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An examination of projects connecting popular and regional needs, demonstrating inclusive practices which are potential catalysts for future interventions.

Pop Regionalism

Wanda Dye

'As it stands, the concept of popular culture is virtually useless, a melting pot of confused and contradictory meanings capable of misdirecting inquiry up any number of theoretical blind alleys' [...] popular culture is in effect an empty conceptual category, one which can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use.[1]

Tony Bennett [quoted] and John Storey in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*

We are only beginning *to know enough about ourselves and about our environment to create a regional architecture. Regionalism is not a matter of using the most available local material or copying some simple form of construction that our ancestors used, for want of anything better, a century or two ago. Regional forms are those which most closely meet the actual conditions of life and which most fully succeed in making people feel at home in their environment: they do not merely utilize the soil but they reflect the current conditions of culture in the region [...] Every regional culture necessarily has a universal side to it. Open to influences which come from other parts of the world and from other cultures, separated from local region in space or time or both together. It would be useful if we informed the habit of never using the word regional without mentally adding to it the idea of the universal – remembering the constant contact and interchange between the local scene and the wide world that lies beyond it.*[2]

Lewis Mumford in 'Excerpts from *The South in Architecture*' in *Architectural Regionalism*

When I refer to the terms Pop Regionalism, or Popular Regionalism, I am not speaking of a stripped down vernacular built by early settlers, but rather a complex mixture of architecture and spaces designed by practices who are openly informed by high and low cultures, young and old ages, rich and poor pockets, high and low technologies, native and foreign people, structures, and landscapes. The inclusive practices and projects examined here engage the lived experience of social and cultural difference, the popular and regional pluralistic conditions so often found in the everyday landscape. The practices deploy both strategic and tactical moves[3] – informed by wit, playful symbolism, deep histories, iconography, site, temporality, inventive programming, or plain and simple generosity. Through these moves, or attitudes, the projects attempt to create a sense of place and of time, a collective memory and belonging in the world. Meanwhile, they still seek to maintain individuality through the idiosyncratic, creating an identity or



1 Pier 11, Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects

2 'Image a Day' photographs by student Luis Spinola for the course entitled 'The Everyday City'

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3 Components of proposed bus stop by Luis Spinola

4 Photomontage of bus stops by Luis Spinola

5 Typological abstraction and laser cut 'tattooed' patterns of the bus stop designed and built by Iowa State University architecture students, directed by faculty member Jason Griffiths

6 Fabrication drawings, laser cut panels and fabrication process by Iowa State University students

7 Various iterations of the bus stop by Iowa State University architecture students

character for the architecture, the place, and especially for the everyday user. When describing Pop Regionalism, it seems like each term presented cancels out the next, or that the pairing is simply another paradoxical post-structuralist, post-modernist, theory or style. But it is 'both/and' – a fluid situation based on contingencies and pluralism. It is understood from social and cultural points of view, understood and made accessible through an active collective of selectors, not through a mass of passive consumers.

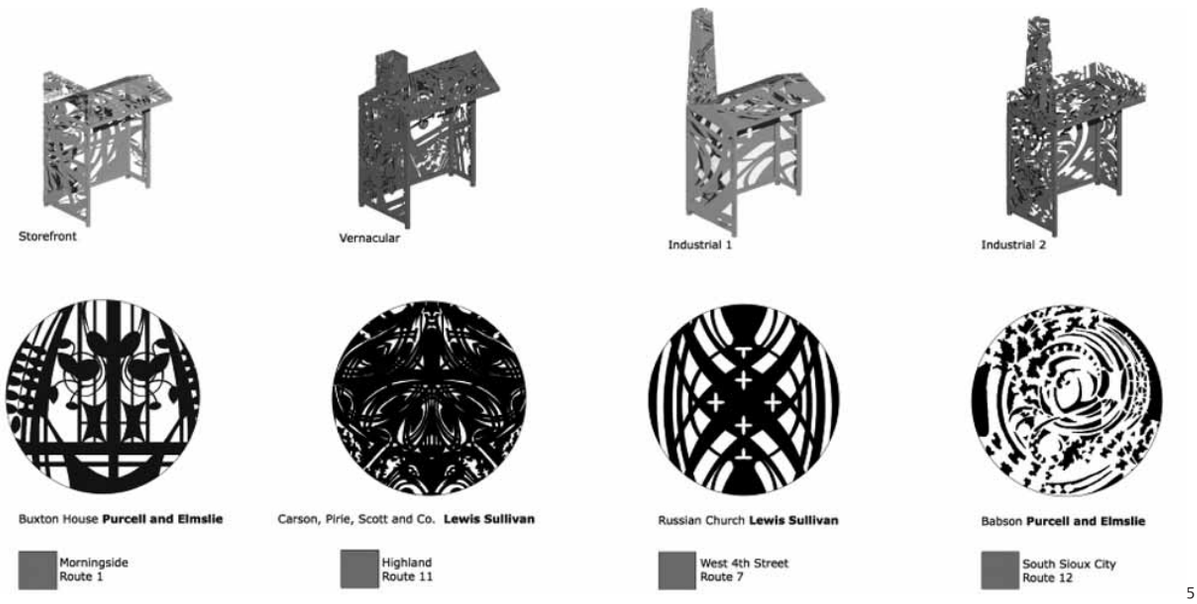
The [Majority] of the [Built] Everyday Landscape [As it Exists Today]

Learning from Popular culture does not remove the architect from his or her status in high culture. But it may alter high culture to make it more sympathetic to current needs and issues [...][4]
Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*

