“What’s a nice architectural historian like you doing in a truck stop like this?”

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ABSTRACT

Along almost every interstate highway off-ramp are the much-maligned places where the everyday rituals of the road are practiced. The truck stop is an integral part of this American scene; yet its mystique is distinct from other vernaculars of roadside architecture, for the expansive domain of the truck stop is a hybrid place that straddles the borders between a protected private precinct and a contested public realm. This paper investigates the socio-spatial order of the truck stop, by engaging interdisciplinary frameworks of the history of architecture and cultural studies, including the theories of Michael Foucault, Edward Soja, and Henry Lefebvre concerning the production and socialization of space. In addition, the study employs a phenomenological inquiry based on the author’s experiences in the long-haul trucking industry. This research argues that the truck stop, both a spatial “in between” and a point of destination in the cultural landscape of the highway, is not a neutral local in which social relations unfold. Instead, it operates as a spatio-temporal structure that materially constitutes and makes concrete the social actions, relationships, and ordinary practices of the road.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of almost every interstate highway off-ramp fast food places, gas stations, cheap motels, and outlet malls greet the curious tourist and the weary traveler alike. They weave an architectural welcome mat stitched of flimsy drivet walls and familiar corporate logos. The sceneographic clutter marks the oft-times maligned places where the everyday rituals of the road are practiced. The truck stop is an integral part of this American scene; yet its mystique is as distinct from that of other vernaculars of roadside architecture as the eighteen-wheel constituency the truck stop was created to serve differs from a fleet of soccer-mom piloted SUVs. With approximately 87% of American freight transported by truck, the interstates that carry watermelons from fields in Georgia to A& Ps in New Jersey and ferry lettuce from coolers in California to the WalMart distribution centers across North America are well traveled. Somewhere between the garden of America and the neighborhood superstore, to be assured, the truck and its driver will need fuel, food and facilities with plumbing. For them, Loves, Flying Js, Pilots, and Petros line the interstate corridor. The truck stops here.

In contrast to its enduring love affair with the automobile, American popular culture exhibits ambivalence in its regard for the big truck. While the automobile became an emblem of the American dream of freedom and prosperity, the truck, born to move heavy loads, represented a less alluring world of work and menial labor. Research and scholarship about the trucking industry reflects this bias: ample studies investigate the economic dynamics of the industry and the regulatory climate that controls it, anthropological and sociological inquiries explore matters of driver identity and ideology, but the cultural landscape of trucking, which necessarily involves issues of the design, production, and negotiation of space, at the unwieldy scale of the highway has been largely ignored. On the subject of the truck stop, Chester Lieb’s *Main Street to Miracle Mile,* a veritable primer for studying roadside architecture is silent. J. B. Jackson’s 1988 essay, “Truck City,” remains the single authoritative commentary on the truck in the domain of architectural research. Similarly, with the exception of Marc Wise’s critical photo essay, *Truck Stop*, this ever-present

landmark of the highway has drawn little attention beyond quirky articles in the popular press, erotic short stories, and a handful of undergraduate design theses.

This investigation of the socio-spatial order of the truck stop, through the interdisciplinary lenses of architectural history and cultural studies, is part of a book-length project, "18 Wheels and the American Dream." What takes a "nice architectural historian" out of the archives and into the truck stop? For three years, I was part owner of a long-haul trucking company and had many opportunities to view the cultural landscape of trucking from the front seat of a Kenworth T-600. Consequently, research of this paper blends an experiential body of knowledge—acquired dining at truck stops, doing laundry at truck stops, Christmas shopping at truck stops, and, even being solicited for "favors" at truck stops, with the more traditional domains of the architectural historian's knowledge. The larger project, from which this paper derives, seeks to make the cultural landscape of trucking more central to the discourses of American architecture and cultural studies, for it engenders issues of domesticity, work and commerce relative to place-making that, this research asserts, reflect overarching transformations of late twentieth-century and twenty-first-century cultural practices.

