

# EXECUTABLE SPATIAL SCRIPTS

SHANNON MATTERN

We're in a supermarket parking lot, in a small city where, as every local teenager will tell you, "nothing ever happens." Our city is nowhere in particular; it's anywhere and everywhere. Yet this generic patch of asphalt is coded, claimed, and conscripted. It's been recruited, many times over, into various networks and zones, territories and registers and archives. Even this most characterless of plots—where, like all boring spots, very little of significance ever seems to happen—is a conduit for forces and flows that *make things happen*—here, there, everywhere, all the time.

Our parking lot—like all plots—has myriad cartographic identities. It probably lives in the form of assorted analog maps at the municipal archives and as digital files at the city planning office. These encoded representations determine who can dig or build or buy. They make real estate and development, historic preservation and resource management *happen*—or not. Our parking lot also exists as an aerial image on a Google Maps server in a data centre somewhere probably far away. If a Street View car or Uber autonomous vehicle has come to town, our plot has also been imaged, sounded out, laser-beamed by cameras, sonar, radar, and lidar sensors. These encodings generate multidimensional maps that shape the way future visitors, planners, and intelligent machines will encounter and navigate through our tedious town.

Our prosaic plot—or any plot, for that matter—is defined by its property boundaries, a delineation of ownership. Yet it’s also ringed and bisected and circumscribed by an array of other boundaries, at multiple scales, embodying a variety of spatial categories: plots, zones, wards, districts, counties, kingdoms, continents, galaxies. For instance, our plot lies within a zone defined by a postal code, a script that renders itself legible to both humans and machines. While the postal barcode on a letter prompts robots in a mail-sorting facility to direct that letter into one delivery bin or another, the code as a spatial “brand” (consider the cachet of London’s SW1X or New York’s 10012) draws retailers looking for desirable target markets and parents desperate for good schools. The borders of the school district, another spatial delineation, don’t necessarily match those of the postmaster’s terrain, yet they reinforce a similar politics and privilege of (social) mobility. The police precinct is another domain. Two neighbours on adjacent blocks might go to the same school but report to different precincts. Our plot lies within an electoral district, too, whose drawn boundaries can swing elections and determine how evenly political representation is distributed.

Those multiple encodings are executable scripts that *make lots of things happen*, but often at temporal and spatial scales that aren’t perceptible to their constituents. They activate particular socioeconomic and cultural practices that unfold over time, through small gestures and slow moves, and thus seem opaque to those living inside the borders. These scripts mobilise opportunity and effect marginalisation. They patch zones and districts into city-wide circuits and planetary-scale systems—or not. And this connectivity, or lack thereof, has the power to make things happen in people’s lives—or not. Even that *not happening* is itself an event of note, one that proscribes the richness of human lives.