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Senior Paper

Deconstructed into its simplest elements, the course of history and human affairs revolves around which people existed in a certain location at a certain time, and which people did not. Human movement, and lack thereof, has influenced just about everything; colonialism, segregation, and war are some prominent examples of this. Those who direct human movement are often among the most well-known and influential historical figures- Christopher Columbus, Henry Ford, or Pope Urban II, to name just a few. Like all things, though, movement exists on both small and large scales. The stores people choose to go to, daily bicycle routes, or even just a place to sit down are seemingly innocuous decisions that are directed, almost invisibly, by urban planners and real estate developers. It is not only where people move that is of great importance, though- it is also where people stop moving. Gathering spaces have been a staple of human existence since ancient times. Town squares, agoras, or forums, spaces to gather have existed under countless different names while serving similar purposes. They have been the powder kegs of revolutions and, in many ways, one of the most essential pillars of democratic society. In recent times, however, the concept of the public space has been warped into something else entirely, and at the current moment, its existence is more threatened than ever before. Particularly in a country like the United States, with its often sharp divides between urban, suburban, and rural areas, the public space has been largely replaced by the shopping mall. In suburbs and rural areas, with their low population density and lack of walkability, there is no symbol that is universally-recognized as a gathering space in the tradition of the Greek agora. Similarly, America's major cities have been plagued by inadequate public transportation as well as urban

planning that is racist and classist at its very roots. Nevertheless, the symbol of the shopping mall is recognized by all. In recent years, however, the existence of the mall has been threatened. Online retail giants like Amazon continue to strong-arm the industry with increasing force. Many economists and pundits now foresee a looming ‘death of retail’. Because of the degree to which a consumer experience has replaced the public forum, a death or distortion of retail will have a catastrophic impact on what remains of public life. So, what will this future look like? And what can be done to turn the tides?

In their article *The Ongoing Evolution of US Retail: A Format Tug-of-War*, published in 2015, Ali Hortaçsu and Chad Syverson detail trends from the previous 15-20 years of US retail, and unpack the differing explanations for these changes. “Some parts of retail, like traditional department stores as well as book and music stores, have seen large declines in sales and employment. Explanations about what is happening in the retail sector have been dominated by two powerful and not fully consistent narratives: a prediction that retail sales will migrate online and physical retail will be virtually extinguished, and a prediction that future shoppers will almost all be heading to giant physical stores like warehouse clubs and supercenters”. Hortaçsu and Syverson go on to set the future of retail along two broad lines: the rise in e-commerce and online retail is being met with a similar rise in physical retail clubs that follow a membership model. These ‘supercenters’ like Costco and Sam’s Club accounted for about 8% of all total retail sales in 2012, almost 50% higher than all total online retail sales in the same year (Hortaçsu, Syverson). The authors go on to state that for this reason, “an impending ‘death of retail’ certainly does not reveal itself in the aggregates”.

While physical retail may have life in it yet, its future may still appear unrecognizable to us. A consolidation of the physical retail market into membership-based supercenters will likely

render the shopping experience more exclusive than ever before. Among the casualties of this shift will be the shopping mall as we know it; and while it may seem overly consumerist to lament the death of the American mall, a generation-spanning symbol for just about everything wrong with a ravenously materialist culture, the community-oriented appeal of the shopping mall is likely to be lost along with it, and it is not entirely clear where these hubs of community interaction will re-emerge. Perhaps an under-appreciated aspect of the shopping mall experience is that, counter to their nominal purpose, it is possible to exist in one of them as something other than a consumer. With their various seating areas and atriums, shopping malls could fulfill a similar role to, say, a public park- a function that is intentionally absent from supercenters like Costco. The changing landscape of retail has also seen the decline of the 'third place'- a place outside of home or work where people can gather. Coffee giant Starbucks built its brand on its role as a third place for consumers, though in recent years it has been investing more heavily in drive-through/delivery, as well as changing the layouts of their physical locations (Taylor, 2019). This development, in retrospect, may seem obvious and inevitable: the more customers that can be moved through a space in a particular window of time, the more profit is likely to be extracted. However, it is worth examining just how counter this method is to traditional thinking about the consumer experience. Though shopping malls have been critiqued as the quintessential capitalist vista, they actually owe much of their structure to pre-capitalist venues. In chapter 3 of her book *Target Markets - International Terrorism Meets Global Capitalism in the Mall*, Suzi Mirgani outlines the history of the shopping mall; "...the concept of the shopping mall has a long history of borrowing architectural forms and adopting consumption patterns. Greek agoras, Roman forums, and the souqs and bazaars of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa stretch back into ancient history as the conceptual originators of the concentrated retail arena". Mirgani goes on to

