



## Peer Reviewed

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# America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire

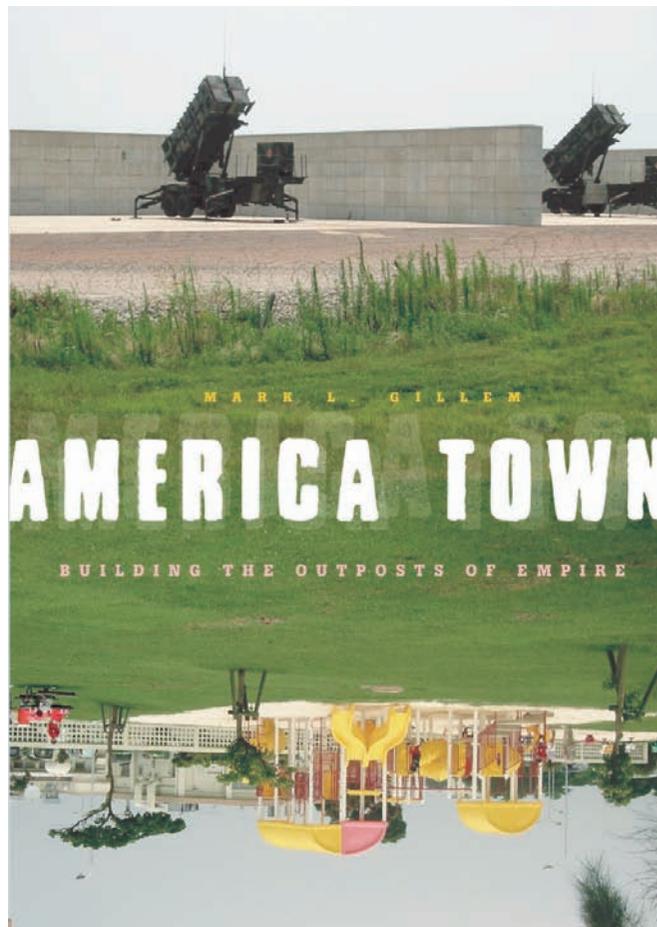
Mark L. Gillem

The models of land use that guide the design and construction of America's foreign military installations are a difficult topic to write about. Not the least of the reasons why is the imperial ambition that has led to the stationing of American forces in foreign lands, which can drastically color any such reflection. Yet, in *America Town: Building the Outposts of Empire*, Mark L. Gillem asks a rather different question: "What can we learn about America from the way it is building its outposts?" And in this book, Gillem's background as an architect, professor of architecture, and veteran of the U.S. Air Force give him valuable perspective on the activities of what he reminds readers is "one of the largest builders in the world."

"You can learn much about a political regime by looking at what it builds," wrote Lawrence Vale, in *Architecture, Power, and National Identity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Gillem aptly uses this idea to point to his concern for the built environment rather than to an analysis of imperial strategies per se. Over the last century, the United States has created a far-flung military empire that is the rival of any in history. U.S. military bases now spread across more than a hundred and forty countries. They also present a distinctive common feature: the attempt to re-create the essence of the American lifestyle so that servicemen and women can feel at home.

In pursuit of this objective, however, what most typifies U.S. military outposts are consumptive land use patterns that create sprawling, low-density suburbs. The usual American base is a world unto itself, featuring isolated land uses and near complete auto-dependency, fully

**Above:** From missile batteries to playgrounds. The cover of *America Town* depicts the two faces of American empire: the militaristic and the suburban.



reproducing the wasteful excess of American consumer culture. The defense of America, the book reveals, has created mini-Americas that alter the relationship between U.S. troops and U.S. allies.

## Sample Juror Comments—*America Town*

**Fritz Steiner:** There are a lot of good books here. And I think that there are two sort of dominant themes, or at least representations. One of them is urban, and the other is landscape. There are just tremendous books in both areas. We were talking about the one about the American bases abroad, which isn't produced in the most stunning graphic design, but I think it is a stunning book. I think it is a really important book. And when you look at the end, there is also a section

on research methods. So, of many of them, this author is the most explicit about the kinds of methods.

**Dennis Frenchman:** For me the most powerful books are those where we see something we don't normally see. I think this is the most powerful among those because it is so taken for granted, and because we've all studied, as is pointed out in the book, well-known outposts, and we look at them as some quaint urban form. And here we are doing it ourselves,

which is a really powerful reflection.

