

Panurbanism: Tysons Corner, A Case Study

CHARLIE CANNON, BRENT STRINGFELLOW,
BOGUE TRONDOWSKI, and DAVID YOCUM
Somerville, MA

Over the past few decades, contemporary architecture practice has neglected careful observation of the American built environment in favor of often-heady theoretical discourse. During this period a new settlement pattern has emerged in North America; a continuous and often messy fabric of malls, parking garages, office parks, airports, highways, gas stations, and houses. Eluding strict definition as "city," "suburb," or "town," it is more the result of consumer forces, rapid development and the persistence of the automobile than well-intentioned design proposals. As a zone it is too diffuse and yet too intense to fit into traditional categories like city or town, hence the term *Panurbanism*. Derived from the neuter form of the Latin *passim*, meaning "here and there, all over, at random; without order, indiscriminately, promiscuously," the prefix *pan-* is ideally suited to define the free and careless development that is rapidly marching across the American landscape. The term *panurbanism* recognizes and insists on the ubiquity of a landscape condition divorced from physical urbanity. It is a reaction to a host of terms that do not adequately identify the scope of modern settlement patterns. Sprawl, technoburb, edge city and ex-urb are too reticent in their identification of the continuous, low-slung, and diffuse landscape which is home to an increasing number of the population.

Recognizing that limited evidence has been collected concerning this type of urbanism, the body of work presented here focuses on one particular region, Tysons Corner, Virginia, as a subject for discovery, discussion, and comparison to similar regions. Located midway between Washington DC and Dulles International Airport in Fairfax County, Tysons Corner is relatively young in age, displays astonishingly rapid and consistent growth, and is of a scale that can still be studied with care. Though certainly not the only example of panurbanism, Tysons is perhaps the purest. As a result, the specific observation of Tysons Corner has yielded five general characteristics which help to define panurbanism in its multiple manifestations throughout the country:

It resides in the pasture, as a landscape that is both physically open and mythologically filled. Spatially, it reorganizes the centralized core and periphery of the traditional city-suburb relationship, existing at a scale much larger than any one city as it is formed by the logic of the automobile. Culturally, the development of these large, unbroken plots inspires American myths of the frontier, Western notions of the pastoral and modernist aspirations of the tower in the park, readily exploited by residential cul-de-sacs and the promise of sylvan office parks.

Panurbanism includes all without being all. The sprawling panurban region accepts into its fold all types of development, building, populations and activities without defining itself at a larger scale. Islands of programmatic difference are supported and separated by loose archipelagoes of civic and social infrastructure, ensuring that regions such as Tysons Corner remain placeless

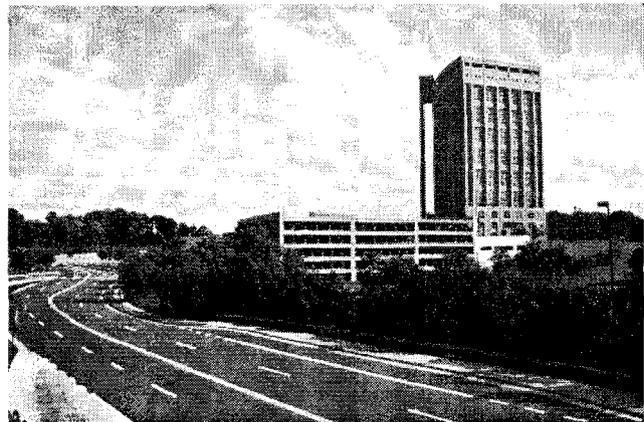


Fig. 1. Panurbanism.

