

# PORTRAITS OF A LANDSCAPE & THE TROUBLE WITH EDEN

by  
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in fulfillment of the thesis requirement for the degree of  
Master of Architecture.



## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## ABSTRACT

If there was ever a question about the subject of this work, I had only to return to the landscape. There was a strangeness, a newness, an inevitability to those urban spaces around the city that insisted on my attention. Those landscape, often called suburban, of subdivision homes, strip plazas, malls and big box stores, of arterial roadways and parking lots, ascendant since the middle of the twentieth century, have overwhelmed their host cities and now claimed urban dominance in North America.

My interest in the sprawl landscapes started with the homes that occupy them. Sprawl is made up mostly of housing. The essence of this circumferential city of sprawling growth is the home. If there is a unifying element in the wildly-different suburbs built over the last two centuries, it is that they are wrought on the foundation of the suburban home. The idea of the home as centre of the suburb didn't take root until after the war, when the lack of affordable housing became a matter of national concern. In *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life*, Dolores Hayden argued that by the 1950s, the American suburban house had become a private utopia. The home -- something separate from its

neighbours and separate from its community, an ideal in and of itself - is both the beginning and the essence of sprawl. In 1950 the average size of a new home was 800 square feet, 1,500 in 1970, 2,190 in 1998<sup>1</sup>. The home as a symbol of the American, Canadian, indeed the industrialized dream, took hold in the postwar environment and bore the offspring we call sprawl.

Although the sprawl landscape is inextricably connected to the single family home, it has evolved into a post industrial cityscape, a place that is in fact, but not in feel, urban. What is the nature of this strange place? How and why does it differ from the industrial urban landscape? And what are the phenomena that propel the building of this place.

I set out to understand this landscape by looking for its proponents, but in the end couldn't find any. I didn't talk to anyone - see, hear, or read anything - that explained the changes in the landscape as a function of an urban ideology or even a choice. Duany Plater-Zyberk argue that "[w]e live today in cities and suburbs whose form and

character we did not choose. They were imposed upon us, by federal policy, local zoning laws, and the demands of the automobile<sup>27</sup>. Most of the literature - books, websites, government and non government studies - bemoan the expansion of the sprawl landscape, and criticize our inability to plan our way out of it. The sprawl landscape, the landscape characterized in large part by the subdivided tract homes is, virtually, without a social or cultural advocate. It is a place that seems to have been built for everyone, without anyone advocating on its behalf.

1 “Separated by Design,” *New York Times*, section H, March 8, 2000, p.6.

2 Duany Plater-Zyberk p.xiii

From homes to highways, the landscape, whose photographs make up this work, was for me, the discovery of a place with which I was almost too familiar to see. The images bear witness to the changing urban condition; they are a documentation of our rural spaces as they are annexed by the sprawl that, like a wave, has rolled over virtually every major city in North America.



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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my parents Gregory and Kate Sorbara. Your unequivocal support has been a constant in my life.



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# PORTRAITS OF A LANDSCAPE





# PART I





































































## PART II













































































## PART III













































































T H E   T R O U B L E   W I T H   E D E N



## THE TROUBLE WITH EDEN



*Figure 1 Moss Creek Blvd., Richmond Hill, 2003*

The homes that have spread over the landscape of my childhood – their fences protecting them from the thoroughfares, office parks and gas stations, with street names that bring to mind those things they have replaced or damaged – Forest Park, Ravine Edge, Pine Royal, Snowy Meadow – produced the initial compulsion to record this landscape. A quiet colonization was taking place. The indigenous life-style would have to go, a loss, but a reasonable and necessary one, a loss that pays back bringing increased democracy, forward-thinking, and commerce. Complicity was what made this colonization possible; that, and a high rate of attrition. Somehow a consensus on the obsolescence of rural living had been reached and a plan for urban transformation was well under way. The urban front moves efficiently and effortlessly over the landscape. Hampered only by its own bureaucracy, it insinuates itself unselfconsciously, if awkwardly,

into the land. It doesn't matter that this new construction belies its tenuous claim to the land, because the claim has been made.

With progressive urban transformation, Maple, Richmond Hill, and Vaughan, Ontario, the places where I grew up, were changing so rapidly that there was something sublime about the landscape. It was not only the change, but the mode of transformation itself – an industrialized process, razing green fields, piling up top soil in mountains, laying infrastructure, snaking roads to end in cul-de-sacs along plots where houses of that particular suburban nature would eventually grow into homes. This assembly line construction, so graphically charged, was being franchised, all over the province. The country. The continent.

The farm I grew up on at the corner of Keele Street and Rutherford Road was no longer part of the rural landscape that let us playact at country



*Figure 2 Farm property at the corner of Keele St. and Rutherford Rd., 2005*

living, hinting at the mythically vast wilderness of Canada. That place, no different than many others, has been annexed to the urban frontier. The farm, a speculative purchase by my grandfather in the late sixties, about one-hundred acres, had, since its purchase, been waiting for the development that investment had promised.

Some years after we moved away, I drove by the south west corner of Keele and Rutherford Rd. as some demolition company; (whose name I forgot) dismantled the house and cut down the chestnut tree that stood out front. The old barns of large hewed timbers were gone. The garden, the sandbox, and the tire swing were gone too. A eulogy to that place might



*Figure 3 Farm at Keele St. and Rutherford Rd., Maple, 1987*

also mention lilacs, worm-eaten apples, pears, chickens, a walnut tree, berries of all varieties, a horse chestnut tree, and two ponies. A separate eulogy to the three grayed barns would also be necessary. A list of what was lost there would be long and would include the secreted cabin on the other side of the Don River that cut a diagonal through the land. Beyond the scruffy field of alfalfa and beyond the treed descent to the River, lay the secret haven of my grandfather, an escape – I’m not sure from what. The cabin was a century-old antique entered by way of the stone chimney built up the side. Climbing the rounded stones of the chimney and prying open the bedroom window on the second floor provided access to the secret

place whose clues to private stories never amounted to more than that. The manicured lawns and pamper flowerbeds sat in stark opposition to the overgrown road and the bushwhacked paths we cut in. The street that now leads to the industrial park there, where the hidden place once stood, makes for no memory of this.

Marks on that land I had thought to be eternal were only the pretensions of my ego to permanence; everything would go. I pulled over to listen to the branches cracking and falling under the hiss of the chainsaw. The wrecking ball went through my parent's bedroom window where my mother had cried after she had been transplanted from her cabin out West in the Kootney Valley to that old farmhouse in Maple Ontario, the same window where she sat and cried 12 years later because she had to leave it.

A blanket of new urban development has since covered that place and many like it. There are 51 new homes on three streets – Wedgwood, Sherwood, and Alberta – a strip mall and an industrial complex. That corner of Keele and Rutherford, the one that the Don River cuts through, is still remarkable, but perhaps only to me.

Our license to hate these places seems unlimited, almost a de facto response that warrants no qualification. To disclaim them seems natural, even inevitable. Perhaps we miss our farms and the quaint knowability of those places. Or maybe we mistrust the hyperbolic testimony of the real estate promotion industry (uniting the lifestyle aspiration of those marketing brochures with the reality of the quiet, hauntingly new communities can incite cynicism or invoke the comic, depending on your state of mind). And maybe we just find them ugly.

I was compelled to photograph this landscape, compelled by the change, its fast track to urbanity, compelled, I think, to stop these places in time, to dissect their geography, their aesthetic. I wanted to create a datum, a reference, an image of those places before their transformations were complete, before it was finished. I would have liked to stop the wrecking ball that day, not forever, but for enough time to see all of its past, present, and future. I was compelled to grasp, these places, to see what perpetual motion looked like, standing still.

I couldn't leave this landscape; it had become lodged in my mind. And along with the absurd feeling I had discovered or been part of its creation, I felt a sort of kinship to it that went beyond my short history there. I wanted to acknowledge the landscape in some structured way, I wanted to contain and classify it. But structure has never been my strength (my first clue to that was that I couldn't locate any in my life). Structure comes very naturally to some; even without content there is form. This landscape presented as much content as I could hope for, but it seemed to elude me; stay amorphous, rhizomatic, in my mind. Despite my attraction to them, I developed an intense ambivalence toward those places.

