



BEFORE AFTER, AFTER BEFORE

by Jazlynn Wohlers

Directed Research
for the degree of
Bachelor of Architecture
2025



Architecture & Occupancy is a Directed Research cohort from Syracuse University's School of Architecture that grapples with the idea that the built environment is an assemblage which includes life beyond the architect's control, but well within the confines of their curiosity and capacity for inquiry. It explores the intersections of architecture and society, using time-based media as a framework for critical and creative post-occupancy studies.

I

IN MY BEGINNING IS MY END. IN SUCCESSION
HOUSES RISE AND FALL, CRUMBLE, ARE EXTENDED,
ARE REMOVED, DESTROYED, RESTORED, OR IN THEIR PLACE
IS AN OPEN FIELD, OR A FACTORY, OR A BY-PASS.
OLD STONE TO NEW BUILDING, OLD TIMBER TO NEW FIRES,
OLD FIRES TO ASHES, AND ASHES TO THE EARTH
WHICH IS ALREADY FLESH, FUR AND FAECES,
BONE OF MAN AND BEAST, CORNSTALK AND LEAF.
HOUSES LIVE AND DIE: THERE IS A TIME FOR BUILDING
AND A TIME FOR LIVING AND FOR GENERATION
AND A TIME FOR THE WIND TO BREAK THE LOOSENEED PANE
AND TO SHAKE THE WAINSCOT WHERE THE FIELD-MOUSE TROTS
AND TO SHAKE THE TATTERED ARRAS WOVEN WITH A SILENT MOTTO.

T.S. ELIOT, "FOUR QUARTETS"
PART II: EAST COKER

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FOREWORD

This project is a culmination of research in theories of power in urban planning, architecture, and mapping, media studies, installation design, and the history of Syracuse, while living in and learning to love the city for the past five years. My research was prompted by my own skepticism toward new development and investments and old, persisting discriminatory struggles, as well as interpreting the relationship between media and reality. As I anticipate graduating and entering the workforce, I used Directed Research as an opportunity to further understand the influence of power in architecture and urban planning, and how it further enforces systemic injustices.

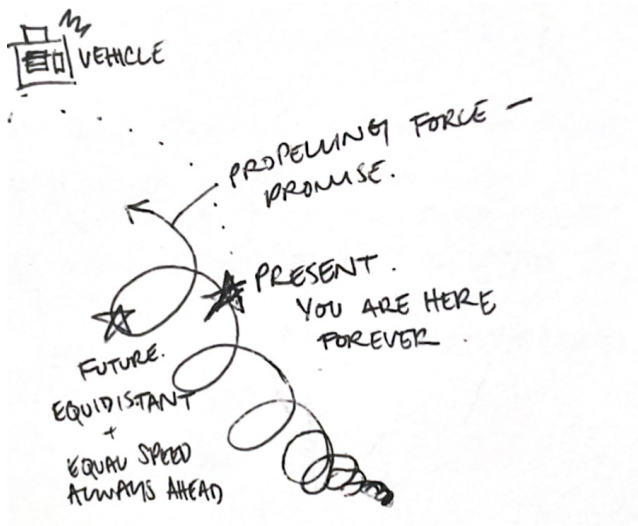
But I wanted to dig beneath the surface of these statements. I wanted to see through the facades of power further than a written history of events or the physical object of a building. Power bleeds into the language we use and the media we consume, which gets reproduced into our culture until it becomes naturalized, accepted, and unquestioned in the Order of Things. In my studies, from an architectural standpoint, I investigate an instance of the cultural reproduction of power through generations of urban planning, which unwound to reveal history in a curious cycle that never truly resigns into its neatly allocated place into the “past,” but instead ripples into the

present continuously. It would be more easily conceived for me to disseminate my findings didactically, to hand you a neatly written paper or design a project that allegedly would magically bring our communities together. However, this part of our discipline tends to lack affect. To translate my research into a project that illicit emotional response, to make audiences feel the same skepticism and unease that plagued me for much of my academic career was a much more meaningful ambition for me, especially under regimes that denounce and threaten the importance of art. The role of the architect historically holds a position of power that I seek to be keenly aware of when I inevitably make design decisions from a cubicle some day, because it is not the most obvious physical implications on the built environment that impose power, but also the language surrounding our work, the type of change we seek to make, our view, observations, and subsequent

observations, and subsequent representations on the existing, and our choice to acknowledge or not the inequitable system within we work and inherently reinforce.



