

LEARNING FROM COMMERCIAL VERNACULAR BUILDING TYPES: A NORTH AMERICAN CASE STUDY

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Abstract

A substantial literature exists on commercial vernacular architecture in North America. This literature has examined everyday places and iconic building types including suburbia, roadside motels, vintage diners, fast food franchises, residential trailer parks, signage, unique commercial establishments, and shopping malls. These places and buildings are generally classified as expressions of folk vernacular culture. In response, Attention Restoration Theory, an environmental cognition perspective based in human information processing research, provided the foundation for an investigation of the food truck/ trailer and its immediate installation context within a North American case study context. Visual documentation, interviews, and archival fieldwork provided the basis for the articulation of a typology. These structures were found to express automaticity, as satisfying the timeless human preference for association with nature, a sense of psychological respite, and as a physical setting visually distinct from its larger urban environment context. Directions for future research on this topic are outlined together with insights for application by architects and urban planners.

Keywords: *Commercial vernacular typology; environmental psychology; preference theory; urban design*

INTRODUCTION

A substantial literature exists on the architecture of the North American roadside landscape. This literature documents and examines a broad range of building types constructed along two-lane highways and in older urban cores in the decades prior to the 1960s, prior to the construction of massive highway networks that would in time crisscross the North American continent. A significant proportion of the visual essays and field research on this subject have romanticized the road and the experience of automobile travel (Liebs, 1985). This literature examines and celebrates iconic roadside motels, movie palaces built during the classic age of the cinema, gas stations, neon signage, billboards, diners, rail and bus stations, shopping malls, and fast food franchises. In-depth treatments of specific building types include examinations of roadside diners (Gutman, 2000), travel lodges and resorts (Baeder, 1982), roadside motels (Jakle, Sculle and Rogers, 1996), and venerable fast food chains (Hirshhorn and Izenour, 2007). Other investigations have focused on particular cities, such as Los Angeles in the early 20th century (Heinman, 2001; Peterson, 2004), and that city's 1950s and 60s *Googie* architecture, designed by architects to reflect the by-then seminal role of the automobile in everyday suburban life (Hess, 2004). The commercial vernacular architecture of New Orleans has also been comprehensively examined in a similar manner (Verderber, 2009; Christensen, 2011).

One such commercial vernacular building type, the motorized food truck, and its non-motorized counterpart, the food trailer, have been integral to the North American roadside landscape since the advent of the internal combustion engine. These portable food vending

vehicles are, ironically, both old and new-again, in our present era when three hundred hours of YouTube content is uploaded every minute and humanity ‘tweets’ over five hundred million times each and every day (Grossman, 2015). Transportable commercial vernacular food establishments, unfortunately, have been overlooked as architecture or as works of art that possess intrinsic aesthetic merit. This has resulted in an absence of attention devoted to food trailers/ trucks, a condition in some measure attributable to their spatial impermanence, temporality, or insubstantial structural attributes. However, sociologists and cultural anthropologists have studied these relocatable structures in association with marginalized, nomadic subcultures, i.e. gypsies, traveling circuses, vagabonds, and other ‘outcast’ constituencies. The most aesthetically inventive of portable buildings are worthy of designation as high-order folk architecture, with the best examples representative of an architecture of temporality, and beyond, expressive of broader population mobility and migration patterns across time and geographic space (Kronenburg, 2013). These ramifications are evidenced in portable food trucks and trailers at instant pop-up event cities such as the Burning Man festival that takes place each year in the southwestern desert United States, and as integral adjuncts to the annual Haj Pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Erickson, 2013).

Portable commercial vernacular structures built for the food industry have for generations also functioned as entertainment attractions in their own right, such as the iconic Oscar Meyer Wienermobile and the ubiquitous Good Humor Truck in the U.S. (Henderson and Landau, 1982). Even in times of disaster, food trucks have served to provide invaluable assistance and this is attributable to their rapid deployability to disaster strike zones, often on only a few hours’ notice. As for service in times of war, during WWII, the American Red Cross commissioned dozens of mobile coffee and donut vendor trucks for deployment on military bases throughout the United Kingdom (Verderber, 2015). Since the early 1950s, prefabricated food canteen trucks have been fixtures on U.S. Army bases worldwide (Jones, 1928; Sharpe, 1996; Butler, 2014). The Salvation Army and the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) now routinely deploy first response food trucks to post-disaster strike zones to dispense pre-prepared meals to disaster victims and emergency relief aid workers (Verderber, 2008; Webster, 2011).

