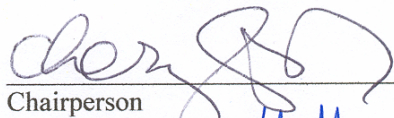



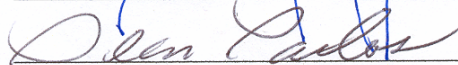
SUBURBAN PLACE?
CONSTRUCTING PLACE IN OVERLAND PARK, KANSAS

BY

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Daniel J. Carey

Submitted to the graduate degree program in American Studies and the
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Chairperson

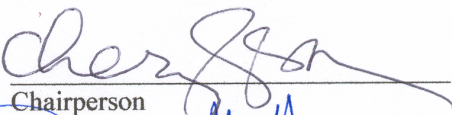
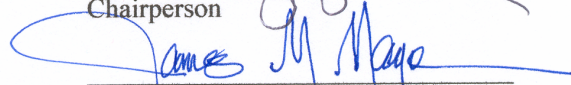
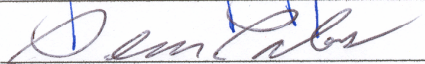



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Committee:


Chairperson



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Suburban Wanderings: A voyage through the built environment of Overland Park, Kansas

Edge City or Sprawl (or “Place”)

As I drive east on Kansas Highway 10 from Lawrence, the landscape changes from rural to suburban. On this autumn evening, the setting sun casts a soft, orange light on the tree-covered bluffs of the valley created by Camp Creek and Cedar Creek. This valley, east of DeSoto, represents the last vestige of rural landscape before the housing subdivisions and office parks begin. The road is normally filled with commuters, especially students from Johnson County returning to the University of Kansas, or Lawrencians traveling to the business parks in Overland Park, Lenexa, or Olathe. For me however, it is Sunday and I am returning home to visit my mother. As I merge onto eastbound Interstate 435, the ring road around the Kansas City Metropolitan area, I head toward the center of Johnson County: Overland Park.

Arguably, the intersection of Interstate 435 and Metcalf Avenue constitutes the heart of Overland Park. My mother lives about two miles southwest of this lightning rod of commercial and corporate activity, near the intersection of 119th Street and U.S. Highway 69, also known as the Overland Parkway. This network of streets, with I-435 and 119th Street as the primary east-west arteries and Metcalf Avenue and the Overland Parkway as the primary north-south arteries, forms the city's geographic center and provides access to the commercial and corporate heart of the city. All four of these arteries funnel commuters from the Greater Kansas City Metropolitan area into the office park of Corporate Woods, the Sprint campus, the

headquarters of Black and Veatch, and several dozen other large office buildings. Additionally, these streets provide connections to the areas' largest hotels, convention centers, shopping malls, strip malls, and retail centers. Furthermore, as in the example of my mother, these routes channel the residents from the surrounding subdivisions into these corporate or commercial centers, or guide them out into the rest of the Metro area. Yet, for all of these analogies to the human body, these "arteries" form less of a central area or heart, but instead connect several isolated hubs into a network of residential, commercial, and business zones.

This is Overland Park, Kansas. Change the street, highway, and corporation names, however, and this could be a suburb of any major metropolitan area. In the 1980s, journalist Joel Garreau famously named areas similar to the ones described above, "Edge Cities." Garreau uses this term to describe the union of residential, commercial, and office space, because traditionally "cities" have served all three of these functions, yet these cities are now located on the "edge," a frontier where new "pioneers" can achieve the American Dream. Edge City's dominant features are copious amounts of office space, interspersed with retail and residential zones, all built within the last thirty years. This physical manifestation of American culture represents what Garreau and other suburban scholars see as a "third wave" of mass, suburban migration. The first wave began after the Second World War and consisted almost entirely of bedroom communities with residents commuting into the central city for jobs and commerce. This changed however in the late 1960s with the migration of commercial space from downtown department stores to suburban

shopping malls, in what scholars call the “mall of America.” Yet, it is not until the late 1970s, when the United States shifted from a primarily industrial economy to a service economy, that Edge Cities are born. This transformation from the Industrial Age to the Information Age created places to locate business and employment opportunities, following cheaper land costs and the available workforce, thus transforming agricultural areas and bedroom communities into new business centers. This rapid shift during the 1970s and 1980s in how Americans live and work produced the dominant form of creating economic centers, not just in the United States, but, worldwide. Furthermore, Garreau argues, the American spirit, rooted in the cultural values of freedom and individuality, helped create Edge Cities. The automobile expands freedom, allowing individuals to make numerous trips in various directions throughout the low-density built environment. This is especially apparent in the late 1970s as women’s liberation movements allowed for a dramatic increase in the number of women in the workforce and an increase in women driving cars. By Garreau’s definition, Overland Park is an Edge City.¹

For residents of Johnson County’s largest Edge City, such as my mother, the highways and arterial roads of Metcalf Avenue, 119th Street, College Boulevard, I-435, and U.S. 69 enable individuals more freedom. These arterial roads connect my mother to hundreds of retail stores, restaurants, and entertainment venues, in addition to several hospitals, doctor’s offices, auto repair shops, and other services, all within a

¹ Joel Garreau, Edge City: Life on the New Frontier (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 4-7 and 111-112. For what Garreau calls the “third wave” of suburbanization, see also K. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier and Muller, Contemporary Suburban America and “Transformation of Bedroom Suburbia into the Outer City.” For the “mall of America,” see Garreau, 4 and William Severini Kowinski, “The Mall of America,” New Times, May 1, 1978.

two-mile radius. If she worked in an office, she would have easy access to thousands of jobs, and if someone visits, the closest hotel is less than a mile away. With her automobile, my mother can visit the dentist's office, fix her car, and have dinner with a friend at three locations in opposite directions from her house, all in a relatively short period, at least in theory. In reality, her job is far from her home, in which she commutes a half an hour each way (on a good day). The roads are congested, and dangerous, with increased travel times. And she has no choice but to use her car, since single-use zoning places the nearest retail stores over a mile away down the busy and often congested 119th Street, with little or no pedestrian accessibility.

The reality of my mother's built environment, and the landscapes of most American suburbs, is what urban designers, Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck call "sprawl." Standardized single-use zoning, creating specialized sectors for housing subdivisions, shopping centers, and office parks, represents the dominant physical characteristic of sprawl. Civic institutions, such as schools, shift from serving as neighborhood focal points to complexes surrounded by parking lots, often unreachable by pedestrians. Massive, yet congested networks of streets, including highways and large arterial roads, connect these land uses. The automobile dominates these landscapes, increasing travel times and making walking dangerous. In America today, sprawl is the dominant landscape. By Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck's definition, Overland Park is an example of sprawl.²

²Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 5-7.

Edge City and sprawl demarcate the polar ends of the suburban dichotomy. However, they are both examples of “placelessness” since these extremes often obfuscate the realities of the suburbs. My project attempts to transcend an examination of suburbs as simply an innovation of the American Spirit or the inevitable downfall of American society. Amazingly, the desire, and the ability, to rise above the oversimplification of suburbs remains deficient in many academic studies. As historian Paul Mattingly comments, “few suburban studies begin without an extraordinarily ritualized mind-set, critical or patronizing of suburban cultures.” While Mattingly argues for examining suburbs as landscapes, through this project, I insist a complete analysis necessitates engaging suburbs utilizing the concept of “place.” Similar to Mattingly, an analysis of one location provides insight into suburbs as a whole, yet primarily serves as an important case study of one particular locale.³

What exactly is “place” or a “sense of place?” Concrete, consensual definitions of “place” are rare. Geography, urban planning, philosophy, psychology, and anthropology, among other disciplines, all have a hard time defining “place” or a “sense of place.” One of the reasons for this disagreement rests in the inherent vagueness of the concept “place.” This is in part due to the complex nature of places themselves as well as the variety between places. For the purpose of this project, “place” is something that we, as humans, experience. According to philosopher Edward Casey, the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant was the first to argue that

³ Paul H. Mattingly, *Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 1.

experience creates knowledge of the world. Kant (and later phenomenology) believed humans experience “place” through the body. Cultural geographers, such as Yi-Fu Tuan, accept this view, claiming, “The human body is the measure of direction, location, and distance.” Concepts of up and down, front and back, and right and left are based in the corporeal. Our senses enable this relationship between the body and the environment, as we see, hear, touch, taste, and smell “place.” Experiential knowledge occurs during our everyday life interactions, requiring us to understand “place” at an intimate level. If nothing else, “place” arises from the perspective of experience.⁴

Yet, to interpret, understand, and become familiar with a place, this sensual level is only the first step. Philosopher Arto Haapala emphasizes within the next two stages, humans “start to recognize the functions and meanings of different buildings and sites.” To understand “place,” it is not enough to experience a locale; instead, true comprehension continues with knowledge of a place’s functions and meanings. Similarly, landscape architect, Robert Thayer, utilized a theoretical framework to understand the ways in which technology shapes landscapes. Thayer’s framework includes three levels: a perceptual dimension, a functional dimension, and a symbolic dimension. Most importantly for both Haapala and Thayer, humans understand places (or elements of places) by interacting on multiple levels, including perceptual, functional, and symbolic. Being an Existential philosopher, Haapala recommends

⁴ For discussions on the definitions of “place” see: Edward S. Casey, “How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time,” *Senses of Place*, ed. Basso, Keith H. and Steven Feld. (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996); Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1977); Casey, 21; Tuan, 44

action. He calls for an interpretation of a landscape based on perceptions, in addition to a comprehension of its function and meaning. “It is interpretation in the hermeneutic sense of living in an environment and making sense of it by acting there, by doing things in the environment, by creating different kinds of connections between matters seen and encountered.” Although the best way for the reader to experience Overland Park necessitates the action of physical experience, the confines of this written project will only allow a virtual tour of the city. To understand Overland Park, Kansas as a “place,” an analysis must begin with a description of the built landscape.⁵

Traveling Down Metcalf Avenue

Although I began my wanderings into Overland Park from the west, most of its growth has occurred to the south. In July of 2005, Overland Park had a population of 166,917, a land area of sixty-three square miles and was the forty-fifth fastest growing city in the United States. The city’s northern border begins at the Wyandotte County line, or 47th Street, while its eastern-most point connects to the Kansas-Missouri state line and its western line for several miles runs along Pflumm Road, the dividing line with the city of Olathe. Currently, the southern boundary extends to 203rd Street, but further annexation remains perpetually imminent. To understand this growth, I will travel to the farthest northerly point in Overland Park

⁵ Arto Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place,” in Andrew Light and Jonathon M. Smith, ed., *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) 41-43; Robert L. Thayer, Jr., “Three Dimensions of Technology in the American Landscape,” *Landscape Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1992, 66.

and travel down the city's "Main Street," Metcalf Avenue. Metcalf represents the city's main economic corridor. It also symbolizes its growth, marking the passing decades chronologically with its built environment. Unfortunately, like many commercial strips in America, Metcalf has become increasingly hard to read. As geographer William Wyckoff explains, "As strip landscapes grow increasingly complex, revealing an accumulating palimpsest of activities and architectures, it becomes more difficult to read their meanings and to interpret their significance in the built environment of the late-twentieth-century American city." Much has changed on Metcalf Avenue, yet much still remains the same. Understanding this commercial corridor and the city itself necessitates direct interaction with a primary arterial road, such as Metcalf Avenue.⁶

Traveling south on Interstate 635 through Kansas City, Kansas, I cross into Johnson County, and thereby Overland Park, as I descend into a steep valley. Below me is Interstate 35, the main link for commuters between the suburbs of Johnson County and downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Before the highway I cross over the railroad tracks of Burlington Northern Santa Fe, one of the main rail lines that made Kansas City a rail hub for nearly one hundred years. After the highway, I traverse Turkey Creek, the body of water that made this small valley. Here is technically where I-635 ends. Ahead of me, up the bluff on the south side, is the beginning of

⁶ 2000 *Population Characteristics*. Overland Park, KS: City of Overland Park, KS. On-line. Available from Internet, http://www.opkansas.org/Bus/Demographics_and_Marketing_Info/popcharacteristics.cfm, accessed April 11, 2008; William K. Wyckoff, "Denver's Aging Commercial Strip," *Geographical Review*, 1992, Vol. 82, No.3, 290.

Metcalf Avenue. Like a seam of ore running through rock, Metcalf Avenue is the commercial vein down the center of Overland Park. Metcalf, which is U.S. Highway 169, runs the length of Overland Park, extending to the Miami County line.

Although this area of the city is commercial in nature, there is a mix of multi-family residential dwellings. In this northern-most segment of the city, two commercial streets bisect Metcalf, Johnson Drive and Shawnee Mission Parkway, the former leading to the Main Street-type downtowns of the cities of Mission to the east and Merriam to the west. Overland Park is only about a mile wide at this point and is predominantly multi-use with gas stations and apartment complexes providing the main staple of land uses. South of Shawnee Mission Parkway, the landscape changes. Residences line both sides of the road for about a mile and a half. This is an older residential part of Overland Park, with most subdivisions dating back to the 1940s and 1950s; however, some buildings remain from previous developments around the turn-of-the-twentieth century.

At 75th Street, Metcalf becomes a commercial strip. Yet, this is not a traditional 1950s strip, instead it is the postmodern strip where the old melds with the new. This is especially evident in this section of Metcalf between 75th Street and 89th Street, since it contains the Overland Park of the early twentieth century, the Overland Park through its heyday as a 1950s commercial strip, and now in its transition to infill, revitalization, and new development, the Overland Park of the early twenty-first century.

Although this blend is apparent in the miles of auto dealerships, auto repair shops, gas stations, restaurants, and the occasional house that line this main thoroughfare, the streetscape itself harkens back to the strips hey-day in the 1950s. The road is a narrow, four-lane street, with no turn lanes, and most of the businesses sit flush against the street. In the postwar era, Alternate 169 Highway became the main north-south artery for most Johnson County residents, yet it was also a vibrant shopping district. The pre-war Art Deco and the Modernistic architecture of the Cold War era that still pepper the contemporary landscape of this section of Metcalf, remind the traveler of this era. The Art Deco movement, popular in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, reacted to past architecture and evoked the spirit of the machine age. The Rio Theatre (originally the Overland Theatre), built in 1946, is a late example of the Art Deco movement of the 1930s. Built by nationally recognized movie house designer, Robert Boller, the Rio mixes the geometric forms of the Art Deco era, as seen in the porthole windows and geometric tile, with material of Modern architecture, including glass block, tubular steel, and pink neon. Even today, with its salmon façade, blue neon lights, and a pink hue shining through glass blocks, the Rio stands as a witness to the wonders of the machine age.⁷

Although this blend of several architectural genres was popular after World War II, the philosophy behind Modern architecture eventually came to dominate most

⁷ *Historic Overland Theater*, 7204 W. 80th Street, Overland Park, KS: City of Overland Park, KS. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.opkansas.org/Gov/History/HistoricOverlandTheater.cfm>, accessed April 11, 2008; "Overland Theater, Johnson County, Ks," National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet. Department of the Interior: National Park Service; Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 54-55, and Christy Davis, "Preserving the Underappreciated: Evaluating Kansas's Modern Architecture," *Kansas Preservation*, Nov/Dec 2000, Vol. 22, No. 6, 1-3.

American commercial strips. The Modern movement in architecture espoused a break from historic styles, demanded the use of modern materials, such as glass, steel, and concrete, and advocated for a design based on the building's function. After the war, Modern architecture, with its boxy design, flat roofs, and corner windows, became prevalent. In the decade following the war, people desired roadside architecture that was utilitarian and plain. The function of the building became known by the design. By the end of the 1950s, tastes changed and "Exaggerated Modern" was born. The Phillips 66 gas station at 82nd and Metcalf exemplifies this style. The basic box, with its flat roof and corner window, became too drab for many motorists. Companies, like Phillips 66, decided to modify these buildings to appeal to customers. As historian Chester Liebs describes a service station almost identical to the one on Metcalf, "the basic box has been cleverly disguised with a canted visual front and soaring canopy—both hallmarks of the Exaggerated Modern."⁸ Although, many of the buildings from this era were removed or have fallen into dereliction, structures like the Phillips 66 remind us that many of these buildings were meant as advertisements on a commercial strip with speeding cars.

Other vestiges from the Modern era were the extravagant signs popular during the 1950s and 1960s. As Liebs notes, "during this period, a new genre of popular imagery, inspired by science and technology, also appeared." This is evident in the amoeba-shaped sign at the White Haven Motor Lodge influenced most probably by advances in cell-biology, in addition to, the satellite-shaped globe on the sign at the

⁸ Liebs, 112.

Glenwood Theatre, built in 1969, possibly influenced by the 1957 launch of the first human-made satellite, Sputnik. These signs and buildings, such as the Rio Theatre and the Phillip 66 station, are what remain from this era, yet Metcalf Avenue also has reminders of Overland Park's beginnings, in addition to, the influences of contemporary changes.⁹

Overland Park's beginnings, around the turn of the twentieth century, are still visible in the area known as downtown. Situated between 79th and 80th Streets and a few blocks west of Metcalf, Overland Park's first commercial center began in 1906 with the coming of the Kansas-Missouri Interurban railway, a commuter train connecting the urban Kansas City with the bucolic Johnson County. Here, a small pre-existing farming community blossomed into a suburban settlement with a small business district to sustain them. After World War II, when the major north-south road, previously named Washington Cross Road, became U.S. 169 the new commercial strip incorporated this old commercial center and its surrounding residential neighborhoods. Today, Santa Fe Drive, downtown Overland Park's "Main Street," with its narrow streets, contiguous facades, and tree-lined sidewalks, has nearly been swallowed-up by the gas stations and auto malls of Metcalf Avenue.

The changing times manifest themselves in part through 1980s auto dealerships, yet also through dereliction and infill. Some of the earliest commercial developments along Metcalf Avenue have fallen into dereliction and either, remain standing, a grim reminder of the blight present in many inner-ring suburbs, or

⁹ Liebs, 64.

someone tears them down, replacing them with new buildings. This “someone” varies depending on circumstance; yet usually includes the city and large, national or local corporations, who often perceive the space occupied by a 1950s-style strip of shops as prime real estate. This is apparent on the southwest corner of 75th Street and Metcalf where the multinational chain, Walgreens, replaced older storefronts with parking lots and their own version of a cookie cutter building. In this particular case, Walgreens typically emulates the look of the Streamline Moderne architecture, popular in the 1930s. This style emphasized rounded corners with lines of flow emulating motion, meant to invoke notions of speed and prosperity. Although it has the appearance of Streamline Moderne, the Walgreens building, built in the 1990s, lacks the historical context of the early automobile age and emphasis on prosperity during a time of economic upheaval.¹⁰

By the 1960s, the Strip moved south of 89th Street, spilling off the high ground where the old town of Overland Park lay and down into the Indian Creek valley to the south. At the cross-streets of 95th Street and Metcalf Avenue, developers designed and built Johnson County’s first indoor shopping mall, Metcalf South. Following the path of other cities across the country, Metcalf Avenue supported the newest in retail design. This once prosperous mall has now become outdated, with limited retail offerings compared to its beginnings. Its massive parking lots are sprawling wastelands speckled with potholes and light poles, a sad reminder of the hey-day of this, and thousands of similar malls. Amazingly, Sears and the Jones

¹⁰ Characteristics of Streamline Moderne can be found in Liebs, 55-57.

