

## Studio Work in Progress: Postcards from the Edge of Atlanta's I-20 East

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*In the concrete reality of today's world, places and spaces, place and non-places intertwine and tangle together.*

Marc Augé, *Non-Places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*

### **Abstract:**

Previous Masters Thesis research conducted by graduate students under my guidance was concerned with the assessment of residual urban sites in relation to suburban expansion. The tremendous influx of displaced commuters and capital into the redevelopment of Midtown and Downtown Atlanta was the impetus for this research. We constructed projects around such spaces as parking lots, brown-fields, newly inscribed 'special public interest' and 'community development' zones, and dysfunctional gaps in the city such as interstate viaducts and tunnels.<sup>1</sup>

The most recent Thesis research, completed in the Spring 2002, shifts away from investigations concerned with Atlanta's numerous urban centers, and moves out toward Atlanta's eastern suburban periphery. For all the prosperous professionals who have moved into the core city of Atlanta to escape traffic, the growth of the suburbs was 100 times greater than that of the city last year. The city, in fact, has grown little while the region around it has swelled. With 427,500 people, Atlanta today accounts for 13.3 percent of the metropolitan area's 3.2 million residents, while it made up 22.4 percent in 1980.<sup>2</sup> Over the next ten years, it is anticipated that the I-20 corridor from Atlanta, east to Madison, Georgia, will become the fastest growing sector of the Atlanta metropolitan area. The State of Georgia is finally involved in a number of initiatives which seriously assess issues related to sprawl - environmental, transportation, civic, and institutional, all related to our quality of life.

As Atlanta expands, small towns on the edge of the metropolitan area must act now to develop intelligent, comprehensive plans for future development, or risk consumption by pervasive growth. *The assessment of existing policies, the implementation of new planning strategies and architectural proposals that address the intertwining of traditional settlement patterns and contemporary modes of being is the focus of this current research.*



### **Organizations Involved**

Over the last 3 years, several parties have come together to outline rules, regulations and visions for future growth in and around Covington, Georgia: The city of Covington; The Arnold Foundation, a funding source for redevelopment; the Community; HomeTown Neighborhoods, Inc, a developer working in concert with Duany/Plater-Zyberk to develop two new neighborhoods; and the Georgia Tech Architecture Program. Georgia Tech's relationship with Covington began 5 years ago in 1997 when Successful Community Partners, headed by the

Georgia Conservancy and Tech's Urban Design Workshop headed by Randall Roark, established the first in a series of workshops aimed at closely examining issues related small town and suburban expansion. The focus was the development of environmentally sound and socially progressive strategies which address future growth in small towns on Atlanta's periphery.<sup>3</sup> In the years following these initial workshops, The Arnold Foundation, a private organization based in Covington, purchased several large tracts of land in immediate proximity to the town's historic center. In the Fall of 2000, The City of Covington and the Arnold Foundation hired Duany/Plater-Zyberk to study future growth patterns in the general proximity of the center and generate designs for two new neighborhoods within a 10 minute walk of the town square. These two developments include 600 new houses, commercial and institutional buildings. Phase one is currently under construction. In the Summer of 2001, Georgia Tech was contacted and invited to participate in further assessment of Covington's future growth and asked to make proposals for sites as yet framed by other planning studies. This research, conducted with 11 graduate students from the architecture and urban design program, is concerned with a variety of very real issues that are not necessarily site specific, and address some of the inherent challenges facing many contemporary metropolitan areas.



### Notes on Covington

Covington, Georgia (pop. 12,000), situated 35 miles East of Atlanta, is under attack, literally, by Atlanta's pervasive sprawl. The original town plan consisted of 16 200' x 200' blocks organized around the town square. Prominent public buildings including a courthouse, bank, county offices and memorial sculptures create a profound 'small town' civic presence. Over time, Covington expanded to include two residential enclaves within walking distance of the square. Farms surround Covington even today, yet a buffer of strip style development pushes against the

historic center and the fields. There are a number of voids in the historic center, once occupied by buildings, now occupied by cars. One-half mile away from the pedestrian town center running parallel to highway 287, is a myriad of big box retail and 'auto-centric' strip centers. The growth projected for Covington and Newton County over the next 10 years will permanently alter the community's physical, economic, community and lifestyle characteristics.

