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Constructed otherness
Remaking space in American suburbia

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Introduction

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre interrogates the impact of production, consumption, and multiplicity of authorship in the built environment (Lefebvre 1991). He asserts that cities, buildings, and interiors are hybrid productions achieved not only by architects and designers, but also through the cultural traditions, social practices, and autonomous interventions of users. By reframing the design of the built environment with the inverse – the quotidian impact of people making space – Lefebvre celebrates the commonplace and unschooled actions that cities, buildings, and interiors receive apart from the top-down hand of formally trained professionals. He fixes his gaze on the lives of buildings well beyond the moment of their completion.

For immigrants and refugees, establishing a rooted narrative in a new country often begins within appropriated buildings and urban forms. Interventions are primarily spatial and temporal gestures that collectively reveal enduring perceptions, practices, and methods of production. In recent years, substantial demographic shifts in the United States have transformed conventional shopping malls into more complex environments supporting emergent forms of urbanity. As such, adapted commercial environments demonstrate Lefebvre’s notion of heterotopia, or liminal social spaces of potentiality serving the quotidian needs of communities. Viewed through post-structuralist theory, these reprogrammed structures have not ‘failed’ by losing their conventional national chain retailers and department stores. Rather, they have embraced more nuanced and modest ways to adapt architecture and shape cities.

Latent borderlands

The United States was established by migratory flows that channelled immigrants from the densely populated cities on the East Coast to the hinterlands of the West. Early overland connections to the American West were forged by primitive routes including the Santa Fe Trail (1821), Oregon Trail (1840), Pony Express (1860), and later, with technologically advanced transcontinental railroads after 1869. Throughout history, the nation has been defined by intersectional cultural influences – Native American, African, Spanish, French, British, Mexican,
Creole, Cajun, and Anglo-American — as well as shifting political boundaries that ignored people while uniquely privileging the frontier for Anglo-American and European settlement. Since the 1990s, however, the heartland of America has been increasingly influenced by trans-border migration from the Global South facilitated on interstates rather than railroads — and most significantly — Interstate 35 (I-35). Linking Laredo, Texas, at the border with Mexico to Duluth, Minnesota, on the edge of the Great Lakes, I-35 illustrates that these shifts are not merely demographic. As the United States absorbs immigrants from more diverse origins, its ageing buildings and infrastructures are being re-made to address emerging socio-cultural needs.

In the mid-20th century, the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 initiated transformative socio-cultural influences on the architecture and urbanity of American suburbia. It abolished a racially, ethnically, and religiously exclusionary quota system dating from the mid-1920s and shifted the country toward greater cultural diversity. Pivoting away from Europe, the resulting multiculturalisation of American society has incrementally changed the ways that buildings are used and occupied, as well as how interior spaces are being adapted.

The enclosed shopping mall exists as one of the most widespread and large-scale of America’s increasingly obsolete building typologies. American malls generally operate between two extremes — the upscale super-regional and the increasingly obsolete — while being challenged by the growth of newer forms of virtual and physical retail. On the one hand, this study reveals how ageing shopping malls support the socio-economic well-being of immigrants in American society. On the other, it opens a window on to the long-term resilience and economic viability of increasingly ‘dead’ retail environments that have historically catered to a shrinking white middle class. Today, upscale malls serve a racially and ethnically diverse, upwardly mobile and assimilated upper-middle class, while so-called ‘dead’ or dying malls and big box stores have come to serve a largely disadvantaged underclass.

In the changing suburban periphery of Texas cities, the impact of Latin American immigration on shopping mall adaptation and hybridisation has become increasingly evident. Appropriated by an assimilated lower class of senior citizens, ethnic minorities, and recent immigrants, these places have been largely rejected by the white middle class, yet offer an important socio-economic support system to their regions. Positioned at a critical pivot point between Anglo and Latin America, as well as a mixing zone for the Global North and Global South, the southern sections of the I-35 and I-45 interstate highway corridors illustrate how abandonment, migration, globalisation, and suburban obsolescence coalesce to enable new opportunities for city-making.

