It never stops
-Robert Ford, 2000

Imagine strolling down Karl Marx-Strasse in Berlin on a shopping spree. After passing common names such as GEA, Hennessy & Mauritz, and Woolworth, one arrives at the budget end of the strip dominated by a Wal-Mart Supercenter—an ostentatiously large anchor of commerce. A chance encounter of two giants—Marx and Wal-Mart—braces a diagram played out in real time on territory. Written here into the fabric of the city is a standoff between opposing ideologies: one promoting the unbridled spread of capital and the other recalling the historic call to arms for reshaping capital exploitation.

But this clash is anything but obvious, for it is buried in the familiar trappings of consumption. We come up on a tangle of signs that are front stage to an otherwise unadorned box where barrenity prevails. Inside, the ubiquity of low prices serves to elevate chaos to a higher level, never ceasing to remind customers of super deals available. Mass products are stacked in the cases in which they were delivered, underscoring the non-fits attitude that pervades the store. Though riddled in appearance, the scene is written over by a formula calling utility as program. Control and the principle of cost-cutting marketing are key to this blueprint that spy out an elaborate scheme linking low price to high profit as the Golden Rule. “High turnover and low overhead”, goes the saying. With an efficient machinery perpetually running backwards, quantity is managed—the more, faster, and cheaper, the better.

Such a business model remains unirritated in its success, having reframed the worldwide flow of commodities and with it the modus operandi of the entire retail industry. The simple fact that one encounters Wal-Mart in Berlin is witness to the scale of the enterprise and the extent of its ambition. To drive the point home, a world map labeled in both English and Chinese is proudly exhibited in the company’s headquarters in Bentonville, Arkansas, demonstrating to visitors the reach of the “Wal-Mart Effect”, while clearly spelling out a politics of expansion. City by city, country by country, each conquest is displayed like a trophy in a case. But national boundaries are nothing more than proverbial placeholders on a map used to plot the next move.

Other players in the game such as K-Mart and Target in the United States, or Aldi, Carrefour, and Metro in Europe, have followed suit in transcending those former geographies of politically bound spaces to span the globe in a new fluid market. In effect, a transnational landscape of corporate retail—one marked by dispersed regimes of logistics and supply distribution networks—s superseded the more familiar mosaic map of nations. Hardly noticeable in their day-to-day functioning, the systems serving this extensive retail web nevertheless leave their mark on the physiognomy of urban regions. Territory is reformatted in their process according to the places the logic of hyper-rationalized movements of capital. In the venture of flexible accumulation, companies must remain agile in their response to changing market circumstances. As quickly as they move in, they might likewise move out. Take the case in Berlin: Wal-Mart has for now left the scene, as the situation did not work to the company’s advantage. The company vacated the premises in 2006, discounting territory in its pursuit of strategic purposes elsewhere.

War Logistics
Wal-Mart does not produce commodities per se but rather systems of distribution, including all the requisite administrative procedures for managing the global movement of goods. The attendant expertise to maintain such an overview is known within the industry as “logistics” and has by now gained the status of a full-fledged discipline. And here, the devil is in the detail. Whereas logistics encompasses all aspects of corporate operations, from data compilation and analysis, planning, organization, implementation, and project steering to the control of flows of information, material, and commodities, it comes as no surprise that the term has its origin in the domain of military science.

Open any instruction manual devised to train the armed forces, and logistics is found alongside “strategy” and “tactics” as a central tenet of military engagement. "Victory is dependent upon the logistic problem," as stated in a textbook of the United States army, was published during the Vietnam War to as ensure the efficacy of that campaign. Logistics, then as now, is the art of calculation, remaining vital to achieving supremacy with the most efficient means possible in any theater of operation. For this reason, logistics has been appropriated by business in what amounts to a transfer of practice from state to the private sector, having become by now routine, if not a buzzword, for corporate management. And with the spread of a free market ethos to all corners of the earth, this formula has likewise become omnipresent. Put

DISCOUNTING TERRITORY
LOGISTICS AS CAPITAL PRINCIPLE
OF SPATIAL PRACTICES

Walmart Supercenter on Karl-Marx-Strasse in Berlin, 2006 (Photograph Jesse LeCavalier)

Promotional map entitled "Walmart Around the World," in both English and Chinese used by Walmart Inc., 2003

Walmart Supercenter interior view, Berlin, 2006 (Photograph Jesse LeCavalier)
Black Box

Different types of boxes are to be credited for the triumph of discount empires—from the cardboard box, to the shipping container, to the big box of buildings. In all those are standardized, golos without saying, thus facilitating the most economic means of storing, transporting, and displaying merchandise.

