

Manual of Suburban Subversion

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Seeing Suburbia (and forgetting its name) ¹

Speaking to the graduating class of Kenyon College in 2005, David Foster Wallace defined the value of education as the ability to choose how one sees the world. “It is within your power,” he suggests, “to experience a crowded, loud, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars.”² The scene that Wallace was describing takes place in a supermarket, likely one housed within a typical big box structure, over-exposed with harsh fluorescent lighting. In Wallace’s parable, the point is to empathize with the clerks and fellow customers in the crowded supermarket who at first seem intolerable, but may, in fact, be experiencing hardships of their own. But what if this empathetic gaze were extended to the building typology that the scene takes place within? What if one consciously chose to see the oft-maligned architecture of American suburbia not as an emblem of consumerism’s unsustainable reliance on excess and waste, but instead, as an untapped inventory

of architectural ideas and tectonics that could potentially be redirected towards different ends.

The *Manual of Suburban Subversion* presented here is a speculative series of design experiments that playfully manipulate and misuse the tectonic composition of big boxes, gas stations, and strip malls to develop alternative visions for these familiar building types. While numerous postmodern architects—from Robert Venturi to James Wines to Charles Moore—ventured into suburbia and proposed their own variations on these typologies, their projects largely accepted the basic premises of American consumption and, therefore, only engaged in a superficial “dressing up” of these suburban forms.³ By contrast, the subversive exercises catalogued within this manual disregard the intended use of these suburban typologies and, instead, focus on their underlying compositional structures.



Figure 1. *Strip Mall Exquisite Corpse*. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Patrick Pineda.

