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Apartment complex, College Station.

With no rhyme or reason, islands of dispersed apartment complexes sit loosely strung together by the roads and commercial strips that connect them. You know they are apartments by the familiar pattern of oddly shaped, monotonous buildings clustered amid parking lots. Stylistically diverse, most of them have some shallow ornament or cladding to give individual identity; others are reminiscent of ski condos or warehouses. These developer-built complexes form the student housing landscape of College Station. There is nothing special about this type of housing. It is the same sort of non-descript landscape one

form an important part of the overall perception of a place.

In 1878 the United States Post Office began readdressing mail destined for Texas A&M campus residents by crossing out Bryan and inserting College Station.¹ Bryan, four and one-half miles north of College Station, changed rapidly in the next decades. But a burgeoning population did not begin to live on the periphery of the college campus until the 1930s. College Station can be thought of as a large residential area for Texas A&M, even though it has become an economic entity in its own right. Although A&M focuses its efforts and resources on cam-

SAME AS IT EVER WAS

HOUSING AT TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY



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encounters in suburban tracts across the United States. As such, it is surprising to find in a college town, where one would expect an idyllic campus with gracious lawns and architecturally interesting residence halls. Because on-campus dormitory space is so limited, three-quarters of Texas A&M's 43,000 students live off campus.

However College Station may appear to the outsider, it cannot be fully understood unless one looks beyond statistics and infrastructure to what holds the community together. Living in College Station I experience this housing landscape on a continuing basis; it serves as the framework for my daily life. A distanced perspective is only useful for understanding the meaning of a place in a limited way. If we are interested in what a landscape means to those who inhabit it, we must look to its physical structure (buildings, roads, etc.) and to the mental framework we employ to make sense of it as that place. To get at this ephemeral sense of place, we must look beyond the physical to how a community defines itself and how people cope with their environment on a personal basis. I can live in a landscape that is monotonous to the outsider because my furnishings and personal attitudes provide texture and enrich that place for me. These personal strategies reflect the landscape of the mind and

pus, the university, as College Station's single industry, always has had an influence on the form of the town and its housing.²

Texas A&M does not have a master-planned campus. It was founded long after campuses like Thomas Jefferson's "academical village" at the University of Virginia (1817-26), which emerged from an early 19th-century desire to build a community for learning that would inspire students to become responsible citizens. A&M also developed before the early 20th-century City Beautiful movement, which affected planning on such later campuses as Rice University in Houston (1912). Professor Frederick E. Giesecke tried to instill a City Beautiful scheme of spatial reorganizations on the campus in 1911. But he had to contend with numerous existing inconsistencies.

A&M students and faculty once lived together on campus, but the university could not keep up with the increasing enrollment after 1963. Original faculty houses were moved to adjacent neighborhoods. Then some faculty members and developers began to construct houses in subdivisions at the north, south, and east gates of the campus. The incorporation of these areas as the town of College Station in 1938 gained support from the college because development of the town, including privately owned apartment houses,

"College Station is like
an old pair of shoes.
It's ugly to look at, but
it sure is comfortable."

Lou Montoya, former Texas A&M student



Dormitories on the A&M campus from the 1960s (left) and the 1930s (right).

relieved the college of its obligation to provide student housing.³ Since the 1960s A&M has used the town as a residential asset, exhibiting an attitude toward housing that could be called *laissez faire* paternalism. The college is in some ways obligated to ensure an adequate supply of housing, but its administrators, as free-marketeers, depend on profit-motivated developers for the supply, maintenance, quality, and location of that housing.

In the 1960s, then A&M president J. Earl Rudder stated that "the greatest immediate need for the school lay in the area of student housing off-campus" because dorm construction on campus was not a financial priority.⁴ Further, Rudder feared that without independent development "Texas A&M would have been a cow college with about 6,000 students because there wasn't any place for anybody to live."⁵

Through the 1970s and 1980s housing starts proliferated, chasing increasing enrollment. As developers built rapidly to keep up with demand and built cheaply to hedge their investments, poor-quality construction resulted. Today the housing market in College Station is more competitive, and higher-quality complexes are being built, but the attitude and landscape of *laissez faire* paternalism remains firmly in place.

A different kind of paternalism was associated with late-19th-century company towns — regimented townscapes built in or near industrial sites by employers to maximize workers' commitment to their jobs. The campus ideal is associated with the belief that the university should stand *in loco parentis* to its students: parents who sent their children away to college expected the administrators to assume responsibility not only for the students' educations but their values and personal needs as well. Texas A&M seems ideologically aligned with the University of Virginia, but it has yielded a housing landscape more like that of the company town. The motive for rapid and poor quality construction in College Station's apartments connect them to the often bleak landscape of the company town. Both are the result of the maximization of profits, which logically reduces the quality of the environment.

Texas A&M did not consciously set out to encourage the present housing environment, but it has left student and faculty housing to be developed by others. This speaks of a subtle transformation of a regional attitude that values individuality (or minding one's own busi-

ness) into an entrepreneurial attitude of maximizing personal accumulation — a deregulation of public space on behalf of private gain. Its adoption in the university setting allows the wider campus environment to suffer the same community dissolution experienced in suburbia. The dispersed, potentially dissociated student population is compelled to fend for itself.⁶ But what of on-campus housing? Are things different there?