I chose the camera as a weapon against my ambivalence. I used photography as a sort of emotional procrastination. Emotional procrastination is often why we take photographs. Travelers, for example, take pictures, not only for insurance against the unreliability of the misbehaving memory, but to defer coming up against the emotional tides of their travels; weddings and birthdays are the same. Pictures can become the surrogate for a response that we don't know how, or don't want to



process. The camera helped anesthetize me to the landscape, it let me think and be without having to catalogue, or index my reaction.

\* \* \*

It was mostly cold when I was out in the landscape, and I was mostly alone. My first ventures into the neighborhood subdivisions, construction site, and office parks, were out of curiosity, and my first steps were on snow that squeaked beneath my running shoes. The cold preserves: the still and the quiet of the landscape made it feel as though it were frozen in time, strange, in the context of its perpetual motion forward.

The snow has a capacity to reduce and simplify, turning everything into a black and white image, and everything seems easier in black and white: people, stories, images, ideas. I remember some of these landscapes in black and white. There is land and there are the buildings in the land. The complexity of a matured urbanism, divested of its purity and gnarled with anomaly and opposition, does not exist here. Simplicity is the planning order on the day. Complexity simply doesn't fit into the bureaucratic mazes that filter building or zoning applications. Boxes must be checked and there is no box for ambiguity. Agency is not bestowed lightly or with much frequency in the bureaucracy of this place; boxes must be checked, those are the rules. This is a black and white landscape.

Off the 404 highway, at Major Mackenzie, there was a batch of new homes. Construction proceeded from the south to the north, marching up toward Major Mackenzie Dr. On the south end, the homes had cars parked

in drives and blinds in the window pulled closed, hiding, what I supposed, were well-furnished rooms with televisions and couches. At the north end of the community the homes were barely that: neon stakes marked survey lines on newly-raized planes, services poked out of the ground waiting for structure, and half-built homes let the wind blast through them as they waited for solid walls. These new homes, like many of the recent immigrants who occupied them, could take a while to feel comfortable on the land that has been razed on their behalf.

The relative indignity of the newest construction was mirrored in the infirm and withered farmhouses that, empty and broken, had retreated into obsolescence. The social and geographic context that once explained their retiring form had vanished and if they were still lovely, they were awkward too.

In that same subdivided community, off the 404, there was an open expanse of land situated between Hillmount Rd. and Oakford Dr., between Willow Heights Blvd and Moss Creek Blvd. The open space at the geographic centre of the community was not a park, at least, not yet. The words of George Sternlieb from Joel Garreau's *Edge City*, come to mind. "They don't want the strangers. If it is a choice between parks and strangers, the people there would sooner do without the parks."<sup>1</sup> To the north of the open space, a large mound of earth stood about twenty-five to thirty feet tall, covered in snow swept into dramatic formations. Out of context, the mound could be a hill or even a mountain, evolved naturally through tectonic movement. The mound of earth is not the mark of nature, but what remains of the previously undulating terrain, the site before it

was leveled. Like a monoculture of teasels, or loosestrife, determined to expand, the new development seems indifferent to habitat. Somewhere in that mound of earth, though, there was hidden the appeal of this place: the beauty elusive, the charm deceptive, awkward and melancholy.

I needed to photograph it because *it had been*. I could fix this moment through my lens so that I could share it. And hope that someone might see it. Finding their roots in reality, photographs can be said have the capacity for redemption simply by showing the world what is there<sup>2</sup>. And it was this capacity that assured me.

There were many things that brought me back to that place and many like it. The quiet was one of them. Even when the roar of the highway was everywhere, it masqueraded as a kind of silence, absorbing the waves of other sounds with less dominion. The noises I did encounter always felt

distant, unlike those from the old city. A car to my left, a barking dog, music suspended in air – these were old city noises attenuated in the quiet afternoon of the new one. Despite this new city's state – a place of flux and constant motion, a frenetic consumer hive where the pace of the pedestrian is patently unwelcome – calm had somehow found a home there too.

If there was a surprising quiet to the streets named Forest or Wood, then the frenetic pace of the big box complex was its alibi. At 3 o'clock on a Tuesday afternoon in January, the Richmond Hill Wal-Mart was abuzz. Inside people pushed past me and scoffed at my lax attitude. Wal-Mart is not for the faint of shopping heart.

This Wal-Mart complex had begun cosmetic renovations. Historic French and Italian arcade architecture had been applied at 1.5 scale across the facade. The windowless aluminum back and sides belied the vanity of



the front of thin stucco. From the facades that creep only a couple of feet around the sides of the massive steel framed boxes, to the homes that start and stop at nine-foot fences, this landscape is one of accidental adjacencies starting and stopping at random.

The arranged marriage between those things is strained and often uncomfortable. Those adjacencies, suited only to our time, set the loud up against the quiet, the fast against the slow, the old up against the new, the obsolete against the contemporary, so that here difference is exaggerated, heightened to comic proportion. The neighbourhoods feel ghostly next to the shopping centers; cul-de-sacs are frivolous beside twelve lane highways. The old is silly against the new, its age and patina evidence of the quaint romanticism of the past. The new is naïve, the old unproductive. They meet on the landscape where each heralds the deficiencies of the other. These confrontations are neither banal nor bleak. It can be sad if we are given to nostalgia, it can be dramatic if the light is right and you are in a position to feel it, but mostly it is just history, the effect of the passage of time – ours. And outside of human judgment, history is indifferent. It simply is.

An exhibition held in 2004 and titled after architect and critic Ignasi Solà-Morales' 1995 essay *Terrain Vague*, (a term coined by the author), was held at the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center. The exhibit, *Terrain Vague: Photography, Architecture and the Post-Industrial Landscape*, brought together nine photographers and one filmmaker, all of whom had stepped onto this strange meta landscape to, in some way, record it. The exhibit – ambiguous spaces where the architecture and the landscape cease to

mesh, where the cohesion of the environment gives way to an unresolved, almost uncanny circumstance – recalls our existing or latent knowledge of these places. The images are foreign only insofar as they are images, because the subject is the landscape in which we are steeped. These are the places we charge over, the places we turn a blind eye to, or no eye at all. These landscapes are the cultural lacunae between relevant zones and installations; they are liminal, they are the non-place, the between space, and most important, the dominant space.

The *Terrain Vague* exhibition included works by the photographers Martha Rosler, Catherine Opie, Philip-Lorca di Corcia, Todd Hido, David Deutsch, Edward Burtynsky, Douglas Muir, Bill Owens, and Lewis Baltz.

The domestic realm of the terrain vague is captured in the works of David Deutsch, Todd Hido and Bill Owens. In four large-scale photographs from his “Night Sun” series, using contemporary tools of surveillance – searchlights and police helicopters – Deutsch appears to be searching, in vain, to find a trace of anyone or anything occupying the terrain vague. The viewer is challenged there too, scouring what look like black-and-white video stills from the evening news. Something terrible has happened, and now, once again, the people have gone missing. In Hido's work the near nuclear scenes of solitude make the absence of that other nuclear entity, the family, more poignant. He captures the emptiness of the inhabited world, that colonization where the trappings of inhabitation speak more loudly than the inhabitation itself. The creeping loneliness in Hido's work, its potency and exaggeration, resonates with the condition of alienation that is sometimes associated with the new city. Like Deutsch, Hido is on the





Figure 5 David deutsch trailer, 2000

outside looking in. Their Photography feels as much like surveillance as photography, catching America in acts of loneliness, and banality.

In contrast to Hido's and Deutsch's work, Owens peoples his images, his sub-urban anthropology bringing to light not the absence of a culture, but the beginning of one. His documentary images, taken in the early seventies, underline the complexity of suburbia: the embryo of the new city, its capacity to be at once full and empty, ideal and hideous, hedonistically social as well as lonely. The captions reveal dissatisfaction over the perceived cultural vacuums, and the comfort and security provided by the nascent community. The images include children at play and neighbors who speak to each other as friends. Owens also sees the empty, treeless



Figure 6 From the series Houses at Night #2736 by Todo Hido, 2000

vistas and bored people on dead end streets, streets without sidewalks and sidewalks without pedestrians. Where Hido and Deutsch place themselves on the outside looking in, Owens appears to have opened the door and invited himself in. While Hido and Deutsch's thesis is concise, Owen's images seem to be piecing together a question for which he has yet to form an answer.