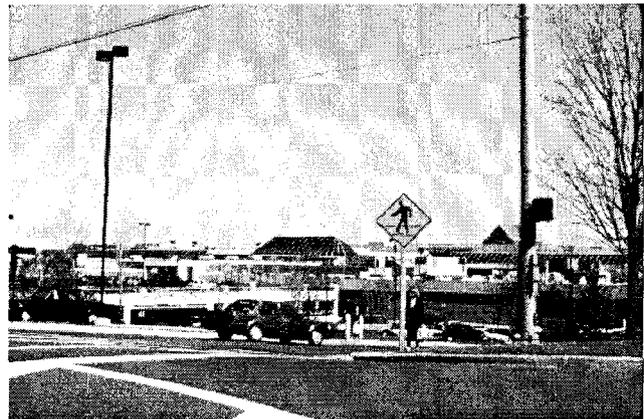


Fig. 2. A low slung landscape.

containers equal to no more than the sum of their parts.

Like a flood, panurbanism exists predominately on the surface, extending indiscriminately over all. Building height, setback, and bulk plane controls conspire to defuse potentially tight adjacencies. Regions maintain the appearance of a Broad Ocean rather than dense fabric, where expansion equals diffusion.

The explicit operational credo is one of newness. Property turnover is high, concealing shoddy building quality. Whether speculative office building or brick colonial house, it is easier to tear down and replace than it is to reoccupy. In sum and substance, panurbia is the built result of the continuous building-occupation-

consumption-moving cycle resulting from an enduring vision of the frontier.

Finally, *panurbanism is less an identification of inhabitation than it is a condition of movement.* Given the multipliers of a migrant professional work population and the short life span of buildings, panurbia does not exist as an identifiable place, but rather as a state of contiguous living. Perpetual motion toward a destination has subsumed the importance of place to the importance of traveling toward a place.

In addition to defining the panurban phenomena, the preceding characteristics establish a framework for analysis and engagement that are the first steps toward critical intervention by the design professions. The panurban landscape may be read as a vast uncontrolled experiment in architectural and urban innovation. Nascent design strategies are being unconsciously developed, tested, and modified by commercial developers and homeowners alike. To a design professional, these "experiments" may not appear to be exemplary propositions; but they are appropriate venues for making explicit an urbanism that is not intent on replicating the physical densities of traditional cities or the comfortable scale of small towns. For architects and urban designers to have a broad and lasting impact in the panurban environment, it is imperative that they take account of what is already there. To that end, a number of strategies may be identified for engaging Tysons Corner specifically and panurbanism in general.

The development of native strategies derived from direct observation allows for two modes of engagement. The first is through the construction of schemas that allow for the impartial investigation of the conditions outlined above. The development of critical distance is crucial to allow perceptions of these conditions to be unobstructed by knee-jerk aesthetic or moral reactions. These methodologies aid in thinking of Tysons Corner as a place, something that even inhabitants of Tysons have difficulty doing. Frequently describing Tysons Corner as one of the ugliest places they have lived, their mischievous tone invariably indicates that they are, to some degree, happy with Tysons as it is.

The second means of engaging panurbia is the development of design propositions. The intent of the strategies presented below is not to transform Tysons Corner into a traditional city, an effort that would inevitably fail. Rather, they are an attempt to manipulate the characteristics of panurban zones to create the ineffable tensions and interrelationships that mark the identity of traditional cities, but which remain noticeably absent in Tysons Corner. The aim of each of these strategies is not improvement, but intensification of latent characteristics that are already manifest in Tysons Corner. They rely upon the economic, social, and spatial logic, which structures its growth and continued vitality. Not intended to be a pattern language, these strategies are a catalogue of themes, which may be combined in any number of ways to create wildly divergent melodies.

The first strategy is that of superimposition, whereby new programmatic uses are overlaid onto existing spaces and structure. In this type of settlement pattern, zoning laws typically isolate uses creating discrete, programmatically themed areas. This strategy is recognizable in the variegated section of the typical Manhattan office block, in Tysons Corner simultaneous uses are applied to horizontal planes rather than pinned to vertical towers.

In Northern Virginia, lush forest doglegs often wind their way from the most abject collection of fifties bungalows through the most exclusive gated enclaves. The presence of these remnants is a function of strict controls. These county regulations, however, are not imposed to preserve the native beauty of the Virginian countryside but to protect infrastructure right-of-ways. Floodplains, high-tension wires and highways are constantly crosscutting one another determining the orientation of subdivisions, buildings and uses. Turning the lattice of protected green space into a web of linear parks would transform these divisive dead zones into seams of physical activity also capable of social integration.