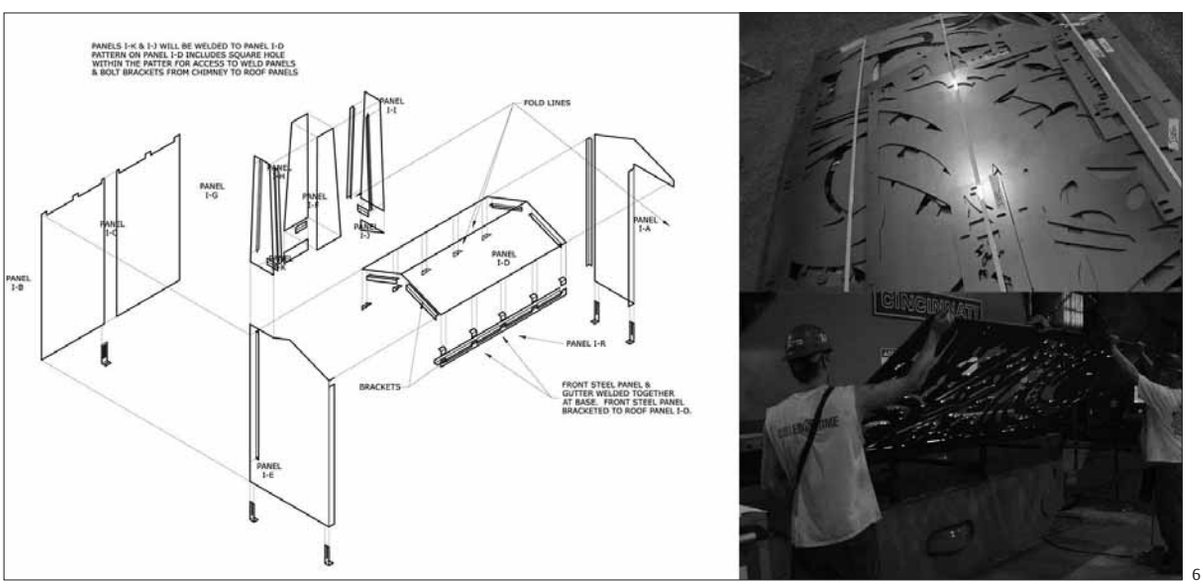
What seems to bring us together in the new landscape is not the sharing of space in the traditional sense but a kind of solidarity based on shared uses of the street or road, and on shared routines. The trailer court does not last for many years and its amenities are scanty: but it is accessible, and the highway is accessible, and if somewhere jobs are accessible, we can look forward to something like a community held together and achieving identity by the short private road which everyone uses in daily life.[5]
J. B. Jackson in *The Accessible Landscape*

Generic or pastiche structures and spaces are the status quo in our everyday landscape. I would argue that, presently, the majority of our daily experiences are disconnected, comprised of interfaces with ubiquitous, characterless design. One of the many challenges for designers intervening within mostly homogeneous landscapes is to design structures and spaces that engage both popular and regional

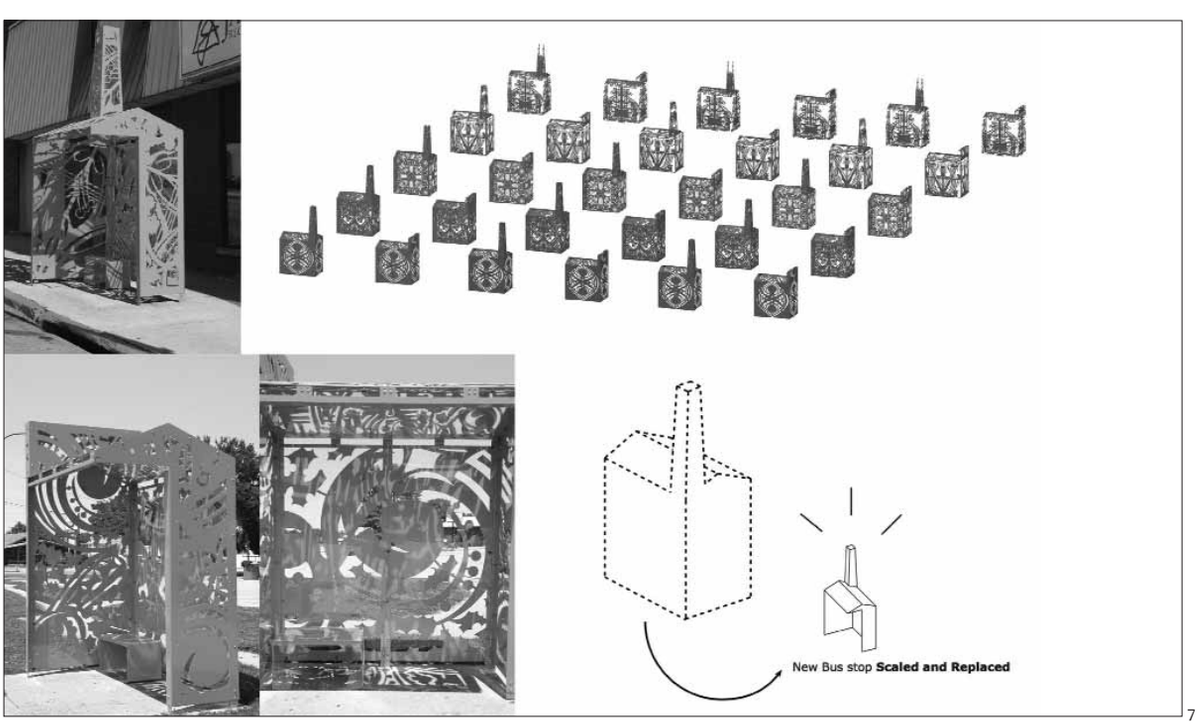
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cultures, while maintaining design integrity and beauty. Structures and spaces that engage the pluralistic everyday user socially, culturally and aesthetically are seriously lacking in perhaps ninety per cent of the American built environment.