Rosler, Opie, and diCorcia find their vague terrain in the transitional spaces of transportation – airports, freeways, subways, and sidewalks. Western systems of transportation are some of our largest, most sophisticated, and necessary pieces of infrastructure. Dividing the landscape like rivers or canyons, awesome and impassable, these systems are the lifeblood of



Figure 7 From the series *Houses at night* #2621, Todo Hido, 2002

the economy; they bring us together and they keep us apart. DiCorcia's image, Igor, looks as though the subject may have been taken captive by the under ground system of transportation itself. DiCorcia has not cropped the evidence of the passenger to Igor's right, nor has he properly included him in the image; the partial absence brings a heightened sense of alienation to an image that already leaves us wanting to embrace Igor and his poor fish. We may believe it is possible for Igor and his fish to keep going around and around in their confined universe.

Edward Burtynsky's terrain vague is the landscapes of our shame. As



Figure 8 From the series *In The Place of the Public, JFK, TWA Terminal, New York*, Martha Rosler, 1990

photographs, Burtynsky's are guilty pleasures – rich and beautiful, but full of ominous foreboding. Burtynsky translates the wastelands of industrial society into sublime pseudo-natural events in the Landscape. His images detail the mark of humanity on that landscape, an effect that leaves the earth broken, scarred and dirty. In Burtynsky's work it is often the beauty in the photographs that is most off-putting; the work seduces with its form and repulses with its content. Uranium Tailings #12 Elliot Lake, Ontario, is crushingly beautiful; a pale yellow and white pallet inflected with long black lines, with trees that divide the horizontal image framing the subtle



Figure 9 From the series *Suburbia*, Bill Owens, 1978

detail of the background. Uranium Tailings #12 Elliot Lake, Ontario, is also a photograph of a worn out place, where dead trees in the polluted earth frame a palpable absence. The photograph shows a wall of radioactive sand, ten meters high, holding back a lake of similarly radioactive materials left over from the defunct Stanrock uranium mining operation. There are 130 million tonnes of uranium in the Elliot Lake area that will remain dangerously radioactive for hundreds of thousands of years.<sup>3</sup>

Burtynsky's are the Residual Landscapes<sup>4</sup>, the Manufactured Landscapes<sup>5</sup>. Like Lewis Baltz' blank walls and characterless building-



Figure 10 Igor, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, 1987.

scapes, these landscapes were not deliberate in-and-of themselves.

The story of the terrain vague is that of forgotten or unintended places; it is the story of happenstance, an unexpected imprint in the landscape, the retelling of our successes and of our failures.

\* \* \*

In January of 2006, The Whitney Museum in New York City, again brought the terrain vague into focus. Their exhibit, *The New City: Sub/Urbia*, treks





Figure 11 *Uranium Tailings #12 Elliot Lake, Ontario, Edward Burtynsky, 1993*

through the terrain vague – the new city – with the photographs of Walead Beshty, Gregory Crewdson, Tim Davis, Corin Hewitt, Zoe Leonard, Karin Apollonia Müller, Catherine Opie, Michael Vahrenwald, and Amir Zaki. *The New City: Sub/Urbia* exhibited both fantasy and documentary images. The suburban fantasies of Gregory Crewdson, from his series *Beneath the Roses*, insist on their weirdness – the strange and the stranger. In his fictitious, elaborately staged photographs, stories lurk, like a suppressed trauma, just below the surface. The images pair the normal with the paranormal, throwing everything into an abyss of strangeness. Crewdson exposes what is beneath the surface; the figures that people his images are found digging, pulling back, or performing eccentric ritualistic acts.



Figure 12 *Untitled from Beneath the Roses, Gregory Crewdson, 2003-2005*

Tensions between domesticity and nature often come to a head in this work, liquid swelling up swallowing the home, plant life piled and strewn around out of place, and bodies whose nakedness threatens to undermine our precarious social constructs. Nature, ours, a dark unpredictable other, is often the skeleton in the closet in Crewdson's suburbs. With Crewdson's fictitious work, one is almost sorry to find the non-fictions, teaming just beneath the surface.

Included in the exhibition, works by Amir Zaki place us, under a pair of homes, designed by Richard Neutra, precariously rammed, into a parched California escarpment, the images seem to question the colonization of this most inhospitable landscape. His Exterior shots



of swimming pools, empty, off colour, closed and photographed from above, and interior shots of fireplaces rendered useless, their mouths erased, left to be perpetually cold; ironic hearths betray the luxury and vanity that seem to dominate our common sense. They are uneasy portraits that do not bode well for their subjects.

This is typical of the photographs of the terrain vague, which tends to show the unease of the author in the landscape. There is a sense that this is a bizarre, sometimes extraordinary, sometimes ominous place that is large piece of who we are and it is worth looking at. I felt a kinship with these images...with their sentiment, with their ambivalence. They encouraged and distracted me. Like the landscape itself I returned to those images if ever I lost my way.

\* \* \*

Susan Sontag argues that the camera is a mechanism of beautification, that to photograph even those things that may repulse, is only to assert that you have, in some capacity found them beautiful. And if there is any truth to Nietzsche's solemn assertion that to experience a thing as beautiful means: to experience it necessarily wrongly.<sup>6</sup> Then the photograph remains a controversial witness, its subject exposed to the ever flattering lens.

In the face of Sontag's concerns, Roland Barthes, author of *Camera Lucida*, may release the image from Sontag's incriminating stance. Barthes reflects on the inextricable bond between the photograph and its subject. Like the concomitant entities, the sea and the shore, the window and the

view, the front and the back, the photograph cannot be read outside of its subject<sup>7</sup>. In fact, Barthes finds that the very nature of the photograph is its relationship to the subject. The photograph is witness for the subject, the *it has been*, or the certificate of presences<sup>8</sup>, that affirms it. Garry Winogrand lands on the same page as Barthes with his assertion that photography is a “two-way act of respect. Respect for the medium, by letting it do what it does best, describe, and respect for the subject, by describing as it is. A photograph must be responsible to both.”<sup>9</sup>

Insofar as the images of the terrain vague seem to satisfy our poignant longing for beauty – to beautify – they might be seen as cheating ambassadors, even liars, as Sontag says. But, somehow we know that a beautiful image is not a beautiful subject, and in this capacity the subject is not, as Barthes suggests, identical to the photograph. To see a photograph as beautiful may in some circumstances mean to read it as separate from its subject: the relationship of the lights to the darks, the juxtaposition of masses, and the complexity of the signifiers. A beautiful photograph is a complex amalgam of a formal, conceptual and intellectual experience, whereby to represent the subject in a particular way, whatever that subject is, might be found to please. Therefore, if the photograph is beautiful, it might also be awful, it might also be terrible. If I say that I have found a photograph beautiful, I am saying that it has done what it is supposed to do well. It has presented its subject so as to draw my attention; it has brought a piece of its subject out, told a story and engaged the imagination, in some way.

The camera as device for beautification can be limited in its ability to



Figure 14 *Untitled FP4Z01, Amir Zaki, 2000*

be truthful, and this point can be stifling. Even if truth is not the motive, one does not relish being a deceiver either. I took comfort in the growing pile of pictures, the focus on the terrain vague, the meta landscape, sub/urbia, exurbia, and all the others. Perhaps the truth in a picture does not lie in the picture itself, but in the space between them, between my pictures and all the others, between Bill Owens’ and Todd Hido’s, between Crewdson’s and Burtynsky’s. And, perhaps the truth lies in the very fact of the subject, as more and more eyes turn their focus toward it – its reality, strangeness,



beauty, urgency and legitimacy, are slowly made apparent through the images.

Documenting the new city, the terrain vague, Sub/Urbia, is far from a solitary pursuit. The world is lousy with images of the posturban condition. As a subject it may be wearing thin, but tell that to the people that find themselves, as I was, compelled to engage it. In the beginning, I had no intention of lugging my medium format Pentax SLR, tripod and light meter over Toronto's hinterlands. A response, perhaps, to being speechless, it was the only thing I could do. I would heap my photos on the growing pile.

I think it is a common compulsion to take the photographs of things on their way out. As Sontag says, "all photographs are memento morti"<sup>10</sup>. Atget's Paris, has disappeared – is still disappearing, as he anticipated. Photographs bear witness to the change that we are a part of or that we feel is coming; they are a datum from which we can speak of before and after. My camera was grasping at the landscape – look at this! Look at this! A moving target, there is only so much time before it disappears – gone forever. If our pictures are liars, they are still the certificates of presences; at least enough to retell a story – truth, lies.