Fig. 3. Rapid Growth.

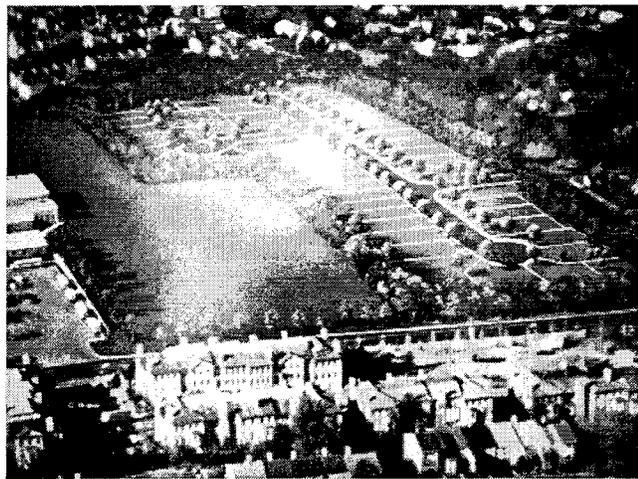


Fig. 4. Superimposition.

Superimposition might also be applied to the economic revitalization of office parks. While the office itself remains the most significant component of the park financially, the buildings themselves rarely occupy more than 30-percent of the park's total area. The loosely plotted parallel tracks of asphalt and grass may appear haphazard but a careful calculus of available parking to permissible floor area ratios determines them. The economic and municipal necessity for open space leaves ample area for the introduction of mixed programs such as day-care facilities, exercise trails, schools, and restaurants. The imposition of these new programs turns the office park from a nine-to-five island into a new kind of village whose use is extended beyond its workday inhabitants and beyond its work a day hours.

The second strategy is the generation of edges. Urban design principles frequently use a strong edge condition to complete a boundary, such as a classic street wall or the enclosure of a plaza. The panurban landscape rarely allows for that kind of heightened spatial definition. The creation of a single edge, of an identifiable threshold, is a singular opportunity in Tysons Corner.

In fact, strict edge conditions frequently occur here, although they are rarely noted due to legislated buffer zones. To reveal the existence of an edge creates an unexpected formal disjuncture, as in the instances where the Dulles Beltway amputates and bisects a series of neighborhoods, starkly juxtaposing disparate scales of structure, speeds, occupation and program. The monstrous appearance of the highway in the midst of the domestic realm results in one of the uncanny spatial combinations particular to Tysons Corner.

An edge condition may alternatively be the site for intense



Fig. 5. Edges.

development. The loose archipelago of disparate strip malls, libraries and county offices could be transformed into a continuous linear city through heightened occupation, paralleling the picturesque route of a suburban thoroughway.

The tendency of residential and commercial developments to emerge as enclaves leads to the third strategy — islanding. Current zoning regulations already create islands of development and use; by highlighting and intensifying those conditions, zones of real physical and social intensity may be established in the otherwise loose and undifferentiated landscape.

In residential neighborhoods islanding is enforced by the cul-de-sac. While the virtues of the cul-de-sac may be difficult to identify in terms of the larger social fabric, as a purely formal device the cul-de-sac does create definable neighborhoods. As zero-lot line mansions become the norm, the cul-de-sac shifts from a dead end into an eminently surveillable playground. By turning the street into a terminal destination, the cul-de-sac alludes to mid-century social confidences sustained by a homogenization of property values, and soothes premillennial fears of serial killers and child abduction.

At a larger scale, islanding promises the development of a destination urbanism. The malls at Tysons Corner and the nearby Reston Town Center daily experience the pedestrian congestion of the worst weekends in downtown Manhattan. In the case of Reston, the main street is revealed to be a two-block circulation spine for a successful outdoor mall. That the main street terminates in a corn field does not diminish its draw even for residents of Fairfax County who live closer to Georgetown than to the Dulles Airport.