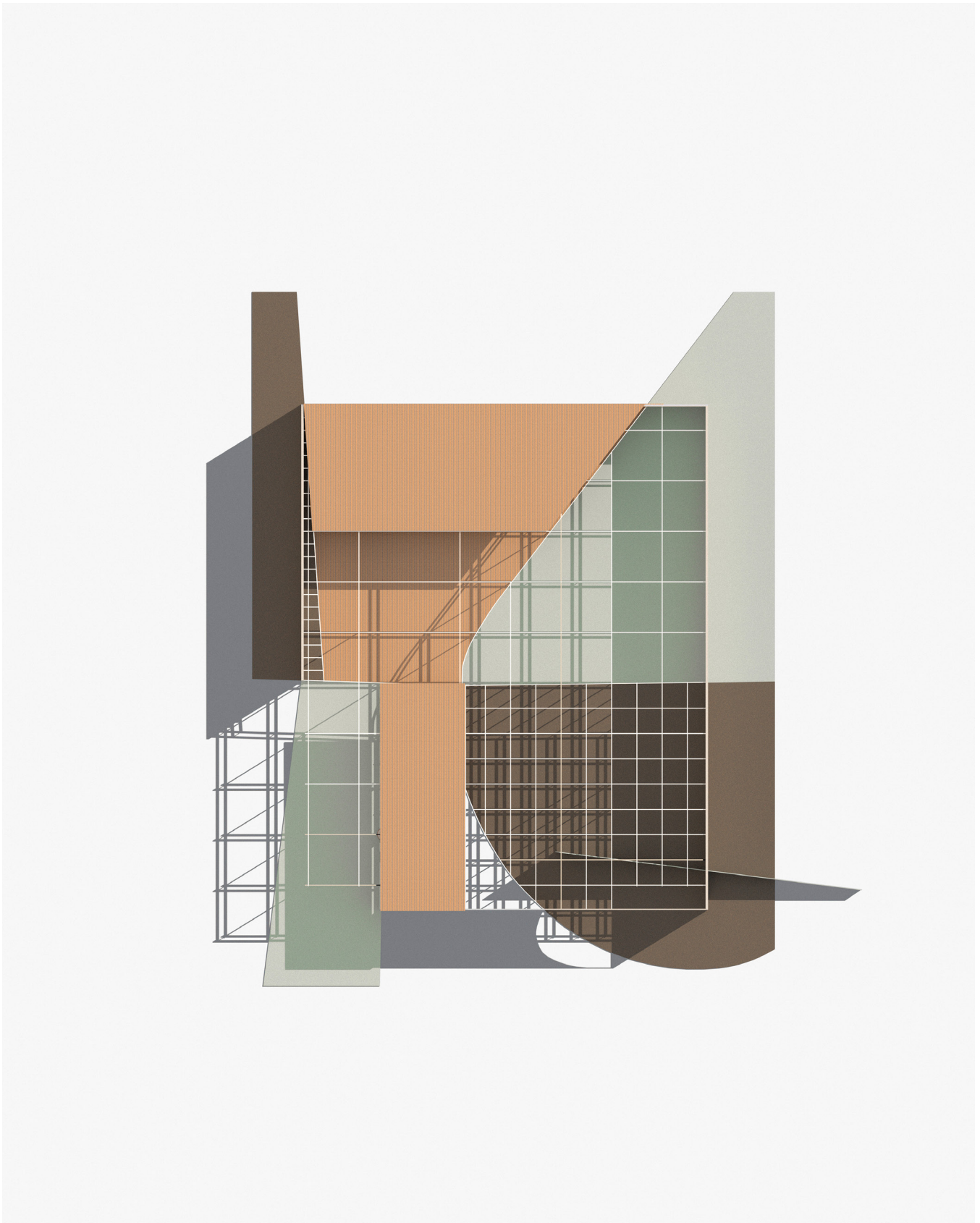


Figure 2. *Big Box* (After Bernhard Buhmann). Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Geneva Sinkula.

