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On the Social Reception of Material Form and Space, or, the SUV in the Melee

by

Juan Kent Fitzsimons

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

Master of Architecture

APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

John Bihn, Associate Professor (Director)
School of Architecture

Lars Lerup, Dean, Albert K. and Harry K. Smith
Professor, School of Architecture

Albert Pope, Gus Sessions Wortham Professor
School of Architecture

Houston, Texas

May, 2000
ABSTRACT

On the Social Reception of Material Form and Space, or, the SUV in the Melee

by

Juan Kent Fitzsimons

This thesis explores social representations in architecture that have been objectified by various discourses on space and human activity. Using the sport-utility vehicle (SUV) as a multifaceted object in which these representations are seen, the possibility that a single material environment can embody conflicting social roles is proposed. A trope—the melee—is introduced as a model for the reception of material form and space that is grounded in bodily experience tempered by memory and projection. Three ‘tries’ engage the SUV in the melee, placing its apparent fixed meanings in crisis. Formal analysis in each ‘try’ reveals the vehicle’s different typological allusions to Land Rovers, station wagons and crewcab pickup trucks. The imagined ancestries of the SUV—rooted in conquest, domesticity, and labor—conflict with one another and with its real uses, rendering architectural and urban space unfamiliar. In this melee, the embodied mind poses itself against the fixed social representations of spatial discourse.
Somehow, I have managed to encounter people whose own work elaborated with such finesse the very same ideas that so roughly pushed me along in my education. Annmarie Adams showed me that worlds were built from the stuff around us. Lars Lerup created places—books, schools—where such worlds are built. But despite these examples, I am not yet able to form the words to express the many ways in which John Blin has helped me search for my own place to build.

I do not work well alone; many have suffered my need for a group. I am grateful to Aaron Casey for his arguments, and Ernesto Alfaro for his angst. Michael Morrow enthusiastically supplied newspaper clippings and an air of humble genius. Brian Heiss was able to teach me many things, but he continues to do more than I ever will. Pleasant disorientation was due to the wildly diverse talents of Luke Bulman, Jaime Lara, Ali Mahjour, Joe Meppelink, Lee Moreau, and Kim Shoemaker.

Kayte Young looked (in the library) and listened (to me), while Sven Zbinden shopped for cars. Both did video work. Albert Pope’s keen sight helped me to steer the project.

I cannot list or summarize the reasons why my parents deserve my thanks. Most important, I think, is that they possess the wisdom, love and magic to have made me feel that I could do anything, without ever having pushed.

The mental mines planted by David Theodore continue to detonate on a quotidian basis.

Better work than this is deserved by Céline Lemercier, whose love never fails to amaze me. Who else would I see approaching in the rear-view mirror, Sunday paper in hand, the sole pedestrian in a field a large cars, to join me for a ‘video stake-out’ of a restaurant parking lot?
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A displacement is caused initially by a simple visual encounter with a new landscape. The encounter quickly implicates notions of the body, and then of space; of visceral experience and of the threat of violence. It is a displacement that implies a level of corporeal occupation accompanied by visual cognition.

To understand the displacement, a theoretical framework has to be improvised: representation in material space, mimesis in ephemeral action.

Soon, a new conception of the urban landscape comes into view—one that might account for phenomena such as gated communities, object-oriented space, and exacerbated yet thinly-spread cultural and social difference.

The displacement reminds me of another that occurred in an average suburb in the early 1980s. A childhood friend spoke of the Toyota 4-Runner that his parents had just bought. Pickup trucks, station wagons, Rovers: these were foreign to me. I was unable to bring the vehicle into my own world, a world of Plymouth Furies and Cutlass Supremes from the late 70s.

The 4-Runner, an early form of the now-popular SUVs, marked my difference from my friend, and the difference of his family from mine. It was clear that the object itself—a mass-produced, authorless object, a commodity that, like all automobiles, further commodified the lives of consumers—held some power that allowed me to orient myself with respect to the culture that it represented for me.

But the form and the space—physical, material—did not cause me to feel and act in a certain way. Rather, form and space allowed me to think difference—however mistakenly and with insufficient information that necessitated conjecture. It was not a given fact that the world of 4-Runners would be foreign to me. But I could conceive of a difference through the object that stood before me, that I sat inside, that hurtled me toward a weekend cottage, another foreign space and culture.

It was a difference from social identity, and thus from the intentions that seemed to lie behind the 4-Runner. But I didn't really know the vehicle's owners, and what I did know was not reducible to the 4-Runner alone. The thinking that I undertook was not dependent on the intentions of an individual who designed or used the SUV. Intentionality was reconstructed, it was supposed, contingent, for operational purposes only; for lack of experience with the 4-
Runner, intentions were inferred from the other automobiles and spaces brought forth through association. The excesses of material form and space in the 4-Runner, activated by memory that surfaced in a moment of displaced experience, buried the ostensible cultural or functional reasons for the SUV in an avalanche of alternative projections.

Now in Houston, the proliferation of SUVs is only one of many causes of displacement. But these vehicles seem to hold unusual possibilities for the theorization of the 'polysymbolic faculty' of material form and space, and therefore for the manner in which the physical environment can contribute to the production of social knowledge.

The present work is an attempt to develop a model of reception for material form and space that would ultimately throw into question some of the presumptions held by those who endeavor to create the physical landscape. The sport-utility vehicle is used as a privileged site for re-imagining the social world that has been fixed in objectified representations by such presumptions. This work occurs in three parts, each of which begins with a formal analysis of the SUV, progresses to a genealogical excavation of the SUV's possible readings, proceeds with speculation on the symbolic city that can be imagined through the readings, continues with a reflection on the conflict between the imagined ancestry of the SUV and its real circumstances, and finally posits a 'position' that can be adopted with respect to a formal and spatial object that has been found to tend toward the commodification of quotidian experience.

All three parts—which are in effect 'tries'—address the issues of typology, mimesis and reception in the SUV, each attempt pursuing distinct aspects of material, genealogy, and experience. Typology is explored as full formal coincidence in multiple objects, then as minor variations in spatial relationships amongst models, and finally as marked absences between a dialectical pair. Mimesis is sought in the juxtaposition of form with action, in the imitation evident in bodily positions in material space, and in the parody of appropriated identity. Three efforts place a person at the site of reception: first, as an observing eye, then as an active body, and finally as the eye of a body whose physiognomic habits are projected through
vision. The observing eye aspires to the object landscape in which SUVs are generally encountered; the sensual body accounts for the memory embedded in the interior space of the SUV; together, the eye and the body found the SUV as a site for the production of small knowledge, which gives the observer a more specific position with respect to the cultural values promoted in the social and physical landscape.

To position the SUV in the city, then, is to position oneself. But the city is changing; the landscape is composed increasingly of mobile objects; ‘positions’ are perpetually shifting. The SUV, while mobile itself, commands attention as no other object in Houston: approaching with enough momentum to crush one’s own shining metal body, it captivates perception with its immediacy and its visual autonomy. As an urban vehicle, it seems awkward and displaced, bold and overbearing—but, then, perhaps the adjective ‘urban’ must be reconsidered in light of this challenge. Furthermore, SUVs share characteristics with heavy work vehicles, yet their conspicuous use for the reproductive functions of the domestic sphere suggests a rhetorical excess of ability: perhaps ‘work’ has to be reconsidered. Viewed in very specific social and urban circumstances, the SUV renders representations of ‘colonists’, ‘women’, and ‘workers’ that tend toward the commodification of conquest, domesticity and labor in the contemporary city. To identify with such representations is to perpetuate that commodification.

But difference is inherent in the reception of form and space. And it can be exacerbated by considering, through visual and bodily projections, the operations of material form (type) in the context of social action (mimesis). It is precisely because the SUV recommends itself to a reconsideration of such notions as domination and labor that it should be scrutinized. Bodily interaction with these vehicles and the spaces between them might produce a symbolic landscape awaiting the establishment of multiple sites of resistance to social representations that are on the verge of disappearing as such.
Visuality, though it is associated with the European city, should not be discarded in favor of conceptual descriptions of space. The visceral promise conveyed in the appearance of Houston’s objects cannot be explained solely in terms of the hectic acceleration of information reception, the bending of time and space, and the breakdown of coherent value systems such as the traditional real estate market. If we at one time had to turn away from static, visual-spatial conceptions of the city such as Haussmann’s Paris in order to imagine (and then, inevitably, to find) non-visual phenomena that characterize the city, these efforts have threatened a critical engagement with form, its production and its deployment. Form has not ceased to operate in the imaginations of city dwellers. We still see what is in front of us, and must think about it, place it, assimilate it, hate it, and pass it through a host of filters. As our bodies move around gated compounds and through large vehicles, we still register material space as the receptacle of significant content.

In this section, the sport-utility vehicle will be observed in terms of its formal typological associations with other vehicles. The history excavated in the SUV’s genealogy shows that common conceptions of form and program are not tenable in the face of a typological reception model. Rather than understand material form in terms of its adequacy to programmatic intentions, typological reception highlights aspects of the physical environment that recall social identities, such as celebrity and anonymity. Such identities are transposed through typological associations of models from the past to the circumstances of the moment of encounter, and seem to attempt to reproduce cultural conventions. However, the encounter

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1 The objet type was Le Corbusier’s name for it, but the idea of refining industrial and domestic products into ideal forms that exploited the qualities of a given material and production method had been pursued by others, in particular Muthesius. See Kenneth Frampton, “The Deutsche Werkbund 1898-1927” and “Le Corbusier and the Esprit Nouveau 1907-31,” Modern Architecture, A Critical History, second edition, London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.


3 To believe so would be complicit with, among other things, the myth of total freedom in dematerialization. On that myth, see Albert Pope, “The Unconstructed Subject of the Contemporary City,” Slow Space, Michael Bell and Sze Tsung Leong eds., New York: Monacelli Press, 1998.
allows for aversion to, in addition to identification with, this cultural publicity. A typological approach to the SUV suggests that it be considered a sphinx, in so far as it challenges, through a series of symbolic juxtapositions, an individual’s identification with the material world.

The observer’s eye has recourse to many aspects of typology that allow the object named “sport-utility vehicle” (SUV) to exist beyond the confines of its marketed image. Taken as an object with formal, spatial and operational qualities, the SUV can attain the status of a model that contributes to the production of a type. in terms of the pair developed by Quatremère de Quincy in his memorable essay of 1825. The type, as described in that essay, exists when numerous singular works (of architecture, for de Quincy) exhibit certain inherent structural similarities that allow them to be grouped. These works are the models, and the type is the abstract agglomeration of the similarities amongst them.

A type, when recognized as the conceptual entity to which a material object encountered by an observer refers, suggests a number of conventions that are specific to the culture in which the type developed. Rafael Moneo attempted to understand the manner in which the formal, spatial and operational qualities of a series of models can imbue their type with cultural conventions. At one end of a field of polar extremes, he pointed to the Gestalt of form. “This would mean speaking about centrality or linearity, clusters or grids, trying to characterize form in terms of a deeper geometry.” Such a geometry for the SUV is characteristic of the interior of automobiles in general, and will be discussed below. In the context of our interest in the social world that visual observation of the SUV might bring into being, the other pole of Moneo’s field is of interest. That pole is the “reality” of a type, by which Moneo meant the “vast hierarchy of concerns ranging from social activity to building construction.” Through the real experience of material form and space by individuals, such varied qualities as spatial organization, social habit, sturdiness and versatility could come to characterize a type. The “reality” of the type roots it in an historical context, opening the way for a consideration of the cultural conventions and the human activity that the typological references of the SUV might bring forth.

Without intimate physical experience with contemporary SUVs, the eye can easily recognize that their size, shape, capabilities and interior spatiality make them models that associate them, through type, to Dodge Carryalls, a series of vehicles developed for the U.S. Army just prior to World War II. These four-wheel-drive 3/4-ton military trucks had their own significant predecessors. These were functional, rather than morphological, relatives, and their role in the transformation of warfare seems to have been independent of exterior form and interior space. The bloodline that relates the proto-SUV’s of World War II with their ancestors is adequately understated here:

The first use of motorized vehicles in war by American forces was in Mexico during the Mexican Punitive Expedition in 1916. General John J. Pershing asked for and received 150 Dodge five-passerenger touring cars. Up to this time the Army’s basic transportation was either the horse or the mule. Lieutenant George S. Patton led a charge against Mexican forces in three Dodge touring cars. The surprising speed of the Dodge cars completely overwhelmed the Mexicans and gave Patton the U.S. Army’s first victory by motorized troops. 6

Stated more clearly, when motor vehicles entered infantry battle, they irreversibly altered the nature of bloodshed in war: a transformation of temporal perception, a reduction of man-to-man combat, a concentration of destructive power in one driver’s hands, and an entirely new way of being felled on the battlefield.

The United States Army, recognizing the need to coordinate the development of military hardware in the context of industrialized production, worked with automotive engineers in the years following World War I. 7 The results included 18 standard types and sizes of four-wheel drive trucks, including the Dodge wagon.

But if motor vehicles modified the modes of bloodshed, they also recommended themselves to the medical services that responded to battlefield trauma. Already in the 1920s, early morphological prototypes of the Dodge wagon had been used as military ambulances in Europe.

