

Wanda Dye

Towards Difference in the Everyday Landscape

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Introduction

A significant amount of our everyday landscape is comprised of repetitive, generic, prototypical design. Developer and corporate driven “one size fits all” quick-fix prototypes and spaces are the status quo in our persistently complex, continuously evolving, globalized world. Alternative approaches to current paradigms of sameness are imperative. Our daily experiences, from our homes, to work, to shopping, to driving, are comprised of interfaces with ubiquitous non-specific design, especially in the United States. Where do critical agendas, research, and design play a part in this moving target world? Margaret Crawford in *Everyday Urbanism* states that “the everyday city has rarely been the focus of attention for architects or urban designers, despite the fact that an amazing number of social, spatial, and aesthetic meanings can be found in the repeated activities and conditions that constitute our daily, weekly, and yearly routines.”¹ This dilemma is further articulated in Ellen Dunham-Jones’s article “Seventy-five Percent”, where she states that:

Architects design only a small percentage of what gets built in the United States. Still, it is astonishing that in the past-century a vast landscape has been produced without the kind of buildings that architects consider ‘architecture,’ a landscape almost entirely uninformed by the critical agendas or ideas of the discipline. This landscape is the suburban fringe, the outer suburbs and exurbs – the landscape often called ‘urban sprawl.’ The favored venue for development associated with the post-industrial economy, this landscape accounts for approximately 75% of all new construction – yet it is shunned by most architectural designers.²

One of the many challenges for these homogenous landscapes is how to design repetitive prototypes and spaces that can adapt and/or even encourage difference. For they are not going away, so how can we begin to critically engage them? French philosopher Henri Lefebvre observed the complex contradictions of capitalist space that is “oriented toward the reproducible”. In his text “Space: Social Product and Use Value”, he states:

Oriented toward the reproduction of the social relations of production, the production of space enacts a logic of homogeneity and a strategy of the repetitive. But this bureaucratic space conflicts with its own results. When space is of this nature, occupied, controlled, and oriented toward the reproducible, it soon sees itself surrounded by the non-reproducible: nature, the site, the locality, the regional, the national, even the world level.³

He continues this critique of capitalist space in that it negates all differences.

This formal and quantified abstract space negates all differences, those that come from nature and history as well as those that come from the body, ages, sexes, and ethnicities. The significance of such factors dissimulates and explodes the very functioning of capitalism. The dominant space, that of the centers of richness and power, is forced to fashion the dominated spaces, that of the periphery.⁴ (Or in this particular situation, the everyday landscape comprised the suburbs and exurbs, as stated earlier by Dunham-Jones).

Typical prototypical architecture such as franchises, public space, and spec housing are based on the repetitive and yet are deployed in many different situations. These differences may manifest itself in several ways, whether it is a difference in climate, site, culture, budget, lifestyle, program, or even aesthetics. New principals such as mass customization have tremendous potential in creating alternatives to the production of sameness, (what is unfortunately a common outcome in most prototypical architecture). Mass customization pioneer Robert T. McTeer states that, "Things used to be made to order and made to fit. But they were labor-intensive and expensive. Mass Production came along and made things more affordable, but at a cost – the cost of sameness, the cost of one-size-fits-all. Technology is beginning to let us have it both ways. Increasingly, we're getting more personalization at mass-production prices. We're moving toward mass customization."⁵ Even though McTeer is speaking mostly about product design, more and more architectural practices are tapping into these new principles and technologies so that something that is repetitive doesn't necessarily have to be generic, or the same everywhere. It may negotiate and/or even initiate difference.

For example, in the research and design studio presented here, the notion of difference was addressed in several ways. Through assigning the students to choose five sites and cities with extreme differences, their repetitive systems were forced to adapt to local constraints. These differences may be related to climate, culture, site boundaries, and so on. Since most capitalist driven architecture and spaces are, as stated by Lefebvre, based on "the logic of homogeneity and a strategy of the repetitive", the students were asked to design prototypes and spaces that are easily reproducible and yet respond to the surrounding "*non-reproducible*: (such as) nature, the site, the locality, the regional, the national, even the world level."⁶ We were curious as to how the local conditions affect the overall global system and vice versa; thus acting as a counterpoint to the universal "one size fits all". For this is could be one of the many future challenges for global practices designing repetitive prototypical architecture and spaces.

