

Life in the Fast Lane: Service Areas and the Emergence of Infrastructural Urbanism

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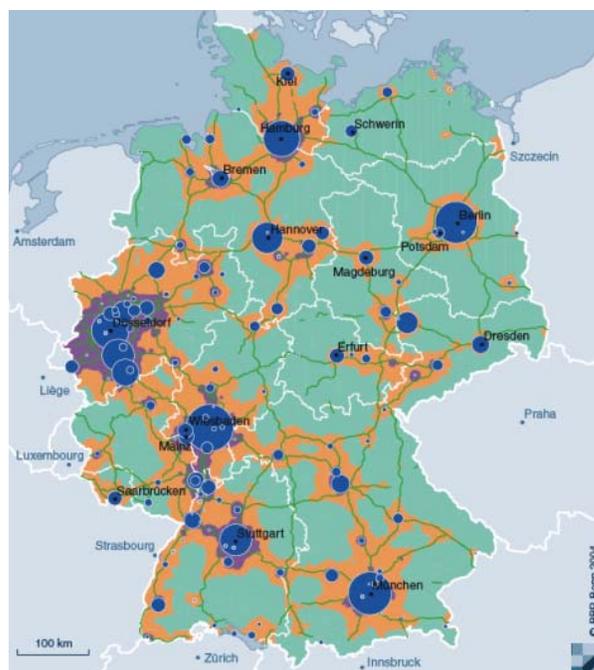
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Shell gasoline station, Switzerland, 2006, photo by the author.

Something is happening along the highway. Mobility, understood as a prerequisite for economic growth, has engendered the development of spatial configurations – those operating at the very small and the very large scales – which expose organizational protocols underlying the construction of urban territory. These protocols are constituted within the normative fabric of the everyday, suggesting the operation of mechanisms tied neither to geographic specificities, nor to the exigencies of localizable interests. The distribution of resources – both labor and capital – across ever wider distances is increasingly contingent on capacities of infrastructure to support the complex demands of a society in a perpetual state of motion. Public transit and political initiatives to the contrary notwithstanding, a significant majority of all travel in industrialized nations continues to be on highways.¹ Within both urbanized and urbanizing environments, investment in infrastructure is increasing, a measure necessary to accommodate a steady rise in automobile traffic promoted by the continued separation of living and working, as well as the general increased mobility of the popula-

tion at large.² Beginning with the exodus from the Midwestern United States to California during the depression era and continuing on through successive waves of suburbanization, infrastructure has been a driving force behind rapid and widespread processes of transformation based on the need for ever-greater individual mobility as well as a binding element of dispersed political domains. The inscription of cultural values onto territory becomes legible within the ubiquitous constructions of its infrastructure.



Metropolitan regions Germany
source: Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, Bonn, 2002. Illustration: Institute für Regional- und Strukturplanung, Bonn.

itability and is dependent on the development of economic strategies designed to maximize competitiveness at minimum cost. The transfer of such assets is particularly significant in that it suggests the dominance of perceived economic benefits over political concerns as they pertain to collective resources. To prevent the monopolization of highway services and further promote competition, however, the government imposed an elaborate set of requirements stemming from 1967 anti-cartel laws, including the establishment of minimum distances between services managed by a single subcontractor, and the distribution of concessions at individual locations to multiple partners.⁸ Additionally, highway service area sites were selected through agreements between local and federal government in an effort to guarantee the provision of services at critical network points.⁹



Tank & Rast logo and logos of branding partners.