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6 Ibid.
7 The legendary Jeep was conceived, for example, in response to the need for a light but resilient reconnaissance vehicle. It was designed by automotive engineer Karl Probst in three days in 1940 for the American Bantam Car Company. Willys-Overland won the contract to produce models based on the Bantam design. See Arch Brown, *Jeep: The Unstoppable Legend*, Lincolnwood, Illinois: Publications International, 1994.
(Fig. 1.3) The motor vehicle's most significant transformation to medicine in warfare, however, came later during the Spanish Civil War, in "an event as important in the history of war as the almost contemporaneous flight for the first time over Madrid of the Messerschmitt 109."5 Realizing that a large number of soldiers were bleeding to death on the battlefield or on trips from the front to the base hospital, and that many of those who arrived at the hospital alive were so weakened by the loss of blood that they were unable to survive surgery, Doctor Durán-Jordà, director of the blood transfusion service of the *Generalidad*, and Doctor Norman Bethune, a volunteer with the Republican Army, organized a mobile blood transfusion unit. During the night of 23 December 1936, a station wagon loaded with bottles of whole blood from donors in Madrid crept cautiously, without lights, to a casualty station on the front line on the city's edges. There, Bethune conducted, for the first time in history, blood transfusions on wounded soldiers in the midst of heavy battle.6

This coupled moment in the history of automotion in war—in which motor vehicles modified the methods of both carnage and care—was neatly resolved, at least formally, in the use of automobiles such as Dodge's four-wheel drive wagons as infantry vehicles, bloodmobiles and ambulances in World War II. (Fig. 1.4, 1.5) It seems, then, that the form of the military wagon was not reducible to a specific function or need on the battlefield. Instead, through use that was sometimes intentional, sometimes incidental, the vehicle acquired notions of its role in

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warfare that were simultaneously more vague and more specific than a program that might restrict it to either producing enemy corpses or receiving friendly casualties. More vague, because the wagon’s program would fall under an umbrella larger than any one function, and more specific, because it would come to represent the revolution in war that automobility allowed. Stalin rendered such a representation when he observed that World War II was to be a “war of motors,” and that “the side having the largest number of motors is bound to win.” Vehicles such as the Dodge wagon are imbued with a symbolism drawn not only from uses inherent in their form (such as the transport of blood or wounded bodies), but also from their more general vehicular capacities: the transformation of bloodshed and conquest. Far more than the embodiment of a rational functionalism, the form of the Dodge wagon was of mythical proportion.

This challenge to the programmatic transparency of form recurs far from the battlefields of Africa, Asia and Europe. The vehicle with multiple sanguinary associations found its way into the home market soon after the end of the Second World War. In 1946, Dodge introduced the Power Wagon to the American public (fig. 1.6). The Power Wagon was a civilian adaptation of Dodge’s military trucks, which were restyled with a conventional truck cab and a deeper and wider 8-foot cargo box. Dodge’s marketing strategy for the vehicle created a new concept in light-duty trucking, suggesting numerous uses for which the Power Wagon was ideally suited. The Power Wagon was, however, typologically identical to the military wagon, and its advertised suitability for civilian work could not eliminate its sanguine symbolism.

10 Stalin, who must have considered the revolutionary role of aircraft to have been adequately recognized in accounts of the First World War, was most familiar with the merits of the Jeep. Countries like Russia were able to buy material such as Jeeps through Roosevelt’s lend-lease program, which provided the “forces friendly to democracy” with the resources to fight the Axis forces. Thus some 4500 Jeeps were tested in campaigns in Africa, China and Russia even before the US, which Roosevelt saw as the “arsenal of democracy,” entered the war. The evaluation of these Jeeps—which had been produced in equal amounts by the three automobile companies Willys-Overland, Ford and Bantam—resulted in, among other benefits to the military-industrial complex, the awarding of the full wartime contract to Willys-Overland. Arch Brown, Jeep: The Unstoppable Legend, p. 28, 36.

11 Bunn, p. 8.
Such conjecture, which starts from a consideration of type, raises questions about the role played by the experience of material form in shaping one’s view of the world in which that form exists. In an object city such as Houston, the SUV is a significant element of that world, and the problems of form and function introduced by its military associates challenge at least two models of understanding the relationship between the physical environment and the human actions that contribute to our understanding of the social world. The first of these models—the form-value model—is discernible in the work of new urbanists and neo-traditionalists such as Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. The material space of the city whose rebirth their movement would oversee is an edited transposition of historical urban and architectural forms. Behind such transposition is the conviction that forms contain the values—cultural, programmatic, and economic—with which they are normally associated, and that forms are reducible to those values alone. The space between a picket fence and a porch, for example, is the perfect coincidence between set-back requirements, domestic bubbles and lawn maintenance. For some, the correct forms would ostensibly induce—in the most simplistic causal manner—sets of social relations appropriate to the cultural values that seem to arise effortlessly in other manifestations of those forms. Effort is to be put into selecting the correct values as antidotes for perceived cultural illnesses in contemporary urban society. For others, the consumption of form feeds either the growth of their social capital or, more directly, their narcissistic appetite. Code words such as ‘lofts’ and ‘palazzos’ thus acquire an exchange value on the spatial market.

The form-value model of the physical environment underestimates the volatility inherent in the interpretation of, and subsequent action with respect to, the material form that it tries to make instrumental. The second model—the programmatic model—avoids this volatility by rejecting symbolic form altogether in favor of a diagrammatic conceptualization of space. It is a conception that allows for ‘program’ to be construed broadly as any phenomenon that is not initially material, from the over-classification of human activity (most insidious when done in the name of the freedom of individuals to “create the space themselves”) to the unabashed embrace of market forces, zoning laws and demographic data as the indisputable yet constantly varying pulses of the world we inhabit. It is, nonetheless, an impoverished idea of program, as it only understands the development of material form as the by-product of nearly imperceptible forces harnessed by those with heightened senses. Material form is but a souvenir of excursions into wild, rhythmic lands (such as ‘datascapes’ or, worse, self-consciously ‘other’ cultures): a fetish whose only symbolic role is that it reminds one of its arbitrary symbolic value to other people who are distant in space or time. The work that is produced from a belief in this model is not necessarily bad—to say so outright would suggest that design intentions determine the designed object in the last instance. Rather, the danger of

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13 This phrase is so common in writing on design that a single reference would be both unfair and indicative of excessive estimation of the weight of words.

14 In a piece on the state to which the design disciplines have been brought by the “neoconservative fundamentalism” he sees in the popularization of such reductionist practices as ‘datascapes,’ Sanford Kwinter confesses to his own occasional promotion of dubious work (though never of that ilk) in the more general field of design. He redeems himself, however, by elaborating first the subtle yet critical differences between the derivative work of Koolhaas’s disciples and a more creative projection of future worlds, and then, more importantly, what is at stake in the loss of “social imagination” in such projections. "FFE: Le Trahison des Clercs (and other Travesties of the Modern),” ANY, n. 24, 1996. For the splinter that caused such irritation, see FARMAX: Excursions on Density, Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs and Richard Koek, eds., Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998.
such ironically limited programmatic thinking is that the rhetoric of pragmatism that accompanies the undeniably transgressive demeanor of the work seems to have made it impossible for anything but this combination to be discussed.

The adherents of this doctrine would explain (with appropriate condescension) the perimeter blocks of housing that neo-traditionalists might build in blighted inner city neighborhoods as the offspring of badly managed market forces and middle-class nostalgia. By the same token, material form that corresponds to a speakable program may only be seen in the reflected light of the human activity, free or restricted, prescribed by that program, and of heretofore invisible codes. The skyscraper, in this case, would be understood solely as the material consequence of the programs inherent in the mechanical repeatability offered by elevators: the object itself is only the trace of an ostensibly democratic culture.

These two models, while they seem to oppose one another, work together to direct attention away from the symbolic capacity of the “ugliness” of the contemporary urban landscape. But the momentary estrangement of the SUV, conspicuous in this landscape, makes it clear that its form has neither definite nor inconsequential connotations. The SUV’s formal relationship to vehicles of war, observable with the naked eye, opens it to multiple interpretations while assuring that those interpretations are not simply whimsical. A consideration of type, and the excavation of a genealogy for the SUV, suggests the need for a different model for the nature of reception of the physical environment, and thus of the ways in which that environment contributes to our understanding of ourselves and our social world.

Before such a model for reception can be posited (which will require that we move beyond the eye to the body), it will be necessary to lay bare the cultural conventions that can be inferred in objects such as the SUV. Another instance of vehicular estrangement suggests that the useful functions perceivable in material form and space are not especially significant in the production of social worlds. Rather, it is the appearance of social identity, however fictional, in the physical environment that makes experience a site of cultural production.
Contemporaneous with the increased use of light utility vehicles in North America was the continued European colonial presence in Africa. A recognizable icon of this presence in forestry, wildlife management, and territorial administration was the British Rover vehicle that made rapid transport available to the select few with executive and symbolic power (fig. 1.7, 1.8, 1.9). As with the Dodge touring in Mexico, the Rover's speed and range disturbed conceptions of time and space that were culturally as well as geographically bound. It is not unusual to speak of Land Rovers with 300,000 kilometers on a single engine, nor of fuel reservoirs sufficient for a 4000 kilometer non-stop trek. (Fig. 1.10) These machines were a gravitational center that allowed colonists, in the midst of the perceived stasis of nature, to identify themselves with cultural progress.

Parallel to the binary opposition between progress and stasis in colonial Africa was a social structure in which those with administrative appointments—which entailed ceremonial responsibility with respect to other local and foreign dignitaries—contrasted with those who were disenfranchised from the administration of the land. The governmental and diplomatic nature of official appointments conferred celebrity on the holders of office, and, by association, on the vehicles that they used; meanwhile, the colonial structure relegated the others to anonymity.

If the vehicles were in possession of such symbolic power, its investment is related to perceptions of form and function. At war, celebrity resulted from actual feats, as is exemplified in the recounting of General Patton's victory in 1916. Automobile performance and the physical characteristics—such as the slant of a windshield or the taper of a body—that seem to play a role in that performance could thereafter be associated with heroics on the battlefield. In the colonies, however, the association is less dependent on a real person or on a witnessed action. The structure projected by colonial administration, which was stable relative to traditional warfare, allowed the vehicle itself to confer celebrity on its owners through its formal coding of the potential for performance. The perception of the Rover, rather than its actual feats, could
reproduce the relationship between celebrity and anonymity. The hierarchy that is reflected in a motor vehicle relativizes an observer not only with respect to that vehicle's performance, but also to its overall form, which is for the most part incidentally related to performance.

In the colony, the celebrity perceived behind the form of the Rover is not a single person, but an identity whose potential to carry out both abstract governmental actions and violence to space and time is what separates it from the anonymous masses. Such perceptions of social identities in colonial circumstances suggest a relationship between material forms (such as the vehicle of celebrity) and space (as a landscape occupied by social beings). It is a relationship with at least one significant contemporary phenomenon, described here:

There are thousands of foreigners here [in Pristina], not just the peacekeeping troops but armies of aid workers, advisors and diplomats ... Already the international organizations are changing the look and feel of the city ... Between them, the United States Agency for International Development and the American mission here have leased 11 houses and plan to seal off both ends of the street to create a secure compound with guards at either end ... The foreigner's presence is being felt most immediately on the streets, because many of them drive big four-wheel-drive vans, outdone in size only by the NATO force's armored vehicles.14

The popular press is forgiving of writing that uncritically evokes shared urban imagery through simple vocabulary. No journalist need worry about precisely what psychological and cultural conditions allow a Kosovar to "feel" a foreign "presence." Nor need they be concerned with the volumes of literature in the design and planning disciplines that deal with the relationship between a city's "look" and its "feel". However, the observation that foreigners make their presence felt through changes to the look and feel of the city suggests that attention be paid to specific descriptions of what seems to be a new urbanism that recalls elements of colonialism. Sudden limited access to certain areas of the city, and the concomitant alteration of circulation routes for most inhabitants, results in cognitive structures that reinscribe an old pair—us and them—in the built environment. "We" cannot traverse their land; 'they' move over 'ours' as they wish, and usually in the form of "big four-wheel-drive vans."

Controlled pathways (around compounds), large vessels (containing protected mobile foreigners), implied capacity for performance (in the form and text of the vans): these qualities are analogues of an architecture concerned with bodily movement, differential spatial quality and functional rhetoric. If the familiarity of these three themes is amusing—drawn, as they are, from a distant city undergoing transformations under political conditions with which most North Americans have no direct experience—then the familiarity of the urbanism that they imply should be disturbing. Gated communities and SUVs are domestic analogues of the new urban landscape described in the passage. In the context of another round of North American urban renewal, the existence of 'us' and 'them' sentiments is difficult to deny. It is also clear that spatial accessibility and material form play significant roles in marking the perceived territories and characters of the inhabitants, new as well as old. 15 These markings, observable

14 Carlotta Gall, "These New Invaders have the Old Pristina Preening," The New York Times, October 5, 1999.
15 A jarring local example of the visceral demarcation of exclusive geography can be experienced by driving along Lovett street, heading east from Monroese, and being unable to continue down what is clearly a wonderful tree-lined boulevard. For a distance of about 5 blocks, the boulevard is accessible only by an electronic gate at either of its ends. Many itineraries that would be most efficient by crossing or passing along the axis of exclusive properties in this enclave are interrupted by bothersome detours that mark not only the seat belt-bound body, but also the socially-bound mind.
in such objects as the SUV, recall the celebrity and anonymity characteristic of the Rover’s African campaign.

