighborhood, and noticed that brightly colored dots covered a lot of abandoned buildings. Doing research we later discovered this was the work of the artist Tyree Guyton ...

And Guyton’s dots blanketed the city, calling attention to abandoned buildings, disinvestment and neglect. These dots, for him, symbolized the notion that people of all colors are responsible for the landscapes we inhabit, the landscapes that comprise our society at all income levels.

Sometimes inner city environments are the only places in America where you see political expression...

.... the language in this image expresses a societal denial—these landscapes of chronic poverty and racial segregation are places that don’t register in the consciousness of most Americans as I said earlier. Inner city inhabitants feel invisible and forgotten. Foreigners are often shocked to learn that the USA—a country filled with so much abundance—has ten percent of its population living below the poverty line; that number is 19% in Washington DC.

Another bit of language suggesting a deep connection to religion and God within the inner city environment.... This was chalked onto the wall of a Walgreen’s drugstore in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina...

This graffiti concisely expresses the social realities of inner city life its inhabitants know only too well ...

Ain’t it funny  
how the factory  
doors close  
round the time the  
school doors close  
round the time the  
doors of the  
jail cell  
open up to  
greet you.

For the record 10% of African-American males between the ages of 20 and 29 are in prison. I think we should be asking ourselves as a society why that is.

And here's the last shot made on Eight Mile Road in Detroit a month before last years election...

In conclusion, I don't think we can overlook sprawl's negative socio-economic impact on urban America over these past 50 years. We've seen tax resources or rebates that favor suburban enclaves and institutions over inner city ones, and land-use policies that support new development in suburbia over true revitalization efforts downtown, especially in areas of chronic poverty and destitution. Inner city populations have had to endure bad housing, job loss, and under-funded schools for far too long. While not every inner city social ill can be directly traced to the advent of sprawl, so many of the properties inherent in late industrial and consumer capitalism that fueled sprawls' contagious growth to begin with, have surely been contributing factors.

Can there be new government policies implemented, and infrastructure projects started that aren't just window-dressing, that will help reinvent our cities as vibrant realms of the public sphere? Can cities rebirth quality jobs and educational facilities that once helped create a robust middle-class culture—a middle-class life that expressed its collectivism via unions and a “street life”—the antithesis of suburban alienation and isolation? Without a doubt some industrial cities of the Northeast have made a comeback in the last decade; but the lingering social and economic injustices—especially for people of color—still need to be addressed in a real way.

A conference such as this—that combines art and social issues—helps facilitate the discussions we need to be having at this historic moment. I want to thank SPE for inviting me to speak; it was a pleasure to participate.

Thank you.