Teaching Toward Difference: Rethinking the Global Franchise in the Everyday Landscape

Teaching toward difference in everyday landscape has been a topic of interest for several years. Past research and design studios and seminars I have taught had real "clients/collaborators", two of which were outside corporations tapping the studios for rethinking their prototypes. They range from franchise restaurants, to travel plazas, to affordable housing, to public spaces. These types of projects or programs may not be glamorous, or heroic in the conventional sense, but, as stated earlier by Dunham-Jones, comprise over 75% of our everyday built landscape. Therefore, I believe

these types of projects should not simply be overlooked, as stated by Crawford, or negate difference as stated by Lefebvre, but taken head on, with critical optimism and opportunism.

The research and design also intends to learn from complex realities and propose an agenda for critical operation within these landscapes. It strives to look closer at the hard pragmatics of what tools, technologies, and most importantly, philosophies our pedagogies and practices could tap into in order to create *difference* out of a globalized world riddled with *sameness*. Furthermore, learning from the problems existing within the everyday landscape allows for their transformation into design opportunities and potential interventions.

The most recent work presented here was developed in collaboration with the global franchise restaurant company Brinker International of Dallas, Texas and fourth year undergraduate architecture students at the University of Texas Arlington. The work seeks alternatives to the generic, in particular, global franchise prototypes and “public” spaces. The approaches strive to adapt and respond to *difference* and outside forces such as site, climate, budget, culture, and aesthetics. It also attempts to examine the infrastructural implications of a city or space by attempting to create place within the public realm – another alternative to the status quo approaches of disconnected “objects in the field”. Our collaborator, Brinker International’s in-house architects, are in the process of designing a new concept restaurant called *Chili’s NOW*, an offshoot of their Chili’s To Go component presently located within their main restaurants. The students in the studio were charged with rethinking prototypes for *Chili’s NOW* – a new drive up/take out global franchise. Chili’s presently has approximately 1500 restaurants and new ones under construction in various cities around the world - from Mexico City to Atlanta, from Seoul to Plano, from Los Angeles to Belfast.

The studio provided an exciting opportunity for the faculty, students, and Brinker International to research and rethink one of the most ubiquitous typologies in our global everyday landscape: the franchise. Comprised of interchangeable and collaborative design teams, the students presented their research and designs to Brinker’s in-house architects throughout the semester. In terms of rethinking the prototype, the students were charged with designing systems to accommodate different sites and situations. Unlike the universal “one size fits all” franchises currently deployed, the studio, through being charged with designing for difference was able to rethink existing “status quo” models based on sameness. Various local and global differences and constraints such as site, program, budget, branding, time, climate, culture, circulation, and efficiency were constantly negotiated and seized as design opportunities rather than design limits. In addition, they were to consider, through alternative site strategies, how the prototypes could contribute to the city’s urban/suburban infrastructure and public realm. Principals of mass customization, ‘file to factory’ approaches, utilization of prefabricated and/or modular systems, as well as sustainable material and construction techniques, drove the design process and afforded innovative responses to the multiple design constraints. Various media from hand sketches and sketch models to CAD CAM drawings and models were utilized to study various

modular, customizable components and assemblies. In addition, selected texts such as *Pre Fab Prototypes: Site Specific Design for Off Site Construction*⁷ by Mark and Peter Andersen and *Re-Fabricating Architecture*⁸ by Stephen Kieran and James Timberlake, “Prefabrication and Sustainability” by Kevin Pratt, “Seventy-five Percent” by Ellen Dunham-Jones, as well as my own research articles⁹ formed the nucleus of our weekly roundtable discussions.

