

Junkspace Wayfinding

Drew Austin

Problem

Large swaths of the contemporary built environment have grown illegible to the ordinary individual. An ever-expanding landscape of suburban sprawl, shopping malls, airports, hospitals, and office buildings—what Marc Augé called “non-places” and Rem Koolhaas called “junkspace”—continues to supplant the more legible forms of urban fabric that preceded it, such as the rectilinear grid. This new landscape is disorienting and often alienating. While it does guide its occupants in a narrow sense—in support of its specific purposes, such as consumption or transportation—its form largely undermines the ability to orient oneself more broadly. As Frederic Jameson writes, this space transcends “the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world.” The less we are able to situate ourselves within that world, the less connected to it (and to one another) we feel.

Participants

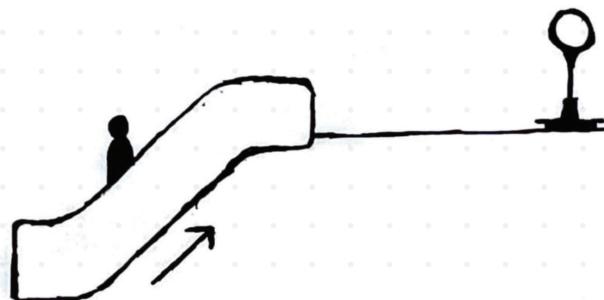
Permanent and temporary inhabitants of the urban and suburban built environment, UI/UX designers, mobile app developers

Infrastructure

Smartphones and wearable devices, digital wayfinding apps

Pattern

For better or worse, the smartphone has become the primary point of contact between individuals and their broader urban environment—an essential navigation tool and the link between the local and the global. Any effort to make the illegible landscape of junkspace more legible must acknowledge this digital layer that mediates our relationship to it. The visual iconography that has supported traditional wayfinding in the built environment—signage as well as design conventions like the street grid—should exist in equivalent (if not identical) form within this digital layer, potentially through video game conventions like respawning checkpoints, which appear arbitrary but impose a spatial logic that helps to structure an otherwise overwhelming landscape.



Joint Ownership

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Problem

The economics of urban living, where space commands a premium price, dictate that city dwellers have limited access to many of the tools and amenities people living in suburban areas find worthwhile to purchase and keep at home. In the city, tools, appliances, and amenities are more likely to be “rented” than owned individually. Laundromats are a familiar example of this, meeting the needs of those nearby who don’t have washing facilities in their apartments. Coworking is a more recent product of the same dynamic, meeting the hybrid demand for traditional office space and home office space that the remote work explosion has created. Many more amenities, including specialized tools and other types of domestic work spaces, have not yet become widely accessible via collective usage, and some are only likely to become available if purchased and owned jointly.

Participants

Individual city dwellers, owners of tools and amenities that could be shared with the local community, small business owners, real estate owners, app developers

Infrastructure

Tools and amenities available for collective ownership or usage, digital protocols that facilitate collective ownership or usage, residential and commercial buildings

Pattern

Collective ownership of urban amenities is an already existing model that can be extended to more domains or fully generalized using protocols. The startup-driven “sharing economy” that solidified in the 2010s was largely confined to profit-driven platforms and ultimately undermined by the growth imperatives of venture capital, but earlier examples like Craigslist and more recent instances of tokenized asset ownership provide better examples of how a protocol-based approach to such collective access might work. A distributed or decentralized infrastructure, properly designed, will minimize the potential for extractive misuse of the system. Additionally, brick-and-mortar businesses can provide localized access to specific services, just as laundromats and coworking spaces have done.

