A CIVIC CULTURAL AND COMMERCIAL CITY CENTER
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Civic Cultural and Commercial City Center

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Architecture

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HOUSTON, TEXAS
May, 2017
I am grateful to Scott Colman for his encouragement, guidance and all the stimulating discussions. You have motivated me throughout the journey of my thesis. I am also thankful to Sarah Whiting for guiding and inspiring me. A very special gratitude to all my teachers, companions, fellow colleagues and Rice for enriching my graduate school experience. With a special mention to Anastasia Yee, Amelia Hazinski and Yingying Guan who assisted me in multiple academic and non-academic endeavors.

To my parents, I owe this journey to you.
ABSTRACT

Collective urban spaces have historically been a mixture of civic, cultural, and commercial programs. These urban spaces and the programs themselves benefited from their physical proximity and architectural integration. An intimate coexistence of C³ constituted the traditional city center. This formula for social and economic sustenance is well tested. However, in the present-day megalopolis, segregated zoning and a shift toward the privatization of public space has changed the nature of collective urban space. Civic, cultural, and commercial institutions have been isolated; we no longer benefit from their mutual imbrication. This project uses an immanent shift in the scale of city-building to produce a new form of collective space that reintegrates C³.
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C³ confronts the present day production of collective spaces in the megalopolis. The project introduces a new form of collective urbanism for the contemporary city that both utilizes and goes beyond present technologies of city-building. It seeks to renew a productive collaboration between civic, cultural, and commercial entities in the context of the megalopolis. It leverages the fact that these entities still occupy dominant positions of influence on society, but no longer benefit from their mutual imbrication. By reintegrating civic, cultural, and commercial functions, we can again construct compelling social conglomerations and relations. Rather than rejecting the megalopolis, this thesis leverages an immanent shift in the scale of city-building; it condenses a diverse and dispersed civic life to produce an inclusive urbanism for a broad audience.
INTRODUCTION

Collective urban spaces have historically been civic, cultural (i.e. religious and leisure), and commercial in nature. These urban programs benefited from their physical proximity and architectural integration. An intimate coexistence of $C^3$ constituted the traditional city center. This formula for social and economic sustenance is well tested.

In the present day, segregated zoning and a shift toward the privatization of public space have changed the nature of collective urban space. Civic, cultural, and commercial institutions have been isolated. The three types of institution no longer benefit from their architectural integration. This result of the disintegration of $C^3$ is the fragmentation and effective disintegration of collective urban space.

$C^3$: FROM INTEGRATION TO DISPERSION
However, in rare instances, the Cs are again being brought together. Private organizations have realized that a private integration of two or more of the Cs aids in the promotion of their institution. In the Second Baptist church in Houston, school rooms, a shopping center, gymnasium, and leisure programs are mingled with prayer halls and chapels, but the institution is overwhelmingly religious in program.

Rather than public space being used to combine the Cs for the benefit of multiple institutions, $C^3$ is being deployed to the benefit of singular institutional interests. In this new urbanist mall in Sugarland Town Center, for example, civic facilities, in this case a town hall, act as an anchor tenant for what is otherwise a singular institution—a commercial mall with a monotonous program.

**COOPTED $C^3$**
To mask this programmatic monoculture, practices producing collective spaces in the contemporary metropolis tend to mimic the historic city – a form of miniature urbanism with fragmented homogenous blocks – or occupy entire city blocks to create introverted “Disney” worlds within. These fragmented blocks don’t synthesize C³, but use the civic and cultural as appendages to the commercial. They don’t integrate housing, office spaces, or other urban activities. And because they are, despite their brief overtures to the cultural and the civic, commercial monocultures, their internalized model disassociates itself from the full breadth of urban life that civic and cultural functions bring.

EXISTING COLLECTIVE FORMS

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The result of this monocultural urbanism, in which C³ is isolated and split apart, is that, whatever programs buildings accommodate, be they civic, cultural, or commercial, they are featureless, rationalized containers that tend to all look the same. The adaptability of the big box, be it church, shopping mall, or the department of motor vehicles (DMV), has become the main agenda. The result is a bland exterior and interior, where flexibility is given preference over specificity. Where cultural spaces are used to give some token cosmopolitan flavor to the bland mall, the only visible evidence of the diversity of collective programs is the directory board.
Houston is an exemplar of the contemporary megalopolis and its characteristically poly-centred urbanism. The following maps demonstrate the fragmented landscape of the contemporary city and the distributed nature of civic and cultural institutions within the city. Many of the civic and cultural institutions are situated next to freeways. Moreover, since the development of the freeway system, the areas adjacent to freeways and, in particular, freeway intersections have become the natural sites of new urban centers. Yet even the city’s existing urban centers, such as the medical center, the galleria, and the museum district are dominated by a single kind of program.

