



8-2017

The Sacred and the Mundane

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The Sacred and the Mundane

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Architecture
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Catherine Elizabeth Dozier
August 2017

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The work included in this thesis project would not have been possible without the critical input of my professors in the College of Architecture and Design. The guidance given to me by my committee during the conception and evolution of this work has helped me to broaden my outlook on what it is to design, and that has made me a much better architect for all my future work.

Special thanks to George Dodds for offering me a place at the University of Tennessee, Jason Young for challenging me to acquire all the vulnerabilities I could want, and Vanessa Arthur and the office ladies for making sure I kept my act together and for always working behind the scenes to support the college and all its students.

To my family, who have been steadfastly on my side through everything, I owe a debt of tremendous gratitude. I wouldn't have made it through these last three years without all of you and your support and love.

ABSTRACT

The 21st century, an age of digital interfacing and global connectivity where a few clicks puts the majority of human knowledge at our fingertips. America's youth have grown up in a world which has conditioned them to be distractible. A culture of instant gratification and nearly constant connectivity has bred shortened attention spans, leading to a citizenry that is psychologically programmed to experience the world differently than it did in most of the 1900s.

The pace of life in this digital age has reached staggering speeds, as science and technology constantly push the boundaries of our world bringing ever-more information crashing in on our collective consciousness. If you do not work yourself into an early grave, you are not achieving your potential as an employee or a provider for your family, and those who are unfamiliar with the latest viral video or are without knowledge of the news on a minute by minute basis are woefully lacking the ages' ever-changing cultural hierarchy.

In the midst of an overwhelming expectation to use up every single minute of the day, we have lost contact with our inner selves. The quiet moments during which contemplation occurs to its fullest degree are buried under all of the complications of being a human in the 21st century American social landscape.

Architecture has the unique ability to shape the modern world, but the American idea of space is the unfortunate byproduct of our current culture of distraction. This thesis will explore American culture and its relationship to sacralty found in mundane spaces.

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PART 1 – MODERN AMERICAN SOCIETY

The Paradox of Our Time

The paradox of our time in history is that we have taller buildings but shorter tempers, wider Freeways, but narrower viewpoints. We spend more, but have less, we buy more, but enjoy less. We have bigger houses and smaller families, more conveniences, but less time. We have more degrees but less sense, more knowledge, but less judgment, more experts, yet more problems, more medicine, but less wellness.

We drink too much, smoke too much, spend too recklessly, laugh too little, drive too fast, get too angry, stay up too late, get up too tired, read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom. We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values. We talk too much, love too seldom, and hate too often.

We've learned how to make a living, but not a life. We've added years to life not life to years. We've been all the way to the moon and back, but have trouble crossing the street to meet a new neighbor. We conquered outer space but not inner space. We've done larger things, but not better things.

We've cleaned up the air, but polluted the soul. We've conquered the atom, but not our prejudice. We write more, but learn less. We plan more, but accomplish less. We've learned to rush, but not to wait. We build more computers to hold more information, to produce more copies than ever, but we communicate less and less.

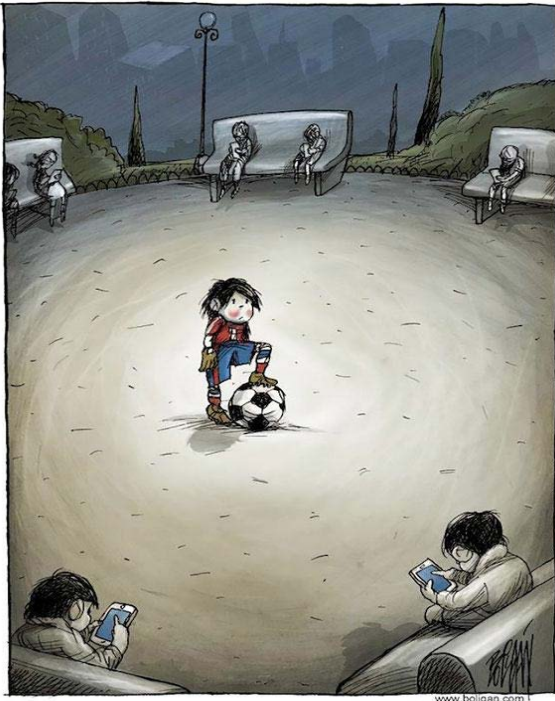


figure 01 satirical cartoon

These are the times of fast foods and slow digestion, big men and small character, steep profits and shallow relationships.

These are the days of two incomes but more divorce, fancier houses, but broken homes. These are days of quick trips, disposable diapers, throwaway morality, one night stands, overweight bodies, and pills that do everything from cheer, to quiet, to kill. It is a time when there is much in the showroom window and nothing in the stockroom. A time when technology can bring this letter to you, and a time when you can choose either to share this insight, or to just hit delete...

The Paradox of Our Time, written by Bob Moorehead (Moorehead).

The words of Bob Moorhead, written at the turn of the century, have come to define many Americans who lead lives they believe they are supposed to want but which leave them unfulfilled. A socially driven idea that to have *the latest and greatest* is a prerequisite to prestige, and ultimately happiness, causes us to constantly gauge ourselves against all those around us. Social media programs located within reach 24 hours a day facilitate this behavior, and the psychological turmoil we face due to the pervasion of technology in our everyday affairs has given us all a techno-complex (figure 01 and figure 04).



figure 02 social media mask

The Search for Myself

It is human nature to seek out attention in the forms of friendship, love and respect. Human beings are social creatures, and our conception of ourselves is derived out of the context we gain from interaction with others and the world around us. We learn and grow

by imitating, and our ability to function in a modern society is predicated on acceptance of who we are by those with whom we work and socialize every day.