It is not only privatization per se which provides insight into the transformation of former domains of the state, but the programmatic and spatial redistributions attendant to such changes as well. State enterprises carry with them the conception of public services or zones for public use. Collective space – a term which could be understood here as the privatization of zones formerly managed by state interests – has migrated beyond the periphery, in the process becoming emancipated from its dependency on an urban or suburban physical context. It might be argued that the economic performance of these infrastructural networks engenders intensified territorial distributions of program and physical mass tied less to conven-

tional spatial planning registers than to questions of speed, distance, and frequency. Whereas public space during the 19th century was situated primarily as a series of large-scale insertions within the metropolis financed largely by the state, and aligned with the user as a citizen and a pedestrian, the development of suburbia brought forth the construction of privately capitalized public space to the periphery, a linking of consumption and public space with mobility. Shopping malls emerged as the apotheosis of middle-class desire, interiorized public spaces oblivious to context, and designed to promote consumption within large-scale boxes accessible almost exclusively via private automobile. Systems of territorial organization thus began to operate beyond the scale of immediate physical context, becoming increasingly aligned with infrastructure and less with the traditional organizational relationships of urban context. Within automobile culture, such subdivisions developed out of strategies to maximize consumer convenience, understood here as the maximum range of goods and services accessible by car, and offered at discount prices possible through large-volume purchasing exclusive to the big-box architecture of retail malls. Operating companies for shopping centers – a name accurately describing the paradoxical concentrations of public space outside the core – were initially regional in nature, managing facilities within a predetermined geographic area. Accelerating patterns of mobility at the end of the 20th century further eroded necessities for anchoring public facilities to a fixed urban context, instead allowing them to become directly integrated along infrastructural routes, many times at busy intersections and at locations where a change of transport mode occurred. Rather than the management of large-scale local or regional facilities at the periphery of suburbanized areas, it is global companies which now determine the distribution of compact programs across ever-greater distances. Set against the context of not only a dispersed urban environment, but a culture of commuting as well, it could be posited that contemporary collective space situated at points of maximum traffic flow density have ended the hegemony of traditional public space located within areas of high physical density and definition or those occupying traditional suburban residential belts. Within the landscape of the mobile society, movement is gradually replacing mass as context, promoting relocations of services as urban space



Co-franchising, Raststätte Linumer Bruch Nord, A24 Autobahn, Germany, 2006. Photo by the author.

to zones beyond the periphery.

The construction of such a network designates a territory defined not by geographical relationships but by capitalist practices. Rather than being owned and operated individually as was the rule until the 1970s, contemporary service stations operate as coordinated components of a global network, often belonging to the portfolios of multi-national investment firms and privately capitalized oil companies. Tank & Rast AG is held in equal parts by a partnership consisting of Lufthansa, Allianz Capital Partners AG, and the Apex Partners investment group.¹⁰ The distribution of the network coincides with nodes of intense use, such as exurban polycentric regions of the Rhein-Ruhr Valley, as well as more conventional locations such as the peripheries of large metropolitan centers. It is the former type of area, however, which is demonstrating the most dynamic increase in density.¹¹ Economic cartographies emerge based on income generated by individual points distributed and programmed to maximize market share. Economies of scale are combined with economies of means. Financial strategies dictate territorial distributions of service within the network of service areas which are indexed according to return on investment. This suggests that distributions of physical substance based on economic considerations engender specific protocols of territorial systematization. Within a volatile and competitive market, value fluctuations often lead to rapid spatial and programmatic reorganization as stations are abandoned or new ones

are acquired. Large networks control territory using strategically placed elements which are themselves relatively small. Individual stations are disposable, changing owners as necessitated by performance evaluations. Individual service areas are only provisionally bound to any specific company, quickly adaptable to the performance criteria of another. The structure of the network is in a constant state of flux, its exact coordinates determined by market performance, strategic projections, and available property. Intense competition between companies – whether private equity firms or global oil companies with extensive resources – demands the foregrounding of economic effectiveness as it pertains to the performance of such a network. Designations of spatial distribution are based on the calculation of commercial radii and the occupation of critical nodes. The performative potential of location dictates specific programmatic requirements as the field of individual stations taps into the flow of commuters at multiple points. Between the 1960s and the 1990s, a process of consolidation occurred through which the total number of gasoline stations in Germany declined from over 46,000 in 1970 to under 16,000 thirty years later.¹² In the United States, the number of service areas has decreased by one third since 1980.¹³ This is attributable to several factors, among them increasingly stringent environmental standards which required expensive physical upgrades, a reduction of network points to only the most profitable stations, costs incurred through the introduction of self-service automation, and the high-volume, multi-functional, low-price competition which only financially powerful franchises could afford to engage in. As profit margins shrink, the need for strategic market accuracy replaces the production of pure quantity. In this regard, economic performance designates the precise layout of networks and their density. Tank & Rast service areas are spaced an average distance of 60 kilometers apart, exposing direct relationships between distribution, service combinations, and financial return.¹⁴ Rather than permanently occupying predetermined geo-economic locations, the field of service installations might be considered a large scale supply and demand calculation device, capable of tracking rapidly shifting consumer behavior patterns and shifting resources accordingly. In this sense the network's return on investment determines the strategic importance of any individual position, requiring a