Despite the otherwise terrifying nature of the situation described in the passage, its observations betray an optimism in the role played by the spaces and objects of the city in the production of social identities, not only on the part of the person controlling those spaces and objects, but also on the part of those confronted with a rapidly changing, other urban environment. To transplant that optimism to Houston, even if only momentarily, is to enter the territory of a city in which material space has been difficult to grasp.

Houston’s landscape incorporates material form whose excesses make the attempt to understand the city as the sum of parts that are reducible to individual intention futile. Equally frustrated are urban explanations based on an invisible, yet rational, hand. Some of the excessive material forms have been discussed elsewhere in terms of “megashapes”: extremely large bodies, such as the downtown skyline and itinerant weather systems, that recur in the visual field of the windshield. There are, however, other forms that confront us close at hand, at “ground zero,” where most of us spend our time. When great expanses of waste or vegetation don’t separate us from the focus of our vision, and when the highway interchanges don’t lift us to the only heights that many Houstonians are offered, we are mostly confronted with objects right before our eyes, only yards away.

Late on Sunday mornings, one of these objects takes form in the parking lot of a popular brunch spot. (Fig. 1.11, 1.12, 1.13) The object in question, which is best described as a street facade for the parking lot, is in fact an agglomeration of objects. This facade presents a neat row of SUVs that have climbed the concrete curb, traversed five feet of lawn, and settled

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17 The restaurant is called “La Strada,” an irony that will become clear shortly.
with their backs turned to onlookers. The SUV’s seem to be intentionally arranged, though it is not clear to whom the intention can be attributed. The automobile designers, anonymous in recent industry practices, cannot be credited, as their work generally ends in the limits of the single vehicle. The intentions of those who bought the vehicles cannot be considered, as this is a restaurant with valet parking. The intention behind the facade, then, would seem to rest in the valets. However, even this is inconclusive: it may be restaurant policy to park this way; or perhaps the form came about through the informal actions of the tip-earning valet’s.

The problem of intention deepens as the entire parking lot comes into view. On Taft Street, the SUV facade suggests that, here, brunch is exclusively a SUV-class affair. Around the corner, the complete landscape is seen: the single row of SUV’s in fact hides two rows of regular automobiles in the rest of the parking lot (fig. 1.14, 1.15). The restaurant loses its veneer of exclusivity. However, a binary field is created in the segregation and juxtaposition of the different automobiles. This field relies on a specific material context to give it form: cars enter the lot in the traditional manner, while the only access for the SUV row is up the curb and across the thin strip of lawn. Suddenly, certain characteristics of performance are brought to attention, with differential implications for cars and SUV’s. Regardless of actual capabilities, the cars are constructed as incapable of the off-road maneuver that SUV’s, as demonstrated, handle as easily as their owners handle brunch.

The owners, however, are absent from the scene. The dominion conferred on the SUV’s through the binary maneuver cannot be transferred back to those individuals. The choice made by purchasers is not at the origin of a chain reaction that results in this landscape, as can be inferred from the principle theme in SUV advertising, which would have the SUV and its
owner far away from urban gatherings in parking lots and the urbane gatherings of brunch. The intentions of the consumer class, even when taken as a consolidated whole, are not simply mirrored on the streets, so to speak. Material environments such as the brunch parking lot are not reducible to consumer statistics, opinion polls, demographic charts or color-coded maps. Similarly, the spontaneous markets that appear at the corners of major streets in western Houston—wild corners not yet tamed by strip malls—do not operate only as manifestations of an economic model. They have material form, symbolic content and physical limitations that rise from the hatchbacks that contain them. Likewise, the scattered parking lots that allow even the least remarkable buildings to show four facades are not solely voids in a damaged urban fabric. As in the brunch parking lot, they can take on architectural proportions in which a social persona, whatever delusions it may hold, can be inferred.

For one who drives by the facade on Taft Street, the 'truth' of authorship cannot be known; it does not, in fact, matter. If an intention is to be found behind this facade, it can only be attributed to a fictional author who exists in the mind of the observer. The valets, after all, are **bricoleurs** with a strangely limited palette, as they cannot control the full symbolic content of the material form with which they must produce the street facade. The observer, on the other hand, has the luxury of projecting onto the form a selection of experiences, knowledge and prejudice that filter the symbolic content of the row of SUV's and produce an intention, with corresponding authorship, for the landscape. As more parking lots are encountered, the observer develops a map of the various personas or social identities that seem to populate the interstitial spaces of the city.\(^\text{18}\) Then there are the houses, towers, overpasses and strip malls with which to cope. In order to produce a comprehensible and integrated entity from the (ironic) surplus of material in Houston's urban landscape, an observer draws from experience, orienting himself with respect to the city.

\textit{encounter and identity}

Contemporary SUV's in Houston, when they are not precisely Land Rovers or Range Rovers, bear most of the formal and functional characteristics of the British product (fig. 1.16). Their names also recall a relationship to the wild landscapes of colonization, and the promise of

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\(^\text{18}\) While the work of Kevin Lynch focused on the legibility of architectural objects, and not on the reading of personas in the urban landscape, the idea of mapping the city suggested here recalls his work. See Kevin Lynch, \textit{A Theory of Good City Form}, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1961.
celebrity: Expedition, Excursion, Explorer, Blazer, Pathfinder, Land Cruiser, Discovery, Mountaineer. Further, as we have seen, SUVs are nearly identical to the vehicles used by the US Army in World War II. The characteristics of the type that relates all these vehicles account for such a great proportion of the characteristics of each model that they are formally and functionally identical. In fact, sport-utility vehicles seem to belong to an archetype, materially identical to what turn out to be not ancestors in a line of evolution, but predecessors in a line of cloning.

What world might one produce from the encounter with such clones? There is clearly a relationship between the form and function of SUVs that cannot be stated in terms of adequacy or complementarity between object and need. The transport of both bloody bodies and plywood sheets is facilitated by a vehicle with a large cargo area and underbody clearance that can negotiate unpaved surfaces, but the form of the vehicle is not the result of such needs alone. (Fig. 1.17) While form might be explained rhetorically in terms of the ends to which it is employed, the social world that is produced at the moment of encounter with form is composed of identities, not necessities. The idea that real needs correspond to definite forms cannot account for the interpretive play at the disposal of an observer who realizes that, in a city where metal objects come at us with the speed of a cavalry charge, behind each form is some fictional social being.

The clones in Houston may be a front for a new kind of celebrity. However, as with the willful persona that is imagined behind the parking lot facade, the identity behind the SUV's actions can only be imputed from the clues that an observer is capable of recognizing. To begin with, it is unlikely that one would know, through a personal relationship, the driver of an SUV that one sees trundling along a sun-dappled residential street in Houston. Access to the driver's thoughts on her place in the city, the functions of her vehicle, and the symbolic world to which her vehicle contributes is impossible and, most likely, unhelpful in mapping one's own city. Moreover, the SUV, which is understood as an industrial product and therefore an object designed without the consumer's direct input, refers to sets of intentions that lie beyond the driver's domain of interests and skills. But, unlike other design professions, it is not common to 'single out' automobile designers as public personas whose intentions can be read in the
form of their cars.\textsuperscript{19} Car companies, and more specifically their product lines, present their concerns and goals through various advertising media, but it is very rare to see automobiles associated with human designers who might have social identity.\textsuperscript{20} It is much more likely to see, in mass media, the identity of motor vehicle designers distributed back onto the car builder’s public: references to consumer needs (gathered through market studies) and concerns for family safety, for example, abound in automobile advertising and test-drive television programs. Thus, in looking for the intentions of the celebrity in the SUV, one is compelled to reflect on ‘the public.’

That public, an imaginary entity, can be discerned not only in explicit automobile marketing representations. Each instance of the type has developed, through repeated practice, a set of contextual conventions that associates the model with a terrain, an activity, a circumstance. While we may not have direct experience with these instances, they are conveyed through media such as film, magazine articles and literature. The media construct the relationship of vehicles to actions by representing them in contexts that necessarily address certain of their qualities, be they of functional or formal nature.\textsuperscript{21} (Fig. 1.18, 1.19) The intentions behind a vehicle such as the SUV, considered in its visual typological potential, lie in a public whose identity is thus embedded in a multitude of representations.

Considering only the form of the SUV and the associations that the form draws from known

\textsuperscript{19} This wasn’t always the case: the ill-fated Preston Tucker and his Tucker, for example. For a case study of an architect’s creation of a public persona with intentions, see Mark Jarzombek, “The Saturation of Self: Stern’s (and Scully’s) Role in (Stern’s) History,” Assemblage 33. Or see Frank Gehry, a few stories high, in a billboard advertising campaign for American Express, which undoubtedly taps the architect’s associations with the ‘freedom’ and cosmopolitanism exuded by his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain.

\textsuperscript{20} The occasional advertising campaign tries to humanize an automobile manufacturer by having employees speak about the product. Saturn, for example, initially predicated its market strategy on the identity of its teams of workers, a rich topic in the wake of decades of assembly line alienation. Nissan recently broke the anonymity of car designers by featuring their Chief Engineer—and his name—in television advertising. In the advertisement, the engineer presents a motor vehicle in much the same way as a prominent man’s wear retailer speaks about the quality of the suits that he sells.

\textsuperscript{21} In lifestyle magazines for example, Rovers are still photographed in the midst of seemingly impenetrable brush, next to wild herds. See Architectural Digest Motors, premiere issue, Fall 1999. These images are themselves references to other representations, such as Hollywood films, which disseminated images of specialized vehicles and exotic landscapes to the American public. In \textit{Hazard} (Howard Hawks, 1962) John Wayne leads a group of men who capture wild animals for zoo collections around the world. The film presents Land Rovers in the context of big-game hunting in the Kenyan veldt. In one spectacular sequence, John Wayne’s character, riding shotgun in an open-top Rover that is speeding alongside a rhinoceros that the group is trying to divert, has his leg gouged by the horn of the wild beast.
representations of its type. Houston can be construed variously as a battlefield, a savannah, a threatening environment, and a social body in need of taming. Recall that the bending of time and space made possible by motor vehicles in both the theater of war in Mexico and the theater of colonial rule in Africa occurred in the context of physical and social domination. What these have in common is the presence of human bodies in a moment where social order is in the process of reproducing itself, either in stable (colonial) or volatile (war) conditions. While it is suspect to suggest that this model might be literally transposed in order to conceptualize Houston, it is reasonable to posit that the current urban landscape alludes to such a model. In the eyes of an observer, the SUV lends itself to Houston’s continued masquerade as a wild frontier in which the culture of the celebrity behind the wheel is the tool of progress, and the bodies of those outside of that culture are subject to domination. The careful eye will notice the resonance between a Toyota Land Cruiser lumbering through town and the Range Rover’s African campaign.

This eye might also see more. When the SUV is encountered in the city, there is a moment of contrast between the mimesis of form and the mimesis of action. The SUV’s use for transporting little-league sports teams, for shopping excursions and for trips to a drive-through restaurant seem to put the colonial campaign in question (1.20, 1.21, 1.22). However, the symbolic possibilities of the SUV’s type are not so easily negated by experience. Together, mimetic actions and mimetic forms produce a third term, in which a dominant culture comes into being as the ‘public sphere’ of experience.\textsuperscript{22}

One of these experiences finds the SUV stuck in rush hour traffic. Traffic jams are commonplace situations that have developed appropriate codes of behavior. Generally, the SUV re-

\textsuperscript{22} The notions of the public sphere and of publicity adopted here are drawn from Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. \textit{Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere}. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
mains immobilized, obeying the rules of civil society, not driving around or over its neighbors. The social identity imagined behind the wheel of the SUV acts in manner appropriate to the circumstance. At the same time, some formal characteristics of the SUV suggest an agency at odds with the scene. Its underbody clearance suggests off-road activity, while its overall shape and size allude to the colonization of wild lands. The identity behind the SUV can be construed in terms of this agency: a colonist.

On one hand, we have actions on the part of the fictional identity behind the wheel of the SUV that correspond with the circumstance. At this level, the identity is essentially anonymous. On the other hand, we have an agent, construed through the agency imputed in form, who, in the spirit of conquest, demands celebrity. These are not irreconcilable. The appropriation of forms that are symbolic of colonial activities demonstrates an attitude that the city is dangerous, that it requires extraordinary efforts in the name of safety, such as excessive height from the ground and intimidating overall mass. At the same time, the conspicuous presence of the SUV in traffic constructs the other vehicles as herd-like, part of a wilderness under the watchful eye of a benevolent agent whose daring brings public renown. The anonymity produced by the traffic jam, then, is reconciled with the celebrity sought by the SUV.