More lightheartedly, my interest in the mid-century era, cultural influence of media representation, and filmmaking started when I made a video called *You Don't Make Breakfast, You Launch it like a Missile* for Edgar Rodriguez's class, *Architectural Media*. In the video, I used a mix of archival footage and contemporary objects to document the architectural, cultural and political history of kitchen appliances, investigating the ritual of operating a multitude of machines as soon as we wake up. Because this era was so influential, I was drawn once again to study the complex intersections of architecture, media, culture, and politics in the very city my academic career started. To me, architectural thinking spans beyond design, into observational and problem-solving skill that can have unconscious bias without caution. With that in mind, I attempted to understand the power in and of our discipline from different angle.



introduction: contextualizing my investigation in time + space

Before After, After Before is a essay film project that uses the lens of absurdity to defamiliarize predominant ways that we perceive “progress” and “development” through rapid major changes in the built environment, as these terms are often measured by newness and economic success.

Looking back to the theatrical spectacle of mid-century imaginings and promises of prosperity in the era of urban renewal, my research investigates how contemporary speculation reproduces a seemingly infinite, cyclical conquest towards a more efficient, brand new, and more profitable future-myth.

Using techniques from still-frame documentary, as well as drawing from the Theater of the Absurd and science fiction, the film, its installation, and performance attempts to address this argument through a curated experience. The project is presented in the form of an audiovisual diptych, unfolding the past, present, and future as told through the built environment.

why syracuse?

I observed Syracuse as a city seemingly stuck in a time loop, obsessed with “returning” to the prosper it initially experienced from its early salt mining days - or at least the image of it. The constant chase of this image and economic status has generationally taken precedence over the lives of its people, and at the expense of its nonwhite communities. As it is about to undergo another major infrastructural project, I looked with skepticism on the future through the lens of the past, concluding with some interesting reflections.



Photo by Jazlynn Wohlers.

methodology

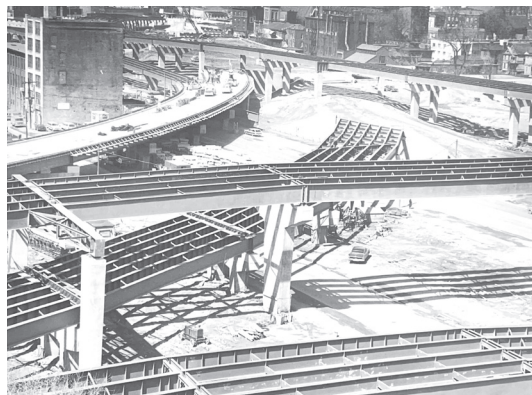
I chose sites to study that were rich with this tension. This included the I-81 viaduct, a midcentury washing machine factory in the process of demolition, the steadily changing Inner Harbor, among others. I mainly focused on areas of the city affected by past and present development aspirations, comparing the language and supplemental media of urban planning from each era. Many of my observations occurred on the streets, walking around with my camera to capture the experience of living through major infrastructural changes.

I compared my findings to past media promoting urban renewal and suburbanization in the 1950s and 60s, mostly sourced from public online domains such as the Prelinger Archives, but also locally from the Onondaga Historical Association. I looked for themes of development that allegedly brought “progress,” but brought attention to who enacted the “progress,” who it benefited, who was included and subsequently excluded, because these silent but intentional impositions could quietly seep into the present as well.

introduction



Schor's Market at 604 Harrison St. in the 15th Ward, Syracuse, 1965. Onondaga Historical Association.



