



Transformation of typology over time: welcome to Albuquerque

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Abstract The New Mexico license plate states that it is the “Land of Enchantment”. The open road, the automobile and the quest for individuality and adventure are all wrapped into an idea about the American dream that defines how and why Albuquerque has transformed. As a representational project, *Welcome to Albuquerque* examines the transmutation of the city from a collection of designed and built objects and infrastructures into an inhabited idea of “city”. Rather than using traditional site analysis techniques, this project experiments with a form of photographic abstraction that codifies time as layers to yield an alternate and multivalent reading. In this study, the real estate snapshot provides the point of departure.

Welcome to Albuquerque defines site via its reduction to fragments. (Fig. 1) Site can then read as a complex texture created over time and not as just property lines or real estate dollars. This reading is not fixed, frozen, or tied to a direct operational principle. Rather, this form of representation opens up play between isolated objects so as to allow outsiders (those not privy to witnessing change over the 40-50 years encapsulated in these real estate photos) a glimpse of the effects of time. The viewer is left to “fit” space back into a photograph that at once manifests a second of light (as time), comingling with space in real time to reveal an identity simultaneously fabricated of past, present and future. *Welcome to Albuquerque* is not only a graphic analysis of the suburb, but also an analysis of regionalism and simulacra. This paper makes a pretense towards a complex space seen through time by layering and codification. This project proposes a representational spatiality that goes beyond a prose/poetic diatribe and begins to visually grasp the complexities of the identity of the city as something against architecture of objects.

Fig. 1 A Record of Changes



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Introduction: Against Architecture

In *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, Denis Hollier argues that Bataille, "...denounces architecture as a prison...." (Hollier, 1989, p. ix) Bataille writes: "Architecture is the expression of every society's very being.... Church and State in the form of cathedrals and palaces speak to the multitudes, or silence them.... The storming of the Bastille is symbolic of this... it is hard to explain this mass movement other than through the people's animosity against the monuments that are its real masters." (as cited in Hollier, 1989, p. ix) Bataille and Hollier are against architecture because it is complicit with the powers that mold societal behaviors. Over time, however, the ability for architecture to impose and express becomes more complex. The form(s) that can translate into spatial/aesthetic conditions and that speak to formerly invisible histories through the democracy of personal invention and the everyday object undermine and even subvert the often complicit nature of architecture, restoring a balance in this dynamic of power.

The things we build shape the identity of our cities, but any piece of architecture lies in the hands of the designer for a brief period in relation to the time it lies in the hands of its owners and users. The identity of our built environment is surely influenced by the objects we place in it, but that identity is built on the way users handle those objects over time. What is the role of change in relation to identity and how does memory function to facilitate or hinder identity? Do urban centers, parks, hinterland, and the suburbs solely define our cities? Or is there more at work? Can a city be potentially devoid of architecture or architects?

The architect's ultimate act might be that of letting go, freeing a design from his or her control. As designers, we must begin to address this evolution "post-occupancy" to recognize our place within the larger process of shaping the identity of our built environment. The following analytical project, *Welcome to Albuquerque*¹, serves as an investigation into these questions and as a response that could stipulate a point of departure for something organizational and spatial, and yet not-quite architecture or landscape – but perhaps a glimpse of the real city of Albuquerque.

Space and Photography

Since its invention, the nature of photography illustrates a similarly complex power dynamic between the physical object and its "capturing" through photographic representation. The ambiguous relationship between the realism conveyed and its alteration in service of a specific interpretation, realistic or otherwise, has been the focus of attention for artists for decades. For Robert Smithson, "There is something abominable about cameras, because they possess the power to invent many worlds." (as cited in Fogle, 2003, p. 9) Alexander Rodchenko believed: "As if in a flight of fancy or a dream, we are discovering the wonders of photography as they reveal an astonishing reality." (Rodchenko, 2008, orig. pub. 1934, p. 10) For photographers intent on capturing the everyday, the intimacy of the moment is often staged with hours of preparation, as seen in the work of Walker Evans. (Mora & Hill, 1993) While artists have recognized the alterable nature of the photograph in service of expression, often subverting the realism inherently implied, photographs are consistently used to convey an "honest" reflection of life. They document evidence and are used in innumerable methods of identity protection.