detail the emergence of exhibitions and fairs in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as other early progenitors of the concept. A key aspect of these exhibitions, such as the World Fair, was to be a place to gather. "...the popular fairs and festivals provided a series of theatrical productions, magic shows, and spectacles in order to encourage customers to stay longer, and in order to imbue the commodity with a wide range of characteristics". It is no coincidence that these fairs and exhibitions coincided with the industrial revolution; the mass production of goods created a boom in consumption. As consumer desire was awakened, temporary exhibitions began their evolution into more permanent venues. "...instead of the customary congregation of urban activity around a traditional marketplace or town square, people were now redirected towards shopping arenas... Urban planners set about developing new infrastructures, and city centers set their gaze toward new focal points" (Mirgani, 2017). Today, it is increasingly obvious that shopping malls are not quite the permanent fixture they may have been envisioned as. Because of this, a key question looms: what will happen to these buildings when they are no longer serving their purpose as malls?

It is a question of great consequence. Many communities will be left rudderless without the shopping centers they were designed around. This is at once a great tragedy and a great irony; shopping malls are, of course, every bit the alienating, capitalist venue that they are often critiqued as. It is only within a certain context- a context wherein alienation is even greater on the outside of these venues- that they may serve a purpose as centers of community interaction and togetherness. Unfortunately, this context is arguably the modern reality. In other words, the death of the shopping mall is not a sign of an oncoming dystopia, but is itself a symptom of a dystopia created, in part, by the birth of the shopping mall. In his essay *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Walter Benjamin describes the Parisian arcades and world exhibitions of the

time period, and their effect in increasing social alienation. The arcades are described as "...a new contrivance of industrial luxury... glass-covered, marble-floored passages through entire blocks of houses, whose proprietors have joined forces in the venture. On both sides of these passages... are arrayed the most elegant shops, so that such an arcade is a city, indeed a world, in miniature". A world in miniature, as a concept, is not an innately alienating thing. Benjamin compares the idea of the arcade to the utopian socialist philosopher Charles Fourier's concept of the *Phalanstère*, a self-contained utopian community, but noted that the market-based nature of the arcade was its fundamental problem. Instead of the mutually beneficial nature of the *Phalanstère*, the French arcades created consumers; noting, in particular, the alienating effect of fashion consumption. "[Fashion] resides in conflict with the organic. It couples the living body to the inorganic world. Against the living it asserts the rights of the corpse... The cult of commodities places it in its service". None of these alienating aspects, however, change the fact that the shopping mall in its various forms has been strong-armed into a role that could be otherwise occupied by the *Phalanstère*. In this context, the shopping mall is, for many, the closest thing to a utopian gathering place that exists, and its death will not consequently eliminate the alienating impulses it has instilled in the public. Commodity fetishism and rampant consumerism will go on without the mall, and what is lost is the benefit that comes with a physical gathering place. And these malls, once shuttered, will continue to exist at the centers of communities that, in many cases, expanded outward from them; unused, they will fall into disrepair, and exist as a sort of negative space, representing a lack of communion rather than a presence of it. However, it does not have to be this way; campuses that once served as shopping malls may indeed be put to better use.

What to do with these structures has been the subject of much debate. Many abandoned mall campuses are not actually abandoned; in many cases, they remain owned by the developer for purposes of landbanking, allowing the property to remain unused while its value rises. For some, the answer about what to do with these venues emerges in the interim period, between the shuttering and eventual resale of the property. As part of a 2003 contest organized by the LA Forum wherein contestants created their own plans for abandoned malls- fittingly called “The Dead Malls Competition”- one contestant noted that official abandonment did not necessarily mean the space was not being used. “Though officially shuttered in 1998, Dutchess Mall lives on in the community as a center of semi-illicit activities including prostitution, flea markets, black market vending, and car cruising”. As the contestant notes, “...there is a logic to these semi-illicit activities, and we might do well to emulate that logic”. What this means is to not necessarily encourage illicit activity, but to take advantage of the organic nature in which a community will develop on the property. In many ways, this prospect is in the tradition of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of Assemblage; detailed in their book *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the term essentially means that in the same way a physical system such as a constellation self-organizes in an organic manner, so too do social systems. The contestant proposes “small-scale interventions including: home offices... coffeeshops; post offices... The emphasis is on the cheap, the feasible, and the temporary... programs that can take advantage of what has been left behind” (Interboro *et al*, 2006). While this may be a pragmatic use of the space, there are those who would argue that this approach is simply a reification of the shopping mall template, and more radical imagination is required.