Construction of the I-81 viaduct, Syracuse, c. 1960s. Onondaga Historical Association.

i. urban renewal: language, media, + the suburban frontier

Urban renewal in mid-century America promised a modernized, economically attractive, often utopian future. However, much like the instigators, lawmakers, and developers at the forefront of its enforcement, the visions of this prosperous future only included whites conforming to the nuclear family. Dreamy ideas of the future contained these racist, colonial undertones – a frontier to be conquered, pioneers to drive the vision forward, and abundant profits to be made. As Moskowitz states in his book *How to Kill a City*,

“The suburbanization of the United States pushed whites into privatized, anti-communal form of living, encouraged more traditional gender roles, and reified racial boundaries – keeping white people separate from black people, Latinos, and other ethnic groups.”

“Condemned,

BEFORE AFTER, AFTER BEFORE



CONDEMNED IN 1955, BUT STILL OCCUPIED
These three E. Fayette St. structures were ordered demolished as “dangerous and unfit for” occupation in 1955, but they remain occupied in spite of repeated orders to demolish and multiple postings and re-postings.

*Efforts Defied to Destroy
3 Condemned Buildings*

but still occupied.”



Diner and homes on E. Fayette St. in the 15th Ward, Syracuse, 1955.
Onondaga Historical Association.

“haphazard growth of past.”

“Protect your property from

‘bad neighbor’ uses.”

“Helps channel development

in the right directions.”

“prevent past mistakes.”

Memo re:

WHY CITY PLANNING IS IMPORTANT TO YOU

Mr. & Mrs. Syracusan:
Mr. & Mrs. Home Owner:
Mr. Business Man:
Mr. Taxpayer:

With your support, it can--

- Protect your property - through zoning and other devices.
- Protect your job - by encouraging business and industry.
- Protect your investment - by stabilizing values, looking ahead.
- Help you plan your private projects more intelligently.
- Help wiser use of public funds.
- Help make Syracuse more pleasant and convenient to live in.

THE CITY PLAN	- Basic over-all "guide" to sound city development./ Seeks to prevent haphazard growth of past./ Aid in planning public and private investments.

ZONING	- Helps protect your property from "bad-neighbor" uses./ Keeps one owner from exploiting property at expense of others./ Helps channel development in right directions.

LAND SUBDIVISION	- Helps prevent past mistakes in laying out new neighborhoods --the 33-ft. lot, jigsaw street pattern, poor drainage, etc./ Protects you--Mr. Home Buyer--and your City.

RESEARCH	- Provides basic facts and forecasts on which both public and private planning depend.

COORDINATION	- Helps avoid "one-track" planning--prevent conflicts between New Street vs. New School vs. New Park./ Helps tailor improvements to future needs.

IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM	- Looks six years ahead./ Will help Council and Mayor place "first things first"./ Will avoid "piecemeal", "one-track" spending for public improvements.

OFFICIAL MAP (under study)	- Would earmark land for future street widenings and other projects./ Would give advance warning to private developers and public agencies--avert waste of funds.

The Nature of our Business, Syracuse Urban Renewal Agency.
Onondaga Historical Association.



Photo by Jazlynn Wohlers.

ii. contemporary consequences: navigating the present of mid-century futures

The consequences of this era continue to grow more severe. Currently, Syracuse has the highest rate of extreme poverty among Black and Latino people out of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas, as well as the highest child poverty rate among American cities with at least 100,000 people.² More recently, cities that suffer from impoverished conditions with histories like Syracuse are seen as places with a "...lack of control and in need of a white 'civilizing' force," needing intervention to be 'saved'.³ A lack of federal funding for urban development has led cities

to attract capital from other means, contributing to the phenomenon of gentrification. This often includes local governments enticing corporate professionals, investors, and real estate developers to act on economically devalued land to introduce expensive, trendy, and privatized changes in the urban landscape that are becoming familiar sights across the United States – luxury apartments, coffee shops, rising rents – with the promise that wealthier residents will follow. Investment and subsequent gentrification occurs at a quick pace and large scale because "...cities have been purposely depressed and are now profitable to reinvest in."⁴

² Marnie Eisenstadt and Kevin Tampone, "Syracuse has the nation's worst child poverty rate," syracuse.com, 2024.