The photo/spatial project *Welcome to Albuquerque* examines the transmutation of the city from a collection of designed and built objects and infrastructures into an inhabited idea of "city." This begins with a valuing of the real estate snapshot. Like documentary or crime scene evidence, the real estate snapshot is meant to capture and convey a home in an "honest" way, capturing the object and its context without the pretension to elevate it to an art form and refusing to acknowledge the potential that reality may in fact not be conveyed by the image itself. We value

¹ Work originally exhibited in *Unprivileged Views*, WUHO Gallery, Hollywood, March 3-25, 2012.

the real estate snapshot because it defines value - the average American's largest lifetime investment is their personal residence, and as such, banks and real estate markets fix prices to these images plus their amenities (number of bedrooms, baths, vaulted ceilings, landscaping, updated kitchen, garage size, etc.). This snapshot serves as the foundation for analysis, augmenting through spatial difference the embedded layers of the image and the object within the image.



Fig. 2 Welcome to Albuquerque

Welcome to Albuquerque (Fig. 2) also takes its inspiration from the work of both Dan Graham and Ed Ruscha. In 1966-1967, Dan Graham, did a series of photographs entitled *Homes for America* to examine the incessant repetition of forms developing in the form of suburban tract homes. Writing on Graham's work, Dan Fogle states, "...the New Jersey tract homes he documented...were products of standardization that generated a particular kind of alienated effect in its disconnection from a grounding in the social." (Fogle, 2003, p. 14) The series of photographs in *Homes for America* are meant to read as a parody of the two-page spread photo essay. (Wall, 2003, p. 38) Ed Ruscha also builds on this almost subversive critique in his series of photo-books, done between 1963-1978. Ruscha himself says, "Actually what I was after was no-style or a non-statement with a no-style." (as cited in *Ed Ruscha*, 2006, p. 11) Jeff Wall, writing on Ed Ruscha's work, comments that, "...the majority [of his photographs] seem to take pleasure in a rigorous display of generic lapses... all in all a hilarious performance, an almost sinister mimicry of the way 'people' make images of the dwellings in which they are involved." (Wall, 2003, p. 43) Both these artists use the medium of the photograph as a kind of "low" form of documentation, building on the apparent honesty in the documentation process to examine and critique the social conditions that produced the very object photographed.

Welcome to Albuquerque

Albuquerque is a unique city to investigate with regard to the process of expression and with regard to the inherent complexity of identity in the city. But what is the city today? We define the "city" here as the sum of its parts, not as an objectified core or zone – our definition includes the ugly and unprivileged bits. We are interested in the city as an inclusive idea – not just as a collection of designed and built objects and infrastructures, but as a collective consciousness of individual expressions of identity, from suburban Pink Flamingos to the cars perched on concrete blocks in front yards.

Albuquerque's origins are distinct: it was a Spanish city for far longer than it has been an American city. Following the Spanish land grants, Albuquerque was formed around an integrated

irrigation and water distribution system of *acequias*² and their resultant land right plats that gave pressure to the formation of long rectangular lots to assure access to water. The railroad initially brought tourists and prospectors to the state, reinforcing the myth of the Frontier and crystallizing a regional architecture that was itself a myth-building merging of Pueblo, Spanish/Moorish, and Mexican building strategies. With its nomination to statehood, and later the introduction of the highway systems, came the motto that can now be read on New Mexico's license plate - the "Land of Enchantment". The open road, the automobile and the quest for individuality and adventure are all wrapped into an idea about the American dream that defines how Albuquerque evolved from its Spanish roots. Route 66 provided the path, and Albuquerque became the stop along the way: fill your tank, spend the night, maybe stay. Route 66 also brought the American City with it: the dream to own a house, a yard, a car.



