concern ourselves with the formal expression of possible interventions; we need to think again about the methods of implementation. We must learn to engage in the political and legal process of the material reality of our visions.

These assumptions form the base for the following text and projects that look at possibilities to amend the American strip and make it not only a well functioning supply of infrastructure but at the same time an environment that offers more sustainable opportunities for the new social and cultural demands of future generations.

2. strip mall - maximization of infrastructure

The infrastructure we build can be seen as a reflection of the life we live; it is the foundation for all our interactions. The network defines our lifestyle and is an expression of what we value and how we organize our society. The massiveness of neglect of this strip mall infrastructure, that reshaped most United States communities, is astonishingly overlooked. Brian Walsh writes in TIME Magazine (March 12th 2009) : “The American suburb as we know it is dying. … Shopping malls and big-box retail stores, the commercial anchors of the suburbs, are going dark — an estimated 148,000 stores closed last year, the most since 2001. But the shift is deeper than the economic downturn. Thanks to changing demographics, including a steady decline in the percentage of households with kids and a growing preference for urban amenities among Americans young and old... .”

We cannot afford to give up an infrastructure with an embedded investment of such vast dimensions. It would be irresponsible to risk economical and social expenses for yet another tabula rasa that promises each "new society" a new world that is maximized for its new inhabitants. Infrastructural alterations at this scale are no longer questions of style, individual expression or special interests. They are a question of recourses, physical as well as cultural.

Recent emergence of “New Urbanist” town centers are shifting away from their suburban past and giving up on
a past investment of existing infrastructural networks, material realities and energy embodiment. In the case of a small bedroom community in Canton, Michigan, a private developer bought over 275 acres of farmland 4 miles SW from the center of town, where most large scale retail developments are located, to reestablish a new, traditional and culturally focused ‘town center’ with a main street, theatre, and dense residential housing. They do not realize that this too is just another strategy of maximization without any connection to the multi-layered reality of the community, and not a far cry from the strip mall they try to replace. The strip mall is a reality that cannot be ignored.

In the 1950s, the members of Team X, most notably Alison and Peter Smithson, argued against a maximization of urban zones for just one use as proclaimed by modernist proponents. The modernist movement developed strategies that were impossible to be implemented without massive destructions of the existing context. In the case of the Smithson’s Economist Building in London, England, they countered the tabula rasa in favor of insertion into the existing context. Initially, through the use of montage, the Economist building appears to strategically embed itself in the existing context through the orientation of the three buildings, one of which pushes to the corner to reveal a single bay window implanted onto the adjacent existing building. But in the case of the Economist Building, it is clear that the Smithson’s did not accept the existing entirely either. The infrastructural aspect of the parking and its use as a base for a public space depended on the destruction of the existing city block. Only the added bay window to the existing building hints at a possibility of a less intrusive intervention. Similar to the Spanish artist, Santiago Cirugeda, whose urban interventions reflect on a similar notion that parasitic architecture feeds off the existing. But in the case of the Smithson’s bay window, it doesn’t tap into or feed off existing but amends it in the process.

Similar to the critique of Team X, Denise Scott-Brown and Robert Venturi reflected on how the popular culture of the strip was a contradiction to the expression of the uniform post war modernist architectural expression. They argued for an integration of this new popular culture into the architectural discourse. What is intriguing about all of these positions is that they have embedded in their argument an idea of continuity of a past investment whether they agree or disagree with it. This attitude goes beyond the importance of the architectural expressions that were derived from them. Through the notion of continuation they offer a stand against the maximization of a singular idea.

An implementation of their ideas demands multiplicity of different aspects as conditio sine qua non. It is an approach that requires an acceptance of past investments and does not allow an attitude of exclusiveness. We must accept past investment in an uncritical way as to not hinder ourselves from moving forward and making necessary amendments to the problems. There must be reciprocity with, or acknowledgment of, the pervasive infrastructural and economical framework we have to work within – and without prejudices.

This understanding of reciprocity is similar to Neil Leach’s description in Camouflage, where he dissects the
relationship between a wasp and an orchid, “…wasp and orchid enter into a mutual reciprocity, such that the wasp has adapted to the orchid, no less than the orchid has adapted to the wasp...
The logic, then, is one of ‘becoming’. It is not a question of imitating some entity, so much as entering into its logic. It is not a matter of representation, but of affect.” So, if we accept the inherent logic of the typical peripheral strip with its economic and pragmatic necessities and become part of the existing network we might be much closer to providing cultural and civic reinvestment that is missing from the current state of the suburban periphery.