Storing with the cardboard box, contractually binding specifications for manufacturers are formulated in the most unambiguous terms. Box sizes are specified not only to consolidate packaging and thereby maximize space requirements but also to accommodate the norms of pallets, forklifts, conveyor belts, and robotics. As the smallest unit in the system, boxes are comparable to pixels in the digital realm. Accordingly, goods must be tagged to be tracked. By now an industry standard, the Universal Product Code (UPC) is used for scanning goods both upon delivery and at point of purchase to close the loop of supply and demand. Other technologies, some developed by the military, are being tested for large-scale application in the market. Wal-Mart, for example, is exploring the use of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) to monitor every movement of every box. Generally speaking, very nearly every act of scanning and tracking sets off a chain reaction throughout the whole machinery, with satellite transponders communicating with supercomputers to relay a constantly updated overview of product activity. Automatic identification enables collection and analysis of information leading to a veritable geography of data. Maps are instantaneously drawn, then redrawn as soon as other parameters come in to profile shopping preferences, categorized by neighborhoods and regions. Mining data increases profits, identifying patterns in this landscape of numbers, statistics, and

graph is key to the buildup of the specialized knowledge coveted by retailers to stay ahead. Even weather reports are factored into the equation as indicators of possible changes in consumer behavior.

Introduced in the 1960s, the next unit in the system catalyzed a transportation revolution. Nothing more than a simple metal box, the shipping container is characterized by some as the quintessential symbol of globalization, if not its core principles. Yet containers did not appear overnight. The unscore of materials handling is marked by trial and error. A case in point is the pallet, which originated in the military. Promoted in the 1940s as “the war’s secret weapon,” the pallet made its way to the private sector when the concept was disseminated by the National Bureau of Standards in campaigns including trade magazines, newspapers, and educational films. One movie in particular was called 26 Wishes—Patelle. Conceived as a means to reduce the amount of muscle needed to move merchandise, the pallet made possible the sheer volume of trade that has by now become worldwide fact. Down the line, shipping containers appeared amid debates about industry standards and appropriate dimensions for train, truck, and sea transport. This yielded the ISO-Norm for containers, which in turn determined the Twenty-Foot-Equivalent Unit (TEU) capacity of freight vessels that specifies the maximum number of containers a ship can accommodate. Entry fleets and harbors had to be rebuilt in accordance with this standard. As with the cardboard boxes, this innovation transformed the way retail business was done. Here again, goods are tracked, but now in larger quantities. In one blow, the shipping container reduced the scale of the earth.
Diagram of Yangshan Port container terminal, Shanghai 2007

Image caption: "This is a pallet!" from Army Services Manual M703-4, Washington D.C. 1943

CFO Jack Shawmeker pointing to map regulating economic data on territory, Wal-Mart Annual Report 1980

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and simultaneously increased that of the world economy. And yet, with this new idea, cargo became more anonymous, an abstract thing hidden from view and only traceable with the proper scanning technology.

The next scale up the chain is commonly referred to as "big box," a building type merging warehouse with store, and, like the cardboard box and shipping container, conceived as a standardized unit. As the name implies, bigness and simplicity rule. In the case of Wal-Mart, these buildings are under the purview of a Real Estate Division that employs hundreds of people with diverse expertise. Scattered throughout the landscape and surrounded by parking lots, the fast-food facilities can cover an area of up to five acres. The company's entire fleet of buildings, including distribution centers, are determined by specification templates that spell out everything down to the last detail. Repeated ad absurdum, the same structure, the same cladding, the same fixtures are stamped out in succession, removing architecture from the equation to make way for pure enclosure. Only what has proven successful time and again to eliminate risk is integrated into Wal-Mart's blueprint. What you see is all you get. More to the point, what is interesting here is that the buildings' commonplace appearance serves to camouflage and, in effect, conceal the calculated intricacy of logistics machinery running nonstop. Not just cargo in the system, big boxes function as conduits for flows of information and commodities.

Whether made of cardboard, metal, or any other material, the box is a principle that places a premium on performance rather than content. These units work analogously to what is known in the natural and behavioral sciences as a "black box," which designates any system or object understood solely in terms of input, output, and transfer capacity. What is here bracketed from view is the internal functioning of the box. Applied to the retail industry, this principle supports the prevalent bias in favor of transparency — flat out in place of flat lur — that has ultimately become the operative program of discount retail. Companies vehemently protect their knowledge as classified intelligence in data centers guarded as one would a fortress. Whereas the Enlightenment might have promised the advance of lucidity, contemporary culture is no longer intelligible in these terms. Quite the contrary, for we inhabit environments comprised of aggregated black boxes and characterized increasingly by stealth.

