

Divestitures

The collector is the true resident of the interior. He makes his concern the transfiguration of things. To him falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character by taking possession of them . . .

--Walter Benjamin

From the Bay of San Pedro ports to the railheads of downtown Los Angeles runs a deeply engraved trace of urban “dwelling” known as the Alameda Corridor. Opened in 2002, the 20-mile-long Alameda Corridor is a state-of-the-art rail freight line that connects the port complex to warehousing facilities, distribution nodes, and freight forwarders throughout the metropolitan region. The centerpiece of the Alameda Corridor is its Mid-Corridor Trench, a below-grade railway that is 10 miles long, 30 feet deep, and 50 feet wide.¹ The trench is an extreme example of the impact of globalization on local communities, as it seeks to mitigate the effects of pollution, noise, and transportation conflicts (such as auto accidents) that arise when goods move through an urban area. As Saskia Sassen observes, “Major cities in the highly developed world are the terrain where a multiplicity of globalization processes assume concrete, localized form.”²

Ranked first in the U.S. and third in the world for containerized distribution, Los Angeles has become the nation’s shipping esophagus. The trench swallows the greatest volume of goods on the east side of the Pacific Ocean and redistributes consumer “content” via rail, truck, and air to the rest of the country. Poised between the collective production of the Pacific Rim and the hyperconsumption of the United States, Los Angeles is a place of divestiture, where goods are stripped of their manufacturing past and prepared for individual retail fantasy. As a result, L.A. is a magnificently empty city—a collection of container buildings filled with objects in transit. This content *de passage* shapes urban form in Los Angeles, just as the 1916 Zoning Law gave Manhattan its formal expression—its shape.³ If Manhattan’s “fullness” can be represented via a two-point perspective articulating the volumes of its many skyscrapers, Los Angeles’s “emptiness” can then be described as an infinite series of one-point interior

1. See Alameda Corridor Transportation Authority website (www.acta.org/newsroom/factsheet.htm).

2. Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and its Discontents* (New York: The New Press, 1998), xxv.

3. See Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (Rotterdam: O10, 1994).



THE MID-CORRIDOR TRENCH.
PHOTO COURTESY ALAMEDA CORRIDOR
TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY.

perspectives, of narrative interior spaces, bare except for the objects collected there. In *Delirious New York*, Rem Koolhaas appropriated Salvador Dali's "paranoid critical method" to force a Freudian analysis depicting Manhattan as an expression of male sexual drive or "congestion," carefully threading each piece of historical documentation back to this central hypothesis. By engaging in a similar game of critical paranoia, the shape of Los Angeles can be characterized by Jacques Lacan's analysis of Freud and the principle of lack. As embodied by its port complex, rail corridor, warehouses, and retail distribution centers, Los Angeles presents its own retroactive manifesto of form, resulting not from congestion but from the decongestion of objects that reaggregate the *corps morcelé*, or fragmented body, in which psychological lack and inadequacy are medicated with objects.⁴

RETAIL FRONT, ARCHITECTURAL BACK

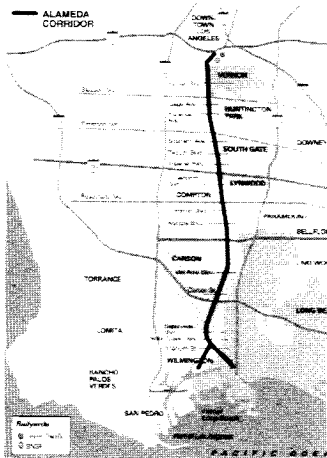
For many years, cultural theorists have puzzled over the nature and social impact of exhibitory spaces, from world's fairs and conventions to department stores, museums, and shopping malls.⁵ This inquiry has focused on what William Mitchell calls the "retail front" as opposed to the "architectural back."⁶ The seamless and generally hidden connections between each element of the intermodal supply chain (a series of interconnected transportation modes that accommodate a standard shipping container) belie a logistically sophisticated infrastructure or "back," not so much designed as achieved. The narrowing margin between freight forwarders, entities that repackage and distribute goods, and retail outlets has become so slim that it threatens to undo 150 years of what Jean Baudrillard once observed as advertising's (in this case, retail display's) "careful omission of objective processes and the social history of objects . . . making it easier, by means of the imagination as a social agency, to impose the *real* order of production and exploitation."⁷ As retail environments become less ritualistic, the consumer is confronted with the anonymous realities of production. As Mitchell observes, the future of the retail front is uncertain as e-commerce becomes more ubiquitous, compressing what in architecture has become little more than a six-inch layer of stucco, signage, and graphics into a pixelated interface of images. An example of this compression of architecture's scope can be seen in the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, designed by Jon Jerde under contract to Mirage Resorts. According to this contract, the architect was only responsible for the project from "the brown coat [of stucco] out," thereby ensuring that Mirage's proprietary casino plans

4. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits I* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).