The presence of private vendors nullifies many tenets of the public space as an idea; for one thing, the right to petition and distribute political literature is not fully guaranteed in a

privately-owned shopping mall. Per the 1980 U.S. Supreme Court decision *Pruneyard Shopping Center v. Robins*, a state may prohibit a private shopping center owner from banning peaceful expressive activity in the public areas of their property. However, at least thirteen states have declined to adopt this measure, while those that have- notably, California, the state in which the *Pruneyard* case began- do so with certain caveats, such as allowing shopping center owners to designate specific areas in which political petition is allowed, or require a permit to be approved before solicitation or demonstration may occur. For this reason, among several others, a shopping mall as it is known today cannot fit the definition of a functioning civic space. This idea was explored in depth in Michael Sorkin's 1992 book *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*. The book does not argue that public space is dead so much as it has been consciously co-opted and slowly replaced by other models- public life increasingly revolves around transactions, in doing so losing its proclivity for the political. As he put it, "There are no demonstrations in Disneyland". In this way, it is not only through the legal obstruction of petition in these spaces, but in their physical layouts that malls undermine the value of the public space. The physical environment of the shopping mall, which attempts to congeal aspects of public life such as bustling downtowns and park-like areas into one single aesthetic flavor, has contributed greatly to the conflation of civic space with Sorkin's idea of the Theme Park. As Jean Baudrillard wrote in *The Consumer Society*, "...these activities which were more or less irreducible one to another, are now at last mixed and blended, climatized and homogenized in the same sweeping vista of perpetual shopping. All are now rendered sexless in the same hermaphroditic ambience of fashion!" With these faults considered, it seems clear that the solution must be to do away with the idea of the shopping mall, and demolish the very foundation of these structures which "undermine actual public spaces by offering ersatz

alternatives that promote a truncated model of citizenship and a deformed image of nature” (Davidson, 2011).

Still, though, one goes to war with the army they have. The fact is, whether they are abandoned yet or not, shopping malls exist geographically as crucial hubs in thousands of cities and towns. Their function as the primary public space is even more dominant in suburbs, which often lack the comprehensive public transit or basic walkability of more major cities, necessarily requiring activity to be concentrated in a single location. This is indeed the result of conscious choices from urban planners and developers who may not have had the public’s interests at heart. Notably, Robert Moses, a New York public official who wielded immense power over roads and urban planning particularly in New York City, its greater metropolitan area, and Long Island, despite having never been elected by democratic mandate. Moses’ life is documented in great detail in Robert A. Caro’s 1974 biography *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York*. The book details Moses’ preference of highways over public transit, which led to an overall lack of investment in public transit for New York City and its sprawling suburbs, a problem that still plagues the area today. On a personal level, Moses was known for racism and many of his infrastructure projects served to limit access to parks and neighborhoods by black residents, who were more likely to use buses and other forms of public transit. For a greater metro area as enormous as New York, the legacy of Moses cannot be understated. Due to his actions, and the actions he inspired in other major cities across the country, public life is indeed highly stratified even to this day; the legacy of infrastructure is hugely consequential, as public works such as bridges and roads are big investments that are usually made to last. And so, in considering what must be done, one must contend with this reality. The atomization of different groups in society is, unfortunately, only a jumping-off point; it is often said that America doesn’t know its



neighbors anymore, and countless words have been written about the fact that American society is more divided than ever. The reality, though, is that America has long been a highly separate and segregated country; these divisions have existed for hundreds of years, reinforced by the seemingly immovable weight of infrastructure. The current social divisions in the country are, in fact, further splinterings within an already-divided framework.