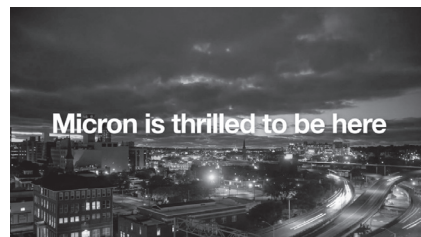
³ Peter Moskowitz, *How to Kill a City* (2017), 36.

⁴ Moskowitz, 40.

These themes underlie the current future Syracuse visualizes for itself. In addition to the “Community Grid” – a tree-lined boulevard revealing economically promising land where the I-81 viaduct once stood – Syracuse anticipates the arrival of Micron, microchip manufacturing company, and its \$100 billion factory plant. These two major projects have come with revitalizing language – they will bring growth that will bring Syracuse back to its ‘former glory’, a “reversal of fortune,”⁵ opportunity to restore the city economically and socially. While these large-scale decisions seem unprecedented, they are likely influenced by a creeping presence of private development and investment that have gradually been reshaping Downtown and beyond. Summarized by Clutter McClain in his book, *Imaginary Apparatus*:

“As the industrial economies of American cities faded, employment in service and office labor surged throughout later decades of the twentieth century... In this new paradigm, urban representation were essential tools in the popularization of a city’s renewed image, fueling subsequent gentrification.”

Syracuse is following many other cities across America to save it from its post-industrial decline, relying on profitable initiatives to bring necessary funding for community redevelopment. On one hand, this feels like the only “way out” in the current political and economic system. On the other, it rips off the city’s old scabs and scars, prompting new healing and leaving it vulnerable to further inequity and infrastructural injustices.



Frames from “Hello New York, Micron Is Here,” Micron Technology (2025).

5 David Rotman, “The \$100 billion bet that a postindustrial US city can reinvent itself as a high-tech hub,” MIT Technology Review, 2023, [technologyreview.com](https://www.technologyreview.com).



Salt City Market intersection. Photo by Jazlynn Wohlers.

iii. construction of 'doxa': the "return investment"

A central commonality between the two eras is an implicit prioritization of economic interest presented as an inseparable relationship with improvement in quality of life. Examining the consequences of urban renewal, there is a noticeable failure in questioning the system that forces a city to frame profit as essential to rehabilitation. Contrasting with previous mid-century representations, “architects and developers have implemented scenographic historic quotations and visual codes that benefit only the interests of private capital accumulation, while complying with a paradigm of urban development devoid of critical or utopian ambitions.”⁶ Contemporarily, there is a nostalgic, romantic reminiscence of a prosperous history that we should “return” to, even if this image of the past is a constructed imagination. This language is deployed to make current development believable, feasible, attractive, and natural.

⁶ McClain Clutter, *Imaginary Apparatus: New York and its Mediated Representation* (2015), 18.

iv. obstruction of 'doxa': history as constellation + deploying absurdity

And so we find ourselves in the ruins after the future that midcentury urban renewal promised us, and before a new future that once again promises a prosperous savior. It is critically urgent to question the present future and what the promise of this future will really do for us. This is therefore why I channel an absurdist lens in my project, a “tactical absurdity” defined by Dave Ball as a “gesture of resistance against the sovereignty of common sense, a symbolic intervention into the conventions and orthodoxies of behaviour, language and representation, and...a departure from the ‘frameset’ of legibility that obtains at any given moment.”¹² Stemming from *The Theatre of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin in 1961, plays by Eugene Ionesco, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre presented the senselessness and irrationality of the human condition by “the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought” and presenting it “in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images.”¹³