5. See Neil Harris, "Museums, Merchandising and Popular Taste: the struggle for influence," in *Material Culture and the Study of American Life* (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 1978), 140-174.

6. William Mitchell, "Transarchitectures Symposium" (lecture, Getty Center, Los Angeles, June 6, 1998).

7. Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, trans. James Benedict (London: Verso, 1996), 175.



THE ALAMEDA CORRIDOR. IMAGE COURTESY ALAMEDA CORRIDOR TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY.

and security layout would remain intact. This type of specialized service contract has become common in architecture, and not only in the retail-entertainment-casino complex. For example, warehousing has also become a building science unto itself, requiring not only a complicated logistical analysis of materials handling and high-density storage but also the construction of million-square-foot facilities, spread like thin pancakes across huge parcels of cheap and accessible land. In this instance, an architect is typically liable for the design of life-safety elements and accessibility but is rarely asked to consider the cultural or aesthetic implications of the building in its context. This thinning of architecture is the principle means by which the consumer ultimately comes into contact with the “architectural back.”

Beyond the literal thinning of the architectural envelope, other processes contribute to the confrontation of the consumer with the modes of production and distribution. The fragmentation of retail distribution into smaller units of delivery polarizes the means of distribution between small-scale “convenience nodes” (on-line and print catalogues terminating with a home delivery) and large-scale warehousing and distribution centers, which are only a half-step removed from the shopping centers that draw upon their inventory. In these cases, the architecture of the retail front is in fact a software “architecture” in which the object of desire floats upon a pixelated screen in a kind of consumer ether, not unlike the first mail-order catalogue published in the U.S. by Montgomery Ward in 1872. The use of virtual reality environments to seduce the consumer stems from the relationship that exists between the image (either in print or on screen) and the virtual self, continually reflected by advertising’s fragmented images of the other.

The impact of the movement of containerized goods on the urban environment is now so severe in Los Angeles that it is no longer a socio-psychological question of status consumption, individual identity, or consumer culture. The Alameda Corridor, especially the trench, is an enormous yet discrete infrastructural element: a big piece of the architectural back. A result of the city’s bizarre geography, whereby the Port of Los Angeles is actually 20 miles south of the downtown area, the corridor is a thin strip of land acquired solely to facilitate the movement of goods from the port to the city – a modern redux of the ancient city of Athens and its port city Piraeus, connected by fortified walls in 850 B.C.⁸ The corridor is the visible, audible, and olfactory embodiment of the depletion of the world’s resources. Eleven million containers per year coursing through a major metropolis designed specifically to

8. Southern California Association of Governments. “Goods Movement Program White Paper.” January, 2002.



THE BAY OF SAN PEDRO.

PHOTO: LANE BARDEN © 2003.

9. The *Los Angeles Times* regularly publishes articles regarding noise, air pollution, and extant lawsuits in the various communities along the major goods movement routes.

accommodate their movement, each 8 x 8 x 40-foot unit capable of carrying 20,000 blouses, 16,500 boxes of running shoes, 132,000 videotapes, or one million Lego pieces, leave in their wake unsustainable levels of air and noise pollution and the traces of international labor violations.⁹ This alliance between individual lack and collective production has created an urban artifact at a scale never before undertaken by the federal government, costing \$2.4 billion over 16 years of planning and five years of construction. While European and Asian ports focus on warehousing facilities located in the port (for example, Rotterdam's "Distriparks"), Los Angeles continues to invest in the swift movement of goods away from the port to inland warehousing and transportation facilities.