maximum degree of flexibility and control across a wide field. This is particularly significant, as the poly-nucleated structure of exurban fabric lacks the stable economic predictability of concentrated urban centers.

The construction of a network rather than the accumulation of individual locations – for instance along a major transport corridor – is instrumental in the occupation and utilization of territory as a synchronized economic field adaptable to the requirements of travelers. The development of such facilities assumes an ascertainable market profile for target groups. In this case, the demands of an urban labor market coupled with widespread desire for suburban living has produced a paradigmatic figure of mobility culture, the commuter. As commuters spend more time on the highway, a venue for taking care of small errands on the way provides an important service traditionally offered by other outlets. As service areas provide a wider range and higher quality of such services, questions of convenience determine spatial and programmatic distributions, both within individual locations and across the network. In the past 20 years, the profit from convenience stores at gasoline stations in Germany has increased almost 500%, while that of petroleum has decreased by almost one half, a trend reflected worldwide to differing degrees. Net income for so-called c-store products now accounts for a greater percentage of profits than the sale of gasoline, indicating that services once conceived of as ancillary have moved to a more primary position.¹⁵ One could speculate that the strategic value of any given location now revolves around questions of consumption and services unrelated to the so-called *core business*.

Attendant to a steady increase in total highway travel is the evolution of a market seeking to capitalize on the flow of commuters. As average driving times and distances increase, service areas adapt to expanded consumer expectations.¹⁶ This has necessitated the development of flexible service assemblages capable of adapting to rapidly shifting consumer demands and technological exigencies. Service areas are transforming from utilitarian constructions designed to supply gasoline into instruments of a market economy with multiple capabilities. These combinations are not arbitrary accumulations of program, but repre-

sent market research designed to extract maximum profit from automobilists seeking to combine a multitude of tasks. Meeting and conference facilities including hotel and presentation rooms, multimedia access, and around-the-clock meals demarcate service areas as attractive communication locations. Customers traditionally seeking gas and rest rooms can now expect sophisticated and entertaining packaging of various activities, from in-house bakeries and restaurants thematizing current movies within meal offerings, to mini-golf courses, petting zoos, dog-care, and church facilities.¹⁷ This indicates that infrastructure is not only functioning as a brief stop-over but rather may be gradually assuming characteristics of a destination itself. Perhaps most significantly, general articles for daily use – specifically those not required while traveling – are now widely available at service area convenience stores, suggesting a challenge to the hegemony of traditional shopping and service venues and their attendant structures. Shopping is done on-the-run, between departure and arrival, rather than as a separate activity. It is significant that such services have traditionally been provided by local businesses not directly connected to infrastructure. As brief intervals spent at service areas are increasingly exploited more effectively, however, these stations assume roles once exclusively held by local providers. The logic of *time-is-money* coupled with the convenience of one-stop, drive-through shopping and more has allowed such areas to expand their roles as zones of collective activity.