Reflecting on Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work in The Production of Space, non-hegemonic spaces and placelessness frame a view on ‘rights to the city’ and spatial adaptations seeded within obsolescence (Lefebvre 1995: 179). This chapter applies a Lefebvrian perspective on spatial production to assert that cast-off dead and dying malls have forged an alternative path toward community vitality. Using field studies of the Texas segments of I-35 and I-45 as a geographical focus, this research examines obsolete retail environments in Laredo and Houston to mobilise Lefebvre’s notion of spatial production and heterotopia. Evidence collected along these corridors forecasts 21st-century retail futures across North America and a new American Dream. Emerging conditions provoke the reconsideration of suburbia, while questioning what gentrification means in the transnational peripheries of mid-continental America. Characterised primarily by modifications to existing buildings, interior interventions facilitate low-cost and participatory actions supporting socio-economic resilience. In an unlikely turn, commercial obsolescence in American suburbia has allowed immigrants to organise, participate, and prosper. These transformational shifts have fostered the growth of a new periphery, a dynamic ersatz-urban place of remarkable demographic diversity.
From utopian origins

Much has been said about the dramatic collapse of American cities and the social cohesiveness that they fostered alongside the simultaneous rise of a homogeneous, trans-continental suburban culture. After the Second World War, urban life in the United States began to fracture and disperse along demographic lines to facilitate the rise of limitless consumer opportunities in suburbia (Baumgartner 1988). Suburbs witnessed the emergence of entirely new and autonomous forms of public-commercial space shaped by urban retail fragments floating within a boundless landscape. Conventionally urban commercial and social experiences were displaced to the suburbs and became internalised; communal space was rapidly translated into controllable, transactional, and primarily interior worlds. Through this process, the developmental patterns of shopping malls became synonymous with automobile dependency and suburban sprawl (Rees 2003: 93). For a generation of Americans raised in the post-war suburbs, expectations of civic space were incubated in the encapsulated worlds of shopping malls, and thus, orphaned from any tangible connection to downtown.

Suburbia has historically epitomised the American Dream, a vision of opportunity and prosperity expressed in greater autonomy, single-family home ownership, and car dependence (Beauregard 2006: 107–108). As Americans left urban neighbourhoods for the periphery, mid-20th-century suburbia imparted profound racial fragmentation and influence on popular culture, mass media, consumer tastes, and housing. Since that time, the United States has continuously exported its suburban ideals to the rest of the world, while American suburbia has simultaneously become increasingly globalised. Within this peripheral ‘utopia’, the shopping mall and strip centre became uncontested icons of American culture – exemplars of social and commercial values which represent the United States to the world and Americans to themselves. Although suburban consumer expectations were initially forged in a throwaway culture of post-war largesse, rising suburban retail abandonment in the early 21st century rivals the demise of downtown commercial districts in post-WWII American cities.

Concurrent with these shifts, the Texas cities of Houston and Laredo have attempted to compete with suburban malls by co-opting suburban typologies for downtown. Although these appropriated forms have generally failed, central cities have re-emerged through widespread reassessment of their cultural venues, building typologies, authentic urban configurations, and civic life. This generational turn has placed suburbs and their utilitarian buildings into a state of increasing disinvestment and abandonment (Alba and Nee 2003). At the same time, changing demographics in the expanding metropolitan areas of Texas demonstrate that suburbia has become considerably more diverse and complex, as well as undeniably influenced by urban influences from the Global South. Undercurrents of racial, economic, and social segregation persist, yet suburbia is being appropriated and hybridised into a place of opportunity for immigrants. Rejected by national retailers, suburban disinvestment has fuelled the growth of emerging places of otherness, radical shifts in usage, less formal occupancies, and alternative consumption patterns which fall far beyond conventional expectations. Although buildings are built to last for generations and expected to hold the habits and values which they embody, homogeneity has rapidly diminished to allow for greater diversity and a dramatically altered built environment (Abramson 2016: 16). Fading monocultural utopias have given way to a multicultural landscape of fragmented heterotopias that colonise, exploit obsolescence, and establish new normative conditions in suburbia.