Store Company, the mall's two anchors, remain, along with several small stores within the mall. However, businesses, capitalizing on the low rent, converted large portions of retail space into offices.

This is not to say the area around 95th and Metcalf is not booming economically, in fact, while some of its late 1960s era strips are still successful, large upscale super-markets, such as Whole Foods and “big box” stores, like Home Depot, have moved into the area. Although these transformations occurred within the last decade, previous alterations included two office towers built in the 1980s and the Regency Park outdoor shopping center built in the 1990s. Yet, this economic success came at a price. The Glenwood Theatre, with its famous Sputnik-style sign, once stood where the Whole Foods now stands. In the late 1990s, despite popular dissent, “progress” and economic development prevailed. Yet, the Glenwood lives on. A local theater company remodeled the old Metcalf Mall Theater with the Glenwood's interior, temporarily memorializing what some considered a local treasure. For now, 95th and Metcalf remains economically viable, however, the worm presence of Metcalf South Mall casts a shadow over this success. As Overland Park expands to the south, what will happen to this commercial dinosaur? Is it doomed to the wrecking ball? This icon to a previous era of one-stop shopping remains standing (at the moment) but begs for city officials and proponents of “growth” to re-examine Overland Park's commercial future.

South of the mall, the last vestige of residential neighborhoods flanks the avenue. Only the cross street of 99th Street enables access to these houses, yet they

provide a repose of green complemented by a dry creek bed (except of course during heavy rains) leading down into Indian Creek. Once I cross the creek and then 103rd street, commercial strips, chain restaurants, gas stations, and car dealerships resume their dominance on the landscape, culminating with the junctures of I-435 and College Boulevard. This is the heart of Overland Park.

Hundreds of retail shops, office buildings, hotels, motels, and meeting facilities are all within a square mile of the intersection of I-435 and Metcalf Avenue. This junction houses nearly one dozen large hotels, including the ten-story Overland Park Marriott and the twenty-story Sheraton, the tallest building in the city and one of the tallest in the state. The area's hotels flourished after November of 2002 with the opening of the Overland Park Convention Center adjacent to the Sheraton. These two buildings alone provided over one thousand square feet of meeting space and enabled Overland Park to compete with Kansas City, Missouri for various exhibitions such as bridal shows, arts and craft fairs, and numerous fundraisers and balls, including the 2006 and 2007 Kansas Alumni Association's Rock Chalk Ball.¹¹

Additionally, several large office buildings and an abundance of restaurants and entertainment establishment are located in this area, catering to the office and tourist crowds. Most of the office buildings flank College Boulevard both east and west of Metcalf Avenue, yet to the west, the boulevard leads to Overland Park's largest business park: Corporate Woods. Beginning in 1974, business enterprises, in

¹¹ 2002-2004, "OPCC" Overland Park, KS: Overland Park Convention Center. On-line. Available from Internet, http://www.opconventioncenter.com/noframes/nf_content/about/floorplans.asp, accessed on April 11, 2008.

conjunction with city officials, began creating Overland Park's premier, master-planned business park. Over the next thirty years, corporations constructed over two-dozen buildings, with over two million square feet of office space. The "business park" actually is a park, since the buildings spread over several square miles, with Indian Creek, access roads, and pedestrian/bike paths meandering through the one hundred and ninety-three acres of green space. Corporate Woods exemplifies office trends that began in the 1970s and continue to this day, receiving accolades such as "a genius concept" and an office park that "sets a standard." Its success hinged upon its suburban qualities, including the mixture of skyscrapers and open green space, the easy access to major highway interchanges, and the close proximity to ample amounts of shopping centers, restaurants, and hotels.¹²

Back on Metcalf Avenue, the road mounts the southern side of the Indian Creek basin and crosses 119th Street where "big box" retail establishments spill across the landscape. The seemingly endless expanses of parking lots and gigantic "mega-stores" lie far away from the now four-lane parkway divided by a grassy median complete with doublewide turn lanes. The main architectural component of these buildings is their incredibly large signage, enabling the passer-by to assess if the retail center is worthy of a break in their journey. This new retail strip development is a departure from the internal, controlled environment of the shopping mall. Once again, the consumer must approach the strip from the outside, yet it is a departure

¹² Ann Wilke, "Corporate Woods: Vision, place, time converge into pacesetter among business parks," Johnson County Sun, 21 April 2005, p. 1E and 4E. For stats on office development south of I-435, see http://www.opkansas.org/_Assets%5Cpds%5Cadr%5Cnonres_dev.pdf

from the traditional strip since the doors of these buildings face gigantic parking lots with access roads, while pedestrian mobility from one store to the next is limited. This design is the latest advancement and the current pinnacle in the progression of the suburbs' spatial expansion.

Newer residents to Overland Park often see this intersection as the heart of Overland Park, and arguably so. Not only does this area provide almost all of the essential retail and entertainment facilities most suburbanites desire, it also houses some of the city's largest employers, including the engineering firm Black and Veatch and just to the east on 119th Street, the world headquarters for the telecommunications giant: Sprint. This two hundred and forty-acre campus has twenty-two buildings, sixteen parking garages, an eight-story illuminated clock tower that plays thirty different "songs," two food courts, a childcare facility, an indoor fitness center, outdoor recreational facilities, including a softball diamond and volleyball courts, and retail shops, including a bank, hair salon, florist, convenience store, and a dry cleaner. The Sprint campus is so large that it has its own zip code. It truly is a city, inside a city. Overland Park's largest employer purchased the land in 1991, began building in 1997, dedicated the Sprint campus on October 1, 1999, and by 2004 had moved over fourteen thousand employees into the office complex. With nearly four million square feet of office and retail space, the campus is two and a half times larger than Corporate Woods, yet sixty percent of the total acreage is green space, including jogging trails and a lake. Ironically, the telecommunication giant who pioneered cellular technology, enabling Americans to have more interaction

across larger amounts of space, chose to not only move most of its employees to the campus, Sprint intentionally concentrated the buildings, allowing anyone to walk anywhere in ten minutes, thus facilitating face-to-face communication. For some, the Sprint campus is a boon, for others, it contributes to the traffic nightmare that is 119th Street.¹³

For the most part, Johnson Countians see Sprint as a benefit. Steve Rose, Chairman of the Johnson County Sun newspaper claimed on the eve of Sprint's first employees moving into the campus, "If you asked what have been the top historical events in the 50 years since we have been publishing this newspaper in Johnson County, I would put Sprint's campus opening in the top three." Rose goes on to laud the city and Sprint, predicting the impact on local retail, the schools, the tax base, and "virtually every aspect of our community." Rose was quite the supporter of the project, which included millions of dollars in tax abatements and revenue bonds from the City of Overland Park. For people like Rose, Sprint provided legitimacy and validity to Overland Park's claim to be a great place to live and work.¹⁴

However, not everyone approved of the Sprint campus, or at least how Overland Park officials handled the project. The size of the Sprint campus forced Overland Park and its neighbor to the east, Leawood, and to widen Nall Avenue. Sprint contributed two million dollars to the project, with Leawood subsidizing one

¹³ "Sprint City," Johnson County Sun, 30 July 1997, p. 3A; Eric Palmer, "Sprint makes history with its headquarters," Kansas City Star, 7 December 1997, p. A-1, A-30, A-31; Terri Linn, "Sprint Campus Opens," Johnson County Sun, 14 July 1999, p. 1, 2; 2008. *World Headquarters*. Overland Park, KS: Sprint. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.sprint.com/hr/worldheadquarters.html>, accessed April 11, 2008.

¹⁴ Steve Rose, "History in the Making," Johnson County Sun, 14 July 1999; Monica Mathes, "Sprint: Company's presence legitimizes county's identity," Johnson County Sun, p. 20, 21.

and a half million dollars for their portion, yet according to City Councilman Adam Bold, his city would only benefit marginally. When authorities in both cities began squabbling over the funding structure, Bold retorted in the Opinion page of the *Sun*, “Leawood is not dragging our feet. We are being diligent in the face of a bullying neighbor with a really good public relations department.” In the end, the two municipalities resolved the matter, however, this was not the first time, nor would it be the last time someone would accuse Overland Park of being a bully.¹⁵

Back to the frightening intersection of Metcalf Avenue and 119th Street, rush hour traffic seems like Dante’s Ninth Circle of Hell. At this point Metcalf Avenue splits, forming Blue Valley Parkway to the west, connecting Alternate 169 back to Highway 69 heading south into Miami County, and “old” Metcalf Avenue, as locals once called it, to the east. Although it takes some maneuvering, we will proceed down “old” Metcalf, into the great unknown of “new” Overland Park.

Although new residential and commercial developments fill most of the first two miles of Metcalf south of 119th street, the farther south one travels, we begin to understand why residents call this “old” Metcalf. Between 119th and 143rd Streets, “luxury” apartments, condominiums, and town homes, single-family McMansions surrounding the Deer Creek golf course, Saint Luke’s Hospital’s southern facility, and a multitude of retail occupy most of the landscape. There are the occasional undeveloped plots, yet most of those are currently undergoing some type of construction. By the time we reach 151st Street, evidence of the “old” enters our

¹⁵ Adam Bold, “Sprint won’t benefit Leawood,” *Johnson County Sun*, 12 March 1999, p. 7A; John Shultz, “Sprint campus set to alter county’s landscape,” *Kansas City Star*, 26 June 1999, p. 4.

view. It begins with the former Stanley high school building, now an administrative building for the Blue Valley District and evidence of single-family dwellings from the 1950s and 1970s. Yet, at 151st Street, the turn-of-the-twentieth century flower shop, formerly the Stanley Bank building, and another commercial building from the same era occupy the southeast corner. With a large Price Chopper grocery store and a Starbucks kitty-corner from these relics of the past, one's curiosity peaks while waiting for the lights to change on four turn lanes and four through lanes, in both directions.

The corner of 151st Street and Metcalf was once home to the unincorporated town of Stanley. Although residents and township officials attempted for years to incorporate the town, Johnson County Commissioners denied their requests. Beginning in 1971, the city of Overland Park began annexing parts of Stanley. After a heated battle in 1985 and 1986, Overland Park annexed the old town, first settled in 1866. Yet, this was only the first of several battles over this historic corner. The next came in 1988, when the city of Overland Park forced the area to change its street signs. Main Street became Metcalf and 2nd Street became 151st Street. After residents raised hackles, the city reached a compromise: two names for each street, with the official name in white-on-green signs and the locally preferred name in white-on-brown signs. City officials patted themselves on the back, as they continued growth and progress, yet allowed for history and local flavor. This was short-lived however, since by 1994 the street widening project on both Metcalf and 151st threatened to tear down all of the historic buildings on the southeast corner. In the

end, the city moved the buildings (perceived of course as a successful compromise), yet the dual street signs no longer exist and the massive intersection makes the turn-of-the twentieth century buildings look out of place. Like many things in southern Overland Park, it is only a matter of time before developers make way for a strip mall.¹⁶

South of this historic corner, new houses and commercial developments dominate the landscape culminating in a Walmart Super Center at the 159th Street and Metcalf. Although this Walmart differs from the traditional “big box” design, it still symbolizes the suburban growth that manifested on this corner. Presently, however, this Walmart is the last true suburban development on Metcalf. After 159th Street, Metcalf narrows into a two-lane county road with farms, barns, and farmhouses. Although several exurban estates or mansions break this bucolic environment, the land for the most part remains rural. At 183rd Street, we end our trip as it began, outside of Overland Park’s city limits. Continuing down Metcalf however, the small, unincorporated town of Stilwell becomes evident around 199th Street. Although Overland Park’s southern boundary east of Metcalf ends at 183rd Street, recently annexed land to the west of Highway 69 extends segments of the city south to 203rd Street. Residents of Stilwell worry of future annexation as the City of Overland Park works to stretch its border to 215th Street, the Miami County Line. It seems only a

¹⁶ Anne Lamoy, “Stanley Community retains its own identity,” The Southern Johnson County Star, July 14, 1989, p. 8; Norm Ledgin, “Two-name street signs in old Stanley represent compromise and pride,” Johnson County Star, May 4, 1988, p. 1; Phil LaCerte and Jacuie Lehatto, “Big Changes in Old Stanley,” Sun Newspapers, October 5, 1994, p. 1A.

matter of time before Overland Park's city limits trail its main commercial road, Metcalf Avenue, the length of Johnson County.

Components of Place

Thus, our virtual tour of Overland Park ends. Yet, as Haapala and Thayer acknowledge, the perceptual is only the beginning to understand "place." In the early twenty-first century, the written historical narrative of Overland Park and Johnson County experienced a Renaissance with the publication of two coffee table-style books by two historical institutions. *Historic Overland Park: An Illustrated History*, published by the Overland Park Historical Society in 2004 and *Johnson County, Kansas: A Pictorial History, 1825-2005*, published by the Johnson County Museum in 2006, became the first published materials on the county in almost ninety years. These necessary contributions to Overland Park's history focused on a narrative over time with an emphasis on three themes: people, land, and economics. Economics tied these themes together, as Mindi Love, the Director of the Johnson County Museums writes, "The final common theme, economics, recounts the struggles and successes of how *people* made a living on this *land* (italics mine)." ¹⁷ These works made the history of Overland Park accessible to a broad, public audience and underscore theorists demands to also examine the functions and symbols of "place."

Although my project incorporates the histories of Overland Park, its main purpose is to examine an exemplary twenty-first century American suburb through

¹⁷ Mindi C. Love, *Johnson County, Kansas: A Pictorial History, 1825-2005*, (Shawnee, Kansas: Johnson County Museum, 2006), p. 1.

the lens of “place.” Utilizing newspaper articles, meeting minutes of the Overland Park city council and planning commission, Internet websites, historical atlases, and other secondary sources, I attempt to locate “place” in Overland Park. I have analyzed these sources, carefully considering the language people used as they talk about places and attempt to create a “sense of place.” At the forefront of this search for “place” is the dichotomy of “other-directed places” and “topophilia.” Geographer J.B. Jackson, in his 1970 book, *Landscapes: Selected Writings of J. B. Jackson*, labeled certain types of buildings, “other-directed architecture,” which was essentially, “architecture which is deliberately directed towards outsiders, spectators, passers-by, and above all consumers.” Another geographer, Edward Relph expanded upon Jackson’s concept claiming “other-directed architecture” inevitably led to “other-directed places.” For Relph, and many other academics, suburbs like Overland Park had a plethora of “other-directed places.” These types of places are most apparent when examining one of the functions of suburbs: economics. The creation of markets, business boosterism, and economic development often, yet not always, create “other-directed places.”¹⁸

Conversely, on the opposite side of this dichotomy, “topophilia” often emerges when examining the symbolic nature of “place.” Here, the cultural forces that construct and maintain “place,” especially manifested in the creation of identity, both individual and communal, are rooted in Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of “topophilia,” or “the affective bond between people and place.” This love of “place” enables even

¹⁸ Relph, 93, 118.

suburbanites, like those in Overland Park, to possess an identity with “place.” Yet, similar to the binaries of Edge City and sprawl, these binaries help form a continuum, in which many spaces in Overland Park will be seen as possessing both elements of “other-directed architecture” and “topophilia.” Sometimes the functional and symbolic characteristics of “place” work in tandem as seen in the revitalization of downtown Overland Park in chapter two, while other times, these characteristics clash, apparent in the fight over the Glenwood Theatre in the third chapter.¹⁹

This project attempts to utilize a definition of “place” that ties human experience to the built environment, thus enabling a suburban landscape history of Overland Park. This began with this introduction, as we journeyed down Overland Park’s primary commercial artery. This excursion enabled an experiential perspective on “place.” However, in the remaining chapters, I will examine the functions and meanings of this built landscape and how they lead to the creation of “place.” The first chapter illustrates the role history plays in creating “place.” This history, most apparent in the area known as downtown Overland Park, began during the turn-of-the-twentieth century. Although one’s opportunities for experiencing history dramatically increases in the unique built environment of downtown, this history remains elusive because it is farthest from our memory. Of course, “place” is only the beginning of this search for the past, although the tools of the philosopher, geographer, and architect are invoked to analyze the contemporary built landscape and to understand downtown Overland Park as a “place;” it is not until the tools of the

¹⁹ Yi-Fu Tuan, Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values (NY,NY: Columbia University Press, 1974), 4.

historian, through archival research, are implemented that the suburban landscape history unfolds. This history, represented by three eras of displacement, was imprinted on the land beneath the pavement.

The second chapter examines the deterioration of northern Overland Park, similar to other inner-ring suburbs across the nation. We follow a group of city officials and local business owners as they revitalize the old downtown area, attempting to create “place” as they generate economic development. Yet, a tension arises between economic development and community identity. Utilizing Relph’s identity of place, this chapter argues for an analysis of the physical, functional, and symbolic entities that make “place,” examining how the tensions with economic development are resolved in all three dimensions. In the end, those who revitalized downtown Overland Park created physical, functional and symbolic manifestations of economic patterns and community identity. This balance between marketing scheme and the collective soul of the community necessitates utilizing a continuum provided by Relph, where downtown Overland Park can be viewed from multiple perspectives as having attributes of both “place” and “placelessness.”

Utilizing Relph’s continuum, the last chapter develops the tale of three theaters in Overland Park: The Overland, the Glenwood, and the Glenwood Arts. An investigation into these theaters uncovers tensions between community building and economic development, revealing that citizens of Overland Park held contradictory views about “place.” The demise of the Glenwood Theatre brought these contested views to the surface and revealed a stronger “sense of place” than many people

expected. Although many current manifestations of economic development destroy “place” and perpetuate “placelessness,” as seen in the Glenwood, the new Glenwood Arts and the new Overland, the Rio, attempt to recreate “place” in Overland Park and prove that community and economic development are compatible.

Places Worth Caring About

Many scholars, writers, and ordinary people believe suburban landscapes, like Overland Park, have no “sense of place.” They see the suburban built landscape and the culture it represents as vacuous, shallow, and hollow. The most ardent of these authors is James Howard Kunstler. The former fiction writer-turned urban critic labeled postwar American landscapes, “the geography of nowhere.” Kunstler’s central point in his three books on the subject is “that a land made up of places not worth caring about will sooner or later become a nation not worth defending (or a way of life not worth carrying on).” In short, America’s lack of “place” may inevitably lead to its downfall. In the end, however, Kunstler negates people’s experiences and the objects, or built landscape created by these experiences.²⁰

Although I admire Kunstler’s critiques, especially since some are extremely valid, his denial of my own experiences and the rejection of the buildings I grew up with leads me to repudiate a complete denunciation of suburbs. The built landscape of Overland Park contains memories of my life. I can recall the hours spent at Metcalf South mall, hanging out with friends, throwing coins in the three-story

²⁰James Howard Kunstler, The City in Mind: Notes on the Urban Condition (NY, NY: The Free Press, 2001), xii

fountain that graces its central atrium. I have fond memories of skipping first hour in high school to visit John's Space Age Donuts on Metcalf Avenue (where they always closed once all the donuts were sold—usually around eleven in the morning). To this day, I still reminisce about seeing the movies that shaped my childhood, like “Return of the Jedi” in the Art Moderne-style Glenwood Theatre, and going with my father to Red's barbershop in downtown Overland Park for the cheapest haircut in town. In addition, I recall working at the “Ken-Taco-Hut” (the nickname for the combined Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut) at 119th and Metcalf in the early 1990s long before the miles of shopping centers sprawled across the landscape. Although these are personal recollections, all of these memories represent the childhoods of many people who grew-up in the suburbs. Their experiences are as real and significant as my own and deserve recognition.