The desire to present ourselves to the world with the flaws minimized or removed is akin to the tendency of canines to hide illness or injury due to a lingering instinct from before their domestication so as not to be shunned from the pack and left for predators (Petty). The internet and its relative anonymity give us a platform from which we can perfect our images (figure 02). Hours could be spent performing edits on the perfect profile photo as we carefully curate the presentation of ourselves for the viewing pleasure of internet humanity. “[A man] must desperately justify himself as an object of primary value in the universe; he must stand out...show that he counts more than anything” (Becker, 3-4).

This obsession with digital technology (figure 03) spills onto other areas of our lives as we ignore loved ones to check *likes* and abruptly jump from homework to texting to cat videos and back again. Dr. Larry Rosen coined the term *iDisorder*, in the true fashion of the early 2000s tech slang, which describes the ubiquitous state of Americans in reference to the nearly psychotic behavior they display regarding technology (Rosen, 5).

The current cultural milieu pushes us past the boundaries of responsible human behavior when we cannot ignore our phones while driving our cars or sit through a two-hour movie without checking to see who has been texting us during the show. These behaviors, taken as symptoms, suggest that America is suffering multiple Axis I and Axis II disorders as defined by the current version of the

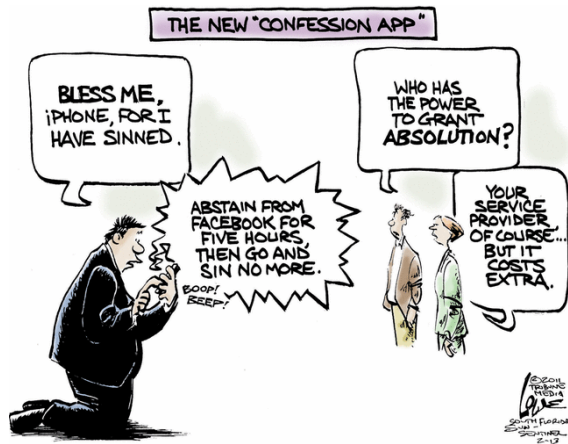


figure 03 satirical cartoon

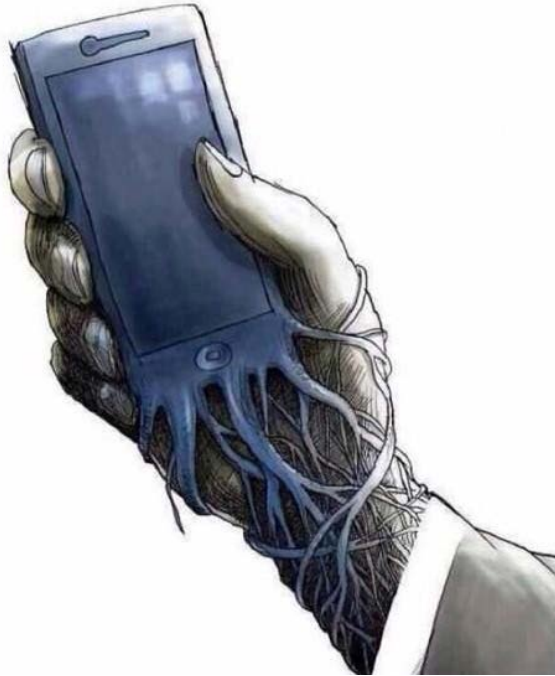


figure 04 sketch

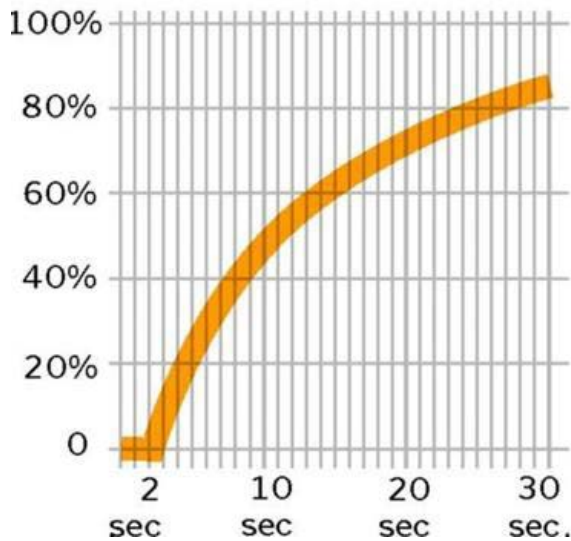


figure 05 abandonment rate

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association. Availability of the technologies which seemingly rule our lives combined with the pressure to meet all of the expectations set for us by everyone from friends to family to co-workers places pressure on people to be able to interact constantly with their devices (Rosen).

Width Without Depth

The prevalent use of the internet has fast-tracked innumerable activities over the last half century. Same day shipping, movies that stream instantly, and lightning fast download speeds have created a universal expectation of expediency in younger Americans. Instant gratification is available for nearly everything, from catching a cab to finding a date nearby. Modern hyperconnectivity, in a time when an overwhelming barrage of media infringes on the majority of our time as we move through a world of billboards, notifications, and the numerous pop-up ads and commercials that strive to persuade us that we simply must have *this* or *that* new commodity, has all but obliterated America's patience. A study by Ramesh Sitaraman, a professor at UMass Amherst, observed the viewing habits of 6.7 million people to determine how long most people were willing to wait between opening a video and being able to view it. The loading time was compared to the percentage of users who abandoned the link (data shown in figure 05). Only half of all users could be bothered to wait longer than 10 seconds for the video to open (Muther).