Banality, a word often associated with this place, is constituted of a sort of ruthless tedium. When the embarrassing fact of the everyday is captured and catalogued, when the mundane is brought to a sort of painful significance, we call these artifacts and images banal. There is a school of thought that sees this new landscape as banal, but this landscape is nothing if not crucial, and crucial is not generally an associate of the banal. Instead,

the banal is home to the monotonous, the chronic and the invariant; its shock is subversive and backward. Although some might argue that the new city is almost de facto banal, I do not see the manifestation of the biggest urbanization in the history of man in this way. This landscape is somewhere between the spectacular and the spectacularly simple, its photographic subject somewhere between that of war and that of flowers. Even though I have caught myself on occasion thinking it, the movement of the urban frontier is too graphic and aggressive, too shocking and without precedent to be banal. The photography of these places is about birth and death, it is about creation and extermination, and if there is banality it is in the matter-of-factness with which it is received.

\* \* \*

In photographing the new frontier of urbanesque growth – the place where city meets city meets home meets field, meets highway – I found, among other things, a void of terminology, what should I call this place? This place did not look like the cities that spawned it, nor did it resemble the suburban form familiar from history. The landscape I was capturing was somewhere between a Medieval village and an industrial park, somewhere between main street and the highway. It was a spread out, an unscrambled, urban egg, self-righteous and raw. This was the place one may have employed the quaint term suburb. That word *suburb*, however, is too captious a term, too crude a nomenclature, to describe precisely the world evolving on the urban edge. It is a place with many names but suburbs still exist in

relation to the city, and they rely on its amenity. The new urban landscape has autonomy, both socially and geographically, it is its own thing. People live, work, shop, and are entertained in the *suburbs*. They commute from suburb to suburb, from downtown to uptown, exurbs and beyond. Today's *suburb* has become a shopping destination, where big-box retailers draw the downtown crowd to their warehouse and discount shopping environments, where parking is free and the product is endless. These places are not constrained by geography, or much else for that matter. These places are not the industrial city, or even the edge city waiting to happen. Postwar suburbia, the suburbs that Levitt built and the one where June Clever, in day dress and apron, raised Wally and Beaver, is history. And it has been for quite some time.

Robert Fishman, author of *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* observed, "with the rise of the technoburb the history of suburbia ends<sup>11</sup>". And the *New York Times* reporter Jack Rosenthal observed back in 1971 that:

Suburbia, if we can for the moment still call it that, has changed beyond recognition, Rapidly, relentlessly, almost unconsciously, America has created a new form of urban settlement. It is higher, bolder and richer than anything man has yet called city. ... Most Americans still speak of Suburbs. But a city's suburbs are no longer just bedrooms. They are no longer just orbital satellites. They are no longer sub<sup>12</sup>.

Jack Rosenthal, "The Outer City: U.S. in Suburban Turmoil,"



Figure 15 Wall Mart Complex off Major Mackenzie Dr., Richmond Hill

The contemporary suburban landscape (if we can for the moment *still* call it that) has evolved so rapidly, and so without precedent, that we do not even have a common name for what we have built. This landscape seems to have snuck up on us, we thought we were building one thing when in fact we were building another. In the absence of a clear identity, the new landscape grows names like mushrooms, one spawning another; the only consensus – it is not the old suburb/city. Alan A Loomis, the editor of the e-journal *Delirious LA*,<sup>13</sup> has compiled a list of current urban nomenclature



Figure 16 Wall Mart Complex off Major Mackenzie Dr. Richmond Hill

to describe the new metropolitan condition:

*Post Suburbia, Outer Cities, Satellite Sprawl, New City  
Technoburbia Urban Villages, Middle Landscapes,  
Centerless Cities, Exopolis, Technopolis, Perimeter  
Cities, Generic Cities, Lite Urbia, Semi Cities, Slopolis,  
Minicities, Mallopolis, McUrbia, Suburban Downtowns,  
Suburban Activity Centers Urban, Major Diversified  
Centers, Urban Cores, Galactic Cities, Pepperoni-Pizza  
Cities, City Of Realms, Superurbia, Disurbia (Dense,  
Industrial, And Self contained Suburban Region), Service  
Cities, Peripheral Cities, Tomorrowland, Slurb, Growth*

*Corridors,, Silicon Landscapes, Mega Centers, Suburban  
Cities, Spread Cities, Outtown, Nonplace, Urban Realm,  
Antipolis, Transformed Suburbia, Ageographical Cities,  
Cyurbia X-Urbia, Posturbia,, Midopolis, Supersuburbia,  
Patchwork Quilt Cities, Monopoly Cities, Mobility Cities,  
Liquid Cities, Ephemeral Cities*

These terms - some widely recognized, some not - all attempt to capture something of the new urban condition. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *exurbia* – a word coined in the mid fifties – as “a quasi proper name for the region outside the suburb of a city”. And *subtopia* is defined as “a disparaging term for Suburbia regarded as an ideal place. Applied

more generally to areas of undifferentiated, ill-planned, and ugly suburban development; unsightly suburbs which encroach on the countryside". Are the words *subtopia* and *sprawl*, interchangeable?

*Language is important* says Lewis Pierce author of *The Urban Invasion of Rural America: The Emergence of the Galactic City*, he says that "We cannot talk about a phenomena unless we possess the vocabulary to describe them, and many observers still cannot agree on what to call this new amorphous form of urban geography."<sup>14</sup>

As I scanned the urban landscape for a name, something new and something brave, I came up short. The place I was looking at didn't seem urban, or suburban, or even exurban. While I waited for that brave new name to surface, I used the term *New City*, an alias for its missing, proper name. In my search the alias kept coming up. Ludwig Hilberseimer's 1944 book on urban reform, for example, was called *The New City*. The aforementioned exhibit at the Whitney *The New City: Sub/Urbia*, used it and most recently John Lorinc has authored *The New City: How the Crisis of Canada's Urban Centre Is Reshaping the Nation*. As it turns out, authors and bloggers and journalists use the term pervasively because the *New City* is simply what it is. This urban growth, for which we have so many names, is in fact, the continuation of the city - a city, masquerading as something other - but the place, in fact, where people live, work, play, dine out, order in, the place their children go to school and take music lessons and find employment in their first summer job. Even the "public space" whose loss has been widely criticized has begun to resurface. The parking lots of the convenience stores

and Cineplex's, for instance, serve as public meeting and mischief places for teenagers and young adults. From Piazza to parking lot, the suburb is the new city. The term suburb is misguided and misleading. It releases that place from their urban responsibility and expectation.

The elusive word "city" still suffices to describe any settlement of particular size and socio-economic significance. I realized that what I was looking at was the contemporary city, one which had culturally, politically, and physically metamorphosed beyond recognition. Just as qualifiers such as *medieval*, *industrial*, or *modern*, put into context the nature of those urban environments, so the qualifier *new* will begin to describe what has happened to the post-industrial landscape.

And what has happen?

The new city with its of repeated elements – homes, highways, big boxes, gas stations rhythmically punctuating the landscape – is a mono culture of ruthless efficiency. The repetition give no sense of scale, the rhythm can start and stop a random or repeat ad infinitum. Driving up Yonge Street, north of Toronto, one passes the same Loblaws, the same Blockbuster Video, and the same advertisements for wide-lot subdivided homes. There are the same variety stores, electronics stores, bookstores, East Side Mario's, and Starbucks. There are fallow fields, and fields of boxy new houses. There are six lanes of-fast moving traffic and plenty of space for each car to park when it chooses to stop, or drive-through. Subdivisions push up against highways lined with office parks and big box retail complexes; small towns, overrun with millions of square feet of industrial and commercial space,



sit in seas of barren parking lands. Everything is big. Big has been the response to the need of the new city. The new city houses a fractal pattern of bigness, from beds to televisions, to cars and homes, shops, meals and our bodies themselves.

