

## The Flaneur of the Strip

The strip of stores and offices leading into the old mill city of Nashua, New Hampshire, from the northwest is seven and a half miles long with two dozen traffic lights, and an uncountable number of Dunkin' Donuts. It's not that the donut shops are as infinite as the heavens; it's just that each time I try to count them I lose track. The strip scrolls past the windshield like those cartoon backgrounds when the cat is chasing the mouse—the same four or five buildings repeating. Dunkin' Donuts, Mobil gas station, Market Basket supermarket, a four-story office building, a string of little shops with their signs pinned like nametags on a low, dun-colored building. It's difficult to remember where anything is on the strip. It's a post-landmark landscape. Anywhere, Everywhere, U.S.A. The Nashua strip is not postcard New England.

The strip runs from Route 101, the state's major east-west road, to Route 3, the choked interstate that heads to Boston

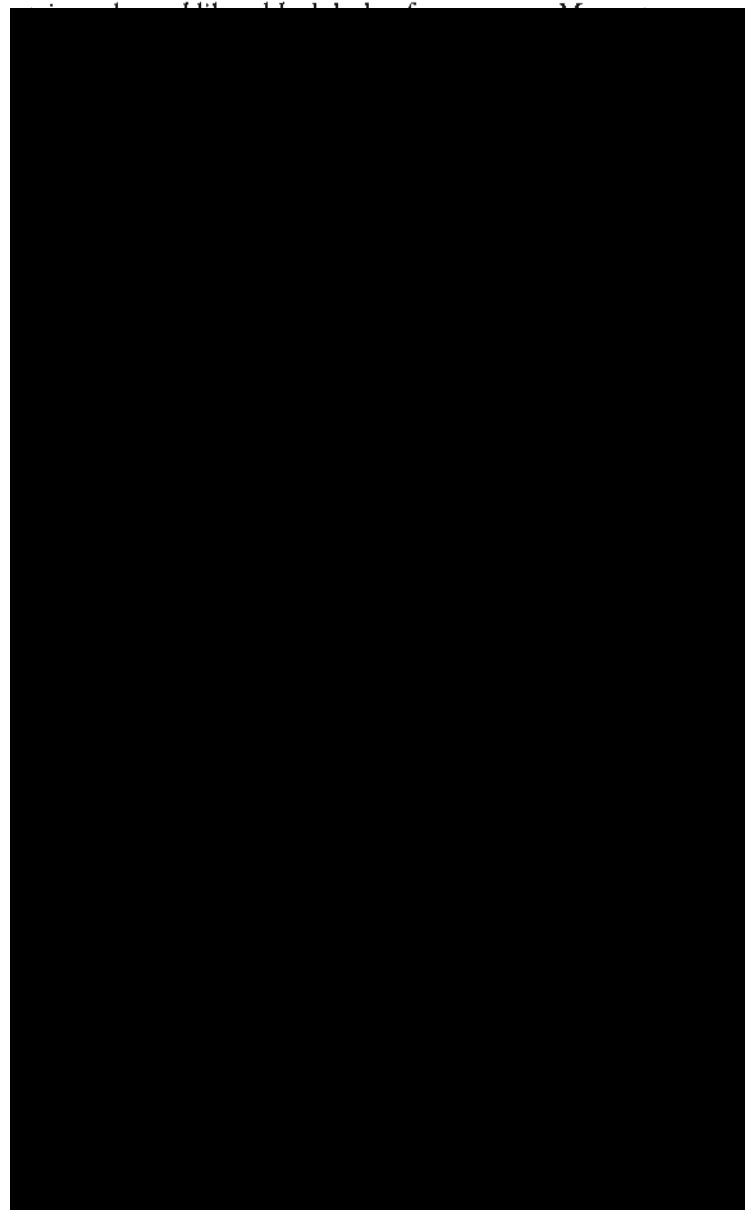
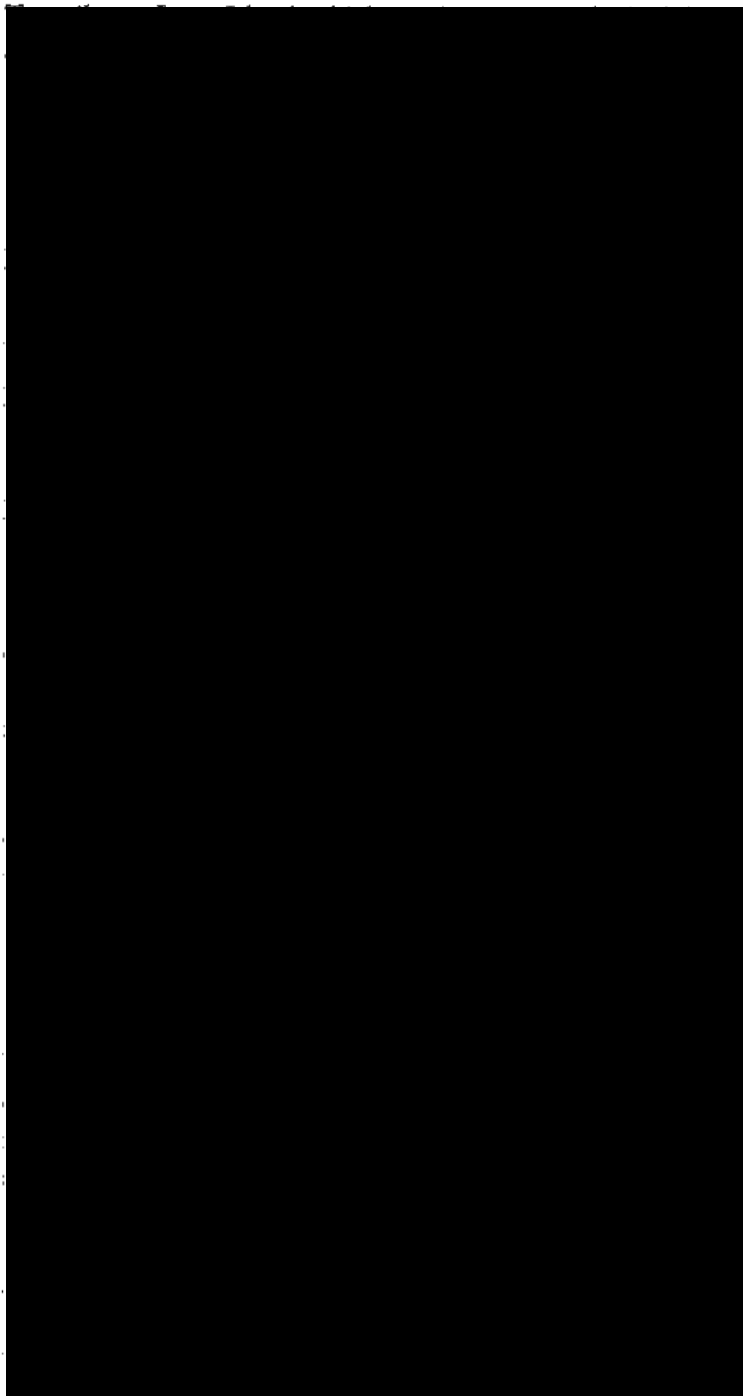
and the high tech companies on the ring road. The strip is a commuter's gauntlet, an obstacle course. But tonight I am not trying to get *through* the strip, instead I have come to tour. My guide and driver is Dan Scully, an architect who understands the automobile better than anyone I know

Like all the architects I know, he has a visceral reaction to bad architecture. It's painful. (Think of life as a daily, grade-school piano recital.) As we drive down the strip, he looks left at a pool and patio store highlighted in oranges and pool-blue, and turns away quickly. "A cartoon," he says in a grumbling voice. "A lot of these are just trying so damn hard for attention. They become cartoons of buildings. It's hard to do a restrained, refined building on the strip. It's all about competing for visual attention. It's all the same; it's all just wildly out of control. It's all bright. The communication is so frenetic, chaotic. *Everybody is yelling and screaming.*"

Scully has defined the principal experience of the strip: we enter a cartoon, we lose dimension. We are cartoon consumers, our legs windmilling in the chase as we repeat: we gotta have. The commercial strip and the cartoon strip are one.