This impatience manifests itself in a variety of ways throughout modern culture, from the refusal to do more than a cursory amount of fact checking in our "news" on social media

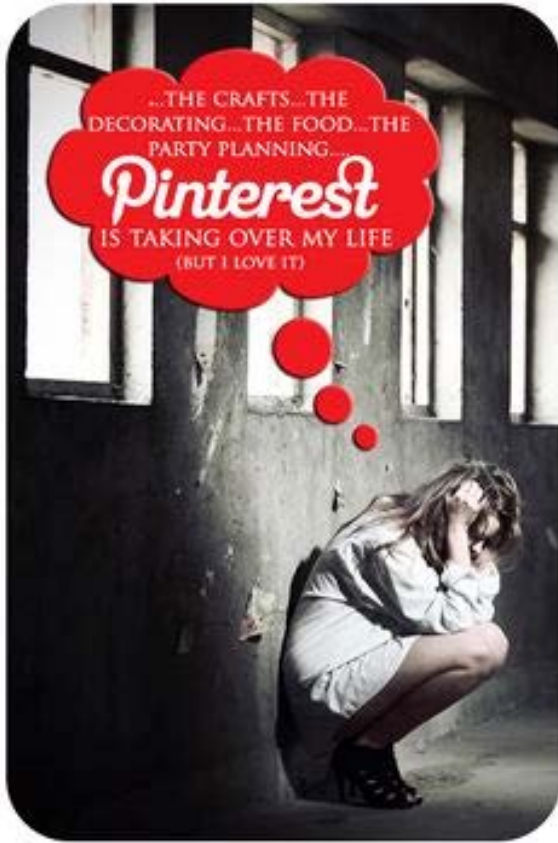


figure 06 pinterest obsession

to a near inability to keep from pirating DVDs before the film is released for home viewing. More and more, Americans have turned to their electronic devices to interact with their world. We exist more exuberantly through our profiles and avatars than in the physical universe. As we pour ourselves into these online personas we ignore physical sensation in our bodies, forgetting to eat or sleep while gorging ourselves on the media influx swirling around us at all times. This mistreatment of the body hints at a deeper, more troubled relationship between Americans and the idea of the body. Americans view human bodies as objects. Objects that can be manipulated, contorted, abused, remade, and possessed. Despite our disconnection from the physical world with our senses, our subconscious is longing for recognition. Ionescu writes about the consonance of pleasing images with human vitality. The American obsession with images and the proliferation of the social media which revolves around them (figure 06) shows our need for constant stimulation from the media, alongside the overwhelming desire to gain some connection to the human spirit within us (Ionescu).

21st century Americans are spread too thinly, and the focus of Western culture on fame and wealth is wreaking havoc with the psyche of those with such superficial life goals. These priorities lead to elevated rates of anxiety and depression, and cause overall wellness to decrease in relation to that of people with more relationship oriented goals. Richard Eckersly writes, "Human needs for security and safety, competence and self-worth, connectedness to others, and autonomy and authenticity are relatively unsatisfied when materialistic values predominate" (Eckersly).

PART 2 – CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE



figure 07 subconsciousness of culture

Western Culture

What is culture in modern day America? A definition of culture is hard to determine due to the subconscious nature of the term. One cannot easily explain the culture they are a part of. No one teaches culture. It naturally evolves out of experience and proximity to individuals who share the same ethnicity or socio-economic background and history. It encompasses humor and ingrained biases we accidentally learned from those who raised us. In diverse locations like big cities of the United States, subcultures are constantly in evolution due to varied influences in the area as multiple cultural groups reside next to one another. Even in more stable cultural areas, the access to information in the digital age exposes adolescents to a wide range of ideas and cultural influences during the years when they are forming their distinct personalities. To the left, figure 07 represents how culture forms within us and spills over to affect how we interact with the world.

One of the most prominent aspects of any culture is its practice of rituals. "Rituals serve to promote feelings of collectivity, senses of belonging and of being brought together as a collective group" (Bell, 34). The modern use of the word has changed from when rituals were centered around religion and woven into the very social procedure of the early agrarian Americans. Modern day rituals have taken on a more personal tone as humans have adapted more individualized routines and become less dependent on gathering as a means of social connectivity and the way to exchange about their world.

Moving Too Fast

In the second decade of the 21st century these thoughts go beyond the horizon and 'beneath the skin'. Throughout our world, consumer goods propelled by hyperbolic advertising techniques serve to supplant our consciousness and diffuse our reflective capacity. In architecture the application of new, digitally supercharged techniques currently join the hyperbole... Today the 'depth of our being' stands on thin ice.
(Pallasmaa, 8)

The speed of life in the 21st century is the biggest cause of inner turmoil for Americans because of the inability of the human brain to truly focus on more than one task at a time. The human brain is an incredible machine. It can function at amazing speed, reading impulses and forming conclusions before our conscious mind realizes what is happening, but specific parts of the brain are responsible for certain types of functions. When you are trying to work on two tasks, such as reading up on your facebook posts and speaking to a friend, your brain has to devote the space it uses to process language skills for reading, writing and speaking to each of those tasks in turn; however, the agility of the human brain allows it to switch back and forth between the two tasks so rapidly that our conscious mind believes itself to be simultaneously reading and speaking. While functionally, it may appear you are multitasking, your performance of both tasks suffers greatly in a number of ways (Hamilton).

The architectural theorist John Hejduk writes in detail about the human's inability to think while moving. "I have often thought that when we actually move physically in space

our mind takes a secondary position to our body's tactile sensations. When we physically stop moving and become fixed, our mind takes over the primary position" (Hejduk). With our mental efforts channeled into the conveyance of our body from one point to another, we do not have space in our brain to deeply ponder any matter. As Americans are swiftly moving from one place to the next in a frenzy to accomplish ever-more each day, it is no surprise that introspection and personal meditative moments are not things that the average citizen engages in regularly. And on the reverse side of that situation, as our brains are constantly intertwined with social media and technology, our bodies are not fully present in a tactile engagement with our surroundings, and we do not experience the world we inhabit to its fullest measure.

PART 3 – REPRESENTATIONS OF OUR TIME

The Embodiment of Our Chaos

One of the most prevalent aspects of life in America since the early 1900s has been the automobile. We have reached a point in our society where we are so auto-centric that a part of the population has spoken out as a force against car-use. With carbon emissions at a high and global warming threatening to sink a good deal of the earth's coastlines in the coming years, it is safe to say dependence on our cars has become a defining piece of modern American culture. With over 150 thousand gas stations across the country selling 185 billion gallons of gasoline per year (Ausick), the Pilot line of truck stops serve as background for this exploration of humanity and its search for sacrality (figure 08).