Situating the Re-Thinking: Systems and Processes

The studio was composed of several research and design phases. The first phase: “Situating the Re-Thinking – Systems and Processes,” consisted of case study research providing the students with a knowledge base of the existing and emerging alternative prototypical approaches. Some of the following topics were explored:

Research Topics

- Prefabrication/Kit of Parts – Modular Components and Assembly
- Mass Production/Mass Customization Manufacturing Principals
- New and Sustainable Materials and Integrative Practices
- Innovative Parking/Drive-Thru/Drive-Up Strategies and Ordering Technologies
- Branding, Marketing, Social, Cultural, Political Contexts

Sites in the Global Everyday Landscape: from Urban to Suburban

The second phase of research and design titled “Sites in the Global Everyday Landscape – from Urban to Suburban” required the teams to utilize empirical observation. Through photography, diagramming, and animation, they analyzed existing sites, spaces, and building types within the Dallas Fort Worth area that were of similar size and program of *Chili’s NOW*, as well as the given “prototypical sites”. Through this investigation of pragmatic criteria, such as the relationship between cars and pedestrians, sites and programs; pros and cons of the “status quo” examples were discussed. In addition to examining the existing conditions, the teams also investigated examples of more innovative solutions, especially strategies related to creating difference within repetitive prototypical structures and sites. They examined examples within the Dallas Fort Worth area, as well as from other resources. Similar to the “status quo” studies, the teams listed the pros and cons of each. From here the teams regrouped and asked themselves: “How can these existing models begin to adapt to difference as well as create ‘place’ through contributing to the public infrastructure of the city?” Through quick speculative diagrammatic studies the students generated a variety of alternative layouts.

Prototypical Sites

- Stand Alone – Suburban parking lots in front of strip malls
- In-Line – Suburban strip centers
- In-Fill – Urban centers
- Add-Ons/Retrofit – Urban and/or suburban additions or retrofitting existing structures
- Mobile – Trailers, temporary structures, kiosks, roadside stands

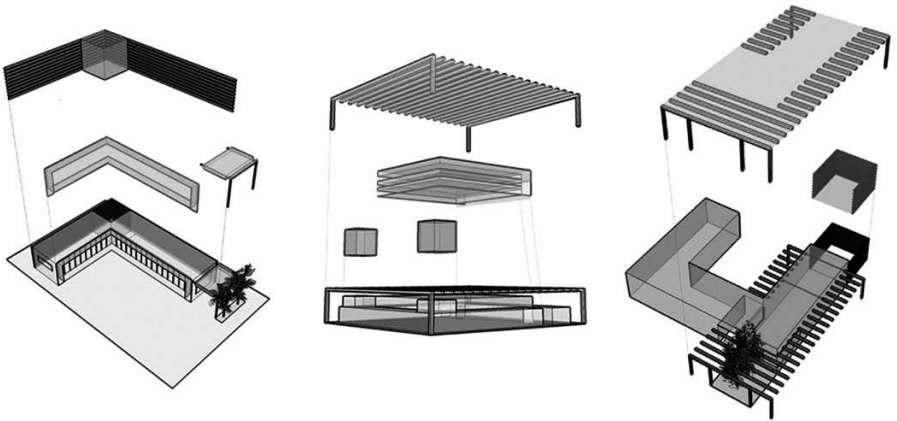


Figure 1

Images from Phase II

“Sites in the Global Everyday Landscape – from Urban to Suburban” alternative diagrammatic layouts of mass customizable prefab components and assemblies by students Jennifer Craddock, Alyssa Watkins, and Jason McDonald