Heterotopian peripheries in transition

Across time and cultures, the built environment has represented a dynamic social construct based on values, practices, perceptions, and production (Teaford 2008). Contemporary
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metropolitan development in Texas assumes car dependence and is characterised by informal methods of urbanisation and obsolescence. Within such seemingly adverse conditions, heterotopias – or spaces of a shared ethnic, social, or cultural experience – have emerged to fuel bottom-up approaches to adapting an overbuilt suburban landscape. Expanding disinvestment in suburbia has created undeniable challenges for urban connectivity, long-term sustainability, assumptions for uniformity, as well as mainstream perceptions of upward mobility. Small-scale interventions act as autonomous agents of resilience within a globalised city reflecting more diverse human needs, daily routines, and social desires. Contrasting obsolescence with the conventional notion of suburban stability, impermanence and internationalisation have encouraged more informal occupancies and forms of consumption. Furthermore, an implied devaluation of social uniformity and commercial homogeneity increasingly celebrates diversity.

Today, the increasingly globalised peripheral regions of Texas cities percolate up rather than trickle down, arguably offering higher self-sufficiency, more flexible organisation, and greater long-term viability. Intermingled within abandoned 1970s retail strips, shopping malls, and housing subdivisions, adaptation challenges the notion that such places are dead. Physically and psychologically distant from gentrified city centres, emergent heterotopias confront conventional assumptions about suburbia. Growing into spaces of otherness and modest vitality built upon compromise, these places enable economic freedom and social assimilation.

Lefebvre proposes a critical shift in spatial analysis by identifying multi-faceted processes of production that demonstrate multiplicity of authorship in the built environment (Lefebvre 1991). As a critic of economic structuralism, Lefebvre argues that the everyday manipulation of space is fundamental to the growth of society, and thus, to the shaping of cities. An embrace of such theory implies distrust of the heroic, formal, and fashionable, as well as suspicion of architecture that acts as an agent of commodification. By reframing architecture and urbanism with the inverse – the everyday impact of people reshaping buildings – Lefebvre celebrates the everyday adaptations that buildings and cities acquire from their users (Lefebvre 2005). Disorganised and fragmented, Lefebvrian actions are difficult to quantify due their irregularities; they exist as contradictions, contributions, and collaborations (Lefebvre and Réguilier 1985). Accordingly, Lefebvre employs the term heterotopia to describe social spaces where something different is not only probable, but fundamental to their existence.

Blending immigration and the suburban neighbourhood, Lefebvrian heterotopias satisfy the basic human desire to mark and redefine space. Houston, the most amorphous of Texas cities, exemplifies globalised suburban informality; its unstructured and visually disorganised fragmentation reflects subtleties of past usage patterns and the marked transformation of recent demographic shifts. For marginalised populations including refugees and immigrants, survival is based upon the ability to socially, economically, and spatially organise. Immigrant communities in Houston have forged new American identities amidst the finely grained retail strips, enclosed shopping malls, abandoned warehouses, and residential streets of suburban sprawl. Emblematic of emergent heterotopias, anti-heroic and autonomous transformations reflect limited means, as well as the impact of time and collective memory. In Houston, a disinvested periphery subverts conventional characteristics to support occupancies that share common ground with working-class urban neighbourhoods in developing countries. Undervalued existing buildings act as the primary building block of places of otherness leveraged through an available and accessible infrastructure supporting quick-start and low-risk mercantile activities.
Otherness and resilience

The idea of fostering resilience in urban infrastructure is a strategic theme and operational goal for many cities around the world (Jha, Stanton-Geddes, and Miner 2013: 9–20). Researchers, scholars, and practitioners in various disciplines struggle to define and pursue resilience in their respective fields. What does resilience mean in terms of existing building infrastructures, and more specifically, how might it be accomplished in suburban peripheries? In suburbia, resilience can acquire a social dimension related to existing building stock, re-use, and re-investment, as well as associated redundancies that mitigate the potential for economic collapse. As architects, designers, and planners develop prescriptive models that guide resilient practices at the metropolitan scale, the ecological and socio-economic dimensions of resilience have become increasingly relevant within unideal suburban forms (Jha, Stanton-Gedde, and Miner 2013: 22–23). In recent years, the focus on resilience has shifted away from the anticipation of risk and mitigation, and toward a more integrated and incremental model that promotes protective and preventative strategies. Sharing common ground with Lefebvrian thought, conventional or low-tech approaches to resistance respond to regenerative aspects of resilience. Among the most vital aspects of resilience is the ability for people to support their own residential, economic, social, spiritual, and cultural needs.