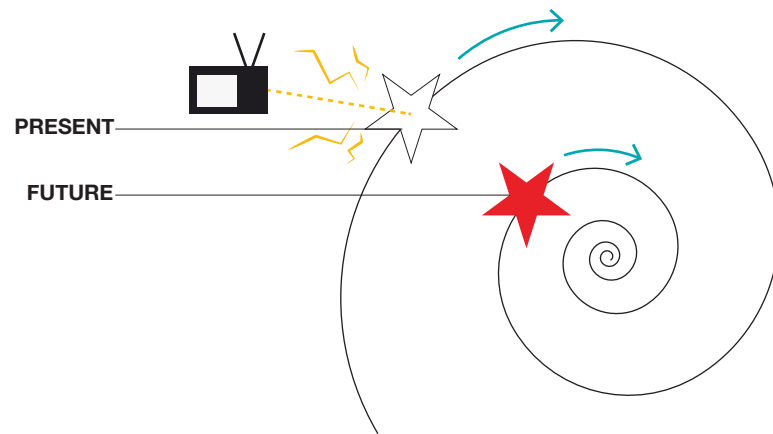
¹² Dave Ball, “The Use of Tactical Absurdity in (Post-)Conceptual Art,” (2020), 23.

¹³ Ball, 34-35.

Furthermore, and more closely to the form of Before After, is **“...a conceptualisation of absurdity as that which does not conform to doxa [things that belong to “the universe of the undiscussed/undisputed”]... For if doxa is that ‘tradition’ which has become so naturalised as to appear beyond question, or, in Bourdieu’s formulation, ‘silent,’ then perhaps it is absurdity – modelled in opposition to doxa – that is uniquely capable of dragging that tradition back into the realm of discursivity. If, in other words, as Bourdieu insists, the ‘truth of doxa is only ever fully revealed when negatively constituted,’ then tactical absurdity might well be that ‘critique which brings the undiscussed into discussion, the unformulated into formulation’; for it is only ‘when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of the natural or conventional character ... of social facts can be raised’.”**¹⁴

I therefore aim to destabilize the inherent connection between and wholehearted trust in the essential profit that must accompany any community rehabilitation. I question whether the continuation of this narrative will provide a sustainable future, or if the mediated fantasies of an immediate, innovative, conclusive speculation mimics the mid-century tandem cultural change motivated by urban planning.

Before After, After Before presents a theatrical setting that reframes the critical present outside of linear time, revealing to viewers a cyclical spiral that the present is stuck in, forever forbidding it from ever reaching the future it covets.



Our world is stuck in the **Present**.
The Present is our vehicle striving to reach the **Future**.

Promise is the force that keeps these realities moving. This force is nearly imperceptible, but the signs of its presence are undeniably everywhere.

The Present continues toward the Future, propelled by Promise, but the Future is always an equal distance away, and moves at the same speed.

Therefore, when Present finally reaches the place Future once was, the relics of the Future are already in ruins, enticing the Present to submit to the force of Promise and urge toward the Future once more.

Here's what I'll tell you:

The Future is made of dreams.

It is a hallucinated oasis. We trust it to pull us out, but the rope vanishes in our hands. It's mist. We think that trusting and thrusting toward the force of Promise will bring us closer, so we throw more coal into its furnace.

We go faster, faster, faster.

**But the faster the Present goes,
so to does Future.**

Theoretically, this references Walter Benjamin's Theses on the Philosophy of History, where he suggests that history be thought of as intersecting constellations of the past and 'now' – the present as a "chiasmus of the past and future"¹⁵ – rather than the predominant function of history as an ideological tool and driven by a concept of "progress". In this way, Before After allows both techniques from both absurd theater and documentary to offer a unique rhetorical analysis through essay film and installation. A special machine is used to take audiences outside of linear time-space, guiding and narrating them through our dimensional cycle: a 1988 General Electric portable Spacemaker television and radio. This small, strange object, a product of consumerist advancements in home technology, plays the 'character' of a vehicle that ensures our safety as we observe our time condition from afar, in hopes of understanding the forces that aim to keep us there. The theatrical performance draws on audiences' emotions of fear and anxiety toward the uncertain unknown, which are anxieties that this cycle seeks to assuage and profit from. Taking an approach that draws on science fiction additionally estranges the language, media manipulation, and economic arguments used by government and corporate entities to justify infrastructural violence. By analyzing time as a cycle, I challenge the telling of history through events in linear time, instead creating a constellation of layers portraying history as a constant ripple of effects that include past-future and present-future representations which reproduce and reinforce power in generational waves. For taking control over the passage of time itself, attempting to stake a flag into the Future and claim its potential, is just the influence of Promise – the extractive nature of capital that aggressively requires constant generation.