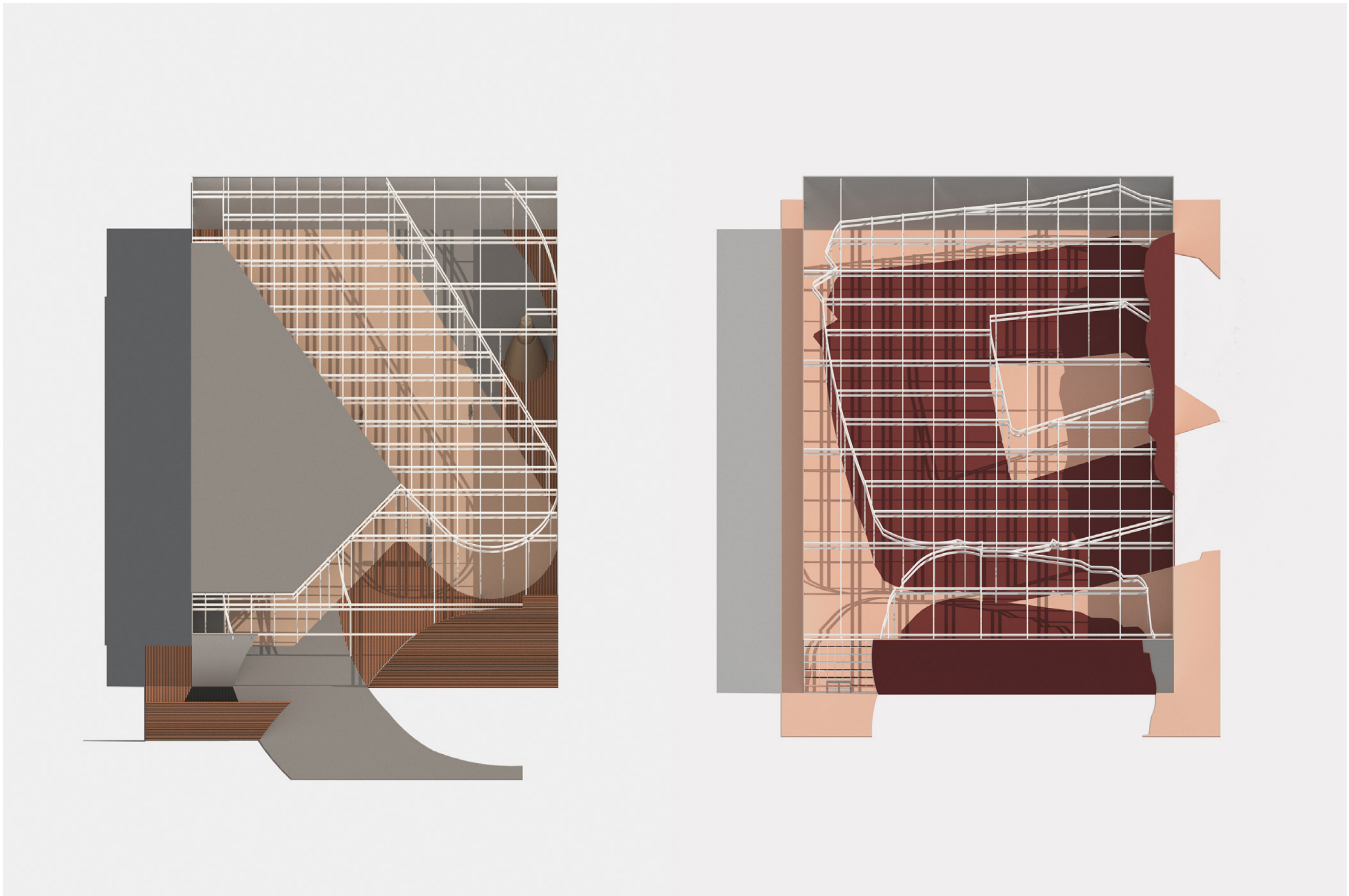


Figure 3. *Big Box (After Anthony Falcetta)*, left, *Big Box (After Yvonne Robert)*, right. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Geneva Sinkula.

Suburban Subversion 1: How to Paint a Big Box

Despite the waves of indignation that big box stores tend to arouse in sanctimonious circles of design, one must admit that there is something beautiful, even poetic, about this familiar building typology. A pure embodiment of market demands, the big box transforms its low-cost material pallet of steel, concrete block, and linoleum into an immediately recognizable form: a simple box with three ordinary walls and a conspicuous front façade that effectively operates as a billboard for the retail tenant. Even as one decries the big box's associations with consumerism and sprawl, one must marvel at the rigorous efficiency of its structural grid and the impressive scale of its interior volume that is available all at once to the spectator's gaze. I, for one, cannot go into a Costco or Wal-Mart without thinking of the expansive space depicted in the collaged interior perspective of Mies van der Rohe's 1954 Convention Hall project. But what if the expressive character of the big box façade was carried through to the interior? What if the structural frame itself were conceived as an exercise in figural composition? *Suburban Subversion No. 1* takes up these hypothetical prompts by projecting a series of contemporary abstract paintings onto the big box typology and then using their figural compositions to alter the structure, organization, and enclosure of the big box.

Suburban Subversion 2: How to Knoll a Gas Station

Eschewing the conventional unity of architectural form, gas stations manifest through the arrangement of discrete elements, which viewers move around, amongst, and underneath. The basic components of a gas station ensemble are the canopy, the pump stations, the convenience store, and, of course, the oversized sign that displays the real-time, market value of extracted fossil fuels. More often than not, additional components populate the arrangement: a drive-through car wash, a rack of propane tanks, self-service air and vacuum stations, and so on. The placement, adjacencies, and spacing amongst these various elements of a gas station are no less considered than the arrangement of elements in Japanese Zen garden. Moreover, the controlled repetition of these compositions has been so perfected that when one visits a gas station for the first time, there is an eerie sense of familiarity. But what if the technique of "knolling," popularized by contemporary artist, Tom Sachs, were applied to the various parts of a gas station? What new compositions might arise if these inventoried parts are recombined with no consideration for their intended function? *Suburban Subversion No. 2* speculates on these part-to-whole questions by cataloguing the individual elements of a gas station and then reconfiguring them into new assemblages.