In fact new city is the place of origin for a new building type. The new type is, of course, big – structurally simple, largely prefabricated, inexpensive, and relatively flexible. These structures house the big box store, the factories, the gas stations, industrial and business complexes and most of the dwellings. Rem Koolhaas, the controversial (and revered) Dutch architect and author of *Delirious New York*, and *S.M.L.XL*, like Manfredo Tafuri before him, recognized that the metropolis had eclipsed architecture. In a lecture delivered to Rice University in 1991, Rem Koolhaas made the following observation:

In a building beyond a certain size, the scale becomes so enormous and the distance between center and perimeter, or core and skin, becomes so vast that the exterior can no longer hope to make any precise disclosure about the interior. In other words, the humanist relationship between exterior and interior, based upon an expectation that the exterior will make certain disclosures and revelations about the interior, is broken. The two become completely autonomous, separate projects, to be pursued independently, with no apparent connection.

The second characteristic of this new, mutant scale of

architecture is the fact that within such a building, the distances between one component and another, between one programmatic entity and another, also become so enormous that there is an autonomy of independence of spatial elements.<sup>15</sup>

The mutant scale of buildings in the new city is a microcosm of the new city itself. The new city is *extraterritorial*, an undelineated conglomerate of foci. Like the universe, it is in a constant state of expansion.

For the Italian Architect and theorist Aldo Rossi, winner of the 1990 Pritzker Prize and author of *Architecture of the City*, the city is the accumulation of its many pasts, a palimpsest. The history of the city fossilized through different mechanisms and at different rates became the city itself; the city as history. In *The Architecture of the City* Rossi said the city “is a human creation par excellence<sup>16</sup>”, a “totality, a repository of history”. This city, Rossi’s city, is the old city – the city of narrative history, the city of mythology and permanence. For Rossi, the city’s *permanencies* can be divided between primary elements and dwellings. Primary elements, like monuments and public institutions, are expressions of the city’s “collective will... the result of its capacity to constitute the city, its history and art, its being and memory”. The old city, Rossi’s city – Toronto, New York, Paris – is about stasis, intransigence and character, the *genius loci*; it is beautiful, it is quaint, it is a narrative formalized. The story of the city is identical to the city itself. The last five-hundred years have brought the old city to

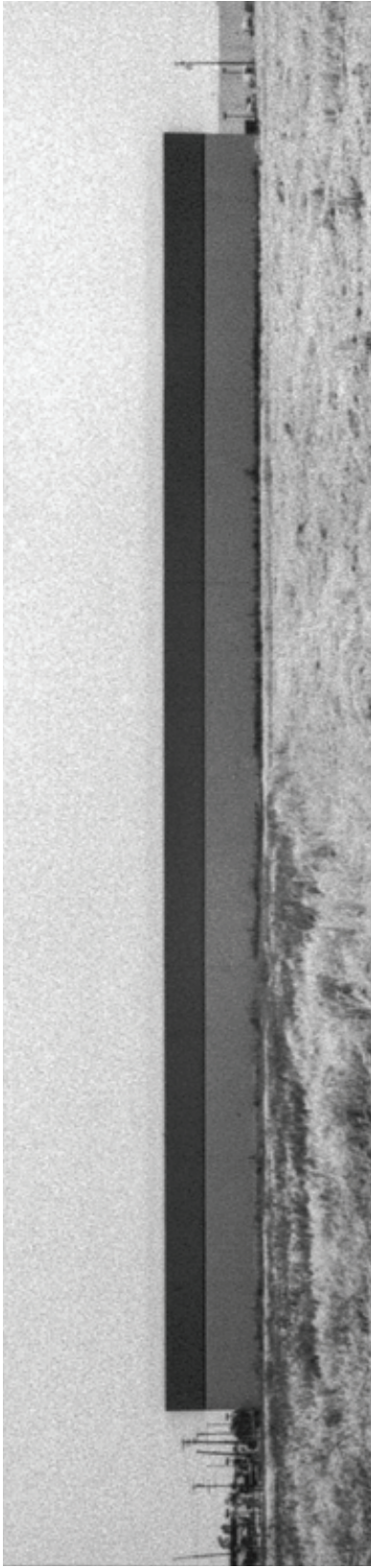


Figure 17 Detail of *New Industrial Parks*, Louis Baltz, 1974.

maturity; it exists in our memory and it excites our imagination, it is the platonic city, it is the only city.

Where the traditional city has syntax – streets, skylines, parks, elements that have an internal resemblance – it also has a unique character that identifies and separates it from others. In the new city, elements are repeated, literally and verbatim (but without the old sense of syntax). The new city cannot be read as a unity, it cannot be grasped as a whole and there is no legible narrative.

Thus the *new city* defies Rossi because it is a cultural and historical void, an essentially fluid formation that was not built with the pretension that it would, or ever could, be the vessel of history. It is impermanent and transitory. It is the tent-city, built for the refugees of the largest urbanization ever, and if there are monuments there they are those built to speed – the

clover-leaves, and the airports. The highway is the most common of our shared urban experience.

We have deposited our stories elsewhere, so that progression through the *new city* is irrelevant, the endless repetition of the same simple structures giving no gesture or invitation to narrative connectedness. And in absence of narrative connection, space collapses into time, time spent in a car moving between installations – local points of interest. And where are the stories? They are hanging in the ether of cyber space and in the elusive vapors of the media that follows us down every country road and up every mountain. If history, our story is indeed the city, then our city is virtual and virtually everywhere. We enter the geography of new city despite itself, like the buildings it houses; its temptation is ethereal, vaporous, virtual; physical allure, with respect to the city, is outdated. Architecture has been



eclipsed by the media, perhaps the key element of the new city. Certainly, the new city is best understood in terms of virtual space.

...a night the world watches in bafflement and begrudged admiration, wondering what it means that the Superpower is a country where a man can win the election but lose the presidency, legally, with no tanks in the streets ... and no crowds scream with celebration or damnation, millions merely mutter at their televisions

Michael Ventura *The Austin Chronicle*, December 22, 2000

In the new city, Rossi's *permanence and identity* – the history and tradition – the architecture, are replaced by *transformation and event*.<sup>17</sup> Speed has dominion over stasis. Architecture in the new city is an extravagance; it is as if there was no relevant place for it. Architecture is an anomaly, an anachronism. In response architecture has grown loud and vulgar to gain traction in a place where we like to view things at twenty-four frames a second. Building must shout to be heard. So retail, corporate, and civic architectures have become the architectures of efficiency and parking: windowless interiors dissolve space and time into orgies of stuff; government buildings show frugality through dowdiness; and CEOs honour their shareholders by building to minimum standard. There are no equestrian statues, or public parks; the public spaces of gathering, protest, and celebration are spread out over the front, side, and back yards of

subdivided housing, they have been relocated to highway embankments, or paved over to accommodate our cars. Places of pause or beauty that might acknowledge that the landscape could be, or ever was, meaningful have been annexed to the consumer *politesse* of wide streets and big boxes.

Welcome to the new city; it's better than you think.

It is possible that this *new city*, this undefined, over-regulated postindustrial landscape, this strange monoculture of bigness—freeways, homes, commerce, business, reproduced like a stamp pattern over the semi-rural landscape – is replacing the *old city*. Further, it is possible, indeed probable, that the old city, the traditional city, is over. In 1921, long before suburbanization was in full swing, the urban apologist Lewis Mumford already mourned the loss of the old city: "The 19th century American town... was the negation of the city; suburbia was the negation of that negation. The result was not a new synthesis but a further deterioration."<sup>18</sup> Richard Ingersoll begins his book, *Sprawlown*, with the assertion, "almost without notice the city has disappeared". While people continue to live in the traditional centres, the urbanization that has pushed urban boundaries from town to city to metropolis has now pushed them beyond that of the megalopolis. Ingersoll asks whether places like Mexico City with twenty-five million people, and Tokyo-Yokahama with an estimated thirty-one million people, can really be called cities<sup>19</sup>. Demographically and geographically, cities have pushed the envelope of what we recognize as the traditional city. Frank Lloyd Wright couldn't have been more prescient when he stated that his new city, Broadacre "will be a city so greatly different from the ancient city, or from

any city of today that we will probably fail to recognise its coming as the city at all”<sup>20</sup>.