Several scholars choose to recognize the experience of those who live in the suburbs, yet they remain critical. The best work that examines postwar American suburbs is Edward Relph's 1976 work, *Place and Placelessness*. Although critical of most suburban landscapes, Relph acknowledges experiences such as my own, linking them in part to identity formation. Suburbs can and do possess “place,” and to discount them leads to “placelessness.” Relph emphasizes, “If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of [hu]man's existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and groups of people, then it is important that the means of experiencing, creating, and maintaining significant places are not lost.” Today, suburban Americans experience, create, and maintain “place” by participating

in a film festival or visiting a farmer's market, by building a community center or rehabilitating an old theater, and by preserving an old building or creating a historic walking tour.²¹

Although suburbs may possess “place,” our current social, political and economic systems constantly threaten the eradication of “place.” Relph cautions about the loss of “place” and the creation of “placelessness.” He warns, “there are many signs that these very means [of experiencing, creating, and maintaining places] are disappearing and that “placelessness”—the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of place—is now a dominant force.” Thirty years later, “placelessness” is the dominant force. The placeless commercial and residential architecture emblematic of the twenty-first century dominates the suburban, rural, and urban landscapes of this country. Significant places are disappearing.

Yet, Relph argues, “place” and “placelessness” are not binaries, instead they are ends of a continuum. Similar to the terms “Edge City” or “sprawl,” cities such as Overland Park are not one or the other, instead they exist somewhere along that spectrum. By examining the economic functions of Overland Park, and the “other-directed architecture” often created by those functions, in addition to the cultural functions, and the experience of “topophilia” many of its residents feel towards the suburb, we can locate a “sense of place” for Overland Park. We should stop neglecting the suburbs, because to simply denounce them as monotonous, conforming sprawl only perpetuates continued misunderstanding. Instead, we should begin a

²¹ Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 6.

more detailed investigation into suburbs like Overland Park, not only to understand their significance as places, but also to fully comprehend their placeless qualities. The following chapters will examine how people create “place” in Overland Park through its history, through revitalization projects, and through contestation.²²

²² Ibid.

Chapter 1

Historic Place: An elusive history exposed

The Story of Places

The histories of the American built environment begin with the stories of places. Most of these stories are accessible, through film, literature, historical accounts, and other artistic and historical forms. For the most part, an abundance of medium enables a person to access the history of the traditional city. For example, the narrative of New York City unfolds through the paintings of the Ashcan school, via the photography of Carl Van Vechten or Alfred Stieglitz, in the films of Woody Allen and Spike Lee, through the novels and poetry of Claude McKay and Edith Wharton, and in the swinging sounds of Duke Ellington. Furthermore, this great metropolis has a long record of historicization, with a deep archival record and a countless number of monographs exposing its rich history. Lastly, the city's architecture, streetscapes, and natural environments successfully transmit the heritage of New York City. All of these physical elements and mediums enable a person to glean a picture of the historic landscape of a "place" such as New York City.

Regardless of the pervasiveness of suburban landscapes described in the last chapter, the history of suburbs is often elusive. Compared to its urban counterpart, the story of a suburb such as Overland Park most often proves deficient in the quantity of sources. Of course, novels and movies take place in the suburbs, in addition, contemporary art and music has suburban themes. These mediums, however, are rarely rooted in place. Instead, they focus on suburbs' "anywhere"

aspects and shun the tangible or the historical. A wonderful example of this is Tim Burton's 1990 film *Edward Scissorhands*. Burton's setting of identical, "ticky-tacky," pastel colored houses with Dianne Wiest's character selling Avon door-to-door, purportedly mocks the planned community of Valencia, home of Burton's alma mater, the California Institute of the Arts. However, no details in the film allude to this, thereby obfuscating any concrete picture of Valencia as a "place." Instead, the film, similar to most stories set in the suburbs, is a critique on all suburbs, not any particular one. Therefore, any attempt to understand a specific suburban place through literature, visual arts, films, and music falls short of a similar inquiry into an urban environment. In other words, unlike the "sense of place" created in Woody Allen's *Manhattan*, which provides a glimpse--albeit a narrow, constructed glimpse--into New York City, Burton's film fails to create a "sense of place" for Valencia, California.

Most "sense of place" studies go beyond the stories told through works of art and fiction, instead necessitating historical inquiry. Historians, both amateur and academic, provide a detailed narrative of most American cities. These works help construct a "sense of place" through history. Yet, besides a few coffee-table books of various suburbs, few academic works focus on specific suburban histories. This is not for a lack of resources. In the case of Johnson County, there is a surplus of archival records, including newspaper articles, oral histories, government documents, and early histories, to name a few. Although potentially not as rich as the histories of

urban places, suburbs have history. Suburban historians should follow the traditions of urban historians, as seen in the historicization of Kansas City, Missouri.

Three historians have examined the history of Kansas City in its defining moments during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: Richard Fowler, Henry Haskell, and William Worley. These historians examined Kansas City during its transformation onto the national scene, as it shifted from a “cow town” to a regional powerhouse. They focused on the key players and institutions that shaped the city, in addition to the natural and technological events that occurred. This model was typical of urban histories, yet they concentrated substantially on the built environment, one of Kansas City’s most distinguishing features. Briefly, let us visit the historical landscape of Kansas City, Missouri.

At the end of the nineteenth-century, the driving factor in creating civic unity and developing a cohesive built environment that created “place” in Kansas City was its Park and Boulevard system, a comprehensive public works plan that gave the city a national reputation as “a good place to live.” Two events made this form of centralized planning possible: an alliance between wealthy elites and machine politicians, and a natural disaster. August R. Meyer, a prominent businessman and William Rockhill Nelson, the owner-publisher of the *Kansas City Star*, the city’s leading newspaper, pushed for a system of parks and boulevards that would enable Kansas City to shed its image as a “Cow Town.” As early as 1881, Nelson and Meyer began formulating a plan that would not come into fruition until the 1910s, after a third person joined the Nelson/Meyer team: landscape architect George

Kessler. When the mayor established the Park and Boulevard Board of Commissioners in 1892, Kessler became the Board's General Secretary. The following year, the Board presented the Park and Boulevard plan that would influence the shape and design of Kansas City for the next half century. In 1895, the citizens of Kansas City, Missouri voted on an amendment to the city's charter that proposed a tax system that allowed for a special, multi-year assessment of taxes based on park districts. These taxes funded the enormous public works projects proposed by the Park and Boulevard plan. An unlikely coalition between the wealthy elites that supported Nelson and Meyer, and the working class, represented by City Councilman, Jim Pendergast, a saloon owner in the West Bottoms, made this tax on the wealthier members of the community possible. The elite members of the coalition benefited by gaining political and cultural power, especially Nelson, in addition to gaining a beautiful, bucolic city where their luxurious homes would be located in the pastoral setting of parks and boulevards, not the filth of the typical nineteenth-century city. In addition, the working class benefited, since the public projects required large amounts of workers, providing jobs for the unemployed during the depression of the 1890s.²³

The second factor that ensured the success of the Park and Boulevard plan was the Kansas River flood of 1903. This flood paralyzed the city, wiping out its water and electrical supply, destroying sixteen of the seventeen bridges over the Kansas River and left 22,000 people homeless. In the end, the flood caused fifteen

²³ Richard B. Fowler and Henry C. Haskell, Jr. City of the Future: The Story of Kansas City, 1850-1950 (Kansas City, Missouri: Frank Glen Publishing Co., Inc., 1950) 74, 75, 120; William S. Worley, A Brief History of the Kansas City Region (Unpublished draft, 1994) 35,36

million dollars worth of damage, submerging the Union Railroad depot and its rail yards, the stockyards, and much of the meat packing industry. The city was quick to rebuild, with most of the development expanding the city to the south. The means for accomplishing this expansion were created a decade earlier with the Parks and Boulevard Commission. As historians Fowler and Haskell claim, “The years 1900 to 1910 produced a park and boulevard system from dump heaps, from tangled expanses of open fields and woods, from shanty towns.” By 1910, the parks and boulevard system spread as far south as Swope Park, the newly created 1,334-acre park with an entrance at Swope Parkway and present-day Meyer Boulevard. Yet, most of the development by 1910 stopped just south of Brush Creek (approximately 47th Street). The city spent over five million dollars acquiring land for parks and parkways, and three million dollars on road improvements. These natural and socio-political forces altered the built environment of Kansas City, transforming the city and leaving a lasting impact still visible today.²⁴

The French civic planner, Baron Haussmann influenced the design of Kansas City with his straight, wide boulevards and open intersections, decorated with monumental sculpture or important buildings, replacing the squalor of Medieval Paris and creating a rational city. Haussmann’s rational plan eventually crossed the Atlantic to the United States during the last decade of the nineteenth century and manifested itself in the City Beautiful movement. Designers of Kansas City,

²⁴ Fowler, 95, for a complete inventory of works completed by Kessler and his colleague Henry Wright from 1900 to 1909 under the auspice of the Parks and Boulevard system, see William Worley, “Kansas City architects, George Kessler, Henry Wright, and Sid and Herbert Hare,” *Kansas History*, Volume 20, Number 3, Autumn 1997, 200. Also, for 1903 flood details, see Fowler, 93-94.

Missouri, such as Kessler, Henry Wright, Sid and Herbert Hare, and later J.C. Nichols, embraced the tenets of the City Beautiful movement, especially the use of parks. The wide, green medians of the Paseo Boulevard, Ward Parkway, and Swope Parkway, filled with statues and fountains and lined with regal mansions, followed the tenets of Haussmann's rational plan in a green, landscaped environment. The city, with its official nickname, the City of Fountains, claims to have more fountains than any city in the world, except Rome. Similarly, it also claims to have more boulevards than any city except Paris, with an informal nickname of "Paris on the Plains." Driving through the streets of Kansas City, one gets the sense of organization and beauty. Kansas City's built landscape creates a "sense of place."²⁵

Through this brief history of an era in Kansas City's history, I intended to shed light on the culture of historicization that many cities possess. Academics and popular historians have produced numerous histories of most major American cities. Yet few, if any, of these histories investigates a city's history through its built environment or by utilizing the concept of "place." Practitioners of cultural landscape studies successfully examine the built environment by focusing on the cultural components of particular locations, yet, most of these "sense of place" studies center on rural, pre-industrial landscapes, with little scholarship on the urban, and even less on the suburban. Furthermore, historians have examined American suburbs over the last half-century, with a flurry of monographs and articles in the last ten

²⁵ Laren Mahoney. 2005. *'City of Fountains' Indeed*. KCMO: Kansas City Convention and Visitors Association. On-line. Available from Internet, http://www.visitkc.com/mediaroom/news_release_detail.aspx?NewsID=37, accessed April 11, 2008.

years, however, the number of case studies is limited. This deficiency of academic studies on specific suburbs complicates the elusive nature of their histories and contributes to the lack of connection many feel towards suburbs like Overland Park. This becomes apparent when comparing the number of academic works examining Kansas City versus the number on Overland Park or even Johnson County. Furthermore, popular works, such as *Geography of Nowhere* and *Edge City*, are often reductionist and polemic, either generically heralding the potential loss of meaningful public space or lauding the most recent manifestations of suburbia.²⁶

Yet, the history of suburbs like Overland Park does have meaning and is worthy of study, particularly given the large and growing population that calls it home. Overland Park's built environment is not an historical void; instead, it offers insight into the past. Since many academic studies of suburban places and their histories are lacking, these conditions often necessitate a person to access a suburb's history through its built environment, if not alone, then coupled with archival records. Conditions are ripe for a new suburban landscape history. This approach combines an analysis of space and design utilized by architects or practitioners of cultural landscape studies, with the tools of the social historian; an investigation of the built environment with an exploration of the archives. It requires examining history

²⁶ For cultural landscape studies and their focus on the rural, preindustrial landscape, see J. B. Jackson's essays in *Landscape*, as well as Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984) in addition to Donald Meinig, The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). For more recent work, see Michael Conzen, ed., The Making of the American Landscape (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). For studies of place that also focus on the rural or preindustrial, see Keith H. Basso and Steven Feld ed., Senses of Place (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996). For studies on specific suburbs, such as Leonia, New Jersey, see Paul H. Mattingly, Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

through the lens of “place.” Tapping into “place” we can find the history of Overland Park, yet utilizing the history of this community, we can access its “sense of place.” As geographer D.W. Meinig proclaimed, “Places are created by history.” For many geographers, and now historians, there is a clear link between history and “place.” This chapter provides a historical overview or suburban landscape history of downtown Overland Park.²⁷

Academics often perceive these historical endeavors, especially those utilizing a “sense of place,” as efforts in unabashed “topophilia,” and for good reason. Many of these histories are implemented by the Chamber of Commerce or the Convention and Visitors Bureaus to do nothing more than attract new businesses, residents, or tourists. Often they perpetuate the myths of the city and obfuscate the histories of minorities or those marginalized by the dominant history. Yet, “sense of place” histories can also be histories of “other-directed places.” The history of a certain place often captures what used to be there, or the built environment of a previous era. A great example of this are the recent coffee table books, often entitled “Then and Now.”²⁸ Although these books prey upon local’s sense of “topophilia,” they also raise the awareness of what the often uniform architecture of Walgreens and Costco replaced. As stated in the introduction of this project, this history of Overland Park provides a spectrum between “topophilia” and “other-directed places.” This history falls somewhere between the two.

²⁷ D.W. Meinig, “The Continuous Shaping of America: A Prospectus for Geographers and Historians,” *American Historical Review* 83 (1978): 1205.

²⁸ The *Kansas City Star* produced two such books in the last seven years entitled, Kansas City: Then and Now and Kansas City: Then and Now, 2.

The history of Overland Park is a history of displacement, which occurred in three eras: the effacement of Native American landscapes, the obfuscation of the agrarian society's environment, and the displacement of the suburban ideal. A transformation in economics provided the primary impetus for all three of these displacements. Western agrarian economies displaced Native American cultures, suburban boosterism replaced the agrarian society, and the economic success of industrial and later post-industrial capitalism deposed the suburban ideal. Because of these dispossessions, much of Overland Park's history is unattainable to the average citizen. In fact, all that remains in downtown Overland Park is a nostalgic view of this last era, a romantic view of the suburban ideal. Utilizing the archival record, I will examine the built landscape to find and describe these dislocated histories. Since the built environment provides clues to contemporary residents, this approach should empower residents to access these displaced landscapes and construct a suburban landscape history. Knowledge of their suburb's history enables contemporary citizens of Overland Park to understand their city as a "place." "Place" enables residents to comprehend the many historical layers and the economic forces that displaced previous cultures, everyday ways of living, and community ideals. Understanding this rich history sanctions a reclamation of those "lost" ideals, in addition it allows us to gain perspective on our contemporary society, especially how contemporary economic forces can and do obfuscate our built environment. Utilizing a "sense of place," more specifically, an examination of the built environment and the archival record, the early history of Overland Park unfolds.

The Land Beneath the Pavement

Few, if any, American suburbs approach the grandeur of Hausmann's Paris. Contrary to Paris, based on the walkable city, most suburbs rely on the automobile as the primary form of transportation. However, the original designers intended areas of modern suburbs such as downtown Overland Park to be viewed on foot. This compact commercial district is accessible by car; however, the wide, accessible, landscaped sidewalks encourage a stroll. In fact, examining the streetscape represents the first way a person can begin to understand the history of a place. Standing at the corner of 80th Street and Santa Fe Drive, the heart of downtown, a person immediately notices the street layout. The Cartesian grid is visible where several streets intersect 80th Street at ninety-degree angles. This grid, interrupted by the diagonal of Santa Fe Drive, is a reminder of the United States' westward expansion and the multiple periods of expulsion of American Indians this expansion necessitated.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 established a grid throughout the western half of the United States. Although this gridiron is a dominant symbol of American westward expansion, often the interruptions of the grid are the strongest reminders of expansionism. Natural formations, such as rivers, form some of these disruptions, however human influences, such as overland trails, create others. American westward expansion under the auspice of Manifest Destiny, with its two most famous routes, the Santa Fe and the Oregon Trails, carved a diagonal path through Johnson County. The southern spur of the Westport branch of the Santa Fe Trail crossed into

Johnson County near its northeast corner at the village of Oxford (presently part of the city of Leawood). At this point, the Santa Fe joined one of the spurs of the Oregon Trail. This combined trail cut diagonally across the county to the southwest for forty-one miles until the Santa Fe split from the Oregon just west of the city of Gardner in southwestern Johnson County. This spur traveled through the area now known as downtown Overland Park. The outline of the trail is visible today. Santa Fe Drive, a long, winding two to four-lane road that forms a crooked line through much of the city, and forms downtown's main street, follows the old trail. This diagonal cuts the grid establishing a unique street design reminding the observer of Overland Park's historic beginnings.

Beyond representing the history of westward expansion, this intersection also reminds us of the indigenous populations displaced by white settlers, thereby exterminating any "sense of place" for American Indians. Remnants of their lives are evident in these diagonal trails since historians believe the Santa Fe Trail followed old indigenous hunting trails. The indigenous people living in the area, known as the Kansa or the Kaw, had interacted with white traders for decades before the United States legally took possession of the area under the Louisiana Purchase. Although their name became the name of the state, in Overland Park, no physical evidence of the Kansa remains. By 1830, the federal government moved the Kansa onto reservations further to the southwest and brought dozens of Eastern tribes, such as the Shawnee, Delaware, Pottawatomi, Kickapoo, Sauk and Fox, and Iowa, to reservations in Kansas.

In 1825 and 1831, the U.S. government signed a treaty with the Shawnee, removing them from Missouri and Ohio onto 1.6 million acres of land in eastern Kansas. In 1830, the Rev. Thomas Johnson established the Shawnee Methodist Mission. By 1839, the Mission moved to its current location in the northeast corner of Shawnee Township, constructed more permanent brick buildings, and instituted a manual labor school. The school, which taught primarily Western farming practices, had seventy-two pupils from five tribes, a few white children, and ten African American children, the offspring of enslaved persons owned by Johnson. The mission and the school flourished until 1854 when the Kansas Nebraska Act opened the area to white settlement. Although Johnson was a strong proponent of slavery in Kansas, during the Civil War, local Bushwackers argued with and killed Johnson at his Missouri residence thereby closing the mission and school in 1864. Reverend Johnson is the namesake of the county. Today, three of the Methodist Mission's buildings remain, operated as a museum by the Kansas Historical Society.²⁹

Other Indian missions in the area include the Baptist Mission established by Rev. Jotham Meeker in 1835 and abandoned in 1855, and the Quaker Mission, established in 1836, lasting until 1870 due in part to contributions by local "Indian chiefs." None of these buildings survived. Similarly, records of a gristmill and several Shawnee dwellings exist; however, none of these structures remained extant. In 1835, Baptist missionary, Isaac McCoy, noted that the Shawnee's "dwellings are

²⁹ Elizabeth E. Barnes, Historic Johnson County: A Bird's Eye view of the Development of the Area. (Shawnee Mission, KS: Neff Printing, Inc., 1969), 12.

neat, hewed log cabins [and] their fields were enclosed with rail fences.” None of these structures remain.³⁰

These buildings were examples of how the Shawnee attempted to embrace Western culture. Several among their ranks rose to prominence in Johnson County, mainly by conceding to sign treaties. Among them included the Reverend Charles Bluejacket, who according to sources, had “a beautiful farm of several hundred acres under improvement, subdivided into fields. His dwelling is a frame house 20X40, two stories high, plastered and painted, furnished in a style that would do credit to many of our wealthy people in the old States.” All that remains of this farm, located at 51st Street and Quivira in present-day Shawnee, is an illustration found in the 1874 Atlas. Bluejacket sold his farm and moved to Indian Territory in Oklahoma in 1872.³¹

Between 1825 and 1854, the only whites allowed to settle in Johnson County were involved with missions. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 opened the Kansas Territory to white settlement and the era of “Bleeding Kansas” began. Most Native Americans fled the area or the United States government forcibly removed them to Indian Territory (Oklahoma). A small group, the Black Bob Band of the Shawnee, stayed on a 200,000 acre reservation in southern Johnson County, yet as the Civil War took its toll on the area, many members of this band also fled. All that remains of the Shawnee in Johnson County are their names: Black Bob Road in Olathe,

³⁰ Isaac McCoy, History of Baptist Indian Missions (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1970 [ca. 1840), 404.

