
TOILET

ENTER+ACTION

The Medium of Lifestyle

Conor McMichael, Class of 2017

"Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves...was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?"

– Haruki Murakami, *Sputnik Sweetheart*

I split the first eighteen years of my life between two realities. The first half I lived in a walkable neighborhood surrounded by friends, with nearby pedestrian-friendly parks, and shopping centers as the backdrops of our endless excursions. The moment I found myself bored, I would simply gather my friends together, and we'd be off on our next adventure. When I turned ten, my family moved from the heart of town to a house half an hour away. I lived fifteen minutes from my new school, thirty minutes from my childhood community, and my parents worked forty-five minutes away. This was an incredibly isolating experience, and the moments that I was not stuck in a car, I was finding dull ways to entertain myself. I believe these two realities are perfectly indicative of the trajectories in which urban designers, planners, and visionaries design today.

The segmentation and isolation of today's social interactions and experiences both influence and are perpetuated by the built environment. The physical realm serves as the background for our daily lives and informs the way people engage

with each other, which in turn informs the lens through which they prioritize their movement through space. As designers, our experiences of community through the built environment become our design toolkit as we filter and synthesize our own social experiences and expertise with project demands. The spaces we design emulate the quality and typology of our social experiences, and vice versa.

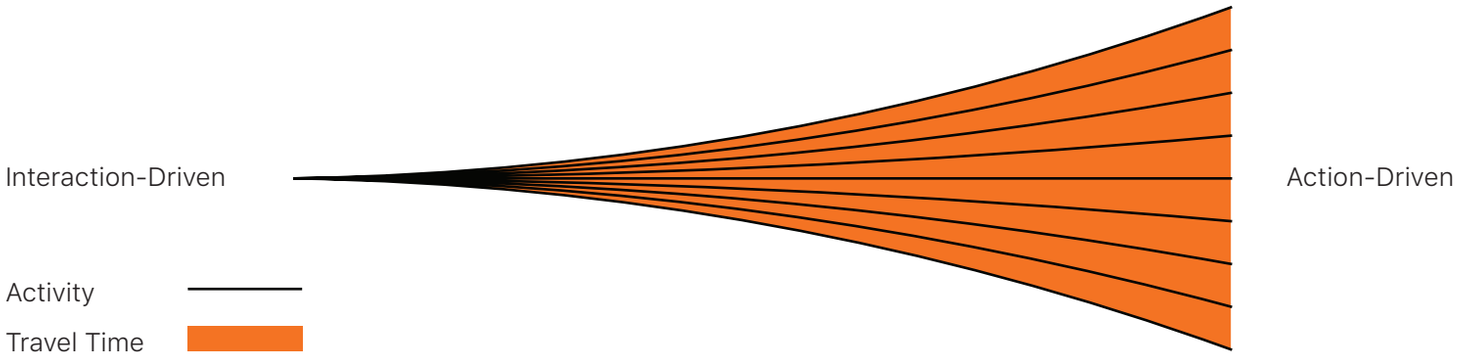
The delineation that I strive to make is not between urban, suburban, and rural communities, but rather between action-driven design, which sustains isolation, and interaction-driven design, which encourages social interaction. Action-driven design can be defined as compartmentalized, heavily programmed zones designed to provide exacting destinations for the consumer. Sold as perfectly convenient, these spaces make for a rigidly segmented lifestyle; each errand and occasion is distinctly punctuated by a parked car. Interaction-driven design can be defined as loosely regulated zones with amalgamated programming. With variations in use and operational times, these spaces are consistently populated, highly walkable and conducive to low-risk, high-reward social interaction. Though some spaces may inherently lean towards urban, suburban, and rural typologies, similar instances can be found across the municipal spectrum. Through the following narrative, I will be making the case for abandoning action-based and embracing interaction-based design approaches.

As American purchasing power increased after WWII, as soldiers and their families yearned for simplicity, as cars became more readily available, and as developers sold the idea that space equals freedom;; our communal landscape began to shift dramatically. Urban parks were traded for fenced-in yards, public transportation for freeways, vibrant sidewalks for vast parking lots, and neighborhood grocers for big box superstores. One significant consequence of this transition was the removal of space for casual, impromptu interactions and replacing them with the necessity for segmented actions. At first glance, this may seem like a desirable shift, encouraging each encounter to be more anticipated and deliberate, but the vulnerability that these encounters require make them much more socially challenging. The action-driven environment makes avoiding social interactions effortless; one can easily spend all day in this environment and not cross paths with a friend, a colleague, or a kind stranger. Often, the only connections encouraged in these spaces are an occasional conversation with a cashier, which today is not even necessary.