2. SITUATING THE TRUCK STOP IN HISTORY: A GLIMPSE AT ITS PAST AND PRESENT

The truck stop, inevitably, evolved in concert with the ascension of the long-haul trucking industry. During the years that followed the First World War, the truck became an important part of American life and a keystone in a seemingly boundless consumer revolution.[1] By the early 1920s, dedicated truck routes were established and, in the tradition of the stagecoach stop relay station where horses and drivers were changed and passengers refreshed, the truck stop was born. It was, however, a typology that grew up haphazardly, and out of necessity when service stations, initially devoted to the needs of long distance automobile and bus travelers, realized the revenue potential of filling the big truck's big tank. Gradually, savvy station owners added lodging, lounges, and the all-important showers to their emporiums; houses, gas stations, and garages were handily adapted to serve the burgeoning business of providing food and mechanical services to truckers. The Dixie Trucker's Home, a Route 66 landmark, offers a model of this evolution. Opened in McLean, Illinois in 1928 and recognized as one of North America's first truck stops, it grew from unassuming beginnings when its founders (John Geske and J. P. Walters) rented one-half of a mechanic's garage to sell sandwiches to truckers. Within a decade, the Dixie added a counter fitted with six stools where grilled burgers and 10-cent milk shakes were available continuously, 24-hours a day. Behind the restaurant, there were cabins for road-worn drivers and a cattle pen where live stock in transit could exercise while their chauffeurs enjoyed dinner. From the windscreen view, the Dixie Trucker's Home differed little from ordinary filling stations of the period: a box of a building with a four-pump fuel island and an overhanging canopy facing the iconic roadside.

Although built in 1955, Meridian, Mississippi's Red Hot Truck Stop echoed the modest program and small town scale of the early truck stop. Its architectural expression, however, resonated with the modernity of 1950s car culture and a trucking industry that was modernizing incrementally with the progress of the interstate highway system. So too, the building reflects the oil industry's desire to make their invisible liquid products appear as modern as postwar consumer culture demanded by giving a new look to the facilities that dispensed them.[2] Designed by architect Chris Risher, Sr., the compact and concrete framed Red Hot translated International Style modernism into the syntax of the American roadside. A state-of-the-art curtain wall capped with a broad, overhanging flat roof wrapped around its restaurant. Signage that rivaled early Las Vegas super-graphics announced "Red Hot Truck Stop Good Food" to drivers approaching from a new four-lane section of Route 80. Legend had it that Red Hot coffee had the power "to reveal things about Hattiesburg and New Orleans that even the natural light of day overshadows."[3] Sinclair diesel flowed from 6 pumps that stood on an island in front of the building; truck service was relegated to an attached garage at the rear of the remarkably unified structure. Outside, the Red Hot displayed the conventions of the typical postwar gas station, an oblong white box with grand

display windows pioneered in Water Dorwin Teague's prototype designs for Texaco (1937-48).[4] Inside, however, its modernity was articulated with a sinuously curved counter, which swept across two discrete dining rooms. Although drivers reminisced about rubbing shoulder with "Fats Domino and Percy Sledge's valet" at the Red Hot, others speculated that the bi-partite plan was a tacit tool of segregation.[5]

Period photographs and oral histories that chronicle the Dixie Trucker's Home and the Red Hot Truck Stop fuel nostalgia for a lost highway landscape of White Castles, Howard Johnson's and drive-in movie screens. Architecturally, they are as closely connected to these icons of modern vernacular building as they are to truck stop myths of comely, yet maternal, waitresses and mouth-watering, biscuits and gravy. Regrettably, the original Dixie Trucker's Home burned in 1967, to be replaced by a barren box with false parapets and mansard-inspired awnings. The Red Hot's demise was more carefully calculated; in 2000, it was torn down to facilitate construction of a Wal-Mart supercenter. The irony of the transition is stunning, for the contemporary truck stop, born of familiar and deeply engrained meta-narratives of postwar America's economic prosperity and corporate prowess, owes far more to the model of the superstore's promises of "one shop fits all" than to the fine balance of machinic utility and cozy domesticity associated with its earliest exemplars.

By the end of the 1950s, bigger trucks, an expanding trucking industry and the Federal Highway Act conspired to render the traditional truck stop obsolete. No longer was the truck stop a two pump or six pump affair; truck stops had grown to 2 acre-6 acre properties, often owned and operated by major oil companies. The Pure Oil Company, the operators of more than ten per cent of American truck stops in 1960, appealed to drivers with promises of "Pure's blue ribbon cup of coffee" and air-conditioned "roomettes." The self declared "crown jewel of the Pure system" was The Detroiter, situated on I-75 south of the "motor city." Pure was a descriptive nomenclature for the coffee, the diesel and the building: white, planar and unornamented in the high modern spirit of its age. With service bays discreetly situated at the rear of the building, the Detroiter façade could easily be mistaken for that of an early Holiday Inn. These spaces, however, were only a small part of the truck stop ensemble that also included restaurant accommodations for 112 drivers, scales, 2 lube bays, tire service, a store, and 10-paved acres of parking. Simply stated, the truck stop was fast assuming the proportions of postwar suburban shopping centers