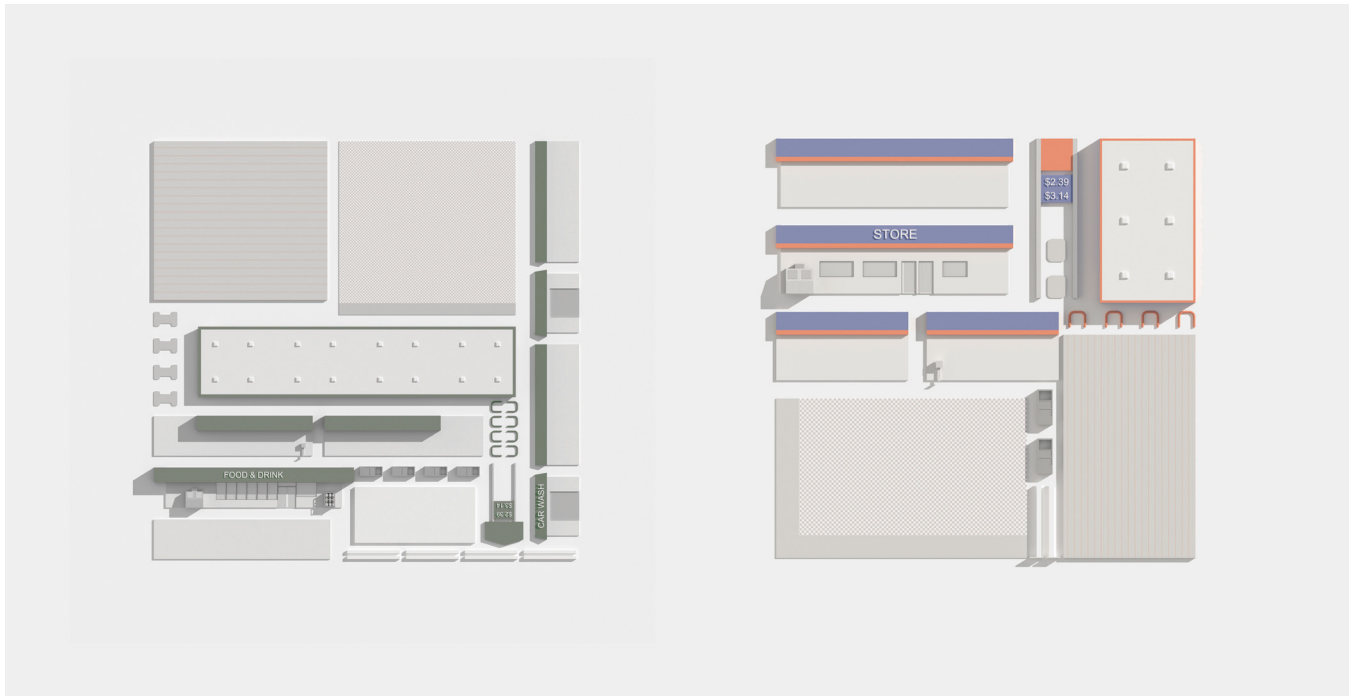


Figure 4. *Gas Station Knolling*. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Austin Riggins.