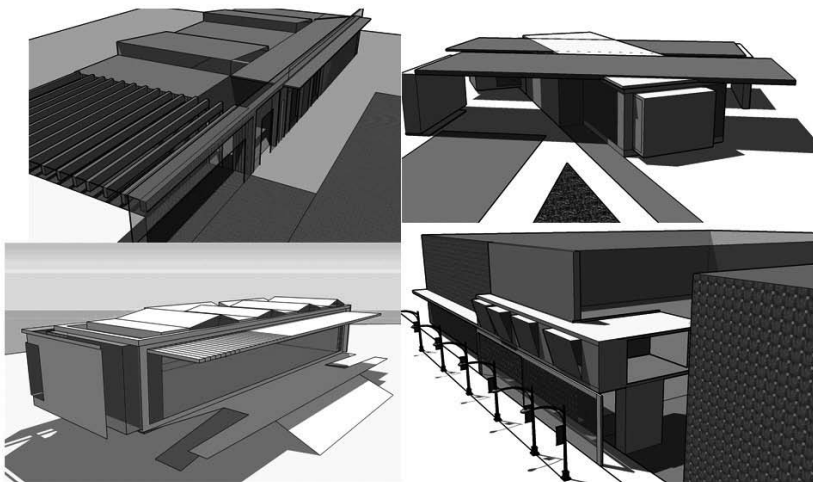


Figure 2

Images from Phase II

“Sites in the Global Everyday Landscape – from Urban to Suburban” alternative diagrammatic layouts of mass customizable prefab components and assemblies by students Tupali Kahumbe and Zachary Spillers

Sites and Systems Scenarios

In the final phase: “Sites and Systems Scenarios”, the teams utilized their previous research and played out different sites and systems scenarios. The teams proposed customizable prototypical systems and site strategies that adapt to different constraints, such as site, climate, program, culture, material, manufacturing technologies, budget, aesthetics, and so on. For each “prototypical site scenario”, (i.e. stand alone, in-line, in-fill, add-on/retrofit, and mobile), the teams chose a real site and city using Google Earth or MSN Virtual Earth. In addition, the teams made a point to exploit these differences through the site/city choices made. For example, the climate and cultural constraints are very different for *Chili’s NOW Jakarta*, versus *Chili’s NOW Anchorage*. Or the site constraints for *Chili’s NOW Tokyo* may call for an “add-on/retrofit” prototype, versus *Chili’s NOW Daytona 500*, where they may need a “mobile” solution. Ultimately the teams were asked how does their repeatable and yet customizable system adapt to difference, and yet still maintain the *Chili’s NOW* brand, as well as create a sense of place within the global city? In other words, how is it “Glocal” – responding to local and global differences?

All proposals utilized principles of mass customization and CAD CAM technologies such as laser cutting and 3 D printing for conceptualizing and creating customizable components. These were also utilized in conjunction with more standard prefab components.

Conclusion

Most of the student’s proposals were innovative in the way they adapted to difference, although some of them had allowed too many variables; thus creating too many options, and perhaps creating so much difference to where the prototype became unidentifiable as a *Chili’s* brand. The challenge was how to respond to local differences and yet still maintain a global identity. Therefore, certain aspects of the prototypes should stay the same and/or still be recognizable as a brand, and yet still adapt to idiosyncratic conditions encountered on site. Perhaps not giving so many different cities and different sites would have lent itself to focusing on what should stay the same, or “fixed” within the prototype, and what should be different, or “fluid” as it is re-sited or resituated. The students had a tendency to redesign or reconceptualize the entire system as they encountered each variable. In retrospect, one may propose the prototype to be site-less in its conceptualization, and then once inserted into the various situations, begin to make the necessary adjustments.

In conclusion, this work is attempting to address relevant issues related to global practices today. Given that the vast majority of our built environment is comprised of prototypical architecture and spaces that we experience everyday, we need to critically engage the problems of “sameness”, a problem that is typically inextricably linked to the prototype. Can we begin to design them with more specificity reflecting difference? And most importantly, this calling for specificity and difference versus homogenous “cookie cutter” prototypes, aspires to be more sustainable from many perspectives – whether it is cultural, ecological, social, economical, or architectural.