The Detroiter is still a feature of the I-75 corridor, but its postwar "purity" has not remained unaltered. The original building is much renovated, reconceived as "a mall within a truck stop." Situated on the edge of an urban center transformed and stereotyped by its history of civil unrest, "secure and guarded" parking is even more seductive to the long-haul driver than the blue ribbon cup of coffee. Comfortable sleeper berths in big trucks have made its carpeted roomettes obsolete, but private showers, washing machines, shoe shine stands, a barber shop, and the services of a massage therapist enhance the Detroiter's aura of domesticity. So too do parking space hookups for cable TV, phone, fax, and the Internet bring the comforts of the late-modern home to acres of blacktop, while TV lounges, movie theaters, and video-games rooms offer public entertainment, traditionally associated with pleasure palaces found only in the center of the city. So too, fax machines, FedEx drops, internet kiosks and ATM machines constitute an information age agora of commercial services drawn from the downtown. Fast food carryout and the Sara Lee Bakeshop, the stuff of the suburban strip, complement the time-tied full service restaurant. The amenities available at the renovated Detroiter are hardly extraordinary. They are standard spatial and functional fare at the myriad Petros, Pilots, Flying Js and Travel Centers of America—the corporate giants of the truck stop industry.

3. NEGOTIATING SPACE AT THE TRUCK STOP: AT WORK, AT HOME, OR IN BETWEEN

> Like the paradigmatic shopping mall, the expansive domain of the truck stop has become a hybrid place that straddles the borders between a protected private precinct and a contested public domain. As a self-contained community, the truck stop embodies layers of transience and permanence and strata of social organization that reveal the complexities of more ancient models of community life. In its conceptual frameworks and spatial order, the truck stop recalls the socialization and discourse of the Roman bath, the hierarchical ordering of labor, prayer and dwelling of the monastery, and the power to practice one's trade of Godin's Familistère. Equally compelling in their intricacies is the interface of the truck stop's two dominant mythologies: the spheres of domesticity and labor.

With its clientele of long-haul drivers, who may be away from home for weeks at a time, much is made of the institutionalization of domesticity at the truck stop. An architectural rhetoric of gabled entrance bays, dormer windows, and enormous front porches masks many contemporary truck stops. The façade of domestic order is deceptive, for psychically, the big truck is the driver's dwelling, and domesticity is hardly authentic in a placeless sea of asphalt with as many as 100 other rigs constituting a very extended family. Parked at the truck stop, however, the machine enters the domestic garden—or more correctly, the back yard, for, typically, truck parking is situated at the rear of the truck stop. Outside and inside form a "dialectic of division," analogous to that of the suburban house on its ubiquitous front yard, that makes them both isolated and penetrable.[6] Only within the confines of the truck stop interior, where drivers pass through the same spaces, performing the same rituals—dining, grooming, shopping, engaging in discourse, does a phantasm of domesticity become possible. In other words, the truck stop is a space of sociality that alludes to, but hardly defines, domestic relations, in the widest sense of the term.

The illusion of domesticity, however, is not sufficiently palpable to erase from the truck stop the residue of work and its traditionally masculine telos. As an institution and practice, trucking involves physical labor, which recent scholarship in masculine studies suggests is necessarily connected to the semiotic construction of working man's bodies as their primary economic asset.[7] In this connection, maintenance and repair of equipment at the truck stop are self-evident extensions of the active labor of driving. Documenting logbooks, scheduling deliveries, and faxing load confirmations are equally critical to the work of trucking, yet reflect modern accounts that organize and rationalize masculinity around "technical knowledge." As a domain of work, the truck stop blurs the clear economic circumstances, institutional structures, and spatial domains of the blue-collared factory floor and the white-collared office.