This search is not commonplace among the back-alley shops or the fast-food franchises of the country. Religion has been extracted from modern American society such that we only imagine sacred moments set among the pools of gem brilliant light swimming over a cathedral floor or in the deepest silence of an ancient forest while the sun seeps, mottled through a thick canopy of green leaves that rustle slightly in the wind. But sacredness is not indistinguishable from religion. To be sacred is for something to be venerable or worthy of respect by warrant of its nature, a much more applicable definition in terms of everyday use in the very most monotonous of all possible settings.

The symbolic plasticity of time and space is especially apparent in the way devout Muslims (who often must pray in everyday, mundane settings in order to fulfill their religious duties) carry out the frequent prayers required by their religion. They lay

down a (sacred) prayer carpet in their office or living room, thereby enabling them to convert a profane time and space into a sacred time and space (Edles, 147).



figure 08 culture of chaos

A Spiritual Journey

The modern day American of a certain age is tied down to responsibilities, and this lack of freedom is what allows for such vivid fantasy to surround the nostalgic idea of the cross-country road trip. Top down, with the sun in your hair, you blaze a wandering trail through unexplored backroads, riding the lines of that asphalt ribbon with no cares except chasing the fiery sunset over the edge of the horizon.

In mid April of 2013, Liza Canthorp was living in Boston with her new husband Oliver when he was killed near the end of his third annual race. Overcome with grief at the prospect of coming into their home each day and never seeing his warm smile as he lowered one of the runners' magazines he was always leafing through, Liza left Boston, bound for Los Angeles, California and her childhood home.

Defining her route as a set of 12 Pilot truck stops between the two cities, she set out on a road that she hoped would heal her heart as well as take her home. Planning to stop about every 300 miles for gas, Liz mapped out the stations she would be spending time in over the next few days (figure 09).

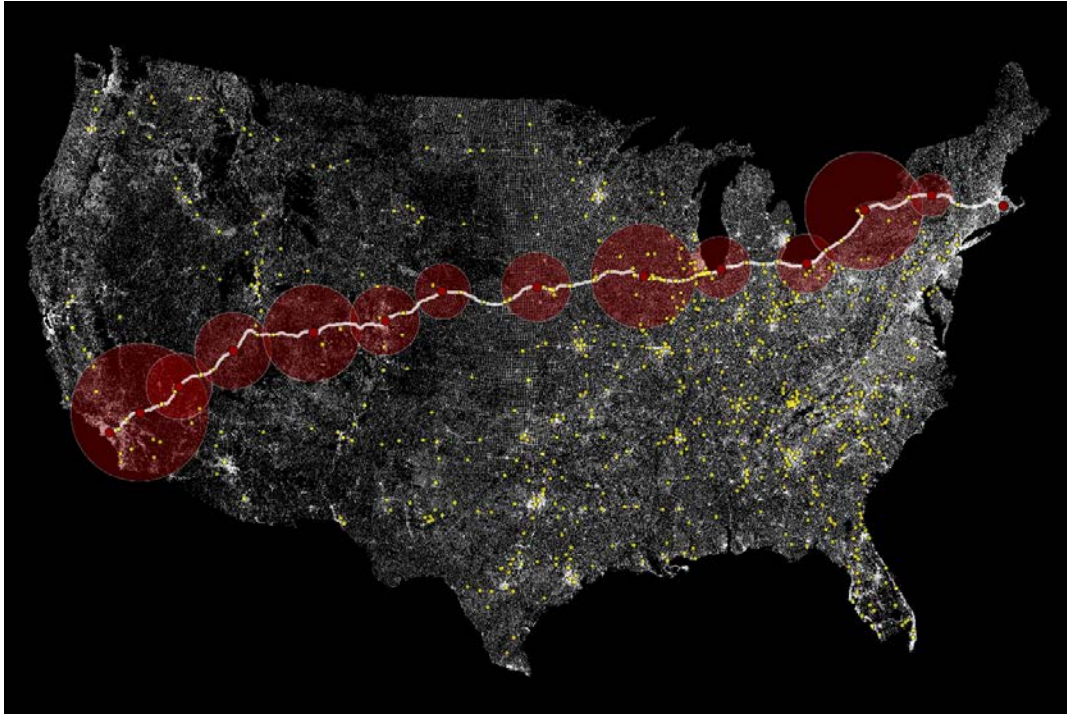


figure 09 stations of the pilot

Over the course of her journey, Liz faced down a gauntlet of emotions. Resentment, anger and guilt buffeted her like a small ship on high stormy seas, but she wrote down the words she struggled to make her own during each of her stops. The following (figure 10–figure 23) is a collection of the journal entries she kept between leaving Oliver’s memory in Boston and arriving with renewed strength in the midst of unwavering love from her family in Los Angeles. The photographs show aspects of the stations that stand out for her as iconic pieces of American culture in the bedlam of the Pilot truck stop in modern times.