Sociologist Henri Lefebvre has observed the complex contradictions of capitalist space that is 'oriented toward the reproducible', reflecting on the homogenisation it creates in the everyday landscape. In 'Space: Social Product and Use Value',[6] he states:

> *Oriented toward the reproduction of the social relations of production, the production of space enacts a logic of homogeneity and a strategy of the repetitive. But this bureaucratic space conflicts with its own results. When space is of this nature, occupied, controlled, and oriented toward the reproducible, it soon sees itself surrounded by the non-reproducible: nature, the site, by locality, the regional, the national, even the world level.*[7]

He continues his critique of capitalist space:

> *This formal and quantified abstract space negates all differences, those that come from nature and history as well as those that come from the body, ages, sexes, and ethnicities*.[8]

Structures and spaces today lack evidence of engagement with difference – socially and culturally within the everyday life of the user and the everyday landscapes in which they are located. It is supposedly faster, cheaper and easier to reproduce the same structures and the same spaces, no matter where they are or who they are for. This is especially problematic in prototypical design and public space in America, from speculative housing in gated communities, to isolated small box and big box commercial, to urban voids in dead downtowns or neighbourhoods, to banal infrastructures and privatisation of public spaces.

Some attempts toward a praxis of difference

> *In a vastly different historical and ideological moment from that of mid-century, today's architectural culture permits and perhaps demands an expanded, inclusive sensibility shaped by the paradoxes of our own age, one that feeds upon past and present.*[9]
> Elizabeth A. T. Smith in *TECHNO Architecture*

> *When Modern architects righteously abandoned ornament on buildings they unconsciously designed buildings that were ornament* [...][10] *But when there is little money to spend on architecture, then surely greatest architectural imagination is required. Sources for modest buildings and images with social purpose will come not from the industrial past, but from the everyday city around us, of modest buildings and modest spaces with symbolic appendages.*[11]
> Denise Scott Brown in *Learning from Las Vegas*

Following are several projects that seek to create place, and alternatives to sameness, by responding to social and cultural differences. Therefore, one would hope that these projects – that create places 'to feel at home'[12] as Mumford suggests, or 'a space [...of] full play; a beach, a place of festivity, the space of a dream'[13] as Lefebvre observes – can act as agents for future interventions within the homogeneous landscapes of the everyday. The projects go beyond pure functionalism – the user and their needs. Each project questions and surpasses the scope of the given parameters to create structures and spaces that are differentiated, appropriated, responding to social or cultural desires, in addition to needs, and all within fairly modest budgets. In 'From the Contradictions of Space to Differential Space' Lefebvre states:

> *The fact is that consumption satisfies needs, and that leisure and desire, even if they are united only in a representation of space* [in which everyday life is put in brackets and temporarily replaced by a different, richer, simpler and more normal life], *are indeed brought into conjunction; consequently, needs and desires come into opposition with each other. Specific needs have specific objects. Desire on the other hand, has no particular object except for a space where it has full play; a beach, a place of festivity, the space of a dream.*[14]

These inclusive projects are located within the routines of everyday life: infrastructures and spaces typically designed by institutions and which usually 'answer to the principles of repetition and reproducibility – principles effectively hidden by semblances of creativity'.[15] They do not mean to do away with strategies of the repetitive altogether, but instead respond to how one can operate tactically *within* strategies of the repetitive, in an attempt to engage or embrace difference or pluralism in our everyday landscape: to be both popular and regional, playful and responsible, predictable and idiosyncratic, functional and desirable: 'For space "is" whole and broken, global and fractured, at one and the same time. Just as it is at once conceived, perceived, and directly lived.'[16]

Bus Stops: Difference for Dallas

This project, by student Luis Spinola, was designed for a course entitled 'The Everyday City'.[17] After direct observations of the bus riders' daily experiences, a design for a new bus stop for the city of Dallas was proposed. Spinola observed that many of the bus stops were mostly sign, with little shelter. The stops that did provide shelter were generic, reflecting little about the site, the user, or the particular neighbourhood in which they were located. They simply functioned, responding only to the barest minimum of needs. The challenge of the design proposal was to respond to local difference within the repetitive logic of mass production. Several design strategies and tactics were proposed: the translucent shell or chassis of the bus stop could be mass produced, while the printed skins could change; electronic marquees and interactive kiosks could display information ranging from time and

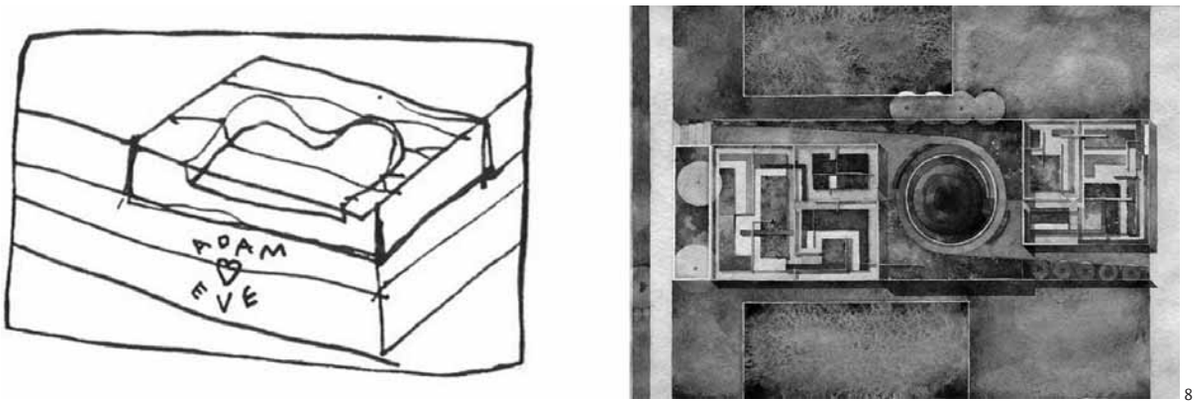
8 Initial conceptual sketch and plan of Knox Garden by LOOM Studio