The earliest Industrial Age precursor to the contemporary food truck/ trailer was the horse drawn wagon in the experimental circus and gypsy encampments in 19th century Eastern Europe. There, confections and simple dishes were served to the working classes and to itinerant vagrants. By the late 1850s, traveling rail line diner cars became an important fixture of passenger trains, in response to expanding settlement patterns across the North American continent. In the American Southwest, in 1866, Charles Goodnight, a West Texas cattle rancher, outfitted his old surplus U.S. Army wagon with interior shelving and drawers and stocked it with kitchenware, food, and essential first aid supplies. This became known as the *Chuck Wagon*. Later, in the Northeastern region of the U.S., other 19th century precursors included Walter Scott’s covered food wagon (1872) featuring small round windows cut into a canvas-sheathed covered wagon, parked daily in front of the town’s local newspaper office in Providence, Rhode Island (Butler, 2014).

Outside North America, the American Doughnuts food truck has been a stationary fixture in Melbourne, Australia’s Queen Victoria market since the mid-1950s, spawning myriad imitators in subsequent decades (Puvanenthiran, 2013). In Texas, the Tex-Mex push cart and food stand movement dates from the barrios of old San Antonio and the numerous Rio Grande border towns, in the 1920s and 30s, gradually spreading to towns throughout the Mexican border region (Arellano, 2013; Engber, 2014). The vendors who operated these businesses in the post-WWI decades would themselves often become beloved fixtures in the local community (Bryant, 2009). During this period most mobile food vending trucks and kiosks were modest, nondescript, and unselfconsciously designed and constructed, serving mostly construction site and factory workers (Belluz, 2010). The current food truck craze in the United States dates from 1974 when Raul

Martinez converted his decrepit ice cream truck into the first taco truck in the U.S. and then parked it outside his East Los Angeles barroom cantina. By 2015, the mobile food truck and trailer had become important fixtures at large rock music festivals, food festivals, in downtown business districts, at major sporting events, art festivals, and on college campuses across North America (Jones, 2015).

Three types of portable food preparation/ dispensary units are most prevalent at this time: (1) Self-powered autonomous vehicles free to roam the landscape; (2) Non-motorized trailer units that must be pulled by a motorized vehicle such as a pickup truck, or freestanding units transported atop another vehicle such as a flatbed trailer; and (3) Ubiquitous street vendor pushcarts (not included in this investigation). The contemporary food truck/ trailer is an artifact of enduring fascination and, in many contexts, is associated with a distinct subculture. With this said, the objectives of this investigation were threefold: first, to articulate a typology of food trucks/ trailers operating in a place well known for these food establishments. Second, to examine the physical attributes of various installation contexts within an urban environment, and third, to examine the role of environmental cognition as a theoretical and operative tool to learn why these structures and their immediate installation/site environs are of enduring interest and fascination (DeCassia, Ryzia, and Marras, 2014).

ATTENTION RESTORATION THEORY

The field of environmental psychology, and more specifically, theory and research in the subarea of environmental cognition, can provide helpful insight in terms of examining this enduring person-environment fascination with commercial vernacular building types such as food trucks/ trailers and their placemaking qualities, qualities which enable these structures and their place contexts to function as genuine attractions as much as *attractors*. Environmental cognition research emerged in the late 1960s in the work of geographers and psychologists largely by means of a technique known as cognitive mapping, whereby individuals and groups were requested to draw out on paper their internalized cognitive representations of a specific built environment, route, or geographic terrain known to them (Golledge, 1998). The manifold of topical foci within environmental cognition research has increased much since to now include salient explorations into the relationship of the role of neuroscience in how an individual experiences the everyday built environment (Robinson and Pallasmaa, 2015).

A particularly influential research stream within environmental psychology has been centered on the functionalist-evolutionary theory of human functioning in the physical environment, as developed by Stephen and Rachael Kaplan (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982). The Kaplans' theory postulates that humans are biologically predisposed through our evolutionary past in a highly uncertain environment to crave visual information about our environmental surroundings, and this predilection compels people to endeavor to adroitly comprehend - to make sense of - incoming information (stimuli) of a type and quality as necessary to maintain a satisfactory degree of functional coping capability. Secondly, this information is essential to ensure our successful functioning, i.e. survival, in light of the rampant uncertainty that surrounds us in our daily existence. As a species, humans continuously crave and strive to process useful environmental information with the cognitive patterning of this information allowing one to discern foreground from background, color palettes, charging animals, and such, as we actively seek out any such relevant information to aid in our coping mechanisms in order to reduce our level of cognitive uncertainty. This requires a sufficient level of incoming visual information and stimulation, together with the promise of information of legible quality, which facilitates informational coherence. This thereby allows one to be further drawn into a specific scene or place with the promise of additional positive informational affordances obtainable as one further engages with a given object, setting, or building, perhaps repeatedly.