figure 10 station 1 entry



figure 11 station 2 entry



figure 12 station 3 entry

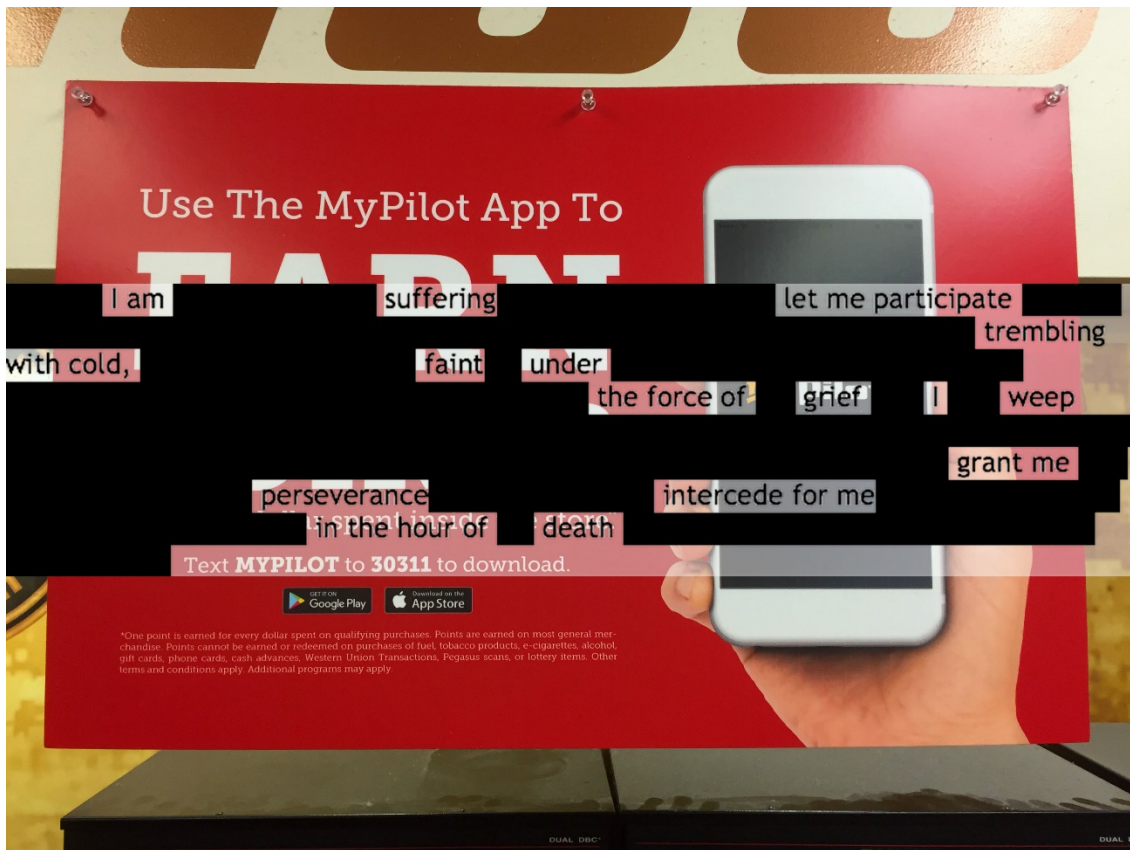


figure 13 station 4 entry

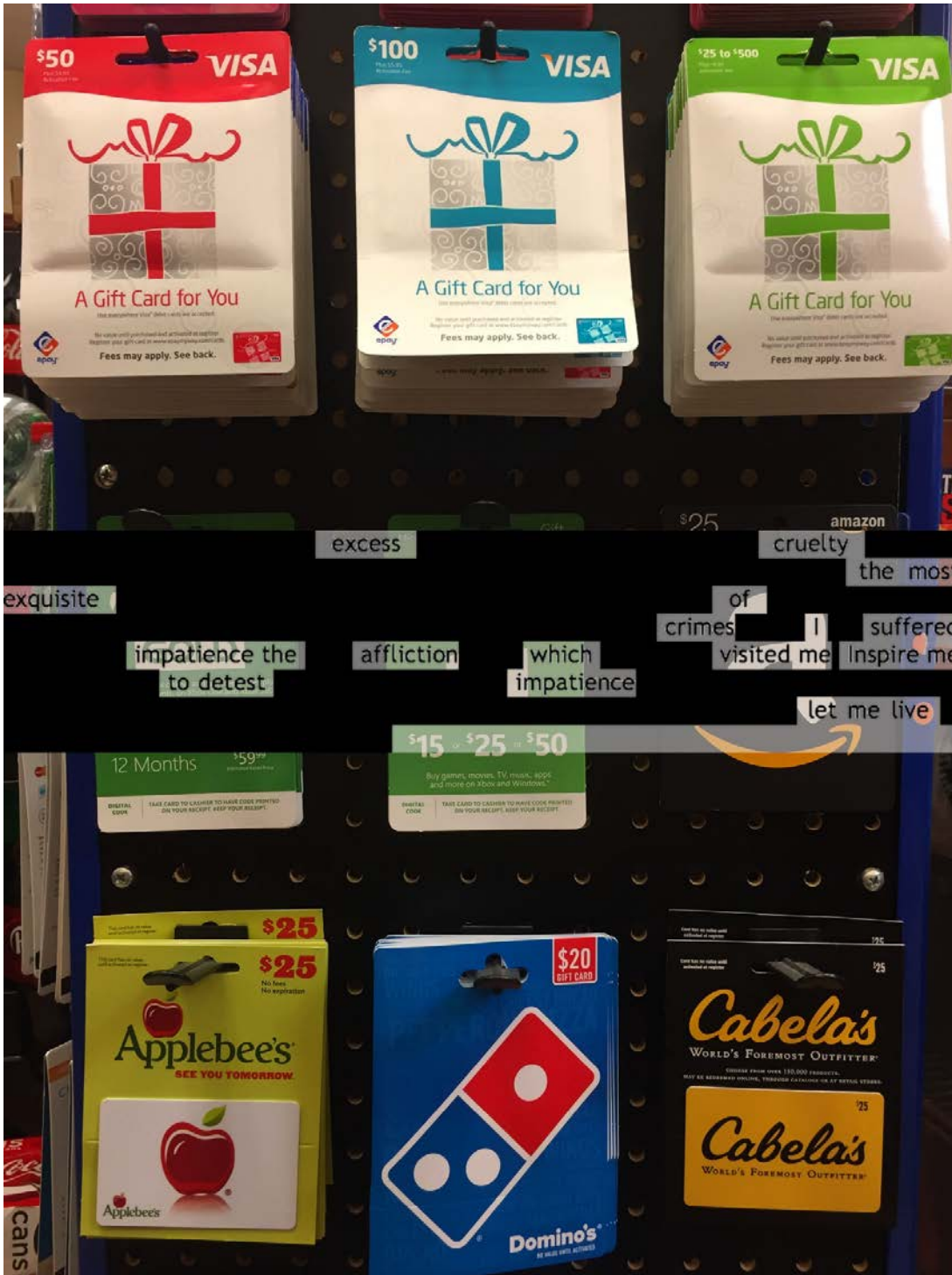


figure 14 station 5 entry



figure 15 station 6 entry

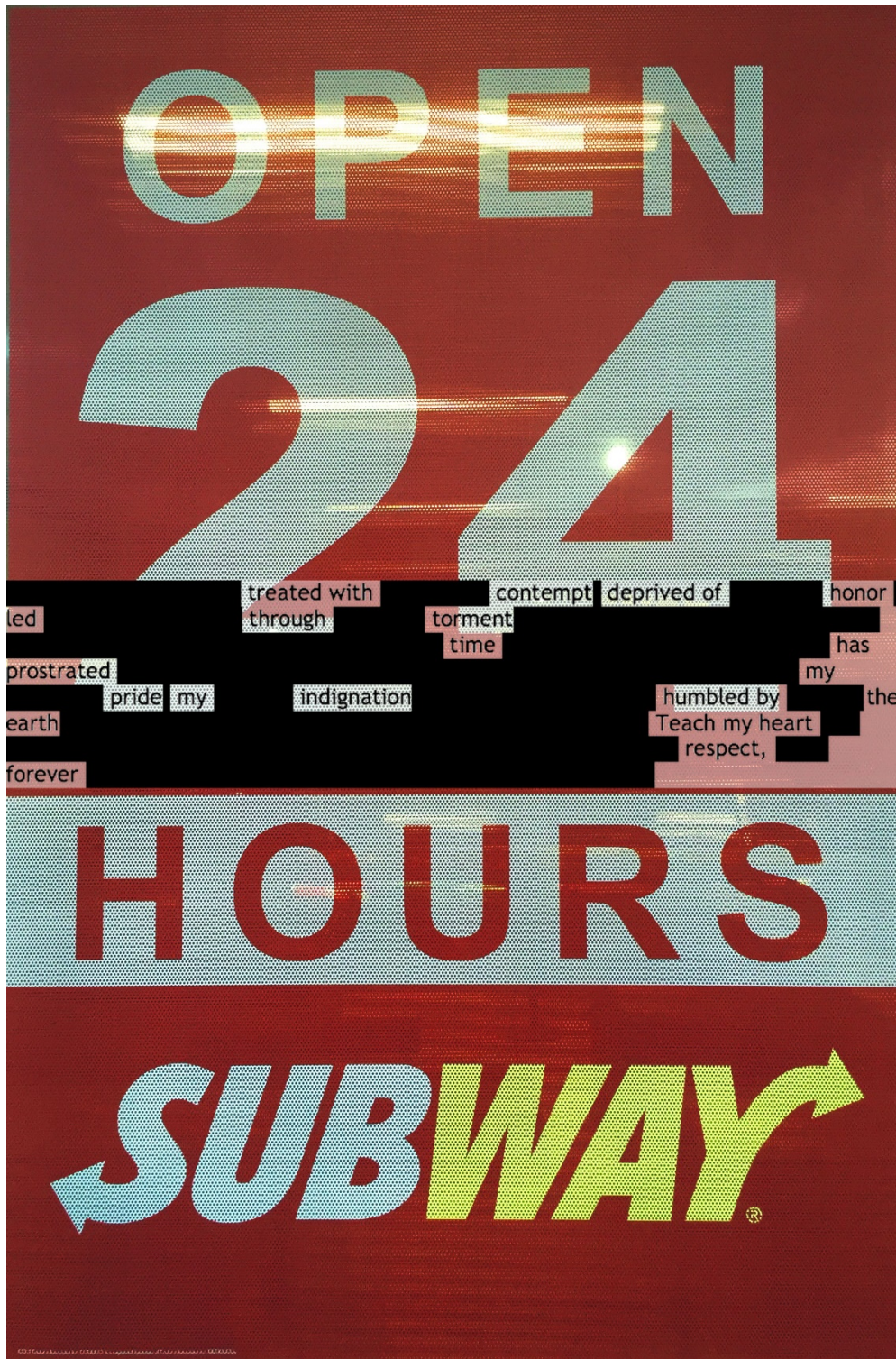


figure 16 station 7 entry

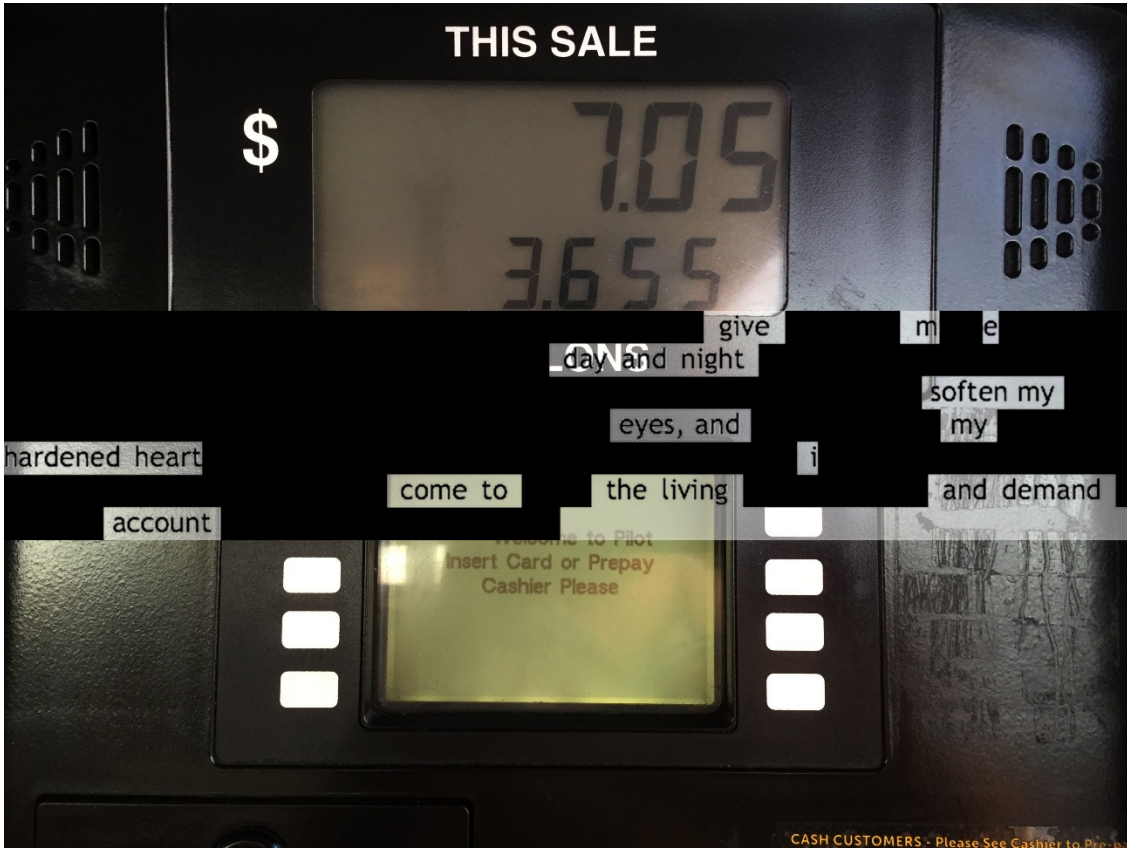


figure 17 station 8 entry



figure 18 station 9 entry



figure 19 station 10 entry