The end of the traditional city was again prophesized by the University of California Professor Melvin Webber. Almost thirty years ago, Webber saw that, with most specialized organizations now freed from locational constraints and able to interact with others anywhere, the organized complexity that is urban society no longer resides exclusively in cities. Webber saw the new city as a massive communications switchboard, the result of social and economic activities unconstrained by geography. In the new city, communities of interest were consolidating among people who were in close touch but geographically distant. What Webber found was that the friction of the city was no longer necessary, and that contemporary communications technology had all but done away with the need for community defined by proximity. According to Webber, the metropolis/megalopolis established by geography persists because the costs of overcoming space has not yet reached zero. Overcoming the burden of geography, both in terms of time and money, has for all intents and purposes, been achieved with respect to information; data is *shipped* at virtually no monetary or temporal cost around the globe. If our physical movement were as effortless and instantaneous as that of the information being shared globally, then indeed there would be a no rational geographic structure to human settlement. Currently, the global adherence to sprawling urban forms is in part a reflection of our ability to traverse them. If the time one is willing to travel to get to work, for example, remains constant - let’s say one and a half hours - then, the explosion of the dense fabric,

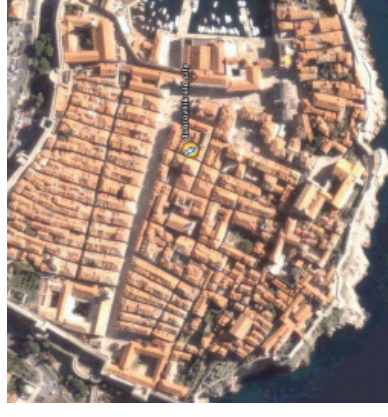


Figure 18 The old city of Dubrovnik seen at 3000 ft.

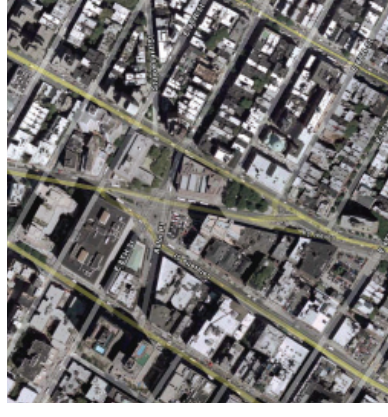


Figure 19 Manhattan seen at 3000 ft.

its transformation into a spongy, amorphous web, starts to make a lot of sense. In this capacity one could imagine that, with respect to time, the city's size remains constant. Dubrovnik for example, the medieval city on the southern tip of the Republic Croatia is the size of one typical North American highway cloverleaf. The scale of things continues to expand in proportion to the speed at which we move through them. This inverse relationship between speed and density means that we have outgrown the geographic unit of the medieval city, the industrial city, the modern city, the edge cities; and even now the new city, is starting to appear in the rear view mirror.

\* \* \*

Structurally the new city is what Albert Pope, author of *Ladders*, calls centripetal, a ladder formation of closed urban system that limits mobility through the city by forcing movement into strict hierarchical spines or routes. What is most significant about these systems of transportation, primarily the freeways, is not what they connect on an interurban scale, but what it disconnects on a local scale<sup>21</sup>. According to Albert Pope, the new city occurs when the urban grid becomes impassable, or ceases to be all-together. Christopher Alexander in his seminal essay *The City is not a Tree* foreshadows Pope in his criticism of the arboreal prejudice of contemporary urbanism. Alexander's concern with the overly binary urban structure was that "Whenever we have a tree structure, it means that within this structure no piece of any unit is ever connected to other units, except



Figure 20 Cloverleaf intersection of the 400 and 407 highways in the Greater Toronto Area seen from 3000 ft.



Figure 21 IKEA store in Vaughan Ontario seen at 3000 ft.

through the medium of that unit as a whole."<sup>22</sup> This system leads to single function zones and the segregation of urban function.

As the urban grid erodes there is significant coarsening of the urban fabric, where blocks are transformed into super blocks and then further into closed *pod* systems. With the impassability of the *grid* - where each exit off the highway is its own and exclusive destination - there is a virtual elimination of the effect of the *by-product*<sup>23</sup> of movement. The *by-product* of movement is that agent of the city that produces other actions outside the movement from origin to destination. It is the friction that activates the minutia of urban activity: social, economic and political stimulation.

*Tree* or *Ladder* urban structure is the antithesis of the old city's continuous grid system, a system that allows a variety of movement, in a variety of directions along a variety of paths. Pope stands by a notion that, as the grid disappears, so does the city. Whatever the "nature of the grid space - idealized or circumstantial, pedestrian or vehicular, curvilinear or orthogonal - the grid literally is the city". (Albert Pope Ladders.)<sup>24</sup> The centripetal city, the arboreal city, the city of ladders, the new city, although thought to offer increased openness, and democracy, is strictly hierarchical, and prescriptive which tends toward exclusionary. The impassable city, with its trunk-lines of vehicular communication, leaves what Lars Lepur author of *After the City*, terms *dross*, the sea of left over space around the conglomerate of urban foci or *Stim*. With no beginning, no middle and no end it is a place of constant flux and perpetual motion, a *flickering, shifting non-form*,<sup>25</sup> a fluid sea of *dross* inflected with *stim*.

By situating locations of interest in the midst of unwanted residual

space, there is not only a loss of secondary urban activity, but an effective erasure of the landscape. The experience of the outside world - a world that is too hot or too cold, or in some other way in need of mediation - is reduced to time minimized. The speed one can move from origin to destination is our primary measure of the landscape. Having divorced ourselves from the residual spaces, multiple screens and interfaces replace that relationship we used to foster with the environment. GPS, TV, DVD, iPod, and the cell phone are the new environments in which we are steeped. Our engagement with the landscape is kept to an absolute minimum. We don't turn left at the top of the hill by the church, but when the global positioning system indicates that we should do so. We move through the *dross*, at high speeds if we can and sit in traffic jams if we can't, but we do not engage the landscape either way. As the urban landscape disappears, it recedes further into anonymity; the landscape becomes almost ghoulishly remote.

There are days when commuting, which I rarely do, feels so impossibly tedious, that I take the scenic route through the old city. Almost doubling my time I can at least feel the potential energy of this more frictionous movement. I stare at the people on the sidewalks, their indigenous behavior-shopping, waiting, kissing, arguing, mulling moseying and loitering, pass the time at the red light. I catalogue what new shops have opened or closed, I leave the window open and the sound of the radio is integrated with the sound of urban *variousness*. As the old city changed to the new, my speed increases, roads widen, there are fewer places to stop, and the space around me seem to have exploded. The landscape is no longer knowable, but at least I can move fast. If there are pedestrians in the new city they seem misplaced or

aliens-to the drivers of the highways they are the other. Physically they are separate and unreachable, because one doesn't just stop one's car any old place. Pulling over is no longer an option. Speed and perpetual motion are now the keys to survival.

Pools of cooled air dot the plane, much like oases in deserts. Precariously pinned in place by machines and human events, these pools become points of stimulation-stims- on this otherwise rough but uninflected hide, populated only by the dross-the ignored, under valuated, unfortunate residues of the metropolitan machine. Space as value, as locus of events, as genius loci, is then reduced to interior space, a return to the cave. In these enclaves or stims, time is kept at bay, suspension is the rule, levitation the desire...

Lars Lerup, *After the City*

Lerup, looking over Houston Texas, saw the pools of cooled air- the electrified, climate-controlled, secure places, where we all want to be, whether they be our cars, the mall or homes, all of the stim, the enclaves- and realized that he had for the first time encountered *what Manfredo Tafuri*, the Italian architectural theorist and historian called the merciless commercialization of the human environment: *America and the Suburban Metropolis*.<sup>26</sup>

In the face of the *merciless commercialization of the human environment* the search for the real and the authentic has elevated the *city as theme park* to the most desired form of urbanity. The urban monoculture of the new city that began as the suburbs has begun to encroach on the old centers. Slowly the old cities become inundated – colonized - with tourists whose search for history and the exotic has brought them to what has become essentially a great outdoor shopping mall, cross-bred perhaps with a museum. The spirit, the history - this feeling of authenticity - appear however to have a half-life, inversely proportioned to tourist activity. The cultural specificity that fuels the tourist economy, drawing those looking for a heterogeneous experience, is slowly disappearing. The homogenization that is synonymous with the development of suburban culture is chronologically in step with the emergence of tourism as the largest industry in the world. As the historic city begins to exhibit the uncanny similarity we went there to escape, as multinational name brands infiltrate the historic storefronts, (themselves embalmed in the image of an idealized past) we are left with a shell, a two dimensional image of the historic city, one that panders to our desire for history as authenticity but delivers only a simulacra. Now, as if tourism were the only legitimate use for these places, cafes, boutiques, and tourist paraphernalia shop – the saltwater taffy, maple syrup, and wooden duck economy - have become the urban ideal. Protected historic districts are stifled by the well-meaning – but ultimately mediocre – ideas of preservation and integration. Urban grit is forcibly scrubbed from these places; the citizens - inundated with perfume and bag and candle shops, high on caffeine and unable to go about their daily lives - disappear. Niagara On The Lake, just



across Lake Ontario from Toronto, is a stark example of this.

