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KIPPLE KABOODLE : REINCARNATING CALIFORNIA CITY

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Abstract

California City is a superlative shrinking suburb. Situated deep in the Mojave Desert, the conditions that typically spur suburban shrinkage are exaggerated here. As such, the city provides a singular opportunity to comment on the decline of the road-centric, single family house dominated town typology within a specific context.

This thesis examines the decaying suburban condition and proposes an architectural intervention that embraces a city's collapse as analogous to death and imagines a reincarnated future. It addresses the notion that shrinkage must be either reversed or ameliorated and instead proposes that it be amplified and radicalized. The architectural proposal is activated at two scales: that of the landscape (or kaboodle) and that of the individual belonging (or kipple). As the town grapples with death on a suburban scale, it encounters deeply personal questions as an entire community. What does it mean when a city dies? How do those who must remain grieve, come to terms with their loss, and move on? What becomes of the corpse?

The stuff of the suburb is examined in depth as the psyche of California City and given architectural agency as the means by which the town is destroyed, reconstituted and rebirthed anew. As it is abandoned, salvaged, catalogued, and transformed, this suburban discharge slowly transforms the reincarnated city into an archival catalog of a previous being: an enclavic representation of what was lost.

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INTRODUCTION

Narrative + Context
Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. What began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording...No longer living memory’s more or less intended remainder, the archive has become the deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memory...a secondary memory, a prosthesis memory.”

- Pierre Nora, Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire
California City is a masterplanned community in the Mojave Desert. Despite aspirations in the early 60’s to become the third largest city in California by population, the town is plagued by suburban blight, low occupancy, high foreclosure rates, and descending property values.

Most of the residents of California City work at the nearby air force base or in Los Angeles, which is a nearly two hour car ride away. Its population has been slowly decreasing and crime rates have been slowly rising for the last decade. In essence, it is a gradually suffocating exurb.
This thesis imagines a present where, incentivized by a cooperative land banking offer from the municipal government, the residents of California City have banded together to alleviate the pain of their suburb’s slow and agonizing death by orchestrating its suicide — so that it might be reincarnated into something more profitable and so that its otherwise uneventful demise might become more meaningful, deliberate, even heroic. It is realized as a series of ritualistic architectural interventions that act as the armatures by which the town is destroyed, reconstituted and reborn anew. Some of these rituals are planned, others are not.

While most of the city’s occupants leave for more convenient living conditions, a small number of residents choose stay. Those remaining situate themselves among the impending ruins of their previous homes but, in place of their once sprawling properties they choose to replace their lifestyle with a newer, trendier one - that of the dense urban domestic. Their new home stands watch over the city that was, a fraction of the size, inverting the suburban logic and co-opting a displaced urban one. It becomes a locus of ritual activity, at once a new home and a means of coping.

Arranged along a single loaded corridor, the units are “houses” on one side and “yards” on the other. Originally meant to function as suburban yards, these spaces instead eventually become a terrain for the informal occupation or invasion of the suburban discharge: a new type of storage unit and an archival catalog of a previous being. The
units aggregated into a reconstituted whole act as a scaffolding for a vertical landscape that mirrors, distorts, and appropriates the suburban landscape. In some ways, an enclavic representation of what was lost, and in other ways, a shrine to the city.

Concurrent with this relocation are other, smaller ceremonies. The residents begin to adapt ritualistic death practices from other cultures to replace their sterilized American ones. The simple act of deconstructing a house becomes revelatory. Decomposed house parts take on different iconographic meanings and psychological associations. Disposal and the preservation of remains becomes ceremonial. Mundane landscaping becomes a marker of a post-liminal state, a place for those displaced to return and recall. Even trash is given new meaning. Imbued with a reverence as an artifact of a dying lifestyle, excrement is carefully cached, condensed, and transported. As their death practices draw to a close, the residents of California City, from their new perch, clinging to their artifacts, the residents are watching the slow deterritorialization of their homes.
Historically California City was a town that began with high hopes as a community masterplanned by a Czech sociologist and Columbia University professor, Nathan K. Mendelsohn, in 1958. Meant as a catchment for homebuyers venturing outside of nearby Lancaster and Palmdale, it is the third largest city by area in the state but houses only 14,000 people. At its inception, the experimental suburb promised a city that both extended and rivaled Los Angeles in size and cultural amenities. During the first phases of construction, the California City Development Company built a Central Park complete with its own man-made lake, golf course, and recreation center. The planners of California City were so certain of its future role as a sought-after destination that one of the first buildings on site was a motel to house visitors. While initial investment and buy-in were high, the project eventually fizzled as demand fell far shorter than expected. The entire city’s grid was laid out but only a small percentage of the roads were paved and serviced.