In many aspects these positions have been further developed in the architectural discourse through a more careful consideration of programmatic organization on all scales. But the implementation on the level of suburban infrastructure has resisted these ways of thinking since it is fundamentally related to an economic system that, as a goal, focuses solely on the maximization of capital. Each big box, each strip mall parking lot, each drive-through, each piece of the suburban infrastructure is ultimately subordinated in its being to this idea of maximization, serving only one purpose at a time, a reflection of the suburban lifestyle. But any kind of categorical rejection of this system can only lead yet to another system driven by maximization.

3. amendments: alterations, changes and corrections

The only sustainable reaction can be the one that embraces the status quo but does not accept it. New urban solutions should be to reintegrate the structure of these strip conditions into a ‘real’ utopia. There is a level of acceptance that must take place where one must learn to work with amendments rather then with revolutions.

As stated by Rem Koolhaas in ‘The Generic City’ of SMLXL, “…the great originality of the generic city is simply to abandon what doesn’t work – what has outlived its use – to break up the blacktop of idealism with the jackhammers of realism and to accept whatever grows in its place.” This is the reality when most react to the generic suburban strip but we need to be more critical and not accept mere replacement but alterations to existing conditions. To accept this environment in its current state as the reality is not enough anymore. We need to go further and not only accept an interaction with what we might consider our worst enemy but learn to see it as the base for our work. If we are at all serious about sustainability we cannot afford to reject a project that has as much embedded energy as the typical strip mall. We must be able to alter, tweak and improve the current condition so that people do not carelessly give up a vast portion of our built environment only because there was again a better promise.

It is the great quality of our society, that through the laws we create, society is once again empowered to express their needs. But we must take these possibilities seriously and engage in this process. It is the amendment that would allow changes that demand the right for a more social, and energetically sustainable environment without total reset. The amendment is a more surgical approach.

At the core of these proposed amendments lies the possibility of the public to demand a certain standard of quality through the codes we enforce. Recently, President Barack Obama successfully convinced Congress to pass one of the first energy bills to combat global warming. In an article posted by the New York Times the reality of needing to bring federal regulation to the local level was evident, “Potential changes to how homes are built and even financed seem likely as energy efficiency is taken into account in building codes.” This offers the opportunity to amend the building codes and integrate more reciprocal approaches to existing strip conditions. This will allow not only for a revival of the strip but it will be a base for a new kind of living environment. New programmatic inserts that become part of the existing infrastructure do not neglect the needs of a thriving retail and entertainment economy but also don’t allow a maximization of these infrastructures...
for only one purpose either. The big box retail can be seen as a seed for additional program. The goal is the integration of multi-functional spaces and programs, such as public and event space, new businesses and various residential communities. The target clientele would be those who want to profit from programmatic proximities, such as urban dwellers, housing for the elderly, single parents or students.

This new shift in programmatic functions does not, by any means, alter the general functions of the strip; they only amend them. Even with new proposed visions for high-speed rail that will hopefully come to fruition, we must accept that cars will still be the main mode of transportation for many decades to come. New ways of thinking about the extended possibilities of infrastructure make the integration of alternate modes of transportation like biking or walking not just possible but a viable option.

Urban Amendments are an alteration or a correction; not a replacement or substitution to what already ‘works’. These urban amendments are within reach if we obtain them through the realm of the current law. An amendment implementation requires that architects, planners and the like become more engaged in a critical practice that embraces public discourse. This of course will not be easy since the law is not at the forefront of most American architecture program curriculums. Reinforcing the knowledge of the building code has been long ruled out as a tool or method to contribute to a sincere intellectual architectural discourse. But the current political readjustments and ever-growing ecological consciousness create a unique opportunity to show not only our interest in this public discourse but also our knowledge, expertise and vision and most importantly our eagerness to amend our environment. Urban Amendments are a way to establish sustainable and real utopias.

4. projects - big boxes, little boxes, all kind of boxes

The following projects show the potential of such an approach to amend our suburban periphery at the core of most bedroom communities – the strip. The foundation of all projects is the stated ‘6. Urban Amendments’ to typical building codes. The projects are by no means meant to be specific or exclusive. They should be read, not as individual projects for one particular strip mall but as a demonstration of approaches to change the prototypical strip throughout the United States.