³¹ *Shawnee Journal Herald*, June 5, 1991; originally published in the *Westport Border Star*, December 21, 1858; E.F. Heisler and D.M. Smith. Atlas Map of Johnson County, Kansas. Wyandotte, Kansas. E.F. Heisler and Company, 1874.

Bluejacket Road, the Bluejacket branch of the Johnson County Library in Overland Park, and the town of Shawnee. Even the area, sometimes known as Shawnee Mission, harkens back to a time and a people swallowed up by Manifest Destiny, westward expansion, and “progress.”³²

This history is important and should be heralded, as well as preserved. Government surveyor, Stephen Long, famously labeled most of Kansas, including Johnson Count, the Great American Desert. Yet, it was the home and hunting ground of the Kansa at the time of the much-celebrated travels of Lewis and Clark and most likely during the previous decades. The land underneath the pavement of Overland Park’s streets was the adopted home of the Shawnee; one of several homelands in their effort to remain autonomous, yet open to Euro-American culture. In spite of that, no earth lodges of the Kansa survive; no log cabins of the Shawnee endure. Instead, the only buildings that stood the tests of time were the buildings at the Shawnee Methodist Mission. Only the streetscape was theirs. The diagonal that cuts through the grid is the last vestige of the American Indian in a land overcome by American expansionism, “progress,” suburbia.

The Glenn Community

In the spring of 1992, Sun Kot, a native of Hong Kong, decided to renovate the building that housed his downtown Overland Park business, the Dragon Inn

³²Ed Blair, History of Johnson County Kansas (Lawrence, KS: Standard Publishing Company, 1915). (Also found at www.kancoll.org/books/blair/); Interestingly, Shawnee Mission cannot be found on any map. The local school district is called Shawnee Mission. However, if one mailed a postcard to any address in one of the dozen cities in Northeast Johnson County with the city designated as Shawnee Mission, it would arrive uninterrupted.

Restaurant. The building was an older, two-story structure made of brick, located on the corner of 80th Street and Conser Street. Pleased with the city's capital improvements program and their attempts to beautify downtown Overland Park, Kot decided to restore the building back to how it looked in 1911. Today, Kot's building stands as a distinct reminder of the past, a landmark to remind those who pass through downtown Overland Park of the historical significance of the area.³³

To local historians, Kot's restaurant resides in the Conser building, named after Grant Conser, a local entrepreneur and business owner, who built the current brick structure in 1911. Conser's story begins in the last decades of westward expansion with the end of the Santa Fe Trail. Conser's family, and many like them, settled in Johnson County after the Civil War. Eastern Kansas would be the farthest west many would travel. So, they did what thousands of other people did on their travels west, they established an agrarian community. Yet, unlike many other rural places, Conser's story continued as this rural community quickly transitioned into a suburban town.

John Conser moved his family to Johnson County in 1867, the same year the Kansas City, Fort Scott and Gulf Railroad came through the area. The 1874 *Atlas Map of Johnson County, Kansas*, with Greg Oliver's accompanying "History of Johnson County," identified fifty acres of land owned by Conser. Yet, little is known about Conser, except that he was a farmer, a beekeeper (with award winning honey), and the father of Grant. We can tell the farm, located west of the Paola and

³³ "Building takes on the look it had in turn-of-the-century Overland Park." The Sun Newspaper, September 16, 1992. Overland Park, Downtown file at the Johnson County Museum.

Wyandotte Road (present-day Metcalf Avenue), had a house and small orchard and that Conser's land was just south and east of the Santa Fe Trail.³⁴

However, if one can assume Conser had similarities with his neighbor, William White, then his story quickly deepens. William White was born in 1810 in Greene County, Tennessee and moved to Lafayette County, Missouri in 1832 where he married his wife, Nancy Bounds in 1835. In 1850, White moved his family to Jackson County, Missouri near Kansas City, where he worked as a carpenter. With the opening of Kansas to white settlement, he purchased land in Douglas County and in Shawnee Township, the northeastern-most township in Johnson County. In 1858, he moved his family to the land he owned in Shawnee Township: Section 30, Township 12, Range 25, (the exact location of present-day downtown Overland Park). In 1874, White, with his wife and six children, had a one hundred and sixty acre farm with a large orchard in the southwest corner. A personal sketch from Oliver's history had the following things to say about William White. "Mr. White is a genial, whole-souled citizen, and when friends call at his residence, delights to set before them a pitcher of cider, made from apples grown in his orchard." Since this area was a rural community, we can imagine that White's neighbors had similar backgrounds and stories.³⁵

Some of White's neighbors included Glenn, Marty, Henderson, Breyfogle, and Conser. Locals called the area the Glenn community, after the Glenn post office,

³⁴ Heisler and Smith; Historic Overland Park: An Illustrated History. Published by the Overland Park Historical Society. San Antonio, TX: Historical Publishing Network, 2004.

³⁵ Greg H. Oliver "History of Johnson County" in E.F. Heisler and D.M. Smith. Atlas Map of Johnson County, Kansas. Wyandotte, Kansas. E.F. Heisler and Company, 1874.

presumably named after G.W. Glenn. The Henderson family operated the post office during the last three decades of the nineteenth-century in their farmhouse located near present day 79th Street and Metcalf Avenue. For much of this time, Ida Henderson was the postmistress, assisted by her mother, Sarah Henderson.

By the turn-of-the-twentieth-century, change was in the air, as the second generation of the Glenn community's initial residents came of age. Meanwhile, the area welcomed several new residents, including Charles O. Proctor, a proprietor of a real estate business in Kansas City, Missouri, and owner of four hundred acres of land, including the one hundred and sixty acres that once belonged to William White. Proctor appears to be the first of several real estate speculators to purchase land in the area. Although a speculator, he and his wife, Florence, had lived in Johnson County since 1858 and apparently moved their farm to the area, since there were several accounts mentioning the Proctor farm. However, many of White's neighbors remained, including Marty, Conser, Breyfogle, and Henderson, although a new generation had taken the reigns. Grant Conser was part of this new generation. While his father, John, continued to farm and raise honeybees, Grant acquired land from Ida Henderson and built the first general store for the area (at present day 79th and Metcalf). It was a two-story building with the store on the main floor and, as typical of the time, the living quarters were above. In 1903, he established the area's first telephone company, Enterprise Telephone Company, with seven phones. A year later, Conser built an ice plant on land acquired from Proctor.

In September of 1906, Grant Conser arranged to move his general store and telephone company next to his ice plant and by the following year, he built a two-story wood structure just west of the Santa Fe Trail. His new general store supplied farm goods and housewares to the local population. This building burned down in 1911 and Conser replaced it with a two-story brick building, which continued to be a general store, while offices, apartments, and a meeting hall occupied the second floor.

Much had changed in the four years between the construction of Conser's first building and the later brick structure. In 1907, Conser's general store was one of two commercial buildings in the area known as Overland Park; yet, by 1911, his business was one of nearly a dozen enterprises, including two grocery stores, a drug store, a hardware store, a feed store, several real estate offices, medical offices, and plumbing, decorating, and carpentry shops. In addition, prominent farmers and outside businessmen and bankers, mainly from Olathe, established the Overland Park State Bank, the area's first bank. Furthermore, the Overland Park Townsite U.S. Post Office, the first in the area since the Glenn post office closed in 1895, opened in 1910, validating the agrarian community.³⁶

Why did Conser move his general store? What created the boom of commercial activity? Why had the area's name changed from the Glenn community to Overland Park? The answers to these questions originate in one man: William B. Strang. To understand the historical implications of Strang and his attempt to create an ideal suburban community, we should examine one of downtown Overland Park's

³⁶ Historic Overland Park, 28.

most notable landmarks: the Strang Car Barn. Although the landscape constructed during the suburban ideal era failed to completely efface this agrarian community, Strang initiated the process of suburbanization that would ultimately obfuscate the agrarian “sense of place.” In fact, almost all remnants of the agrarian era have been lost. Conser’s building was the last vestige of the Glenn community, yet it was primarily a symbol, since it was built in 1911 at its present location to take advantage of Strang’s Interurban railroad. However, its purpose remained true to its original intent, since it continued as a general store that served the local agrarian community.

The Strang Line

For the last century, one building holds prominence over downtown Overland Park’s physical environment: the Strang Car Barn. Currently home to Traditions Furniture and located at the north end of Santa Fe Drive, this building has what Dolores Hayden calls, “the power to evoke visual, social memory.” Originally built in 1908, this massive limestone structure housed the streetcars for the Missouri-Kansas Interurban Railroad. From 1908 until the present, the Car Barn was a landmark, a symbol for all who lived and visited downtown Overland Park. Similar to the Conser building, the Car Barn tells a story. This is a story of technology’s impact on the process of suburbanization. In a time when the dominant form of suburbanization was the streetcar suburb, as seen in most major metropolitan areas, William Strang helped create a community far from the central city, replicating the

mid-nineteenth-century suburban ideals of country living, yet easy access to the city.³⁷

Strang was primarily a booster and a promoter. Most of his activities revolved around selling land to new customers seeking the suburban ideal. Building on his experience as a railroad developer, Strang's first venture was the Missouri-Kansas Interurban. On May 20, 1906, the Interurban railroad, with its tracks running along the Santa Fe Trail route, made its first trip from Lenexa, Kansas to Kansas City, Missouri. By June, Strang opened the Overland Park Depot, a stone and frame structure housing a ticket office, waiting room, and offices for the Strang Land Company. It was around this time that the area became known as Overland, or Overland Park. Strang produced the name, in part to memorialize the overland trails that passed through the area, yet also because the community was at a high point in the prairie, therefore exempt from devastating floods like the one in 1903. Strang's addition of "Park," represents his understanding of the suburban ideal, for Strang hoped to create a suburban community in a park-like atmosphere. The Interurban represented a new way of traveling and the possibilities for an escape from the dirt and congestion of the city. For the people who began to settle this area, as well as the farmers who already lived there, the railway enabled a connection to the markets, commercial shopping, and entertainment districts of Kansas City, Missouri to the northeast and Olathe, Kansas, to the southwest.

³⁷ Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscape as Public History (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), 47.

The new rail line also provided the town with its most noticeable feature, the Car Barn. This barn housed and maintained the Interurban rail cars. Originally, a gas-electric engine, invented by Strang and built by the J.G. Brill Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, powered the streetcars. A car shop used to maintain these complex engines was located in Lenexa. In the summer of 1907, Strang's company decided to build a new maintenance and storage shop, and both Lenexa and Olathe vied for the new Car Barn. However, in the end, Strang decided to locate the Barn in Overland Park. Workers finished the one hundred by sixty foot building in January of 1908.³⁸

By June of 1908, the Interurban had gone into receivership and by July, the railroad was out of commission. Strang's company discontinued the use of the gas-electric trolleys, since they were hard to maintain and prone to stalling when carrying heavy loads, and replaced them with the more traditional electric trolleys already prevalent in the Kansas City metropolitan area. During the winter of 1908 and 1909, workers installed overhead electric wires along the twenty-two miles of track enabling the transition from gas-electric to overhead electric propulsion. Simultaneously, contractors built a forty by sixty foot powerhouse onto the south side of the Car Barn to provide the primary source of power for the new streetcars, in addition to providing electricity for churches, schools, and homes in the area. Two new engines from the Buckeye Engine Company fed electric power into the overhead

³⁸ *Lenexa News*, November 1, 1907, p. 4; November 15, 1907, p. 2; December 27, 1907, p. 3. All articles found in Laura Gill, compiled, "Abstract of Articles in Johnson County, Kansas newspapers, 1906-1920, pertaining to Overland Park, William B. Strang and his business ventures," Johnson County Library, 1976.

electric wires. Several natural gas wells located near the Car Barn helped fuel these massive generators. It was not until January of 1909 that the electric trolley was up and running. The shift in propulsion however, changed the face of Overland Park, as the Car Barn became both the center of the railroad and the community.³⁹

Although Strang and his Interurban had a great impact on the built environment of Overland Park, they were not the sole cause for all the new buildings. In 1907, Charles Proctor built a building west of the depot, yet east of Conser's building. In July of that year, O. B. Carver of Kansas City moved his family to Overland Park and opened a grocery store and ice cream parlor/confectionary. Carver also made plans for Bell Telephone Company to put a switchboard in his store, making him a rival of Conser's Enterprise Telephone Company. Later, Proctor sold the building to Roy L. Herr of Kansas City, Kansas and in May 1911, Carver sold the grocery store to the Ruckle Brothers, formerly of Kansas City. In August, this building met the same fate as Conser's building. The following year, a local resident, Emile Voight, constructed a new brick two-story building that housed a grocery store and a drug store on the ground floor and medical offices and apartments on the second floor.⁴⁰

Other buildings quickly arose during the first years of the 1910s. In June of 1911, Frank Keyser's Hardware opened in Homer Breyfogle's building north of Roy Herr's building. George Howell moved his blacksmith shop next door to Herr's

³⁹ *Olathe Mirror*, August 17, 1908, p. 1; October 23, 1908, p. 4; December 25, 1908, found in Gill; *Historic Overland Park*, 28.

⁴⁰ *Lenexa News*, September 14, 1906, p. 1; *Olathe Mirror*, July 4, 1907, p. 6; May 11, 1911; August 24, 1911; August 1, 1912, p. 6, found in Gill.

building, sometime in the years before Breyfogle built his building. Also in 1910, A.M. Wood built a two-story wood structure, to the south of Conser's building. Wood had moved to the area in 1908 from his farm in LaHarp, Kansas, to establish a real estate and insurance business. His new building housed his offices, other offices, a grocery store, in addition to the Overland Park Townsite U.S. Post Office, the first in the area since the Glenn post office. Founded in 1910, the Overland Park State Bank, the first bank in the area, opened its building just east of the depot in 1911. With a bank, a post office, several real estate offices and grocery stores, a hardware store, a general store, restaurants, and other businesses, Overland Park became a center for commerce. Yet these businesses would not have been economically viable without Strang's Interurban railway; they especially could not succeed without a burgeoning local population.

Although real estate agents and investors such as Wood and Proctor helped build Overland Park, Strang contributed most to the area's growth. Strang did two important things to increase the population of the new community: he purchased six hundred acres of land and subdivided it into six sections and he created and promoted multiple entertainment venues that lured potential residents to Overland Park. While Strang provided some smaller, more affordable lots near the commercial center, most of the lots were a half-acre to an acre in size, with restrictions on the minimum cost of the house and the size of out buildings. Strang encouraged people to live in Overland Park and commute to Kansas City for work. Residents could live in a park like setting, raise their own vegetables, cows, and chickens, yet still be only a half hour

trolley ride into the city. This suburban ideal took a page right out of the works of early suburban designer, Andrew Jackson Downing. Downing, whose ideas would influence a generation of landscape architects, most-famously Fredrick Law Olmstead, encouraged “suburban cottages” with kitchen gardens and landscaped yards. While Downing envisioned his designs for the Antebellum Hudson River valley, with the steamboat as the primary mode of transportation to and from New York City, later technologies, such as the railroad, streetcars, and later interurban railroads, encouraged future designers, like Olmstead, to actualize these designs into the first suburbs. The Strang Land Company held its first auction in September of 1906. Soon, Strang’s real estate company was selling upward of thirty thousand dollars of land and lots in one weekend.⁴¹

Yet, this type of commercial and residential growth was not possible without some type of boosterism and Strang understood how to promote Overland Park. Strang recognized immediately the potential for creating an opportunity for entertainment and profit. Most of this entertainment was originally homegrown, such as dancing, baseball games, and picnicking, yet soon Strang usurped these activities in attempts to bring people and potential investors to Overland Park. Strang’s biggest booster efforts included dance halls, baseball games, air shows, and later films. Yet, all of these events were only for promoting real estate.

⁴¹ Historic Overland Park, p. 25; Dolores Hayden, Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000 (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 26-35; Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 63-66 and 79.

One of these entertainment venues was the Santa Fe Trail Hall, later named the Overland Park Dance Pavilion, a wooden private dance hall built to provide a space for dancing and entertainment. It is unclear who built the original structure, though later Strang became involved and utilized the hall as a way to promote the area. It appears the dances began in May 1907 with people coming from Lenexa, Olathe, and the surrounding area, although some events brought people from Kansas City. Lenexa's boys band played one of the dances that summer, while the Overland Club sponsored another event. Originally located northwest of the Interurban depot, Strang moved this long rectangular, wood structure to the east of the train tracks, directly north of the depot in 1908. In his efforts to create a park-like community, Strang turned the tree-lined green space where the dance hall once stood into a park for picnics, adding a gazebo in 1908. In 1913, Strang disassembled the Santa Fe Hall and moved the maple-spring dance floor into his new Pavilion on the south side of the commercial district, where it remained until the Pavilion closed in 1923. Eventually the Pavilion became a mill.⁴²

Another form of entertainment created by Strang was an airfield, complete with hangars for airplanes and covered grandstands, originally utilized for baseball games, also promoted by Strang. This eighty-acre airfield, located to the east of the car barn, apparently was the first west of the Mississippi River and the third airfield to be located within the United States. In December of 1909, Overland Park laid claim

⁴² *Lenexa News*, May 10, 1907, p. 2; May 17, 1907, p. 3; June 7, 1907, p. 2, found in Gill; Brochure "Where Overland Park began...": Self-Guided Walking Tour, produced by the Overland Park Historical Society and the Downtown Overland Park Partnership; Historic Overland Park, 30.

to the first public flight west of the Mississippi. In winter of 1910 and 1911, Strang moved the airfield about a mile southwest to his newly constructed Aviation Park, a larger complex, with a larger grandstand, more hangar facilities, and an aviation school and airplane factory run by the then famous pilot, Frank Champion. Strang's new airfield provided multiple opportunities for recreation while the crowds waited for exhibitions, such as balloon races, parachutists, and flying demonstrations by famous aviators including the Wright Brothers. This airfield operated from 1911 to 1920 with audiences ranging between twenty to twenty-five thousand people per weekend. Most of these people were day-travelers from Kansas City who would visit on the weekends or evenings taking advantage of a "round trip ticket including admissions to the ground."⁴³

Furthermore, Strang built a lake near Aviation Park, adding an additional recreational venue to Overland Park. For promotional events, Strang set up tents for people to stay the weekend in, maximizing Strang Land Company agents' opportunities to sell real estate. Strang envisioned the Kansas City area's ultimate get-away. The new illustrated history of Overland Park paints a vivid picture:

One could stay in the tents Friday night, hunt, fish, swim, and play all day Saturday, go to a dance or stage show Saturday evening, stay in the tents that night, attend baseball games Sunday morning and enjoy an air show—hot air balloons and aeroplanes—that Sunday afternoon. After the airshow they could hop on one of the Strang trains, a trolley car pulling several trailers, going home Sunday evening relaxed and refreshed for work on Monday.

