Case Studies in the Design and Appropriation of Space in Surface Parking Lots

Abstract:

Parking lots are often ignored, blind spots in the American cultural imaginary. They can be considered urban lost space or voids in the urban fabric. It is estimated that our cars are parked 95% of the time and that there are roughly 3 parking spaces for every registered car in America. Surface parking consumes an estimated 4,360 square miles in the United States. There are dire cultural and environmental consequences to covering so much surface area with pavement. Three research components guide the development of this thesis project: the sociological aspects of parking lots and garages, how these sociological aspects are represented in popular culture, and how these uncanny spaces have been addressed in contemporary art and architecture practice. The sociological aspects of parking lots serve as a basis for the discussion. These include historical, environmental, safety, and psychological factors. Popular culture, songs, television shows, and movies, reveal hidden psychological phenomena and help establish the transformation of parking lots from space to place. Research on contemporary art and architecture practice informs what problems have been addressed conceptually and aesthetically, but it also reveals what still needs attention in order to reimagine and rethink these types of spaces for the twenty-first century. These three research components are then filtered into three design strategies: (1) the architectural uncanny, (2) temporality, and (3) rendering space into place. The architectural uncanny is a term borrowed from the architectural historian Anthony Vidler who identified the “uncanny” as the primary strategy that modern and contemporary architecture took from Surrealism. All three of these concepts deal with ideas of anxiety, temporality, impatience, and (dis)comfort. In addition to the sociological and historical research I also conducted a series of observations of
human behavior in parking lots in and around Charlotte, which were recorded and filtered through the lens of previous research and contemporary artistic and architectural precedents. The combination of the observations and the research guide the creation of images. These images seek to draw attention to the spaces by altering them to make them unfamiliar thereby instigating a creative reimagination of mundane spaces. The architectural uncanny is explored with additive and subtractive methods, asking how small an intervention can be made to a space to de-familiarize it, generate anxiety, and provoke critical questions. Methods of quick sketching, layering, erasure, and attempts at capturing fleeting occupation of space are used to construct images of temporality and impatience. Collage techniques are used to explore the space to place theme, transforming the anxiety and ambiguity of space into a more desirable place. These images are inspired by John Baldessari and use clean geometries as spatial interventions. The purpose of these images is to instigate a reimagination of each space through a creative forgetting, using absence to provoke newness.