WAREHOUSING AND DISTRIBUTION

Codified into mundane and cryptic diagrams of truck turning radii and standard dock dimensions, architecture's relationship to the traces left behind by the movement of consumer goods is ambiguous, but it could be described as primarily intermodal. For example, the antiromantic vision of two truck trailers affixed to the back wall of a Target store along a snow-swept highway in Minnesota is so ubiquitous and bland that it has become virtually invisible. Poised at the openings of two adjacent loading docks, the trailers span the distance between their own supporting legs and the raised floors of the interior



CONTAINER SHIP IN PORT.
PHOTO: DEBORAH RICHMOND.

service bays. The sectional dimensions of the containers correspond precisely to those of the loading dock apertures, the slight differences mitigated by a rubber gasket, which also serves as a weather seal. Intermodalism as a form of Heideggerian “dwelling” leaves traces on buildings of all types as they plug into a network of movement quite distinct from that of the human body.

While the trench certainly represents an epiphanic crystallization of the consumer paradigm, it feeds a pervasive complex of distribution areas. The airports of metropolitan Los Angeles form a cargo archipelago served by rail and truck traffic alike. Warehousing and distribution nodes coalesce near the airports, including “Cargo City” by Los Angeles International Airport and the Home Shopping Network’s 818,000-square-foot warehouse, located near Ontario International Airport.¹⁰ These, and other recently completed warehouse and distribution facilities adjacent to LAX and ONT, were responsible for roughly 80 percent of all air cargo handled in the region.¹¹ High-density storage systems and other materials handling problems pose questions for the design of these buildings. The architectural back – both distribution facilities and the retail outlets such as Ontario Mills near ONT – supplants the retail front as the locus of architectural inquiry and design. As architects continue to squeeze water from the stone of the retail-entertainment-casino

10. Gary Bastien, “Architect’s Big Boxes Getting Bigger,” AIA Online (<http://www.e-architect.com/news/bastien.asp>), April 17, 2001.

11. Los Angeles World Airports website (<http://www.lawa.org>), June, 2004:

"Ontario International Airport (ONT) is the center of a rapidly developing freight movement system which includes the airport, two rail lines, four major freeways and an expanding network of freight forwarders. ONT is located less than 50 miles from Los Angeles and Long Beach Harbors, and is ideally situated to be an airfreight center for Pacific Rim and European air cargo."

In 2000, more than 67.3 million people traveled through LAX. Its ever expanding air cargo system handled more than 2.2 million tons of goods. International freight was nearly 50 percent of this total. Convenient location, modern facilities, and superior sea/air/land connections have led to LAX's designation as a world-class airport. LAX handled 75 percent of the passengers, 78 percent of the air cargo, and 100 percent of the international passengers and cargo traffic in the five-county Southern California region."

12. Baudrillard, *System*, 175.

13. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century (1935)," in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 9.

complex, with its formulas and myriad signage, streetscape, and graphic consultants, design is shifting toward the backs of these buildings, where issues of circulation, connection, structure, and material offer rich opportunities for architectural innovation.

SUPPLY CHAIN

Baudrillard may not have foreseen contemporary supply chain logistics in 1968, when he set forth his *System of Objects* as a semiological exposé of commodity culture. Nevertheless, as he writes, "Whether advertising is organized around the image of the mother or the need to play, it always aims to foster *the same tendency to regress to a point anterior to real social processes*, such as work, production, the market, or value, which might disturb this magical integration: the object has not been bought by you, you have voiced a desire for it and all the engineers, technicians, and so on, have worked to gratify your desire."¹² The supply chain acts as a regressive armature, whereby the American consumer represses the object's history of production – such as sweatshop labor in China – in order to participate like an innocent child in the pleasure of abundance, without the messy political confusion of shady Asian subcontractors, farcical factory inspections, outsourcing, and American corporate exploitation. From Southeast Asia, objects are packed into container ships and loaded onto post-Panamax vessels, so named for their inability to fit through the Panama Canal. These ships, as tall as a 15-story building and nearly 1,000 feet long, arrive in West Coast ports like bloated corpses, less the few stray containers that typically fall off on the way across the ocean. Containers are unloaded using special cranes that span an 11-lane freeway, placed on trucks or trains, aspirated into the region's freeways and train lanes, and plugged into big-box retailers where their contents are finally disgorged. After a brief moment of retail seduction on the selling floor, the object or possession is loaded into the back of an SUV and deposited in the home. The scale of the operation, both in terms of time and space, occludes the consumer's visceral comprehension of the human privation that allows the object to be cheap and plentiful. As Benjamin so presciently observed:

*The private individual, who in the office has to deal with reality, needs the domestic interior to sustain him in his illusions. . . . In the formation of his private environment, both commercial and social considerations are kept out. From this arise the phantasmagorias of the interior – which, for the private man, represents the universe. In the interior, he brings together the far away and the long ago. His living room is a box in the theater of the world.*¹³



In the end, the consumer takes possession of the object and a new discourse begins. Finally liberated of its arduous past, the object is not packed but arranged either on the body or in the home and enters into the Lacanian choreography of the self and the other.

