

Re-Envisioning Modernity: Transformations of Postwar Suburban Landscapes

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Abstract : In an effort to explore the potential transformation of North American postwar suburbs, this M.Arch thesis actively engages in the ongoing critique of modernism from the mid 20th century to the present. Contemporary urban design practice has emerged out of the reaction to orthodox modernism. Typically, new suburban development falls into one of two strategies; an attempt to replicate pre-war fabric that never existed, or a reliance on high-density to create instant urbanism. In both cases, the critical role of architecture has been grossly undervalued. Ironically, it is the denial of suburbia's inherent modernity that has served to prevent genuine place-making. As history demonstrates, modernism is not antithetical to architecture and place. In the postwar years, a critical discussion emerged amongst architects, which sought to evolve modernism beyond functionalism. This was demonstrated through critical discussions on image, experience, and monumentality. As well as increased interest in civic space, and investigations into mat urbanism and the megastructure. The undercurrent within these explorations was a belief that the scale and complexity of modern development could become an opportunity to create urbanism, rather than squander it. This critical discourse has continued through architectural work in the Netherlands and Denmark since the early 1990s, where an emphasis on visual variety, human scale, and public interaction has been given high priority. This thesis applies principles from this ongoing dialogue, and identifies hidden potential within existing North American suburban networks. As a result, the project re-evaluates the legacy of the master plan from a contemporary perspective.

Keywords : urbanism, modernism, suburbia, place-making

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