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ABSTRACT

Compressed Strip: The Deceleration of the Automobile

by

Maria Cruz

I am interested in erasing the disparity between the body and the automobile by allowing both to participate in a new and common public space simultaneously. This new public space incorporates various diverse models of trade; bazaar, market, ATMs, drive through restaurant etc..., into a series of striated zones or bands having to do with the deceleration of the automobile. The car by virtue of its speed becomes the pedestrian and its space becomes a market.

By annexing a portion of the set back off the street for slow traffic the first transition zone is established for the automobile. This allows motorists visual access to the business and amenities. The second zone is compromised of a series of drive through booths for the businesses on the lot. Within this band are permanent stalls for temporary or seasonal venders. The last zone farthest off the street is reserved for the traditional store restaurant and businesses.
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I have developed an interest in understanding how ethnic populations adapt to new environments. As an immigrant to this country I have a personal connection to Houston's immigrant population. Through their methods of assimilation, and appropriation I am interested in the cities evident transformation as a result of their insurgence. Houston is a sprawl of many cultures and ethnicity's within this pastiche rendered virtually homogenous by a limited pallet of building typologies, communities, neighborhoods and developments vie to define themselves largely by means of signs and symbols.

Ethnic pockets can be found throughout the city, these neighborhoods are rich in content that is not obviously apparent. They can be mistaken as chaotic because of the variations of customs they keep, throw out, or reinterpret in order to live. The question is how and what differentiates these people and their surroundings from others.

Most situations are that existing structures have been appropriated to accommodate different types of businesses that do not necessarily serve the function originally intended or the current function needed. More often than not, the circumstance allows them to re-use rather than destroy existing conditions. This allows for appendages that can help modify and better serve the needs of the community. Due to the nature of these neighborhoods, I have found that adding on to the existing condition is the most valid way by which to intervene. By this I mean these neighborhoods are full of a richness that accompanies re-use, an inventiveness that can not be planned and a use of other customs and cultural norms that add to the simplicity of the structures they inhabit.
Seen as a whole the city can be seen as fragmented, a patchwork changing abruptly every few blocks stitched together by large streets and intersections. Specifically, the ethnic entrepreneurs, I described below, take advantage of this fragmentation by providing a highly specialized service that caters to a specific clientele. Where these businesses manifest themselves is in the strip mall. It has become the architectural vehicle for economic opportunity in Houston. An example that typifies this observation is located in a 10-block radius around the intersection of Bellaire and Hilcroft. This is the site of primarily small ethnic business, housed in old strip malls from the early 70’s, they provide highly specialized services to the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood (about 71%).

There are three groups that use this site: one is the people who live there, the business owners, and the commuters who drive by everyday. A phenomenon that exists within ethnic populations that immigrate into this country is the "clustering of ethnic entrepreneurial niches." This clustering isn’t physical (geographical) but specialty oriented. Ethnic niches are industrial clusters of co-ethnic workers at levels far exceeding chance. They consist of non-mainstream groups that are self-employed they deviates from the general opportunity structure because local networks channel them into particular niches in different regions. For example around Houston there are a large number of Vietnamese nail shops. They start a network through their family and community. When a new person immigrates and needs a job they are directed to an already established family business.

This phenomenon has a specific manifestation in Houston mainly because there are no zoning ordinances, which facilitates a random organization of city center, residential, and commercial. This allows for a scattering of these ethnic clusters because they concentrate on their “specialty” and can locate themselves anywhere in the city.
At a larger scale, the site and the communities around it, can be seen as a patchwork of small neighborhoods coinciding within differing social/economic levels. Stitched together by large streets and intersections.
The site is located at the **intersection** of Hilcroft and Bellaire, outside of the loop, west on RT. 59.
The appropriation of existing strip malls is often seen as “ugly” or “chaotic.” It is characterized by multiple layers of seemingly random signs shouting competitively in different languages; makeshift markets and pedestrian activity in parking lots; and nodes of bus commuters sitting on curbs and newspaper dispensers at seatless bus stops. Underlying this physical occupation is a partnered economic occupation that situates itself within the mainstream commercial structure of Houston.