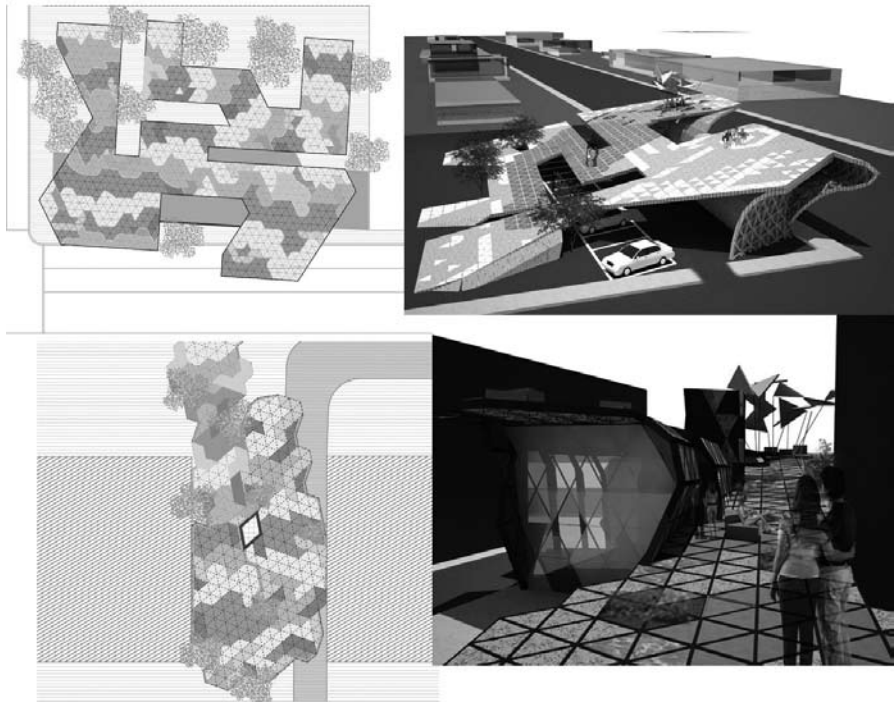


Figure 3

Images of final proposals for Stand Alone – Arlington and Inline – Detroit
by students Olga Herrero, Albert Navarro, Zeleste Ortigosa

(Customizable triangulated system integrates structure, skin, and identity through various reconfigurations and infill panel options. Proposal also incorporates other programs such as ‘public’ park/play ground and drive in theater in an effort to contribute back to the city and the public realm).



Figure 4

Images of final proposals for Inline – Houston, and Retrofit – Chicago
by students Kenneth Fitzgerald and Juan Rico

(Customizable rib structures and infill panels vary and reconfigure as per varying site constraints, climate conditions and signage options. Proposal also incorporates other programs such as ramps and public eating areas, thus contributing back to the city and public realm).

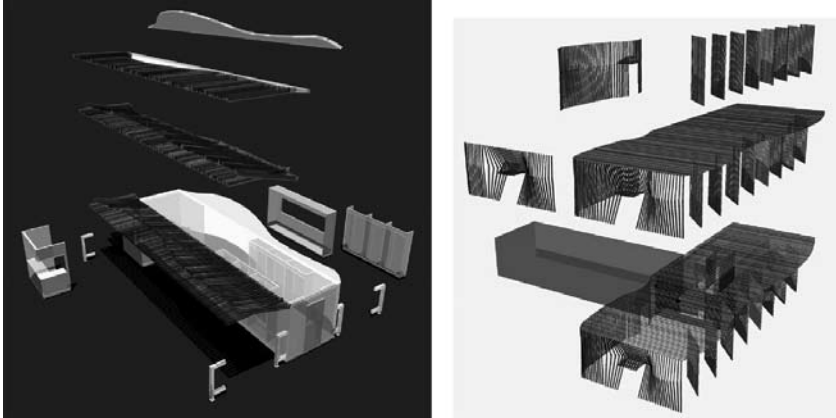


Figure 5

Images of final proposals for Infill – Rio De Janeiro, Mobile – Dallas Cowboy Stadium by students Jennifer Craddock and Jim Wiese

(Repetitive and yet differentiated skin wraps and warps according to varying site conditions. Densities and porosities' of skin also adjusts according to varying sun, heat and wind conditions. Proposal also investigates generous residual space for gathering while open and after hours, as well as engaging the immediate sidewalks with "walk-thru" porches and outdoor seating).