To heal itself, then, the country will have to reverse-engineer what has been inflicted upon it. This will, of course, require the eventual rebuilding of infrastructure on a massive scale. However, this is a process that will take decades at the minimum, and requires an appetite for such a project from within the government, a prospect that is impossible in a country whose social fabric is as frayed as current-day America. If there is one consensus among the growing American Left, it is that in its current state, the country's populace lacks the class consciousness that will be required in order to make necessary demands. There is no clear consensus, however, on how to go about this. In lieu of any sudden revolution, and with no clear course of action, the only thing that can be done is to reverse the current trajectory in whatever way possible. This trajectory threatens to push the country past the point of no return; as dystopian as it is, the consumer experience may be the last real vestige of self-expression that Americans have. In this way, the abandoned mall offers a glimmer of hope. Thousands of communities have these massive, underused campuses at their centers, and as long as this infrastructure remains intact, it ought to be put to use. Similar thoughts are shared by author Benjamin Barber's group, the Agora Coalition; they posit that the mall's format has been imprinted upon the public's psyche to the point where reluctantly, it must be worked *with*, rather than against. In other words, malls must be reprogrammed to be more civically engaging. This may seem an impossible or redundant task, and perhaps one that is destined to simply recreate the capitalist nature of malls

over and over again. For certain, it is doubtful that they can fully transcend this purpose, especially in a country like the United States where profit will be squeezed out of wherever profit wills itself to be. However, the infrastructure has many potential uses that are not decidedly exploitative. A mall campus, in the absence of vendors, can be an amateur film set, which are needed now more than ever in a period of ever-increasing major studio hegemony; they can be hubs for political action and engagement, much in the tradition of the town square; they can be retrofitted as public housing, shelters, or just a place to sit down for a while. The potential of the abandoned mall is unignorable.

The public forum is an irreplaceable part of human history. Its existence has largely been a constant, and today it is threatened more than ever. In the same way that retail positioned itself as a replacement for the public forum, it is now on a trajectory to distort the format to a level of unrecognizability, and in doing so remove the few civic benefits that had been enmeshed within its alienating environment. These changes must be recognized for just how unprecedented they really are, and pushed back against. There is a future in which the consumerist model of the shopping mall can be done away with completely. However, it is unlikely that this future will arrive if the notion of public space is eradicated. The shopping mall is universally recognizable as well as physically and geographically abundant; its semiotic codes are, for better or worse, a comfort of sorts for millions of people. Therefore, its format must be worked with and learned from, and these massive buildings must be used to fulfill their true potential. It may be paradoxical, but in order to do away with the shopping mall, the shopping mall must be saved.

Of course, to save the shopping mall seems today to be a harder task than ever before. The devolution of these structures has only been hastened by an ongoing pandemic. This same pandemic has revealed a deep need for human connection and community, as the necessary

separation of large groups of people in one space has led to profound psychological harm, the extent of which cannot yet be accurately predicted. It is not clear the extent to which the world will 'return to normal' post-pandemic, either; certain developments borne out of the pandemic, such as remote work-from-home over video chat platforms like Zoom or Slack, appear as though they are here to stay in some form or another. And despite the fact that millions of people wait desperately for the world to open up again, so they can experience community once more, it is not entirely clear how these communities will have changed, and additionally how much say the average person will have over the post-pandemic order. The full year and counting of COVID-19's spread has rendered clear that much wellbeing will be sacrificed in the name of profits, and that the economy is more separated than ever from the average person and their desires. And as tantalizing as a normal day in a shopping mall might seem to those who have avoided these things over the course of the pandemic, there is no guarantee that this need will be met, as the convenience of online retail sinks its claws deeper into the economy. There are deeper fears here yet- how do we talk about all this after the fact?

How do I make a piece of art about the pandemic without referencing the pandemic? This is a question that I'm sure has been dogging many who consider themselves artists since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Already one of the most consequential historical episodes of the still-young century, its influence has dominated nearly every aspect of public discourse over the past year (at the time of this writing, the pandemic continues to rage amidst a stratified global vaccination effort, the timeline of which is still unknown). Going into this project, I knew the pandemic would be impossible to ignore- the way it has hung over my head (and all of ours) necessitated that whether I was doing so consciously or not, I was making a COVID-19 project. I chose to lean in and do it consciously.