To thrive in a landscape like this, great effort must be made to enlarge

LIFESTYLE ADJACENCY DIAGRAM

Action-Driven vs. Interaction-Driven Design



the private life if any semblance of community is to be found. As Jane Jacobs asserts in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, in this landscape "(people) must settle for some form of 'togetherness,' in which more is shared with one another than in the life of the sidewalks, or else they must settle for lack of contact. Inevitably the outcome is one or the other; it has to be; and either has distressing results." This social filter has created a void in our communities that was previously filled by a social common ground. The resultant vacuum dramatically shifted our societal identities and forms of interaction. It was into this vacuum that escalating isolationism, exacerbated by digital communication methods, evolved our social culture from one of interactions to isolated actions.

A recent Cigna Health study found that America is in the midst of a loneliness epidemic in which rates of loneliness have doubled in the last 50 years. Only an estimated fifty-three percent of Americans feel they have meaningful in-person interactions on a daily basis, and forty-three percent feel they are isolated from others. Twenty-seven percent even identified that they rarely or never feel as though anyone understands them.[2] An experiment performed by professor Bruce Alexander further illustrates the effects of loneliness.[3] The

experiment consisted of two scenarios to study the effects of isolation and addiction. The first scenario involved isolating rats into individual cages, the other involved placing rats in a cage with an abundance of cheese, colored balls, tunnels, and other rats. Each of these cages contained a clean water supply and a cocaine-laced water supply. The study found that the isolated rats became addicted and died prematurely nearly one-hundred percent of the time, while the percentage of rats in scenario two that elected to drink the laced water was significantly less.[3] Similar outcomes are evident through human social observation. Consider a recent American Addiction Centers article that draws a strong correlation between modern isolation of American housewives and the four-hundred percent increase in prescription painkiller-related deaths among women over the last 20 years (compared to two-hundred-sixty-five percent among men).[4] These studies paint a clear picture of how the interconnectedness and health of our communities are intimately influenced by the spaces in which we interact. Even though our

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means of connectivity are becoming more readily available, the separation of society's physical realm is rapidly diminishing our collective feeling of connectedness.

The evolution of these norms amplified our shift from interaction to action and has transformed the urban design toolkit. With the advent of digital communication, real-time conversations and interactions have begun transitioning to intermittent games of "tag" through text messages, emails, and online platforms, and the segmentation of action-driven spaces only perpetuates this dependency on digital communication. Consider online dating as one metric for this shift. Just twenty-five years after the first online dating website was launched, thirty percent of adults use online dating platforms.[5] The social gaps that are created by the built environment are being filled by technologies that capitalize on isolation, and as the studies above illustrate, this is detrimental to our collective health at

large. By distilling our communication to isolated words and phrases, we have severely weakened the level of camaraderie typically found in physical social interactions.

Stanford University's Dr. Emma Seppala clearly explains the benefits of social connectedness in her article "Connectedness & Health: The Science of Social Connection." Strong subjective feelings of connection lead to a fifty percent increased chance of longevity, strengthens immune systems, and leads to higher self-esteem, greater trust and cooperation, and greater empathy.[7] The opposite is true for those who feel socially disconnected. This has a direct influence on the cities and spaces we design. As Charles Montgomery poignantly illustrates in his book *Happy City*, the more a social network is stretched, the less likely chance encounters and impromptu meetups will take place, thus creating a less-robust community and support network.[8] As we synthesize our own social interactions with the spaces we design, these spaces begin to reflect our interactional experiences. We must leverage our experiences with and knowledge of interaction-driven spaces to facilitate healthy communities and enable social connectedness.

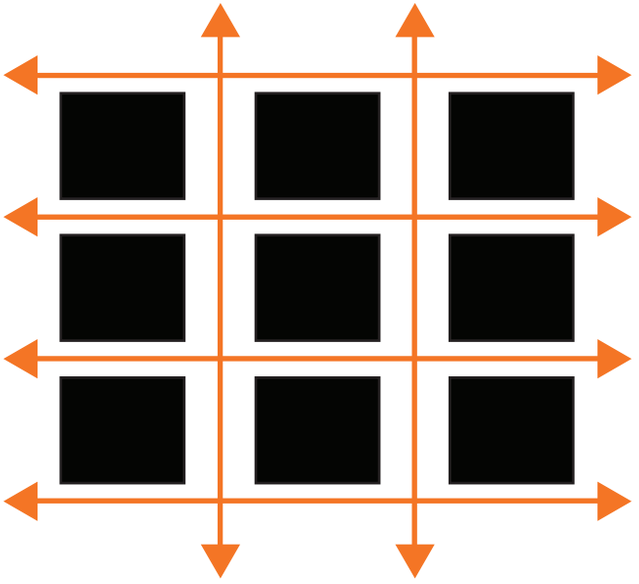
> "The evolution of loneliness and the built environment are intimately related."