I can be the happiest guy on earth, but by the time I am two or three stoplights into the Nashua strip, I'm sour. I'm an angry Puritan spoiling for a pulpit or a polemic. *The Day of Doom*: "We never looked for such days in New-England . . . [Are] all your promises forgotten?" It is a "damp, drizzly November in my soul" (to borrow Melville's phrase). This is not Thoreau's "New Hampshire everlasting and unfallen" that I love.

When I was growing up, the Great "strip" I remember looking



I hate the strip. Why? Here's my shopping list of despair:

1. No place of grace.
2. No value beyond the marketplace. No civic order.
3. The individual—first and last.

4. Any chance encounter is bad, i.e., "an accident."
5. No walking allowed. Here's a diagram of stupidity: I had to go to Sears, to a bookstore, and a computer store. The stores were at the same corner, just a couple hundred feet apart—but across an intersection of four-lane roads. There was no walking. Each time I exited a store I had to recross the intersection. A good part of our national wealth is tied up waiting for the light to change, all the shining cars with their ticking loans polluting the air and water.
6. On the strip I'm a consumer and nothing more. I consume cars, gas, food, computers. I consume the earth. I am appetite. I am anxious about time, about having and getting.
7. "Things are in the saddle and ride mankind." (Emerson)
8. If this is freedom, why is it tyranny?

Here's the answer to number eight. Philip Slater answered my question in his incisive book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970). Slater lists three "desires that are deeply and uniquely frustrated by American culture:

1. The desire for *community*—the wish to live in trust and fraternal cooperation . . .
2. The desire for *engagement*—the wish to come directly to grips with social and interpersonal problems . . .
3. The desire for *dependence*—the wish to share responsibility for the control of one's impulses and the direction of one's life."

On the strip we meet our desires and frustrations. We succeed as a marketplace and fail all other measures of democracy and civic sanity. The strip is a mirror, a snapshot. The strip is us. (And I still hate it.)

I am touring the strip with Scully to try and get beyond that hate. Hate is beside the point. We must ask: What's going on here? What have we authored? I'd rather be a flaneur of the strip than be Cotton Mather at the wheel, preaching to the dashboard.

In nineteenth-century Paris, the flaneur strolled the city at leisure studying the crowds. The flaneur was not a tourist; he was not interested in the guidebook's anecdotes and dates. "These are all so much junk to the flaneur, who is happy to leave them to the tourist," wrote Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, a Weimar Germany intellectual, the flaneur was an important figure. The city was theater for the flaneur; the crowd was the show. Crowds were new; they were the harbinger of modern times. "To endow this crowd with a soul is the very special purpose of the flaneur," wrote Benjamin. "The flaneur is the priest of the genius loci. This unassuming passer-by with his clerical dignity, his detective's intuition, and his omniscience, is not unlike Chesterton's Father Brown, that master detective." The flaneur was not a sightseer, but rather a seeker of the spirit of the age, the *zeitgeist*.

On the strip the flaneur is no longer on foot. He cruises instead of strolls, but he is in the right place. The nineteenth-century flaneur welcomed crowds, while others feared them. The flaneur experienced the city as a landscape—"It becomes a landscape that opens up to him and a parlor that encloses him," wrote Benjamin.

The flaneur of the strip is not here to turn out the usual editorial against sprawl (it's bad) or to denounce America as the fallen landscape of ugly greed. (It's not Tuscany.) The flaneur is here to understand this new city.