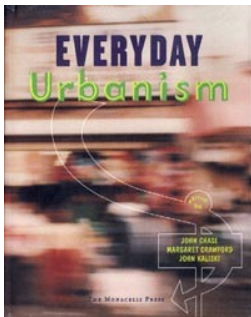
There are several very different scenarios confronting Covington over the next 20 years. As Atlanta continues to sprawl, Covington, like it's immediate neighbor to the West, Conyers, could very easily be absorbed by strip, *cul-de-sac* and other low-density developments. Regrettably, Conyers has become yet another poster child for poor planning and myopic development. Covington is on the cusp, and could very easily be absorbed, becoming yet another bedroom community of commuters and big box development, or worse another Conyers. While there have been occasional improvements, Covington has slowly eroded over the last 50 years. The streets, sidewalk and square are still intact, but the town lacks cohesiveness, both physically and socially. However, there are so many positive aspects - reasonably priced housing and affordable land; the potential to have many commercial and civic nodes linked by pedestrian and vehicular paths; walking, cycling and rail as a primary/secondary mode of transportation; dense woods and forests in close proximity to the town square; a reasonably

sound watershed; and a commuter rail line, which links Atlanta to Augusta. There are excellent opportunities for experimental approaches to projects such as mixed uses, hybrid building types civic/institutional in-fill and adaptive re-use.

## Theoretical Platform:

### Introduction

For the first 7 weeks of thesis preparation, defined as “Critical Positions” all thesis students participate in an intensive reading exercise with a faculty member not engaged in studio teaching. Students explore a variety of general topics as a means to identifying a specific research trajectory. Typical to any thesis studio, each student develops a personal and particular line of inquiry, yet in the studio setting it is necessary to have some cohesive foundation from which to work. For the second half of the seminar, students shift into smaller group discussions with their specific thesis instructor. Using Atlanta and Covington as a reference, in my studio, we moved forward to address current issues concerned with the intertwining of traditional settlement patterns and contemporary modes of being. This continuing investigation includes cross media examinations of critical writing, literature, film and art, situating these issues within the larger realm of the history of ideas. We extended our reading and analysis to include the exploration of appropriate typologies and programs specific to each evolving individual line of inquiry.<sup>4</sup>



### On Urbanism

In the second part of the seminar, we began by investigating what Doug Kelbaugh has intelligently defined in “The Essential Common Place” as ‘Three Paradigms for Urbanism.’ Using source case studies and writings, aspects of ‘New Urbanism’, ‘Everyday Urbanism’ and ‘Post Urbanism’ were investigated throughout the first seminar. *“The three fundamental values described in the Introduction as underlying this book - community, sustainable order and human spirit - can be loosely assigned to these three paradigms. New Urbanism, with its emphasis on environmental values and ecological design, most fully embraces sustainable order. Everyday Urbanism is most aligned with community and Post Urbanism with the human spirit, especially freedom.”* Excerpts from Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream, Everyday Urbanism and S,M,L,XL were the source text for debates. Students worked independently or in small groups to unpack the texts and write synopses.