The bedrock of functionalist evolutionary theory is research premised on directed attention fatigue, a neurological phenomenon resulting from the overtaxing of the brain's inhibitory attention mechanisms which accommodate incoming distractions while allowing one to maintain one's focus on a specific task, place, or object. Directed attention fatigue assumes it is natural for one to alternate between periods of attention to a task, place, or object to periods of distraction from such stimuli. This latter condition is due to the need to cope with (suppress) excessive incoming external stimuli that may be otherwise difficult or impossible to make sense of. This inability to psychologically cope with the incoming flow and rate of external stimuli can result in environmental stress due to mental fatigue. A prime characteristic of mental fatigue is *inattention*. The two types of attention involved in this process are *involuntary* attention, which refers to attention that requires no effort at all (as when something intrinsically fascinating or exciting occurs) and *voluntary* attention, or directed attention (referring to attention that requires a great deal of effort) as when something is perceived as monotonous, undifferentiated, tedious, or simply boring (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1989). This theory has been researched in both laboratory and in field settings on topics ranging from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to post-cancer treatment therapeutic regimens (Kuo and Taylor, 2001).

An aesthetically satisfying, inherently compelling task, place, or object, one that draws an individual to it for the promise of a positive experience, has been shown to aid in fostering recovery from attentional (mental) fatigue due to antecedent associated environmental stressors (Kaplan, 2001). Natural environments, such as forests, mountain landscapes and beaches have been found to be particularly effective in attention restoration in this regard and this occurs because these places and objects provide compelling stimuli. If it follows that fatigue and stress can be alleviated through exposure to nature, i.e. nature immersion, and exposure to compelling, interesting settings in some way connected with nature and landscape, these places will likely be perceived as especially preferred from an information processing perspective (Kaplan, 1995). Further, these places and landscapes will tend to attract individuals who seek them out, repeatedly. By extension, it stands to reason that individuals will involuntarily seek out a food truck or food trailer set in a context identifiably set apart from its surroundings. Such installations may be viewed as "islands" or oases once removed in some way, or set apart - refuges - providing a needed break from one's routine in a setting that simultaneously facilitates direct immersion with nature and/ or landscape.

This psychological phenomenon is referred to as Attention Restoration Theory (ART). It is based on an extrapolation of psychologist William James's 1892 definition of involuntary attention, which James described as having a directly fascinating, interesting quality, including "strange things, moving things, bright things, pretty things, metallic things," even including in his taxonomy of involuntarily interesting phenomena blood and wild animals (James, 1892). This theory posits that the term *automaticity* distinguishes between involuntary and directed attention and that, once again by extension, involuntary attention is activated when one is being automatically drawn towards a unique or compelling task, place, or object, such as a food truck/trailer situated in nature and/ or landscape and at least somewhat autonomous from its everyday urban context, especially when sited 'off the beaten path' insofar as simultaneously fostering exposure to nature, i.e. trees, shade, grass, and/or picnic tables set amid a park-like ambiance, and thereby expressing a condition of relative cognitive automaticity.

A NORTH AMERICAN CASE STUDY

The contemporary food truck/ trailer movement in North America is in many respects epitomized in Austin, Texas, the state capital of Texas and the home of the University of Texas at Austin. This city has grown exponentially in recent decades. In 2000, Red Wassenich, a local civic booster who believed Austin's pre-boom, laid-back atmosphere was being threatened with extinction, first coined the phrase "Keep Austin Weird" (Hylton, 2013). He did this to counter his

fear that Austin was becoming merely another anonymous, faceless, *Anywhere USA* city. The Austin metro area is expected to expand to 5.3 million persons by 2050 (Hutheesing, 2013). Meanwhile, public transit alternatives such as a light rail system remain politically elusive and suburban sprawl is ongoing and rampant (Holtz, 1997; Yglesias, 2013). The two types of mobile food vending units predominant in Austin at this time are the self-powered truck and the non-self powered trailer variously pulled by a motorized vehicle from site to site. The food trailer is the most prevalent type, with approximately fifty units operating in Austin at this writing. Most mobile self-powered units roam about the urban landscape on a scheduled basis while others are stationary, remaining at a single site for months or even years at a time.