9 Final Knox Garden intervention

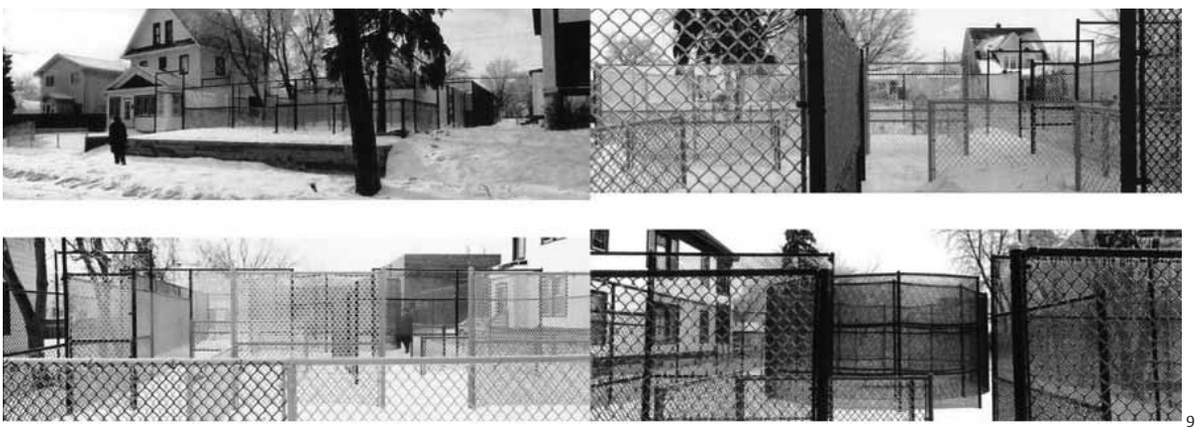
10 Playful labyrinthine spaces within Knox Garden

11 Active and contemplative places within Knox Garden

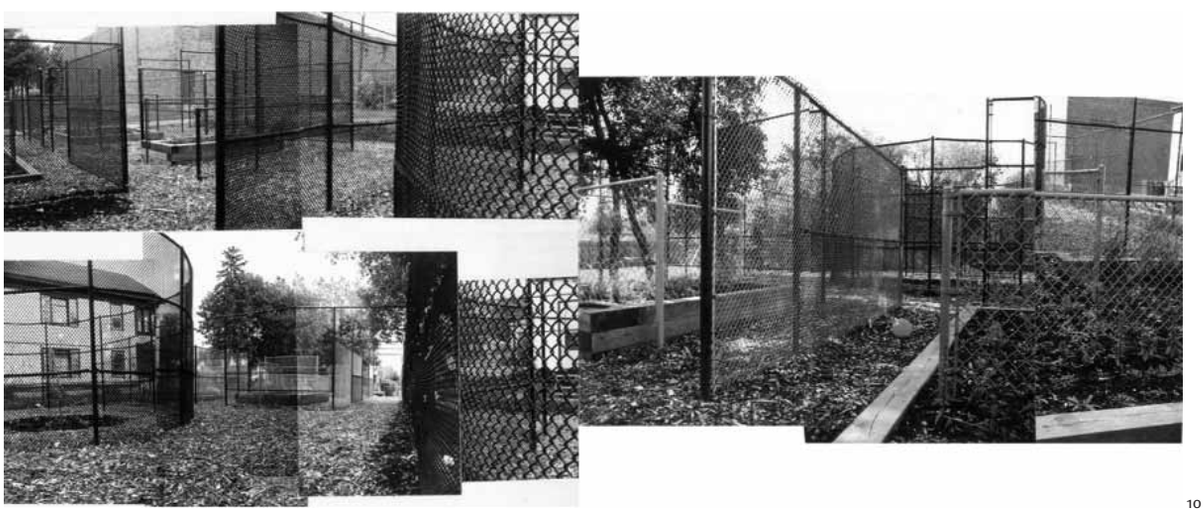
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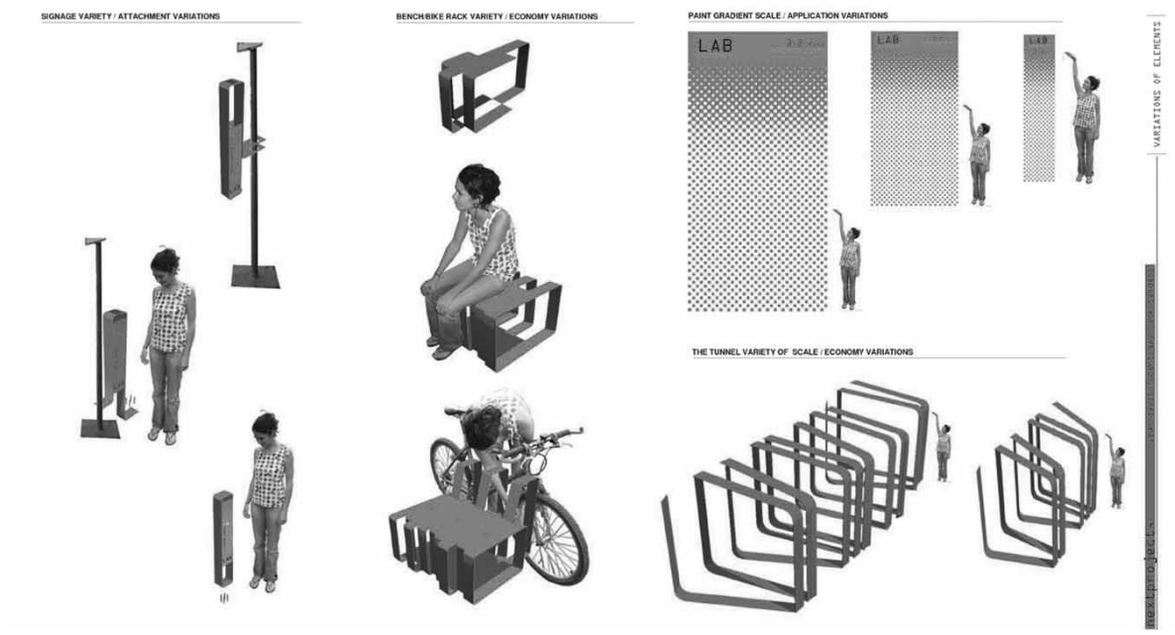