A&M's campus housing, directly under institutional control, serves less than one-quarter of the student population. Conditions are better than in most off-campus housing, but not to the degree one might expect. Some of the 1920s dormitories of my undergraduate days have been torn down and replaced by more modern units. But the new dormitories are more functional than beautiful. Furthermore, the dorms are not concentrated in a residential area of campus but are dispersed to the edges, separated by classroom and administrative buildings across pedestrian-unfriendly roads. This impedes community interaction in the same way as placing the Memorial Student Center away from the center of campus and remote from residential areas. Even so, living off campus is vastly different from living on campus, where everything is within walking distance.

It is interesting to compare Texas A&M with the University of Virginia. Jefferson's plan was based on long-standing models from Europe and earlier colleges in America such as Yale and Harvard. At Virginia all incoming freshman live in one of four residence halls. After their first year, students may live off-campus, but a mark of prestige for seniors is to be awarded a room in one of the pavilions on The Lawn. Other campus housing is grouped in two large clusters close to this historic center because of the administration's desire to retain "the intimacy that characterized the academical village."⁷ In other words, the physical quality and layout of the housing is an important factor in realizing the University of Virginia's goals.⁸ The school has kept enrollment low, a rare achievement these days, to maintain conditions that foster a democratic sense of community.

Texas A&M's state-mandated, ever-increasing enrollment and its reliance on off-campus housing has made achieving something like the University of Virginia experience difficult, if not impossible. Does A&M really have the same intentions for campus life as the idealized example at Virginia? Yes and no.⁹ The

emphasis on individuality and self-sufficiency in A&M's student handbook interprets the desire for community in its most mundane sense — a collection of individuals. To be a part of the Texas A&M community seems to be possible only through a do-it-yourself process of bootstrap placemaking through language that lacks the sentimental community-building concerns of the University of Virginia.

A&M's Department of Residence Life informs students of their rights — "to sleep and study without disturbance" — and their responsibilities — "to communicate with other residents" — as well as presenting a philosophy of diversity, individualized involvement in the community, the sharing of traditions, and accountability for your individual actions. What is significant is not the possibility that the underlying attitude of self-reliance might determine on-campus experiences (although not entirely) but how it is indicative of and consistent with *laissez faire* paternalism. So what does Texas A&M do to maintain such a strong and loyal student community? If the housing, both on- and off-campus, leaves so much to be desired in terms of amenities, design, and layout, what is it that binds students together?

It is Aggieland, that constructed virtual community of tradition, ritual, history, and sport. Through these forms Aggies relate to each other and derive meaning from their experience at Texas A&M. Aggieland is the mental landscape that gives College Station its sense of place, and this mindset constitutes an important coping strategy we all use to inhabit any place beyond its physical manifestation. It enables an A&M student to live miles away from the campus yet remain connected to the community.

The potential insidiousness of this ideological strategy should not be overlooked. It is a sort of "emperor's-new-clothes" idea, where the impoverishment of a physical landscape can be *virtually* overcome through the construction of a rich mental landscape.¹⁰ The university is responsible for much of the contour of this virtual world through football and the other extracurricular activities it supports, but a larger part of the virtual landscape is personally constructed by students as they individualize places and form social groups.

Some students complain of feeling nomadic because they rent by the semester, stay on campus only during the day, and go back to their hometowns on

weekends and over breaks. Like living in a motel, this pattern allows students to be less critical of their College Station surroundings. Others practice personal placemaking by decorating with posters, mementos from home, or college-related memorabilia. Largely, they rely on the development and maintenance of an independent community of friends, social clubs, entertainment, bars, and parties to enrich their college experience. The landscape of friends and legends is real and brings life to ordinary apartment living, helping to mask the negative aspects of remote location and bad architecture. But such compensation works only up to a point.

The character, layout, and quality of student housing at the University of Virginia is intended to prepare its students for responsible and democratic citizenship. The physical landscape, quality of the architecture, and strong sense of place in Charlottesville contribute to the University of Virginia's institutional goals. Texas A&M's residential landscape, that of *laissez faire* paternalism, seems to have no such ideological intentions. Rather, it is an unconscious landscape of profit. In this it resembles suburban America. If the University of Virginia is right, and the environment is an important aspect of acculturation, we should ask ourselves, "What are the students of Texas A&M being prepared for?" ■

1. Deborah L. Parks, "The History of College Station, Texas 1938-1982" (master's thesis, Texas A&M University, 1984), p. 31.

2. Mary C. Fabishak, "Single Industry Boom Town: The Rise and Decline of a Dependency Relationship — College Station, Texas" (doctoral dissertation, Boston University, 1986), pp. 499-500. A 1975 comprehensive plan for College Station was reviewed in Fabishak's dissertation. Comments on housing included: "deterioration of existing housing stock"; "ubiquitous strip development"; and "dominance of the university." Most people would agree that College Station is a single-industry town, but it is informative that a city manager in 1983 considered it a company town and hoped it would remain so.

3. Ibid., p. 210.

4. Ibid., p. 294.

5. J. Earl Rudder, cited in Fabishak, p. 295.

6. In 1979 Off Campus Aggies, a registered student group offering activities and information to involve off-campus students in on-campus life, was founded.

7. Office of the Dean of Students, University of Virginia. This quotation is found on the university's web site: <http://www.virginia.edu/~odos/tlo/geral.html>

8. David Orr, "Architecture as Pedagogy," in *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1994), pp. 112-17.

9. Texas A&M, Department of Residence Life web site: <http://reslife.tamu.edu/housing/studentguide/>

10. William Gibson formulates a "cyberpunk" vision, where mass addiction to virtual reality results in the neglect and destruction of the physical world.