In Houston and Laredo, the adaptive potential of existing and undervalued buildings systematises a bottom-up framework of social support for the economically disadvantaged. The following case studies illustrate retail change and emerging heterotopias tied to migrational influences in the US-Mexico Borderlands. Beginning in Laredo at the international border on I-35, so-called dead malls demonstrate ongoing changes in suburban production and consumption. Here, a landscape originally defined by 1970s homogeneity has become a place of multicultural hybridisation, urbanity, and resilience.

Laredo: the portal

Since its founding in 1755, Laredo has been a majority-Hispanic city blending two identities, well known for its ethnically hybridised schools, churches, and civic institutions that serve a populace in flux (Morales 2002: 221–222). The historical mixing of this region traces its origins to the founding of Mexico, and later, to the development of commercial connectivity with the opening of a trans-continental railroad (1881) and subsequent influx of European immigrants and American migrants from the east. Since the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, Laredo has become a centre of global commerce and the most important US-Mexico border crossing. In recent years, the intensification of border controls and a secondary security barrier north of the city have created physical and psychological boundaries between Laredo and the rest of the United States. In response to these constraints, undocumented immigrants now find it much harder to travel beyond Laredo. Accordingly, the city’s appeal as a destination for migrants instead of a temporary landing point has become far more commonplace. Colonias – or unregulated settlements characterised by informal housing – have grown substantially in size since the mid-1970s as an outgrowth of the inadequate housing supply in the Rio Grande Valley (Arreola 2002: 90–91). More recently, Laredo has become one of the border cities receiving the highest flows of unaccompanied child migrants from Mexico and Central America. The current humanitarian crisis underscores a dramatic shift that has positioned Laredo as an international city and pivot point between the Global North and Global South.
Interstate 35 (I-35) is one of the most important highways in the United States. Beginning in Laredo and forming its path along the historic Chisholm Trail, it conveys a massive flow of consumer products, car parts, processed foods, and other goods along the NAFTA corridor from Mexico to the United States and Canada. Laredo serves as a hinge between two autonomous nations – a blurred zone, a third country, and a hybridised place – among the most Mexican of American cities housing a bilingual population that often prefers Spanish to English. Both cultures hold historic political and cultural claims to the region, while their parallel stewardship supports the socio-economic integration of new residents with identities that straddle the border.

Immigration is the primary reason for the rise of several private bus lines that use Laredo as a hub for operations connecting cities in Mexico and the United States. In Laredo, bus fleet route maps illustrate the extent to which Mexico has blurred into America. Daily coach services to Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, and the Carolinas reveal the places where an increasingly cross-cultural American experience is taking shape. Tornado, El Conejo, Turimex, Senda, and other bus lines weave a web connecting Mexican cities in the north and east of the country with small towns and big cities across the United States. Threaded through Laredo, these private bus companies provide a lifeline for families divided by the border. Migration has slowed with closer scrutiny of undocumented immigrants; however, buses depart daily in steady intervals supporting a connective network that gains little notice from mainstream American society.

Many cities in southern Texas trace their origins to the colonial administration of Spain and later to Mexico before the establishment of the independent Republic of Texas. In 1845, the Texas lands north of the Río Grande River became part of the United States, whereby Anglo-American norms were imposed on Spanish-speaking society to cast Hispanics as ‘others’ by means of systematic political and socio-economic disenfranchisement (Collier, Galatas, and Harrelson-Stephens 2017). Notwithstanding territorial changes, Laredo has welcomed migrants and immigrants for many years, while cities in the Midwest have, until recently, reflected ‘difference’ primarily in the conventional American polarity of black and white. For many recent immigrants from Latin America, Laredo serves as a portal to the Midwest – a new Ellis Island – while I-35 acts much like the ‘ferry to Manhattan’.

