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Spring 5-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Luo, Yuxiang, "American Picnickers" (2014). *Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects*. 727. https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/727

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American Picnickers

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Architecture

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Date: April 23, 2014

Abstract

This thesis investigates the eating practice of American commuters. The issue of food is addressed through a social lens, affected by spatial conditions. The project thus aims to reinvent the operation of roadside food business, through the design of a series of spatial conditions that activate new social relations.

Commuters' eating practice is problematic; the drive-thru as a prevalent building and business typology has created spatial and social isolation for various parties in the society. The social isolation has two implications. On one hand, as drivers eat alone in the car, they are isolated from other eaters, thus degrading the social value of food. On the other hand, because the drive-thru is standardized and franchised, people cannot shape the experience in their own creative ways, thus negating the social value of design.

Therefore, the thesis is a critique of both the space for commuter eating and the design process of how that space is made. This project thus imagines an alternative spatial type to liberate eating from its confined situations, and propose a systematic design process in three steps: from a manual, to a product, and then to a local test, within which planners, architects, food vendors, commuter eaters, and the neighborhood community can together shape their space for food, eating socially and creatively.

The idea of picnic is thus a metaphorical one. It means the concept of eating with others, while exploring new spaces and engaging with other social activities. Picnicking is the antithesis of rigidity. The thesis addresses the issue caused by rigidity, with the proposal of design mechanisms that foster socialness, creativity, and spontaneity.

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Executive Summary

(The following text is all meshed into the pages of the visual documents.)

The thesis aims to reinvent the operation of roadside food business, through the design of a series of spatial conditions that activate new social relations.

The quality of eating is deeply tied to people's behavioral tactics and social relations. For American commuters, confined eating practices (in the car alone) have degraded the social value of food: when eaters do not pay attention to how they're eating, they are more likely to ignore what they are eating as well. So the thesis proposes that, by eating with others in different spatial and programmatic contexts, the commuters can start to establish new awareness of their eating practices.

This project targets the commuter population that are driving along the Interstate "Loop" 610 in Houston, by introducing a design mechanism to generate diverse roadside food interventions. Currently, the typical food place by the road is the drive-thru. However, as fast food chain companies put the same series of fixed rules and protocols for different locations, the space for eating is as rigid and anti-social as its design process. Therefore, the customers have no right to diversify their spatial experience. Such economics of specialization and standard franchising further alienate various user-groups from potential design participation, isolate roadside businesses from their urban contexts, and negate the plurality of a city's social life.

So instead, what I am giving is a product called the Architectural Conditioner. It behaves like a camera – you can add different lenses to make different devices. Similarly, the Conditioner offers a platform against which individual users can improvise with their spatial, functional, and visual imaginations, through the change of the conditioner's height, shape, cladding, space, and utilities. Although it is mass produced, no two are identical, because the different activities change the form of the conditioners, when they are in different places of the site.

Therefore, the Conditioner becomes a starting point to produce a variety of interventions in different places and at different scales.

Firstly, when the Conditioner is directly off the road, it borrows the inflatable structure from the familiar roadside attractions. The membrane

material and air pressure produce different spatial conditions for the roadside eating, such as canopies, rooms, large outdoor furniture, and billboards. By spatially diversifying the roadside environment, the Conditioner creates pockets of intimacy next to the open road. Because they are not big buildings, vendors can actually control them, and by interacting with these small architectural interventions, vendors can show off their creativity, instead of just sitting behind the closed kitchen doors and serving anonymously.

Secondly, to further encourage the commuters to eat socially, the project makes available various social groups for drivers to join. Although commuters tend to eat quickly because they move fast, if you can find a shared fragment of their busy schedules or a common interest, they might be able to eat with other fellow drivers or people from the neighborhood. So based on the local conditions, a series of institutions are extended on the site to intersect with the road: automobile business, daycare, produce distribution, recreation, religion, and service, where the conditioner becomes structures and equipment for these buildings. The building and the road can intersect in different ways, creating different connections where people meet. For example, when the daycare center and the food truck road intersect, the junction is made as an auditorium, where the vendors can teach the kids how to cook. These places essentially serve both the people who are moving fast and the people who are staying for longer, allowing commuters to enjoy other activities while eating. By weaving together eating and these other activities, you can add second layers to food, and encourage the lonely commuters to eat socially.

Thirdly, there are large open spaces between the institutions and road. They are farms to produce part of the food that can be consumed on the site. Because these farms are always in between two different institutions, you can invite neighboring institutions to manage the farm together, so food becomes a tie between people. The conditioners will become farming equipment in the field, at the same time organizing non-farming activities in the farm. For instance, next to the daycare center, the conditioner and pathways form a maze, within which the kids can play miniature golf. And next to the church, the booster pump for the reservoir will become a baptistery for the religious services. In this way, the conditioner builds the important overlap between food production and institutions, so that farming is not only geographically in the city, but also programmatically part of people's life.

Fourthly, the project addresses the larger scale - the distance between the highway and the neighborhood. This distance is the negotiation between fast and slow, between global and local. Vehicle routes and pedestrian paths are meshed to produce separation and intersection for the different lifestyles to bypass, converge, and communicate. Food vending

mechanism, building typologies, and farming activities are also each differentiated across the site according to their distance from highway / local streets. Such gradient of movement and uses ensures that the project is both a part of the highway system and a part of the local neighborhood, so that various constituents can engage the project distinctively and collectively.

Finally, the design I just presented is only a local test on the specific site near the Reliant Stadium. Nevertheless, you can design in a similar way for the many other vacant lots of the Interstate 610 highway. When you design other interventions along the highway, you can identify at least one local institution and one road to interact with the highway, and use the conditioner to allow the population in that particular place to improvise with their spatial imaginations.

Like McDonalds, there are many spots of this kind of intervention along the highway. But unlike McDonalds, they are not rigid spaces designed in a rigid way. Although the basic diagram of road intersecting with institutions and producing farmland in between remains the same, and the same conditioner can go to all different site, people from different backgrounds in different part of the city can use the diagram and conditioner to make different food items, create different spaces, and host different events.

So this design process generates an open system, with a basic rule that allows various participants to give their input. For the entire highway, the driving is constant, yet the activities that go with eating are different. The basic design rule will be written in a Manual, which also contains information that make sure the highway's general uniformity. The Conditioner then becomes a product to be played by different people for different purposes, and becomes different things when in different part of the project. Given the context, designers, planners, and local constituents can begin to test the local contingency and build a highway intervention that's actually part of the city's social life.

So in the conclusion, what this design mechanism allows is to give handle points for local participants to collectively shape the scope of the project, in terms of space and functions, so that you can bring a variety of activities to the roadside eating experience. In other words, it uses the diverse social life of a city to save drivers' degrading eating practice, and uses roadside eating as a spatial and programmatic organizer to re-imagine the life of the American city on the American highway.