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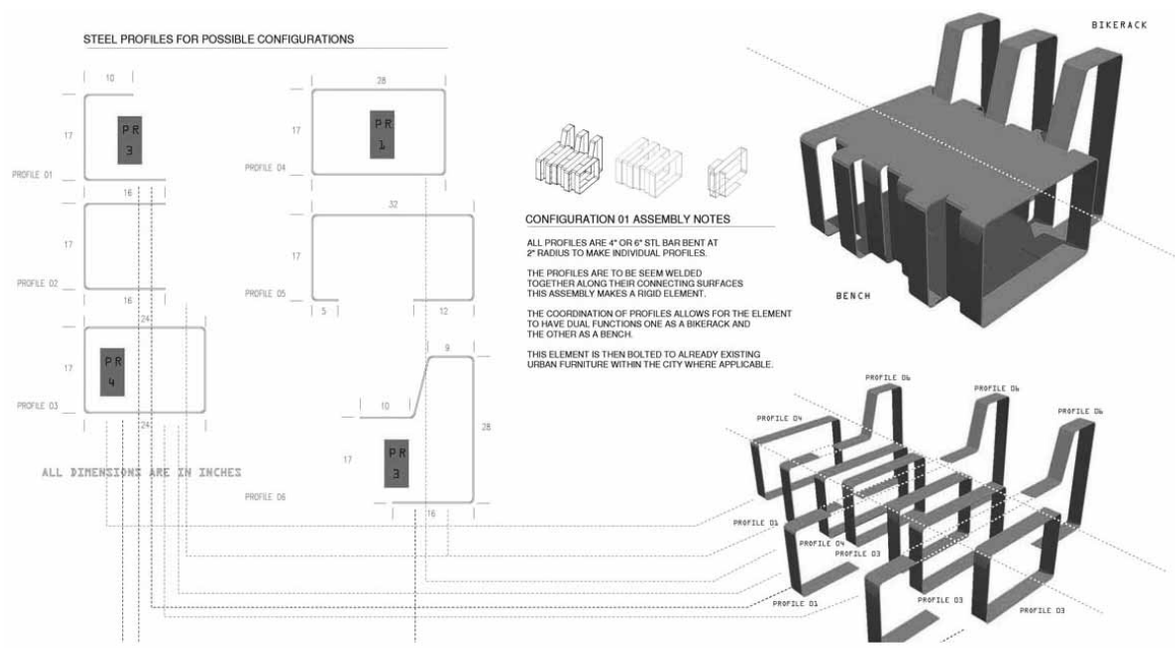


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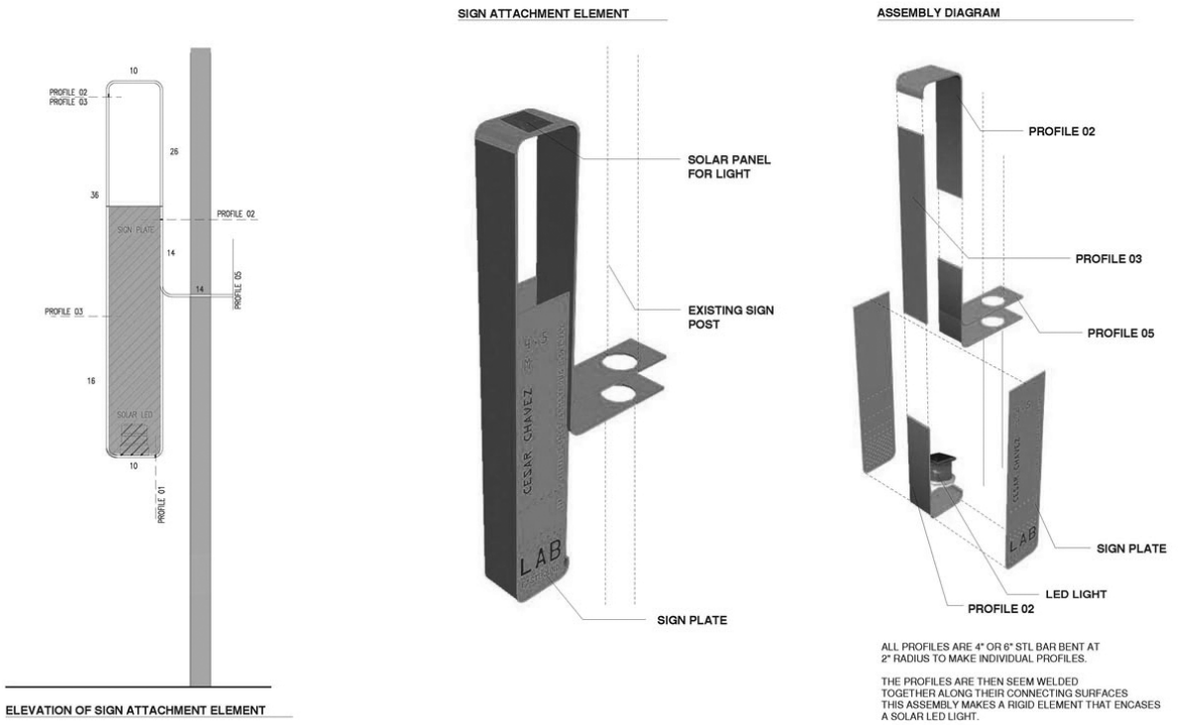
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temperature, to bus routes, to local social or cultural events; and integrated planters containing various floral displays could also change depending on locale or the seasons. The different skins could show images of local emerging artists' works, local bands and sports teams or images of seasonal fruits and vegetables available at the local market. Instead of plastering the bus stop with advertising, the proposal was to provide an identity through information and communication about the neighbourhood in which the bus stops were located. The translucent shell could also be lit from within in the evenings – providing safety, but at the same time a locatable lantern for the different sites within the city. In addition to differentiating the skin, the planters provide a more tactile experience through sight and smell, in opposition to the banal glass and steel bus stops and barren signs currently in use. Through the use of iconography, symbolism, site specificity and inventive programming, these proposed bus stops attempt to respond to social and cultural difference and create a sense of place and time for all citizens within the everyday landscape of Dallas *[2–4]*.