In the sense that it reconciles certain contradictions that arise in form and circumstance, the SUV can be considered a form of publicity. That is, it is the form taken by certain private interests in their attempt to penetrate the social lives of all individuals, regardless of the real interests of the people and groups subjected to that publicity. Publicity produces a public sphere that claims to represent the values of society as a whole, while it in fact organizes social experience in a manner that excludes the interests of those unable to enter, for example, the realm of celebrity. In other words, the SUV, as construed through the rhetoric of its form and actions, colonizes the material symbolic world, changing the terms in which public identity had been negotiated before its arrival. It is as though, suddenly, a new dimension has been added to the roads, with the people “down there” being relegated to the position of undesirable urban flotsam.23

The SUV’s specific associations with conquest and war coincide with economic factors that affect its availability in the market. For many years, they were subjected to protectionist trade laws that levied an import tariff ten times that levied on regular automobiles, allowing domestic manufacturers to raise their prices.24 Despite changes to the system of classification, prices have remained high. As a consequence, manufacturers earn up to ten times more profit on a sport utility vehicle than on a car. At Ford, for example, 17% of the total number of sales is

23 Jack Hitt phrases the phenomenon well: “Down there is the old working class, the new peasants who haven’t figured out how to snatch a six-figure income out of our roaring economy ... they huddle down in their wretched [Ford] Escorts and their [Geo] Metros.” “The Hidden Life of SUVs,” Mother Jones, July/August 1999.
currently attributed to SUV’s, while those same sales account for 60% of total profits. Because of consumer demand, the dealer mark-up is up to twice as much on SUV’s as is it on regular automobiles. While it is only one consideration of many in the symbolic landscape—and others will be seen below—there is little question as to what economic class the anonymous herd belongs. In so far as the publicity of celebrity in the SUV produces the terms of appropriate public appearance, its landscape tends toward the exclusion of many from legitimate urban presence.

But this kind of publicity has other interesting circumstances. As in the colony, the vehicle induces not only identification with the cultural significance that it has developed. Aversion, as a symptom of difference, is also possible in reading the physical environment. Yet the habits of perception promoted by both the neo-traditionalist and programmatic models cannot adequately interpret Houston’s landscape, replete with objects such as SUV’s, strip malls and helicopters. They are unable to draw difference from an object landscape because, in order to ground their own urban transcriptions, both must reject the unpredictable moment of reception that is inherent in the encounter with such forms. The form-value model, because it invests incorruptible cultural conventions in formal configurations, cannot conceive of the encounter with objects as a possible locus for the production of social identities different from those it projects. The programmatic model, which presumes an inconsequential role for material form, cannot conceive of productive reception through form at all, because doing so would admit that form is a significant medium in which the city may be imagined.

Reflecting on these models, it seems that their projections of the city risk becoming nothing more than transcriptions of consumer desire onto a landscape otherwise rich in possible interpretations. The public that is placed as the privileged user and observer of the city has ‘always already’ been defined in the limited terms of such a transcription. The SUV facade, for example, would be explained in one of two ways. The form-value model would construct the public as a group of people who consume the SUV forms in order to resolve a problematic relationship with nature. Such consumption is then mapped onto the SUV as the only possible reading of form. The other way would conclude that the public could discern a component of the city in the activities made possible by the SUV, as exemplified in the off-road maneuver that makes the parking lot facade possible.

The resulting blindness avoids the role that form plays in mapping one’s own place: my motorcar, her automobile; our city, their city. In fact, the excesses of material form in such an environment open it to appropriation by a multitude of (re)active intentions. While an

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35 See Kelly Blue Book on-line (www.kbb.com) in order to compare dealer invoice price and suggested retail price.
individual purchases an SUV to actualize some desire (even when it is posing as a need), it is not that desire alone to which we have access. The form and space of the SUV, and the circumstances in which we encounter it, carry more implications than one individual could transform into desire. At the same time, it sets limits on interpretation and circumscribes the terms in which the city can be given voice. In the same way that a fictional identity with implied power over the urban environment exists behind the parking lot facade, each SUV in that facade refers to its own set of conventions that can be said to crystallize in one’s mind as the intentionality of an other.

A model for understanding such moments might recognize in reception a violence that is potentially liberating with respect to the public sphere that tends to restrict urban presence. This violence is directed at the desire that an imputed colonial identity tries to bring into being in the material world. The moment of perception is crucial in the constitution of the object: in perceiving and even reading the SUV, the historical associations brought forth in its type confront the immediate circumstance, such as unpacking groceries. The desire discernible in the SUV surely does not involve consumer goods; it is more likely to concern the ceremonial pomp of colonial office. In assigning the desire a physical model, violence is done to both that desire and the identities that are thus mimicked.26 Mimesis necessarily carries out violence on its objects, as it reproduces them through a spatial and temporal displacement, objectifying both the dominant and subjugated as they enter the realm of social interaction. By experiencing the SUV, its possible mimesis is constructed for the observer, and the identities objectified in desire are revealed. Witnessing the mimetic act thus orients the observer, as it forces him to recognize his identity objectified in the actions of another.

In order to be able to recognize being objectified as, for example, a member of the herd, the SUV must be seen as an object that reveals its own attempts at juxtaposing an idealized condition with an immediate circumstance. The juxtaposition is sometimes visually obvious: viewed through the filters of bio-morphological minds, we have had our heads disembodied, or rather re-bodied: the new body composed, as the sphinx, of disparate parts, including the

human head, the body of a lion (awaiting the carnage of car wrecks or war), and wings visible in our speed. (Fig. 1.23)

There are other ways of imagining the SUV as a sphinx. Recall that when man encounters the Sphinx, she poses her riddle. Her riddle and her body are both examples of juxtaposition, the former semantic, the latter morphological. The Sphinx comprises the bodies of three different animals, and the seams where different parts meet are very clear: eagle’s wings and human head attached to a lion’s body. It is a monstrous form in the sense that, by so clearly revealing (monstrer, after all, is to show) the construction of its abnormality, it is understood not as the form of a feasible animal, but as the symbolic representation of an impossibility.

The military origins of the SUV’s obvious body parts are less exotic than those of the Sphinx. However, certain aspects keep the SUV in the sphinx’s formal realm of juxtaposition. For example, the human being at the wheel appears out of proportion with the vehicle: on occasion the head of this sphinx, leaning into a turn, seems to stretch from the body, fighting its massive inertia and dragging its hind quarters in the new direction. Other times the rear enclosure on a model is sheathed entirely in black glass: the enclosure thus appears to be a single figure that interlocks with the remaining figure: a regular crew cab pickup truck. (Fig. 1.24) These parts of the SUV suggest that it, like the Sphinx, is not a feasible being, but rather a monstrous representation.

Seeing such representations is not always easy. Perhaps because of her unreal, fantastic nature, it is the Sphinx that prompts the man before her to establish the active gaze. His answer to the Sphinx’s riddle is not simply the word ‘man’. His spoken response is accompanied by his finger pointing to himself (me, myself). Through this verbal and physical gesture, the ‘point of view’ of a universal man is embodied: and embodied sight brings the rational world into existence. This fixing of an objective gaze marks the passage from ‘aspective’ (sym-
bolie) to 'perspective' (real) perception. The world that a universal man sees is no longer a world of signs, symbols, and representations. The world becomes an object, knowable through reason, and cannot tolerate the existence of a symbolic beast: as man's finger touches his own breast in answer to the enigma, the sphinx disappears.

When symbols no longer exist, all objects are impervious to interpretation. They are, simply, what they are. Man can thus traffic in reason using the fixed value of objects as common currency, thereby building a culture of real knowledge. The hegemony of objective sight is cultural hegemony.

Maintaining the SUV as a sphinx undermines the hegemony of the public sphere that it is bringing into being. This sphinx, however, must be sought. Rather than abruptly appearing as a monster, the SUV first comes into the observer's view as an object, suggesting itself as another element in the ordered landscape of the city: another car or truck. But it also contains an anthropomorphic trace in its movement, in its temporal occupation of a space. (Fig. 1.25) The SUV lumbers into parking lots, lurks at red lights. The monstrosity of its form betrays it as a pretender—not really an ambulance, not really a celebrity. Through its implied uses, real contexts, auricular properties, and spatial arrangements, the SUV brings into juxtaposition a number of qualities that, in the eyes of cultural convention, contrast with one another: what is domestic and brawny, of leisure and of toil, from morning until night?

Unlike the Sphinx, this question is not verbal. The SUV poses its riddle through form, or, more specifically, through the genealogy of cultural conventions and human activity that one

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27 This reading of Oedipus' actions before the Sphinx is from Jean-Joseph Goux, *Oedipe Philosophe*, Paris: Aubier, 1990. The chapter "De l'aspective à la perspective" describes the rise of a humanist 'point of view': for the Egyptians, "le principe général pour chaque objet, est celui de l'optimum de visibilité: l'objet est figuré selon le côté qui permet de l'identifier le plus facilement ... On pourrait dire: les Égyptiens dessinent ce qu'on voit (ou ce que ça voit depuis le temps immuable du fantasme ou du divin) tandis que les Grecs dessinent ce qu'on ne voit ... De symbole obscur surcharge de significations inépuisables, le paysage perceptif devient un fait, un objet* (134-5).
can construct through that form. However, the 'correct' reply here—which is the reply that saves man from the Sphinx's maw—has the same effect as objective sight. If one draws the SUV into one's culture: if one recognizes a transcendent, rational, uncontroversial being in the vehicle; or if the SUV can be fully assimilated into the observer's world view: then its power as a monster disappears. If the SUV poses the question, 'what is this assemblage of parts' and the response is 'me, myself', then it exists as nothing more than an automobile. If one can answer, 'yes, I am that which the SUV describes,' then the object called the SUV vanishes, along with the sites at which its publicity might have been resisted.

If, on the other hand, the promoted identity is not adopted, the SUV takes on an exaggerated presence. It challenges the observer, demanding a response, looking to divide its own kin from those of other origin, hinting through its military reference at the stranger's fate. Beyond its threats, a closer look reveals the posing of this sphinx. Its gesture is to desires the vehicle itself cannot obtain. Its overbearing presence on the ground, the excessive mutability of its single interior volume: these suggest unusual efforts in the show of capability, the demonstration of prowess. (Fig. 1.26, 1.27) We have seen that the forms neither fully nor exclusively respond to the needs they suggest. The eye that, through type, constructs the identities fetishized in the SUV's form sees beyond the limits of form and function, space and program. But even further than the eye can see, past the soldier and the colonist, beyond the victim and the herd, there are other possible answers to the SUV's question, "who is it that I mimic?"

The SUV is more than an object in the landscape. It can be inhabited by different bodies whose relations to each other and to the exterior world suggest other personas and identities to be recovered in material space.
The high level of commercialization and industrial rationalization to which SUVs are subjected means that they exercise a particular kind of hegemony over cultures that operate in their midst. Market surveys answer to the needs of automotive design departments as much as the inverse, and the marketing programs are selective in the lifestyles that they construct as ideal companions to their products. The buyer-profiling that car companies carry out are so rigorous and fine that we "don't so much shop for one of these SUVs as they shop for us."

The car companies are very clear about their strategies:

Taking a page from Land Rover, Ford Motor wants its dealers to display camping gear, canoes, skis and other outdoor equipment as part of a new marketing campaign to promote its sport-utility vehicles ... in addition, all Ford SUVs—the Explorer, the Expedition and the upcoming Excursion and Explorer Sport Trac (an Explorer with a pickup bed)—will be featured together in TV commercials. The ads will show people riding rapids, Ford SUVs bouncing over rocky trails and climbers hiking snow-covered mountains.

Ford’s planned advertising contains the standard elements of SUV marketing: remote locations, mastery over the wilderness, and the paraphernalia of physically challenging sports. These sports focus on the presence of an active body in the SUV, and on the exterior environment into which the vehicle takes that body. The camping aspect of this focus will return later in a discussion of the commodification of work. Here, it is the real bodily experience of the SUV, and the landscape into which the SUV usually (rather than ideally) takes the body, that is of interest.

The bodies implied in SUV advertising experience the vehicle in ways that differ greatly from the dangers of the frontier. As with the observing eye, the body has recourse to typology in order to interpret such experience. Consider the spatial characteristics of the SUV that allow it to participate in typological discussions. At a general level, SUVs are related by type to most

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1 Jack Hitt, "The Hidden Life of SUVs," Mother Jones, July/August 1999. Hitt echoes the classification of consumers described by Horkheimer and Adorno: "Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines different price ranges, depend not so much on the subject matter as on classifying, organizing and labeling consumers. Something is provided for everyone so that none may escape: the distinctions are emphasized and extended. The public is catered for with a hierarchical range of mass-produced products of varying quality, thus advancing the rule of complete quantification. Everybody must behave (as if spontaneously) in accordance with his previously determined and indexed level, and choose the category of mass product turned out for his type." So it is with automobiles such as sedans, hatchbacks, minivans and SUVs. They go on to note that these "mechanically differentiated products prove to all alike in the end. That the difference between the Chrysler range and General Motors products is basically illusory strikes every child with a keen interest in varieties." Max Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, The Dialectic of Enlightenment, London: Allen Lane, 1973, p. 123.

It is not entirely true that all differences that arise are illusory, but the practice of marketing the same vehicle with two different names under two different car makers has found its way to the SUV. The Chevrolet Blazer ($19,000 and up), the GMC Jimmy ($22,000 and up), and the Oldsmobile Bravada ($23,000 and up) are formally the same vehicle, differing only in the their target markets and such details as engine size, upholstery and electronic options. See Michelle Krebs, "Vehicles So Much Alike They're Actually the Same," New York Times, Oct. 20 1999, Cars section, p. 9.

other automobiles. In cars and in SUVs, bodily occupation activates the automobile's formal type. One enters from doors on the side of the vehicle; seats usually face the direction of vehicular movement; the engine sits in the front portion, whose bulk is lower than the passenger area so that the driver can see. Some seats allow passivity, while the driver's seat requires mental and physical exertion. Views from front seats are less restricted than those in the rear, which are directed to the side. The asymmetrical geometry of spatially inscribed activity is also a characteristic of the type. Generally, the automobile driver sits on the left of an otherwise fully symmetrical formal structure. This geometry itself is reflected and reinforced in an infrastructure that supports the automobile's wide use. Drive-through restaurants and banks, toll booths and car washes: a vehicular medium that structures human activity is lopsided from beginning to end. There is even a system of etiquette concerning priority at intersections that was built around left hand driving. In the sense that this asymmetry exists as a recurring formal structure as well as through social experience (one is, after all, in relation to others), it can be considered an element of the type.