In automobile-centric city planning, the freeway system becomes the datum by which we situate public space, the obvious medium for reaching a broad audience. In addition, religious institutions remain influential in Houston where they maintain a capacity to choreograph public life. This makes them an ideal attractor for the realization of a new form of collective urbanism. This thesis taps these potentials in the existing urban condition. But it leverages these tendencies into a fundamentally new proposition by way of a new intervention.
Distribution of Civic centers in Houston
- City Hall
- DMV
- Tax Center
Distribution of Cultural (religious) centers in Houston

Church
Synagogue
Temple
Mosque
Distribution of Cultural (Leisure) centers distribution in Houston
- Fitness center
- Cinema theatre
- Hotel
- Library
- Other leisure venues
Proposed Site for the Inter-state High Speed Rail Station at the intersection of U.S. 290 and I 10 freeway network.

THE SITE: A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY

In its integration with the existing freeway system, the proposed site for the new high speed rail station connecting Houston to Dallas provides a rare opportunity for densification in Houston. Moreover, as a new gate to the city, and an infrastructure integrating Dallas and Houston into a regional urbanism, this new development offers an opportunity to provide a new scale or urban center. Integrated with these transportation systems this site offers a unique opportunity to realize a new form of collective life.
My thesis condenses the future nodal interchange between the freeway system and the high-speed rail system to establish a new kind of collective urban space for Houston. It monumentalizes this new scale of urban concentration to make an effective presence and impact in a vast and dispersed city. The project integrates civic, cultural and commercial entities to create a new kind of civic center for the megalopolis.
This intensity of urban concentration makes an effective presence and impact in the dispersed city. The project concentrates civic, cultural and commercial entities to create a new kind of civic center for Houston.
C³C² asserts the formal recognition of collective urban space in a disintegrated urban context. Bringing together diverse scales and programs, the project reintegrates C3 without letting one program or institution dominate. Through careful attention to form, organization, circulation, and the design of public space, the project sets the stage for compelling social, cultural, and political interactions in the new city center.
Civic and Cultural programs rely on specificity to stage social space. Differentiated, yet abstract functional forms for each of the specific programs represent and internally structure the social environment particular to that space. A city hall, Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), tax center, and high-speed transit terminal are considered part of this civic infrastructure. Abstraction allows these different institutions to be equated, creating a democratic stage. These abstract forms represent the diverse constituencies of Houston, providing a cultural backdrop consistent with the diverse, multicultural city described by Rice sociologist Stephen Klineberg. The similar level of abstraction between the different forms equates the diverse programs, while their individual articulation structures the space within and represents these varying social rituals externally.
The project manipulates the mass of the commercial program, necessarily larger and more malleable than the civic and cultural programs, to articulate the central public space of the complex and to produce a monumental profile for the new urban center.

As in Isfahan, the rectangular court at the center of the project is designed with a twofold aspect. On the interior, it frames a singular collective space. On the exterior, it asserts a strong presence that is formally distinguished from the rest of the city.

The plinth framing the collective courtyard is manipulated in section to integrate with the raised transportation infrastructure at various altitudes. On the interior, the plinth is formed into stepped terraces, as in Bramante’s Vatican Belvedere, that overlook and thus intensify the theatricality of the collective space. The singular court employs dividers in the form of thoroughfare bridges to breakdown the large central courtyard into smaller squares with a more intimate scale. The diversity of thematic courtyards, similar to the Dhundar fort illustrated by here, create heterogeneous collective spaces within a singular court.

In One million Acres & No Zoning, Lars Lerup describes the way in which Houston’s urban centers, situated along the freeways, establish their presence through a concentrated density of taller forms that establish a stark contrast to the widespread flatness of Houston. This project employs towers in a similar fashion to project the urban presence of the complex. The formal manipulation of the commercial program establishes a system for commercial occupation that allows variation in the allocation of offices, housing, small up-market shops, and large department stores.
Situating C³ in the context

Schematic classification of commercial program
TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The following diagrams demonstrate the workings of the city center. Starting from the vehicular access, the down ramps from the adjacent freeways lead to the upper or lower parking levels housed on the periphery of the mass. The multi-level parking allows easy access to all levels of the complex and ensures the overall usability of the city center.

INTER-STATE TRANSPORTATION

The city center is integrated with the multiple transportation modes of the city; High-speed rail, and the interstate system, merge seamlessly into the project at multiple levels. The high speed rail station forms an anchor spine for the perimeter mass.
The commercial plinth opens up at the ground level to emphasize street level connection. Providing direct access from the ground-level street network to the center’s mid-level allows the center to be integrated with its local surroundings. The center’s long edges have drop off zones for cars, local buses, and taxis. The integration of local, regional, and interstate transportation allows the center to become the most significant transportation junction in city. Vertical circulation for rapid movement is provided within the commercial mass. In addition promenades that allow movement between different levels are situated along or within the civic and cultural forms, to integrate the diverse social spaces with the everyday experience of the city center.

