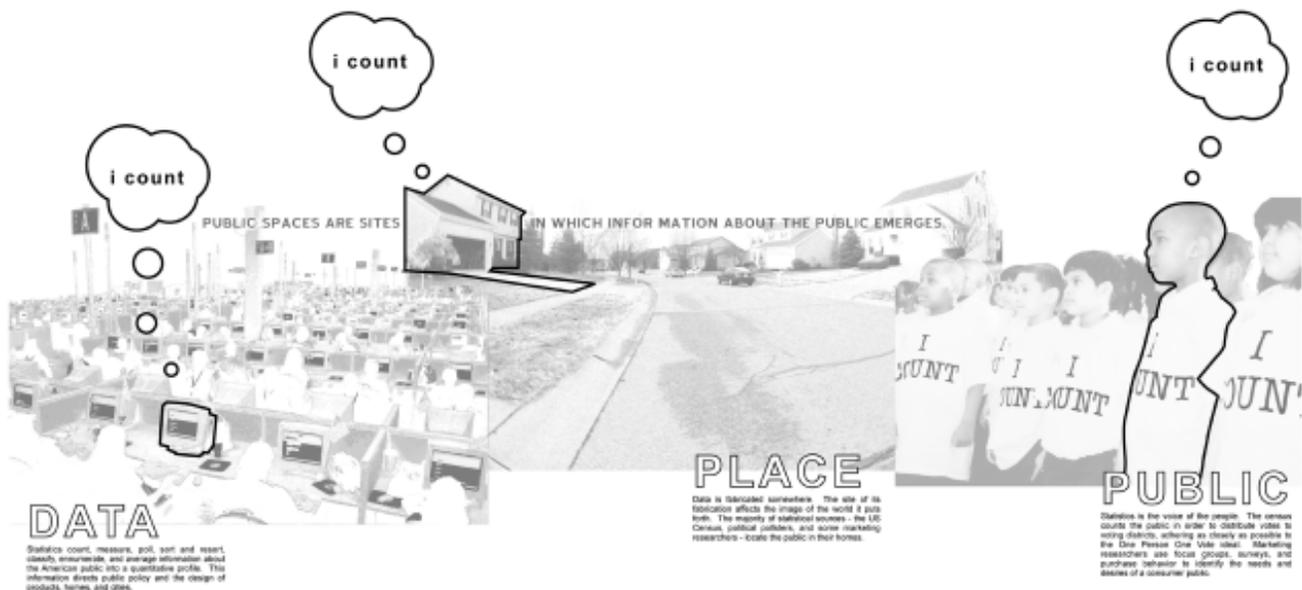


# Places That Count: Latent Public Spaces of the American Demographics Machine

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Public space is often defined as government owned land, universally accessible space, or sites of mass congregation. But images of the public also emerge from opinion polls, government surveys, and corporate databases. Our culture is dominated by “a demographic machine... that delivers presidents and elections as fluently as it delivers customers for Honey Nut Cheerios.”<sup>1</sup> The fact factory of statistics counts, measures, polls, sorts and re-sorts, cross-references, enumerates, and averages data about the public. At best, this system conveys information between the public and government, and between consumer and producer in a manner highly sensitive to the desires of the people.

Statistics are also entangled among the places in which people live, work, communicate, and become active as a public. Information is created some-

where. The US Census Bureau, for example, creates a peculiar classification of domestic architecture in order to comprehend the scope of the public. Similarly, marketing researchers model their lifestyle categories on the gated communities of commercial town planners. Each site, along with researchers’ assumptions about them, directly affects the way in which our population is created, understood, and measured.

In a culture driven by demographic analysis, public spaces are sites in which information about the public emerges.

But before we can adopt statistics as a voice of the public we first have to ask a simple set of questions: How do statistics generate public identity? How do environments affect the production of in-