Real Estate

The public image portrayed by Wal-Mart is that of a conservative family business rooted in small-town values, epitomized by Sam Walton himself, who as company founder continues to serve as the firm's emblematic figurehead. His autobiography, Sam Walton: Made in America, is written in a plain, jovial style and sets down simple rules for running a successful enterprise. Especially revealing is his presentation of Wal-Mart's real estate strategy and its politics of spatial practice. With the motto "rolling out the formula," Walton explains his recipe for territorial expansion that rolls out store after store across the land. The fact that the book has been translated into numerous languages, including Chinese, makes clear just how fertile the soil is for such an approach. Looking for potential new locations for stores, Wal-Mart examined urban patterns from the perspective of his private plane. Those areas not yet encroached upon by the city were of particular interest, as he was attempting to anticipate future corridors of growth. Instead of shopping for sites in the city, he headed out to the periphery, with no competition in sight. Historically, the agenda was to cover as much of the region as possible. We saturated northwest Arkansas. We saturated Oklahoma. We saturated Missouri.14

Current practices have not strayed far from the original plan of saving for those updated by advances in data collection and communication technologies. After reconnaissance and only if a site is deemed worthy, a distribution center is planted deliberately near a highway intersection, guaranteeing the all-important connection for transport. Then the territory is peopled with branches in a circumscription of several hundred miles. Conditions are negotiated with local municipalities and landowners to get the best deal on land prices, ensure tax incentives, and secure the provision of publicly funded infrastructure. To eliminate competition, too many outlets are built, with the assumption of eventual attrition. Anything in the way is crushed. The first victims are usually the small shops in nearby towns, which cannot compete with the discount belt encircling them. Here territory is unreasonably discounted, resulting in what is often lamented in the press as "The Death of Main Street USA." The economic lifestyle of whole agglomerations is methodically sucked out in due course, and with it goes public space. Without question, the firm's objective is to establish an economic monopoly over a given region.

The next step is to remove those Wal-Mart stores that — according to the Darwinian "survival of the fittest" — do not yield the adequate quota of profit. What remains after the field in selectively cleared are wastelands cluttered with empty boxes, in turn giving rise to ghost towns on the edge of cities. It is clear that Wal-Mart's policy of cheap construction is also motivated by the fact that their stay is limited. Flexible accumulation entails not only the realm of commodity production and consumption but space itself. This is the real state of real estate. Just as goods are mobile, locations are rendered temporary in the game of moving in and out. Place is temporary and architecture disposable. That something is lost on the way should come as no surprise. Social and spatial conditions are compromised, leaving those left behind to bemoan the loss.

Spatial Fix

A speckler is haunting America. "The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles," proclaim Marx and Engels in The Communist Manifesto.15 Whereas we encountered by chance the clash of mindsets on a street in Berlin, this confrontation is anything but geographically bounded, now being most evident in the United States. In the land of market freedom, who would have thought that Wal-Mart would face fierce resistance? Those most affected by the downside of discount retail have assemblaged and begun to fight back in a manner recalling peasant uprisings. The company has come under attack in numerous instances for accusations from human rights violators and denying worker benefits to the exploitation of female employees.

A documentary entitled Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price captures this showdown, in a movie that Bentonville dismisses as an unwarranted railing cry.16 The film documents the destruction of social bonds and urban space, revealing the hidden cost of this destruction played out not only on the edge of the city but also on the fringes of the legal system. Story after story recount personal mistreatment, community tragedy, and disaster visited upon place. One scene unrolls in the jurisdictions of commercial licensing and building permits. It is when Wal-Mart seeks approval to set up shops that it faces the stillest opposition from local stakeholders, including neighborhood organizations, city officials, and clergy. The significance of territory and its very construction come to the fore. A "war machine" of another sort is at
The authors would like to thank Jesse LeCavalier for his invaluable preparatory research that made this essay possible.

NOTES
4. Wal-Mart's attempt to establish the company's presence in Germany failed. The eighty-five stores were taken over by the German chain Mporte in 2006. See Neue Zürcher Zeitung, “Wal-Mart richt sich aus Deutschland zurück,” July 29th, 2006.
6. The term logistics has its etymological origin in the Greek adjective logistikos, meaning "pertinent in the art of calculation."
15. The inner core of these distribution centers are constituted by seemingly blank bazaars and trustee, the contents of which can only be accessed by workers with special 'keys' in the form of their hand-held or 'wearable' scanners.” Jodi Harewood, Jesse LeCavalier, and Guillaume Majin, Slaveyapunk 01: The Wal.. (Basel: Thirdspace, 2006), 29.
17. See Peter Sloterdij, “Ekistics - ur

Stills from Robert Greenwald's documentary film Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Pay, Los Angeles, 2005