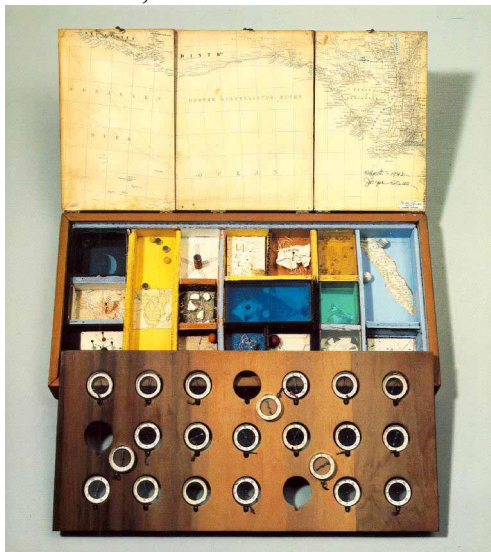


External sources and references regarding each type of urbanism were brought into the discussion primarily through student presentations and lectures. Students were asked to prepare 10 minute presentations on selected texts and projects and then allowed to engage in debate to test the positive and negative aspects of each paradigm. Debates and case studies were posted on the web for each discussion, and continue to be an excellent resource as students move deeper into their respective projects. Students positioned their work in relation to these debates at the outset, and moved into investigations of Covington with these arguments in mind. During reviews, in some instances, students refer to the information on the website to help make a point. This proved to be quite fruitful in the first phase of the studio.

## On Narrative and Cross Programming

As design research, Architecture and Urban Design must always be an expression of a desire and an instrument of necessity. It is this double operation, the dialectic between utility and desire, which is an underlying theme in this research. Involving students in programming discussions strengthens their commitment to their own work while simultaneously helping developers, the county and community investigate the latent potential of vacant sites. Discussions with the various parties involved revealed a willingness to explore new building types, particularly as related to new forms of commerce and transportation. During the programming phase, students were asked to develop a series of Program Collages which specifically identified each and every component pertinent to continued architectural research as a series of scaled pictographs. The challenge was to outline all aspects of each evolving program, from the largest to the smallest space and begin generating a script which could be quickly edited and reconfigured to explore as many program alternatives as possible for a site.

What characterizes an urban situation is not a singular condition or name, but various actions, and with this a resistance to simple inventory. In the contemporary city, urban no longer refers to a particular form or place but to a specific class of spatial situations identified with a density of overlapping actions and characters, orders and scale relationships. This aggregation of scales – regional, metropolitan and local; of programs: political, economic, ideological, physical and functional; and characters: those complex social interrelationships which are inherently American, are all set within a framework conditioned by prior acts and future modifications.



Central to our argument is the construction of new programmatic narratives that seek to outline contemporary modes of existence. Attempts to conceptualize the contemporary city and all of its detritus with orders based solely on historic models limit more inventive readings of current situations. Conceiving of sites as a compilation of urban narratives, both literal and fictive, might propose, as J.B. Jackson suggests, stranger paths through the city.

Another key component of our research was a reassessment of single use building types. The term mixed use has been used in the past to denote a variety of programs implemented in one location. And yet we are beginning to see another approach, which can be defined as the creation more radical programmatic relationships in highly concentrated areas. The work of Joseph Cornell, the American assemblage artist, and some of the other surrealist *bricoleurs* is of particular interest, especially as a teaching tool. Similarly, Andre' Bretons "Free Union" is an excellent metaphor for free thinking about potential hybrid programs: (excerpt)

*My wife whose shoulders are champagne  
And fountains that curl from the heads of dolphins under the ice  
My wife whose wrists are matches  
Whose fingers are raffles holding the ace of hearts  
Whose fingers are fresh cut hay*

Cross programming, a staple of any successful urban environment, encourages invention, not tradition and potentially offers new possibilities, which suggest quality of life, economic and social benefits at multiple scales.