As authenticity dissipates, the simulacrum is an increasingly acceptable stand-in for the *real*. We simply rebuild the old city – the old city minus its function. *City Place* in Palm Beach Florida, for example, is a faux old-style town with the faux architectural equivalents of churches, town halls, and old style theaters; there are plazas with fountains, boulevards, and arcades. Similar projects are seen popping up all over the United States, China, and Canada. Las Vegas is certainly the most obvious and extreme example. Like Piero della Francesca's *Ideal Town Urbino*, these places are a kind of *Every City*, conceived as an amalgam of all that is good in the real, (read older) city. The *city as theme park* has also manifested itself on a smaller scale in residential projects. There is a subdivision in Bend, Oregon, for example, called the Shire, after J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbit village in *Middle Earth*.<sup>27</sup> And in Atlanta Georgia there is development that dates back to the 1940's with a Robin Hood theme, called Sherwood Forest. The city as simulacra, although based in history, have no authentic connection to it. Form and history are mined for whatever can be commodified. The rest falls away. Jean Baudrillard wrote that America is a place that *lives in a perpetual present*<sup>28</sup>. (*America* 1988)

These simulacra can be seen, with respect to history, as impoverished versions of the past as disappointing fakes. If we free them from their history, from their tenuous connections to the past, however, they might start to feel more like originals, authentic and contemporary *architectural* urban phenomenon. What if we could rebuild Sienna Italy in Woodbridge Ontario, for example? Essentially a condominium/bigbox complex; it



Figure 22 #55 Kansas City, Philip-Lorca dtCorcia, 1980

would house people, shops, business, and have the added bonus of drawing tourists. Outlet stores and coffee chains would squeeze behind variegated facades along acres of parking mandated by contemporary planning theory.

With digitization and standardization, breeding sameness across the globe, to Rem Koolhaas asks the question “What if this seemingly accidental – and usually regretted – homogenization, were an intentional process, a conscious movement away from difference toward similarity?”<sup>29</sup> (Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. S,M,L, XL.) If so, the idea that somehow the right planning could stop the effects of a world going digital, global and



universal – *generic* – seems unlikely. According to Koolhaas, planning, in the traditional sense - lacking the analytical tools to see the city that the post-Ford, digital, consumerist world is producing across the globe - will pass away. In his article, *The Generic City*, Koolhaas addresses the dissolution of city as a planned edifice:

The Generic City presents the final death of planning. Why? Not because it is not planned – in fact, huge complementary universes of bureaucrats and developers funnel unimaginable flows of energy and money into its completion... But its most dangerous and most exhilarating discovery is that planning makes no difference whatsoever.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1930's Walter Benjamin ( 1892-1940), pondered the question of art in the age of mechanical reproduction<sup>31</sup>. He found that uniqueness was a prerequisite to authenticity and aura – tradition and history. According to Benjamin, reproduction had the capacity to depreciate the original, to erode its embedded value. The reproduction – a likeness, a simulacrum only – had no gravity, no aura, and no permanence.

Uniqueness and permanence are as closely linked in the latter as are transitoriness and reproducibility in the former. To pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose “sense of the universal equality



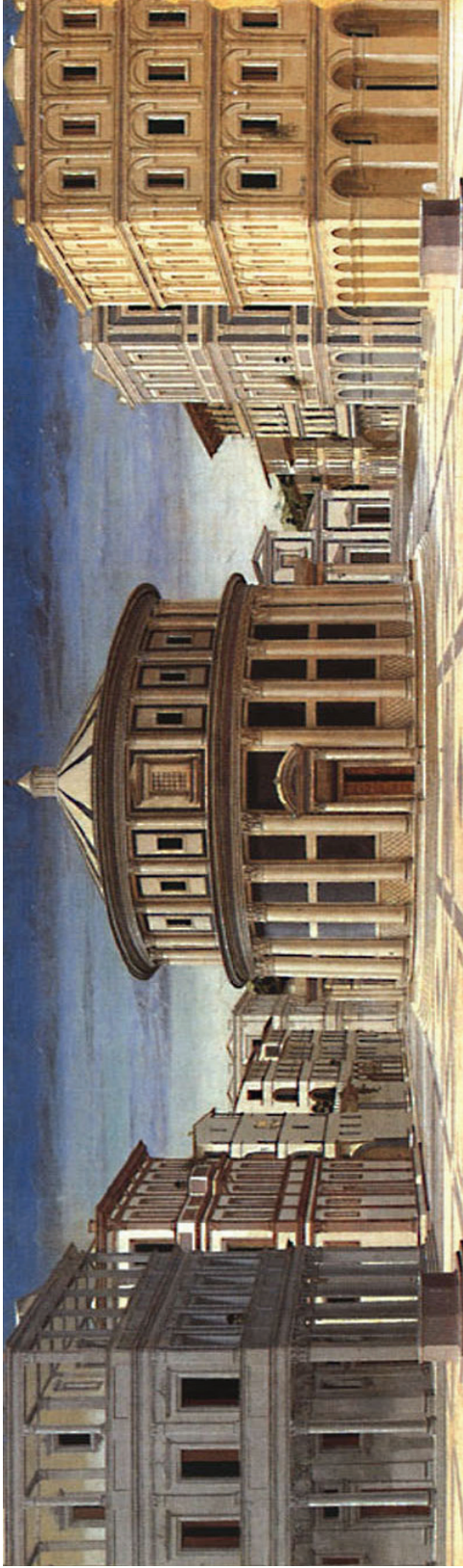


Figure 24 Piero della Francesca's *Ideal Town*, Urbino circa 1450

of things” has increased to such a degree that it extracts it even from a unique object by means of reproduction <sup>32</sup>.

Walter Benjamin *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936)

And what would Benjamin make of the city in the age of digital manipulation, reproduction, and communication? Contemporary cities are not originals; as works of art, or just plain works, they are being mechanically, digitally, and architecturally mass produced. “Cities”, argued Mumford, “are mankind’s work of art. When the city ceases to be a symbol

of art, ritual and order, it acts in a negative fashion.”<sup>33</sup> Can we extrapolate from Benjamin’s thesis on the reproduction of art to the mass production of the city? Aura – history, tradition – is not present in this reproduction of the city. But is it even possible to engender difference in a market where, even if uniqueness was possible on an architectural level, the chains of coffee shops, grocery stores, restaurants, clothing giants, monopolize retail property? The rules of the franchise demand sameness and density. In the GTA there are approximately 121 Starbucks coffee shops; at least 69 Gap clothing stores, and over twenty-four Lablows supermarkets. The sameness of the contemporary city is not just a forgone conclusion, but one of its most desirable characteristics. The new city is the home of those





Figure 25 City Place, Palm Beach, Florida, 2005

things which do not have original

Pico della Mirandola heralded the end of the Medieval mental landscape with the almost heretical conviction that the hallmark of being human was the capacity for *freedom*. For Pico, the greatest dignity for humanity was the individual's power for self-transformation. The effect of Pico's *Oration on the Dignity of Man* was a remapping of medieval social geography, focusing all attention on the human capacity to choose – to be an individual. Pico's legacy and the myth of rugged individualism continues to strike a powerful chord; it excites the consumer imagination. Sameness homogeneity - although in some capacity diametrically opposed to notions

of individuality - seems to thrive in cultures where the individual is the basic unit of focus. Jeff, the drug addled lovesick teenager in Eric Bogosian's novel *Mall*, remarks while wondering through his local mall:

Everyone wants to be an individual. Everyone wants to wear special things and cut their hair in special ways and learn special lingo, so that they can be an individual. But there are too many slots to fill. The more individual everyone tries to be the more alike they all are<sup>3,4</sup>

This ironic coexistence – homogeneity and individuality – is manifest in the formal strangeness of communities made up of dead-end residential streets and three car garages. In the new city, homes spiral toward sameness, this sameness a function of one's desire to be autonomous, to be an individual. As each individual presents his unique aspirations in the same way, the houses, cars, televisions, package vacations, coffee shops, and barbeques all start to look the same. Housing in the new city offers everyone the opportunity to be the centre of his own universe at the end of his cul-de-sac in his large private home, with a private vehicle to navigate a city whose overall form is unknowable and irrelevant. In the new city, we are all right where we want to be, at the very origin of the spiral.