Bus Stop for Sioux City by Sioux City

This project, designed and built by Iowa State University architecture students and directed by faculty member Jason Griffiths, explores symbolism and context in an effort to create a sense of place within Sioux City's disappearing downtown, or as Griffiths states, 'phenomena attached to a certain locality'.[18] In collaboration with the Chamber of Commerce and the citizens of Sioux City, the students proposed a series of mass produced and yet differentiated bus stop prototypes. The structures were fabricated using repetitive details but still

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14

12–14 Details of design built/fabricated variable components of LAB by nextproject design collective

yielding slight variations through laser cut 'tattooed'[19] skins, all within the logic of mass production. The symbolic and contextual variations reflected rapidly disappearing vernacular typologies – housing, industrial smoke stacks and downtown storefronts. Various ornamentations reflecting the local Prairie Style detailing from some well known works of architecture were also incorporated into the series. Even the material and colour respond to social and cultural locality through the use of steel – a local material. Chromatically, the various bright safety colours reflect the agricultural equipment so prevalent within Iowa's farming landscape. Through slight abstraction and rescaling of the symbolic iconography, through simple mnemonic moves, connections to popular and regional cultures are made. The designs inject the downtown with a collective memory and register demolished buildings and the disappearing vernacular, as well as demonstrating playful and symbolic interpretations of what are typically generic or nostalgic structures within the everyday life of the bus rider and citizens of Sioux City *[5–7]*.

Knox Garden – activating the void

Knox Garden was a built intervention by LOOM Studio within a temporary void in a transitional neighbourhood of Minneapolis, Minnesota. The project, located behind the Boys and Girls Club, created a place of play and refuge for local kids. The symbolic concept of Adam and Eve reflected its adjacency to the club, as well as a thoughtful and didactic narrative for the three interconnected and yet different spaces: spaces for boys, spaces for girls, and a space for both – the storytelling space, which was a simple stone circular retaining wall made for sitting, with the symbolic apple tree planted in the centre. The spaces for the boys and girls were constructed of reclaimed off-the-shelf coloured cyclone fencing. They are playful labyrinthine landscapes, and yet through their complex but accessible layering, transparency and seasonal transformations, you could very well mistake the garden for a site specific art installation by Robert Irwin or Olafur Eliasson. Through its implementation of an everyday material – cyclone fencing – the garden creates a sense of irony through its colourful and accessible spaces, especially in relation to the typical implementation of confinement most prevalent in generic asphalt school yards. The intervention was constructed by volunteer labour through the local prison work release programme, so creating another layer of subtle or hidden difference and collective memory.[20] Today the garden no longer exists. The void was purchased and built upon by a new home owner; but within that time, between the void and the new home, there was a temporary and modest intervention that, if only for a short time, served its time well – symbolically, playfully, beautifully, and generously in the minds of many *[8–11]*.

LAB – infrastructure as public art

LAB [Lance Armstrong Bikeway] by Leah Davis, Robert Gay and Jack Sanders of nextproject design collective is an infrastructural project that is both popular and regional in its use of iconography, local history, symbolism, site specificity and inventive programme – permitting various social and cultural interpretations, appropriations and inhabitations.

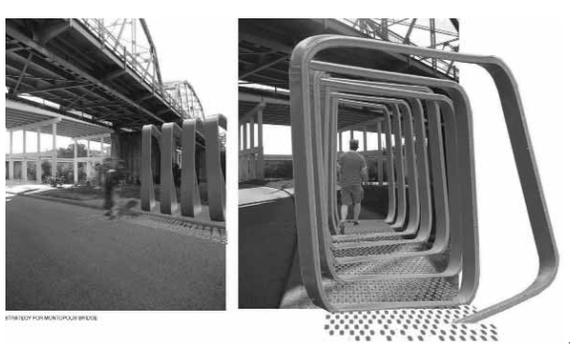
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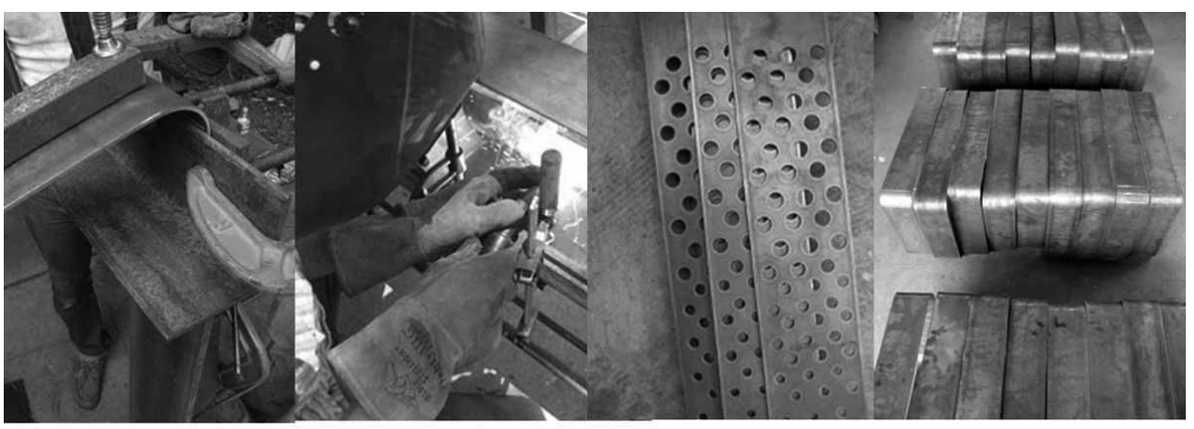