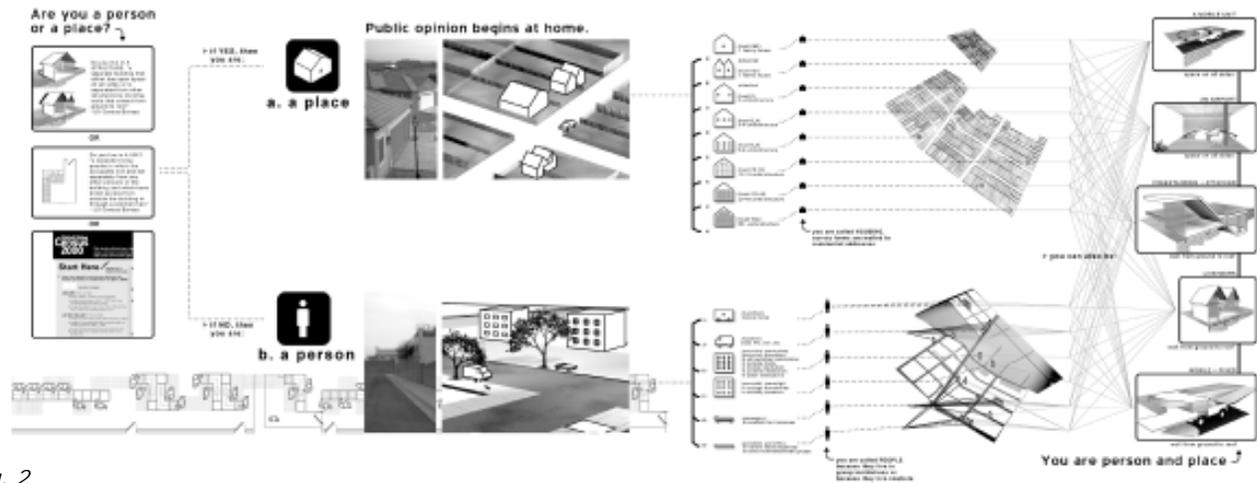


Fig. 2

formation? We can test this at the sites, subjects, and catalysts of demographic production: the home, coordinate, zip code, and database. In each case, a civic identity emerges from an otherwise undifferentiated collection of individuals. In each case, this identity is colored by political and corporate biases behind the data. But in each case we can rework the tools and cartographies of demographic production to begin to allow for a more varied and inclusive public.

### 1:HOME:ENUMERATION

"When setting out to conduct a national opinion poll, the first thing Gallup does is select a place where all or most Americans are equally likely to be found. That wouldn't be a shopping mall, or a grocery store, an office building, a hotel, or a baseball game. The place nearly all adult Americans are most likely to be found is in their home."<sup>2</sup>

-- George Gallup, founder of the Gallup Poll

Public opinion starts at home. The most prominent and influential source of demographic data in the United States is the census. Every ten years the government spends \$185 billion dollars to locate, count, and analyze data about the American population. The census' primary purpose is to apportion votes to the states and set up voting districts for the House of Representatives. It also determines the distribution of government funds,

taxes, and programs throughout the country. It influences the creation of a national poverty level<sup>3</sup> and determines who is eligible for welfare. It lays the foundation for marketing research and telemarketing databases. And it is used to evaluate the success of social policy and city planning.

In order to locate and count as many people as possible the Census Bureau must choose a systematic method that counts no one twice. To do this, the Bureau divides the entire population into two groups – people and place. [FIG 2]

The Census Bureau locates those identified as "place" by mailing forms to residential addresses in the government's database. Housing is defined as follows: "A household includes all the persons who occupy a housing unit. A housing unit is a house, an apartment, a mobile home, a group of rooms, or a single room that is occupied as separate living quarters."<sup>4</sup> The Bureau establishes 10 different housing types. "HUSTR1DE," (1 housing unit per structure, detached) for example, must have space on all four sides (exceptions to this include a shed, garage, or business), while "HUSTR1AT" (1 housing unit per structure, attached) has "one or more walls extending from ground to roof separating it from adjoining structures." How do you know if you live in a separate living quarter from your neighbor? 1. You must eat separately from your neighbor, 2. You must live separately from your neighbor, and 3. You must have direct access to the outside of the building or through a common hall. This is domestic architecture according to the logic of the Census Bureau.



Fig. 3

This of course does not include everyone, and by default relegates everyone who lives in unconventional housing into another category: institutional, home-less “people.” You are a “person” if you are known to sleep in a homeless shelter, happen to look homeless on March 31st, 2000, reside in an institutional setting, or live in group quarters of ten or more unrelated persons, to name a few. As the Bureau acknowledges, these people are much harder to locate and tend to go undercounted. To locate the homeless, the bureau compiles a list of street blocks and public areas frequented by homeless people, and on “Shelter-and-Street Night” counts “all persons found as pre-designated street sites from 2 a.m. to 4 a.m. and leaving abandoned or boarded-up buildings from 4 a.m. to 8 a.m. on March 31, 2000.” Enumerators are instructed to count all people except “persons in uniform such as police and persons engaged in obvious money-making activities other than begging or panhandling.” On Shelter-and-Street Night, the bureau also performs a basic architectural act by encouraging local governments to set up temporary shelters for homeless people – simply for the sake of counting them – that will be taken down as soon as the count has been completed.