The Urban Amendments are projects of imagination, an invisible city yet to be uncovered. A city that is far beyond its current state but securely founded in the origin of its infrastructure.
6 URBAN AMENDMENTS

The following 6 urban amendments are only a sample of alterations that could be made to the building or local zoning code of any generic strip, commerical, or business zone if a town deems necessary to make such alterations. These amendments are meant to support private / public partnerships for easability of implementation at a small urban scale.

How to read the Urban Amendments: The original code is written in standard, arial font. Each urban amendment 'alteration' to the code is highlighted in BOLD, CAPITAL TEXT. If the code needs revision or is no longer relevant, current requirements are canceled with a strike-through text.

1. PARKING AMENDMENT
   Section VI-1. Parking and Access - Design and Specifications of Off-Street Parking

   1. Permeable asphalt, permeable pavers or other suitable surface including new environmentally friendly technologies IS THE REQUIRED MATERIAL IN CASES WHERE TREES ARE REQUIRED AND TO PROVIDE GATHERING SPACE IN OFF-PEAK BUSINESS HOURS as approved by the Zoning Administration. All off-street parking lots, access drives, off-street loading areas, and parking spaces shall be paved with a hard surface including concrete, asphalt, or brick. IN LOCATIONS WHERE TREES ARE NOT REQUIRED.

   2. Distinct landscaping, such as large caliper, or ORCHARD trees (ANY SPECIES THAT CAN BE HARVESTED, I.E. FRUIT, NUTS, ETC.) WITHIN PARKING LOTS, should be used to link signage, pedestrian facilities, parking areas, drainage areas, and buildings together in order to distinguish the site PROVIDE POCKETS OF PUBLIC SPACE FOR PEDESTRIANS. Orchard trees are preferable to off-set additional costs for landscaping and is seen as a sustainable solution for the longevity of the community.

   3. Open space uses, such as environmental corridors, protected natural areas, community parks, water bodies, and storm water facilities, AND PUBLIC SPACE MUST be either retained, created or incorporated into the development plan IF IT DOES NOT ALREADY EXIST.

Table VI-1A. Shrub Species for Parking and Access

1. One tree shall be provided for every nine 3 parking spaces. Trees must be planted at intervals of less than nine 3 spaces to achieve a more even spacing along the row AND CREATE A CONTINUOUS CANOPY OF SHADE OVER PARKING AREAS.

2. Deciduous canopy street trees, SUCH AS FRUIT OR NUT TREES shall be provided along all streets AND PARKING LANES in a development. Trees need not be evenly spaced FOR EASE OF FARMING, and should be placed in the landscaped area of a boulevard, or in tree wells, AND ALL PARKING SPACES. TREES SHOULD DEFINE EDGES OF ALL PUBLIC PLAZAS.

3. DUE TO FEDERAL REGULATION, RETAIL DEVELOPMENT AND FARMERS WHO PLANT ORCHARD TREES CAN SELL POLLUTION CREDITS THROUGH PLANTING ADDITIONAL TREES THAT ABSORB MORE CARBON DIOXIDE.

Table VI-1B. Compact Car Spaces

In the descriptions below we have identified 6 typical infrastructural conditions that have the potential to offer the highest impact to a neighborhood or town and bring about density, multi-functionality, cultural identity and public space. If any of the 6 amendments are used in combination with one another, the opportunities for civic improvement will increase.

1. DUE TO MARKET TRENDS AND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTRICTIONS, where ten FIVE or more parking spaces are required, the Zoning Administrator may WILL authorize up to 90% of the total required parking spaces to be designated as compact car spaces.

2. The length of compact car spaces may be reduced from the standard to 15 feet six inches to 12 FEET and the width may be reduced to eight feet six 8 FEET inches. TAX INCENTIVES WILL BE PROVIDED FOR THOSE APPLICANTS WILLING TO DEDICATE AT LEAST 50% OF COMPACT SPACES TO ‘SMART CAR’ SIZES WHICH ARE 12 FEET IN LENGTH AND 6 FEET IN WIDTH.

3. IN THE CASE OF EXISTING PARKING LOTS, THE GAINED SQUARE FOOTAGE ON THE PROPERTY DUE TO SMALLER PARKING SPACES MUST BE USED AS PUBLIC SQUARES, EVENT GATHERING SPACE, ETC. UNLESS ADDITIONAL PARKING IS NEEDED UNDER EXTREME CIRCUMSTANCES.