It is precisely this element of habit, of repetitive encounter and manipulation of material space in quotidian practice, that draws the body into the operations of typology. The relationships between formal structure and cultural convention do not arise from single events. Nor can the eye alone calm the anxiety for historical contingency that arises in typological debate. Rather, the recurring corporeal experience of spatial relationships, of openings and interdictions to mobility, of induced contortions, produces a "physiological knowledge" that can be deployed later. With knowledge come expectations: these imbue material space with cultural significance. They arise in subsequent spatial encounters, which, as we have seen, can be accommodated by a practice of grouping by type. The type is a conceptual construction, and its production implies intellectual activity, drawing on knowledge and deploying expectations of common characteristics between different spaces and different forms. The activity is tantamount to the appropriation of space, and cannot, as Benjamin noted, "be understood in terms of the attentive tourist before a famous building." It is the quotidian activity of the body, a semiconscious meander through familiar territory. Any tourist can see the blood bottles and colonists in the SUV: a longtime resident of automobile space is needed to access the habits of touch hailed by the SUV.

3 Julia W. Robinson posits two kinds of types. The first is the basic type, which, in architectural terms, can name buildings using "ordinary parlance." The second is the classificatory type, which defines boundary conditions for various formal agglomerations and is common in the professional world. For Robinson, the recognition of ordinary types is unconscious, while that of classificatory types requires conscious thought. "The Question of Type." Ordering Space: Types in Architecture and Design. Karen A. Frank and Lynda H. Schweikloth, eds. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1994.

domesticity and the suv

At a general level, the bodily engagement of vehicular forms, whereby one enters, moves through and exits an automobile, happens at a scale familiar to those who have, in childhood, occupied houses in ways that one would not normally attempt in non-domestic environments, hiding in closets, crawling in attics, or playing in the corner behind a chair. The degree to which the interior of an automobile prompts one to appropriate it as one would a bedroom adds further to its sense of privacy. Moreover, the addition of elaborate entertainment systems, including audio and video components, to all sorts of motor vehicles renders them increasingly as extensions of the home’s family room. For these reasons, automobiles approach the quality of total domestic environments.

At a more specific level of description of this vehicular type, a stronger domestic persona appears in the SUV. As the celebrity of conquest projects its values into quotidian traffic, the domestic persona introduces other possibilities for mapping the spaces of the city. Specifically, the SUV has four doors, a tailgate, and a continuous passenger and cargo area in common with the postwar station wagon, the history of which poses a critique to the project seemingly lurking behind the colonial vehicle.

It is instructive to consider station wagon advertising of the 1950s and 60s in the shadow of the SUV advertising discussed above. Despite the uses of station wagons for heavy work and by the military even before World War II, their representations in postwar advertising were dominated by domestic themes. (Figs. 2.1, 2.2) Given the typological link between family station wagons and SUVs, the contrast in tone of their different marketing campaigns underlines again that representations of use are inadequate for objects whose materiality renders them much more complex than an image.
It was specifically use on which station wagon marketing dwelled. Station wagons were advertised as the second car for suburban families. They were cast as vehicles of fun, freedom and recreation. Because this second car would obviously be used by the woman of the household during the day, it was often marketed as providing easy handling for women drivers. (Fig. 2.3) These women were provided with uses of their own, as the station wagons were typically pictured outside of modern-looking supermarkets, or serving as transport for the baseball team (today, the 'soccer mom,' a legacy of the mini-van, can be seen all over town in the guise of the 'after school sphinx') (Figs. 2.4, 2.5) In an extreme case of domestic promotion, Oldsmobile advertised its 1965 Vista Cruiser, with its multi-window roof, as the ideal 'family room on wheels.' These uses clearly contrasted with the wage-earning work of the man who could not only provide for his wife and children, but could also offer them the independence and convenience that ownership of a wagon implied. 6

The advertising is believable, as the form and space of the station wagon did become embedded with domestic connotations through its widespread use in suburban America. Little-league baseball teams used them; they served as play areas in the driveways of suburban homes; they came to denote the safety of family travel; they served the double-generations and double-features inherent in drive-in theaters; and they allowed activities that prefigured the recently popular 'do-it-yourself' home care and currently popular 'nesting.' (Fig. 2.6, 2.7)

The more general coincidence of domesticity and automobility should be reviewed briefly. Before the widespread availability of cars, developments such as commuter rail allowed a radical geographic separation between the family home and the economic environment of the city, giving way to separate sphere ideology that produced the home as solely domestic. As an entity into which men ventured from their suburban homes in order to provide for the family, the city became associated with work. This reflected back on the home by constructing the female domestic sphere as leisure: recreation and reproduction, not creation and production: non-labor, as opposed to labor.

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5 Heon Stevenson, Selling the Dream, London: Academy, 1995, p. 239.
6 Ibid., pp. 224-9
The popularization of the automobile accelerated the entrenchment of separate sphere ideology in American society, as it allowed the spread of suburban homes beyond the confines of rail lines at the same time as it opened the opportunity for suburban life to greater numbers of middle-class Americans.

As suggested in station wagon advertising, increased affluence meant that the family could own a 'second' car. By implication, the 'first' car came into being as the domain of the male head of the household, who used it to go to his place of employment in the city. The Victorian model of domesticity, whereby the female-gendered home contrasted with the civic sphere occupied by the male-gendered body, saw a portion of the feminine container develop wheels as the station wagon. Regular automobiles—the 'first' cars—and station wagons engaged in a dance of male/female, city/suburb, work/leisure oppositions.

The station wagon, firmly established as a mobile family room, became the means by which the domestic sphere could safely undertake the occasional foray back to the city. The total domestic environment of the automobile interior meant that the family could venture, without concern of violation, to the place that automobiles in general had feminized. The perceived hostile conditions of the postwar inner city produced a ground against which the material space of the station wagon could be overdetermined as the figure of domesticity.

Family adventure attains special significance in the context of the relationship between SUV's and station wagons. Through the typological operation, the specter of the family appears to one seated in a lumbering SUV. Floating in a volume of steel-encased domesticity and protected by swiftness, one's projection into the city constructs the space outside of the SUV as hostile and exotic. On the road, from the domestic prosthetic's comfortable point of view, Houston's streets are simultaneously the opposite of safety and leisure and the ground over which safety and leisure have the right to roll. In a stunning example of how the public sphere is rendered as the medium in which private interests are promoted, the city, construed from the point of view of an adventurous family, becomes precisely what the family institution needs in order for it to reproduce its symbolic social position. The SUV's publicity obfuscates relationships between the home and work, women and work, and recreation and the city that would threaten the integrity of domestic ideology.
This figure of domesticity addresses only the relationship of the overall interior environment of the station wagon to a conception of the city. When regarded more carefully, however, the interior of the station wagon is seen to have reinscribed gender roles, and thus notions of power, in clear spatial relationships. In much of station wagon advertising, the idea of space and control, and thus of bodies and power, is already evident. The dominant person among those present in an advertisement often occupies the space just outside the tailgate. (Figs. 2.8, 2.9) It is simultaneously a position of control and benevolence: associated with the particular makeup of the group, the position implies that family integrity is the precondition for safety.

In practice, when the entire family traveled in the station wagon, the mother’s position ‘behind the wheel’ (since it was hers, the ‘second’ car) was usually taken by the father. Thus the front passenger seat, now occupied by the displaced mother, constructed the woman as both passive and active at one time: passive with respect to the relationship of the vehicle to the outside world of cars, parking lots, and city intersections that were encountered as the family ventured back into the city; active with respect to the social life of the family, able as she was to turn to the back and engage or discipline her children.7

Other practices occasionally throw these constructions of roles into question. While the family outing is a moment of significant scripting in the actions associated with automobile interiors, other moments play against those scripts. As disturbances to deeply ingrained physiognomical habits—“where unconscious strata of culture are built into social routines as bodily disposition”—such moments open quotidian experience to the possibility of radical change.8

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7 Navigation is another duty that comes to mind for the woman in the front passenger seat. This would seem to allow the woman some active engagement of the world outside the vehicle. However, it is not in jest that we are reminded of the stereotypical masculine aversion to asking for directions.
A familiar occurrence is the shouting of "shotgun" by teenagers, to lay claim to the front passenger seat, as they approach a car. The reference to shotguns in relation to vehicles is a residue of North American colonization: the stagecoach driver needed an armed companion to protect the traveling party from hostilities in the still unconquered land. But the (usually male) young adult's attempt to claim the (mother's) front passenger seat as his place in the vehicle disrupts the spatial expectations established and perpetuated since childhood. These transgressions—the father's usurping of the mother's place as driver, the teenager's appropriation of the mother's place as passenger—often occur in the context of symbolic milestones: the restoration of the family's wholeness; being considered old enough to sit in the front seat; or vying for the position that is second to the teenager who has just earned a driver's license and, therefore, social desirability. (Fig. 2.10)

The revolutions predicted by many theorists of mass culture are not likely forthcoming from such adolescent behavior. However, these transgressions remind us of the bodily projections used in reading material space. They offer a conception of reception that can measure up to the physical and symbolic powers of the sphinx that we call the SUV. They suggest a mixture of bodies, a confusion of place, vector and identity. It is a melee, "mixed up," recalling the mess of form and movement, shape and energy that is inherent in the kind of battle that goes by that name. The confusion is visual and sensual in addition to being intellectual: bodies close together in space, confronting one another as physical obstacles and threats whose forms are seen as gestures preceding a blow.9

Together, the selections and deflections of possible bodily positions, and the instantiation of prior knowledge in authentic or parodic social action, make the experience of material space

* One could object, of course, that a city like Houston has little relation to the inter-body contact implied in images of warring tribes. Moreover, the discussion of sport-utility vehicles clearly removes the present consideration of the melee from the sidewalks of the traditional or neo-traditional city, where one might expect a call for increased bodily engagement. However, the tendency to conceive of the body and the industrial objects that dominate its visual and corporeal field as separate, irreconcilable entities threatens our ability to perceive the ways in which material form constrains the body and, thus, the manner in which the body can occupy space. In architectural terms, the contrast between, on the one hand, a temporally bound visual, sensual and cognitive experience and, on the other, a static physical environment has an architectural analogy in the problematic pair composed of program and form. In the melee, there is no such distinction: the animate is sublated into the static.
conducive to the production of what has been called a "small knowledge." By rendering the space momentarily unfamiliar, this knowledge undermines the fixed representations of social relations characteristic of cultural commodification. The melee, then, is a conceptualization of the reception of material space in which the operations of material form—such as type—reveal the sites in which one can conceive of one's difference from the publicity of which that form is a vessel. 

In the SUV, the eye of Benjamin's tourist reveals only one aspect of that publicity. The habituated body, as it calls 'shotgun', knows more of the representational nature of the space thereby appropriated. The spatial typological operation produces many possible representations, which a mindful body will recognize as nothing less than objectified identities prepared for the observer in the workshop of the culture industry. In the face of these coexisting yet competing identities, the SUV's question—the one by which it shops for us—can be denied. In the melee, the SUV can be engaged as monstrous rather than ignored as a typical automobile. To deny this sphinx the opportunity to disappear into the public sphere is to escape the position into which one is placed by the culture of commodification for which the SUV is the vehicle.

The body projected into the city as a domestic subject might notice in the SUV some material qualities that differ from those in the station wagon to which it is related by type. Such differences are normal in the models that constitute a type, and contribute to the “singularity” of the work. In some instances, however, these differences, while minor in dimension, are critical in performance. Like the snapshots of bodily positions in a traditional melee, they are cues to subsequent motion, allowing us to read them as representations rather than as the static, objective facts of perspective vision.

Compared to the station wagon, for example, the SUV rides higher, rolls much more in turns, and is conspicuous in the suburban landscape. The station wagon's mimetic relationship to a regular sedan, as played out in height and ride, was a significant factor in its acceptance into

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11 In French, the scrum in rugby is called la melee. This reference to professional sports recalls an observation by Brecht, on the lighting at sporting events. In contrast to bourgeois theater, the lighting equipment at sports events is never hidden. This, Brecht claims, is because sporting events do not try to present themselves as ahistorical. Theater charged with representing the modern capitalist world, on the other hand, must project a transhistorical identity for its content in order to avoid referring to real social relations. Stage production works to eliminate points of reference that lie outside of the presentation itself, placing the observer in a fully passive position. Brecht, recognizing that the discourse of abstraction tended towards the latter, explored different conceptions of representation that dwelled on the role of immediate experience in generating a critical attitude.