Fig. 3 Decoding the Layers of a Home

During and after World War II, Albuquerque experienced an extreme housing shortage as the population in the city ballooned. In part this was due to the United States government battling time in order to harness the Atom before the Nazis. To quell this shortage, contractors and architects developed typical house patterns to cope with the rapid construction needed that combined modern living and cost effective construction methods with the aesthetic and proportional qualities found in vernacular buildings. Books and pamphlets such as William Lumpkin's *La Casa Adobe* (1961) and Wilfred Stedman's *Santa Fe Style Homes* (1936) were both an analysis of existing vernacular strategies and a proposition to homemakers to borrow from the aesthetic traditions found locally and meld these with contemporary luxuries such as the two-car garage. The Southwest's rich architectural tradition was subsequently wedded to this suburban dream. The wild and exotic aspects of the frontier carried through the building culture, becoming a badge, a chance to play the mythic homesteader from the convenience of your suburb. Albuquerque is now an amalgamation of nostalgic and iconic representations of both Route 66 and the myth of the Southwest, also managing the realities of day-to-day contemporary life. Its identity has developed out of how it has coped and adapted with this mythos over time. From the suburban dream came the reality of the remodel, the repair, and the addition.

Climatically, Albuquerque differs from Middle America, being both dry and hot as opposed to temperate and humid. However, both of these regions gained significant housing stock that was constructed prior to the advent of central heating and air. The Albuquerque home adapted to these services in a manner that allowed for an uncanny exposing of systems. These services are almost gladly exposed as if to communicate internal comfort and cash-valued real estate improvement,

² An *acequia* is a gravity-fed, community-operated water course used in Spain and in the Spanish colonies.

but these additions are almost never designed by an architect. Instead they are installed with the rhyme and reason of a specialized contractor. The exposure of the systems in Albuquerque's typical home is rarely complete, and rarely finessed; it may however be economical and direct. These homes illustrate a kind of Occam's razor approach to retrofitting that are at once as clunky as they are beautiful. These exposed system retrofits are however essential to a real understanding of Albuquerque's complex identity, and an intriguingly architectural proposition. Building in modern materials precipitated the loss in passively controlled cooling provided by traditional adobe. The exposed ductwork of the typical Albuquerque home speaks as loudly as the traditional, vernacular adobe brick – exposed ductwork is more about Albuquerque's identity than the authenticity of traditional adobe construction.



Fig. 4 Decoding the Layers of a Home

Operationally, Albuquerque is a kind of matrix of homes synthesizing the “Casa Adobe” type, building from prototypical housing patterns, such as Lumpkin’s, with a visible record of add-ons, punctures, retrofits and nostalgic ramblings. In addition to the typical systems exposed on the roofs, owners have altered the form of this type through various means – at times adapting to xeriscaping strategies by returning their lawns to a reined-in wild landscape, replacing windows and doors to provide better insulation, adding exterior walls to provide privacy, or even by adding a pitched roof or second stories onto their existing homes, to name but a few. These strategies vary wildly from nostalgic meanderings towards southwest “authenticity,” to contemporary updating of outdated technologies, to the audacity and awkwardness of wholesale re-roofing or re-skinning. This matrix works to stitch together a locally independent yet interdependent whole that works to express a larger idea of what the city is. The identity of the city is the sum of its parts and systems, giving expression and exposure equally, if not awkwardly, to each.

