

OUTER KINDS OF STRUCTURES

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A dusty path just recognizable among the shrubs and tumbleweeds dotting the foothills of the mountain range provides just enough room to guide a horse. The desert path, coming in and out of view, winds its way over and between these hills making its way somewhere, meandering as it goes. The path eventually leads to a place, in this case to a long-stripped valley, which appears below the foothills. A small town appears along this valley, its buildings showing enough affinity for each other to provide the town with a barely monumental presence in the otherwise desolate environment. The path moves past the town's sign announcing its city limit, but as the rider approaches the entrance of the town the path begins to fade into a street-like landscape. Facing buildings provide the only structure needed for defining the street, which would otherwise just be a dusty, shrubby, rattlesnake-ridden and infinitely expanding ground plane. There is no structure known as infrastructure here and if there is, it happens automatically, as a casual yet legible by-product, never conditioning yet always being conditioned.

What is nowadays referred to as infrastructure remains here in a passively wild state—an unplanned complement to the composition and accumulation of individual structures. The trails of the prairie that locals use for tracking—which really are positive absences—are the closest the area comes to infrastructure. The clapboard sidewalks and hitching posts, on the other hand, are built-in.

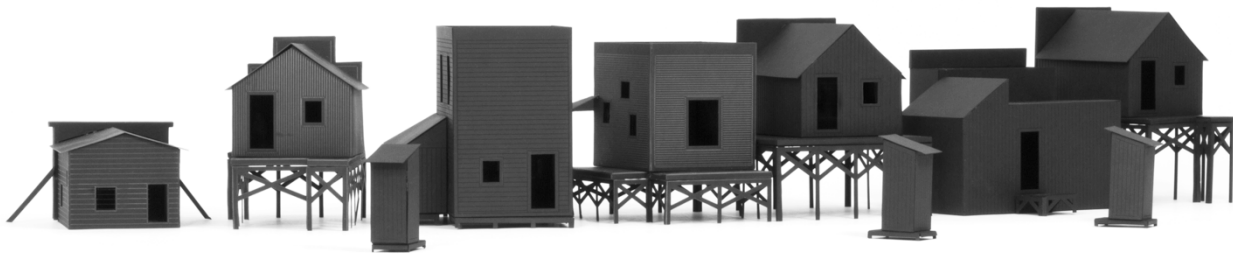
The town is comprised of diverse structures, which together form a dynamic interplay. Through these sometimes literal and other times phenomenological interactions, the town creates moments of cohesion. At other times, these same parts appear disparate from each other. How the town's elements manage to simultaneously showcase both of these behaviors—in other words, how they manage to be only lightly contextual—allows this part of Lisbon to live up to its many contradictory characteristics.

THE INDIFFERENCE OF THE GROUND PLANE

Stagecoaches fly out of town, easily transitioning from the structured streetscape of the town into the ruts of the stage route paths. The surrounding wilderness is an unencumbered desert landscape containing a diversity of natural objects and animals roaming freely in an infinite ground plane of horizontal space. Yet, at times, even the datum of the ground plane changes grade, sinking down into canyons cut out by rivers and floodplains, while at other times it ascends up into plateaus, buttes, and mesas. The stagecoach service creaks, bumps, and rolls through this landscape, and into one of the most famous desert landscapes of the county. Almost resembling towns on the horizon, the spaces between the desert's plateaus are altogether a much more dangerous territory than the cities and towns the stagecoach runs between. This same landscape is able to support both the natural occurring structures as well as the structure of the town, functioning as a substructure tenuously connecting the towns to their context.

When standing on top of a mesa, the flat ground plane can be observed as a space just as

impressive as the geological features dotting its surface. These wide-open spaces provide vistas and in-between vantage points for viewing and observing not just other natural geological features but also the town itself, a man-made mimicry of a canyon. However, the only permanent structures on this sub-structural ground are the natural geological features and variations, the kind of places that can be used as a hideout when not in the town. The structures of the town, although dependent upon the substructure in order to exist, are not a necessity for the ground itself to exist. Though it changes slightly as wind and weather erode its surface, as a whole the ground will always exist as the most permanent structure in the Western landscape. The Western town, although a powerful image on the horizon, is still only a temporary canyon in this landscape; when the town is gone it leaves no trace behind.



THE STRUCTURE OF THE TOWN AS A WHOLE

The town's structure—each individual architectural building—barely touches the ground. Tiny legs resembling an upturned comb provide a loose mechanism needed to negotiate the topographical changes of the ground's permanence. The built structure of the town is an antithesis to the permanence of the wilderness by being built on top of the new ground plane placed on top of the comb-like base. Tumbleweed, rattlesnakes, and dust can still move unencumbered through the wilderness as they pass beneath the buildings and between the town's thin supports. The buildings, with the cooperation of the sub-structural ground plane, provide all structure needed to cohere the town's disparate qualities into one collective town monument in an otherwise stark absence of permanent infrastructure.