Pursuing the sporting event further, one is reminded that the audience is not an undifferentiated mass. The players have friends and enemies in the stands, and the match exacerbates their differences.

postwar suburban culture. (Fig. 2.11) Further, the cargo area's dimensional relationship to both the driveway and the parental zone was critical to the family activities that developed around and through the station wagon. Compared to the station wagon, the SUV's cargo area floor is both higher relative to the ground and lower relative to the eye level of people seated in front portion of the monospace. (Fig. 2.12) In a familiar event in station wagon mythology, children, too tired to hold their heads above the rear bench at the drive-in movie theater, fall asleep in the cargo area. However, this kind of ritual is unlikely in an SUV, as rear passengers no longer slide into each other on a bench, but rather sit in what seem more like airplane seats. (Fig. 2.13) It is impossible to slump lazily over such seats; a child would have to stand in order to peer over them.13

The typological structure of the SUV's material space suggests the social world of station wagons. At the same time, this material space frustrates some of the expectations that are induced by the domestic allusion. Anticipated bodily positions (such as tired children in the cargo area) are proscribed, and novel positions (such as the isolation of rear bucket seats) are induced. The form allows a preliminary relationship between objects to be drawn, but expectations are foreclosed by specific manifestations of the type produced from the association in the first place. By pursuing type and its models, one can infer in the SUV the objectification of family relations, of postwar domestic ideology, and the simplistic formal projection of this

13 Houston reached its largest number of theaters—twenty—in the 1960s. By 1981, there were only six. Today, there are no surviving drive-in theaters in the Houston area; not even in ruin. John Perry wrote about the decline in the (appropriately named) 'Nostalgia' section of a local free monthly paper. 'The end of Indian Summer,' Houston City Life, Boulevards Edition, v.12 n.10, 1999.
objectification into the contemporary city. The corporeal occupation of the SUV’s material space—and the sophistication the experience offers—highlights the semiconscious expectations that the mind, thinking in types, would otherwise commit to the depths of habit.

The space between type and model is a privileged one for a critique of domestic corporeal habits. Drawing back from the SUV interior, while retaining the domestic nature of the station wagon that continues to haunt it, the observer’s eye offers further opportunity for resistance to the landscape of material publicity. Aside from its spatial typological allusions, the SUV is not really domestic at all until it is witnessed in certain social circumstances. At such moments, such as when (in parallel with high capacity vehicles such as buses) it is used to transport children to school, its overt formal allusion to colonial machines is placed in crisis. In the wild, parched city imputed earlier by the military and colonial vehicles, a haven is offered, an oasis of ideal domestic space of home and car. But this space, as we have seen, also promises the celebrity inherent in risk and dominion. The SUV holds both possibilities in equal estimation, producing its form and space as conflicting representations. The celebrity assigned the SUV through vehicles of conquest is not fully compatible with the domesticity of the station wagon. The agency produced through allusions to domination in hostile lands is historically masculine, while the domestic sphere constructs its doyenne as feminine. The identity that might be discerned behind the SUV in the city, or behind the parking lot facade produced by the hind quarters of these vehicles, is unstable. As the public nature of celebrity overpowers the anonymity of home life, the simulated dangers of family adventure erode the heroic value of conquest.

In light of this conflict, any one of the SUV’s possible representations is like that of a stage actor whose particular method distracts the audience from the illusion that the events portrayed are immutable historical truths. Such an actor represents only one of many variants:
his method—precisely excessive, somewhat like form and space—allows the other possibilities, the things he does not do, to be conserved in what he does.\textsuperscript{14} As the gestus of the actor counters the illusion of a single, predetermined narrative, so the SUV counters the illusion of identities fixed by material form and space.

A member of the herd, the benevolent yet powerful shepherd; the domestic doyenne, the masculine usurper: the protected nuclear family, the cohort of extreme athletes: identities produced in the melee with the SUV, each one splitting the audience in at least two ways through empathy and aversion, identity and difference, the possible combinations rising exponentially. The SUV cannot maintain a binary field. Its publicity fails as the eye and the body move over and through it. It reveals multiple sites in the public sphere at which to imagine resistance to the commodification of family relationships, of the violence of war and colonization, of the experience of physical space in the metropolis.

It is resistance to the commodification of experience, in fact, that is most pressing. Real experience in which the eye and the body work together lays the ground for further critique, where the cognitive mind moves beyond what is presented in the SUV to the aspects of the social world that it simultaneously appropriates and suppresses.

\textsuperscript{14} This is in contrast to the illusory method of what Brecht called "bourgeois theater," in which the narrative and its associated actions were presented as ahistorical and beyond critical interpretation. The empathetic actor of such theater strained to portray the event, decision or action as predetermined and natural. An observer is expected to concentrate on the action on stage as the unfolding of a story that exists beyond his knowledge. It is, however, a static story, and the spectator's role is of the uninhibited. For Brecht, this illusion paralleled capitalism's manifestations in marketing and consumption, which encouraged the subject to conceive of its individuality as independent of capitalist relations of production. The subject and the object were fixed through representational means. Because the process of objectification that acts on the subject was invisible, it was impossible to react against the static identity that the culture industry had created for each individual. Brecht's method forces the spectator in the audience to be aware of the action, decisions, and events that are absent in the portrayal. This absence is allowed to come to light because the actor draws attention to himself as an actor, and to the character whose actions he is representing. This would be accomplished through the painstakingly choreographed and rehearsed gestus. The actor thus attempted to bring the relations of production into view so as to underline the objectified nature of the individual's role. See Bertolt Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect," \textit{Brecht on Theatre}, John Willet, ed. and transl., New York: Hill and Wang, 1964, and Elizabeth Wright, \textit{Postmodern Brecht}, New York: Routledge. 1989.
Now that we have found the habits of the body, we can return to the eye and propose that it, too, comes to know these habits and to be affected by their disruption. The optical reception of material form and space—which occurs more often in the "incidental fashion" of the resident than through the "rapt attention" of the tourist—is determined to a large extent by these habits.\(^1\) We understand space not in terms of the architect's plan; rather, knowing spatial configuration in material and social terms relies on sight that, by frequenting the sense of touch and the three-dimensionality of space, has been made into an extension of the moving, sensate body.\(^2\)

In the \textit{mellee}, the mimetic act is discernible in the excessive gestures of the SUV as a physical object, and of the social identity it infers. The eye, a trained reader of space, is able to see the conflict in the different imitations, as well as the publicity that tries to hide this conflict. The physical and social mimesis produces a small knowledge of the SUV, which itself allows a critical worldview to surface.

By coincidence, Reyner Banham has provided a vehicular example of this small knowledge.\(^3\) Like the \textit{mellee} with the SUV, it alludes to the schism between analytical and receptive modes of interpretation. The context was the sudden prevalence of car designs in England in which the "top line of the side panel above the rear wheel ... humps up into the window space above."\(^4\) (Fig. 3.1) Banham addressed the role that formal imitation plays in producing the

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4. Banham was interested in showing the error in the assumption that low-priced motor cars principally acquire appeal by imitating the forms of "more spectacular models" in the same manufacturer's range. But Banham's explanation also demonstrates an instance of radical difference between iconography and iconology, or between the elaboration of design history based on factual research and the elaboration of social fact from lived experience. For Panofsky, iconology is concerned with "the discovery and interpretation of ... 'symbolical' values (which are often unknown to the artist himself and may even emphatically differ from what he consciously intended to express)." That is, a work contains symbolical values that result from interpretation, not from intention (although this latter is not excluded from coinciding with the former in a non-deterministic way). These values rest in the work as residues of the medium or of convention. They call to the interpreter from a past constructed in moments of historical contingency. When Argan used iconology as a reference for his elaboration of type in architecture, he alluded to the productive nature of encountering an object, or model, in a real, historically bound moment. This historicity of the interpretive encounter is ignored in iconography, which is concerned with study of "the development of the themes which artists use;" that is, the conscious deployment of symbols in the production of artifacts. Erwin Panofsky, \textit{Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History}, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955, p. 31, and Argan, Giulio Carlo. "On the Typology of Architecture." \textit{Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: an Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995}, New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996.
desirability of a car model, and pits the analytical outcome of "the strict art historian's methodology of exact formal comparison" against that of the "man at the end of the bar." Banham, without stating as much, developed two genealogies for the hump element in the British-made Ford Zodiac. (Fig. 3.2) The first genealogy, implicitly credited to the art historian, demonstrates the great affinity of the Zodiac to the Studebaker Avanti. (Fig. 3.3) This parentage of the Zodiac is clear not only in its restrained hump, but is also "very plain around the back and fairly clear around the front."

However, as Banham points out in his second genealogy, one was unlikely to encounter an Avanti on English roads in the late 1960s, and Studebaker's car division had folded three years prior to the model year in question. In practice, the common perception of the Zodiac in 1967 was that it was a "poor man's Mustang." This was because only the Mustang, with its pronounced hump, could be seen in any appreciable numbers on British roads, with approximately six hundred of them "galloping about the greater London area." Regardless of the access that the designers of the Zodiac had to foreign models, the perception in the minds most of Londoners was that the British cars were mimicking the sporty import. The effective lineage of the Zodiac, and many other models, lay with the Mustang.

The Mustang's curve denoted "sports car," which was associated with leisure and wealth, themselves not characteristic of Zodiac owners. On the road in England, this synecdoche of the hump for the wealthy man's sports car made the Zodiac appear as the poor man's Mustang. In the latter, the eye of Banham's "man at the end of the bar" perceives a practice of 'othering', of adopting the traits of someone else in an attempt to fulfill a desire that springs forth from difference.

5 The Mustang, in Banham's estimation, was visible on the roads in England despite only 200 models having been imported through normal channels in the years preceding his observations. For Banham, the cars not accounted for, which far outnumber those reported by customs, had seeped into the country through the diplomatic corps and through the US forces in Britain. This has an interesting relationship to the landscape now being produced in Pristina, and probably many other former "war zones" in the world.
The world of automobiles is rife with synecdoche. 'Hatchback' denotes a small car with a peculiar rear door to which it owes its name; and 'four-wheel drive' describes a range of vehicles whose formal characteristics are similar even when they are not related to off-road capability. While not evident in its acronym, many aspects of the SUV have the character of synecdoche evident in the Zodiac; that is, of standing in for a whole that is desired by an identity seemingly engaged in a practice of 'othering'. Its height above the ground, the "cow-catcher" applied to the front bumper, the tailgate; these are only the obvious possible signs of othering in the SUV. The typological operation, by incorporating the habits of the body with the trained eye, reveals more insidious instances.

The SUV is very similar in external appearance to a pickup truck with a camper put on the cargo bed. A significant difference on the inside of the SUV is its continuous volume between the cargo and passenger areas, in contrast to the wall that separates the driver's compartment from the covered bed in the pickup truck. For this reason, it is a very illuminating experience to witness, in the early morning, two vehicles crossing each other in an affluent Houston neighborhood: one, a red crew cab pickup truck, six men in the passenger compartment, seen through empty window panes, the open bed full of lawncare equipment; the other, a green Excursion, only the driver visible, tinted rear glass hiding any passengers from view. They move in opposite directions, to and away from a house with a manicured lawn, respectively. They are coupled in a dance that requires formal as well as functional cooperation. The SUV seems to mimic the crew cab (fig. 3.4, 3.5), engaging in a sort of 'othering' in an attempt to appropriate the hard labor embedded in the pickup truck's form. From another point of view, the crew cab borrows some elements of the affluent Excursion in an attempt to acquire appeal; to the man on the street in Houston, its relegation to lawncare marks it as the "poor man's" SUV.

From either point of view, the nexus of the encounter is work, or more specifically toil. The SUV/crew cab couple highlights the relationship that each has to the obligation of physical labor. Crowded crew cabs mark the obligation of their occupants to perform physical labor. Conversely, in the early morning, as recent model SUV's leave affluent neighborhoods, their
juxtaposition with crew cabs rhetorically suggests that office work denotes freedom from toil. The SUV’s visibility in the streets surrounding schools, in the parking lots of office towers, and outside brunch restaurants seems to suggest a landscape punctuated by puddles of freedom: freedom from toil, freedom from obligation, freedom from work. But to believe in such a landscape is to fall again to the form-value model, and to lose sight of the SUV-as-sphinx. Freedom, after all, can also indicate lack, and a typological operation will make the consequences of this duality clear.

First, recall the importance of the idea of concordance in type discourse. Great emphasis is traditionally placed on the role that type, once recognized, plays in expressing “the permanence, in the single and unique object, of features which [connect] it with the past, [which act] as a perpetual recognition of primitive but renewed identification of the condition of the object.”

Despite the stress on presence, type in fact depends on something that is absent: the imaginary object that groups the models under scrutiny. This absent object can be ideal, as in a fully delimited and defined form from which real examples deviate; or it can be vague, an envelope that allows disparate real objects to be related to one another. When an object is to be considered through type, one relates it to another concrete, known object. Only then, in the relation between the two, is the type produced. The models that produce a type are necessarily different from one another; otherwise, the two objects would constitute identity.

The quality of absence does not belong to the type alone. Typing requires the projection onto real objects of characteristics such as elements of formal structure, relative sizes, number of elements, and sequence. In this process of applying typological expectations, some will remain unrequited. While normal type discourse might suggest that an object is only of interest to the extent that its formal characteristics concord with those of an ideal type, an object always exhibits significant gaps and shortcomings with respect to that type.

As one object is considered in terms of another through typological characteristics, the differences between the two models fall away, repressed yet not eliminated. But the deflection that is inherent in an object’s ostensible reflection of reality persists as both a physical trace of difference and as unrealized conventions associated with the type. Thinking of objects through type does not tend toward consensus: as two models are differentiated by a pair of elements—such as the open bed of the crew cab and the closed bed of the SUV—each model can contain both of these elements simultaneously. One element is selected in the model, and the other, though physically absent through deflection, present through association. These typological

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projections incorporate the visual and corporeal projections seen earlier. They suggest an active mind that, in the cognitive aspect of the melee, produces knowledge not through similarity, but through difference.