While the preceding strategies all require specific economic, social or political means to achieve urban goals, the last two strategies are categorically architectural in their means.

The fourth strategy is one of exaggeration, in which a priori



Fig. 6. Islanding.



Fig. 7. Exaggeration.

characteristics are inflated to the point where an implicit spatial or structural attribute becomes explicit.

For example, most buildings in the panurban landscape are decorated sheds, basic structural systems that are differentiated only by the applied imagery. Whether mirrored curtain wall or neo-Georgian brickface, most of Tysons Corner is steel and wood frame enclosed with the thinnest possible drapery. Our initial discomfort at this impermanent construction could give way to a celebration of the thinness inherent in Tysons. Exaggeration of this characteristic could lead to the exploration of thin and malleable material such as vinyl and aluminum in the interest of redefining the tectonic of panurbanism as something more than applied image.

Spatially, exaggeration might be applied to the overlooked typology of the parking structure. As has already been noted in various essays, the parking structure plays an important role as both the final node of the highway and as the lobby of the far distant building. Typical to most excursions through panurbia, the parking garage is an undercontrolled public terrain between autonomous privacy of the automobile and the privatized mass experience of the mall or the workplace. Physically, its disproportionate size and its uncertain ground plane make the parking structure available for extensive formal and programmatic manipulation. Combining the spatial and social potential of the garage could result in a new model of public space, analogous to the traditional city street.

Finally, the fifth strategy may be described as the state of looming, which is the creation of intentional juxtapositions that defy

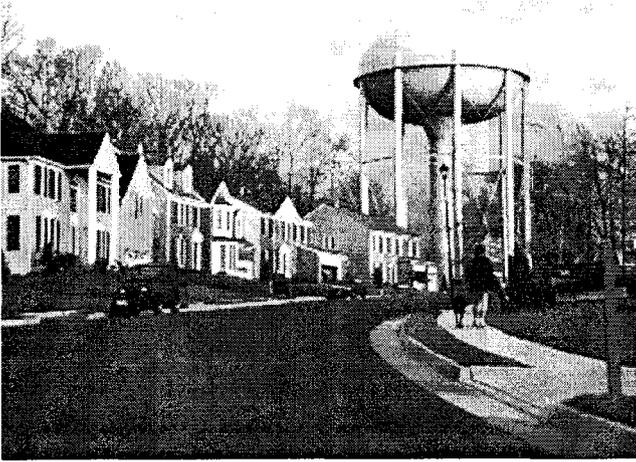


Fig. 8. Looming.

the expected consistency of pocketed, insular development.

Looming may be read as an object-based strategy in which a strong vertical element breaks the insistent horizon of the ubiquitous

two-story development. Such a device becomes an instant landmark, distinguished less by its singular qualities than by the jarring juxtaposition of unlike entities. Even bereft of its original function, an element such as an empty water tower becomes a magnet for whatever personal, idiosyncratic or community meanings which may be affixed to it. Looming, however, is not only a formal strategy, but a programmatic one as well. Stark programmatic juxtapositions are *important contributing factors in creating the types of social activity, which we normally associate with our most positivistic readings of physical density.*

As the new incarnation of the "city," Tysons Corner in particular and panurbanism in general pose unique challenges to those seeking to engage their various zones, especially given panurbanism's rapid and undaunted expansion across the national and global landscape. The characteristics and strategies outlined in this paper are an effort to overcome the neglect of the everyday by attempting to ground a discourse in the mundane facts of parking lots, billboard heights and commuting. In all, the strategies, built as they are on the exploitation of latent characteristics of the panurban landscape, promise a new urbanism equally at home in Tysons Corner, Brooklyn, or Phoenix, one relegated to neither enclave suburban developments, nor one dependent on the radical transformation of the American psyche. Panurbia is now home to the majority of the American population, culture, and building markets. But, as a place and a phenomenon it has yet to be embraced as an inevitable and exciting zone for intervention by the design professions.