Within a culture of mass-customization, efforts are being made to adapt services to segmented target groups. Travelers, identified as different types of user groups, are provided with a range of consumer options designed to encourage spending, from gambling automats within the café area to impulse-purchase items arranged at the cash register and proprietary television programming available directly at the pump.¹⁸ Children are encouraged to consume through tactile displays and the engagement of entertainment strategies. Such strategies seek to maximize consumption while minimizing consumer idleness. Service area hotels with separate sleeping quarters for Islamic men and women address not only questions of cultural heterogeneity, but also the expanding market for overnight facilities attached to other services offered, all open 24 hours a day, 365

days a year. Autobahn churches signal the translocation of traditional symbols of urban centers to infrastructural space. Market research has indicated the presence of an Asian population owning second homes in Europe with substantial purchasing power, leading to the inclusion of items specifically for such groups. The requirements of an aging population no longer able to drive includes the re-organization of parking areas to include additional bus capacity and the installation of so-called *slow cashiers*, specifically trained to respond to the unique needs of the elderly.¹⁹ As the number as well as the range of customers at service areas increases, these locations assume the role of collective reference points, providing travellers with a dynamic network of common domains. If collective space could be said to be constituted through such common activities, one might understand these areas as a form of public area distributed over enormous geographic areas, yet managed as a single capitalist unit.

The provision of multi-functional facilities is augmented by integrated branding strategies. Service areas often engage in a brand management practice known as co-franchising, in which fast food outlets such as McDonald's share space – as well as management and maintenance costs – with service area corporations, occupying primary location at service areas.²⁰ Additionally, service area restaurants are often sublet to global gastronomy chains, which foreground specific products as part of a coordinated corporate strategy.²¹ Architectural homogeneity among so-called branded stations – service areas exhibiting a uniform appearance regardless of location – points to a systematization of identity, while repetitive exposure to corporate logos, color schemes, as well as formal elements on the exterior and interior imprints such identity within travelers' daily perceptions. Advertisements alternately foreground the generic appearance of stations and the global resources of the companies they represent. In this respect, individual service areas might themselves be considered logos, avatars for multinational conglomerates, their historical formal expressionism replaced by the normative syntax engendered by mass-production.²² On the highway, views of service area signs and price columns becomes the repetition of the familiar, perpetual arrival at the same location, a territorialization through the endless repetition of image as well as through the negation of

distance. The distant view of a service area sign marks not a geographic location, but simply an acquirable point in space, a reference anchored only to the non-place of the highway.

Infrastructure can no longer be understood exclusively as a system of transport. Rather, it is a network within which programs and physical substance are organized according to economic concerns, engendering economic geographies which increasingly denote development patterns of exurban fabric. Systems which allow commuting across such territory capitalize on a field of continuously accessible service points rather than hierarchically structured urban centers. As opposed to dense organizations of physical mass, it is coordinated dispersions of minimal construction which characterizes this territory. Unbound from considerations of urban proximity, distributions of space and program align with the logic of traffic flow along high-volume circulation routes. Networks not only promote synergies between previously separated systems of organization, but also capitalize on the non-localities of circulation networks for the establishment of flexible and efficient service points. These points are no longer exclusively aligned with technical automotive requirements or the separate fulfillment of travelers' basic needs, but rather have begun to systematize and integrate programmatic combinations previously external to such criteria.

Representing the intersection of global iconographies, commercial nodes, and mobility lifestyles, service areas might be said to signal an inevitable shift of public space from the center of metropolitan areas to a commercially organized field beyond the periphery, a field whose significance derives from its capacity to directly translate economic strategies into flexible spatial configurations. Functioning as a programmatic and social condenser, these service points have become emancipated from past relationships to an urban center, themselves becoming multiplied, distributed and decentralized in the process. Rather than being limited to dispersion across local areas, service areas designate capitalist networks of collective space at global scale. Although the organizational structure of service areas are precisely aligned with the physical systems of highways, individual points within the system are malleable and provisional, suggesting localized manifestations of col-

lective space as increasingly short-term propositions. The scale and size of international networks promotes the adaptability of individual locations.