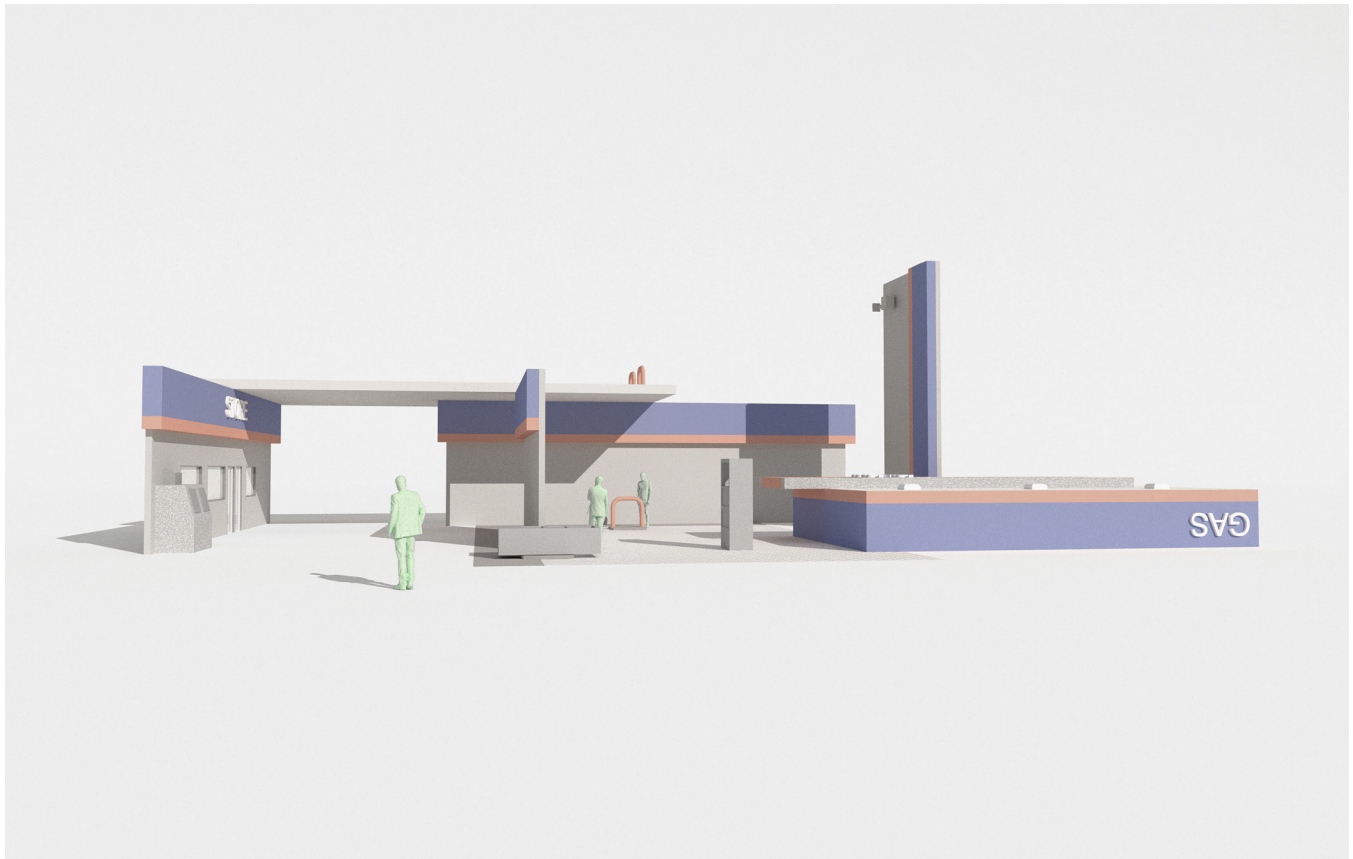


Figure 5. *Gas Station Assemblage*. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Austin Riggins.

