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HACKING GEODEMOGRAPHY

by McLain Clutter with Matt Kenyon

Reversing the self-fulfilling prophecies of Big Data.

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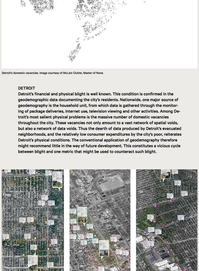
Hacking Geodemography exhibition at Taubman College, 2015; Image courtesy of McLain Clutter, Master of Fine Arts.

GEODEMOGRAPHY

Over the past several decades the use of geodemographic data has become common in both marketing and urban planning practices. Despite the fact that it combines the study of the geographic distribution of demographic data, geodemography is increasingly influential in determining the character of the built environment.[1] City planning commissions use geodemography to aid in the implementation of policy, and private corporations reference this data when purchasing, selling or developing real estate. Demand for geographic information has created a vast governmental and corporate apparatus engaged in the collection, collation and amalgamation of data. Among the products of this apparatus are geodemographic segmentation systems, which combine consumer data (information about consumer spending statistics, figures scraped from Internet usage and many other sources.) Market segmentation sets amalgamate data to describe symbolic consumer identities, and link these identities to their spatial locations in urbanized areas. In an attempt to make the distribution of identity groups across geographic space scientifically knowable, these systems combine consumer data with information about race, ethnicity, lifestyle, and social as scientific fact naturalized distinctions about race, gender and ethnicity.

When market segmentation data is used to influence site selection, the resultant buildings are profoundly instrumental in targeting new, symbolic identities. The shopping malls, housing developments, and office buildings that result from these practices become emblematic, becoming territorial beacons for the collection of a specific combination of consumers. United in space, this mix of consumers becomes the synthesized identity described in the operative geodemography.[2] Thus, development guided by geodemographic forges a completely solipsistic relationship between constructed consumer identity and constructed space. In this way, the economies of data collection work to ratify artificial socio-cultural divisions based on the consumption of data collections, and limit urban development to the repetition of conventionalized consumer-building formulas.



Aerial photograph of Detroit; Image courtesy of McLain Clutter, Master of Fines.

Detroit's domestic vacancies; Image courtesy of McLain Clutter, Master of Fines.

DETROIT

Detroit's financial and physical blight is well known. This condition is confirmed in the geodemographic data documenting the city's residents. Nationwide, one major source of geodemographic is the household unit, from which data is gathered through the monitoring of package deliveries, Internet use, television viewing and other activities. Among Detroit's most salient physical problems is the massive number of domestic vacancies throughout the city. These vacancies not only amount to a vast network of spatial voids, but also to a huge loss of tax revenue. The result is a city with a huge number of underutilized neighborhoods, and the relatively low consumer expenditures by the city's poor, reiterate Detroit's physical conditions. The conventional application of geodemography therefore might recommend little in the way of future development. This constitutes a vicious cycle between blight and one metric that might be used to counteract such blight.

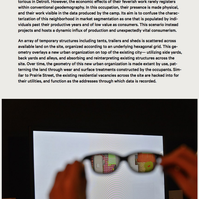
A set of maps used to examine the ways power and urban context supports activities contributing to the underlying image of the city's physical reality is constructed over ten segmentation sets. From these mappings, three sites have chosen for occupations that reflect the consumer and their received data's images. Image courtesy of McLain Clutter, Master of Fines.

Map detail; Image courtesy of McLain Clutter, Master of Fines.

PROJECT

Hacking Geodemography is a speculative research project that forwards strategies to intervene in this vicious cycle. The work consists of three parts. First, a set of maps assess how Detroit's present urban context supports activities that contribute to the prevailing image of the city's neighborhoods in conventional market segmentation data sets. Shown above, these maps confirm that Detroit's consumer landscape is highly tailored to reinforce constructed identities in commercial market segmentation.

Second is a map that proposes a speculative geodemographic collection and aggregation. Represented in a video below, the map is placed together by hundreds of pages of industry white papers, journalism and prior scholarship. The map explains the myriad relationships between the vast network of corporate and governmental interests involved in geodemography—highlighting their interconnections with contemporary real estate development.



The Apparatus of Contemporary Geodemography; from McLain Clutter on Vimeo

Here, an incomplete record of governmental and corporate actors involved in the geodemographics industry has been gathered, and each actor has been briefly explained and organized on cards on a wall. The adjacencies of the cards are based on the relative connections of each actor. The resultant map is a visualization of the vast, interlocking network of corporate and governmental interests involved in contemporary geodemography and their connections to contemporary real estate development. From this map, activities that might be hosted in Detroit's domestic vacancies have been planned in order to produce aberrant data.

These two mapping exercises inform the third and final part of the project: the design of three transgressive occupations of Detroit's domestic vacancies. Each site was chosen based on an assessment of Detroit's consumer landscape, and each program derived from an understanding of the activities that produce consumer data. Each occupation is intended to produce data, which eschews the site's present data image.

In one sense, the design of each occupation should be considered on its own terms. Each forwards what can oneliners that re-project the potentials of Detroit's vacancies in a novel manner. But the real design project is in the production of data produced by the occupations. The data produced by these occupations is intended to be used by activists in order to encourage new forms of urban development—forms that might scaffold messy, heterogeneous and even agonistic forms of public life. In this way, it is hoped that the built environment can assume new agency vis-à-vis the expanding hegemony of urban data.