2. RETENTION / DRAINAGE + STORM WATER RUNOFF AMENDMENT
   Section VI-2. Drainage and Storm Water Runoff

1. The collection and diversion of such surface waters into public areas, or into drains which the applicant has a right to use, MUST BE SUITABLE FOR PUBLIC AND RECREATIONAL USE (FISHING, BATHING, ETC). DRAINAGE PONDS MUST HAVE PROPER VEGETATION, APPROVED BY THE CITY, FOR FILTERING WATER.

2. That such surface waters will not MUST be deposited on the property of adjoining land owners in such concentrations as may thereby cause damage PROVIDE A PUBLIC CONNECTION to the adjoining property TO ENCOURAGE PUBLIC INTERACTION BETWEEN VARIOUS PROGRAMMATIC FUNCTIONS.

3. Drainage areas may MUST count as open space, but should not AND SHOULD constitute the majority of open space IF PUBLICLY ACCESSIBLE AND NOT OTHER SPACE IS DEEMED POSSIBLE FOR PUBLIC OCCUPATION. Drainage areas should be permanently accessible to the public and link to other such areas, SUCH AS PARKING LOTS, CULTURAL SPACES, AND MIXED-USE PROGRAM within a development.

4. ALL DRAINAGE AREAS MUST provide connections to existing and planned bicycle, shared-use paths, and greenways ADJACENT TO THE DRAINAGE PONDS.
5. Distinct landscaping, such as prairie REGIONAL VEGETATION AND SEAWEED plantings FOR FILTERING, ALONG DRAINAGE PONDS should be used to link signage, pedestrian facilities, parking areas, drainage areas, and buildings together in order to differentiate the site PROVIDE PUBLIC AND RECREATIONAL SPACE FOR PEDESTRIANS.

3. COMMERCIAL BUILDING AMENDMENT
Section VI-3. Building Regulations

1. In the B-3 and B-4 Districts, if the height of a building exceeds two stories or 25-75 feet, the minimum side and rear yards shall NOT be increased IF A ONE STORY CULTURAL BUILDING MASS (SUCH AS THEATRE, MUSEUM, CHURCH) IS PROVIDED ABOVE EXISTING BUILDING STRUCTURE.

2. IT IS NOT REQUIRED TO incorporate common patterns and architectural characteristics found throughout the development and the surrounding area, roof types, and building massing IF NEW STRUCTURES ARE PROVIDED ABOVE COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS THAT WILL DENSIFY THE DISTRICT AND PROVIDE MULTI-FUNCTIONAL USE PROGRAM.

4. SETBACK AMENDMENT
Section VI-4. Front, Rear, and Side Setbacks

1. Setback is from any road easement or road right-of-way; corner lots shall have two front NO setbacks AND CONFORM TO AREAS NOT OCCUPIED BY EXISTING PARKING AND ACCESS. Front minimum setback = 30 feet; Side min. setback = 15 feet; Rear min. setback = 20 feet

2. Multiple Frontage Lots- The rear line of a generally rectangular lot with frontage on two intersecting streets shall be the line parallel or approximately parallel to the narrower of the two street frontages AND EXTRUDED FOR DENSER BUILDING MASS WITH 80% MIXED BUSINESS PROGRAM (I.E. START-UP CONTAINERS FOR NEW BUSINESSES, TRADE SCHOOLS, ETC).

3. Front, Rear and Side Setbacks- Each required setback BEYOND PARKING + ACCESS AREAS SHOULD BE EXTRUDED FOR DENSER BUILDING MASS AND shall be increased by three feet for each ten feet or fraction thereof over 25 feet in building height, whichever is greater.

3. Front and Rear Setbacks - No Display of merchandise shall be placed in any required front setback BUILDING WHEN FIRST LEVEL IS PUBLIC, when UNLESS screened in compliance with Section VI-6.2.

5. SIGN AMENDMENT
Section VI-5. General Sign Permit Requirements

1. Freestanding ALL signs should incorporate design elements, such as BUILDING FACADES WITH 90% MULTI-LIVING PROGRAM (I.E. MARKET RATE, MIXED-INCOME AND/OR ELDERLY URBAN LIVING) landscaping, strategic placement, and compatible materials, to draw attention. Monument signage* (as opposed to pylon signs) is strongly encouraged REQUIRED when appropriate, especially near residential areas AND BUSINESS DISTRICTS WITH MIXED USES.

*Monument Sign: A freestanding sign supported primarily by an internal structural framework. A BUILDING MASS TO BE SEEN FROM AT LEAST 300 FEET AWAY AND AT LEAST 4 STORIES, or other AND MADE OF solid structural features other than support poles.