Still though, referencing the pandemic outright felt like a good way to lose people. For one thing, its oversaturation in the media and in our psyches creates a burnout effect (to say the least); art consumption as a means of escapism has grown exponentially over the course of COVID. It will likely be a good few years before audiences really have an appetite for pieces about the pandemic. This can be a difficult fact to contend with, especially from an artists' perspective. How do I contend with this historical event that has shaped me as a person and for better or worse, lives inside me? How do I speak truth to power, deconstruct the ways in which the world's population was systematically failed by an incompetent elite, leading to thousands, if not millions of preventable deaths, and with seemingly no consequences for anyone besides an election loss or two? The more I thought about it, I actually came to realize that it worked in my favor to not directly reference the pandemic. More than maybe anything else, the pandemic debacle has been known for the uncertainty it has generated. Uncertainty revolving of course around how long it would last, uncertainty revolving around growing social malaise. Even now, as the USA romps forward with vaccinations, there remains great uncertainty about vaccine hesitancy and what the world will look like after the pandemic ends. These felt like heavy questions to tackle, and questions that I myself feel completely unequipped to supply the answers to. COVID as its own event, as a beginning to a new era, is a subject that feels too uncertain to tackle in a substantive way. So instead I asked myself: how does COVID-19 fit into other stories? Are there ongoing events that COVID is merely a second act of, or even an endpoint?

I immediately started wondering about public space. One question I kept coming back to is: why, exactly, did restrictions on public congregations create such mass psychosis in the populace? To me, such restrictions seemed more to highlight already-ongoing trends, the growing level to which Americans had been voluntarily self-sequestering in their homes,

whether they knew it or not. Factors such as luxury appliances, streaming, social media, and- especially with the onset of COVID- remote work, have contributed to the household's increased role as a center for entertainment and leisure. It is not exactly that today we have more reasons to stay in. It seems more like we have less reasons to go out. Leisure has been decoupled from events; it has become a state of being.

I explore this idea in the opening monologue of the video. In this section, the nameless narrator addresses someone called only "Sir", the identity of whom is never explicitly revealed. The narrator describes how her living quarters have been overtaken by a glut of products that are delivered to her in a constant stream. Our narrator's living quarters have become so filled with these products that she no longer goes there at all. I hoped to demonstrate several things with this part of the story. Firstly, the increased role of living spaces as the primary location of leisure. These products, which are never specified, are given precedence in the space by the narrator, who willingly leaves so that there will be room for the products. Of course, the presence of the products in the space is essentially rendered useless by the narrator not being there to interact with them. I hoped that this aspect of the narration would serve as a commentary on the nominal use of spaces versus how they are actually used. Tied into this is a commentary on online commerce, and the way the automated convenience of e-commerce has changed the relationship we have with shopping. The limits of what a space like a shopping mall can contain within their walls does not apply to online retailers like Amazon. Available products lose factors like scarcity; Walter Benjamin might say that products, when made limitless in this way, lose some of their 'aura'. The product's authenticity, interactivity, personalization, are rendered secondary to the delivery of the object itself; it becomes not about having the product, but getting it. And even then, the 'getting' of the product is itself detached from any hints of activity or community that

would be required by leaving one's home to go to the mall. It becomes a wholly passive activity, the path of least resistance for endorphin release.

Another relevant aspect of the narrator's opening monologue is the idea of the 'lifetime supply'. This is summed up when the narrator asks, "I am simply curious as to whether you have an employee who is tasked with keeping track of when I die in order to end my weekly deliveries, or otherwise if your company operates with a different definition of *lifetime* entirely." The definition of 'lifetime' is an idea that figures heavily into this piece. There exists a sort of push-and-pull between the comparative lifespans of humans versus buildings, which I believe plays into the conflation of a building being abandoned with it being dead. I was very interested in the ambiguity of when a building can be said to be 'dead'. When I initially began this project, one of the central ideas I had was that walking through a lot of abandoned buildings was similar to walking through a graveyard. However, as I continued to think about it, abandoned buildings struck me not so much as grave markers, but as comatose bodies. The idea of the building as a body became an animating conceit of my project. "Do you find it curious that we say a building is finished at the moment it is born?" the narrator asks at one point. I believe the way we talk about a building's lifespan can greatly impact the way we interact with them. We should embrace the fact that buildings, for the most part, will outlast us. Buildings can span multiple generations of human lifespans so long as they are structurally maintained, and there is a certain magic to walking the same halls as countless people before you did, and as countless people will do after you. We recognize this with famous buildings, many of which are among the most popular tourist destinations in the world. Why not with an average shopping mall?