The field investigation consisted of firsthand and archival research conducted in 2014 and 2015. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, with fieldwork consisting of two-hour site visits and photographic documentation of twenty-eight autonomous installation sites in Austin and its suburban environs, plus documentation of multi-unit installation sites each occupied by 6-10 units. Site visits to autonomous installation sites consisted of individual interviews with staff personnel and their clientele. For collective installations, where numerous units shared a single site, sit-down focus groups, each forty-five minutes to one hour in length, took place. These occurred with staff persons who sometimes worked in one or more units at a shared installation site. Focus group sessions were also held with unit owners. Small groups of clientele were also interviewed at these various shared installation sites. Five to six persons participated in each focus group (directed by this author) with all sessions and the one-on-one interviews recorded for purposes of content analysis. This data collection method illuminated many insights into the local food services industry relative to the role and perception of these portable food establishments. This information was augmented with archival research on the history and evolution of the food truck/trailer phenomenon in Austin and elsewhere in North America.

Based on the fieldwork, consisting of installation documentation, four types of food truck-trailer installations became discernable within three primary site locational variants: the downtown core, adjacent inner urban perimeter neighborhoods, and suburban/ edge city site contexts. Urban core sites were installations situated along main arteries leading to and from the Central Business District (CBD), where strings of *One-off and Arterial Necklace* installations operate (Type 1). *Type 1* installations consist of units installed on autonomous sites such as in parking lots, gas stations, or places shared with another commercial establishment such as a 7-Eleven convenience store. Multiple installations situated along a single artery collectively function as *necklaces* comprised of perhaps eight to twelve individual units sited intermittently along the same four to six block stretch of roadway on one or both sides of the street. More specifically, three primary Austin north-south commercial strips (South Lamar, South Congress, and South 1st Street) contain the majority of such installations, with the majority of these unattached trailer units, including (pictured) the *Best Wurst* and the *Regal Ravoli* (both custom built), *Crepes*, and *Chicken* (both adapted Airstream motor home travel trailers), *Torchy's Tacos* (an adapted carnival food trailer), and the *Purple Tounge* (an adapted private residential camper unit). These units typically feature a small adjacent outdoor seating area consisting of a shaded area with picnic tables, a bike rack, and an unpaved parking area in close proximity to the sidewalk or street. This is the predominant unit type in Austin: one-off independently owned and operated establishments either custom-designed for their current function or repurposed from a different, prior, non-food dispensary function (Figure 1a-1f).

A second installation type, *Type 2*, consists of units configured non-linearly on a single parcel of land expressly dedicated for the purpose of aggregating mobile units on a single site. These *Freestyle Food Court Encampment* installations operate in neighborhoods surrounding the CBD, in East Austin, and in the University area, including one noteworthy enclave in the Guadalupe Street neighborhood to the immediate north of the University of Texas at Austin campus; this neighborhood is the home of "The Slider House", a semi-sequestered outdoor food

court/ quasi-compound that houses eight units surrounding a former private residence repurposed as a bar and restaurant. Two of the eight units installed here, behind a tall wood fence, include *Love Balls* (an adapted yellow school bus) and *The Vegan Yacht* (an adapted Airstream travel trailer). In these examples of Type 1 and 2 installations, each unit is artfully and inventively painted in bright colors, with many featuring bold graphics, small festive lights strung above, and bright, offbeat neon signs (Figure 1g and 1h).

A third unit installation type, *Formal Food Court Encampments*, consists of quasi-informal groupings configured in a strength-in-numbers organizational pattern. These *Type 3* installations are more elaborate and aggregated, in plan. The most prominent, centrally located shared site in close geographic proximity to the Central Business District is the *Barton Springs Picnic* (2014), designed by the architectural firm Studio 8. This open-air food court was constructed on the site of a former 1950s trailer park. The 1.2-acre site was to be turned over for construction of a row of generic national fast food franchise outlets, but a sympathetic local developer intervened at the last minute when learning a number of the units were about to be displaced from an arterial necklace site to make room for construction of a generic national chain hotel. In response, permanent infrastructural support was provided on this new, shared site. Because many of these units were previously well-known 'refugees' being displaced from an ad hoc *Type 1 One-off and Arterial Necklace* context, at *Barton Springs Picnic*, these dislocated trucks were clustered together in a semi-radial configuration. This tourist-centric place currently houses *Hey Cupcake!*, *Tapas Bravas*, *Turf n' Surf*, *The Seedling Truck*, *Mr. P's Electric Cock Fried Chicken*, and the *Gourmet Sandwich* plus a few lesser-known units. Permanent restrooms are provided as is all utility infrastructural support (Figures 2a-2b). This 'wagon circle' surrounds an open-air central court with picnic tables placed beneath a pair of permanent canopies, together symbolizing a rapidly evolving, darker side of the equation, locally, as if now these units have to be installed safely together, not unlike a threatened animal species displayed to the public in a zoological park in order to ensure their continued survival (Figure 3).