The time spent in transit through the urban service spaces, Lerup's *dross* - the highways, the parking lots, the brown fields - is the debt owed by the individual on his wide-shallow building lot, that debt owed on all



Figure 26 Home construction, Richmond Hill, Ontario

that stuff. It is the debt incurred when we choose to live at the centre of the spiral – the large social pyramid is deconstructed and replaced with countless smaller ones; each one of us resides at the top and feels entitled to the peak. The shift from the communal to the personal – perhaps only a function of our recently-acquired ability to survive autonomously outside of community – has led to an explosion of technology, space and resources to bolster the private citizen. A relatively recent invention, North America's private realm<sup>35</sup> is a unique and amazing thing, with more square footage, more bathrooms, more appliances, more bedrooms, more garage space, more security, and more climate control than anywhere else in the

world. Our privatet realm brings into sharp focus our social and cultural autonomy.<sup>36</sup> The formation of the new city around the anti-communitarian creed – privacy and individuality – is an urban paradox captured by Lewis Mumford: “Suburbia is a collective effort to lead a private life”<sup>37</sup>. Mumford would have been hard-pressed to convince the suburban resident of the 1950's and 60's of the veracity of his argument; currently however, it is a statement of the obvious, almost impossible to deny.

Evan McKenzie, author of *Privatopia: Homeowners Association and the Rise of Residential Private Government* looks at the issues of the public versus the private world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His investigation into the private

governments that have instituted themselves in the gated-communities of the new city led him to coin the term “privatopia”. The places McKenzie writes about have abandoned the city completely. With high walls and private security, these gated communities have forgone the basic liberties the nation offers, opting instead for insurance against declining property values.

In place of [Ebenezer] Howard’s utopia is privatetopia, in which the dominant ideology is privatism; where contract law is the supreme authority; where property rights and property values are the focus of community life; and where homogeneity, exclusiveness and even exclusion are the foundation of social organization<sup>38</sup>

Evan McKenzie. *Privatopia: Homeowners association and the Rise of Residential Private Government*

Advocates of Gated-Communities contend that they help to revive a sense of local community and belonging. McKenzie’s study concludes that restrictions within gated communities exist only for maintaining property values, not for the nurturing of civic ones.



Figure 27 Mavis Rd. and Bancroft Dr., Mississauga, Feb. 2004

Before I built a wall  
I’d ask to know  
What I was walling  
in or walling out,  
And to whom I  
was like to give  
offence.<sup>39</sup>

Robert Frost *The Mending Wall*

Robert Frost's famous lines from the poem *The Mending Wall*, which in the 1930's, signaled a tension between the individual and society, now seems an almost quaint concern in the new city, where walls are there to give offence, and to give definition to the only centre of new city: the individual.

Under what may appear to be the environmental, social, and architectural wreckage in the new city, there lays the project of individual liberty, the unimpeachable idea that everyone should have access to well-being, a dwelling, and work.<sup>40</sup> But in consumerism – the promise of providing everything to everyone – there is a paradox: through individuality we became homogeneous. The myth of individual actualization achieved by consumer choices initiates the avalanche of wasted resources that continue to threaten not only our personal and collective well being, but the planet itself. The unassailable notion of the individual in society, as realised through *stuff*, is what makes the sprawling new city an unstoppable force. As the old city is sacrificed to the mythology of individual liberty, the question of the precise location of that freedom arises. Are we really free, barricaded in the postmodern fortresses<sup>41</sup> called gated communities? Are we free, bound to commute for hours in smog, down traffic-clogged highways? And are we free when the debt that might swallow us dictates where and for how long we will work?

The freedom of the polis was inconceivable without dialogue among equals. Among the Practitioners of sprawl,

however, the quest for individualistic freedom, has led to forms of self-exile, the unconscious punishment of being ostracized from civic life. But while one may feel free to escape from the city, there is no way to free oneself from sprawl if it is spreading everywhere. In this respect, all of the alienated fragments of sprawl are waiting for a new awakening of synoikismos—the ancient process of agreeing to live together in dialogue. Synoikismos would not be just a creative tool for administrators but for designers as well.<sup>42</sup>

Richard Ingersoll. *Sprawltown: Looking  
for the City on Its Edges*.

To unravel the cultural web that binds up the contemporary city, first we have to acknowledge, often despite ourselves, we are complicit in its production. As the new city appears, we see that it is configured around the culture of our desire, with virtuality and speed further eroding traditional notions of space and settlement. Desire, manifest in the landscape, has steered us from the traditional city to the new one. Not that the desires of man have changed dramatically throughout history, but contemporary society caters to the individual, what he wants, what he needs. The built environment, now has the capacity to reflect that. Once the prerogative of a select few, the city is now dictated by a much broader demographic, a demographic that represents the force of the market. And the way we build



our cities is no longer the only measure of man, and financially, technically, spatially it is no longer the primary gage of our progress.

There are many who disapprove of the new city, yet is continues to succeeded famously. Its fluid movement and wide variety, ease of accessibility, its disposability, newness, and its flagrant disregard for precedent seem to have drawn us in. And it has drawn us in because it has a profound resonance with our desire; it is in fact what we want. It is a transformation of the landscape into commodity, *the merciless commercialization of the human environment*. Although it is clear the new city is built by a people who do not identify with place, it is equally clear that we desire, more than ever, to possess it. And even though it is aesthetically aggressive - both the layman and the connoisseur have cursed its lack of grace - that has done little to quell the tides of would-be owners searching for their dream homes. And why shouldn't they search? Home ownership has been the fuel that powers the growth of the new city, it is the symbol of our right to self determination, freedom and individuality. But will anyone ever love these places? Will we continue to build and buy them despite their lack of advocates, despite the social, political and environmental warning? Perhaps we are too like the famous scorpion that despite himself kills the frog on which he relies to get him safely across the river simply because it is in his nature.

It is said of our strengths that they are also our most determined weaknesses, I am not sure of the universal veracity of this statement, but it seems a good fit to the new city. Its characteristic tolerance is as well its indifference; its full unprotected embrace of the new ignores our wealth

of collected urban knowledge. It's democracy it also its lack of hierarchy. Its efficiently has stolen its charm, so that while I am glad to never have to search for a parking spot the trek across the lot is a social and aesthetic burden.

The key to change in the urban landscape, if that is what we choose, does not lie in how we regulate it, but more in how we educate our desire, our nature, how we protect it from manipulation, or save it from itself. The built environment will expose us and our desires unflinchingly, and it is clear that we have constructed a place with a tendency toward the base and the prosaic. Our landscape is our unwitting autobiography, an unselfconscious reflection of our tastes, our values, our ideals, and our aspirations. The grandeur that characterizes the old city is apparently unnecessary to inspire, sell, or intimidate us. What ever the motivation, the old city dressed to impress. The new city employs other means, and this city is the portrait of what we want - the confession of our desire. So if this place is ugly or if it is embarrassing surly we will not be surprised.

## ENDNOTES

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- 7 Roland Barthes Camera Lucida
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- 9 Austin, Texas 1974
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- 17 Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, and Elizabeth Ewen. Picture Windows: how the suburbs happened. (New York, NY: Basic Books, c2000). p xviii

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- 22 Christopher Alexander “ The City is not a Tree”
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- 25 Lars Lerup. *After the City*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000).
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- 30 Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau. *S, M, L, XL*. (New York : Monacelli Press, 1998). 6.15 p. 1255
- 31 Watler Benjamin *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936)
- 32 *ibid*
- 33 from *The Lewis Mumford Reader*, ed. Donald L. Miller (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), pp. 106
- 34 Eric Bogosian. *Mall*. (New York, NY Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2000). p.48

35	It was unusual for someone in the 16th century to have his own room. It was more than a hundred years later that rooms to which the individual could retreat from the public came into being. Houses were full of people much more so then today, and privacy was virtually unknown.	41	ibid
36	Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck. Suburban Nation The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream. (New York: North Point Press, 2000). p.41	42	ibid
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