Welcome to Albuquerque opens the door to the sometimes kitsch, the sometimes elegant, and the often cartoon-like owner-driven modifications that are typically done sans architect by contractors or do-it-yourselfers. Surely these acts and their testament relics count as contributing to the development of the identity of a city as a whole? Prior to the infamous burst in the housing bubble, real estate value was considered so predictable that homeowners would buy property simply to makeover and flip. Or, spawned by mass media, homeowners radically over-improved their properties by way of countless Home-Depots and the like. The onslaught of HGTV and numerous spin-offs like the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) Channel forged a home improvement lifestyle where the individual homeowner’s perception of the value of one’s home became an augmented expression of one’s identity.

An analysis of this matrix of homes made graphic flirts with a representational spatiality that goes beyond a prose/poetic diatribe and begins to visually grasp the complexities of the identity of

the city. This approach is not without precedent - architects from Le Corbusier (whose use of the axonometric uncovered his own hidden cubic playbook) to Daniel Libeskind (whose infamous *Micromega* drawings trace labyrinthine paths from the inside to outside to the inside) to James Corner's collages (as a means to manifest a spatial/architectural condition of the landscape) all work as a kind of visual contextual analysis tackling the intricate conceptualities at work in the city. The visual analysis *Welcome to Albuquerque* makes a pretense towards a complex space seen through time by layering and codification. The viewer is asked to "fit" space back into a photograph that once was manifest by mere second of light (as time), comingling with space in real time to reveal an identity simultaneously fabricated of the past, present and future.

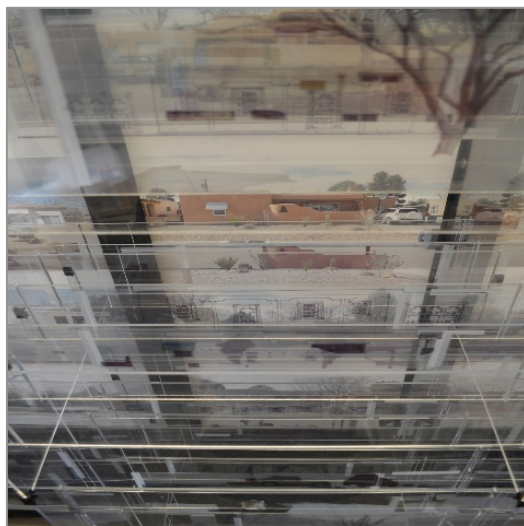


Fig. 5 A New Topography of Change

Welcome to Albuquerque is not only an analysis of the suburb, but also an analysis of regionalism and simulacra. William Lumpkin's prototypical pattern homes, among others, serve as the baseline to facilitate a very specific typology, a nostalgia or utopia for countless synthetic New Mexican Casa Adobe homes. Over time, even these scaled down copies of larger, more stately, originals either lose their modicum of purity by both internal and external fragmentation, or they build on references to an original that cannot be found through larger moves that operate to quiet the neighbors' kitsch-like add-ons and landscape appendages. (Fig. 3, Fig. 4)

Spatial Implications

The analysis illustrated here deconstructs and codes the layers of the aging Albuquerque suburban home. Elements that alter the original Casa Adobe type literally pull away from the image to reveal the traces over time. Borrowing from William Lumpkin's *La Casa Adobe* (Lumpkin, 1961, plate 4) as a ground zero layer, this key elevation also asks the reviewer to contemplate the *Casa Adobe* prototype versus the suburban reprogramming of the idealized design. Some viewers report no noticeable difference and others are keen to see proportional variation. The separation of these elements relative to this Casa Adobe layer outline a new physical topography, an adaptation of a new kind of 'long exposure' as compared to the single privileged moment of light encapsulated by traditional photography. The fabricated and three-dimensional nature of the analysis is then delimited by the rules that materials like Plexiglas and transparencies require for structural endurance and reproduction. (Fig. 5)