Type 4 units, *Informal Suburban Encampments*, are located in suburban contexts. One notable example, the *Midway Food Park* (2014), is situated in an urban fringe context on the Capital of Texas Highway 360 near the beginning of the Texas Hill Country. This master planned enclave consists of a parking lot with a fenced-in site, a playground, permanent restrooms, tree-shaded picnic tables at the center, and an outdoor stage for weekend musical performances (Figure 4). These amenities are surrounded by ten food trucks/ trailers configured in a semi-circle including the *Dock & Roll Diner*, an adapted fireworks truck (Figure 5) and *The Celia Jacobs Cheesecake Experience*, an adapted Airstream trailer (Figure 6). Other units installed in this open-air food park include the *King & Country* (trailer) and *One Taco: An Urban Eatery* (truck). Most of these units, as in the case at *Barton Springs Picnic*, were exiled from former installations in *Type 1* arterial necklace sites in the urban core and later displaced to the urban fringe due to skyrocketing land values in the center of Austin. Its circle-the-wagons configuration is not dissimilar from *Barton Springs Picnic* only here the arrangement is somewhat looser and less spatially constricted. It is noteworthy that many food trucks and trailers in Austin, such as *The Celia Jacobs Cheesecake Experience* and *The Love Bug*, overtly draw aesthetic inspiration from a persistent romanticization of the 1960s "hippie" psychedelic counterculture movement in Austin.



Figure 1a-1h. Type 1 Installations: One-off and Arterial Necklaces (upper six images), and Type 2 Installations: Freestyle Food Court Encampment, The Slider House, Austin (bottom two images) (Source: Author).



Figure 2a-2b. Type 3 Installations: Formal Food Court Encampment, Barton Springs Picnic, Austin (Source: Author).

In documenting installations throughout Austin, it soon became apparent that nature and siting have a prominent role. Many installations afford protected refuge, a sense of escapism, even retreat, and as such, their operators seek to position the unit in close proximity to trees, lawns, and shrubs, and even water elements such as a small fountain. Connectivity with nature was in evidence, often, with the most financially successful and aesthetically offbeat, iconic, units almost always framed by a backdrop of nature. Such objects or structures set in natural environments or in urban oases such as is the case here, in point of fact, consistently fostered positive involuntary attentional behaviors as exhibited on the part of their clientele. This is most likely because these places are perceived as providing some measure of restorative amenity. By contrast, from an information processing perspective, food establishments, whether mobile or otherwise, lacking in iconic aesthetic imagery and nature amenity of this type may generally be perceived as significantly less compelling (Kaplan and Berman, 2010).