"America is a fast, hard, and restless place carved out of the wilderness, where the European notion of social places as a fixed piazza has been redefined into moving along Main Street," Scully has written in a Japanese architecture magazine. "Cruising Main Street is the American notion of 'place.'"

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We drive the strip after rush hour when the night-paving crews are at work under the dramatic NASA launchpad lighting. (It looks like a W.P.A. mural of workers. Heroic.) There is construction all along the road. We read a sign: 136,000 square feet for lease. "That's done entirely on spec," says Scully. "I'll tell you, that's gutsy. If you drive up and down here, half of it's empty." Indeed, many of the faux Colonial villages are dim. (The conceit: We're really not a shopping center, just old houses that have bumped into each other.)

I had thought that the Nashua strip was all built up. It's hell to drive through. But as a chauffeured flaneur at leisure, for the first time I see the gap-toothed pattern I remember from my childhood near Jericho Turnpike. There's a driving range with black nets, antique stores in old sheds, a sign offering eighteen acres for sale. We drive past buildings that have been torn down. "What was there?" We can't remember. We're in a cartoon. We pass the expected fast food franchises, the 7-11's and their competitors (also uncountable). "What percentage of all this food is fried?" Scully asks. (Fifty-seven percent of Americans eat at least one meal a day outside the home. This is our national health plan.) For evenings there are the upscale, get-a-baby-sitter-we're-dining-out franchises, like the pizza place in terra-cotta colors with Tuscan red awnings. "Definitely a trip to Italy," he says. "A lot of them are just bright lights in space."

The strip ends with a rat-a-tat-tat of gas stations just before

the interstate. The cloverleaf is just about the only open green space we've seen. "If they could figure out how to get commercial action there they'd probably do it," Scully says. Beyond the cloverleaf Nashua's downtown neighborhoods start. We turn around.

Heading back we stop at the new Home Depot, which is built on a hill over the strip. They had to blast out tons of rock. "They were willing to take on a horrendously expensive piece of land to develop. Huge site development costs. And that's a big thing with all these people: site development costs," he says.

Where I remember there once was a small farmhouse, we turn and enter a deep stone cut, the kind of thing you see along the Interstate. "I feel like I'm going into a tomb. Remember Mycenae where you go through the rock wall to the end of the cave?" Scully asks, referring to the beehive-shaped tombs that were cut into the limestone hills of Greece around the fourteenth century B.C. We're on a private parkway, winding up the hill. "We're going to another world here. They're not going to let us shop at anything else here." Up top is the brown and orange warehouse store.

"This is an Acropolis," Scully says.

"Home Depot Acropolis," I say, trying it on.

"But the parking lot is the monument," he says. From the lot we can see miles into the countryside. The parking lot lights must blight the night sky.

He scans the facade. "Now what right do they have—'Home Depot: New Hampshire's Home Improvement Warehouse.' Wait a minute: I saw one of those in Massachusetts. I saw one in Connecticut—What do you mean New Hampshire's? The money's going out of New Hampshire."

"It's like you once said about the Applebee's sign that says, 'Neighborhood Grill & Bar.' It's not your neighborhood bar," I say. "It's not like you know the family. You come in and they look at your new baby, or go out to the curb to look at your new car. You've seen that family through bad times and good. You pretty much know the gossip about the family, the crazy

brother and the strange aunts. Even though the food has fallen off, you keep eating there because it's the neighborhood place. That's not what's going on at Applebee's. At your neighborhood bar the food stinks and you still go because you have a loyalty to the family. On the strip they could bulldoze the joint minutes after you've paid the bill and walked out the door and you might never notice. What was there?"