**CIRCULATION**

- Interior and exterior pedestrian pathways
- Car drop-off zone
- Load bus drop-off zone

**SERVICE MECHANICS**

The perimeter mass houses the center’s mechanics, framing the collective space within. The service corridors, logistical cores, and loading docks, accommodated within the periphery of the mass, ensure access to the various levels, and liberating the depth of the floor plate toward the inner court for the retail, civic, and cultural programs.
Associated with the civic and cultural activities interspersed within the commercial mass are collective spaces that, each belonging to a civic or cultural program, provide an exterior space for activities related to that program. By further integrating the program with the larger civic space, these interstitial spaces facilitate dynamic social dialog and interactions. The thematic diversity of the five plazas bridge the two civic/cultural functions in each plaza with other activities related to these specific cultural institutions. The five plazas allow local differences without obscuring the singular identity of the city center as a whole. The project thus creates a varied spectrum of social relations among the C’s and between C3 and collective spaces.
The project provides an autonomous urban center, combining civic, commercial, and cultural functions. Integrated with road and rail transportation systems, it is an important nucleus for the city and the region, and sustainable in itself. The project is understood as a catalyst for density, but does not prescribe the exact form that this future development will take. As an autonomous catalyst it nevertheless stimulates future urban development in its vicinity by setting up formal datums through the towers and raised plinth.

Civic, cultural, and commercial entities occupy dominant positions of influence in sociocultural life. The relationship between them has altered over time, but is currently one of physical and social estrangement. My thesis mends the fragmented relationship between the Cs. Historically, civic and cultural institutions dominated commerce, which was rendered as the bulk buffer space. Commerce is no longer a traditional market or street arcade but a large boisterous shopping mall. Until recently, the mall has sustained its independent existence, but is increasingly coopting other Cs to provide its sustainability. Just as the civic and cultural anchors add variety to the generic commercial mass, civic and cultural spaces can benefit from commercial space. The scale at which commerce operates helps promote and broaden the narrow outreach of civic and cultural programs. The proposed concentration of Cs at a scale apt for today asserts a remedy to our prevailing monoculturalism.

The site for the new high-speed rail station connecting Houston to Dallas located amidst two freeway intersections provides an excellent opportunity. This concentration of transportation infrastructure ensures easy accessibility to the project. High speed rail creates an opportunity for a new form of urbanism. Moreover, the physical infrastructural requirements for a rail station differentiate it from other forms of urban center. Where transportation interchange is necessitated and people are forced onto their feet there is always the potential for social interaction. As the single high-speed rail station in the city, this new infrastructure allows an architectural integration of C³C² to produce a new scale of urbanism.

The intention of this thesis is to make the speculated fiction a plausible solution and to foster disciplinary conversations about rectifying the disintegrated civic and cultural life of contemporary cities. The project seeks an architectural innovation contiguous with historic urban forms and existing technologies and lifestyles. C³C² is meant for now.
The following images demonstrate the architectural collaboration of C³ in response to the city, local communities, and individuals. Houston sets the frame for the new city center. The project conglomerates C³ to create a new democratic stage for compelling social interactions and relations. The individuated civic and cultural communities are embedded within the commercial mass to integrate disparate social conditions with a continuous, enriching daily experience.
The different formal parts project different sectional relations with the courtyard by extending the internal social space to outside. By situating the figural forms at various altitudes of the perimeter mass, it allows for a thorough engagement at multiple terraces of the collective space. It makes for a compelling social, cultural and politically charged interactive space.
The individuated colors of the plazas get carried to the upper levels in order to sectionally integrate the collective space. The figural forms pop-up above the plinth to assert their presence to the city beyond. The vertical circulation ramps and stairs interlock together.
Green Courtyard - Fourth level - Cinema, Tax center in the background

Blue Courtyard - Sixth level - Synagogue
The civic and cultural forms don’t just situate and subtract the commercial form; they merge with the large mass, which formally echoes the presence of the relatively small figures. The geometry of the figural form is echoed by the commercial form. Some of the figural forms are strategically situated at the street level to connect with the immediate context, projecting beyond the center glimpses of the collective spaces housed within.
Yellow Courtyard - Ground level - Local Bus drop off, Ramp up to the Hotel

Green Courtyard - Ground level - Local Bus drop off, Mosque
The civic and cultural spaces are in constant dialogue. For example, the fitness center hovers in the backdrop of the church and you get glimpses of the tax center from the cinema theatres. These relationships between the varied social spaces construct a collective space that is apt for today.
SPECIFICITY TO THE GENERIC SPACE

The strategy of the formal echo provides an alternative identity to the commercial mass which, in other projects, often obtains its identity through the branding of individual stores. This formal resistance to the dominance of a single commercial player, sustains a constant awareness of other programs and collective spaces within the center.
Blue courtyard - Ground level - Retail space, ramp leading to the Synagogue

Blue courtyard - First basement level - Retail space, entrance to the Inter-state Bus terminal
Orange courtyard - Fourth level - From the pedestrian bridge overlooking the DMV

Green courtyard - Ground level - Retail space. Entrance to the Tax center
On approaching from the city via the freeways surrounding the site, the center clearly establishes its strong formal presence, distinct from the rest of the city. By the formal contrast between the commercial and the civic and cultural forms, the massing projects the diversity contained within the center outward into the city. Moreover, as you approach and move around the complex by train, bus, or car, the relationship between the figural forms and the rational mass constantly changes, providing a representation of the dynamic social interactions that one will discover upon reaching the project and entering the central courtyard.
Overview from the high speed rail
Overview from the freeway