Mobility lifestyle emerging – among other factors – out of labor distribution requirements and greater individual wealth engenders service networks as collectively experienced space. Given that privately capitalized global companies construct and manage such networks, it might be said that the production of collective space has not only shifted still further from political toward commercial mechanisms, but also from locally organized to globally systematized structures. This space is distributed within infrastructural networks, along the non-place of the highway. Instead of densifying existing centers or building at progressively enlarging peripheral zones, service areas expose an alternative scenario: the construction of highly dense, very small-scale islands of urbanity, coordinated and managed as a privately capitalized network over great distances. Mass-produced, micro-scaled, and liberated from context, such networks are not bound to political entities, defining instead economic geographies within which spatial and programmatic organizations emerge. Outflanking political borders and negating necessities for conventional urban context, service areas represent high-performance morphologies adapted to the simultaneous and multiple requirements of a culture in a constant state of motion. This suggests that spatial identity within exurban territory is increasingly tied to the image and performance of such locations, and less to coordinates in geographical space. Urban territory may be characterized here less by formal accumulations than by the systematization of territory engendered by protocols anchored within economic logic. As mobility continues to increase in importance as a factor for economic growth, circulation networks and their attendant architectures constitute high-performance capitalist networks capable of translating commuter demands into physical reality, the rapid adaptability to shifting requirements as dictated by market strategies. The flows of capital within these networks promotes the construction of an ephemeral urban territory, one both omnipresent and in a perpetual state of change.

ENDNOTES

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See also: The Socio-Economic Benefits of Roads in Europe, Transportation Research Board of the National Academies, European Union Road Federation (ERF), Brussels, March 2006

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3. Rodney Slater, "The National Highway System: A Commitment to America's Future", Public Roads, Spring 1996. The United States National Highway System (1958) was originally conceived as a strategic network for rapid troop mobilization. Similarly, the German Autobahn was planned with strategic concerns, although neither network was primarily used militarily.

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5. Ralph Johannes und Gerhard Wölki, Die Autobahn und Ihre Rastanlagen, Michael Imhof Verlag, Petersberg, 2005, p. 16-19.

6. Ibid, pp. 63-66.

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13. National Petroleum News (NPN) market facts supplement Nr. 120, July 15, 2000.

See also: www.referenceforbusiness.com/industries/Retail-Trade/Gasoline-Service-Stations.html, Goliath databases, Thompson- Gale online-business content services, Michigan, 2007.

14. Johannes und Wölki, p. 19. In 1936, the Germany's Reichsautobahn (RAB) planned a network of gas stations at 35 kilometer intervals. It is assumed that this was based on a combination of factors including average trip length, mechanical reliability of automobiles, and maximum travel ranges. See also: Autobahn Tank & Rast Holding GmbH company information, www.tank.rast.de/unternehmen/unternehmensportrait, Bonn, January 2006.

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16. Passenger miles of travel by selected mode, Table 2-2, Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), United States Department of Transportation, Washington DC, Report 2004.

see also: Average commute time increases, U.S.Census 1990 and 2000.

17. Johannes und Wölki, p. 67; see also: Tank & Rast company information, Bonn, 2006. www.tank.rast.de/on-site-services

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19. "Der Homo Tankonomicus," Tagungsbericht, "Handel und Wandel an Tankstellen", 10. Handelsblatt Jahrestagung, Bonn, March 2006.

20. Johannes und Wölki, p. 58. In Germany, a so-called "integration model" was developed which provided the legal framework for global fast-food chains to occupy space at highway service areas. See also: Annual Benchmark Report for Retail Trade and Food Services: January 1992 Through March 2002. Washington DC: US Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau, May 2002.

21. Mehr Kundenfrequenz durch starkes Markenprofil, "Handel und Wandel an Tankstellen", 10. Handelsblatt Jahrestagung, Bonn, March 2006.

22. Op Cit, Johannes und Wölki, p. 50. Mass-production of service areas accelerated at the end of the 1960s in Germany as the need for additional locations outstripped the capacities of companies to design individual outlets. By the mid-1980s, global companies were running the majority of service areas, precipitating the homogenization of all stations run by a single company.