One of the primary differences between action- and interaction-driven spaces is the ways in which people are allowed and encouraged to move through the built environment. If the circulation and program is too formalized and rigid, there is little room for unplanned exploration, reducing the likelihood of informal interactions. The destination becomes the only goal, with no consideration given to the movement between destinations. This perpetuates the quarantined social structure described above. Yet, before we can embrace one or the other we must first establish the spatial typologies of action- and interaction-driven designs. To do so, let us compare two similarly intentioned retail spaces in Oklahoma: Classen Curve in Oklahoma City and Utica Square in Tulsa. The former was completed in 2010 as a product of orthodox suburban development typology, the latter in 1952 during the emergence of suburban expansion. Both are upscale suburban outdoor shopping centers; however, Utica Square was constructed

preceding the social shift to action-driven spaces that has led to socially bereft developments like Classen Curve.

Defined by rigid linearity, Classen Curve stretches over a quarter mile from end to end, five miles from downtown Oklahoma City. The 2,000 feet of single-sided storefront is distributed across 10 islands of 14 buildings each, separated by distances of up to 350 feet. Each building has its back turned to the street, doing little to invite unplanned travel into the development. Most of the fourteen buildings are made up of two or three retail spaces, reducing the opportunity for incremental exploration that often takes place where retail storefronts average twenty-five feet. With

CLASSEN CURVE
Pedestrian Circulation Diagram



UTICA SQUARE
Pedestrian Circulation Diagram

little interstitial shade and an elongated layout, there is little reason to walk rather than drive from one island to the next, and pedestrians must stick closely to the storefronts beneath the arcade twenty feet overhead. The formal grandiosity of the architecture does little to invite informal ownership of the space, and the strictly curated movements demand absolute purpose. On a rudimentary level, the development is positioned in a way that resembles the suburban strip center experience, wrapped in an aesthetically refined shell. Spaces like Classen Curve, regardless of aesthetic quality, neglect the importance of social interaction and perpetuate the physiological and psychological consequences of a disconnected society.

Utica Square is located just two miles southeast of downtown Tulsa. Nearly all of the four-sided building blocks are positioned directly adjacent to each other. Nearly every foot of sidewalk is covered with either an architectural or treed canopy only ten feet overhead. With a mile of shaded and interconnected sidewalk-engaging storefronts, interactions between spaces and people happen naturally. The 30-foot-wide driving lanes are bordered by angled parking spaces, which straddle manicured islands dotted with trees providing a thick shade canopy. The trunks of the trees act as visual speed bumps, slowing down vehicular traffic and easing pedestrian movement from one block to the next. The three main rectangular building blocks are centered on a quarter acre park, which is bordered by a coffee shop and several retail offerings. Each of these three blocks contains small pockets of green space and are transected by friendly partial or full alleys lined with additional shops. The openness to the adjacent thoroughfare promotes greater commuter porosity through the site perimeter. With no more than 150 feet of shaded path between buildings, pedestrians are able to maintain a healthy rhythm of intentional shopping and curious surveying. The flexibility of the four-sided blocks has allowed the storefronts to evolve into a level of managed muddle that provides visitors with a sense of intrigue without creating confusion. This spatial and programmatic variation, accompanied by comfortable pedestrian conditions, is exactly the scenario that promotes social interaction. With purpose suspended by intrigue, spaces like this give room for impromptu social interactions in a way that many modern developments have sterilized.

The evolution of loneliness and the built environment are intimately related. The more separated our society becomes, the more our spaces begin to reflect that, and the more our experiences in these spaces perpetuate disconnection. When our common spatial experiences are predicated on isolated actions, it's no wonder why we become

solitary ourselves. As architects and designers, we have the ability and obligation to shift the pendulum from action-driven to interaction-driven design; from isolation to community; from loneliness to camaraderie. By re-framing our own social interactions to perceive the spaces between the actions and rigidity of modern society, we find spaces in which our communities may breathe with new life. We must wield our experiences and learn from them, consciously creating spaces that empower individuals to commune. We cannot continue to perpetuate the disconnection of society if we are striving to improve it. Being both subjects and composers of the built environment in which we all interact and engage in community, we must take seriously our responsibility to design spaces that encourage social interaction and fight the interaction-deficient culture we are experiencing today.

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