### **On Sustainability and Materiality**

In the article “Eco-Effectiveness,” William McDonough explains that strategies of sustainability go beyond environmentally friendly practices. “It engages the idea of an effective economy producing profits for companies in the business of making profits, while treating people fairly and well and respecting, or even celebrating, the natural world.”<sup>5</sup> These notions take sustainability beyond a single issue approach, which might simply focus on energy efficiency. While his essay might read like a marketing brochure, selling sustainable architecture to corporate America, others refer to sustainability with a similar, expanded definition. The New Urbanists refer to it in their descriptions of smart city growth. In both cases, the definitions of the terms are such that they begin to implicate one another in such a way that an *either/or* restatement of the proposition is impossible. The apparently opposing sides actually co-exist, regardless of whether the scale is tipped or balanced. Sustainability, should, whenever possible, be implemented as it generally refers to a well designed, site sensitive built environment. Architects are obligated to use environmentally friendly products, and to site buildings in ways that are responsive to a given environment on obvious levels. Perhaps the design of buildings as ecological machines can become an exciting proposition – engaging the processes of each site (part of genius loci and context) and adding to the understanding of architecture as assembly and making.

### **Some Pertinent Projects:**



Students are currently in the studio phase of the research. Throughout the review process, sites and programs were developed with future implementation in mind. In fact, most of the proposals are part of a larger, ambitious master plan for the town. The students are actively involved in discussions at the community level, and due to the nature of the research, are committed to expanding conceptions of how Covington could grow in the future.

### **Hybrid I: Assessing and Redesigning Parking Lots and Strips Centers**

These projects are concerned with re-evaluating the strip, particularly in relation to the historic center. Walking north from the central square, the fabric of Covington very quickly erodes into single use occupancy buildings surrounded by asphalt. One look at the attached aerial photograph reveals the challenge: How can defunct strip shopping centers be reinvigorated? How can a greater density be sutured into an existing site? What are the economic and environmental



parameters of such research. In Covington, a significant ecosystem meanders through all aspects of the place, from the strip through the center and on into the countryside. By increasing the density around these sites and addressing the mitigation of environmental conditions, can architects change public empathy toward the automobile, or will atrophy eventually set in to super sized suburban culture? One goal of this critical project is *to make the common uncommon, by seeking ways to* transform an ordinary strip development into a place, to make something ordinary, extraordinary.

*Project One: Small Scale Big Box and Housing*

What are the potential connections, (if any) between standard, suburban big box retail, parking, housing and a 200' x 200' city block on the edge of the historic center. Target, one of the more progressive retailers in the 'big box' corral is the anchor tenant in this exercise. In addition, 20 housing units will be included in this project. Convincing retailers to develop housing in concert with shopping facilities is at least now unprecedented.<sup>6</sup> As demographics change, and vehicular congestion coagulates, living in close contact to shopping will be imperative, even in the suburban landscape.



*Project Two and Three: Piggybacking*

The current condition in Covington along Hwy 287 is similar to small towns across the country. Commonly referred to as 'the strip' this area runs along the highway, only a few blocks from the urban center with large retail centers spread out along part of its length. Constructed adjacent to the train depot years after it was rendered defunct by the automobile, new interest in light rail creates a desire to reassess the strip in order to create more density close to the train station. There is no edge condition, the buildings have no relation to the street, and the scale is conducive only to vehicular traffic. Peppered along the edge of the parking lots are various smaller businesses - fast food restaurants, bank branches, video rental stores etc. In many instances these function as the de facto building edge, providing only symbolic mitigation between the street and the vastness of the parking lots. This in between area is ripe for speculation. What would happen if these established islands had a new program added above? What would happen if various new programs were inserted within the confines of the parking lot? How can points of densities begin to challenge the current landscape of the parking lots?

This investigation is concerned with three key issues: The assessment of existing strips and parking lots for future changes and uses; the development of a structural and spatial prototype which could be used on other sites; methods of increasing density by cross programming without drastically altering parking and vehicular patterns.

**Hybrid II: Rail Transit Center/ Live/Work Housing**

One component of Georgia's SmartGrowth initiative involves the renewal of the Atlanta-Augusta rail corridor. Covington benefits from its inclusion in this transportation network - a rail corridor of affluent small towns connected to metro Atlanta. GRTA is the state of Georgia

authority that works to provide transportation choices, improved air quality and better land use in order to enhance the quality of life and promote sustainable growth for all Georgians.