What remains of the city today is analogous to a decaying corpse. Sections of the city are skeletal, others contain bits and pieces of architectural flesh barely identifiable, and yet others still bear resemblance to an incarnate city. Experiencing the town from its center and driving outward, one first encounters commercial buildings and single family houses dotted few and far between. Paved streets eventually lead to dusty dirt roads identifiable only as paths cut through desert brush. Intersections in the middle of large swaths of desert are marked by street signs, almost uncanny in their visual dissonance. Eventually, these paths give way to an uninterrupted desert landscape inhabited largely by tortoises and lizards. Experienced from the sky, the town appears reminiscent of a massive ancient geoglyph. In many ways California City is the extreme embodiment of similar existing American conditions. As such, it serves as a lens through which we can examine post-suburban shrinkage as it interacts with exurban isolation, harsh environmental conditions, and increasing job loss.
California City Mapping: Topography, Foreclosures, Largest Local Employers
1,570 will move.

4,559 occupied 1,528 vacant

will move rental unit or can afford higher mortgage.

65% owner occupied 35% rental
In recent years, the city has seen an increase in ATV/OHV tourism. Adventurous families from California and Nevada seeking to vacation in the desert but still have access to restaurants and gas stations have begun to swarm the dying city like necrophagous insects feeding on carrion. They are attracted to the town precisely because it is almost dead, offering both the image and experience of harsh, almost alien, desert landscape while also providing basic amenities. This thesis argues that this is an opportunistic intersection, a chance for the city to reinvent itself anew.
KIPPLE
Or...Suburban Detritus
“Kipple is useless objects, like junk mail or match folders after you use the last match or gum wrappers or yesterday's homeopape. When nobody's around, kipple reproduces itself. For instance, if you go to bed leaving any kipple around your apartment, when you wake up the next morning there's twice as much of it. It always gets more and more.”

“I see.” The girl regarded him uncertainly, not knowing whether to believe him. Not sure if he meant it seriously.

“There's the First Law of Kipple,” he said. “Kipple drives out nonkipple.' Like Gresham's law about bad money. And in these apartments there's been nobody here to fight the kipple.”

“So it has taken over completely,” the girl finished. She nodded. “Now I understand.”

“Your place, here,” he said, “this apartment you've picked--it's too kipple-ized to live in. We can roll the kipple-factor back; we can do like I said, raid the other apts. But--” He broke off.
“But what?”

Isidore said, “We can't win.”

“Why not?” […]

“No one can win against kipple,” he said, “except temporarily and maybe in one spot, like in my apartment I’ve sort of created a stasis between the pressure of kipple and nonkipple, for the time being. But eventually I’ll die or go away, and then the kipple will again take over. It’s a universal principle operating throughout the universe; the entire universe is moving toward a final state of total, absolute kippleization.”

-- Philip K. Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

“Carrying on a distinctly American visionary tradition, Dick proposed that God preferred industrial waste to holy sanctuaries. In its spiritualization of the coarse and the vulgar, Dick’s demotic Gnosticism unexpectedly echoes Emerson, or Whitman, or even Melville. HE sought a kind of urban sublime, looking for shards of divinity in piles of junk.”


Merriam Webster defines stuff as:

the quality or qualities that make a thing what it is / transportable items that one owns / items needed for the performance of a task or activity.

The mundane paraphernalia of our lives – the furniture, the tools, the knickknacks, the baubles – are often treated as architectural occupants, physical afterthoughts second to built form. But, especially in the case of American suburbia, stuff is what lends our homes familiarity – it is the essence of the single family dwelling.

What if we gave power to junk, or kipple, to be an essential building block AND inhabitant of a newly configured suburbia? What if we treated stuff as an actor in an architectural narrative? As an architectural building block, junk is nonhierarchical. Each piece is unique yet no one piece has a more important role than another. Choosing, curation, is incidental but also telling – archeological – in its banality. At the individual object scale it tells a personal story, perhaps humdrum perhaps revelatory, of a small part of an individual’s life. At the scale of the garage or storage unit, it weaves a narrative about the penchants and priorities of a household. At the scale of the megastructure (or many storage units collected together), it can tell the story of an entire community.

“It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive, right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”

- Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever 91

The act of storage has the ability to transcend its typically prosaic logistical role and become something beyond -- an archive.