⁴³ History of Overland Park, Kansas. City of Overland Park, Kansas, Community Development Department, Comprehensive Planning Division, August 1979, 3rd Printing, p. 24. (Also found at: http://www.opkansas.org/Assets/cm/history_1979.pdf; Brochure "Where Overland Park began...": Self-Guided Walking Tour.

Strang had created an entertainment venue, with selling real estate as its primary purpose, not that he did not make a buck or two on the actual events. Future plans for Aviation Park, including making the area famous for film production, failed and in 1920 developers platted a new subdivision, Overland Acres. That same year, Strang's health failed and on January 13, 1921, he passed away.

By 1913, the community had a bank, schools and churches, concrete and brick stores of every description, natural gas, electricity, and water, "that gave it a metropolitan aspect." The community had paved streets and sidewalks as early as 1907 and many of the amenities that most rural communities did not have. In October of 1912, the area published its first newspaper, the *Overland Park News*, with Mrs. Frank Keyser as the editor. Although still dwarfed by Olathe, the county seat, Overland Park rivaled most of the larger communities in Johnson County, including De Soto, Shawnee, Lenexa, Merriam, Stilwell, and Spring Hill. Yet, Overland Park differed from these towns, since during this era it shifted in its purpose from agrarian community to suburb. Residents and developers ceased to focus solely on agricultural needs, instead aligning themselves with the larger cities of Olathe and ultimately, Kansas City, Missouri. The agrarian ideal was transformed into the suburban ideal.⁴⁴

Most of this history is now lost to average citizens. Little remains of even the landscapes of the last era, as postwar suburbanization engulfed this early suburban development. New economic forces replaced those that created the suburban ideal,

⁴⁴ History of Overland Park, 25; *Lenexa News*, June 28, 1907, p. 1 found in Gill.

thus destabilizing the lived continuities and community ideals of early Overland Park. In fact, much has changed since the end of World War II, and today's economic forces are reshaping the built environment. The next chapter deals specifically with the reconstruction of "place" in downtown Overland Park during the last two decades of the twentieth century and into the first decade of this century. This reconstruction further effaces these early constructions of "place." For example, the recent addition of a roundabout on Santa Fe Drive to the southwest of downtown further obfuscates the landscapes and histories of Native Americans and westward expansion. Because of these continual changes to the suburban landscape, most people have no access to this history directly through the built environment. I chose to examine the "sense of place" of early Overland Park by evoking a suburban landscape history, combining empirical knowledge with archival sources. In the end, citizens can know and understand their city's history and understand how that history helps create a "sense of place."

Chapter 2

Re/Constructed Place: Downtown Overland Park

Identity of Place

Similar to the boosters at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as Strang and Proctor, a collection of city officials, business owners, and citizens gathered at the end of the century around the area known as downtown Overland Park to reconstruct a “sense of place.” This neo-boosterism physically reshaped the dying commercial district, and injected capital, making downtown one of several shopping districts in the city. In the early 1990s, Overland Park joined the growing national trend where city officials, planners, business owners, and residents attempted to revitalize the older sections of their city, especially their dying downtowns. Although this development trend focused on reviving an economically depressed area, it also attempted to create a “sense of place;” a place worth investing in, worth visiting, and worth caring about. Although the actual language of “sense of place” was not necessarily used by city officials, business owners in downtown Overland Park, or residents, the intent was always the same: to create a place for people to congregate and shop, all with the intention of creating or revitalizing community through shared experiences.

The goal of this chapter is to provide a historical account of the revitalization of downtown Overland Park by focusing on the physical features of the built environment, the activities of the people who created, maintained, and experienced the “place,” and the meanings or symbols ascribed to or realized in downtown.

Although the story and how it related to national trends is important, the meaning of “place” provides the heart of this material. Furthermore, this chapter will utilize Relph’s notion of the “identity of place.” A place’s identity depends as much on its physical uniqueness (or sameness) as it does to the experience of the beholder of the physical form. Similar to Haapala and Thayer, Relph describes three components of the identity of places that helps to understand the recent history of downtown Overland Park: 1) physical features, landscapes, buildings, or appearances; 2) activities of people and the functions of these activities; and 3) meanings or symbols, based on values, intentions, and experiences. The physical features include the streetscapes, the benches for sitting, the trees, plants, and other landscaping, the buildings, both newly built, such as the Farmer’s Market building and the clock tower, and the old, such as the Car Barn and the Conser building. The physical also includes the overall appearance of downtown, with its enclosed space of narrower, tree-lined streets that distinguish this area from the rest of Overland Park. Economics form the basis for all activities within downtown. The area is primarily a retail district, including entertainment venues such as bars, restaurants, and a movie theater, in addition to live music, and other local events. Although the meaning of downtown Overland Park is often elusive, it transcends both the physical and the functional. Of course, to many people, the area represents a shopping district or people identify with the clock tower or the barn-like structure of the Farmer’s Market, yet for many of those who regularly utilize the space, downtown Overland Park represents a “place.”

Although the physical features, the functional characteristics, and the symbolic meaning of downtown Overland Park are primarily economic in nature, essentially a marketing scheme, the way people utilize these spaces, and even the physical setting, also represents a community's search for itself. Although this search for a collective soul almost always loses to the economic forces of the contemporary society, this search influences these economic forces, just as the economic forces will always be a part of downtown Overland Park's identity. A downtown's identity is inextricably tied to its economic function even as economic forces efface other elements of its identity, including its history and its historic built environment.

Overland Park's Inner-ring

An understanding of the physical features of and activities occurring in downtown Overland Park over the last three decades necessitates a comprehension of the local and national economy and its effects on the built environment. During the latter half of the twentieth-century, urban centers of large metropolitan areas continued to deteriorate, often at an accelerated pace. A multitude of factors combined to shape these urban cores, yet most academics, politicians, and city planners point to the decentralization of residential, commercial, and office development as the largest factor. Historian Chester Liebs described this shift as "the great American commercial diaspora." By the late 1980s, the southern half of Overland Park was part of this unfettered growth. Many corporations, retail shops, and residents had moved out of Kansas City, Missouri and into southern Johnson County. Overland Park had grown exponentially during the previous two decades,

shifting most of its commercial, office, and retail space south along Metcalf Avenue, the city's main thoroughfare. Most retail centered around Metcalf South Shopping Center and other regional shopping malls, such as Oak Park Mall, while much of the area's office space coalesced along College Boulevard and in Corporate Woods. For most American cities, this most recent migration of commercial and office space was the latest in a long procession of death knoll for the central city's urban core.⁴⁵

Although this story of urban deterioration usually made the headlines, a similar, yet quieter and more protracted phenomenon was occurring in inner-ring suburbs throughout the United States, including the older sections of Overland Park. This same migration, of office and retail leaving urban centers, also influenced older segments of the suburb. Inner-ring suburbs were (and still are) the older, (primarily) post-World War II suburbs suffering from waning populations and declining median household incomes. Many urban problems, such as poverty and crime, crept into these close-in suburban areas. Declining infrastructure, city services, and property values compounded these effects. Many of the inhabitants were working class, renters and often minorities. The "white flight" that deeply impacted the central city half a century ago turned its punishing effects on the inner-ring suburbs as many middle class residents fled to the larger houses of the outer suburbs.

By the early 1990s, parts of northern Overland Park began showing signs of decline. Residents complained of run-down rental properties, driveways full of trash

⁴⁵ Chester H. Liebs, "Silent Screens in a New Century" in Michael Putnam ed. Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 77-79; For further details on the long decline of the downtown's of central cities, see Robert M Fogelson, Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

and excess number of cars, and yards filled with weeds and junk. Streets were falling apart and many were lacking gutters and curbs. In addition, some of the aging housing stock, between thirty and forty years old, showed visible signs of dilapidation. City Councilman Jay Lehnertz observed, “Suburban areas, in general, never have had to face declining neighborhoods. This is a new thing for us and there aren’t a lot of guides along the way.” The city of Overland Park’s reaction to these signs of neighborhood decline was to spend three million dollars over five years to improve streets, curbs and gutters in the older areas.⁴⁶

Furthermore, in 1991, the city established the Neighborhood Conservation Program as part of an effort to improve city services in northern Overland Park. Five neighborhoods organized official groups that received city support through small grants and community police officers. Skip Moon, the director of the program, noted, “It’s extremely forward thinking to start a program in a suburban or mid-urban area. We want to build the trust (with residents) before there’s a problem, so there won’t be a problem.” Moon and others witnessed the area declining, yet believed these trends were reversible.⁴⁷

The city funded these projects to improve the neighborhoods, however city officials realized a more robust revitalization effort was necessary for the commercial areas that served these neighborhoods: mainly downtown Overland Park. Then Mayor Ed Eilert noted, “If the older areas are going to continue to be viable, it’s

⁴⁶ “Overland Park to revive areas in north,” Kansas City Star, January 24, 1991, C-1

⁴⁷ Stephen Roth, “City planner’s dream is uniting neighborhoods,” Kansas City Star, May 29, 1996, 3.

necessary to make investments.”⁴⁸ A viable downtown would increase property taxes for the city in addition to enhancing property values of the surrounding neighborhoods. A thriving downtown would ensure stable neighborhoods and encourage a community with character and identity.

City officials, following, and sometimes even leading, national trends, employed many urban planning tools as part of this revitalization program. Beyond capital improvement programs and the Neighborhood Conservation Programs, Overland Park developed a historic preservation program, a Business Improvement District, and central retail management to improve downtown. The revitalization of downtown Overland Park was both a marketing scheme used to lure shoppers back downtown away from the businesses on the south part of town and a search for the community’s collective soul. Residents still felt that the historic business district held the “heart” of the community. Although the inner-ring suburbs were deteriorating and in the late 1980s, downtown Overland Park was suffering, many people came together to recreate the “heart” of the city. Although the revitalization effort was a combination of economic development and restoring a sense of community identity, tensions between these two objectives continue, even to this day.

The Construction of the BID

The first era of revitalization began with the formation of the Business Improvement District (BID). City officials believed that in order for downtown

⁴⁸ “Overland Park traditional downtown is getting a face lift,” Kansas City Times, August 31, 1989, C-4.

Overland Park to survive, a public/private venture was necessary. In March 1987, the City Council created a Business Improvement District Planning Committee and authorized Mayor Ed Eilert to appoint “at least nine members to review and develop preliminary plans for the establishment and operation of a Business Improvement District in Downtown Overland Park, Kansas.” Mayor Eilert appointed twenty-three members to the Committee that met regularly for over one year and developed a proposal for the creation of the Downtown BID of Overland Park. Tom Cohen, a Vice President at Metcalf State Bank, was the chairman of the Committee, which was comprised mainly of merchants and business owners who would eventually participate in the BID. In the early months of 1988, this group held three public meetings and on May 11, they proposed Resolution No. 2101, later Ordinance No. BID-1525, officially establishing the Overland Park Business Improvement District.⁴⁹

Establishing the Business Improvement District’s composition was the ordinance’s first order of business. The BID’s boundaries were the area between 78th Street on the north and 83rd Street on the south and Metcalf Avenue on the east, which later expanded two blocks to Broadmoor Street, and Conser on the west, which later enlarged two blocks to Robinson Street. Furthermore, the BID placed a “minitax on commercial property” on over three hundred businesses, to be collected by the city at a rate of twenty-two cents per square foot of nonresidential, gross leaseable space, with a minimum annual fee of one hundred dollars and a maximum not to exceed one thousand dollars. The BID Planning Committee allocated fiscal

⁴⁹ City of Overland Park, Resolution No. 2101

appropriations for four principal areas: capital improvements, landscaping and maintenance, promotion, and administration.⁵⁰

In the late 1980s, the City of Overland Park contributed funds for the first two principal funding areas, mainly capital improvements and landscaping. Partially because of these projects, an increased amount of BID funds went toward promotion. According to a report by the BID planning committee, “Downtown needs to be promoted as a place to shop, a place to locate businesses, a place where things happen and a place for the family to spend leisure time.”⁵¹ Both city officials and business owners within the BID district were aware of the competition with area shopping malls, therefore they knew that the revitalization project could only succeed if downtown Overland Park had a strong promotion element.

Some funding also went toward administration, including hiring Denise Buenning, the director of the Downtown Overland Park, Inc, a not-for-profit business association comprised of downtown merchants and created to oversee redevelopment efforts. The idea to establish a limited joint-partnership was not new. HUD deputy assistant secretary, Jack Stokvis, advocated for downtown business districts to utilize:

Centralized retail management- a strategy sponsored by an area’s property owners and retailers to revitalize retailing and to increase the area’s share of the regional retail market. It usually involves creating a public/private entity to coordinate functions such as marketing, security, promotions, maintenance, street improvements, parking and leasing.

Buenning’s group had four areas of emphasis for revitalization: promotion and publicity, design, economic restructuring, and networking with other civic groups.

⁵⁰ “Overland Park creates district”, Kansas City Star May 11, 1988 p. 1

⁵¹ “City agrees to \$300,000 for renovation”, Johnson County Sun, May 18, 1988, B-1

Buenning focused on the positive attributes downtown had to offer, such as, low rents, an eclectic mix of shops (often not found in shopping malls) and most importantly, she believed that once the capital improvements were finished the area would see an “upswell of community pride.”⁵²

City Funded Capital Improvements

To assist the Business Improvement District, city officials began funding additional capital improvement projects beyond those initiated by the BID itself. The City contributed upwards of one million dollars over the first three years. This began with the City’s streetscape project, a \$787, 000 project that would widen sidewalks, improve storm drains, re-surface streets, landscape, create a mid-block crosswalk on Santa Fe, install twenty-two ornamental streetlights and a fountain, and create a ‘pocket plaza,’ a small public area between a parking lot and Santa Fe Drive. Additionally, the city built a sixty-foot clock tower in the ‘pocket plaza’ in the center of Santa Fe. Later, in the summer of 1991, the city would construct a new canopy for the Farmer’s Market, costing nearly four hundred thousand dollars. General obligation bonds financed the canopy, intended to protect the nearly three-dozen vendors who sold their wares several days a week since the market opened in 1981 from the elements. The city continued its capital improvements in the summer of

⁵² “Executive director chosen to lead business association” Kansas City Star, May 10, 1989, p. 7; Jack R. Stokvis, “Making Downtown Competitive again: The Promise of Centralized Retail Management”, Urban Land. April 1987, p.8; “Buenning is catalyst for revitalization”, The Sun Newspapers, May 12, 1989, 12A

1992 with street improvements on 80th Street between Metcalf and Conser, including landscaping and sidewalk improvements.⁵³

These projects created an attractive environment conducive to foot traffic. Pedestrians were the primary focus of the beautification aspects of the project since beautiful, clean, and safe environments produced higher pedestrian traffic and more customers for commercial areas. By no means, was this a new idea. Not only did downtown Overland Park begin as a “walking city,” pre-dating the mass consumption of cars, city officials and planners were following the advice of many in the field. For example, freelance writer, Philip Langdon, encouraged several improvements to “breathe vitality” into deteriorating suburban downtowns. He suggests capital improvements, such as narrow streets and the creation of public spaces between gaps in the streetscape. Furthermore, Langdon encouraged dispersed parking, modified for both on and off street parking, and pedestrian thoroughfares to increase pedestrian traffic. Downtown Overland Park’s ‘pocket plaza,’ with clock tower, and the improvement of streets, parking and most importantly pedestrian thoroughfares all followed the nation-wide trends discussed by Langdon.⁵⁴

City officials also employed historic preservation to help revitalize the area. The first building to be preserved was the Strang Car Barn. This structure, built in 1908, stored and serviced Strang’s Interurban rail cars until 1940 when the Kansas-Missouri Interurban was closed and dismantled. For nearly half-a-century, the

⁵³ “Streetscape project to beautify Santa Fe”, The Sun Newspapers, May 12, 1989, 12A; Johnson County Sun, June 21, 1991

⁵⁴ Philip Langdon, A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994) p.219-223

building fell in and out of use, ultimately falling into disrepair. At the urging of a group called the Overland Park 2000 Foundation, the city used community development block grants (CDBG) issued by the state to purchase the ailing Car Barn. In early 1989, the city's new Landmarks Commission declared the Car Barn a city landmark. By June, the renovation of the exterior of the building began using \$250,000 in CDBG funds. The city hoped the renovation of the Strang Car Barn would be the focal point of a revitalized downtown. A report from the city's planning staff echoed these hopes, "over the years, the car barn has become a focal point for activities in downtown Overland Park. The preservation of this historically significant focal point will enhance the overall redevelopment of downtown Overland Park and provide a unique cornerstone for the neighborhood."⁵⁵

Former Mayor of Indianapolis, William Hudnut advocated for the use of historic preservation to revive a "sense of place" traditionally held by the inhabitants of older parts of a city. Hudnut asserts, "A city's omission of historic preservation from its planning agenda produces places lacking in character and substance, devoid of much of a sense of community." For Hudnut and others, historic preservation encouraged reinvestment, enabling public/private partnerships and providing a "sense of place." Overland Park's city officials were aware of the reinvestment potential the historic buildings would provide. By September of 1992, the Landmarks Commission considered seventeen homes and buildings for designation, including the old Conser building built in 1911. The owner of the Conser building, pleased with

⁵⁵ "Revitalization effort to begin in downtown OP", The Sun Newspapers, May 12, 1989, 12A

the city's capital improvements program along 80th Street, renovated the building for his restaurant. The restoration of the Strang Car Barn and the streetscape improvements encouraged private investment into the older sections of the city.⁵⁶

Although these fiscal appropriations by the city were indeed tools for revitalization, we may also view these capital improvements as means of promoting a "sense of place." As the City of Overland Park attempted to revive an economically depressed area of their city, they were also attempting to create an attractive, walkable location that would hold community events and become a "place" for the citizens of Overland Park to congregate. The renovated Strang Car Bar, the old Conser building, and the new clock tower could possess what geographer Kevin Lynch calls "high imageability." These structures stand out and separate themselves from the surrounding environment. They are icons to the local population and many people identify with one or all of these structures, associating them with the downtown area, with the history of Overland Park, or with a unique shopping district. In fact, the entire enclosed space of downtown possesses elements of a highly imageable place, distinct from much of Overland Park and positing an alternative built environment from the rest of the city.⁵⁷

Yet, the pocket plaza and adjoining clock tower also represent elements of "placelessness." Although the clock tower differs from other landmarks in the suburbs, it is still a product of mass culture, built by the government, for the people,

⁵⁶William H. Hudnut, III, Cities on the Rebound: A Vision for Urban America (Washington D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1998), 132.

