

STRESS TEST

AN ARCHITECTURE OF CRISIS



PREMISE

Recent times have been marked by the crisis and failure of multiple systems that formerly were considered stable and secure. Many of these systems, such as financial institutions, real estate markets, etc., were built on an idea of flexibility and speed of production as well as monetary values. The answer to the financial system's recent distress comes from the idea of resilience and banks are put under a 'stress-test' to measure that resilience.

With the ongoing housing crisis and the ever-present commercial crisis, we propose to put the built environment under a 'stress-test' that is not based on its financial capabilities but rather on its material capacity to transform and become more productive. What are the resilient capabilities of the materials our environment is built from? The nine projects of the exhibition offer speculations on the relationship between rather cheap materials that we commonly build with and their programmatic potential to transform the American suburban landscape. Rather than propose fixed answers, the speculations serve as a testing ground of different scenarios to check for resilience in a di[stress]ed condition.

According to Webster's dictionary, 'crisis' can be defined as 'a turning point, a decisive moment, or a situation that has reached critical phase'. The work presented attempts to define crisis as a process of transformation or a need for change within our built environment in a time when crisis can only be lead to resilience.

Today, we are combating an economic as well as a social and environmental crisis that resulted from the housing bubble. Late, developer driven capitalism has failed. This issue stems from an article written by Brian Walsh in a 2009 article of TIME Magazine that stated, "*The American*

suburb as we know it is dying. The implosion began with the housing bust, which started in and has hit hardest the once vibrant neighborhoods outside the urban core...[Arthur C. Nelson, Urban Planner and Director of] Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech predicts that by 2025 (more recently upgraded to 2015) there will be a surplus of 22 million large-lot homes in the U.S."

With Nelson's prediction of a 22 million home surplus, which he recently predicted in March 2010 would happen sooner in 2015, as well as commercial vacancy rates of up to potentially 40%, we are left with an even larger abundance of suburban space rendered unusable. This statistic suggests we will have an abundance of material rendered unusable in the next 5-10 years. In this context the 9 projects question the maximization of developer driven capitalism and its manifestation in the imagery of the oversized suburban house at the expense of material, labor and construction quality.

EXHIBITION

The exhibit work consists of 3 full-scale objects built of common building materials and 9 drawings address the programmatic resilience of those materials. The nine projects speculate on the connection between the housing and upcoming commercial crisis of 2008 to the present and the material reality of typical American construction that contributed to the crisis. The speculations 'test' the norms of suburban construction and utilize them for more resilient social and economic demands.

Through the re-appropriation of three materials found in typical wood frame construction – vinyl siding, pre-engineered wood trusses, and asphalt roof shingles – the projects test the economic, social and environmental value of residential suburban construction. Spatial narratives speculate on the potential of unusable, reclaimed materials found within the 22 million homes to reconfigure material practice within suburbia. In contrast to typical architectural representation, these drawings are meant to allude to relationships and questions in regards to the materials rather than defining solutions. The goal of each project is to reconfigure the meaning of the three materials used in the common construction.

DETAILS

Three suspended material objects serve as apertures to frame views of speculative panoramas. Strategically placed binoculars allow visitors to participate in the panoramas and immerse themselves in the scenes of each story.

The realm of material and construction methods in the US can be translated using Roland Barthes explanation of the difference between Language and Myth. Everyday materials can be defined with a common 'language' of construction while the cultural results of normative applications can define the 'Myth' of a universal material. For example, the typical American 2x4 stud wall or truss, that despite their simple construction, imply a specific production of the suburban Myth – the large-scale single-family house. Consequently, this means the rethinking

of the Myth offers the opportunity to reconfigure the normative Language of the construction method or vice versa.

Or as Roland Barthes describes in his book *Mythologies*:

"... an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life) and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales ." – Roland Barthes

In this sense, any suburban alteration can no longer be a question of style or individual expression. Our current state of affairs offers an opportunity to revisit the value and resilience of architecture from the detail of construction and materials to the scale of the urban crisis. The focus of architecture needs to shift from the production of an image to its power as a material practice and its possibility to reconsider the Myth itself through the theory of construction and design. The suburban 'stress test' has become a necessity if we want to assess the resilience of building stock across the US. With this, architecture offers a material resilience and becomes the major player to overcome the recent crisis. If we do not act, the event of crisis can only be described as a failure.

The economic crisis becomes a material crisis.