**Fritz Steiner:** I like both *America Town* and *The Concrete Dragon*.

**Susan Szenasy:** [*America Town*] to me was the most powerful.

**Leanne Rivlin:** The concept troubles me a bit...

**Dennis Frenchman:** I must say I agree. This [*America Town*], in a sense, is a one-liner, where this [*Concrete Dragon*], although I am pretty experienced with China

In investigating these conditions, Gillem documents some surprising attitudes among host populations. Most residents of communities near American bases do not express anger with America's foreign wars, or even a more general anti-Americanism. Rather, Gillem found, they are frequently most concerned with the land-use and planning impacts of the massive facilities. Thus, Gillem writes, U.S. military development has created unintended antagonisms, an overlooked but not negligible consequence of the American presence.

In selecting *America Town* for this year's book award, jury members praised the importance and timeliness of its investigation of foreign bases as a reflection of American values. They also noted that it provides an original contribution to ethnographic research, crossing not only disciplines but also methodologies. In addition to providing surveys and case studies, Gillem combined standard ethnographic models with what he calls "autoethnography and institutional ethnography." What facilitated this approach was his own experience in the Air Force and his familiarity with the language of the military. This allowed him to overcome a typical obstacle in ethnography, that of being an outsider.

For this reason as well as for the story of oblivious ambition the book tells, the jury deemed *America Town* a valuable contribution to its field. In its novel approach and subject matter, it will be useful to scholars, designers, and planners as well as members of the general public interested in the intersection of place and culture.

### Planning as Warfare

Gillem is an assistant professor of architecture and landscape architecture at the University of Oregon. He is also an eighteen-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force and Air Force Reserves. In *America Town* he makes use of both his

former work as a military planner and his present status as an independent researcher to document how little value the U.S. military places on the land it occupies.

He begins the book by emphasizing continuities between America's outpost planning practices and those of imperial powers through history. By looking at the settlement patterns of former empires, he believes, conclusions can be drawn to help decode the planning practices employed by the U.S. military today.

"Displacement and Demolition," "Ordering Disorder," and "The Regulation of Imperial Vice" are some of the motifs he introduces in Part I, entitled "Empire's Reach." Gillem shows how other empires have ruled by displacing local populations, imposing heavy regulations on apparently disordered indigenous settlements, and gaining the consent of local leadership. Gillem then explains how, like older imperial powers, the United States also imposes its rule through the regulation of spatial patterns.

The phenomena Gillem investigates are as old as the history of empire itself. Until the nineteenth century, empires devised policies of assimilation, where the colonizers transformed the cultures, languages, and legal systems of the colonized. When assimilation was met with resistance, the colonial project switched to practices of association, as exemplified by the French and Italians in North Africa at the turn of the century. However, all of these practices were, in reality, articulations of a greater struggle—over land, power, and resources. What is new, Gillem asks, in the relationship between present-day American military installations and their "hosts"? What makes the new frontier different?

"Arrogant, supersized, extravagant, and isolated" are just a few of the adjectives Gillem uses to describe the particular character of American empire in Part II, "Familiarity on the Frontlines." But there is one more qualification that Pentagon strategists disdain: "entangled."

from a Western point of view—really puts a lot of what is happening together in a coherent attitude, which I haven't seen. It makes a kind of theory out of it, which, I think, is a critical achievement. But they are both very strong.

**Susan Szenasy:** Maybe this is the one where we give two awards?

**Leanne Rivlin:** But [*America Town*] has five votes....

**Fritz Steiner:** But I would easily go with *The Concrete Dragon*. Looking at it again, the production is superb....With *America Town*, I don't think it is a

one-liner. On one hand, yes, it's the American bases.

But on the other it's their context.

**Dennis Frenchman:** It does have a history of this which I think adds a lot.

**Fritz Steiner:** The other thing, because [the book award] has fallen out of the research category, is its research contribution. And in that sense, when I read the appendix, which is his research method, it's really good. It's original; he's combining research methods.... I can see a Ph.D. student or a researcher picking that

up and saying "OK, this is a method I can adapt for my research." As much as I like *The Concrete Dragon*, maybe that's possible there too, but I don't know; he doesn't make it as clear. Maybe it's embedded in what is obviously a wonderful-looking book. But in [*America Town*] it is easy to pull out.

**Dennis Frenchman:** And this is also a much more unusual topic. There are a lot of people writing about China.

**Jane Weinzapfel:** This is fresh. This seems to be an



“American policy-makers do not want their war-fighting options limited,” Gillem writes. The constraints brought on by long-term global alliances, host nations, and contact between soldiers and local populations are precisely what American empire-builders fear. Thus, its build-

ing model is one of neither assimilation nor association.

“The American Empire practices avoidance,” Gillem writes. He believes the events of September 11, 2001, were a tipping point toward this approach. And the book is structured around this recurring concept and the way it is made manifest spatially today, at the height of imperial fear.