⁵⁷ See Edward Relph, Place and Placelessness (London: Pion Limited, 1976), 35, for a description of "high imageability," from Kevin Lynch's 1960 work, The Image of the City.

with little of their input. Relph calls this “masscult- designs come from above to the people...they are formulated by manufacturers, governments, and professional designers, and are guided and communicated through mass media.” Indeed marketing groups, like the non-profit in charge of promotion, capitalize on the iconic nature of the tower by utilizing the symbol in their logo, in addition to having several images on its website. The Overland Park Chamber of Commerce also uses an image of the tower on their website, one of four images that captures the essence of the city. To some extent, the central authority of the local government, as Relph mentions, makes this mass culture possible, and indeed, the City of Overland Park acted as the leading power in shaping the built environment. Some agreed to follow the city’s lead, capitalizing on its actions, yet there were some who did not agree, and they faced pressure by government officials.⁵⁸

Dissent and Recession

Not everyone was in favor of the BID. Gene White, owner of the White Haven Motel, was one such person. Many however remained quiet, though an anonymous flier was distributed to local business owners, claiming that the district would change the zoning regulations on building density and would allow for high-rise projects. The flier alluded to other revitalization projects in the Kansas City Metropolitan area that had ultimately failed. Recognizing possible opposition to the

⁵⁸ Relph, 92; *Discover Historic Downtown Overland Park*. Overland Park, Kansas: Downtown Overland Park Partnership, Inc. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.downtownop.org/>, accessed April 11, 2008; 2003. Overland Park, Kansas: Overland Park Chamber of Commerce. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.opks.org/>, accessed April 11, 2008.

BID, the City Council allowed for two protest petitions within the first year, yet they controlled the parameters of those protests. Fifty-one percent of the business owners could petition the City to remove the BID and its assessment fees, yet neither petition was able to gain that much support. Additionally, those in favor of the BID, recommended several people who remained skeptical to the advisory board. For the most part, however, city officials and supporters of the BID had little tolerance for dissent.⁵⁹

The City Council appointed a fifteen-person advisory board comprised of local business owners that allowed for another form of administration of the BID.⁶⁰ Suzie Oberg, owner of Suzee's Fashions, a clothing store in downtown for thirty years, strongly supported the BID, claiming the "BID would help reverse the downslide of Downtown." Ms. Oberg, joined Tom Cohen and nine other people to make up the first eleven members of the advisory board. Harold Caplan, another member of the board was new to the area. He recently moved his business furniture store, American Business Interiors, from College Boulevard to downtown. He was "drawn to the area because of the automobile traffic and the character of downtown." Caplan claimed the high speed limit on College Boulevard ultimately hurt business. Additionally, he believed that downtown Overland Park was still the center of the

⁵⁹ John North "Overland Park creates district", Kansas City Star, May 11, 1988, p. 1; Minutes of City Council Meeting, May 9, 1988, p. 4

⁶⁰ Minutes of City Council Meeting, May 9, 1988

city. Ironically, in 2008, White's business still thrived in Downtown, while Oberg and Caplan had long since closed their doors.⁶¹

By early 1990, downtown Overland Park was on a path to success. The Business Improvement District had been created, forging the public/private relationship deemed necessary by Hudnut, Langdon and others. The city spent millions of dollars in capital improvements downtown, constructed the clock tower and the canopy for the Farmer's Market and provided funds for the preservation of historic landmarks. The private Downtown Overland Park, Inc, contributed money for capital improvements, promoted the businesses within the district and with the city, encouraged private businesses to improve their properties.

Merchants and business owners within the BID hoped the improvements would put downtown back on the map, especially for customers who spend most of their dollars in the region's shopping malls. Most officials and business owners were aware of the reasons for downtown Overland Park's decline. The most painful reminders were the numerous dilapidated storefronts, the poor quality of streets and sidewalks, and the lack of cohesiveness between business owners and between business owners and city officials. The BID and the city's commitment to capital improvements rectified many of these problems, yet nothing could prepare those involved for the affects of the ensuing economic recession.

⁶¹ "Taxing district plans help to revitalize Downtown OP", Johnson County Sun, May, 11, 1988, B-1; "Caplan trades College for Santa Fe", Johnson County Sun, May 18, 1988, B-1.

Reorganizing the BID

The second era of revitalization began during an economic recession that contributed to the temporary failure of the BID, only to end with intervention from outside consultants and the reorganization of the BID. In early 1991, two of Downtown Overland Park's largest businesses, Dale's Sports and Thriftway Grocery, closed after forty years of business and remained vacant for nearly one year. Additionally, Denise Buenning quit as director of the Downtown Overland Park, Inc., and the vacancy rate reached fifteen percent. Meanwhile, the city's revitalization projects stalled. The streetscape project and the Strang Car Barn renovation could not compete with a lagging economy. The low point (for some) didn't come until two years later, when some businesses attempted to break up the BID. The downtown Overland Park Business Improvement District teetered between success and failure.

Yet, low rents (due mainly to the recession) attracted other small businesses. By the summer of 1992, more businesses filled other vacant spaces and the 80th Street renovation project began. Pam Gale became the new director of the Downtown Overland Park, Inc. and the success of the free noon concerts at the clock tower brought business to the surrounding shops. In addition, the city's master plan for 1992 called for rezoning some of the commercial and non-residential areas within downtown Overland Park. Bob Dalton of the Downtown Development Review Board said, "the health of the businesses almost entirely depends on the health of the surrounding neighborhoods." To support the surrounding neighborhoods, the city

council endorsed rezoning that would create a ‘buffer zone’ between commercial and residential areas. The plan was to increase the single-family housing value stock by building a ‘buffer’ of duplexes and apartments between the single-family and the commercial. Though vacancies were high and times were tough, there was hope that these improvements would create a more viable downtown.⁶²

Not all businesses benefited from the improvements provided by the public/private partnership. In fact, in early January 1994, nearly half the members of the BID submitted a petition that called for the BID to dissolve. Complaints ranged from “loss of parking and illogical district boundaries to poorly focused development efforts and vacant storefronts.” Those merchants located farthest from the clock tower (the focal point of downtown) were less likely to benefit from the promotional events that took place in that area. The city heavy-handedly denied the petition, calling it invalid. Mayor Eilert, claiming he understood the need to alter the revitalization structure felt the best way to remedy merchants’ dissatisfaction with the revitalization process was to hire outside consultants to review the downtown’s redevelopment.⁶³

The city hired Hyett Palma, a consulting firm from Washington D.C. to conduct a market analysis and produce a business plan for downtown Overland Park. Hyett Palma, in conjunction with the National League of Cities, designed a pilot program called “Accepting the Challenge: The Rebirth of American Downtowns.” Overland Park was the eighth city to receive the “on-site technical assistance”

⁶² “Downtown gets a survival plan,” Kansas City Star, May 22, 1992

⁶³ Elaine Adams, “Downtown taxing district catches heat,” Kansas City Star, January 15, 1994, C-1.

provided by both groups. Hyett Palma was charged with the task of investigating business operations and market orientation of downtown, developing economic strategies to enhance existing businesses, attracting additional businesses, and guiding future development. They examined the existing retail, office, select service and housing sectors and then recommended potential growth opportunities in all four areas. In addition, Hyett Palma advocated for the replacement of the Downtown Overland Park, Inc. for an organization of downtown merchants, city officials and other business leaders from outside of downtown. By January of 1994, the city had disbanded the institution that originally managed the BID and the Downtown Overland Park Partnership Inc. was formed. The city agreed to contribute fifty thousand dollars for the salary of the new executive director. For the most part, this action quelled some of the discontent expressed by local tenants and property owners.⁶⁴

Business owners, city officials, and members of the outside community comprised the fifteen board members of the Partnership. These members were appointed by the mayor and supported by Ronda Barry, the new executive director of the Partnership. Its goal was “to build on preserving the past while pursuing the future by working with and for the businesses in the Downtown Overland Park District.” The not-for-profit corporation was contracted by the city to handle the BID assessments. With the finances from these assessments, the Partnership provided four

⁶⁴ Deborah George. November 19, 2001. *Program Breathes New Life into Downtown Overland Park*. Washington D.C.: The National League of Cities. On-line. Available from Internet, www.nlc.org, accessed May 5, 2003; “Market Analysis and Business Plan- Downtown Overland Park- 1993, Hyett Palma, p. 1; “Downtown taxing district catches heat”, Kansas City Star, January 15, 1994, C-1.

main areas of service: beautification and maintenance, marketing and promotion, business retention and assistance and business recruitment, economic development and organization. The Partnership also worked with community organizations and the Overland Park Chamber of Commerce to promote and enhance the quality of downtown. Similar to Stokvis's centralized retail management, the city had finally "established an organization through which all area property owners and tenants can work and which helps finance security and maintenance." Although the Downtown Overland Park Partnership Inc. did not have the ability to control or shift retail space in order to keep up with demand, it became a unifying force shaping downtown Overland Park for the next decade.⁶⁵

By 1998, the area was once again thriving. This is partially because of a nation-wide economic boom, yet also because of the success of the Downtown Overland Park Partnership. Occupancy rates had risen to ninety-eight percent and property values increased forty-six percent. One hundred and twenty-five new businesses had opened and demand necessitated a waiting list for new businesses. The annual holiday festivals, the Farmer's Market and the outdoor concerts had become rituals for many residents. The mix of eclectic stores and eateries expanded, while other stores planned to move in. This success squelched the disgruntled cries of four years prior. These victories were coupled with the Partnership's adoption of a new BID assessment system with two tiers, a higher fee for those businesses with the "core," or Tier 1 area, and a lower assessment for those on the "fringe," or Tier 2

⁶⁵"Preserving downtown" The Sun Newspapers, August 24, 1994, Special Section, p. 1; Stokvis, 11.

area. This enabled those businesses on the “fringe” to pay less in assessments since often they did not directly benefit from promotional events often held in the “core.”⁶⁶

Destination Downtown

By the turn-of-the-twenty-first century, the city and private interests had invested millions of dollars for capital improvements, maintenance and promotion. Overall, the project was an economic success. In 2001, the occupancy rate was ninety-eight percent, property values increased, new businesses continued to open, and special events and unique shopping brought thousands of people to the area. Yet, for many, this was only the beginning. In May of 2001, the city adopted the Destination Downtown Overland Park master plan that called for a community center, new urban residential living, including town houses and lofts, adding an indoor, year-round public market, erecting a hotel, and other changes to the built landscape. All of this was to promote the downtown area as a great place to live, work, and play, a walkable city with a wide variety of restaurants and retail establishments.⁶⁷

City officials and developers would not be able to capitalize on the momentum the master plan promised because after September 11, 2001 (and arguably prior to it) the economy became sluggish. The one plan the city did move forward on was the community center, however, it met resistance from some local citizens. The same mayor and many city officials who promoted historic preservation a decade

⁶⁶Deborah George. November 19, 2001. *Program Breathes New Life into Downtown Overland Park*. Washington D.C.: The National League of Cities. On-line. Available from Internet, www.nlc.org, accessed May 5, 2003; Brochure for Downtown Overland Park Partnership, Inc. 1998.

⁶⁷ Rob Roberts, “Downtown plan advances,” *Johnson County Sun*, May 4, 2001, 1-A.

earlier were now willing to tear down the Masonic Lodge Number 436. Built in 1913, the building originally housed the city's first church, Overland Park Presbyterian. Yet, this building and many others stood in the way of the new community center. After examining other sites, city officials decided to alter the plans from nearly nine acres, down to five and a half acres. This plan preserved the historic building and caused the least amount of damage to the surrounding neighborhoods. However, this did not quell all the resistance. To acquire the land it needed for the site, the city used its condemnation powers on three of the thirteen properties. Two commercial property owners, the only two within the site, and one residential, protested the acquisitions since they felt the city had not offered just compensation. In the end, the power of the city prevailed.⁶⁸

City officials also tried to limit the ability of building owners to lease ground level space on 80th Street and Santa Fe Drive as office space. Planners, wanting to keep this district for retail and restaurants only, attempted to change the zoning codes, yet met fierce resistance from business owners. Bob Meyers, owner of A. Friendly's Used Books, was not too friendly in his response to the new zoning. "This is a usurpation of property owners' rights. It should not be allowed in a free society." City planners and business owners finally reached a compromise, yet not until over two years after the city council passed the master plan.

⁶⁸ Rob Roberts, "Some oppose displacement by community center," Johnson County Sun, December 7, 2001, 3-A; "OP moves ahead with plans of downtown community center," Johnson County Sun, May 15, 2002; Nick Kowalczyk, "City uses condemnation power to complete center site," Kansas City Star, June 11, 2003, 5.

By 2005, the economy had picked up and the zoning disputes had settled. Over the next two years, private developers proposed two residential projects, a twelve-unit townhouse development and thirty-four condominium lofts with ground floor retail. Neither saw completion. In 2007, six years after the City Council passed the Destination Downtown Overland Park master plan, the community center finally opened.⁶⁹

Community Soul Versus Superficial Myth

For the most part, Overland Park was ahead of the trend on constructing a BID. Now a popular device for revitalizing business districts, this planning tool was in its infancy in the late 1980s. There are several benefits to utilizing a BID as a method to revitalize a struggling commercial area, most significantly is its ability to balance commitments by the public and the private sectors. BIDs have access to the local government's fiscal powers, thus legitimizing the efforts, yet local businesses, often through a non-profit third party, independently manage the BID. In Overland Park's case, this enables business owners to have a voice, yet keeps much of the space within public hands, including parks, sidewalks, the Farmer's Market, and the pocket-plaza, thus facilitating public activities and encouraging civic character. As public policy researcher Jerry Mitchell explains, "A strong sense of place encourages

⁶⁹ Cait Purinton, "Despite protests, officials endorse downtown Overland Park plan" Kansas City Star, April 10, 2002, 1; Brad Cooper and Joyce Smith, "Downtown storefront plan contested in Overland Park," Kansas City Star, May 29, 2002, B-1; Brad Cooper, "Overland Park alters zoning proposal," Kansas City Star, July 2, 2002, B-1; Rob Roberts, "OP mayor says 'whoa' to downtown rezoning," Johnson County Sun, March 20, 2003, 5A; Sara Stites, "Townhomes continue downtown revival," Kansas City Star, November 2, 2005, 1, 13; Sara Stites, "Condo Project coming to market," Kansas City Star, October 25, 2006, 1, 16.

economic activity and the emotional attachment to special spots may elicit the willingness of individuals to be taxed and regulated on behalf of others.” In the case of downtown Overland Park, local government officials and business owners felt their historic district possessed that “sense of place” and were willing to pay fees that they believed would ultimately revitalize the area economically and thus, enhance its identity. Yet, the question arises, was this identity part of a deeper collective soul or simply a myth?⁷⁰

The hiring of Susan Powell as the new director of the Downtown Overland Park Partnership in late winter 2004 encapsulates Overland Park’s attempts to find a “sense of place” and illustrates the tensions between searching for the community’s soul and perpetuating a superficial myth. In an interview with the *Sun Newspaper*, Powell underscored the riches of downtown. “I was particularly charmed...because it is so much like the small town that I came from. It’s small, it’s fun, it’s high quality, it’s relaxing, it has unique stores. It’s a special place that I consider the jewel of Kansas City.” Powell evoked characteristics of places, comparing a section of a large, sprawling suburb to a small town. For Powell and many others in Overland Park, downtown was the community’s soul. Yet, comparing this small corner of a massive suburb to a small town perpetuates the myth of the past. Overland Park is not a small town, no matter how many buzzwords like “unique” and “special,” its promoters utilize. That being said, Powell did elucidate what many citizens of Overland Park want and hold dear, emphasizing that downtown “is one of the safest,

⁷⁰ Jerry Mitchell, Business Improvement Districts and the Shape of American Cities (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2008), 9.

most convenient places to shop in Greater Kansas City.” Residents of Overland Park pride themselves on living in a safe place to raise a family. Powell definitely understood her clientele’s desires and needs. For Susan Powell, downtown Overland Park possessed “place,” yet simultaneously, it was a promotion.⁷¹

The revitalization of downtown Overland Park was and remains a combination of both an economic development campaign, based largely on the superficial mass culture implemented from above by a powerful local government, and a search for community identity, grounded in community pride and a sense of history. The revitalization projects renewed Overland Park’s identity of place with its historic downtown. The revitalization created a physical environment that nurtured citizens “sense of place.” Efforts of the BID produce clean, landscaped sidewalks complete with benches to sit and enjoy the shade, and fun, engaging activities such as the Farmer’s Market, parades, craft shows, and music concerts. All of these elements bring people together and allow for “place.” Yet, the “masscult” nature of much of the physical environment of downtown, such as the clock tower, causes disengagement with residents of Overland Park since many were not directly involved in its production. More importantly, this new built environment continues to obfuscate the history of Overland Park, since there was no historical precedent for the tower.

⁷¹ Rob Roberts, “New director is already sold on historic district,” Johnson County Sun, February 26, 2004, 5A; 2007. *Overland Park, Kansas: The Leading Suburban Business Community in the Midwest*. Overland Park, KS: Overland Park Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Council. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.opedc.org/op/media/docs/OPEDC%20Booklet%202007%20for%20e-mail.pdf>, accessed April 14, 2008

The revitalization projects also reinvigorated the function of downtown. City officials and business owners have created opportunities for people to live, work, and play in downtown Overland Park. The area has survived through economic hard times and is a viable commercial area, one of many throughout Johnson County. It fulfills its economic function, yet often too much so. A case in point was the proposal to tear down the Masonic Lodge to make way for the new recreation center. It was only after protests that city officials offered a compromise. Arguably, some of the revitalization projects, both those directed by the city government and those initiated by the BID directors, lacked compassion. In the end, the economic function of downtown Overland Park provided a “sense of place” for many in the community; however, it was not without feelings of dislocation and “placelessness.”

The commitment to the historical forces that created and continually reshaped downtown produced a “sense of place” that enabled residents to reclaim the soul of the community. This could be seen in the commitment to historic businesses, such as barbershops, auto dealerships and entertainment businesses. Going back to historical roots is also evident in the attempts to make downtown a center for community activity. The city and private interests have accomplished this through the Farmer’s Market, the preservation of the Strang Car Barn and the Overland Theatre, and events such as Overland Park Days and the Clock Tower Music series. These senses of history and pride helped create a community with a center. Ironically, having a “sense of place” is currently trendy in America. As Mitchell explains, “When the

value of an old idea [i.e. downtowns] is recognized and transformed into a new fad, [then revitalization occurs].”⁷²

Yet, the revitalization projects also perpetuated myths. As Relph critiques what he calls, “the present-day landscape,” he warns against a built environment that becomes superficial. Places like downtown Overland Park risk being “characterized by signs pointing not to deeper levels of reality but to overriding sets of ideas or ‘myths’ that are often contrived and deliberately fabricated.” Furthermore, these myths are dangerous because they may lead to an idealization of the past or the future. An adulation of the future leads to the worst forms of boosterism, while the glorification of the past, as stated in the previous chapter, obfuscates the real history of a “place.” For “place” to succeed, citizens of the community must have input in the construction and preservation of the built environment.⁷³

Downtown Overland Park treads lightly in the balance between community soul, or “place,” and marketing scheme, or “placelessness.” Yet, this is how Relph and others perceive our contemporary built environment. Philosopher David Seamon praises Relph for his conceptual structure, “especially through his continuum of insideness and outsideness, he [Relph] provides a language that allows us to articulate the particular experience of a particular person or group in relation to the particular place in which they find themselves.” As we examine an identity of place in Overland Park, we find various people experience the physical environment, the functional activities, and the symbolic meaning of downtown in different ways. Those who

⁷² Mitchell, 9

⁷³ Relph, 137, 138.

completely embrace the physical, functional, and symbolic aspects of downtown experience a high degree of insideness, and thus have a strong “sense of place.” Conversely, those who reject or are alienated by these dimensions experience outsidership or “placelessness.” I argue that the contemporary landscape of downtown Overland Park lies on a spectrum of “place” and “placelessness.” The Business Improvement District, coupled with the actions of the government and local business owners have indeed helped create “place” in downtown Overland Park, enabling people to feel a sense of insideness, yet they have also maintained the dominance of “placelessness” in our contemporary landscapes, thus perpetuating outsidership. The following chapter further examines the continuum between “place” and “placelessness.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ David Seamon. “A Singular Impact: Edward Relph’s *Place and Placelessness*,” in *Environmental and Architectural Phenomenology Newsletter*, Vol. 7, no. 3 (Fall 1996), p. 5-8.