We stop for dinner at a pit of nostalgia, the Time-Less Diner. A restaurant in earth tones (brown clapboards and the word "Green" in the name) has been remade into a 1950s stainless steel diner. The place glitters. Inside they've poured on the (reproduction) "memories": a Rock-Ola Juke Box (playing CDs), pedal cars hanging from the ceiling, the front of a '57 Chevy mounted like a deer head on the wall, gas pumps, James Dean pictures, boomerang squiggles on the Formica table, a traffic light, a barber pole, a Mobil sign, colorful neon on a malt machine, black and white floor tiles, and the waitresses dressed in a bobby-soxer motif.

"It's cute," say three women as they leave.

On the menu I order a souvlaki with their "famous" sauce. How can it be famous? They have only been open a few months.

In the thirty years since the Yalies went to the desert to study Las Vegas, America has lined thousands of miles of roads with fast food and malls. I read Scully a line from *Learning from Las Vegas*: "We term it sprawl, because it is a new pattern we have not yet understood." Is that still true? I ask.

No. It's a predictable pattern by now, he answers. Most of these strips started small, a hot dog stand, a corner of the family farm sold for a few house lots. "And it just starts to slowly disintegrate," he says. "You can't see it while it's happening—'Oh, we'll build a house and it won't change anything.' And all of a sudden it's all changed. The forces keep pushing for more land and bigger signs. They go to the planning board and say we've gotta have a sign this big. Who says you gotta have? We're so big we get whatever we think we want. Gotta have.

You never know, do they really have statistics behind them that say nobody will buy if the sign is less than fourteen feet deep? Christ, they get a sign, they get a building that's orange. They got so much damn signage going on they could build it without the sign."

The pattern is known. We have sprawl's rap sheet. For more than a half century, the strip has been a big part of American life. "Thousands of people drive through here daily. The Wal-Mart parking lot is jammed at 9 p.m.," I say. "And yet no one puts this on a postcard: 'Hey, I'm living in New Hampshire.' It looks the same as any place else."

"Is there a comfort in that?" Scully asks. "There must be."

Comfort. Cartoons are comforting. No one is really hurt when the mouse dynamites the cat. The strip is marketed with the come-on of comfort (the Comfort Inn) and with the promise of a home on the road, a home where nobody knows your name and they're glad to see you as long as you can pay. The strip lives in the contradiction of the name Home Depot—domesticity on a gargantuan scale. Home—"a person's native place," "at ease," "deep; to the heart," says the dictionary, and Depot, "a storehouse or a 'warehouse.'" (Warehouse of the Heart?)

In the post-World War II boom, these contradictions troubled many Americans. The popular press and best-seller lists fretted over this affluent, mass consumer society. Books like *The Split Level Trap* tore into suburbia. *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Organization Man*, and *Life in the Crystal Palace* worried about a culture dominated by large corporations. In a telling phrase, sociologist David Riesman called this new landscape "the suburban dislocation." Who had the map to this new America?

In that era John Cheever, an elegant writer whose stories were mapping one kind of upscale suburb, wrote a short list: "A Miscellany of Characters That Will Not Appear." Number three was:

"All scornful descriptions of American landscapes with ruined tenements, automobile dumps, polluted rivers, jerry-

built ranch houses, abandoned miniature golf links, cinder deserts, ugly hoardings, unsightly oil derricks, diseased elm trees, eroded farmlands, gaudy and fanciful gas stations, unclean motels, candlelit tearooms, and streams paved with beer cans, for these are not, as they might seem to be, the ruins of our civilization but are the temporary encampments and outposts of the civilization that we—you and I—shall build."

The "scornful descriptions" have receded. We seldom complain about this landscape anymore. Now and then a community makes a brave stand against a Wal-Mart or a Rite Aid. They are portrayed as adherents of the Flat Earth. (Stop commerce? You might as well repeal gravity.) But mostly we don't look at the strip. We lack the fresh inquiry of *Learning from Las Vegas*, the anger of *God's Own Junkyard*, or John Cheever's hope. I'd like to sign up with Cheever, but I'm afraid that this "temporary encampment" is our civilization. Coming Soon! More of the same.