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15–18 On-site photomontages of LAB

19–20 Reclamation of stop signs and components for LAB

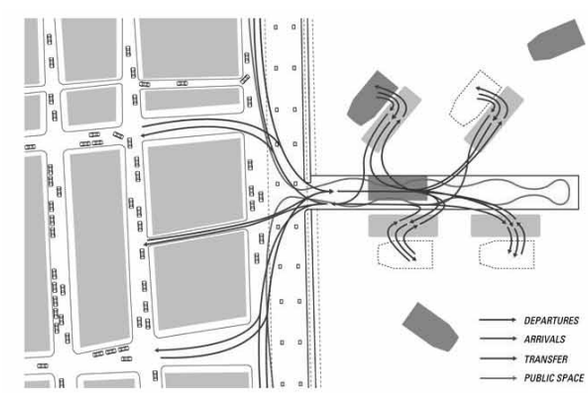
nextproject state that 'the project's larger agenda is to contribute back to the public realm and to design the series of elements or components in a way that it can be added on to incrementally, depending on available sites and their specificities, program, and of course, economics.'[21] In this way, the project is both tactical and strategic – it operates according to time and constraints, but still does not lose its overall infrastructural identity through its repetitive elements. The proposal, located in Austin, Texas, questions the scope of the given programme by creating a hybrid between needs and desires through a series of multiple interventions. This is achieved through expanding the programme as an integrated public artwork, and popularising alternative modes of transportation for the entire community, instead of simply instituting a bikeway for one type of user. This variation is achieved through the design of built structures which adapt to difference, and yet maintain an iconographic repetitive logic in detail, material and colour. The repetitive, and yet differentiated, steel ribbed structure may be a bike rack at one moment, a bench at another, or even an inhabitable public art sculpture, reminiscent of Claes Oldenburg. In addition, the metal for the bikeway markers is laser-cut reclaimed aluminium from the City of Austin's stop signs, so again creating a sense of locality,

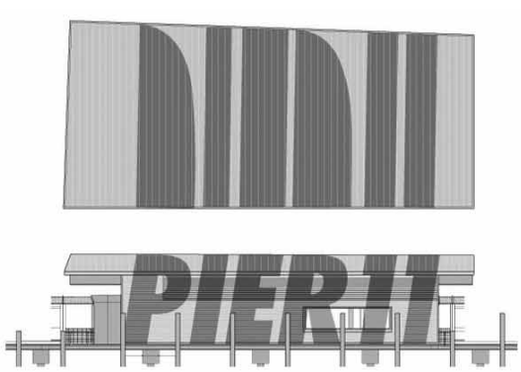
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although subtle and hidden.[22] Through painting all of the structures – and certain ground surfaces – a bright yellow, a nod to Lance Armstrong's LIVESTRONG bracelet is made. Even the slinky-like geometry of the bikeway's structures is an iconic abstraction of one of the most popular worn objects today. These inclusive practices of differentiation, reclamation and reinvention are conscious choices made by the designers – improvisational moves brought about by multiple constraints and their own design values *[12–20]*.


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21 Pier 11 building 'getting out of the way' and Wall Street Ferry esplanade by Smith-Miller + Hawkinson Architects

22 Pier 11 building 'opening up'

23 Diagram demonstrating the public space and anamorphic graphics at Pier 11

24 'Larger than it seems-ness' at Pier 11 demonstrated by the big beam and big door

25 View of 'Pop billboard' graphic from the ferry



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PIER 11 – Wall Street Ferry Terminal

In *Between Spaces*, Laurie Hawkinson of Smith-Miller + Hawkinson writes:

> *The Theory:*
> *1. To disperse the univocality of a 'master plan' into an aerosol of imaginary conversations and inclusionary tactics. 2. To bring in rather than leave out. 3. To make signs. 4. To renaturalize. 5. To question the priorities of style and taste. 6. To anticipate change and invite alteration. 7. To construct a cycle of repair and discovery. 8. To question the limitations of vocation. 9. To be brought down to earth. 10. To make the permanent temporary. 11. To see the forest for the trees. 12. To have no end in sight.*
> *The Program:*
> *1. To restructure the approach to the museum. 2. To allow for laboratory settings for artists and designers. 3. To provide a visible, inexpensive, short-term botanical strategy to alter the place. 4. To introduce movie-going, walking, wading, eating, reading, bird-watching, relaxing, and other familiar pleasures. 5. To punctuate the site with regional, cultural and vernacular signage. 6. To replace the forest that has been lost.*[23]

This excerpt lucidly describes the approaches and attitudes that the firm has consistently held in their work for the past thirty years. These approaches are exemplified at Pier 11 at the Wall Street Ferry Terminal; a modest project with substantial repercussions. A building designed for the New York City Economic Development Corporation and the Department of Transportation, the project was thoughtful in its moves and designed with the public in mind. The building is simple and yet extremely generous through its strategic move of 'getting out of the way'[24] and giving space back to the public – something that is somewhat hard to find within the density of New York, as well as in today's object-centric landscapes. The 2,800 square foot building creates a sense of identity, place and time through several strategic and tactical moves. The iconic aircraft hangar door (facing north to take advantage of the sun in winter months) is supported by an extremely long and deep beam, giving the modest building an oversized presence, creating awe through structure and material and, most importantly, opening up to the outside to encourage a more public sense of space and social activity between many different users. SM+H state that 'the beam's very deep section suggests a project size greater than it seems and defers to the very tall buildings of Wall Street'.[25] In addition, the generous shed roof canted north takes further advantage of the sun in the winter and provides shade in the summer. The translucent fibreglass covered walks are lower, yet they remain continuations of the building and reconnect the vast scale of the esplanade physically and visually, reconciling user, land, boat and sea. The billboard-sized 'PIER 11' typography also gives the building iconic presence and symbolic relevance within the collective memory of the commuter, the tourist and for the citizens of New York. In the pop graphic, one is reminded of the works of Andy Warhol or Ed Ruscha – artists who transformed or represented the banal in extraordinary ways. SM+H argue that 'the building is replete with anamorphic graphics, allowing its name to be read from sea and skyscraper'.[26] These modest yet bold, simple yet complex moves – in addition to the high-tech and low-tech materials: steel, glass, corrugated metal, wood, fibreglass, and bright school bus yellow paint – are very conscious of different everyday users, and its occupation within an everyday landscape – full of different regional histories and uses of the pier *[1, 21–27]*.