In chapters entitled “Homeward Bound: Identity, Consumption, and Place” and “Ruling the World: Exporting Bureaucracy, Privatization, and Fear,” Gillem shows how the policies and practice of avoidance have distinct spatial implications. Besides reducing the number of overseas bases, American military planners are now addressing the fear of terrorism in ways that have transformed the military built environment. Bases are now being relocated from city centers to more remote areas. With extensive on-site facilities that include shopping centers and hotels, they are also being made more self-contained to minimize off-base trips.

Specific planning directives not only now mandate setbacks of 25 meters around most buildings to protect against perceived threats (i.e., car bombs), but they also specify an additional “stand-off” distance between buildings. The result, writes Gillem, is less a military base than a prison. All of this caution requires extremely low densities, and comes with a high land cost.

### The Central Question

The question remains, “What can we learn about America from the way it is building its outposts?” The narrative of *America Town* seems to tell a simple story: how America has laid claim to foreign territory; how the encounter between the American military and local communities and authorities has created conflict; and how “In defense of the United States, the military has imposed on the globe the single-family house and the shopping mall.”

In Part III, “Outposts Under Construction,” which

### Sample Juror Comments—*America Town*

opportunity to understand and influence, maybe, what is happening.

**Leanne Rivlin:** It’s likely to be a continuing presence in the world.

**Jane Weinzapfel:** And can change for better or for worse, just like our embassies.

**Fritz Steiner:** The other thing is, in a way, how much can we really influence [China]? On one level, we can; on another, we are always going to be outsiders. This

[*America Town*] is our responsibility. This is us. We are doing this. We can look at other cultures and say “Oh, you guys are just nuts. You’re making Vegas-like things, and it’s goofy....”

**Leanne Rivlin:** But that’s based on a philosophy of life. Whereas this [*America Town*], now that I think about it, really gives pause to thinking.

**Jane Weinzapfel:** You can think about a whole range of fallout from a particular mind set.

**Susan Szenasy:** I agree. And naming American imperialism for what it is. I think *America Town* is one of those things that was a surprise to me. I did not think about it at all. I think the China, as much as I love the writing and everything, and I think it is a great book, *America Town* is much more significant research.

**Dennis Frenchman:** So let’s go with this. Fair enough, I agree.



details three case studies, reveals little about the residents of these outposts, other than the foregone conclusion that Americans working for the Department of Defense “live under an all-consuming corporate military complex that insists on conformity.” In the studies from Italy, South Korea, and Japan, Gillem draws a well-documented and comprehensive picture of the suburban character of such “America Towns.” But one is left wishing for a deeper investigation of the nature and nuances of the encounter between Americans and the local populations.

Nevertheless, Gillem’s point is that these development and consumption patterns are driven less by individual demands than by the intersection of corporate America and the military, “where the military has even started to privatize its outposts.” It is here that Gillem’s critique of military planning is most pointed. This is a practice that operates outside the logic of the market, yet still propagates familiar models of sprawl historically fueled by real estate interests. “Commercial interests have signed on in unprecedented ways to extend their reach under the guise of national security and in the service of capital accumulation,” he writes.

### Looking Back and Thinking Ahead

By drawing on an extensive body of literature, Gillem’s study of empires throughout history not only puts American expansionism in a historical context but also draws relevant parallels in terms of planning practices. For example, by noting the rise and fall of the British colonial power, Gillem underscores the inevitable decline that follows an empire’s overextending its human and material resources.

Whether or not one subscribes to Gillem’s comparison with the British Empire (one that announces the imminent decline of America’s imperial ambitions), the fact that

he does not conclude with explicit planning alternatives suggests that the character of the American empire may be beyond change. Nevertheless, *America Town*, the first scholarly work to investigate the spatial practices of the Department of Defense, has already garnered considerable interest outside academia. In particular, it has been featured at major conferences of military planners from the U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Finally, Gillem speaks of the need for a sequel to his research. This would focus on the Middle East and investigate a new direction in military planning and land use: the shift from permanent to temporary bases. While permanent bases have traditionally allowed servicewomen and men to live with their families, temporary installations provide fewer amenities and accommodate only active personnel, not their families. This realignment not only has consequences for on-base lifestyles, but also creates different socioeconomic impacts on surrounding communities. The temporary installations not only reveal the new penchant of the land-based military to travel lightly, but epitomize the paradox of an empire that practices avoidance while being heavily entangled.

— *Elena Tomlinson*

Photos and drawings courtesy of Mark Gillem.

**Opposite:** A shopping center provides the sense of a distant America in microcosm on Aviano Air Base in Italy.

**Above left and right:** Figure-ground drawings of Osan Air Base in Korea and Kadema Air Base in Japan show the effect of American patterns of land use on local communities.