In spite of the rigors of trucking and the pragmatic concerns of the driver, the male telos of the truck stop cemented its identity as a "grimy asphalt jungle crawling with hot-pants clad lot lizards and amphetamine pushers."[8] The stereotype fast diminished when the industry, anxious to expand, aggressively changed its image to attract a four-wheel driving clientele, a marketing strategy analogous to Las Vegas's self-referential reinvention of itself as a family destination. A critical mass of news articles, including a *National Geographic* profile of the Giant Truck Stop in Jamestown, New Mexico; chronicles on "best of" series on the discovery channel and the food network, and the publication of an *All American Truck Stop Cookbook* make clear that the truck stop no longer evokes images of "greasy spoons catering to rough clientele."[12] Popular travel literature notes with awe that the Lodi Travel Center (near Cleveland) features a Starbucks café; 260 slot machines energize the Alamo Truck Stop at Sparks, Nevada; and travelers in range of Salisbury South Carolina's Derrick Plaza Truck can tune in the CB to hear Sunday morning services broadcast from its chapel. The Iowa 80, the largest truck stop in the world, boasts a food court filled with fast food nation staples Wendy's, Dairy Queen and Blimpie, and a well-stocked Trucker's Warehouse Store. Noteworthy for its selection of chrome items, the boutique affords opportunities to dress up the Peterbilt just as the Home Depot markets Ralph Lauren paint to embellish any suburban tract house. The appearance of chiropractor offices, clinics for sex workers, and permanent ministries housed in abandoned trailers, however, transcend the culture of late-capitalism and underscore the degree to which the truck stop has evolved from a modest arena of roadside commerce to an expansive ex-urban community. Consequently, neither the gas station, the fast food restaurant, nor the shopping mall—where Sears long ago conquered the dilemma of harmoniously intermingling tire sales, oil changes, and ladies lingerie—offer satisfying models for making cultural or architectural sense of the truck stop, both a space of transience that marks the "in between places" of the highway and a destination in and of itself.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In its emulation of domesticity, the truck stop advertises a hegemenous model of domestic bliss that enforces precise orders of sleeping, eating, and bathing that are requisite for conducting a life in common. Along its restaurant counters, in carpeted lounges that lead to shower halls, and, on the blacktop of its parking lots, quasi-public places of encounter, discourse, and occasionally, sexual concourse locate a sociality that is bound, concomitantly by the mystique of the road and the rigors of the trucking industry. For all the designer coffee, home-style fried chicken, and chrome ladies that can be bought at the Detroiter or the Tucson Truck Terminal, the truck stop cannot be dismissed as just another landmark of late-capitalism. Each truck stop has a significance that transcends its physical character and architectural situation. The truck stop is not a neutral local in which social relations unfold; it is a spatio-temporal structure of social life that defines how social action and relationships are materially constituted and made concrete not merely in built form but always in space. Like the liminal edges and decentered slums of late-capitalist cities, truck stops are heterotopias, which are, according to Michel Foucault's formative discourse, "those singular spaces to be found in some given social spaces whose functions are different, or even the opposite of others.[10] Understanding the truck stop as a heterotopia, thus, recognizes how it juxtaposes in one real place several different spaces, incorporating several sites that are in themselves incompatible with or foreign to one another.[11]

In conclusion, the banal commercial façade of the truck stop belies its intricacy as a self-contained community. The twenty-first century truck stop is nothing like its antecedents of the 1920s or the 1950s; neither are the cities linked to the interstate much like those of thirty years ago. After one-half century of the suburbanizing and malling of America, the big truck driver is hardly alone when he plots a route that patently avoids the old city center. Perhaps the truck stop appeals to such a large audience of consumers because it is painfully akin to the new setting for urban life in which they increasingly dwell—new edge cities called superburbias, suburban activity centers, and pepperoni pizza cities.[12] For a night or two at a time, the truck stop has all the functions these new sort-of cities have, and just like them, spaces and places are spread out in a form that only the road can recognize.

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6. ENDNOTES

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[2]See John A. Jakle, “The American Gasoline Station, 1920-1970,” *Journal of American Culture* 1 (Spring 1978): 529-31.
[3] Marty Stuart, “Truck Stop Heaven,” *The Oxford American*, March-April 2001,unpaginated.
[4]See Chester Liebs, *From Main Street to Miracle Mile*, *American roadside architecture* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 104-105; see also “Standardized Service Stations Designed by Walter Dorwin Teague,” *Architectural Record* 82 (September 1937): 69-72.
[5]Stuart, “Truck Stop Heaven.” Meridian architect Ed Welles argues that the arrangement was simply the product of Risher’s exploration of modern space relative to the program (telephone interview, 14 September 2003). See also “Red Hot Truck Stop,” http://members.tripod.com/redhottruckstop/Index.htm.
[6]See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans, Mara Jolas (New York: Orion Press, 1964).
[7]See especially R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 36, 55.
[8] Kitty Bean Yancey, “Truck Stops Pump Up Image,” *USA Today,* August 31, 2001, 8D.
[9]Jim Wilkes, “The Truck Stops Here,” *Toronto Star,* June 28, 2002, B3.
[10]Michel Foucault, *Other Spaces,* 1967; see also his “Space, Knowledge and Power,” in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reade*r (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 252, and Alain Corbin*, Women for Hire, Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1950,* trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996). .
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