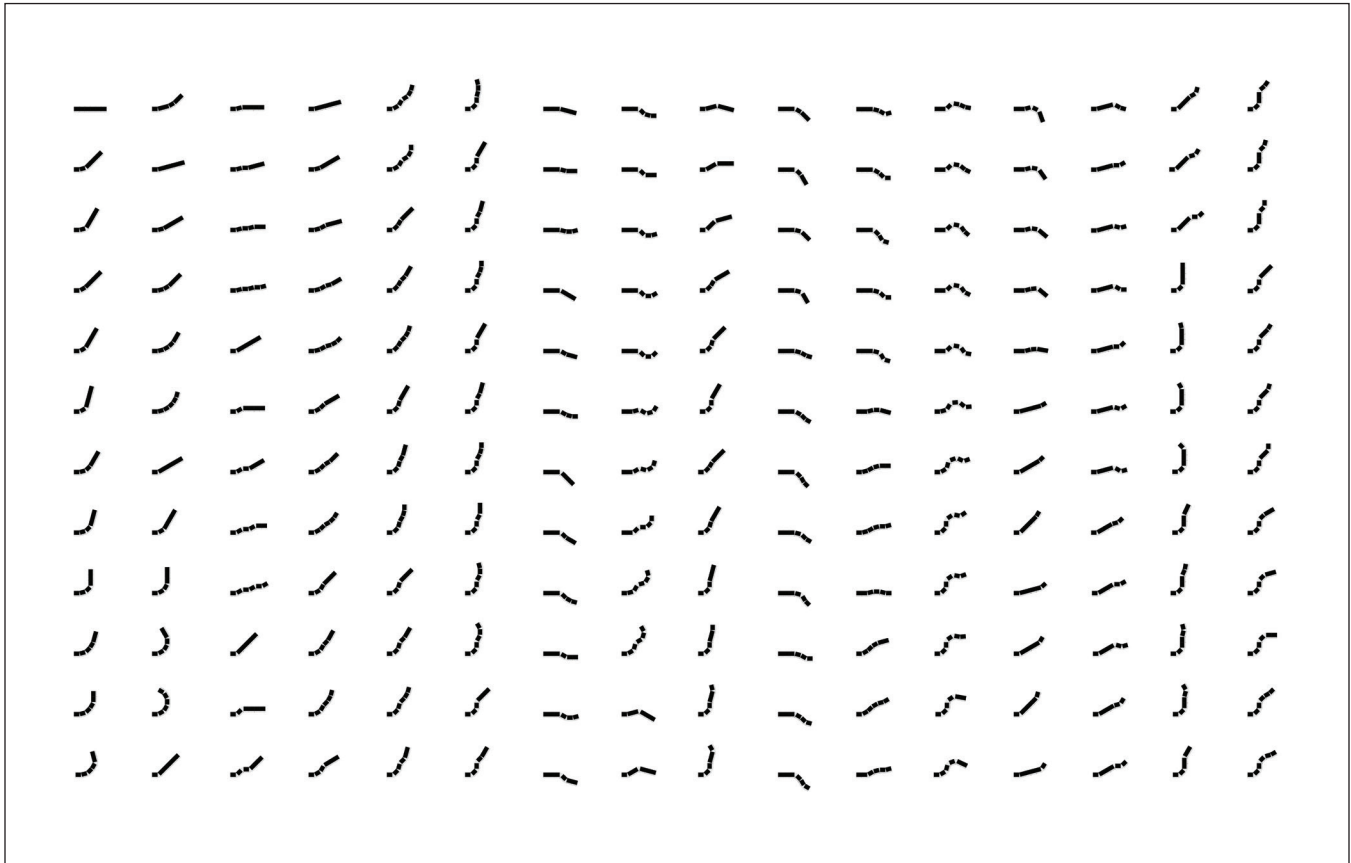


Figure 6. *Strip Mall Mutations*. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Patrick Pineda.



Figure 7. *Reconfigurable Strip Mall Toy*. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Patrick Pineda.