Chapter 3

Contested Place: A Tale of Three Theaters

The Last Picture Show

In the 1971 film, *The Last Picture Show*, the town of Anarene, Texas is slowly dying. Although set in post World War II Texas, a time of economic plenty, best buddies, Sonny and Duane, must navigate the last year of high school, the quest for sex and love, and deal with the immediate economic reality of their lives.

Throughout the film, Sonny is always scrounging by on the few cents he has, while Duane ultimately leaves town, first to work in the oil wells of west Texas and later for a tour in Korea. Before Duane leaves, he and Sonny take in the last film before the local movie house closes. Sonny is alone, in a dying town.

In *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater*, director Peter Bogdanovich acknowledged that “the shuttering of a town’s only movie theater is rather obviously a metaphor for the shuttering of the town itself, a certain closing off or insularization.” For many who grew up in small town America or bustling urban centers, the death of the single screen theater symbolizes both the decline of these rural community hubs and urban metropolises and the loss of their individual and collective memories. Movie houses represent both commercial ventures that provide litmus tests of the economic viability of the town and historical repositories for the community’s identity. Although the economic aspects of this demise seem clear, experiential facets are more elusive, as Bogdanovich explains,

“When the theater in a town was closed, it could no longer form part of the experience of growing up, people were robbed of this kind of communal memory that is also so very individual.”⁷⁵

This sense of loss clearly appears when examining small rural communities or the inner city yet becomes more elusive when examining suburbs. Michael Putnam, whose photographic work provides the bulk of *Silent Screens* content, only focuses on small town and urban theaters. In fact, he insinuates that suburbs led to the decline of single screen movie houses. Of course, Putnam is correct in that the large multiplex movie theaters that started in the 1960s and exploded by the 1980s rang the death knell for these single screens and most of these multiplexes and later megaplexes indeed reside in suburbs. However, such statements discount the single screens built in early suburbs, many prewar, yet some postwar. Furthermore, Putnam’s statement begs the question: do suburban multiplexes inherently negate any sense of community bound in personal childhood memories? In other words, can suburban theaters “form part of the experience of growing up” and thus a “communal memory that is also so very individual?” Theaters in Overland Park, such as the Overland, the Glenwood, and the Glenwood Arts, help provide those personal and communal memories, and in some way help shape the community’s identity.⁷⁶

As *The Last Picture Show* implies, movie theaters are lightning rods for community identity. Yet, beyond the emotions associated with movies and movie

⁷⁵ Peter Bogdanovich “Old Dreams” in Michael Putnam ed. *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theater* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 27-31.

⁷⁶ Ibid

houses, we should not overlook the cold-hard reality that Hollywood and AMC are commercial ventures. Usually, movie theaters close because they are not economically viable. The physical structures provided by this tension between memories and identity, for individuals and the community, and profit, marketing, and mass culture presents an excellent opportunity to examine the continuum of “place” and “placelessness.”

The Overland

Coinciding with the revitalization of downtown Overland Park was the restoration of the old Overland Theater by the Fine Arts Theatre Group. Built in 1946 by renowned theater designer, Robert Boller, for the Dickinson Theater Group, this Art Deco Theater opened on Christmas Day and was the first movie theater in downtown Overland Park in over a decade. Two theaters existed in downtown before the Overland, yet they failed to weather the Great Depression. Arguably, before the war, claims that downtown Overland Park possessed attributes of a small town held some validity, yet by the time Dickinson built the Overland, its suburban nature was clear. Thus, a single screen theatre built after World War II in a suburb must have been seen as a viable economic venture, and indeed, it was. Although Dickinson changes the theater’s name twice, first to the Kimo South and later to the Park Cinema, it continued to operate as a theater until the late 1970s. Small, single-screen venues were no longer profitable, so Dickinson sold the Overland to the Theatre for

Young America in 1977. This live performance group for children did little to alter the structure and successfully ran shows until 1987, at which time they sold the theatre to the City of Overland Park, yet continued to lease the space until 1993. At that point, the City was looking for another institution to help revitalize downtown Overland Park and in stepped the Fine Arts Theatre Group.⁷⁷

The Fine Arts Theatre Group's partners, Wade Williams and Brian and Ben Mossman already owned two theaters in the Kansas City metropolitan area, the Engelwood, in Independence, where they showed classic films, and the Fine Arts Theatre in Mission, where they presented first-run art flicks. Over the next seven years, they would work to restore as much of the 1940s structure, both inside and outside, as possible. Luckily, time changed little, however, the Group did replace some interior elements. Looking to salvage elements from other theaters prior to demolition, Williams recovered a chandelier for the lobby, wall sconces, and lobby posters from the Isis Theater, originally located at 31st Street and Troost Avenue in Kansas City, Missouri and the 1949 Manly Popcorn maker and lobby door trim from the Plaza Theater in Abilene, Kansas. While Putnam and Bogdanovich claimed the single screens of the inner city and rural towns were dying, Williams and the Mossman's were salvaging as much as they could and bringing them back to the suburbs. On June 31, 2000, the Fine Arts Theatre Group opened the Rio Theatre.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ *Historic Overland Theater, 7204 W. 80th Street*, Overland Park, KS: City of Overland Park, KS. On-line. Available from Internet, <http://www.opkansas.org/Gov/History/HistoricOverlandTheater.cfm>, accessed April 11, 2008; "Overland Theater, Johnson County, Ks," National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet. Department of the Interior: National Park Service.

⁷⁸ "Overland Theater, Johnson County, Ks," National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet. Department of the Interior: National Park Service.

The Glenwood

In December of 1997, Kansas City Star columnist Mike Hendricks wrote, “When they knock down the Glenwood IV Theatres [in Overland Park, Kansas]...you won’t find historic preservationists blocking the bulldozers. Its not as if it’s an architectural treasure.” Hendricks then proceeded to reminisce about the “old movie palaces” in downtown Kansas City, Missouri that sprung up during the 1920s and 1930s. By the late 1990s, public/private partnerships restored many of these old theaters, converting them into venues for “high” theatre, musicals, and opera. Conversely, the boxy, steel exterior of the Glenwood looked more like an “airplane hangar” than a grand theater, and Hendricks foreshadowed that the citizens of Overland Park would not try to save the building. The land had higher value as retail space. The Glenwood’s fate was sealed.⁷⁹

Yet, three years later, with the Glenwood under the wrecking ball, Bill Knoch, an Overland Park Developer who owned the land, kept the demolition date quiet since he had received numerous indignant calls from local citizens condemning him for tearing down “the finest theater...in the country.” For the most part, both Hendricks and Knoch overlooked the sentimental value of the movie theater. During public hearings, both a resident and a City Councilman compared “the Glenwood’s place in Overland Park history to the Coliseum’s place in Roman history.” For Johnson Countians, the Glenwood was a special place. It invoked memories of first dates that later led to marriages, it became a repository for memories between friends and

⁷⁹ “Glenwood’s last reel rolling soon,” Kansas City Star, December 8, 1997, B-1.

families, and it functioned as the place for several generations of Overland Park residents to see blockbusters, such as “Star Wars.” At the turn of the twenty-first century, with the architecture of commercial and retail space becoming superficial and mundane, the Glenwood Theatre represented a “place” in a “placeless” world.⁸⁰

What made the Glenwood so important to the residents of Overland Park? After all, was it not simply a big box building, similar to most suburban movie theaters? For many residents of this Kansas City suburb, the Glenwood Theatre possessed distinctiveness. Unlike many things suburban, it had history. In 1966, Glen W. Dickinson Jr., the owner of Dickinson Theatres of Shawnee, Kansas, built a theater on the last piece of his father’s five hundred acre Overland Park farm, with the gigantic auditorium literally springing out of a cornfield. In a time when downtown Kansas City cornered the market on the powerhouse movie theaters, building at the corner of 91st Street and Metcalf Avenue was like building on the moon. At first the single screen did not fair well, however, by 1969 it thrived enough for Dickinson to add a second screen, making the Glenwood one of the first multiplexes in the region. Later, in the 1980s, the multiplex expanded with two smaller screens. Throughout its history, the Glenwood often had exclusive rights to show movies and sometime held film premiers with stars in attendance. In 1977, “Star Wars” grossed almost a million dollars setting a Kansas City record for highest grossing film. Yet, by the 1990s

⁸⁰ Johnson County Sun, June 16, 2000, A-1; “Glenwood demolition plan approved,” Kansas City Star, April 18, 2000, B-1; “Plan approves for shops at Glenwood site,” Kansas City Star, March 28, 2000, B-1.

theaters saturated the area's market, especially with the rise of the Kansas City-based AMC Theatres and their megaplexes. Soon, the Glenwood's sales plummeted, necessitating decisive action. In the end, Wood Dickinson, Glen's son, sold the theater. "It [selling the theater] was like giving up a child and a piece of history."⁸¹

However, its history was not the only reason for its importance. Besides what some critics said, local citizens deemed the Glenwood architecturally significant and a landmark to Overland Park. The main attraction was the original, 1966 auditorium. The sixty-six-foot panoramic screen was more than two stories high, the largest in Kansas City and possibly largest in the Midwest. The theatre enclosed eight hundred and sixteen-red, plush, rocker seats arranged in arced rows with plenty of legroom. A faux fireplace graced the entrance to the main screen giving the theatre a homey feel. The main concession stand and the ticket booth were located in a circular lobby that extended from the boxy theater number one. The roofline of this structure resembled the arched concrete roof of Eero Saarinen's TWA Terminal at Kennedy Airport. Similar to Saarinen's structure, the copious amounts of glass enabled light to stream into the lobby. At night, a fifteen by fifteen-foot chandelier with more than five hundred crystals and two hundred lights illuminated the lobby. For Overland Park, this structure embodied opulence.⁸²

Beyond the massive screen and the lavish, modern lobby, the Glenwood Theatre's sign stood out as its most notable landmark. For over thirty years, this

⁸¹ "Saying Goodbye to the Glenwood," Kansas City Star, May 1, 2000, A-1; "Forecast: Reign to end," Kansas City Star, January 13, 1998, D-1

⁸² "Saying Goodbye to the Glenwood," Kansas City Star, May 1, 2000, A-1; "Glenwood demolished," The Sun Newspapers, 2000, A-1

forty-foot steel sign dominated the corner of 91st Street and Metcalf Avenue, becoming “a monument to freestanding theater signs erected before the days of municipal uniform sign ordinances.” This eclectic sign featured two turquoise-colored Moroccan arches with a Sputnik-style light between one and an Old English-style “G” on a coat of arms between the other. Below this, the medieval theme continued, spelling out “Glenwood Theatre” in the same font. Finally, below that, yet still well above street level the marquee listed the movies for the week. For some this sign was an eyesore, yet for most, it was a “landmark worth preserving.”⁸³

At the end of 1997, the *Johnson County Sun* allowed its readers to give their opinions of the sign through its “Talk Back” line. Overall, the vote was in favor of saving the sign, yet more importantly, several callers felt that the sign symbolically represented the city of Overland Park and was one of its cultural treasures. For one caller tearing down the sign destroyed the history of Overland Park, a community that needed physical reminders of the past. “The Glenwood sign is certainly a treasure. Is the glorious past only something to be wiped out as we go? We need to save as many landmarks as possible.” Another caller echoed the concern for preserving history especially in a place where economics outweighs culture in importance. “I definitely think that the Glenwood Theatre sign is a treasure and that it is worthy of preservation. Especially in a suburban area that is prone to too much change and

⁸³ “A Sign of Times Gone By,” *Johnson County Sun*, December 10, 1997, C1; “Readers: Save the sign,” *Johnson County Sun*, January 2, 1998, A1; “New life likely for theater’s remnants,” *Kansas City Star*, December 1, 2000, B1.

growth, it is really important to retain some of the elements of the past.” The battle over the Glenwood Theatre had begun.⁸⁴

The discussions that took place in the newspapers and at city council meetings represented more than ideas about preserving a building, or a sign, they symbolized a clash between nostalgia and commercial growth, between ideas of “place” and “placelessness.” Interviewees and call-in comments reverberated with issues of history and a sense of place, utilizing language such as “heritage,” “character,” “memories,” and “vintage” to describe the theater. Citizens like Peggy Squibbs, speaking in front of the Planning Commission, correlated the building with Overland Park’s history, claiming, “This is a building that signifies that beginning of Overland Park.” For many, the Glenwood Theatre and its sign represented unique vessels of nostalgia that helped create “place” and deserved preservation.⁸⁵

Yet, in the end, property owners tore down the Glenwood Theatre and built a retail development on its site. Those defending the Glenwood characterized supporters of this economic development and commercial growth as encouraging “placelessness.” Several people voiced concern of the amount of retail space in Overland Park. In a January 6, 1998 article in the *Kansas City Star*, a moviegoer claimed, “Like this place needs another strip mall. We’re the strip mall capital of the world.” Furthermore, City Councilman, Jay Lehnertz, in whose district the

⁸⁴ “Readers: Save the sign,” *Johnson County Sun*, January 2, 1998, A-1; “Plan approves for shops at Glenwood site,” *Kansas City Star*, March 28, 2000, B-1.

⁸⁵ “Moviegoers lament as theater’s fate sealed,” *Kansas City Star*, January 6, 1998, B-1; City of Overland Park *Overland Park Planning Commission Meeting* minutes, March 27, 2000, On-line. Available from Internet, http://www.opkansas.org/Assets/minutes/Planning_Commission/2000/20000327PC.pdf, p. 6, accessed April 11, 2008.

Glenwood resided, commented on the homogenizing effects of further retail. “It will be the ultimate homogenization of that intersection. We’re tearing something down that gives some unique character to that intersection and replacing it with retail. It will make it just like every other intersection in the city.” Not only were people worried about preserving a “place,” they were concerned about then encroachment of “placelessness.”⁸⁶

Yet, those wanting to tear down the Glenwood argued against notions of “placelessness.” Developers simply wanted to invest in the land, creating, as they saw it, much needed retail for northern Overland Park. In fact, the Glenwood’s demise was rooted in the same movement that saved downtown Overland Park. During the recession in the early 1990s, developer Bill Knoth built a commercial center, Regency Park Shopping Center, as an in-fill project. By the late 1990s, this shopping center and the surrounding area thrived economically. Knoth believed that “development of additional retail space along the Metcalf corridor would be in the city’s best interest,” and would ultimately “strengthen Overland Park’s core.” At the same time, however, the four screens of the Glenwood lost viability compared with the number of multi-plexes with twice or three times as many screens. By the end of the decade, Dickinson Theatres had sold the land to Knoth and the building to Goodrich Quality Theaters. Goodrich operated the theater for a year before it closed

⁸⁶ “Moviegoers lament as theater’s fate sealed,” *Kansas City Star*, January 6, 1998. B-1; City of Overland Park *Overland Park City Council Meeting* minutes, January 5, 1998, On-line. Available from Internet, http://www.opkansas.org/Assets/minutes/City_Council/1998/19980105CO.pdf p. 36, accessed April 11, 2008.

in May 2000. Knoth then moved to demolish the building and build his expanded retail project.

At this point, this tension between nostalgia and economic growth expanded the struggle into defining what it meant to be “American.” America’s heritage faced off against America’s property rights. Resident Peggy Squibbs correlated the Glenwood to America’s immigrant history, “She [the Glenwood] brought the people to this country. They stayed. They built homes. They built businesses.” City Councilman Carl Gerlach saw other matters as more important, “Property owners have rights. For us to step on those rights is against what this country is built on.” The fight for the Glenwood moved beyond the theater itself, becoming a fight for the city’s soul.⁸⁷

In the end, on April 17, 2000, the City Council voted 6-3 to approve the development of a shopping center. On April 30, 2000, the Glenwood Theatres closed its doors for the final time. Although efforts to save the building at both a grassroots level and in the City Council continued over the summer, the Glenwood’s fate was sealed. Overland Park Mayor Ed Eilert exclaimed, “[It is] sad to see the Glenwood go. You hate to see a longstanding landmark like this come to an end, but these changes do occur. The City Council has determined that retail is an appropriate use for that site.” Quietly, developers demolished the Glenwood on December 28, 2000.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ “Glenwood demolition plan approved,” Kansas City Star, April 18, 2000, B-1.

⁸⁸ Johnson County Sun, September 29, 2000, 5A.

The Glenwood Arts

Yet, the story of the Glenwood did not end here. During the autumn of 2000, many groups, including the United Methodist Church, the Johnson County Museum, and the Fine Arts Theatre Group worked to salvage much of the interior of the building. The Glenwood's large chandelier was donated to the United Methodist Church for the lobby of their new building at 135th Street and Roe Avenue. The Johnson County Museum claimed several of the plush red seats and portions of the carpet that featured the Old English-style "G," small replicas of the letter that adorned the famous sign outside. Furthermore, Knoth opened the building to the public for one day in October, allowing residents and anyone interested in the theater to buy memorabilia. Most however went to the Fine Arts Theatre Group, including the sign and marquee, twelve thousand seats, the faux fireplace, mirrors, trim, exotic wood paneling, three concession stands, and three smaller neon Glenwood signs; all of this for around \$20,000. Although the Theatre Group's partners, Wade Williams and Brian and Ben Mossman led the charge to save the Glenwood's interior, they had no plans for their new prize. Although they had refurbished several old movie theaters in town, the Fine Arts Theatre Group had no specific plans for the Glenwood, at the time, preserving its interior was enough.⁸⁹

The group's indecision did not last long and within weeks, talk of a new Glenwood began. As *Sun* staff writer, Michael Smith, exclaimed in a February 23,

⁸⁹ "Pieces of OP history: Glenwood seats, many items on sale Saturday," The Sun Newspapers, October 25, 2000, 2A; "Group rescues Glenwood's historic sign and marquee," Johnson County Sun, December 1, 2000, 1-A; "New life likely for theater's remnants," Kansas City Star, December 1, 2000, B-1.