Toward Pop Regionalism

> *Regionalism is variously a concept, strategy, tool, technique, attitude, ideology, or habit of thought. Despite its many manifestations, collectively it is a theory that supports resistance to various forms of hegemonic,*

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universal, or otherwise standardizing structures that would diminish local differentiation. These theories propose alternatives in the form of methods and criteria for the respect, revitalization, and if necessary, reconstruction of life along regionally determined lines. It is a self-conscious set of theories, which distinguishes it from vernacular – the responses to local conditions by necessity, not by choice. The vernacular is often characterized dubiously as 'unconscious', which is meant to suggest that it is not purposely regional, but only accidental; in fact settlers and other pioneers very scrupulously and consciously adapted the architecture they knew to the places they chose to settle. Regionalism is voluntary; alongside being self-conscious, it is a choice made by a practitioner [planner, architect, or politician] *among alternatives, including theories of regionalism.*[27]
Vincent Canizaro in *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*

As with the human being, every culture must both be itself and transcend itself: it must make the most of its limitations and must pass beyond them: it must be open to fresh experience and yet it must maintain its integrity. In no other art is that process more sharply focused than in architecture.[28]
Lewis Mumford in 'Excerpts from *The South in Architecture*', in *Architectural Regionalism*

The projects and practices examined here are working through the complex and often contradictory circumstances so often found in the everyday landscape. Instead of seeing these circumstances as negative, as setbacks, or as invasions on design concepts, they embrace the unknown, the contingent and the fluid both/and situations. The complexities and constraints serve as catalysts for the projects, from concept to construction.

In what might be described as an age of pluralism,

26–27 **Photographs by Wanda Dye from the series 'Project on the Everyday Landscape'**



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practices are often confronted with popular and local or regional agendas. In this context, can practices' projects 'be themselves but also transcend themselves'[29] through embracing constraints and difference? Can a project be open 'to fresh experience'[30] while also 'maintaining its integrity'?[31] Can practices today draw inspiration 'from the everyday city around us, of the modest buildings and modest spaces with symbolic appendages'?[32] And can these projects and practices act as agents for others intervening within similar situations and constraints? The word popular in 'Pop Regionalism' begins to deal with issues beyond the local. As Mumford states: 'Every regional culture necessarily has a universal side to it'.[33] I believe the pairing of the terms to describe these particular projects and practices is appropriate – because they create a pluralistic architecture open to difference and the universal, done without taking itself too seriously (even though some of their repercussions are profound and beautiful). The projects and practices draw from the playfulness and the complexities of 'everyday life'. They describe thoughtful attitudes towards history, symbolism, iconography, irony, generosity, programme and place. They 'are themselves and yet transcend themselves'.[34]

Notes

1. John Storey, 'What is Popular Culture?', in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2006).
2. Lewis Mumford, 'Excerpts from *The South in Architecture*', in *Architectural Regionalism: Collected Writings on Place, Identity, Modernity, and Tradition*, ed. by Vincent Canizaro (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).
3. Michel de Certeau, 'Making Do: Uses and Tactics', in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). De Certeau refers to tactics as moves based on time and opportunity, bottom up operations or practices of resistance and autonomy within the homogeneity of capitalist consumer-based society. Strategies are also used in the architectural practices examined. Strategies are larger top down moves based on space or position. In most of the projects examined the theories and practices are tactically *and* strategically based.
4. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* [Revised Edition] (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
5. J. B. Jackson, 'The Accessible Landscape', in *Landscape in Sight: Looking at America*, ed. by Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997).
6. Henri Lefebvre, 'Space: Social Product and Use Value', in *Critical Sociology*, ed. by J. W. Freiberg (New York: Irvington, 1979).
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Elizabeth A. T. Smith, 'Introduction', in *TECHNO Architecture: Jones Partners, Ten Arquitectos, RoTo, Smith-Miller + Hawkinson* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
10. Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas*.
11. Ibid.
12. Mumford, 'Excerpts from *The South in Architecture*'.
13. Henri Lefebvre, 'From the Contradictions of Space to Differential Space', in *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1991).
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. 'The Everyday City' is a course that examines urban theories engaging the everyday, from the writings of Henri Lefebvre to contemporary critics and my own articles. Through case study research and empirical observation, as well as the use of photographic and filmic techniques, the course attempts thoughtful alternatives to (re)present and intervene within everyday public spaces. Through these spatial/temporal documentations, using images, sound and text, ideas of possible interventions within everyday public space emerge. Whether driving, walking or riding, our lived experiences of the everyday city are increasingly difficult to (re)describe or (re)present in a lucid, articulate manner. Furthermore, montage images and movies of proposed interventions provide a more visceral understanding of how an intervention may potentially transform a space into a place through multiple possibilities of inhabitation and temporal programming.
18. Jason Griffiths, 'Pop-Tech Flat Fab' in *EAAE/ARCC 2008 Presentation/Proceedings*, Copenhagen, Denmark.
19. Ibid.
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Biography

Wanda Dye teaches design studio and a seminar titled 'The Everyday City' at UT Arlington. She received degrees from Auburn and Columbia University. Present teaching, writing and creative practice explores problems of sameness within the everyday landscape, in particular, those associated with public space and prototypical design.

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