figure 20 station 11 entry



figure 21 station 12 entry



At length the sorrow permitted mangled triumph
 renew ed I obtain power feel
 and of the
 embrace salvation.

figure 22 station 13 entry

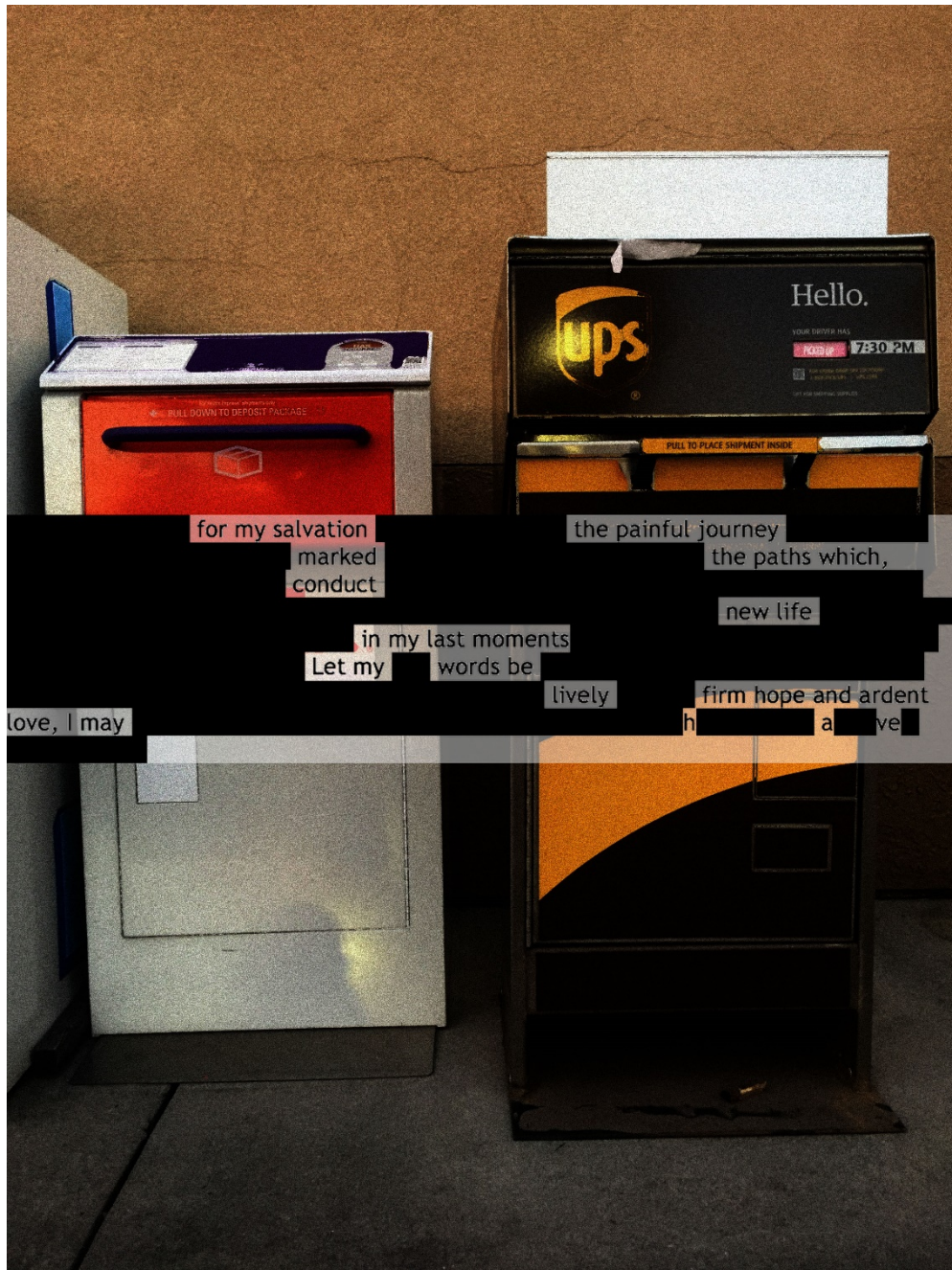


figure 23 station 14 entry

Psychology of the Pilot

The American attitude toward space has fractured in the modern era, with those who believe all space should be designed and valued for what it can offer on one side and those who see a distinct separation between architecture and building on another. Utility is a word one might associate with the Pilot truck stop vein of architecture. The pervasive typology acts as a gathering point for no small number of people. There is no way to deny that the shipping industry moves the economy of the world, and that the shipping industry comprises an incredible percentage of the fuel purchases from Pilot truck stops.