¹⁵ Kodwo Eshun, *Ghost Songs: The Film Art of the Black Audio Film Collection* (2007), 13.

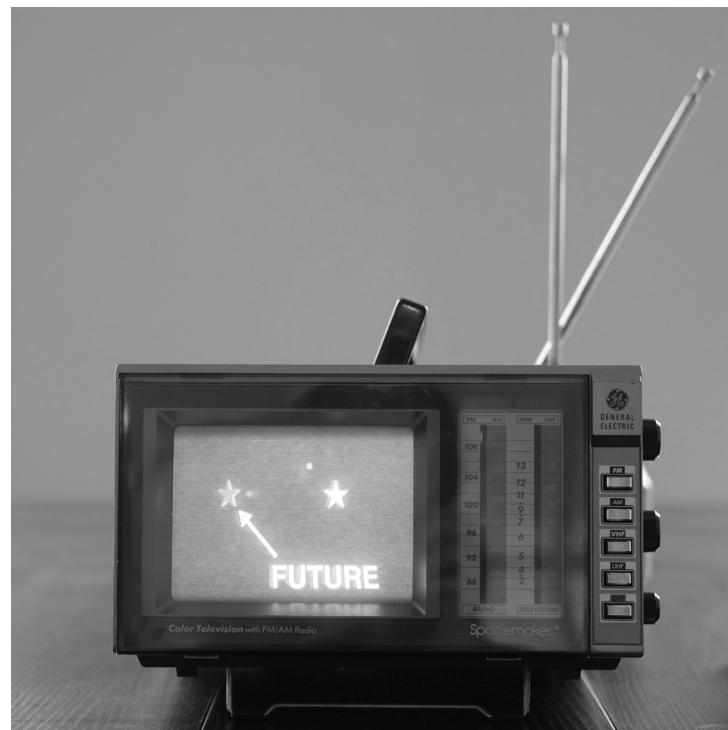


Photo by Jazlynn Wohlers.



"Futurama, the Prototype of the American Highway City," General Motors (1939).

v. the futurama: seeing through a spectacle + a lesson in future visions

At the 1939 New York World's Fair, Norman Bel Geddes presented the Futurama for General Motors, and in 1965, Futurama II. It was a ride that took audiences through a model of a utopian world of the Future and narrated all of mankind's future accomplishments, but specifically, accomplishments that aligned with American suburbanized consumerism. Exhibitions and films envisioning the future in this era were arguably a reaction to social and economic crises, like the Great Depression, WWII, or the Cold War:

"The Futurama can be viewed as a Zerrspiegel, a refracting cultural mirror that both dramatized and distorted 1930s American social reality... there was innocent self-assurance about the Futurama and the grand (re)vision of America that it promised its spectators during the Depression."¹⁶

¹⁶ Adnan Morshed, "The Aesthetics of Ascension in Norman Bel Geddes' Futurama," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 63, issue 1 (2004), 78.

The Futurama is also a case study into why we should be careful in trusting narratives of the future, especially those where economic interest seems to take the main stage and that situate us as actors of the present separated from actions of the past. While the exhibit aimed to showcase advancements in transportation, Bel Geddes embedded a larger narrative of human progress, which Christina Cogdell argues, is a lurking eugenic undertone:

“In Bel Geddes’s future world, whenever possible the rights of way of the express city thoroughfares have been so routed as to displace outmoded business sections and undesirable slum areas.”