6. FENCE | SCREENING AMENDMENT
Section VI-6. Screening Requirements

1. Buffer and Landscape Yards
In order to maximize MAXIMIZE POSITIVE impacts between uses of varying intensity, to create a more effective INTER-CONNECTED community, and to provide a greener URBAN edge to our environment AND ENSURE PROGRAMMATIC QUALITIES ARE BROUGHT TO NEIGHBORHOODS THAT INCREASE DENSITY AND SPUR ACTIVITIES NEEDED TO ESTABLISH MULTI-FUNCTIONAL URBAN SPACES, the following requirement shall apply:

2. Outdoor Screening
The screen shall be at least EIGHT feet but not more than EIGHTEEN feet in height and shall provide a permanent, opaque, year-round, visual barrier BUILDING WITH ATLEAST 60% PROGRAMMED SPACE (DAYCARE, YOUTH CENTER, SPORTS + RECREATION, JUNGLE GYMS, COMMUNITY AND SPORTS EQUIPMENT STORAGE, ETC.) to ensure that outdoor commercial areas are not visible BUT ACCESSIBLE from TO THE public rights-of-way or adjacent residential property as identified above.
Retention ponds exist in most suburban peripheries and we normally brush past them as inevitable wastes of valuable open space. Instead of turning the other cheek we should embrace these spaces as potential recreational havens that offer such qualities as riverwalks, swimming, boating, or even fishing.

In the case of ‘the submerged box’, seaweed planted in underwater concrete containers assures a simple system to control the amount of nutrients in the water which is crucial to maintain the quality of the water. The water flows through the seaweed into the container allowing it to retain excessive nutrients. These nutrients rise to the top of the stems of the seaweed which are then trimmed thus taking the bound nutrients out of the system. The cleaned water is collected and reinserted into the system guaranteeing a natural water supply. Since this system is naturally maintaining a balanced nutrient level as well as clean water supply into the retention pond, wildlife is attracted to the area and people are free to swim, boat, fish and enjoy a space they always viewed from a distance.

Through amending the storm water runoff and drainage requirements, ‘the submerged box’ brings vitality and life to what should naturally be sustainable and can serve as a community driver, literally stitching multiple spaces, owners, people and functions along one vision.
Most strip mall buildings are reduced to the bare minimum; materials and architectural integrity are sacrificed for square footage. But in the aftermath of the economic downturn, some low-cost retailers are rethinking their marketing approach. To retain their middle class customers some retailers are improving stores and amenities – quality is starting to matter. We need to harness this interest and offer cultural amenities that compliment commercial development.

Due to the structural framework of most large-scale retailers, ‘the [sky] box’ provides a spatial flexibility to amend space above and around the buildings. Introducing a secondary system of columns to an existing store doesn’t complicate interior organization and offers a potential to build upon the roof of the building with cultural amenities, such as theatres, youth centers, churches, museums, etc. that don’t currently exist in many bedroom communities. This approach doesn’t only benefit the community but offers stores the opportunity to capture customers who wouldn’t normally be there in off-peak shopping hours.
SIGNAGE AMENDMENT

Section VI-5. General Sign Permit Requirements

In Robert Venturi's Learning from Las Vegas, the 'dumb box' with a sign was beginning to tattoo the American landscape and it continued for the next 50+ years. Developers of retail space prefer signs to be seen from over 300 feet to maximize visibility. If each sign in America became occupied living and working space, the density of strip areas would increase by 15%, allowing for a multi-functional community within areas that are currently zoned for singular use. If the scale of signs expands to include market-rate, mixed-income, and more importantly – housing for the elderly* – additional eyes will not only be looking at the signs but looking back on the surrounding area.

With 'the [sign]al box', the simple notion of translating shutters to signs maintains the necessity to create high visibility while providing necessary privacy for the occupants. Through amending infrastructural necessities like signs, we can productively engage with the reciprocity between the signifier and signified.

*Considering more closely housing for the elderly – we are in the midst of the baby-boomer generation hitting retirement. The difference between this generation and those previous is their new standard of living: they are healthier, more active, and more interested in giving up their suburban lifestyle of lawn and gardening for closer proximity to amenities and people. We need living environments for older generations to live longer and not end up in elderly homes to be forgotten. The baby-boomers are establishing a new understanding of how we see the older generations and urban space needs to provide the necessary network for older generations to thrive.
the bachelor party returning home from all-night bar crawl...

everyone meeting up at Chili's after Obama 2012 political rally...

84 year old woman picking up her friend to get lemonade at TGI Friday's...

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