The Census Bureau does not just collect facts about the physical environment. It defines and designs architecture in order to count, and in the process establishes an architectural norm for all Americans. Even before the first person is counted, the census adopts a logic of categorization that presumes we are a nation of landowners. It sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy in which types of land use that do not fit into the standard of private property go undercounted and mis-categorized.

However, if we follow the census’ classifications to the letter, strange definitions of the American home begin to emerge. Architects who now use census data to understand demographics and living pat-

terns can use this same information to erode the hierarchies and presumptions behind its very construction. Homes, airport benches, and mobile structures can all have space on all four sides and allow for people to eat separately from each other. There can be more mobility between types and more opportunity for hybrid spaces and experiences. You can be person AND place.

## 2:COORDINATES:MAPPING

Census data is most often analyzed using GIS mapping software such as Arcview that assign data to location, relating information about the public to points or zones on a map. [FIG 3] Most Census maps printed in newspapers and research journals are Arcview maps built around an average condition – whether it is income, average lifespan, or domestic lifestyle – and a standard deviation above and below this national standard. Then, geographic areas ranging from nation to region, division, state, county, county subdivision, census tract, block group, and census block are assigned a color or icon that signals its deviation from the national average. In this way, data about the public is associated with place to produce profiles of an American standard of living.

I decided to test this out by visiting the most representative location of the country. What is average America? Every ten years the Census calculates the center of the population – a point that reflects the shift in population growth across the country. Every ten years, the Census produces two centers, depending on its method of calculation. The first center, the median [FIG 4], is defined as follows: “The intersection of two median lines, a north-south line (a meridian of longitude) constructed so that half of the Nation’s population lives east and half lives west of it, and an east-west line (a parallel of latitude) selected so that half of the Nation’s population lives north and half lives south of it.” In 2000, this point – 38.75644

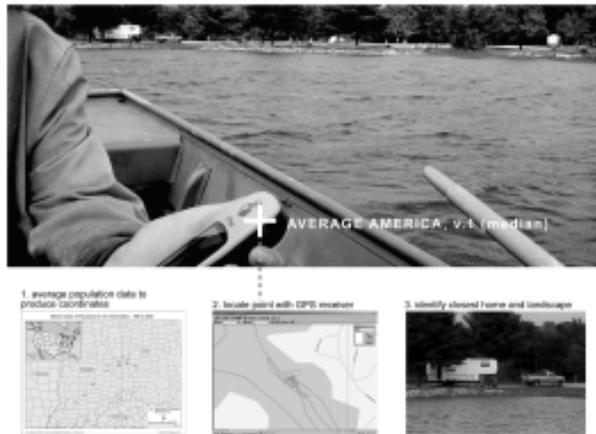


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

North; 86.93074 West – can be located with a GPS receiver in the middle of a small public lake fringed with campers and vacation homes in the Van Buren Township in Daviess County, Indiana. The second center, the mean [FIG 5], is “the point at which an imaginary, flat, weightless, and rigid map of the United States would balance if weights of identical value were placed on it so that each weight represented the location of one person” This point, in 2000, could be found in a forest on privately owned land behind a barbed wire fence in Phelps County, Missouri, 2.8 miles east of Edgar Springs. Two miles north of the mathematical center is a small monument, bench, and American flag adjacent to a State Route intersection and a cemetery that

marks this average American landscape.

What became clear was that the Average was actually a rare condition.

When I approached the man who lived in a ranch home closest to the mean center of the population, he denied living closest to the point: “Oh, no. There is a woman who lives in a green house closest to the monument.” And even after being pressed with more information, after seeing the GPS receiver himself, he still refused to accept that he was the most average man in America. Perhaps the average is too big a burden – too unsettling or too bizarre to accept as an individual. When the 19th Century statistician Adolphe Quetelet created the ideal man by averaging measurements of Scottish soldier’s bodies, his critics warned that a figure constructed as a composite being would result not in a model of beauty but a monstrosity. If the average man is formed by taking the numerical mean of measurements from hundreds of arms, legs, and heads, it fails to represent any one person. And by representing no one, the statistical is anomalous. We cannot comprehend the normal without the abnormal – the two are perhaps the same thing.