Giving thought to the presence of an absence in a concrete object presumes a set of definitive terms. Without an idea that something is lacking, the absence never comes to mind or into view. The lack must be conceived in terms of norms that are rooted in subjective meaning; formal difference alone is never sufficient for thought or voice. A means of egress in the rear wall of an entrance hall is expected in a plantation house modeled on Palladian villas, and if it is not there its absence can only be stated in terms of the movement it prohibits. If movement were not at least at the edge of consciousness, the blank wall would escape contemplation and slip into the supporting role for another locus of thought (perhaps as the limit of a grand staircase).

Recall the encounter with the crew cab and the SUV. The typing process may proceed unhindered if each vehicle is considered individually, and together the two vehicles suggest typological concordance through a number of characteristics: four doors, scale with respect to other automobiles, height above ground. But at a certain point in the attempt to bring one of the objects into line with a type, the process risks having a projected characteristic remain unanswered. The SUV cannot fulfill the expectation of an open bed that is recommended by the more specific type to which the crew cab refers. Conversely, the crew cab displays a lack of an enclosure that might create a monospace for passengers and cargo. The open bed is absent in one; a monospace absent in the other.

In a social vacuum, this would not be remarkable. However, the SUV is leaving its lawn—the site of toil—and the crew cab is arriving. Read against the pick-up truck, the rear enclosure typical of the SUV marks the simultaneous capture and exclusion of the bed as a place of work. Read against the SUV, the crew cab’s lack of enclosure marks the absence of freedom. (Fig. 3.6) The thing at the edge of consciousness is obligation. Brought together through type, the two vehicles produce the cargo area as the site of othering, each of its two forms becoming the synecdoche for either a vehicle of leisure or a vehicle of toil.
Reflecting on the relationship between the name and the object sheds light on the SUV's appropriation of work. Individually, 'sport' and 'utility' each suggest that specific activities are facilitated or made possible by the sport-utility vehicle. Furthermore, both locate an active human body in the SUV's formal and functional qualities: off-road driving is facilitated by the vehicle's underbody clearance, engine power and four-wheel drive, but it is a form of driving that requires special physical work on the part of the driver (fig. 3.7): the size and shape of the cargo area allows the transportation of large, heavy objects, but raising these objects onto the tailgate and moving them into the vehicle usually requires physical exertion (fig. 3.8); a combination of off-road travel and abundant cargo area lends itself to many forms of wilderness activity (hunting, camping, cartography), all of which deliver the body to extraordinary physical circumstances (fig. 3.9). It seems, then, that the name and the thing collude to produce a pre-experiential understanding of the SUV's uses and meanings.

Examined more closely, the two words that qualify the vehicle are more specific about the manner in which the social value of work is appropriated by the SUV. Sport is defined as a pleasant pastime, entertainment or amusement, recreation and diversion. Utility is the fact, character, or quality of being useful or serviceable, of having fitness for some desirable purpose or valuable end. The fruits of sport are not calculable within an economy of human labor, while utility implies a balance sheet of waste and gain. Sport, Bataille might have said, is in time what the tiger is in space, while utility can only exist in a space of balanced credits and debits.

Despite this obvious dichotomy, the phrase 'sport-utility vehicle' describes a consumer good that dominates the sale of leisure automobiles by drawing attention to specific performance criteria. These criteria traditionally have been associated with niche markets that serve people who have real needs for certain vehicular capabilities (recall the marketing campaign of the Dodge Power Wagon). The term sport-utility vehicle highlights these markets and associates the vehicle with the needs they serve. Utility, which responds to the needs of specific kinds of work, is conjugated in terms of sport, which turns that work toward the valorization of recreation.

The non-labor inherent in sport is arrived at through what Lefebvre calls a three point interaction in the movement from the space of consumption to the consumption of space. Toli, which implies an obligation on the part of the one who works, must be bracketed from labor in order for non-labor to appear. While toil is extracted from labor, activity must remain in order for non-labor to differentiate itself from non-activity. Sport, as non-labor, is not stasis.

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Far from being opposites in activity, sport and toil may, in fact, fully coincide from the point of view of degree of exertion, type of movement, and nature of result. What marks them as different from one another, and thus productive from the point of view of identity, is their relationship to obligation. The SUV represents non-labor and extends the hegemony of leisure—that is, the commodification of work and the exhibitionism of wealth—because it contains labor within it, appropriating it and turning it to the production—by negation—of an identity that, in the end, is positive.

Both the name of the SUV and the encounter between SUVs and pickup trucks denote a binary opposition. This opposition marks a cultural convention that suppresses one term in order to give value to the other, and its terms preexist an encounter with the SUV. The encounter instantiates a relationship between sport and toil, reinforcing their existence as abstract, fixed, and transcendental representations. When contextualized in mimetic acts and material form, the terms become marked interpersonally. Acting as lightning rods for participants in the melee, they orient social identities according to the valuation encoded in cultural conventions. At the moment of reception, sport, being free from obligation, gathers social capital at the expense of toil. It suppresses toil, makes it pejorative, excludes its representational functions from the public sphere. It is an ironic suppression: as discussed earlier, sport can only exist in the medium of toil, just as culture can only be conceived in the midst of the nature that it suppresses.

Work (the humanized corollary of utility) and play (the human activity in sport) are not simply opposites. They are also a productive couple that colonizes social worlds far beyond the temporal and physical settings of labor and non-labor. As each term describes an actual activity, it constructs the other as an absence that is always an object of desire contained within the immediate social circumstance. Thus sport, an exemplification of leisure in that it exerts energy without putting it to the production of economic value (its capital is social), produces the anxiety of the lack of productive work. This anxiety does not reside in an individual person: rather, it exists in the space of the social, revealing the release mechanisms of differential power and making anxious all preemptions to rational order, such as a transparent relationship between work and the accumulation of resources. Such anxiety is not destructive because it maintains, for those temporarily or indefinitely excluded, the promise of non-labor.

Through the dialectic of sport and utility, the publicity of the SUV constructs toil as the absence of leisure. That is, whereas the historical production of leisure depended in the first place on the condition of toil (as obligated work), the SUV's publicity produces a distorted representation that reverses the order. This representation hides the relationship of the individual to the means of production and to the fruits of production by constructing leisure as the norm, as the privileged term that seems to be independent of other relations.\[11\]

\[11\] The weekend is another instance of such publicity.
It is this sort of commodification that Brecht's method was to undermine. The passive reception of the single, predetermined identity of leisure, for example, would have to be disturbed into active reception. The eye, trained through the habit of the body to read the "physiognomic aspects of the visual world," creates that sort of disturbance in the SUV.\textsuperscript{12} It finds the crew cab in the SUV, and discovers the reversed representation that marks labor as a commodity through the cargo area's enclosure. As with the gestus of an actor, the SUV is separated from its part and allows its absences to accompany what is present in its form and space. The bodies that are imagined in relation to material space are also imagined in relation to obligation; the SUV thus divulges its identity and the alterity that it suppresses.

Considered through type and through the synecdoche of the cargo area, the SUV indeed appears to be an actor. Its portrayals recall another three point interaction, which Lefebvre proposed as analogous, not alternative, to that of labor-(toll)-non-labor. Space becomes consumable when some of its activities can be understood as non-quotidian. It is through festival, feigned or authentic, that the quotidian is left behind. The interaction of quotidian-'festival'-non-quotidian exhibits a strange resonance with the "acting" or "playing a role" inherent in the use of the SUV. The fictional identity behind the wheel seems to live everyday as an adventure, a fantasy of hard labor and reckless play, a re-inscription of a simulated lifestyle in built form, a development of a meta-language of visual rhetoric in the post-city. (Figs. 3.10, 3.11, 3.12) Accompanying the SUV are the bodily movements of the individual, sometimes in direct engagement with the object, sometimes not.

It is noticeable, for instance, that even very mild mannered and matter-of-fact men who go out shooting are apt to carry an excess of arms and accoutrements in order to impress upon their own imagination the seriousness of their undertaking. These hunters are also prone to a histrionic, prancing gait and to an elaborate exaggeration of the motions, whether of stealth or of onslaught, involved in their deeds of exploit. Similarly in athletic sports there is almost invariably present a good share of rant and swagger and ostensible mystification—features which mark the histrionic nature of these employments. In all this, of course, the reminder of boyish make-believe is plain enough.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Benjamin.
\textsuperscript{13} Thorstein Veblen, \textit{The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions}, New York, N.Y.: Mentor Books, 1953, p. 171. Veblen's remarks, as on the mark as they are independent of further explanation, are doubly remarkable because they are made in the context of a critique of the leisure class at the end of the 19th century. His pretense is that this class sets the standards of value and consumption that the remainder of society ultimately and, under capitalism, necessarily adopt. This is a suitable definition for the hegemony under discussion in relation to the SUV.
It seems, then, that while the SUV, its strength, sturdiness, capacities—short, its design—may be utilous, it is primarily a sign of play. The 'sportiness' of the vehicle is rendered by the meeting between inferred utility and actual use. Like the huntsmen, the SUV colonizes the city as a playground.

This play, from which toll has been extracted, is marked on the SUV by adding an element that, incidentally, creates a space charged with domestic themes. An exacerbation of cultural hegemony is to be found in the simultaneous presence of parodic crew cabs and awkward station wagons in the SUV, where laborious representations of the families of American domestic mythology might suppress the reality of families of (often immigrant) workers.

The absence of toll revealed in the typological operation on the SUV points to the projection of a culture of sport and leisure into the urban landscape. The vehicle of this projection gathers the connotations of freedom from toll into its form, and thus into its appearance in the city. Work, recognized as a socialized form of production within the structure of a capitalist economy, is relegate to crew cabs—the SUV's others—while the SUV marks the driver that one can imagine behind its wheel as standing outside of that economy.

At the same time, the SUV's spatial allusions to grocery shopping and suburban recreation also carry the reminder that one of the enduring obstacles to the valorization of 'women's work' has been the domestic environment's invisibility as a vital element of the capitalist economy. By many accounts, and despite its invisibility, the unpaid labor performed by women in the home has been and continues to be crucial to the functioning of the paid workforce. For example, in contrast to those (like Lenin and Engels) who thought that domestic work held women back from the fulfilling aspects of industrial labor, the material feminists advocated that women assert the social and economic value of reproductive work in the domestic sphere. Challenging patriarchal social structures of Victorian culture and the conception of reproductive labor as insignificant and demeaning, the material feminists promoted the socialization
and concomitant financial compensation of work such as cooking, laundering and child rearing, traditionally seen as a woman's unremunerated duty.14

The coincidence between the absence of labor and the presence of domesticity (or alternatively between the presence of leisure and the absence of remunerated work) in the SUV reinforces the regressive commodification of both the family and the worker. The leisurely driver behind the SUV’s parody of the crew cab pickup truck occupies the same spot as the domestic identity behind the SUV’s imitation of the station wagon. The relationship between toil and sport in the former finds an uncanny reflection in the conventional opposition between male and female in the latter: work and masculinity, characteristic of the city, against leisure and femininity, characteristic of the home. As the SUV captures the economic value of work and turns it into capital for the social economy, the domestic sphere is inscribed again as a place bereft of valuable work, underlining the invisibility of women’s toil, which is swept up in the binary opposition between labor and non-labor by an unremarkable automobile.

It is precisely this collapse in a single representation that the typological operation at the moment of encounter with the SUV—that is, in the *melee*—will not allow to happen. The mind with a discerning eye and a sensate body would not accept such an unremarkable automobile: rather, it would maintain the SUV as a sphinx. Behind both the appropriation of labor for leisure and the domestic publicity, the parody of identities trying to fulfill desires can be inferred. The sphinx gives form to those desires as it situates them in a real social circumstance, violating them and their objects.

Such desires have been noticed before, in other situations where a form was appropriated by someone with only passing familiarity with the world from which it is drawn: that is, in instances of overt othering. Count Harry Kessler describes one such situation, which took place amongst friends in his library in 1926 as they watched Josephine Baker dance for them:

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Suddenly she ... switched to her negro dances, spicing them with every sort of extravagance. The climax was reached when Fried tried to join in the clowning and she caricatured, ever more preposterously, ever more dizzyly, any and every movement he made. Where Fried was just ungainly, with her it became a wonderfully stylish grotesque which struck a balance between what is depicted in an ancient Egyptian relief frieze and the antics of one of George Grosz's mechanical dolls. Now and again Lulé Metern also improvised a few movements, very delightful and harmonious: but one twist of the arm by Josephine Baker and their grace was extinguished, dissolved into thin air like mountain mist.  

Fried and Metern parody the very extravagances that Baker, anticipating her audience's own expectations, has introduced into her dance. She confronts the mime of herself that has form (of its movement) and setting (the gathering of friends), transforming it through her own material bound action. In the moment of collapse between interpretation and action, she reads the form and content of her own objectification and converts it, en plein elan, into further contortions, producing the scene for social action inseparable from material form, from the body, from the library. She produces a relationship between herself and a representation of herself (a stereotype of an African-American cabaret dancer) that reflects back on the others, undermining the gains that their othering may have been able to gather in the eyes of Kessler.