Welcome to Albuquerque maps layered changes over time by codifying them as discreet items. The iconographic traces from the "original" are preserved by the very thing photography

does best: recording/documenting. Dissections of the real estate snapshot pull away from the original image as transparencies. This procedure yields side effects – one that operates to retain specificity (detail, color, texture, mechanisms, systems, routings, landscaping, lighting, etc.) and the other that makes space (through floating elements as tethered to fixed conditions) and opens alternative and associative relationships. These floating layers slide spatially due to the physical offset from their host images – they can be viewed head on or from an angular trajectory, resituating individual elements and allowing whole façades to come along. (Fig. 6) This approach reveals a kind of reverse Cubism - rather than being a fragmented and collaged image of an object pieced together by memory, these resultant layers and spatial meanderings eclipse and coalesce accuracy and origin to create a stitched-together ensemble of generalized conditions laced with DNA-like specific components and dimensions. Akin to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* but without a readily identifiable head or arms, the floating layers become a network of components stitched together, a mass greater than the sum of its parts.

Any form of representation brings with it a set of rules that obstruct or aid in delivering information to the viewer and this is true for *Welcome to Albuquerque*. The semi-transparent Plexiglas material that has a 1/8" depth of materiality for fabrication as per laser cutter requirements works to hinder the translation from image to eye, and this in combination with the 2 mill thickness of the standard transparencies that are home to the actual photographic information creates patterns that regulate what at first appears to be a random landscape of housing modifications. What this tectonic system supports it taints as well. As an armature to allow transparency, the system also mandates a grid of classification much like a 19th century insect collection. Due to the thickness of these combined layers, and from the viewer's ability to see diagonally through this ensemble of lines, tones and external reflections, the viewer perceives a collaged interference that is perceptually as interesting as the analysis itself. In a way, the Plexiglas layers evoke both apparitions and precise lens-like views.

Rather than using traditional site analysis to create an almost Platonic form of site and building understanding, representation by a form of abstraction that codifies time can yield a more resonant alternate reading. *Welcome to Albuquerque* defines site via its reduction to fragments. Site can then read as a complex texture created over time and not just property lines or real estate dollars. This reading is not fixed, frozen, or tied to a direct operational principle. Rather, this form of representation opens up play between isolated objects so as to allow outsiders (those not privy to witnessing change over the 40-50 years encapsulated in these real estate photos) to witness change that is tangible and corporeal. The transformation of a city/suburban block is the transmutation of lead-like common materials/systems into the alchemical gold of a potential architecture or spatial field. In his seminal work *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that the; "...experience that determines spatial practices later develops its effects, proliferates, floods private and public spaces, undoes their readable surfaces, and creates within the planned city a "metaphorical" or mobile city." (de Certeau, 1984, p. 110) Here de Certeau acknowledges the transference of power by which the individual can subvert the architect's intention that Bataille and Hollier have also written about as they take their stance against architecture. Kandisky understood the implications of this urban reversal of power when he outlined its positive repercussions writing about the city; "... built according to all the rules of architecture and then suddenly shaken by a force that defies all calculation." (as cited in de Certeau, 1984, p. 110) In the end the aftermath of representational interpretation can be transformative in terms of a re-defined spatial condition for the city that might make visible a previously un-championed and idiosyncratic hidden history. Ultimately, when studying conditions like that of the suburban Albuquerque, one begins to discern a growing appreciation for "clunky" add-on elements that are in reality the very items that architects would eliminate. Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown write; "*The critics of suburban iconography attribute its infinite combinations of standard ornamental elements to clutter rather than variety. This can be dismissed...as the insensitivity of the uninitiated. To call these artifacts of our culture crude is to*

be mistaken concerning scale.” (Venturi et al, 1977, p. 154) When seen through the lens of analysis/representation as visual traces of a homeowner’s care and attention, the careful observer recognizes the potential for the celebration of these often over-scale, ill-placed and sometimes daring acrobatic maneuvers. While tiptoeing perilously close to Venturi’s celebration of the everyday, these maneuvers seem a likely foreshadowing for the remaking of aging homes and infrastructure alike; an identity that exists in as a state of becoming.



Fig. 6 Spatial Possibilities

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