The distinctions and similarities between human and buildings' lifespans is most explicitly explored in the final segment of the video. This section takes place in a small

graveyard; behind it looms a water tower. I found this to be a striking visual that demonstrated a building's longevity compared to a human's. The gravestones exist in various states of deterioration, and are overtaken by moss and lichen, while the water tower stands in the background, unblinkingly continuing to exist. To me, the gravestones almost reek of desperation—a final plea from humans to exist with some of the same longevity as buildings, stone structures as an extension of the human beneath them. “For me, death is to shrivel- to exceed usefulness,” says the narrator. “I wonder, can the same be said of you?” In this instance, *you* refers to buildings. For a building, ‘death’ does not quite represent the finality that it does for humans, and the visual of the water tower behind the gravestones demonstrated this perfectly.

Over the course of creating *A Building in the Distance*, it became increasingly about two things: Westchester county and Robert Moses. In many ways, these themes are one and the same; Robert Moses exerted great influence over the infrastructure of Westchester, and as a result, the county remains stratified and, to a degree, segregated. Westchester county is the county to the immediate north of New York City; its southern limits border the Bronx. Westchester is often used as a shorthand way of describing a yuppie suburban area of upper-middle class residents who commute to work in the nearby city— sort of the platonic suburb. This is certainly true of large sections of the county; but in truth, Westchester is quite diverse, in terms of population, economics, and the structural foundation of its cities. I have lived in Westchester my whole life, in three different places that came to figure increasingly into my piece. I grew up in the north Westchester town of Yorktown Heights, essentially the exemplar of an upper-middle class suburb that Westchester is often characterized as. For college, I attended SUNY Purchase where I lived on campus for my first three years of school, until the pandemic necessitated that on-campus presence and activity be limited. The distinctions between the simulated environment of a

college campus and the outside world has been of great interest to me; for SUNY Purchase, even the outside world of Purchase, NY is itself a curiosity of sorts, it being a hamlet of the city of Harrison, with one of the wealthiest ZIP Codes in the United States, and home to the headquarters of corporations like PepsiCo and Mastercard. Finally, I lived in Port Chester for my final year of college; Port Chester is geographically close to Purchase, but quite different in a multitude of ways. Port Chester is both more diverse and more working-class than many of its surrounding towns and villages. These three places, and the roads that connected them, came increasingly to define this project.

The first video I shot emerged out of a hobby of driving around somewhat aimlessly, this pastime itself being a product of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this hobby, I became increasingly familiarized with the geography of Westchester; at this same period in time, I was reading Robert A. Caro's biography *The Power Broker*. It was a thought-provoking experience to see with my own eyes the physical legacy of Moses; his favor of highways over public transit and spearheading of many key roads in the area such as the Sprain Brook Parkway led to the expansion of the suburbs that I myself grew up in. This is an already complicated legacy that continues to evolve. These suburbs, originally vistas of escape from the city during the white flight of the 1950s, are today going through a sort of disintegration. This effect is demonstrated at various points in *A Building in the Distance*; in my hometown of Yorktown Heights, I shot video of various abandoned buildings in a shopping center located at a central location in town. These buildings used to serve purposes as a Food Emporium, and a K-Mart; today, they sit in disrepair and disuse. The ashen remains of the 'BIG K-Mart' logo still remain on the facade of one of these buildings, and this is visible in my video. These buildings are symptoms of suburban decay; they sit completely empty, and have for years, with no current plans to develop them for



future use. Suburban homes, meanwhile, grow larger; it is all a symptom of the same pathologies, directed by intentional, profit-driven forces, that separate humans from each other, either as a byproduct effect or by way of conscious goal. Robert Moses, according to Caro's book, was a virulent racist who, among many other things, built low overpasses over his highways to prevent busses from using them, to prevent Black Americans' access to both parks and entire neighborhoods, as they were more likely to use public transit at the time that these projects were envisioned. Of course, Moses was no singular force; there are thousands of Westchesters and, in turn, thousands of figures such as him, wielding vast and semipermanent influence over geography and human movement. Westchester's status as the 'platonic suburb' lent itself to my themes; I was able to tie this project to a specific location, while also retaining universality in the themes. Yes, this is a project about Westchester county; but through this, it is also a project about all of America.