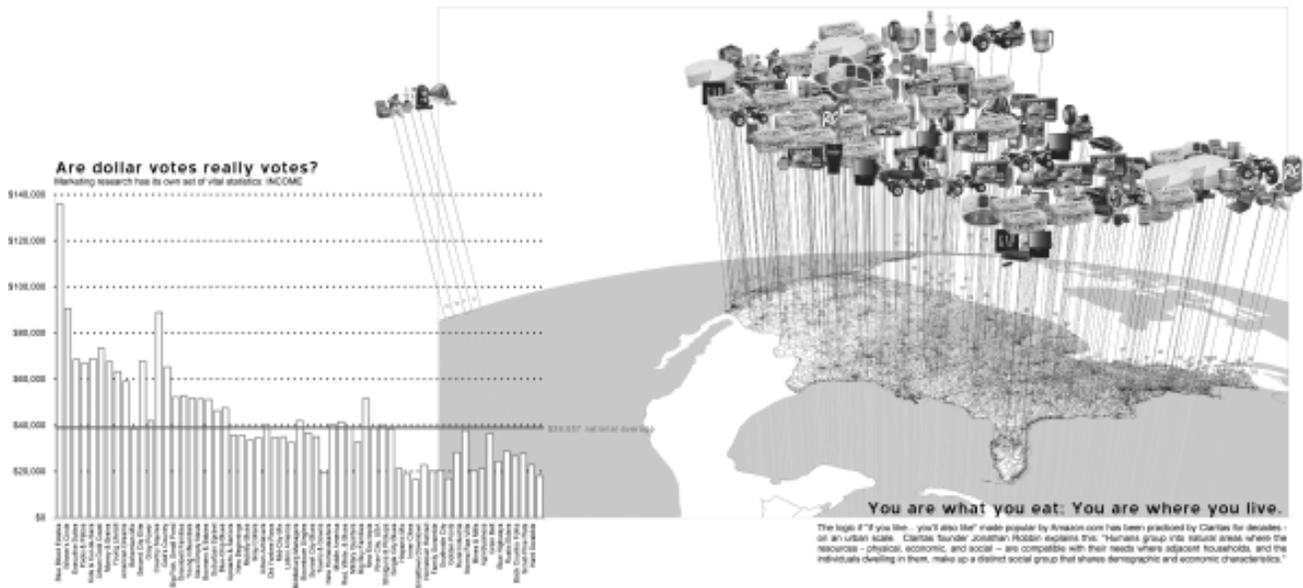
### 3: ZIP CODE: SEGMENTATION

“Of all the business professions, marketing research is probably the most noble because it makes constituents out of consumers – empowering [them] with information that gives them the power to choose what they want and redirect resources towards the invention of better products and services.”<sup>6</sup>

– Marketing researcher William Neal

If the census creates a voting public, then marketing research produces a commercial public in which ‘constituents’ use dollar votes to influence the design, production and advertisement of products ranging from Coca-cola to a three-bedroom house.

Market segmentation is a technique of marketing research that targets a portion of the market rather than trying to appeal to a mass market. In theory, this enables companies to better understand their customers and concentrate on marketing to people who really buy their products. In the marketing world, this classification forms communities of people bound together by common location, inter-



Close to the city center we find a high concentration of lifestyle group #26: Gray Collars. These “highly-skilled blue collar workers” drink malt liquor, watch the Home Shopping Network, and play the lottery weekly. Claritas’ icon for lifestyle #26 depicts colonial style homes that bear a striking resemblance to the brick structures in the German Village neighborhood. Far removed from this urban lifestyle group is category #44: Shotguns & Pickups. These people are “blue-collar” workers, “married with school-age children.” They are “church-goers who also enjoy hunting, bowling, sewing, and attending auto races.” Although the rural environments of #44 are only several miles removed from #26, they are miles apart in their social circles, purchase behavior, and lifestyles.

Claritas is part marketing researcher and part urban planner. It exploits differences among people, carving up the nation into communities isolated by economic disparities, highway embankments, and zip code boundaries. These marketers create a nation of gated communities in which the public is a commodity. In Claritas’ world, I only see what I might also like.

The same network of lifestyle segments, however, can be re-used to create new connections among communities. We have more in common with our fellow consumers than Claritas credits us with. Figure 8, for example, shows a proposed redesign of the Claritas database [Fig 8]. The database takes advantage of the shared associations among specific behaviors that bridge geographic territories or lifestyle categories. The database introduces a racquetball player to a member of a fraternal order, a 65+ year old, or a computer operator. It emphasizes links among individuals over segmentation allowing for communities to arise in unexpected ways.