Baudrillard's discussion of regression, gratification, and desire traces an ideological trajectory back to Lacan through Roland Barthes, arguably the first semiotician of material culture and an early student of Lacan's seminars. According to Lacan, the child identifies itself in the treatment it receives from its caregivers before it ever identifies itself as a finite body recognizable in the mirror, usually at 18 months. Lacan offers this observation from clinical practice as evidence of the mutable nonexistence of the "self," which is in fact a construct of the other (other people, other objects). The inability to aggregate the self completely is a human condition that, in some of Lacan's clinical examples, finds expression as nightmares about body parts or children decapitating their dolls as a form of play. This fragmented body represents the inescapable consciousness of unachieved identity (lack), which is the source of human desire for the other (other people, other objects).¹⁴ The movement of consumer goods can thus be seen as an unprecedented deployment of others toward selves – a kind of collective apparatus for the gratification of individual lack. By divesting the object of its past (its production and distribution), the mechanisms of advertising elaborated by Baudrillard allow the consumer to fantasize about a moment anterior to

¹⁴. See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits I*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966).



THE INTERIORS OF DIVESTITURE.
CLOCKWISE, FROM UPPER LEFT:
BIG-BOX STORE, PHOTO COURTESY
IMAGEBANK; ALAMEDA MID-
CORRIDOR TRENCH, PHOTO COUR-
TESY THE ALAMEDA CORRIDOR
TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY;
HOME SHOPPING NETWORK
WAREHOUSE, PHOTO COURTESY
BASTIEN ARCHITECTS.



the consciousness of the “fragmented body,” through the fleeting gratification of finite desires that momentarily reaggregate the self around the new possession. The one-point interior perspective mentioned above, unlike the two-point perspective, confines space around a single, virtual point. Like individual identity, the vanishing point symbolizes a static perfection that does not exist. The vanishing point is, in this sense, the subject of the one-point interior perspective, itself empty but for the virtual object that is the basis of its construction. This is why, as a visualization technique, it suits a city like Los Angeles, itself a loose aggregation of virtual subjects inhabiting a primordial emptiness that comes into focus only when they stop moving.

DIVESTITURES

When objects come to rest, they must be divested of the traces of mass production. This is the purpose of intermediary environments, from warehouse distributors and freight forwarders to museums and shopping malls. Without these intermediaries, mass production risks confronting the individual in the home. At the onset of the Industrial Revolution, “The place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work.”¹⁵ As Federal Express and UPS trucks now circle residential neighborhoods with the regularity of ice cream trucks, the individual’s interaction with the river of goods passing through the city becomes complex. Los Angeles provides an overview of this process of divestiture. Goods travel along a corridor highly specialized to their movement, connecting them to places of distribution. They are then packaged and presented in various states of divestiture, becoming points on a continuum of privilege from the transparency of Wal-Mart to the opacity of

15. Benjamin, “Paris,” 8.

Prada. The illusion of power – of exploiting rather than being exploited by the processes of production – operates according to the Lacanian principle of psychological lack that has long been used to explicate the psychology of everyday spaces but only recently to understand larger processes of urbanization.

In a 15th-century manuscript of the medieval morality play, *The Castle of Perseverance*, performance instructions required that virtues and vices be manifest not only in the actors but also in physical structures; in this way, allegorical meaning was not only personified but architecturally constructed. In the play, the character Covetous ultimately entraps the human soul and necessitates its redemption. Los Angeles presents its own morality play, in which Covetous is once again personified and constructed, this time as an urban artifact of great scale and magnitude, the prolonged use of which threatens the stability of our physical existence. Each piece of the supply chain, from the ports of San Pedro through the Alameda Corridor and onto the outlets of Ontario, forms an armature of collective lack and a platform for the self-medication of fragmented identity with consumer goods.

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