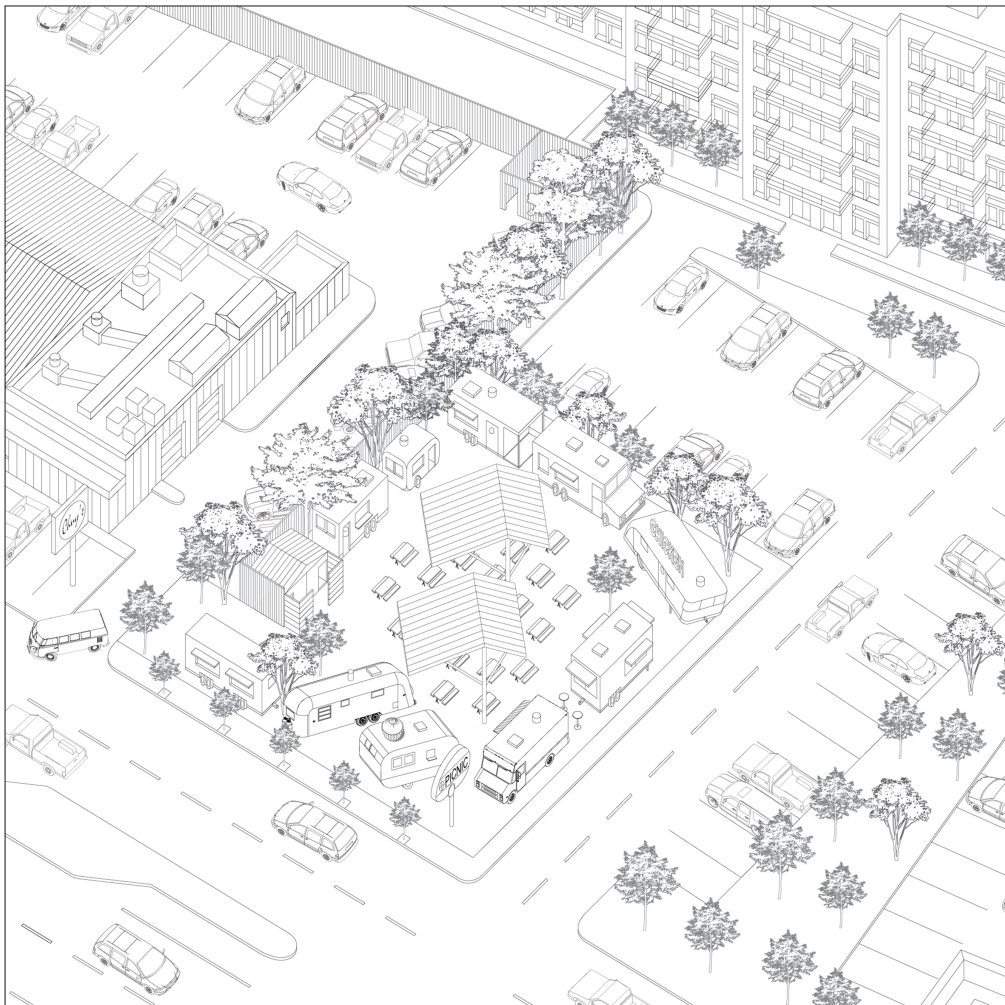


Figure 3. Type 3 Installations: Barton Springs Picnic, Austin, Axonometric View (Source: Author).

Automaticity

Automaticity, from an environmental cognition perspective, and with regards to the most highly preferred installations described above, is likely attributable to their being preferred over what is around them. The *One-off Arterial Necklace* installations depicted here are somewhat sequestered micro-settings onto themselves, possessing a separateness and autonomous identity as if throwbacks to an era when Austin was much smaller (and far more small-town in its ambiance). These installations are nested, as such, within their sites, making maximum use of any available landscape elements as if to draw one in effortlessly into an immersive world if even for a short period of time while eating an ice cream cone or sandwich. The *Freestyle Food Court Encampment* type is the result of many trucks/ trailers bundled on one site amid large shade trees surrounding a main house not unlike chicks snuggled around the mother hen. Its six-foot high wood fence, surrounding a nearly full square block refuge in the center of the city, reinforces an atmosphere of autonomous refuge. Operating hours are clearly defined and a large outdoor wood deck at the center of this compound further draws people together, inward, as if gathered within an outdoor room around an open-air fireplace, where one can see and be seen. It is a

world onto itself, with landscaping elements seamlessly interwoven, all adding up to a sequestered ambiance and it being a place that fosters cognitive restoration, a sense of respite.

The *Formal Food Court Encampment*, personified by *Barton Springs Picnic*, is less informal and less random in its spatiality. It, too, possesses a degree of automaticity as it seeks to create a memorable experience with nature integrated yet somewhat less so compared to the more sequestered experience provided at *The Slider House*. At *Barton Springs Picnic*, the physical setting is overtly commercial and designed to be readily seen by the general public. Success is predicated upon its rapid identification from the road with the goal of drawing tourists in as well as locals. A row of mature trees frames two edges of this site as a sort of *nature wall*, providing a backdrop and yet integral to the overall aesthetic experience. On site, the individual experiences a strong sense of place. As for *Informal Suburban Encampments*, as personified by *Midway Food Park*, its automaticity lies in a restorative park-like setting protected by, in the case at Midway, a low fence that allows children to engage with the play spaces created for them and as a means to



Figure 4. Type 4 Installations: Informal Suburban Encampment, Midway Food Park, Austin (Source: Author).