When it came to shooting video, I was struck by imagery that I began to classify as new Americana; office parks, suburban architecture, road markings and signs. There is a sort of standardized entropy to things like this; they look more or less the same wherever in the country you are, but seem to pop up almost at random. I hoped for this to demonstrate several things: a lack of central planning in the majority of American suburbs, which often manifests itself in the phenomenon known as urban sprawl. Through this, I hoped to show a need for a beating heart at the center of a community or place, a need that could be fulfilled by a shopping mall. Without these, suburbs continue to sprawl outward with little rhyme or reason. Besides simply the cosmetic downsides, this type of sprawl contributes to a host of other negative factors: increased reliance on personal vehicles, and in turn decreased or nonexistent funding for public transit; a lack of walkability, which detracts from potential community interactions, as well as increasing

emission of carbon, necessitated by use of cars; and a decreased incentive to leave one's house at all, as the inconvenience of travel in decentralized cities and suburbs creates motivation for online shopping. This 'new Americana' imagery is most prevalent around 5 minutes into the video, when images of a shopping mall are shown for the first time. The narrator describes the mall as a "beached whale... powerless against the sun-drenched American beach". In the video, the "sun-drenched American beach" is not a beach at all, but a parking lot. This serves a dual purpose, firstly as a commentary on the conceding of large pieces of land to pavement. It also implies that the power of a shopping mall is derived from personal vehicle transit; and of course, this power will decrease as physical transport becomes less and less integral to shopping. The physical legacy of unused parking lots may be among the most damning aspects of abandoned spaces, as well as an example of personal vehicle transit's shortcomings. Parking lots, more than maybe anything else, speak directly to the need for central planning, walkability, and public transit.

And of course, there is the environmental angle of all of this as well; use of space directly correlates with environmental impact. Initially, I wanted to avoid talking about climate change, as the topic is not only greatly depressing, but in the early stages felt unrelated to my chosen subject matter. However, the more that time went on, the more I realized that these subjects are one and the same. I most explicitly delve into this in a section of the video towards the middle, in which images of nature are contrasted by loud mechanical sounds and human voices. No narration plays over this section, as the intent was for this section to be meditative; I believe there is an extent to which words cannot accurately sum up the climate crisis, and that rather than being articulated, this sort of thing must be deeply felt. Many of these images of nature were filmed in my hometown of Yorktown Heights. Perhaps most importantly, the final shot of this

section depicts a farm; the camera zooms in, past the hills, where the skyscrapers of New York City can be seen poking upwards. This shot is repeated later on, as the last shot of the video entirely. This shot combines many of the themes I set out to explore. Firstly, there is the obvious relation to the video's name, *A Building in the Distance*. To me, this title means several things—the physical separation of spaces from other spaces, as well as the distance in time in which a building will continue to exist. This shot's location also has several meanings; taken from one of the northernmost points of Westchester county, it is nearly the entire county that is between the camera and the buildings. This is meant to demonstrate the aforementioned concept of urban sprawl; additionally, the dichotomies between rural and urban life. New York City itself has its own unique relationship with several thematic elements, between its experience with COVID-19, being the hardest-hit area in the country, as well as the city's history with Robert Moses, who exerted far more influence within the city limits than in Westchester.

New York's place on the horizon speaks to the general uncertainty of the times in which this project was made. It faces a reclamation of identity post-COVID, an ongoing mayoral race, and is in many ways an exemplar of the United States' difficulties with public transit, environmental detriments, and urban sprawl. It is also a place of deep and distinct cultural differences, neighborhoods with unique personalities and identities, and overall diversity of population. Many of the biggest problems with public space are on display in New York, from its anti-homeless architecture to lack of public bathrooms. But, at the same time, it possesses many of the elements of more idealized use of space that this paper advocates for. New York City is highly walkable, and many necessities can be found within a few minutes' walk of one's front door. It has also long been known for its role as a hub for community events, from baseball stadiums to small pop-up shows. But, as mentioned earlier, it is also rife with uncertainty. At the

time of this writing, public events are on their way back, and there are many opportunities to be had. But still, it is unclear exactly what is in store for New York. As an exemplar of both great hope and great uncertainty, it felt appropriate to end *A Building in the Distance* with it peeking just over the horizon.

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