In trying to understand how most of the businesses operate in this area it is important to determine what role they are playing in attracting clientele. I characterized the businesses through the traffic they generated. For instance, there are only a few “Impulse Spots,” these are convenience stores, ATM’s, gas stations, drive through fast food. Basically any element for the car that provides easy fast access to the general public.

The second category is “Point of Origin,” this would be the home or work place. The traffic for these places is consistent. Everyday one must come to this area to work or come home after work. There is a fair amount of work places but they tend to fall behind the commercial fronts on secondary streets. This area is not characterized as residential or a business center. The last group is where everything else falls into, points of destination, mostly service, retail, and entertainment. This last group is what I thought generated all the traffic in this area. However, it only attracts the people in this neighborhood, the rest of the traffic is commuter traffic.

The discrepancy between the purpose of the commercial front and what is presently being appropriated for other uses generates a problem to the community. The neighborhood wants a public space for themselves, which is pedestrian friendly, a place to gather, shop and use the services they need. However one can’t deny the location of the neighborhood, on a highly trafficked street that also has needs, such as gas stations, and banking facilities.
In order to understand the distribution of program on the site, and the amount of traffic each program generated, an organizational system was established that characterizes three different uses of the site.
Existing Point of Destination: Service / Retail Stores
Existing Places of Origin: Home / Work Place
The redistribution of the existing program would allow for a better distribution of services that would accommodate both the commuter traffic and the neighborhood.
The nature of a strip mall is that is it is generic, anything can go into it. When these buildings where originally built around 1970, the strip mall was at its high point of sucess. The strip malls on this site were used the way they were intended, by drive through traffic. They operated the way larger strip malls now operate as a mall, a destination where one can get a few different things. They were not highly specialized, one of a kind stores, as they are now. At the moment they do not serve their function.

What the current strip malls are being used as is not the problem. The concern is how it is being used and is there a way to better accommodate the user. The characteristics of a strip mall are that they face the street and have a huge parking lot in front them to attract cars who are driving by. Currently the parking lot is used as sidewalk, vending place, gathering place, meeting place, eating-place. Etc... The method of approach is usually from behind but in fact people walking approach them from behind and from the sides. The present situation calls for a compromise between the store merchants who cater to the surrounding neighborhood, the automobile passerby, and the community.

The businesses on this site are specifically service oriented to the surrounding Hispanic neighborhood. What makes them unique is the common practice of providing access to one or more services. This comes about because the general knowledge of how to access various services is not wide spread in immigrant populations due to language barriers, and lack of basic services. Therefore, the storeowners act a "middleman" by providing access to specific services that are culturally related. For
instance, because there is a large population of people from Latin America, travel agencies can buy tickets in bulk. This allows for extremely cheap rates all year round about $200 to anywhere in Central America. These types of businesses are possible because they specifically concentrate on a certain market. This idea starts a certain type of network that operates locally by word of mouth. What else might a Latin immigrant need? Phone cards to call long distance, access to express mailing services and wire transfers. Consequently almost every store, even a shoe store sells phone cards and provides access to wire transfers. However, these services are not known throughout the city. A lack of accessibility to the general public is one of the problems with most services provided in this part of town. "Urgent Express" advertises itself as a type of convenience store for money; money orders, phone cards, telephone booths, wire transfers to Mexico, insurance, car titles, income tax returns, notary. Do they actually provide all these services? Most likely they provide access to a few and would direct one specifically to someone who would provide the rest. That would explain why there are three different telephone numbers on each storefront. The most interesting phenomenon is that these small stores, who barely have a store name, become a networking system to all kinds of services. These services don't necessarily need a place; they can be stripped to the absolute minimum, a sign.
The existing uses of space consist of a combination of mixed uses.

A. Travel Agency  "Urgente Travel"
1. provides insurance service
   713.432.1653
2. provides international courier service
   "Urgente Express" 713.432.7035
These mixed uses can be completely unrelated as in this instance, where a shoe store is also a delivery place.