Similarly, we can redesign environments to take an active role in using and updating such databases. In a project called Broken Homes [Fig 10], housing units are broken down to a subunit, smaller than the size of any household. These subunits are distributed on the site according to social preferences for environmental variations, and then parceled out in unit-groups which change over time with subsequent real-estate transactions. Here, housing design and databases inform each other, facilitating the formation of new communities that go beyond the family and encourage and allow

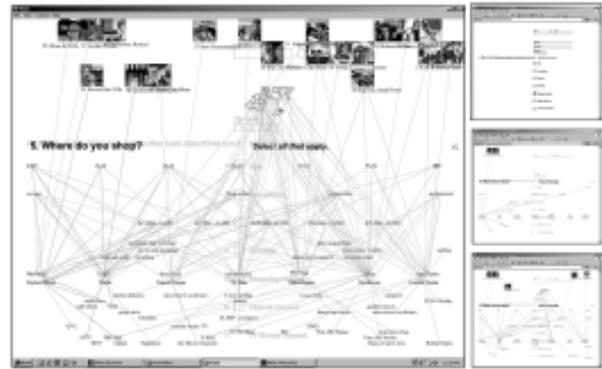


Fig. 8



Fig. 9

people to gain access to each other’s housings. Individuals might use the database to share their books, belongings, equipment, office space, or even to open stores, galleries, and restaurants from their own spaces. The database forms changing and conditional households.



Fig. 10

#### 4: DATABASE: STANDARD DEVIATION

"Every household gets a score and the highest scores are the most likely to generate and to exhibit that target behavior... I'll not only talk to you differently, but I'll invest differentially if you're a high-value versus a low-value customer."

-- Marketing Researcher, anon.

Marketers increasingly locate people through technologies not assigned to place: email, online shopping, frequent buyers cards, and the ever powerful social security number. Marketers can obtain information about you from voting records, land titles, property tax records, the DMV, voter registration, hunting and fishing licenses, credit card companies, supermarket frequent buyers cards, census records, surveys, warranty cards, mailing lists of magazines and subscriptions, doctor's office visits, pharmacies, and insurance companies. Companies can even find out if I am polite to telemarketers when they call. Marketers sort through database after database to find consumers most likely to buy their products. Information is processed through "affinity modeling" algorithms that generate your "propensity scoring" or in other words, the probability that you will buy an estate house or an under-\$10,000 car. Thanks to Direct Marketing, I can purchase the names of architects, cryogenics enthusiasts, and people who buy sliced lunch meat. List providers actually copyright lists of names and sell them by the thousand.

In common marketing practice, the tendency to organize people by income and purchase power obscures any other portraits of the public. However, the use of databases does not have to prioritize income, propensity for Coca-Cola, or taste in domestic architecture. The strength of the database is that it can create nonhierarchical and layered associations among individuals.

We can, for example, reconfigure the Westside of Manhattan [FIG 11] according to a Propensity Index purchased from Claritas, Inc. This report, called a Target Cluster Index, tells the propensity of people in a given lifestyle cluster to a national average. A 100% index indicates that the cluster is a likely to follow certain behaviors as the nation is; 110% means they are 10% more likely than the national average while 90% means that they are 10% less likely than the national average. For example, New Yorkers are 206% as likely to buy cut flowers, 100% as likely to write an elected official, but only 8% likely to own a horse. Sure enough, when we map activities in the target zip codes, there are only one or two sites that house activities below the 100% mark. New Yorkers do only what they are expected to do.

But what happens when we conduct urban planning based on the premise that for every activity New Yorkers are likely to do we introduce an activity that New Yorkers are unlikely to do? We can do a kind of anti-affinity database modeling to drive urban planning that introduces the public to unexpected experiences. What are you least likely to do?

## PLACES THAT COUNT

Because data about the public is so dependent upon the place and manner in which it was constructed, architects have an opportunity to affect the construction of public space by appropriating and reworking techniques of data production. We can find common ground between the statistician's and architect's techniques of analysis and design by exaggerating, redrawing, and introducing each system to each other, finding in this odd mixture not a common measure but an aberration from any standard. We can influence the formation of data by redesigning the spaces in which the people act like a public. And we can design a more deliberate relationship between information technologies and their environments, involving people in networks that define the city, the public and civic identity.

Perhaps in this way we can provide for a popular culture defined not by government ideology or corporate profit but by people's ability to have a voice, interact, and constantly and willfully redefine itself.

## NOTES

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