Figure 5. Dock & Roll Diner, Midway Food Park, Austin (Source: Author).

draw families into this 'food park.' Its automaticity is derived from its geographic autonomy from the urban core, where the vast majority of food truck and trailer installations operate. Midway is designed to attract a clientele who might otherwise opt to drive further out from the city such as to a state park, for an afternoon picnic. Its ART 'quotient' stems, most likely, from a perception of it being involuntarily fascinating while simultaneously affording the condition of cognitive respite, not unlike the experience of being on a camping trip.

The collective automaticity of the examples discussed above is premised on individuals' deep-rooted human information processing needs, and these needs likely explain why these places are so preferred, as well as because they are seen as novelties. Individuals are repeatedly drawn to them because they stand apart from their otherwise generic, even bland, i.e. non-restorative, everyday urban surroundings. They stand apart in a positive way. They each provide the opportunity for some degree of immersion in nature. As noted earlier, involuntary attention is defined as incoming stimuli about the physical environment that is perceived as relatively effortless. Voluntary attention, on the other hand, typically requires a significant degree of directed, i.e. fatigue inducing, attention in order for an individual to be able to maintain sufficient focus on the task, place, or object at hand. The latter condition is, as mentioned, far less preferred compared to the former.



Figure 6. The Celia Jacobs Cheesecake Experience, Midway Food Park, Austin (Source: Author).

Moreover, excessive periods of directed attention can result in deleterious behavioral and health outcomes beyond fatigue alone. One's workplace may be seen as stressful, although going out to a food truck for lunch and sitting at a picnic table amid shade trees can constitute an antithetical experience. From an environmental cognition perspective, for these reasons, these places stand apart as different, as magnetic. In this regard, the most compelling food truck/ trailer installation sites described above provide a sense of being nestled amid a backdrop of nature/ landscape. It is an atmosphere in some ways tantamount to an individual occupying a natural 'outdoor room'

amid a dense urban environment. As such, these places and structures possess the timeless capacity to satisfy deep-rooted human functionalist-evolutionary predilections. As a species, humans are attracted to informationally interesting objects set in natural environments, novel and unique physical forms and attributes, all of which is in direct support of what William James first hypothesized in 1882.

Learning from Roadside Commercial Vernacular

The role and function of commercial vernacular architecture in the everyday milieu is no less important now than when Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown traveled to Las Vegas with their Yale University architectural design studio in 1970 (Venturi and Scott Brown, 1972). This seminal work remains highly instructive insofar as it illustrates how intrinsic meaning often lies hidden amid the ordinary everyday vernacular built landscape (Esperdy, 2012). Architects and urban designers can draw numerous positive lessons from the food truck and trailer movement in North America at this time, including, specifically, the following:

A Canvas for Design Experimentation: The portability and scale of a mobile food establishment and its installation context allows for aesthetic experimentation in tone, timbre, and visual appearance, with messages ranging from the risqué to the political to the whimsical, sometimes all at once, and in a mutually reinforcing manner. Here, the whole can yield something entirely greater than the sum of any of its individual component parts, all in an effort to fuse pragmatic functionality with an inventive symbolism (Rice, 2013).

Health Promotion Amenity: A food truck/ trailer can contribute to a neighborhood's vitality, ambience, and walkability. One or more units on a shared site can function as a destination point in support of a community's physical wellness and behavioral health needs, and hence, in the promotion of healthier urban lifestyles in a community (Verderber, 2012; DeCassia, Ryzia, and Marras, 2014). One such example is the South Congress (SOCO) neighborhood in Austin, where locals and tourists congregate to patronize food truck and trailers sited in a *necklace* installation pattern along a three-block long stretch of this street.

The Virtues of Mobility: An autonomous food truck/ trailer is able to roam with freedom in a manner not otherwise possible with any conventional permanent-site building. This freedom to roam untethered can take on extreme expressions, an ability to operate for one day or even for one hour at a site and then the next hour at a different site, perhaps miles away, without being hampered by the logistics associated with tedious building codes and site preparation work, all costly, tedious, painstaking processes even in the best of times with respect to the successful operation of a permanent-site food establishment.

A Minimal Carbon Footprint: A food truck/ trailer unit is a prefabricated, often modular, 'offsite-built' structure. Its manufacturing process consumes far less non-renewable resources and space compared to a conventional building because excess construction materials and unused resources can be minimized in type and volume. Prefab buildings designed in this manner are lightweight and transportable, not unlike a yellow school bus or mobile Airstream trailer repurposed for use as a food truck/ trailer versus the comparatively costly up-front expenditures necessitated with the design and construction of a conventional, permanent-site building.