The dislocation of these racially and culturally different neighborhoods created the impression in Stuart Chase’s eyes of a eugenic “civilization which had been cleaned, garnished, and ordered. Waste, clutter and ugliness were out of it...” His model world depicted the “civilized” ideal, where the superficial cleanliness of order and harmony in actuality masked over the complicated realities of those people who had been displaced or co-opted by a demanding economy.”¹⁷

While a fictional, temporary experience, we know from other mid-century corporate and government sponsored media that the imaginary and the actual inform each other, as “ideology and material culture interact in cultural production.”¹⁸ But a further disturbing analysis of the Futurama is its ability to make its future vision not just plausible, but desirable, as

Bel Geddes’ used a strategic blurring of present and future to “manipulate his audience into accepting his vision of the future and to help them overlook the disturbing social realities present in his exhibits.”¹⁹ These underlying themes reflect the real, divisive binary of language used in major urban planning projects, which continue to reproduce racial and economic stereotypes. “Blight,” “slums,” “dirty,” “dangerous,” become covert associations with Black and other ethnic minority communities. In Syracuse, this language was used to legitimize the destruction of the 15th Ward and the exclusion of its former residents from predominantly white neighborhoods. Still used frequently today, this language also reinforces problematic ideas that these associations are inherent to racial and economic minority communities themselves – consequences of their own actions, rather than effects of generational systemic discrimination. Reproducing these narratives renders its perpetrators faultless and frames their improvement efforts as charitable and progressive. When we hear promises of economic opportunity, enlarged tax bases, and mass influx of investments, and we consume the clean, rendered visuals of a (re)constructed afterproduct, reproducing systemic segregation and the sustainability of profit incentives from such intense planning efforts are hardly ever questioned in mass media. While I reappropriate the framework of a guided “ride” into another realm like the Futurama, I use it as a comparative medium that includes the contemporary and calls attention to both eras’ construction of future narratives that promise to innovate, progress, renew, benefit, and save.

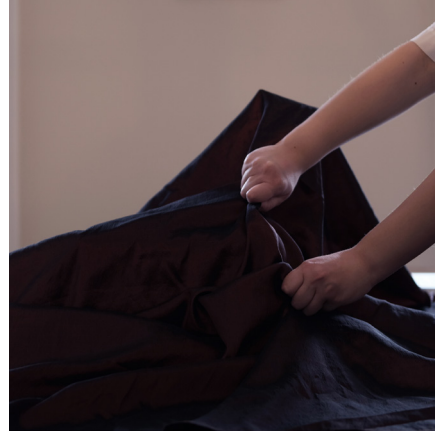
17 Christina Cogdell, “The Futurama Recontextualized: Norman Bel Geddes’ Eugenic ‘World of Tomorrow,’” *American Quarterly*, vol. 52, issue 2 (2000), 230.

18 Cogdell, 235.
19 Cogdell, 235.

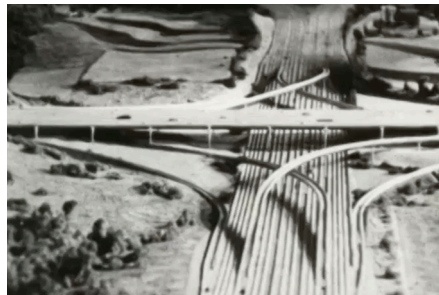


On April 24, 2025, I installed and publicly screened my work at Kairos Cafe, a small coffee shop on the Eastside. The performance begins with an uncloaking of the mysterious object that brings audiences outside of time and space, to view the history, present, and future of Syracuse in a network of connections, constructions, and relationships. Two different videos play simultaneously on the Spacemaker TV and a projector on the wall. The screening experience can be repeated using the two included discs provided.

On April 28, my work was projected onto the Everson Museum of Art as part of the Urban Video Project along with other student work.







Diptych stills.



@ the everson museum of art

BEFORE AFTER, AFTER BEFORE



Adnan Morshed. "The Aesthetics of Ascension in Norman Bel Geddes' Futurama." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63, no. 1 (2004): 74–99.

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