Immigrants arrive in Laredo in various ways – some hold green cards while others cross the border through clandestine means. Temporary visitors arrive with border-crossing cards allowing them to stay in the United States within 25 miles of the border for up to 72 hours. Of these, some travel north as tourists and overstay their visas. The historical bilateral openness of the Río Grande Valley international border zone became more restricted in the 1990s, when undocumented migrants began to use freight railways and private bus companies to move further into the United States (Hernandez 2010: 221–225). At the same time, the population of Laredo doubled between 1990 and 2012 to 244,000, largely attributed to the flow of migrants from Mexico and Central America (Cave 2014). After 9/11, border security tightened with additional American officers, security cameras, powerboats, and a secondary checkpoint barrier farther north on I-35 (Anderson and Gerber 2008: 212–215). Regardless of shifting entry regulations and immigration policies of the American federal government, Laredo serves as a primary gateway for overland migration into Texas and the mid-continental United States via I-35 – a quintessential American highway that hosts several dying malls stretching from Laredo to Duluth.

An edge condition: River Drive Mall in Laredo

Located within a day’s drive of major cities in northeastern Mexico, Laredo is a primary shopping destination for the middle- and upper-middle classes based in the sprawling Monterrey
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metropolitan area. Four bridges connect Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico; the oldest of these, the historic Gateway to the Americas International Bridge, remains an important and critical crossing point. Originally built in 1889 as the Convent Street Bridge, this busy, diminutive bridge connects the downtown commercial cores of Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, with a four-lane roadway, pedestrian paths, and international customs and immigration stations. Unlike most trans-border bridges, the pedestrian paths of the Gateway to the Americas International Bridge are typically busier than the automobile roadway.

Downtown Laredo is a bustling commercial district that serves local, regional, and international consumers and merchants. Many downtown retailers serve Mexico-based merchants as wholesale supply agents. Situated directly adjacent to the Gateway to the Americas International Bridge, River Drive Mall opened in 1970 as the first enclosed shopping mall in Laredo with anchors JC Penney, Frost Brothers, and Weiner’s. The mall is only a five-minute leisurely walk from the downtown central plaza of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, and was originally popular due to its pedestrian accessibility. River Drive Mall represents a common urban renewal strategy of the era that sought to attach suburban shopping centres and enclosed malls to established downtown commercial districts in small-to-medium-size cities. The popularity of the mall would be relatively brief, however, due to the construction of Mall del Norte that opened in 1977 outside of downtown on the I-35 corridor. Continued retail development along the freeway contributed to the decline of River Drive Mall through the mid-1980s. By the early 2000s, this downtown mall housed independent mom-and-pop retailers serving a pedestrian-based clientele from Nuevo Laredo. During the interstitial years, River Drive Mall represented a heterotopia supporting very modest needs and micro-entrepreneurship.

Shifting security concerns exacerbated the permanent closure of River Drive Mall in 2003, at which time Morgan Stern Realty purchased the property with the intention of converting it into an outlet centre serving a wealthy trans-border market (Herrera 2013). Although the mall offered proximity to a large consumer catchment zone of wealthy Mexican nationals, its location in the wholesale district of downtown Laredo has been largely avoided by the class-conscious elites of Mexico. Morgan Stern renamed River Drive Mall as the El Portal Center and embarked on major renovations in 2003, but abandoned the project by 2005 citing security concerns and marketing issues. In 2013, the City of Laredo and Horizon Group Properties announced redevelopment plans for River Drive Mall. The existing structure was demolished in mid-2015 and a new three-story open-air building with 90 outlet stores was built in its place. Forces of gentrification strategically decoupled River Drive Mall from the modest resilience that emerged within its faded obsolescence – independent merchants were evicted, and the lower-middle-class needs that they provided for have been ignored. The new Outlet Shoppes at Laredo opened in 2017 to serve the trans-border elite of northeastern Mexico. The municipal government believes that the new outlet mall will help to revive downtown Laredo by attracting wealthy Mexican nationals who typically travel further afield to outlet shops in San Marcos, Texas. Although the new outlet mall employs over 2,000 people and includes 80 national retailers, it no longer supports the microbusinesses that kept it viable for nearly 20 years. Here, an emergent heterotopia has been permanently erased.