Spheres of economy collide inside the Pilot as weary travelers drag themselves over to the coffee bar, rejuvenated truck drivers saunter in after having taken well-deserved showers, employees smoke cigarettes and take phone calls behind the building, and overly-excited children careen through the store after way too long inside the car. The domestic spaces of the drivers' lounge bump up against the commercial kitchen of a fast-food franchise and a miniature roadside casino filled with flashing video gambling machines.

Moments of extreme intrigue are plausible in a place that has the ability to facilitate the accidental meeting of a circus ringmaster, an aspiring heavy metal guitarist and a homeless man who can multiply 3 digit numbers in his head. We like the Pilot for its convenience and its familiarity. The consistent shape and setup of the various store types makes one Pilot station more or less blend into the next, and our frayed attention spans almost allow us to mentally delete the time between visits so that the country just becomes one big

interconnected station as depicted below in figure 24. Above all, the Pilot appeals to our modern idea that we should be able to do it all, *right here and right now*.

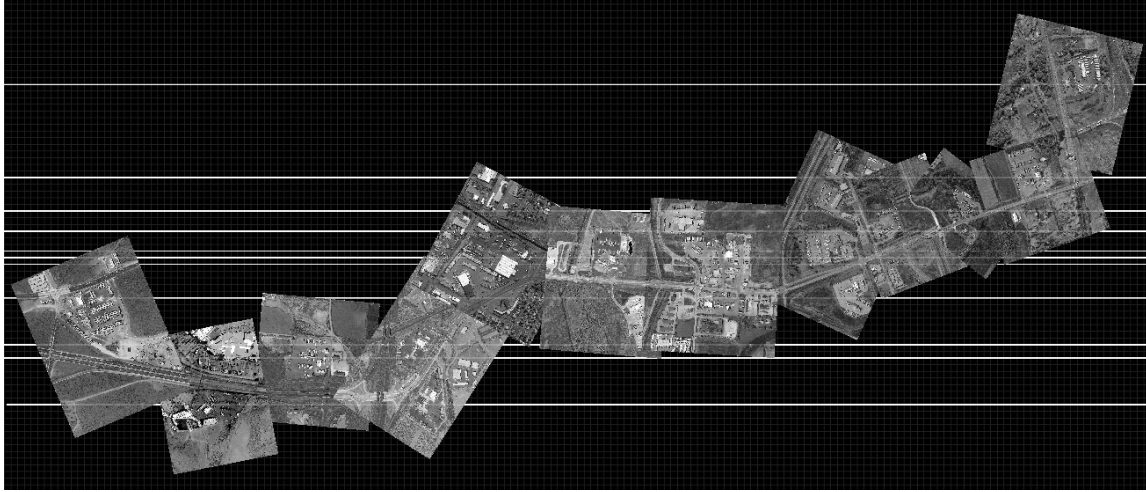


figure 24 continuous pilot

As overworked, overstressed citizens of the digital age, we are conditioned not to think too deeply about things. Our need to have a constant distraction or stimulus makes our brains seek out quick easy fun like that of a mobile app game instead of taking the time to invest in pleasurable long-term activities such as reading or making art (Muther). The ubiquity of places like the Pilot Flying – J show just how desperate our society is to have a pre-packaged all-in-one option available to us. Our quest for fulfillment causes us to believe it necessary to get fuel for our vehicles when what we are truly in need of is fuel for our souls. Little moments of sacrality can be found amongst the mundanity if we open ourselves to the possibility that something might not be exactly what it seems. We are responsible for our own experience of life no matter what cultural milieu we were born into.

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- figure 02 – *social media mask* by Marcel Heymann, 2016
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- figure 04 – sketch by Banksy, 2014
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- figure 05 – advertisement by AYE Gear, 2017
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figure 22 – *station 13 entry* by author, 2017

figure 23 – *station 14 entry* by author, 2017

figure 24 – *continuous pilot* by author, 2017

VITA

Catherine Elizabeth Dozier was born to Beth Curry and Steve Dozier in 1988. She grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, graduating with honors from Vestavia Hills High School. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering from the University of Alabama on a full academic scholarship while also competing on the women's softball team.

During her second summer in Tuscaloosa, Catherine began working for Jon McLelland converting hand sketches into Revit models to be used for renovating existing buildings. She stayed on with McLelland Architecture, accepting a full-time position as a designer upon graduation from engineering school.

The work that she was involved in during her time as a student made her realize that she wanted a creative profession. After two years of working in architecture, she realized that her passion for design had grown such that she needed to prepare for life as an architect.

Catherine accepted a Chancellor's Fellowship to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville in early 2014. She promptly found a studio that was available for rent that summer, and she proceeded to Knoxville to start classes for a Master of Architecture that June.

Living with her dog in a studio apartment with a kitchen shoved into what was clearly once the hallway of a Fort Sanders Victorian, she spent her days in the architecture studio and her nights in the architecture studio. She slept in a hammock for most of that summer before buying a house in South Knoxville and finishing her career at UT with this thesis.

The experience she had at the University of Tennessee shaped her into the designer that she will be for the rest of her life, and she will be forever grateful for the people who helped her as she pursues her license and practices architecture in the future.