All at once it is…

a museum: a documentation of a lifestyle and landscape lost
a tomb: a place of mourning and of vigilance
a junkyard: a place for forgottenmemory as physical excrement
a security blanket: a means of coping

Constantly changing, constantly being pushed to its physical boundaries, constantly shifting -- the storage unit cum archive acts as a safety net now (what if I need this broken lawn mower for parts next year?) but, in the distant and unpredictable future, can come to serve a very different purpose: that of an archeological artifact. A time capsule to be. A monumental relic of our current age, a story told through junk. An unborn archeological object.
Single Family House Decomposition
Yard: Dickerson Family
“Here the inhabited ruin loses for us that sensuous-suprasensuous balance of the conflicting tendencies of existence which we see in the abandoned one. This balance, indeed, gives it its problematical, unsettling, often unbearable character. Such places, sinking from life, still strike us as settings of a life. In other words, it is the fascination of the ruin that here the work of man appears to us entirely as a product of nature.”

- Georg Simmel, “The Ruin”, 381

Central to this thesis project is the question of death and the nature of the death of a city. The stuff of the city’s collective households is equated with its soul. Initially discarded but subsequently recognized as sacrosanct, it is hoarded and takes on an almost iconographic meaning that transcends its physical form. Individual edifices are equated with the corporeal -- the body -- and are put to rest as buried remains and as ruins. In both explicit and suggested ways, the project seeks to analogously mirror each step in death and mourning:

The testament – parsing the suburban order
The mundane – documentation of life
The death
The uncanny – corpse
The grotesque – decay / processing
The liminal – funeral
The supramundane – transcendence
The reincarnation/reconstitution
The icon (physical re--)

Construction of the post-self – memory
Construction of the other – corpse

The following vignettes and drawings illustrate the rituals that emerge.
As one ceremony expunges the corpse to free the soul... the other consumes it. The cleansing of land, the consumption of grief.
Vignette: Turning of the Trash
Turning of the Trash
Exploded Axonometric
California City Boulevard is the main artery that serves California City. Access to homes from neighboring highways is virtually impossible without setting tires on CC Blvd. Nearly all restaurants, gas stations and stores cling to it in an effort to survive through accessible convenience. Pedestrian traffic is largely nonexistent as is public transportation. As such, the city is experienced almost exclusively by car and travelling along California City Boulevard is perhaps the single most important shared experience for those living in and visiting the city. Serving both as a means of
bypass and as a collective intersection, the road acts as a suture stitching the disparate and disintegrating pieces of town together.

In its future incarnation, the road is even more central to the experience of living in California City. It is gradually lifted, inhabited, and subverted to create a roof, an entrance, a viewing platform, and a terminus. Once a passage through, the road becomes a passage into. Once cutting through and holding together the city, it now stands in contemplation of it. Slowly ramping up to accommodate inhabitation below, the road accommodates parking and terminates at a 25 story tall precipice. To access the architecture’s collection of houses, one enters from the road and descends into the space through elevator shafts and stairwells. The day begins and ends on the road.
A borrowed urban compression, at once grossly unnecessary (physically) and totally necessary (emotionally), the residents of California City adopt the microunit initially as a way to squeeze out the excess of their lives. Unlike the expansive custom houses that they inhabited previously, these microhouses are built to provide just enough space for a tolerable level of inhabitation and lack the flexible real estate to glut, cram, stuff, or bulge. Edited out of these domestic spaces are the game rooms, the pet jungle gyms, the garages for tinkering. Initially imagining that this would be freeing, the citizens of California City eventually find that, in discarding their “junk”, they’ve somehow disposed of their souls. Which leads to a subversion of… the yard.

Intended to be a place for self-expression, the yard becomes a storage space, a place of self-contemplation and introspection. The residents of California City eventually and incrementally begin to adapt their yards into ad-hoc storage spaces. They hastily paste up cheap building paper to shield their belongings from the rain and, just as quickly as it was discarded, kipple begins to rehabit the reconstituted town. Boats are brought down in pieces, old toys are recollected, and heirloom furniture items are stashed away – all in the name of JUST IN CASE. The yard becomes a means by which the inhabitants cope with the loss of their town’s previous life and ultimately a tool for anamnesis.

Viewed from above or from the ruins of former houses, the yards are a condensation of the anima of California City into a wall that stands as a testament to the decaying ruins of the town that once was. As the stuff, now fully stripped of the veneer of “necessity”, pokes/jabs/sticks outward, the façade becomes a vertical registration of a public collective crypt – the ghosts of belongings past haunting the edge of its reincarnated self. The yard is the site of an architectural shift – the unintended yet unavoidable transformation from organized housing community to mausoleum.
Anticipating a need for a place to put to rest the bodies of California City’s previous homes, the burial ground is a tomb in the underbelly of the reconstituted city. The ground is organized by plot, mirroring the contemporary American cemetery. It is a well-organized and deliberate final resting place for the corpse of the city. While the yard becomes the place for the soul, the burial ground is the place for the cadaver.