A ‘ruin’: Indeterminate Façade Building in Houston

The Best Products Company of Richmond, Virginia, was a catalogue retailer founded by Sydney and Frances Lewis in 1958. As merchants and art and design aficionados with a desire to draw interest to their stores, they commissioned James Wines and SiTE Architects to design a series of unorthodox and irreverent retail showrooms. The Houston showroom opened in 1974 on a
site near Almeda Mall – a regional shopping centre built by the James Rouse Company in 1968 that was the premier mall in Houston at the time. Named the Indeterminate Façade Building, the showroom was one of nine radical, prototype big box stores designed by SiTE (Sculpture in The Environment) for Best Products that rethought utilitarian suburban retail architecture. Wines described the project as de-architecturisation of the façade achieved by extending the brick veneer beyond the leading edge of the roofline; its ‘finished’ appearance alluded to something between construction and demolition (Drexler and Balch 1979). The resulting subversive and displaced form evoked ruins or deconstructed buildings, a vision of neglect that would ironically predict a future of 1990s disinvestment and decline in the Kingspoint neighbourhood.

As a commentary on both the strip shopping centre and the suburbs, Wines mobilised everyday buildings to work against conventional expectations, as well as the reigning social, psychological, and aesthetic notions of 1970s suburbia. The ambiguity of their form, a subversive decay within a context of perceived ‘normativity’, distorted its relationship with site, formality, proportion, scale, history, and nature to evoke tentativeness and instability. In short, its architecture subverted suburban utopia to foretell a story of dystopia on the horizon – a provocative narrative that challenged the increasing irrelevance and complacency of post-1968 architecture.

As the first of a series of buildings that James Wines would design for Best Products, the Houston showroom was perceived as a conceptual statement in the art world, however, it was viewed with deep disdain by mainstream architects. Wines believed that the Houston showroom was an ‘architecture of information’, retelling a site narrative which straddled the line between art and utility, environmental and consumption, permanence and deconstruction. Similarly, the Indeterminate Façade Building’s design emerges from a liminal place between art and architecture – its purposely ruined and fragmented profile has ironically succumbed to the cyclical rise and fall of suburban retail. Furthermore, the building has been radically altered to appear more conventional over time – its subversive façade has been diminished, intentionally levelled, and rebuilt by the current owners to convey a more ordinary and finished appearance.

As the neighbourhood surrounding this iconic retail store began to decline in the 1990s, the Indeterminate Façade Building assumed a more conventional appearance and banal purpose. Today, this historically important building serves as a warehouse and lapses in a tentative state of partial abandonment. Surrounded by a security fence and parking lot filled with shipping containers, the Indeterminate Façade Building has been unapologetically stripped of both its architecture and memory as a design icon. A building that forecasted the future of suburban obsolescence has been profoundly violated by the throwaway culture that it criticised. National retailers have left the nearby Almeda Mall and its vicinity for upscale malls – the middle ground has been gutted and mom-and-pop retailers have filled the void. In place of national brands and suburban homogeneity, immigrant merchants have carved out a Lefebvrian heterotopia by providing relevant services such as car repair, pawn shops, nail salons, clothing stores, and restaurants serving multi-ethnic consumers. Although neighbourhood retail has not been entirely abandoned, it has transitioned from a bastion of 1970s white middle-class conformity to a contemporary working-class Latin American immigrant heterotopia of aspiration. Today, the Almeda Mall, Indeterminate Façade Building, and their adjacencies have been significantly altered to host more informal uses and new patterns of consumption.

An interstitial space: Greenspoint Mall in Houston

In The Architectural Uncanny, Anthony Vidler considers architecture as the uncanny – a metaphor for the modern condition (Vidler 1992). He analyses the state of Architecture in an era of increasing obsolescence in everyday building typologies of the recent past. He interprets the
ungrounded qualities of abandoned or under-used shopping malls as the wasted territories of consumerism, corporate disinvestment, and post-industrial culture. Vidler analyses the problems inherent to such architectures as they lose their novelty and fade into the past, proposing a future vision of retail environments built upon the ruins of alienation, suburban exile, and obsolescence. Forgotten by their intended users and appropriated by others, these so-called dead malls are the cast-off orphans of a recent past civilisation. They exist along the undefined margins of our suburban landscapes as scars and dead zones, yet there are indeed qualitative nuances in their so-called deadness. Existing in various states of informality and disinvestment, ‘deadness’ ranges from total erasure to emerging, vibrant, and alternative communities of otherness.