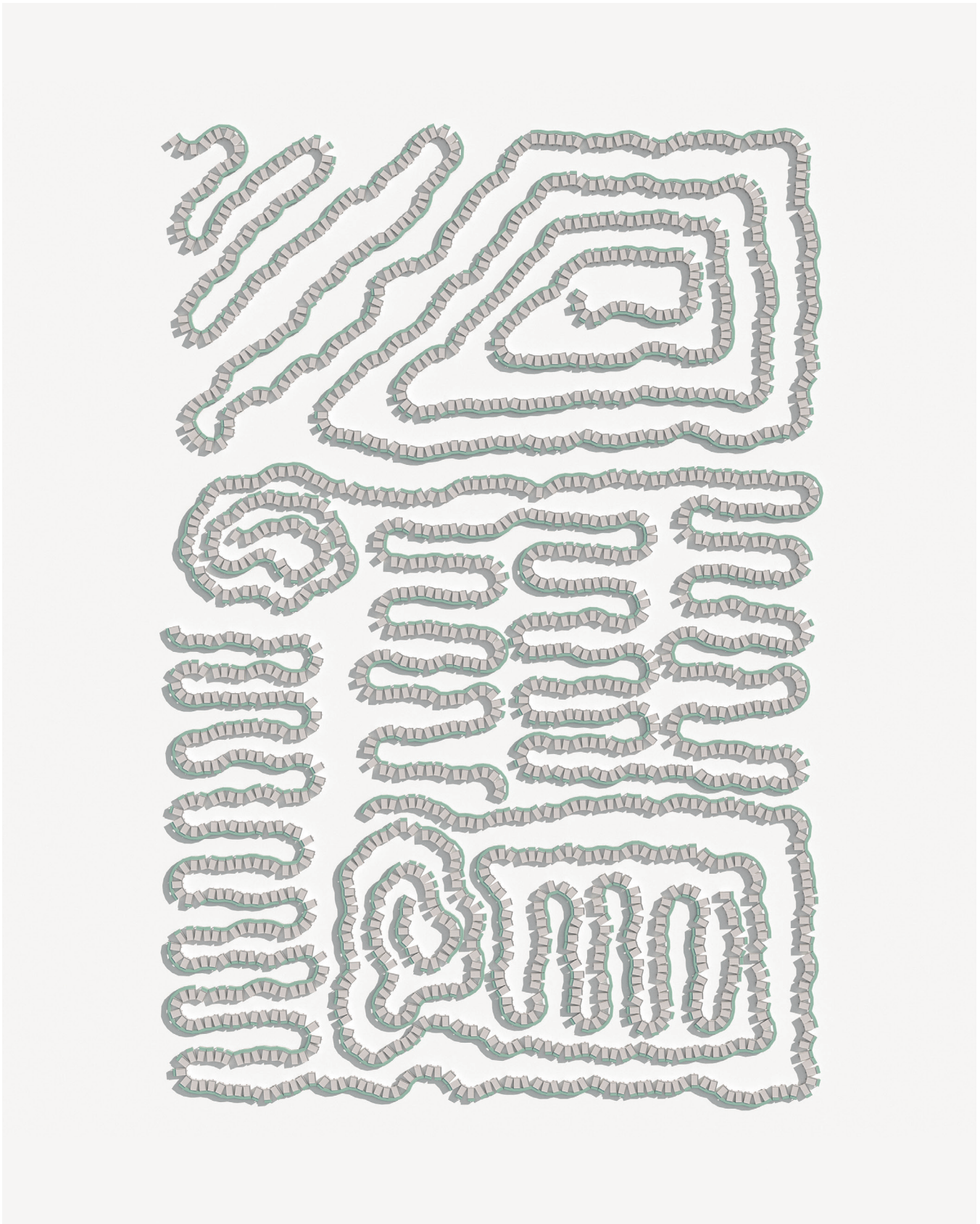


Figure 8. *Strip Mall Squiggles*. Credit: Zachary Tate Porter, Austin Riggins & Patrick Pineda.