The Burial Ground
Collage - Bird's Eye View of South Facade
Ceremonial Insertion Book Spreads
Ceremonial Insertion examines a series of suburban tropes, their roles as signifiers and meaning-makers within the cultural landscape of suburbia, and the psychological conditions that emerge in reaction to the rituals of everyday life. It poses the question: If the future of suburbia must change, what new rites, conditions, and ceremonies must be invented as additions, responses, and antidotes to existing ones? These supplementary rituals are depicted as visual and textual vignettes nested within larger conversations occurring at the intersection of cinema, literature and art.

The tropes identified are: backyard, club, drive through, garage, movie theater, parking, sidewalk, single family house, shopping mall, swimming pool, TV, vacation
He finally, uneasily, turned to her and said...
“I don’t feel like Don Draper yet.”
To which she replied...
“Do you think it’s the cats?”

“Renee and Gene, Winners, 2012
Living Legend House Lottery”
Carrie wanted to attend Mow Day but she hadn't finished her homework.

She made her brother take an old mason jar with him before he left so that he could bottle the smell of fresh cut grass.

...To build upon the feedback that we received last year, we would like to reiterate the baseline pumpkin bakefight rules:

Only uncarved pumpkins are allowed. Those of you who have used the recommended etching process will be permitted to submit.

All ages allowed to the fight but only those age 16 and above are allowed beyond prep floor 2 of the tower.

No surrendered pumpkins can be reclaimed.

As always, post-fight, 2-3 articles of clothing will be kept for archival purposes. Please plan accordingly.

Cinnamon will no longer be allowed during the fight (due to last year's unfortunate events).
He looked over at Karen, shivering. "I'm cold. Why do these things always have to happen at night?"

She ignored him, pointedly, and stared straight ahead at the Reids -- who were invariably pondering their decision to move into the neighborhood by now.
"Tastemaker"

1. Unpackage items before scanning (if possible)
2. Clothing items can be scanned using hangers and pins provided
3. Please refrain from entering scanner for your own safety
4. To ensure complete cataloging, omitting items from scan is not advised
occupied parcels - residential

individual residents

potable inbound water

commercial profit (dollar amounts unknown)

municipal expenditures (dollar amounts undisclosed)

unpaved roads (user created)

paved roads
This series of maps and textual vignettes represent a parallel investigation into potential futures for a California City undisturbed by architectural interventions. They exist in a world parallel but very much related to this thesis. The project imagines how the systems that make up California City might evolve and how corresponding illustrations might mutate if the town continued along its current trajectory. These drawings are meant to depict previously documented interpretations of the site, speculative realities, and manufactured futures.
California City is a master planned community with over 52,000 lots and is the third largest city in land area in the State of California. The City maintains two parks, a senior center, a community center, a sports center, tennis courts, and a pool. In addition to the City facilities, the community contains the National Desert Tortoise Preserve. Schools are provided by the Mojave Unified School District including two elementary, a middle, and a high school, Cerro Coso College, and local private institutions. The community boasts of a variety of fraternal organizations, youth sports' programs and a myriad of faith-based organizations. California City has one prison (California City Correctional Center operated by the Corrections Corporation of America), a large automotive test track (Hyundai USA Proving Ground), one landowners' resort (Silver Saddle Ranch), one PGA golf course (Tierra del Sol), and one municipal airport.

Join our community today!
Greetings from California City! We are a sprawling community situated deep in the heart of Antelope Valley. Our town boasts two gas stations, a local market, one high school, a prison and a municipal airport. Lots of all shapes and sizes available for both commercial and residential projects. Due to an increased demand for water coupled with a decrease in availability, California City has recently begun a cutting edge water saving program courtesy of the scientists at Edwards Air Force Base. Move here to be at the epicenter of sustainable water saving research!

In addition to our commitment to earth-conscious living, California City has signed a 2020 pledge to dedicate 30% of municipal land to tortoise habitat rehabilitation by 2040. Nature enthusiasts welcome!
Here in California City we are committed to providing living opportunities for alternative habitants. Global nomad? Live life on the road? OHV enthusiast looking for a desert adventure? Vacationing with your family and searching for a wild west experience? California City is the place to be! *

* Water permits in high demand, please apply promptly.
OHV Riding permits available at City Hall.

Please do not disturb residents. Occupied housing units can be identified by blue California City flag on lawn.

Please do not temporarily occupy abandoned units. Some houses may be unfit for inhabitation.

Water not provided on city grounds, please provide for yourself accordingly.

The native tortoise population is growing at an unprecedented rate. Please be respectful of all animals.
Appendix iii
Physical Model