B. Shoe Store  "Rogers Shoes"
1. provides deliveries to Honduras
   713.666.8203
2. provides deliveries to Guatemala and El Salvador  "Carza Express"
   713.662.0631
Parking lots are used as a place for vendors to sell merchandise out of the back of their trucks during the day.
Taco Stands sit next to existing buildings sharing the parking lot.
Defining Characteristics: Signage

One of the problems in this area is the lack of coordination when distributing signs. However, there seems to be an overriding system determined by the location of the observer.
Types of Signage are determined by the location of the observer. Depending whether one needs to see a sign from the street, or as one is walking into a store.

Window Signs

Best seen approaching store front
Signage: Types of Signs Determined by Location

Large Organized Signs

Best seen from the road or at a closer distance
Signage: Types of Signs Determined by Location

High Scattered Icons

Best seen from far away
Depending on where one stands, the signage from one block can be extremely chaotic.
Looking at a small space of 50 meters two different zones are apparent. The first part is public, the “Sidewalk Zone.” It becomes a meeting place, a place to get a paper or wait for the bus. The second zone is the private “Store Front Zone,” the conglomeration of product advertising defines it. In this particular store there are seven different kinds of Marlboro advertisements.

### BLOCK 2

IN A DISTANCE OF 50 METERS YOU CAN FIND.....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A STORE FRONT ZONE</th>
<th>B SIDEWALK ZONE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>COCA COLA .99</td>
<td>NOTICE NO TREPASSING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEPsi</td>
<td>NO LOTTERING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COPIES .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>COME IN TO WHERE THE FLAVOR IS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NEWSPAPER &quot;EL DIA&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PHONE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SPECIAL OFFER 22.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>METRO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TACQUERIA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TACOS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UNIQUE FURNITURE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>DINETTE SET</td>
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</table>
Sidewalk Zone_ The public space for the community.
Store Front Zone — The advertising space for products.
This diagram is proposing an organization for signage based on the zone and speed one is traveling. According to the BMW it takes a car, going 45 mph, 320 ft. to come to a complete stop. Therefore it takes a car going 10 mph, approximately 72 ft. to come to a complete stop.
Speed Diagrams
Speed Diagrams

scale 1" : 200'

relative speed zones

scale 1" : 60'
At 45 mph it takes 320° to react to something you see and to bring the car to a complete stop.
In order to redistribute the existing program, a smaller version of the existing buildings was moved forward towards the street. This is a diagram of the compress buildings replacing the sidewalk.
The basic diagram for the proposal is to implement a slow lane that allows for cars to move in and out of the new drive through component that has been added. This drive through component is a compressed version of the existing program replacing the sidewalk. The zone created between the existing and the new is for pedestrians only coming out to accommodate the bus stop.
Elements that determine programming: Middle Man Stores

**SALE OF AIRLINE TICKETS TO THE WHOLE WORLD**
**PREPAID CARDS FOR FAX, COPIES, ETC.**

**PUBLIC NOTARY**

**AGENCY OF THE 3 AMERICAS**
**WE'LL SEND YOUR**
letters, documents, packages
money orders, fast cash, packages by ship
free phone card when sending money

send money to Mexico
with RIA envia

**VENTA DE BOLETOS AÉREOS**
**TODO EL MUNDO.**
**PASATIEMPOS VACACIONALES**
**Y CRUCEROS**
**Y TARJETAS PREPAGADAS**
**FAX, COPIAS, ETC.**

(713) 777 7097

**AGENTE LAS 3 AMERICAS**
**SERVICIO DE ENCOMIENDAS**
**CENTRO AMERICA**
**SUR AMERICA**
**MEXICO**
**EL CARIBE**
The program is defined by what already exist on the site. What was added was a drive through version of that same program. I.e. an express gas station
This group of services allows for convenient access to western union type of places, phone card dispensers, and phone booths that dial out to travel agencies.
The vendor stalls are the new program that are adjacent to the existing buildings. They are canopy structures that provide a place for vendors to sell things out of their cars.
The parking falls behind the vendors and the existing strip malls.
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