More specifically, GRTA works with those counties in Georgia that have been designated non attainment under the federal Clean Air Act standards. Currently, there are thirteen counties in the metropolitan Atlanta area that are non-attainment. <sup>7</sup> Planned for implementation in phase two of the Georgia Regional Transit Passenger Rail Integration Plan, the Atlanta-Covington-Madison commuter rail corridor should be functioning by 2008.

With proposed future expansion into these small towns, Atlanta's growth is projected to maximize the Atlanta-Madison rail corridor for continued expansion. This system will create a virtual proximity for Covington creating viable alternatives for suburban living in Atlanta without the commuting deterrents. DPZ's analysis and proposal discusses the potential of a connector to Atlanta, but never investigates Covington's ability to accept this change. What



possibilities will it create? What conditions will it alter? How can it be used off the main lines and into the town centers? The proposal for this project is a direct result of these questions. How can this kind of infrastructure influence the transition of

Atlanta's growth into traditional Covington. The program of this project will include: Rail spur from the main connector line into downtown Covington; Work/live hybrid units that allow easy access into Atlanta with the advantage of suburban living while accommodating the need for low cost housing; Retail development that intensifies the urban street condition; Parking Garage to promote pedestrian surfaces in the adjoining town square; and park that abuts the adjacent wetland.

### **Hybrid III: Neighborhood Telework Center, Chamber of Commerce, Design Center**

This proposal superimposes three distinct programs: The Covington Chamber of Commerce, A new Teleworking Center and a New Design Center. This new typology will bring together some key elements at play in the redefinition of Covington. Under future funding by the Arnold Foundation, the design center will serve as an integral addition to the Chamber of Commerce. As a progressive town on the Suburban periphery, Covington's move to create a telework center, a centrally located, walkable business center subsidized by private and public funds, will demonstrate how successful teleworking can be. Larger corporations are now understanding the benefits of employee telecommuting, and Atlanta's annual telecommuting day has demonstrated the real impact working from home or remote locations can have on Atlanta's



stifling rush hour traffic. During the summer of 2000, the Atlanta region ranked 4th worst in the country for bad air days. Between 1997 and 1999, Fulton County had the worst smog problem in the country outside of Los Angeles, making Fulton's air pollution one of the worst in the US. In 2000, every region of Georgia violated the health based smog standards except coastal Georgia. According to the Georgia Public Interest Research Group (PIRG), the air is unhealthy somewhere in Georgia on one out of every two days.<sup>8</sup> To help combat metro Atlanta's increasing traffic problems, the Metro Atlanta Telecommuting Advisory Council (MATAC) is committed to demonstrating the positive impact of teleworking has on both traffic and pollution issues as well as employee recruiting, retention and productivity. MATAC says that widespread telework activity can accelerate Commuter Choice participation by metro Atlanta employers

because when executives discover they can save money, improve employee performance, reduce absenteeism and turnover, and recruit quality employees.<sup>9</sup> This progressive facility will serve as a model for future development in neighboring counties.

An architecture that synthesizes both the private and public interest of its users will strengthen the downtown district of Covington. As Jane Jacob notes, a district must satisfy the multiple needs of its users. Currently Covington is threatened by its changing demographics and the surrounding retail strip centers. Previous attempts at revitalizing an urban center have been stereotypically focused on issues of nostalgia. Everyday space is the connective tissue that binds daily lives together, amorphous and so persuasive that it is difficult even to perceive. In spite of its ubiquity, everyday space is nearly invisible in the professional discourses of the city.<sup>10</sup>

Everyday life is organized by time as much as by space, structured around daily itineraries, with rhythms imposed by patterns of work and leisure, week and weekend, and the repetitious gestures of commuting and consumption.<sup>11</sup> The tension between modern architecture's quest for the conceptually pure and the plurality of the modern city defines the fundamental dilemma of twentieth-century urban design.<sup>12</sup>