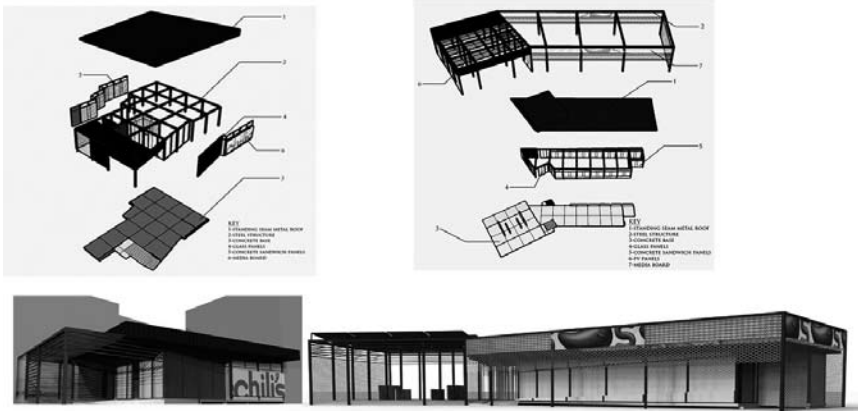


Figure 6

Images of final proposals for Stand Alone – Seattle, Infill – Edinburgh, Retro-fit – Tokyo by student Kristen Thovson and Jason McDonald

(Multiple panel options allow for site and climate specificities as well as branding alternatives with integrated media surfaces. Proposal also gives back to the immediate site and city through providing public spaces with generous ramps and porches).

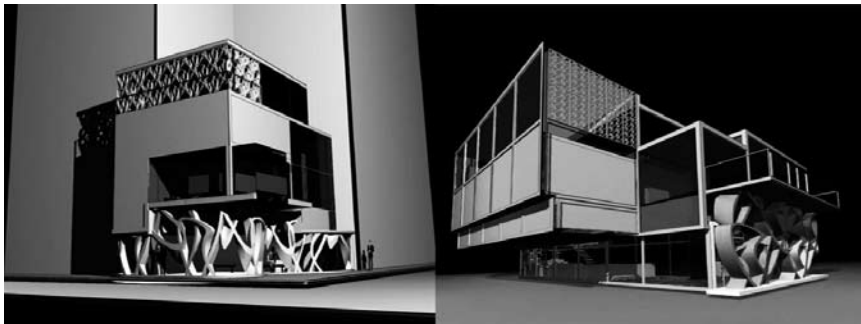


Figure 7

Images of final proposals for Infill – Venice and Retro-fit – New York City

by students Ana Cavazos and Alyssa Watkins

(Proposal utilizes an abstraction of the chili pepper as logo - from the scale of the screen to the scale of the inhabitable wall. The ground floor wall interacts with the public space of the sidewalk by providing interesting places to sit, lean and walk through).

Notes

- 1 Crawford, Margaret, "Introduction to Everyday Urbanism".
- 2 Dunham-Jones, Ellen, "Seventy-five Percent".
- 3 Lefebvre, Henri, "Space: Social Product and Use Value".
- 4 Ibid
- 5 McTeer, Robert, "The Right Stuff: America's Move to Mass Customization".
- 6 Lefebvre, Henri, "Space: Social Product and Use Value".
- 7 Text of Andersen and Andersen Architecture describing new prefabricating and manufacturing technologies and practices for site specific construction.
- 8 Text of research conducted by KTA examining the new possibilities of sustainable, affordable and high quality design and construction afforded through new manufacturing methodologies and principals of mass customization.
- 9 Dye, Wanda, "Paradigm Shifts in Manufactured Architecture: From Standardization to Customization", "Mass Customization in Architecture: Heterogeneity in the Making", "Drive-Thru Architecture: Rethinking the Fast Food Prototype".