The overly ambitious SUV parodies both work and domesticity. Embedded in its othering is an objectification, which arises at the moment in which the mindful eye rolls over its form and through its space. Baker, by placing herself inside the corporeal expectations of the circumstance, was able to read and respond to the representations that would try to pin her down into a fixed social identity. By projecting positions such as Baker's into the SUV, our eyes also recognize stilled representations of ourselves, of our desires, that would ultimately suppress our ability to exist as anything more than unremarkable drivers and passengers of vehicles that ceased being monstrous long ago.

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ongoing positions

All three of the preceding ‘tries’ addressed the issues of typology, mimesis and reception in the SUV, although each one pursued distinct aspects of material, genealogy, and experience. In the first part, the SUV was considered in its overall formal characteristics, which turn out to have been developed long before the appearance of the commodity that is marketed as the sport-utility vehicle. The excavation of the historically contingent human activity and cultural conventions embedded in these characteristics challenged the notion that a functional reading of the SUV’s form would give a clear indication of its current cultural meaning. The trope of the sphinx, with its evident juxtapositions, kept the SUV in the realm of symbolic representation, lest its interpretation be limited to the physical capabilities that its owners ostensibly require.

In the second part, a study of the spatial relationships within the interior of the SUV, and of that interior to the exterior, allowed the SUV to be related by type with station wagons. A reading of the corporeal positions in SUVs and station wagons suggested that the physical differences amongst various models that are related by type could produce moments of estrangement from the social circumstances in which a space is experienced. The melee described a mode of reception of material space—occupied by other physical bodies with social relations—in which the operations of form (such as type) reveal the social identities that such form tends to reinscribe.

Finally, the ‘unrequited projections’ that are inherent in applying typological expectations to objects allowed a complex relationship between SUV’s and crew cabs to arise. A visuality habituated to the relative social and physical positions of different bodies was able to discern absences in the SUV that marked its simultaneous appropriation and suppression of aspects of the social world. The notion of parody, as mimesis that reveals its own construction, emerged
as the suppressed aspects of toil (located in the crew cab pickup truck) confronted the illusion of transcendental leisure that otherwise pervades the urban landscape.

The initial position of the participant in the *melee*—amidst material form and social action, burdened with the potentials and constraints of formal structures (type) as well as those of previous experience with ostensible intentions (mimesis)—anticipated the development of a later position with respect to a social world created in the *melee*. It began with the eye of a casual observer, progressed to the body of an active participant, and finally returned to the eye that, having accompanied the body in corporeal habit, could produce complex readings of material form and space through the "physiognomic aspects of the visual world." The eye addressed the unprecedented visuality of Houston's landscape of *objet types*. The body was imbued with habits developed from material space, as well as with the memory that comes to accompany all spatial encounters. Together, the eye and the body transformed elements of the 'object city' into sites for the production of small knowledge, which could position the observer with respect to the cultural values promoted in the social and physical landscape.

The possible readings—some might call it conjecture—of material form and space in the very specific case study of the SUV in Houston underscore the multivalence of that vehicle's representational modes. The materiality of the SUV is conflicted, complex, full of both resonance and dissonance between its layers of visual and corporeal associations. The interaction of these readings counters the effects of singular, fixed representations that are prevalent in other models of understanding the social aspects of form, space and the city. The SUV is variously a bloodmobile, a station wagon, a vehicle of weekend adventure: different 'other spaces' with different historical contingencies, each with a different inscribed social position, cultural connotation, rhetoric of use. Each interaction established that the SUV is a particular
instance in which an awareness of the formal and spatial characteristics of type leads to a proliferation of possible identities, independent of the rhetoric of function in the vehicle.

Thus careful readings of the SUV, as material form and space which one encounters visually as well as corporeally, reveal a complex web of competing 'interests' that induce one to orient oneself with respect to the cultural norms that serve those interests. The SUV's references to conquest, domesticity and labor loosely parallel interests in race, gender and class. The interactions amongst these references reveal both the dangers (in terms of commodification of experience) and openings (in terms of critique) that the SUV presents. The celebrity of the colonist is carried forth in the SUV, and constructs the regular automobiles in a traffic jam as subjects; however, when the anonymity of the domestic sphere is drawn into the SUV itself, it conflicts with the celebrity assigned the SUV through vehicles of conquest. Similarly, the leisure assigned the SUV through its social and material expulsion of toil undermines attempts to recognize domestic work—represented simultaneously with sport—as a contributing factor to the capitalist economy. However, the SUV's parodic sportiness, which reveals its appropriation and commodification of labor, opens the door to a conspiratorial critique between the ghost of suppressed toil and the invisible doyen of domestic work.

The theme of mimesis appears first in the symbolic juxtapositions of the sphinx, then as the gestures discernible in the melee, and finally in Josephine Baker's devastating imitations of the parody directed at herself. Recognizing formal and social mimesis allows the SUV's different representations to coexist, to arise in the moment of reception of material form and space. This simultaneity of different possible renderings of the SUV is analogous to the dramatic 'gestus' in which an actor, in representing one aspect of a character's actions as an imitation of someone outside of the person on stage, separates himself from the role and allows other possible actions to loom above that which is visually dominant. Such gestus, which should induce active reception of the play's content from the audience, counters the aspects of the public sphere that are traditionally perpetuated in the illusion of theater; similarly, the SUV, if 'received' properly, points to illusions in the public sphere (the danger of the city and its
social body, the integrity of the nuclear family, the idealization of labor) that, while seemingly promoted in the SUV, cannot survive its multifarious representation.

The SUV must be kept at a distance. It should under no circumstances be subjected to an objectifying eye that would convert it into our identity by seeing it as a rational phenomenon. We must not let it and the other sphinxes of Houston disappear as symbolically juxtaposed elements of the material landscape.

It is, however, easy to dispel the SUV, as it commodifies those aspects of quotidian life that are already suppressed in the public sphere: sympathy for authoritarian ideals; family life; and toil. If we do not recognize the symbolism inherent in form and space, we run the risk of missing the sites in which power is trafficked and where cultural hegemony becomes invisible, as with the social and economic construction of dominant and dominated classes, the perpetuation of domestic ideology in the landscape of the post-city, and the commodification of work as leisure and the concomitant marginalization of real labor.

As a sphinx, the SUV works against the static representations of 'perspective' sight, thereby impairing its ability to promote its culture, which is nothing less than the general commodification of experience, its divorce from real social circumstances, and its displacement from a productive to consumptive role.

The SUV both signals and undermines its commodification, showing how material forms and spaces contain that which can expose the publicity they tend to produce. The SUV is subject to formal and functional associations; through these associations, we can imagine the desires and fictional social identities behind the use of the SUV; we can analyze how those desires, in being assigned not only physical form but also temporal appearance, are violated; and we can see the possible fractures in the 'audience' that result from the violence. The fractures are multiple in this multilayered metropolitan society, where the physical space of groups with
different and separate political and social spaces in fact overlap: witness the SUV on public roadways in all parts of the city.

Pursuing these multiple fractures places the traditional notion of a singular cultural hegemony in crisis. For the SUV, there is no single publicity: a consumer cannot postulate the cultural effects of his or her decisions, and the material world thus produced is not reducible to a single intention. There is therefore no possibility for those excluded from the symbolic economies and multiple forms of publicity in the SUV to exercise solidarity in resistance. As a consequence, a cultural politics of resistance to commodification must be founded at multiple sites. The SUV, by displaying "the complex dynamics of existing public spheres, their imbrication of global and local parameters, their syncretistic, unstable makeup, their particular modes of dis/organizing social and collective experience." supplies the material as well as social locus for such sites.¹

In addition to the cues for resistance to the commodification of experience toward which all aspects of our lives seem to tend, this fractured publicity also goads us to imagine architectural and urban space that, as with the conjecture employed to arrive here, carries the project inherent in Houston’s landscape to new heights.

Material form and space are always much more than the assigned role, be it a real or fictional intention, a classification of human activity, or an agglomeration of laws, codes and handshakes. The SUV can be rendered as publicity precisely because of the excess meaning of its socialized material form. And while it seems as though the SUV has been used here as a representation of cultural hegemony, that nefarious cloud of commodified experience does not exist independently of the SUV’s forms and spaces, waiting to take up residence in its receptive interior. This holds true beyond the SUV, as culture is not something abstract that decides to take physical form as a landscape. It is the landscape.

The SUV—a conspicuous object of this landscape—demonstrates the difficulty of maintaining a binary field in the city. Its publicity fails as the eye and the body move over and through it.

It reveals multiple sites in the public sphere at which to imagine resistance to the commodification of family relationships, of the violence of war and colonization, of the experience of physical space in the metropolis.

The allusions of material form, the symbolism of the structures of material space: these aspects of the physical environment, which are available in experience through type (work in the eye, work in the body, work in the mind), occur in the present, in actual social circumstances. They are actualized for us complete with the violence that is exercised on memory and expectations. Rather than signaling the decline of visual and corporeal experiences as constitutive elements of urban worlds, the landscape in cities like Houston has allowed the emergence of new scales of bodily projection that find their locus in physical objects. The scales extend in at least two directions from the limited range inherent in traditional figure-ground experiences of the city: the vast empty spaces that reveal 'megashapes' to be inhabited conceptually, and the close-up encounters with objects that are reminders of the body's commitment to physical occupation and navigation.

Upon this wide range, we can piece together an urban fabric in which we navigate a social world more consciously (we orient ourselves, are aware of the commodification of experience) than in 'traditional' cities, where the overbearing and overdetermined continuity of material form suggested a continuity of social experience that never did exist. In contrast to those corridors, the landscape of meandering legions of SUVs opens up clear gaps in the symbolic constitution of the city's social space. As objects such as the SUV are strewn across the urban landscape, the seemingly instantaneous architectures of the city become discrete moments of intellectual and corporeal experience and work. The city becomes a collection of symbolic objects (cultural artifacts) against which and within which we position ourselves. The objects are like so many posts in a field, each of which beckons to us, distracting us from the others until, through a glimpse in the corner of our eye or by tripping on a stump, our attention is
turned to another post, itself unable to fully obscure the field’s range of possible itineraries. Free from the obligation of holding the city together with traditional urban forms, we try to find the distinct cohesiveness offered by the objects and spaces that were disguised therein.

The cohesion does not come from intention. The SUV landscape is neither the result of a formalist nostalgia for safety, control and physical exertion, nor the harnessed manifestation of forces invisible to the anonymous crowd. It is not the end of a process, and even less the end of a labor. And in no sense is it a fait accompli, awaiting passive occupation and, inevitably, critique.

Instead, the SUV landscape is a work in progress, and it only comes to be a landscape because we engage it in the melee. We seek out the places into which seemingly benign buildings and cars would usher us; we feign adopting the positions promoted by parking lots and reclining seats of unprecedented comfort. Standing inside the melee yet outside of our scripted roles, this landscape—an architecture and its city—come into view, not as the concordance between expectations and outcomes, types and models, or programs and forms; but rather, as the work undertaken amongst the fragments of a world that, while discovered in memory and experience, lies beyond the confines of both. It is never a work of recuperation, and always one of projection.

Looking for the distinct cohesiveness of this landscape, we find that it is one of perpetual difference. and Houston, for one, offers continuous estrangement. Identity requires no thought: but difference from sphinxes turns the city into a material laboratory in which one thinks through form. Those thoughts must be turned to creating one’s social world, one’s relation to others, and to perceiving the dangers of identification, the possibility of resistance, and the extrapolation of the project discovered in the object city.

The SUV is not alone in offering so many possibilities. Other forms and spaces have the capacity for perpetual gestus, pointing to cracks in the public sphere’s facade of homogeneity. The possibility alone tempts me toward further moments of conjecture, which are my own practices of small knowledge. Through these practices, I seize the displacements inherent in the encounter with all those forms and spaces that, like the 4-Runner of my youth, have momentarily slipped outside of the blind spots of my own culture, my own world.
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figure

1.1 Donald Bunn. *Dodge Power Wagons*. p. 13
1.2 Donald Bunn. *Dodge Power Wagons*. p. 9
1.6 Donald Bunn. *Dodge Power Wagons*. p. 67
1.7 *Architectural Digest Motoring*. Fall 1999
1.8 *Architectural Digest Motoring*. Fall 1999
1.9 Photograph courtesy of Alfred Sutter
1.10 Photograph courtesy of Alfred Sutter
1.11 Photograph by author
1.12 Photograph by author
1.13 Photograph by author
1.14 Photograph by author
1.15 Drawing by Céline Lemercier
1.16 Photograph by author
1.17 source unknown
1.18 *Architectural Digest Motoring*. Fall 1999
1.19 *Architectural Digest Motoring*. Fall 1999
1.20 Photograph by author
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1.25 Photograph by author
1.26 2000 GMC Yukon advertising literature. p. 19
1.27 2000 Cadillac Escalade advertising literature. p. 19

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2.7 GMC Yukon advertising literature. p. 25
2.10 Drawing by Céline Lemercier
2.12 Drawing by Céline Lemercier
2.13 http://www.fordvehicles.com. 19 September 1999

3.3 http://members.xoom.com/wpj2d/stude/black.gif. 10 November 1999
3.4 '62-'72 Chevy Trucks. Spring 1999. p. 19
3.5 http://www.fordvehicles.com. 19 September 1999
3.6 Drawing by Céline Lemercier
3.8 *Architectural Digest Motoring*. Fall 1999
3.9 GMC Yukon advertising literature. p. 32
3.10 source unknown
3.11 *Architectural Digest Motoring*. Fall 1999
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