#### **Hybrid IV: New Community Center/Elderly Housing/Community Market**

Covington needs a diversified recreational facility that responds to three major groups: the elderly (ages 55-up), Young adults (age 21-35) and youth (age 15-20). The immediate vicinity of Covington is composed of shops, offices, restaurants, abandoned factories and residents with no structures that address planned recreational activity. Through uniting many diversified genre of activity under one roof, it is possible to achieve a dialogue between social groups who would not necessarily interact and this housing of events would create a vehicle which

could be driven towards social understanding amongst its users and ultimately, social unity. By

overlapping programmatic elements intended for a diversified group of users (varying in age, race, class, day and/or night users, etc.), this proposal is concerned with a new type of community center. Programmatic types include an Art Gallery, Auditorium, Cafeteria, Community Market, Parking Lot, Computer Lab/ Learning Center, Conference Room, Exercise Room, Game Room all set within a Terraced Greenspace which is part of Covington's emerald necklace, a resuscitated ecosystem which flows through the town. In the world of the psychological, barriers between humans are formed in mind sets through differences in class, stations, wealth, self-conceit, etc. In the physical world these differences and barriers may take on the appearance of walls or vertical planes that block horizontal movement. More so, in a world combining the psychological and the physical, the metaphysical exists. This metaphysical world introduces a world of impenetrable and penetrable layers in space. One could see this evident in the interior and exterior design of the Kawasato-Mura Center. By using the program and formal architectural elements one could envision creating spaces that foster interaction between groups that would not necessarily intertwined on a regular basis. This stage from dialogue could be a possible solution for understanding one's self and other members of society.

## Conclusions

Sprawl and unmitigated growth are a detriment to the quality of life in Metropolitan areas. Long commute times and higher and higher levels of pollution weigh heavily against the American Democratic ideals of mobility, freedom and personal liberty. Hundreds of communities are now working toward controlling runaway development by prescribing to the tenants of SmartGrowth. Indeed there are a litany of buzzwords surrounding new attitudes toward urban growth, and the risk is very real that 5 years from now our concerns for more efficient urban/suburban environments will have further succumbed to the perils of unchecked expansion. Anyone involved in the debate knows that change will only come slowly over a protracted period of time. In Atlanta, the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority is operating on a 25 year timeline. Changing public policy and perception is no easy task, and the implementation will prove extremely costly. But the challenge is real, and counter to trends in the academy over the last 10 years, students have the opportunity to begin embracing new ways of thinking about towns and cities that will have a direct impact on their, and their children's, futures. In fact, it may very well become vogue to read a planning or zoning document in the design studio! Perhaps this work will contribute to the debate, and help empower future designers to consider viable alternatives as small towns are confronted with the multivalent forces of the contemporary American city.

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<sup>1</sup> See Design Work presented: *2 Projects: Another Atlantic Steel and the Contemporary Film Institute* and Reprogramming Midtown Atlanta : Excerpts from the Masters Project Studio published in the ACSA National Conference Proceedings, Baltimore, Maryland, March 2001.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.ganet.org/grta/nyt\\_11\\_21\\_99.html](http://www.ganet.org/grta/nyt_11_21_99.html)

<sup>3</sup> See Workshop Covington: Blueprints for Successful Communities , published by the Georgia Conservancy, November 1997.

<sup>4</sup> See my syllabus online at <http://undertow.arch.gatech.edu/homepages/mgamble/mp2002.htm>

<sup>6</sup> See Sienna Architectures acclaimed Zupan Market in Portland, Oregon

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.grta.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://georgia.sierraclub.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.matac.org/>

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<sup>10</sup> Everyday Urbanism, edited by Margaret Crawford, John Chase and John Kaliski. New York: Monacelli Press, 1999. pp. 25.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 90.