2001 article, “Like the mythical phoenix, a familiar name in Johnson County cinema history will be rising again this summer.” The Theatre Group looked into retrofitting the three screens of the old Metcalf South Mall Theater. The dying mall’s theater closed several years earlier, yet the infrastructure remained. To insure the theater’s success three ingredients were necessary. The first was a complete retrofit of the theater with all of the materials saved from the Glenwood. As Fine Arts partner Wade Williams said, “we want to get that exact same feeling that you got when you went into the Glenwood.” With warehouses filled with vintage material, this ingredient proved easy, the remaining two ingredients, the sign and the name, would both reveal problems.⁹⁰

By early March of 2001, there arose questions over who owned the rights to the name, Glenwood. The name came from the combination of first and middle names of the founder of Dickinson Theatres: Glen Wood Dickinson, Sr., his son who built the original Glenwood in 1966, Glen Wood Dickinson, Jr., and his youngest son and last member of the family to preside over the franchise, Glen Wood Dickinson III. Yet, similar to many street names in Overland Park, the community honored its influential citizens by naming streets after them, including Glenwood Street and Glenwood Place that surround Metcalf South Mall. Many citizens agreed that it was not enough to have a similar theater fill the void of the old Glenwood; it needed to have the nostalgic and familiar name. For the Fine Arts Theatre Group, the battle was over before it began. They knew they could not open a successful venue without the

⁹⁰ “Glenwood Theatre born again,” Johnson County Sun, Feb. 23, 2001, 1-A

name. In the end, the name was updated and now the theater is called the Glenwood Arts.⁹¹

The installation of the old Glenwood sign proved an even larger issue for the Fine Arts Theatre Group, who filed for a variance on the current sign ordinance. In late March, the Overland Park planning staff recommended a rejection of the variance, claiming, “the forty-two foot sign might be unsightly to homeowners east of the mall, especially when lit at night.” The Theatre Group acknowledged that if the planning commission rejected the sign, they would have to pull out of Metcalf South. On March 27, 2001, with a 5-4 vote, the Planning Commission accepted the sign. Commissioner David White exclaimed, “We are presented with a unique opportunity to do something right for once. My God. This sign stood in Overland Park for forty years, and to say it can’t stand in Overland Park again is a crime.” Wade Williams continually proclaimed that the theater, tucked in the back of an aging mall, could not succeed without the Glenwood name or without the sign. The Fine Arts Theatre group got both, yet they also found they had support for the community, not just from members of the planning commission, but also from the 2,500 signatures from residents collected on a petition to preserve the sign.⁹²

In the end, the new Glenwood Arts Theatre did not open until late fall of 2002, but by the following summer, business was booming. What made the new theater so successful? In part, the Fine Arts Theatre Group found its niche in classic

⁹¹“Same mystique, different location for new Glenwood,” Journal Herald, March 1, 2001, p. 12; “Conflict arises over Glenwood theater name,” Johnson County Sun, March 2, 2001, 1-A

⁹² “OP staff opposes Glenwood Theatre sign,” Johnson County Sun, March 23, 2001, 1-A; “Action saves Glenwood Theatre sign,” Kansas City Star, March 28, 2001, Metro Section, p. 1.

and art house films, bolstered with local film festivals, yet for the loyal following there was something more, nostalgia for the old Glenwood. The “vintage, regal atmosphere” with the old curtain, the comfortable, red rocker chairs, the fireplace and the mirrors in the lobby, and the gigantic sign with the old-English style lettering and the Sputnik ball, all reminded patrons of the old Glenwood. For them, the Glenwood lived on.⁹³

The Power of Place

Yet, why was the Glenwood Theatre so important to so many residents of Johnson County? Why was there actual resistance by Overland Park citizens to tearing down an old theater along with its dated sign? Why did a small company think that it could resurrect the Glenwood and still turn a profit? For the answers, we turn to “place,” and what architect and social historian, Dolores Hayden calls, “the power of place.” For Hayden, this power comes from ordinary landscapes that “nurture citizens’ public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory.” For many growing up in the suburbs, the ordinary landscape of the Glenwood Theatre resonated with citizens in Overland Park, becoming a vessel for their shared memories. Furthermore, Hayden links identity to both personal and social memory, claiming, “urban landscapes are storehouses for these social memories.” Quotes from the *Johnson County Sun*’s Talk Back line, emphasize the connection between place, memory, and identity. One caller remembered, “My wife

⁹³ “New Glenwood captures look, feel of the original,” Kansas City Star, June 21, 2003, Metro Section p. 36.

and I spent our honeymoon at the Glenwood Manor [a hotel next to the theater that was torn down] and saw a film at the theater. That was eighteen years ago and driving by that sign now still reminds us of that night.” For many, the sign and the theater possessed the “power of place.” The economic development that destroyed Glenwood Theatre, eradicated the physical repository for these social memories, leading the older part of Overland Park down a slippery slope towards “placelessness.”⁹⁴

However, for others, the Glenwood Theatre, with its sign, already represented “placelessness.” A few callers to the Talk Back line demanded the sign be torn down. One caller asserted, “It is not a landmark. It is not as if it were a beautiful building with gorgeous architecture. It should be put away with things that are old and outdated.” In general, many Americans would agree that post World War II architecture is not “beautiful” or “gorgeous.” Yet, beyond these assertions, many geographers and other critics of postwar suburbia link all things suburban to “placelessness.” It is possible to perceive the sign and the theater as “other-directed architecture,” thus contributing to what Relph called, “other-directed place.” For the most part, the Glenwood Theatre, located on the commercial strip of Metcalf Avenue, characterized an other-directed place. In 1966, Dickinson built the Glenwood to compete with the movie houses in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, therefore, to lure

⁹⁴ Hayden, The Power of Place. p. 9; “Readers: Save the sign,” Johnson County Sun, January 2, 1998, p.1.

outside consumers into the suburbs. For many, this type of architecture leads to “placelessness.”⁹⁵

Yet, a closer read of Relph’s 1976 book, *Place and Placelessness*, uncovers more of a continuum between “place” and “placelessness” rather than a binary. Although the Glenwood Theatre had elements of kitsch and a perception of “placelessness,” it also had “place.” For Relph, unique locations or landscapes on their own did not necessarily create “place.” Instead, “place” necessitates a deeper emotional and psychological tie that leads to individual and communal identities. In addition to having symbolic meaning with which people can identify, these experiences of the lived-world must include “real objects,” for instance buildings where people live, work, and play. The Glenwood Theatre epitomizes such an object. Comments such as the couple who spent their honeymoon at the Glenwood Manor, or the hundreds of people who saw the movie “Star Wars” at the Glenwood, illustrated the emotional ties, personal and social identities, and symbolic meaning people associated with the theater. For Relph, “place” necessitates a relationship between human experience and the built landscape. For over thirty years, the southwest corner of 91st Street and Metcalf exemplified that relationship. Therefore, it is possible to view the Glenwood Theatre as embodying both the “other-directed architecture” found in “placelessness,” yet possessing the deeper, symbolic meanings that

⁹⁵ “Readers: Save the sign,” Johnson County Sun, January 2, 1998, p.1; Relph, 93, 118.

resonated emotionally with those who utilized—worked or played in—this physical structure, thus, a “place.”⁹⁶

Although the Glenwood Theatre possessed qualities of both “place” and “placelessness,” it is important to recognize it as the former. Understanding the Glenwood Theatre as a “place,” a building in which local residents identified with and gave meaning to, enables us to comprehend why, to some, its destruction embodied “placelessness.” The reasons are twofold. First, the destruction of a “place” in itself is a placeless act. Furthermore, the construction of uniform, standardized commercial development perpetuates manifestations of “placelessness.” Many critics of suburbia agree with the latter, claiming that authentically created places are disappearing, destroyed and replaced by the placeless landscapes of the contemporary world. However, those concerned with the relationship between “place” and suburban sprawl, such as Relph, acknowledge that “placelessness” is not only a landscape void of noteworthy buildings, activities, and meanings; it is a mind-set, which fails to acknowledge the significance of place. Relph asserts, “[Placelessness] reaches back into the deepest levels of place, cutting roots, eroding symbols, replacing diversity with uniformity.” In part, Relph, like many residents of Overland Park, blamed big businesses and the economic system for not only creating “placelessness” but also being explicitly “anti-place.” In the name of economic development, the dominant forces in American society, government and big

⁹⁶ Relph, 144.

businesses, are not creating, re-creating, and experiencing “place,” instead they are destroying “place” and perpetuating “placelessness.”⁹⁷

These attitudes against “place” become apparent with an examination of the meeting minutes of the Overland Park planning commission and city council. Those who advocated for the tearing down of the theater only saw the land on which the building stood in terms of its functional use and potential, thus solely in its economic terms. While placating the desires and concerns of those who complained about the Glenwood’s destruction, developers and government officials replaced an “experiential geography” with a “formal, scientific geography” embodied in the language of the inevitability of economic progress. These people saw no economic value in “place,” yet for the time being, the Fine Arts Theatre Group has proven them wrong. The success of the new Glenwood Arts, even with its location in a dying mall, proves that “place” can have an economic benefit.⁹⁸

The Glenwood Arts hangs in the balance between “place” and “placelessness.” Analogous to the small town movie house in *The Last Picture Show*, this theater cannot survive on memories alone. Similar to the Rio, the Glenwood represents the economic viability of the area, and they both embody Overland Park’s identity. Their physical structures function as entertainment venues while serving as storehouses for both individual and collective memories. For now, they continue as

⁹⁷ Relph, 109-114, 143. For critics of the suburbs, see also, *Suburban Nation, The Geography of Nowhere*, and *It’s a Sprawl World After All*.

⁹⁸ City of Overland Park *Overland Park Planning Commission Meeting* minutes, March 27, 2000, Online. Available from Internet, http://www.opkansas.org/Assets/minutes/Planning_Commission/2000/20000327PC.pdf, accessed April 11, 2008; Relph, 117

places, yet the specter of “placelessness” inevitably lurks in the darkness. It is only a matter of time before Metcalf Mall closes and the city demolishes the ancient behemoth. For now, the mall still lives, in part because the Glenwood Arts provides much of its traffic. Similarly, the Rio thrives, adding to the sense of place of downtown Overland Park. In twenty-first century America, where the power of “placelessness” grows at an exponential rate, creating uniform built landscapes and continually eradicating the rural, urban, and even suburban places with which many of us identify, the importance of these movie theaters becomes amplified, solidifying their status as repositories of “place.”

Concluding with “Place”

Suburban Landscapes

In his book, *Suburban Landscapes*, historian Paul Mattingly provides two reasons for studying specific suburbs, such as Leonia, New Jersey, or Overland Park, Kansas. First, suburbs provide twenty-first century America its dominant landscape where the majority of the population lives, works, and plays. However, Mattingly continues, “Our basic knowledge of suburbia rests on a few exceptional examples of the genre and social mythology.” Although statistically significant, our understanding of suburban culture lags behind. Many descriptions of the suburbs, both academic and non-academic, exacerbate the binary of Edge City and sprawl, thus obfuscating the everyday dynamics of actual suburbs. Yet, I disagree with Mattingly since “our basic knowledge of suburbia” does not come from these descriptions, instead it comes from our experiences. Most of my colleagues do not denounce Overland Park as placeless because of something they read. Instead, it is because of their experience, or lack of, that shapes their “basic knowledge.” The demographic, architectural, social, economic, and political dominance of suburbia on America necessitates a deeper analysis of specific suburbs. Yet, it is also our experiential relationship to “place” that shapes the way we view and understand suburbs, therefore, examining suburbs necessitates an investigation utilizing the lens of “place.”⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Paul H. Mattingly, *Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 2.

Beyond the statistics, we need to examine specific suburbs like Overland Park because it prevents a categorical denial of all things suburban as placeless. As Mattingly remarks, “the general terms that social scientists, journalists, and others have applied to suburbanization—homogenous, affluent, middle-class, parochial—have become so abstract and ahistorical that they misrepresent the actual nature and experience of suburban culture.” This thesis not only attempts to transcend the misrepresentations of suburbs as “placelessness,” it also attempts to examine suburbs as places, thus examining people’s experience with “place,” its functions, and its symbolic meanings. This thesis examines the early development of the built environment, the attempt to preserve that same landscape as a vital economic and social environment by organizing a Business Improvement District, and the evidence through the attachment to some symbolic buildings, such as the Glenwood, that some residents of Overland Park have developed a “sense of place.”¹⁰⁰

The first chapter of this thesis demonstrates a need to uncover the landscape histories of suburbs such as Overland Park. Without these histories, a “sense of place” eludes most suburban citizens. Although these histories may produce “topophilia” for both the contemporary and historic built environments, they also remind us that economic forces and the “other-directed places” produced by these forces often destroy the landscapes of previous generations and cultures. Training ourselves to examine the built environment and access the historical archive will

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

strengthen American's historical knowledge and "sense of place." It is a necessary step in understanding the history of American suburbs.

The second chapter analyzes the built environment, its functions and meanings, thus enabling citizens to understand their "identity of place." This identity allows us to see places like downtown Overland Park as a continuum between the binaries of marketing scheme/other-directed places/placelessness and community soul/topophilia/ place. Physical elements of downtown Overland Park, such as the Clock Tower, and functional elements, such as the Farmer's Market, represent both. They possess elements of what Lynch called, "high imageability," yet they arise from what Relph explains as "masscult." City officials, business owners, promoters, and those who live, work, and play in downtown provide multiple perspectives on how to construct, reconstruct, and perceive downtown Overland Park. In the end, the binaries can, and do, co-exist for those who experience downtown.

Ultimately, these perspectives create a spectrum between "placelessness" and "place" that guides us through the third chapter. Since there is contestation between differing perspectives, with some seeing economic development as destroying "place," and creating "placelessness," this solidifies the need to continually examine areas of Overland Park as part of a spectrum between these two points. The Glenwood Theatre embodied elements of "place," yet seeing through the lens of "topophilia" does not mean one cannot appreciate its characteristics as an "other-directed place." While knowing that the Glenwood's sign exemplifies kitsch, does

not mean one cannot find it endearing. The strip mall and grocery store that replaced the Glenwood should be examined using this same spectrum.

While Overland Park exhibits the features of what many see as “placelessness,” it also has a history and reveals evidence of people’s attachment to such places; so much so, that they attempt to preserve them. However, forces of a different nature than these attachments determine whether they endure. One of the most powerful of these forces is capital accumulation. In contemporary America, these forces appear to be indifferent to the specificity of the built environment and of the emotional attachments that people develop toward it.

Limitations of “Place”

Utilizing “place” to understand suburbs has its limitations. Two of these limitations manifest themselves in environmental determinism and the economic production of space. It is possible to perceive this thesis’ focus on the built environment as an examination of the successful or unsuccessful ordering of buildings to create “place.” As geographer David Harvey warned, “From time to time the spatial ordering of the built environment is treated as an end sufficient unto itself, and some form of environmental determinism takes hold.” Although reliant on the physical structures, this thesis intends to assert that “place” is also and possibly more importantly about the human experiences within the built environment. J.B. Jackson warns of this when he cautions, “we attach too much importance to...architecture in producing awareness of our belonging to a city,” instead, “a sense

of place is something that we ourselves create in the course of time. It is the result of habit or custom.” Regardless, this limitation does have merit and begs questions such as, would the revitalization of downtown Overland Park been successful without the clock tower or the pavilion for the Farmer’s Market? Place’s reliance on the built environment limits its usefulness to understand suburbs like Overland Park and risks an emphasis on environmental determinism.¹⁰¹

Similarly, my use of the concept “place” does not focus as much on the economic production of space as others such as Hayden or Harvey. Utilizing the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, Hayden draws a Marxist critique of the built landscape. Hayden claims, “Lefebvre argues that every society in history has shaped a distinctive social space that meets its intertwined requirements for economic production and social reproduction.” An analysis of downtown Overland Park or the Glenwood Theatre through this lens of economic production reveals a quality of contemporary American capitalism that creates clock towers as social icons and destroys movie theaters unless they can prove themselves economically necessary. This form of capitalism is inherently “masscult” and implemented from above, either by a powerful government or influential businesses.¹⁰²

Harvey also focuses on the economic function of the built environment. He notes, “As a physical resource complex created out of human labor and ingenuity, the built environment must primarily function to be useful for production, circulation,

¹⁰¹ John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 151, 163; David Harvey, “On Planning the Ideology of Planning” in Scott Campbell and Susan S. Fainstein, ed. *Readings in Planning Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), 176.

¹⁰² Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 19.

exchange, and consumption.” Although this thesis attempted to elucidate the functions of Overland Park’s built environment, it also focused on the other elements of the identity of place, the perceptual and the symbolic. Yet, borrowing from both Marx and Lefebvre, Harvey grounds his approach in the economic production of space. To understand the “cultural costs in terms of identity, history, and meaning” of the built environment produced by contemporary capitalism, Harvey utilizes “a ‘grid’ of spatial practices.” Not necessarily used for “systematic exploration,” he claims, “My purpose is to find some point of entry that will allow a deeper discussion of the shifting experience of space in the history of modernism and postmodernism.” Harvey provides a framework to understand Overland Park that highlights the limits of this thesis’ use of “place.”¹⁰³

In the end, this project attempts to address the issues of environmental determinism and economic production of space, while not making them the central themes. The central element of “place,” allows for inclusion of these elements, yet further studies could more directly address both of these issues.

A Deeper Analysis

This thesis is part of a current trend of deeper analysis of suburbs utilizing cultural landscape theory, Marxist theory, and/or a “sense of place.” Yet, this is only the beginning, since this project does not deal with race and ethnicity, class, or gender directly. Many historians recommend engaging both the built environment and the

¹⁰³ Harvey, 176, 177; Hayden, 19; David Harvey, The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989), 218-223.

archives, in addition to oral histories. Mining these resources, Hayden advocates that future research could address “working landscapes” and “territorial histories of cities based on race and gender.” Regardless of the sources or methodologies, it is clear that American suburbs require further exploration and critique. Arguably, the concept of “place” provides a rich method of inquiry and analysis.¹⁰⁴

Of course, there are dangers in using “place” as a lens to examine suburbs, especially for those critics who reduce the suburbs to a binary, for it is easy to adapt that binary to “place.” These critics believe that humans experience “place” as either “existential outsidership, places are superficial, empty, and meaningless to the observer” or as “existential insidership, characterizes belonging to a place and the deep and complete identity with place.” This “most fundamental form of insidership is ...a place experienced without deliberate and self conscious reflection, yet is full with significances.” Instead, our experience with “place” usually lies somewhere on the continuum. My experience with Overland Park, for example, can be at multiple levels, for as a child seeing movies at the Glenwood or getting my haircut in downtown Overland Park, I experienced parts of the city as an existential insider yet now I am an outsider, a graduate student living in the college town of Lawrence, Kansas. For now, I am not an existential outsider to Overland Park, because I still actively experience the city, yet one day, my mother will pass away and I will move from the area and then I may experience Overland Park as an existential outsider.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Hayden, The Power of Place, 22-29.

¹⁰⁵ Relph, 51, 55

Place and its continuum with “placelessness” provide a necessary window into our built environment. As economic, political, and social forces alter the physical landscape of Overland Park, it is important to record and analyze these transformations. Again, I utilize Dolores Hayden, “The process that transforms places demands analysis. As a field of wildflowers becomes a shopping mall...[it] must still be considered a place, if only to register the importance of loss and explain it has been damaged by careless development.” Overland Park deserves this type of analysis.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Hayden, 18.

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