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Excess Capacity: Shared Space Possibilities in an E-Commercial Suburbia

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For all of documented history, commercial and social interactions have coincided in the same spaces, largely because commercial transactions have always required that people physically meet, verbally communicate, and exchange physical property. E-commerce is the first platform that allows commercial transactions to occur completely distinct from social, and this could significantly shape the future of suburban social spaces. As the shift continues away from the physical shopping experience and toward a completely digital one, my question is, what is the nature of the spaces in which we will find social fulfillment?

This project explores possibilities presented by these entities: food and entertainment, e-commercial, delivery, housing, and virtual reality entities. The exploration seeks to re-envision shared spaces and discover opportunities for new design typologies.

Through these explorations, an underlying agenda asserts that designers can shape an evolving typology through proactive design. This project is an anticipatory study of the possibilities designers can act upon as a counter-option to responsive design.
The rise of global e-commerce is driving a model involving centralization of parcel network through retailer replenishment and consolidation of deliveries by suppliers or wholesalers. The shift away from social shopping is being driven by the growth of e-commerce, with the weighted average population density of warehouses increasing over time. The evolution of retail logistics shows a shift from physical stores to online shopping, with facilities like Amazon Fulfillment Centers playing a key role in the logistics of goods. The Knox County case study illustrates the impact of e-commerce on retail distribution centers, with facilities like Amazon's warehouse in Kentucky. Future shared spaces and spatial influence on consumer outcomes are also highlighted in the diagram.
Structures formerly housing shopping and retail entities find new tenants seeking to meet evolving local demands. Dining, recreation, and performance venues provide services rooted in experience. The reinterpretation of existing conditions by shifting, subtracting, adding, and manipulating mall typologies presents unique and evolving opportunities for designers.

Similar to the Strip Mall Reinterpreted, opportunities for new typologies exist in the formal manipulation of enclosed suburban malls. Former marketing-driven designs are less suitable for their new use as experience-focused shared space.

Coffee shops commonly feature ample seating and lounge space, ideal for meeting with friends, working from a laptop, or reading a book. As social shopping decreases, the multi-purpose lounge areas in coffee shops and cafes could become more heavily demanded. The craft coffee becomes a day pass to use the space.
Opportunities for optimization and smaller footprint occur with density. A scenario of optimized fulfillment folds living, office, shared social, and manufacturing spaces into the existing fulfillment warehouse, now able to meet nearly every type of demand. Opportunities for a variety of new design typologies occur in this unprecedented condition.

Where economic opportunity or governmental regulation apply, the portion of property providing new shared spaces could be the current location of break rooms which are distributed throughout the warehouse.

E-commerce displaces social activity but doesn’t currently provide an alternative outlet. One possibility is that, whether by economic choice or government regulation, the fulfillment center could provide a percentage of its footprint or sections of underutilized rooftop space for public use.
The dependence on e-commerce inherently implies a dependence on the delivery of product to the consumer’s doorstep. The decrease in consumer transit and expectation of instant gratification could create opportunities for designing deliverable spaces, which could be manifested in temporary structures, mobile units, and yet undefined typologies. The decrease in consumer transit due to the convenience of delivery services could result in a dependence upon the home to provide shared space. The potential for densifying suburban housing presents new hybrid design opportunities. Virtual spaces are shared through multiplayer servers and same network connection. People find social fulfillment digitally, negating the need for physical shared spaces. The opportunities for design are endless, yet never realized physically.