Conventional malls built during the first and second waves of mall development are increasingly a lost generation. One prominent Houston example of this phenomenon is the Greenspoint Mall located at the junction of Interstate 45 (I-45) and Beltway 8 (Figure 7.1). It has been diminished by the re-emergence of downtown, new retail forms, web-based means of consumption, and shifting demographics. Opening in 1976, Greenspoint Mall was once the largest mall in the Houston metropolitan area, but by the late 1980s, it began to wane due to the oil recession, rising crime, and newer malls at Willowbrook and Deerbrook. Over the last ten years, most of the original six anchor stores have closed, while mall shops have transitioned from national retailers to mom-and-pop retailers serving a more diverse, predominantly African-American and Latino clientele. A permanent flea market was built across the street and the substantial parking lot hosts new activities including carnivals, motorcycle meet-ups, and clandestine pop-up retail shops housed in vans, moving trucks, and tents. These informal occupancies offer new layers of life that contrast significantly with the past.

Conclusions

Ageing strip malls, big box stores, and enclosed shopping malls afford immigrant communities an existing infrastructure that houses ethnic shops, storefront churches, and social clubs within
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former bastions of suburban conformity. Transitioning from solidly middle class to greater socio-economic diversity, suburban neighbourhoods and their long-time residents must negotiate various polarities – chaos/order, ambivalence/adaptation, resistance/resilience – while continually learning from and adapting to a new context. The obsolete and considerably altered retail environments adjacent to these neighbourhoods offer a window on the future of suburbia in Texas and across the United States. On the one hand, suburbs are increasingly less affluent – but more urban, heterogeneous, demographically diverse, and socio-economically blended. On the other, they demonstrate core attributes of resilient systems – resource diversity, resource availability, and institutional memory – and thus, offer the potential for even greater socio-economic layering and enhanced urbanity.

For Lefebvre, dead zones along the suburban edges of cites are charged with latent support systems offering a form of organic resilience to new users. Processes of disinvestment and fragmentation create voids that carve out physical space for alternative occupancies to germinate and thrive. Although enclosed shopping malls and their adjacencies have been conventionally perceived as privatised – and to a certain degree both secure and homogeneous – the increasing subversion of their formality and conformity by the 1980s gave rise to a significant shift in usage. Malls and their environs are vast spaces, so their abandonment and cannibalisation create unique issues for urban planning and architecture. Private, but perceived as public space by their users, the interior worlds of dead and dying malls give rise to unplanned and unofficial communities. Left empty, these de-programmed infrastructures evolve into transgressive places; they can no longer support hegemony and are being appropriated by socio-economically disadvantaged immigrants and minorities.

American society has become desensitised to the post-industrial abandonment in former sites of production and consumption; suburban typologies that have lost their original functions are generally perceived as both subversive and dystopian. These undefined zones – or terrain vagues – have always been acquired by marginalised communities and occupancies. Viewed through the lens of impending gentrification, Sola-Morales proposed the notion of terrain vague to describe the organic magic of obsolescence (Sola-Morales 1995). Dead mall heterotopias do the opposite by juxtaposing various seemingly incompatible functions – private micro-investment, national retailers, independent merchants, social services, and immigrant community activities – whereby their collection creates occupancy, stability, and emergent resilience. In a remarkable turn, these so-called dead zones enable the emergence of heterotopias by offering a foundation upon which delicate ethno-socio-economic configurations are constructed (Gennochio 1995). Blending the peripheral fringe of Sola-Morales’s terrain vague with Lefebvre’s perspective on radical new occupancies, these retail heterotopias reveal how conventional spaces are reborn. Heterotopias built upon so-called dead malls do not conceal difference, but rather, reveal the inherent flaws of social fragmentation, political polarity, and economic upheaval germinating within the late capitalist system.

Today, mid-continental suburbia in the southern tier of the United States is resoundingly less shaped by developers, architects, planners, and the exclusionary motivations of enclaves defined by uniformity. Adapted through the needs of laypersons, entrepreneurs, and makers, this temporal and globalised landscape is increasingly contingent upon compromise and connectivity far beyond the physical boundaries of the country. An emerging periphery sabotages conventional wisdoms and shifts expectations for what is possible in suburbia. The changing socio-cultural geography of Texas suburbia offers exceptional affordability and a near limitless opportunity for the adaptive re-use of overbuilt existing retail infrastructure and housing stock. A formerly homogeneous suburban utopia has been replaced by a far more complex, globalised, and resilient urban heterotopia with strong connections to Latin America and beyond.
References