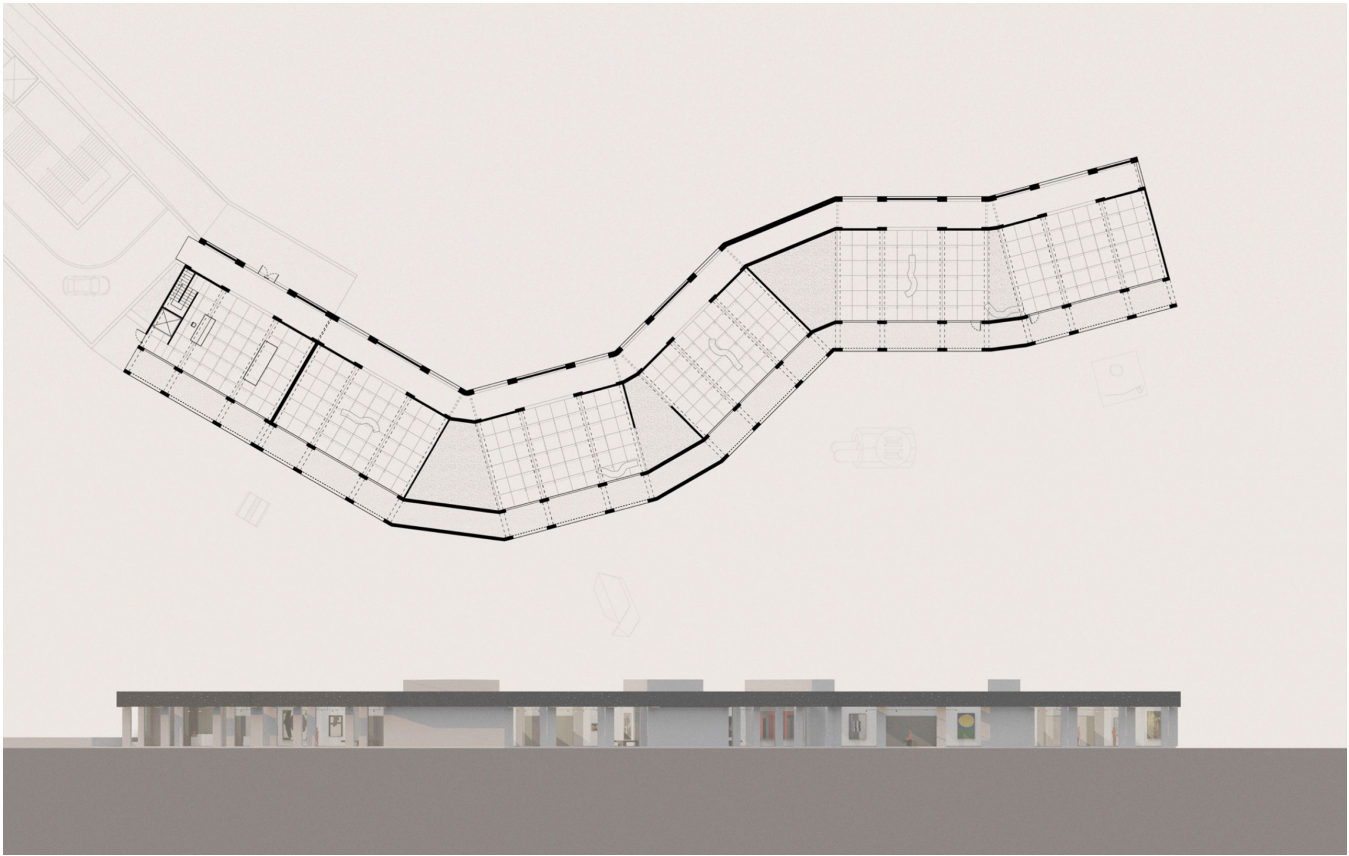


Figure 9. Museum for a Prairie Landscape (After a Strip Mall). Credit: Zachary Tate Porter & Patrick Pineda.

Suburban Subversion 3: How to Wiggle a Strip Mall

The sublime qualities of strip malls derive from their relentless pursuit of linear expansion. Although they are typically subdivided to accommodate individual retailers, the exact length of any given strip mall is conceptually infinite. Such a linear typology placed on a flattened ground—as most suburban sites are reduced to a *tabula rasa* prior to construction—has the effect of doubling the horizon. In this sense, strip malls often read less as figural objects and more as rhythmic datums within the suburban landscape. While there are countless stylistic, material, and programmatic variations amongst strip malls in the wild, they all share a common typological structure: a single-story bar with a clearly defined front and back, subdivided into segments of equal length. But what if these individual segments of a strip mall line were hinged at connecting corners, allowing each segment to rotate independently of the others at increments of fifteen, thirty, and forty-five degrees? *Suburban Subversion No. 3* speculates on this possibility, creating strip mall mutations that wiggle and twist into gestural configurations.

Abstracting Sprawl

Speaking to *NME* magazine in July of 2010, Win Butler, lead singer of the indie-rock band Arcade Fire, described the group's most recent release as "neither a love letter to, nor an indictment of, the suburbs." Instead, Butler described the

album (appropriately titled, *The Suburbs*) as "a letter from the suburbs."⁴ In a similar manner, the *Manual of Suburban Subversion* aims to engage with suburban forms without resorting to moralistic censure or naïve valorization. The projects presented here simply acknowledge that suburban spaces exist, and therefore, deserve the same attention afforded to works of "high design." And, if we choose to look at them in a particular way—perhaps through a lens of typological abstraction—then we might even find that this stock of familiar building typologies offers potential value to the discipline: an inventory of ideas that might one day be mobilized towards more deserving ends than American consumption. At the very least, this exercise might allow us to see our everyday surroundings with a heightened level of criticality and rigor.

ENDNOTES

1. The reference is to Paul Valéry's quip that "seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees."
2. David Foster Wallace, "This is Water." Commencement Speech, Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio, May 25, 2005.
3. See *Buildings for Best Products*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1979.
4. "This Week's New Music Releases". *NME*. June 27, 2011.