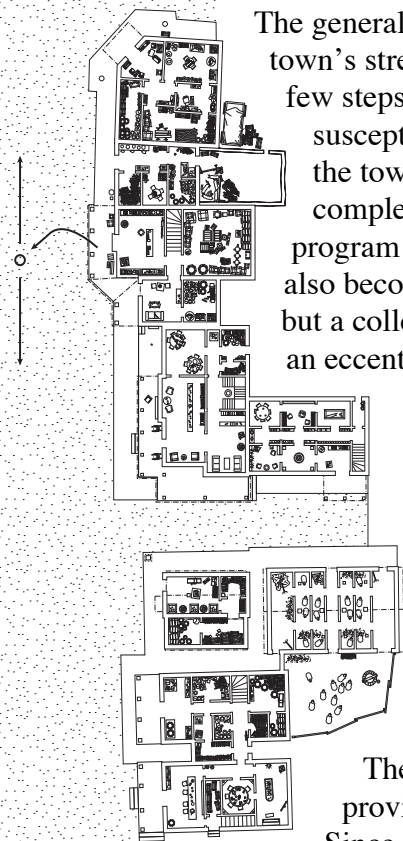
THE STRUCTURE OF THE STREETScape

The beginning and end of town become more and more ambiguous as the desert path reaches the opening of the town's street. As the exterior view of the town, consisting of the many structures that back up the street from behind the scenes, fades into the interior profile view of the street, the relationship of the buildings facing each other becomes more apparent. The town begins and ends with two buildings facing each other, two elements indifferent to each other except for the fact that their fronts are aligned in a synchronized dance not too close and not too far apart. They face each other with a type of polarity, an unintentional affinity for each other that gently repels, keeping just enough distance and just enough hierarchy to become a street. There would be no street without the two facing buildings and their relationship with each other. In essence, the

street is nothing more than a void, an absence of built structure contingent upon the presence of two other structural forms.

The presence of this dependency is offset by the indifference the individual structures have to one another. While it is obvious that the street would not exist as a space without the confining nature of its buildings, it is not so obvious that the structures themselves can exist without a neighbor. The relationship between the streetscape created by its buildings is stronger than the relationship these forms have to each other. The space between them that defines the street cares very much that these two forms exist and requires a close tie to their presence. Although the void is formally antithetical to mass, it cannot exist without it. The town is only as big as the street is long. Therefore, calling such a street “main street” is redundant, a tautology, as there is no other street. However, main street may stand not so much for street as it might for space, an ad hoc construction of something collectively valuable within the context of great nothingness. The result is an automatic infrastructure as much as it is an automatic public solely created out of an accumulation of private entities—a *Superstreet*.

THE SUPERSTREET’S INDIVIDUAL BUILDINGS



The general store is one of the first structures making up the town’s street. A two-story-high front door sits at the top of a few steps attached to a wood plank deck where supplies not susceptible to the elements sit on display as riders enter the town. The second-story windows imply a more complex program than the otherwise typical building program. As the eye moves to the edge of the front façade it also becomes clear that the building is not merely one mass but a collection of smaller out buildings. The general store is an eccentric collection of structures not contained or encapsulated within the clapboard siding of one dominant structure. A collection of both smaller buildings and a main dominant building structure at its center, the property boundary of the store is not altogether clear. A lean-to functioning as a storage closet, a pile of wood and timber, and a restaurant are all transgressing the structure of the store. As inhabitants of the town enter the scene, it is the space between these transgressing structures that provides a new inhabitable space.

The nature of the ground plane acting as a substructure provides the town with a unique building aggregation. Since the street is only defined by the presence of two facing buildings, the buildings themselves are therefore not encapsulated by any one element of the town; they become more complex than just a single box or infill. Yet the street gains order through the fronts, which are able to bring coherence to all of the

different eccentricities found behind them through a single vertical plane.

THE SUPERSTREET'S SIDEWALK

Attached to each building is the porch, which is nearly always placed in front of an entrance and often, especially in this little town, extends to wrap around the façade and occupy the in-between spaces. One of the most explicit yet ubiquitous expressions of private ownership, the front porches are occupied by the stuff of the townspeople. Providing the general store a few extra feet of floor space for more stuff, this space also serves as an advertisement of their goods. Barrels, wagon wheels, even mining implements all go on proud display. The town was built with these tools, and from the porch sitting in a rocking chair or any makeshift seat, one could take stock of the street. Clinging close to the buildings yet explicitly defining the street, the porches occur as often as a building is constructed. One after another they occur automatically as an externalized interior domestic space of the buildings they are attached to.



Team: Alessandro Bosshard, Savvas Ciriacidis, Alex Lehnerer, Matt vander Ploeg. This contribution is part of our work on “The Western Town—A Theory of Aggregation”, published in 2013 by Hatje Cantz.