Urban Catalysts: A run-down aggregation of vacant lots on Harrison Avenue in the South End of Boston provided an ideal stage for the emergence of the now-popular *SoWa Market*. There, the establishment of artists' studios, an open air farmers market, and a food truck enclave has injected new life into a once-forlorn urban zone near Boston's CBD, which had suffered from

decades of benign neglect and disinvestment (De Costa Klipa, 2015). This off-the-beaten-path yet now 'hip' enclave demonstrates how, when effectively sited, one or more food trucks or trailers can foster urbanity by drawing people to a place previously considered off the "hipness" cultural grid (Van Wattering, 2014).

SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This has been the first attempt to apply an environmental cognition theoretical perspective to the study of commercial vernacular architecture in North America. More specifically, it is the first time Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and the concept of automaticity, as embedded within environmental cognition theory and research, has been applied to further understand the enduring and repetitive-exposure psychological importance of these structures and their immediate installation contexts. The perspective afforded by ART and the role of automaticity helps in explaining why the best of these places and structures are compelling, even fascinating. It is a perspective premised on humans' deep-rooted psychological preference for places and buildings in some way rooted in our biological evolutionary past. At present, this relationship between environmental stress, fatigue-reduction, and the aesthetic preference for commercial vernacular places and buildings remains only minimally understood. Regardless, it is a subject that warrants further qualitative as well as quantitative research. It is hoped that future research will address what has been a limitation of the work reported above: the dilemma of objectification. In other words, what is of most importance to an individual? Is it the imagery and physical attributes of its immediate natural environs, the imagery and physical attributes of the installation itself, or some combination of both?

The 19th century food wagon was a strictly utilitarian device, serving the day-to-day survival needs of its customers. The journey could be quite inhospitable and the food wagon would typically be stationed in a clearing that provided shade and respite for the weary journeyman worker or traveler, and these amenities undoubtedly contributed to its early, and continued, financial longevity. It is not unreasonable to draw parallels between its automaticity and the current practice of locating a food truck/ trailer in a semi-sequestered location next to yet apart from a road or worksite, yet not disconnected from nature/ landscape. This provides an equivalent experience, namely, a psycho-socially preferred alternative to the repetitiveness encountered in the everyday generic urban environment.

As for the future of the food trailer/ truck in North America, unit operators are often seen as threats to nearby permanent-site restaurants and at times have been subjected to NIMBYism (Settembre, 2014). In some cities, discriminatory actions continue to occur with some regularity against unit operators (Millar, 2008; Kendzior, 2014). In Chicago, a prosecutorial ordinance was adopted in 2014 that requires food trucks and trailers to remain at least 300 feet from any existing 'permanent' food establishment (Stroka-Rickert, 2014). Because of this, a historical perspective is in order; J.B. Jackson, in his 1984 essay "The Moveable Dwelling and How it Came to America," elaborated upon the merits of Charles Goodnight's 1866 innovation, extolling the merits of the portable building as an important cultural artifact, commercial or otherwise (Jackson, 1984). Jackson viewed transportable buildings as expressing a libertarian ideal, symbols of an unbounded freedom on the periphery of the open North American frontier. To him, they deserved to be independent (free) of any conventional land ownership laws, free to stand as vibrant, prefabricated, low-cost, environmentally sustainable alternatives to conventional (permanent) buildings.

As mentioned at the outset, some misperceptions still persist within the Academy regarding the merits of North American commercial vernacular architecture, the automaticity of food trucks and food trailers notwithstanding. Within postmodern urban discourse, however, Michael de Certeau has drawn the distinction between the preordained (sanctioned) and the tactical (unsanctioned). He views them as opposing interventional strategies in the design of

cities, and yet as entirely compatible strategies in urban resuscitation efforts, with the ability to function within a loose *both/ and* somewhat randomized pattern as opposed to a rigidly didactic *either/ or* polarity (deCerteau, 1988). Denise Scott Brown and other leading urban designers have similarly advocated for the virtues of *both/ and* spontaneous spatial interventions in the everyday urban milieu (Scott-Brown, 1990; Crawford, 2008). Portable architecture personifies what can be achieved if thoughtfully, imaginatively, and effectively implemented. An inventively designed and sited food truck or trailer can help to energize an otherwise forlorn, decaying urban space, neighborhood, or district, and for this reason alone they are worthy of further investigative architectural and urban research attention.

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