

Mobile/Home

The Trailer As America

(Abstract)
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In the United States today the mention of trailers, or mobile homes, conjures up images of tornado and hurricane victims—people with no other choices available for their homes. Less than a century ago, however, the trailer was a symbol of freedom and adventure, as well as community and family togetherness. The marvels of small-space living and the autonomy of traveling the newly built roads were features once coveted by Americans seeking to fulfill their dreams of seeing their young country. While a grass-roots movement in the first decade of the twentieth century led the earliest enthusiasts to create their own trailers from scraps of wood and metal, companies like Auto-Kamp and The Covered Wagon furthered this practice by creating and selling trailer building plans and kits that simplified the process. Consumer desire for the trailer and what it promised spurred an industry that, with all its ups and downs, still flourishes today.

Despite its promising beginnings however, the inherently transitory and mobile nature of the trailer has cast a shadow on its legacy. While trailers and trailer parks by the 1930's were primarily for vacationers, during the Great Depression trailers became homes for temporary or unemployed workers. Geographically, trailer parks moved from forests and lakesides to the edges of urban areas, and instead of being associated with vacationing nature-lovers, they became identified with the unemployed. This marked the beginning of a downward spiral in the image of the trailer.

This paper focuses on shifting characterizations of the trailer in relation to the American idea of "home". How can this simple design, neither house nor vehicle but somehow both, be at once evocative of freedom and romance and also of squalor and devastation? Inherent in the American spirit is the wish to move, to be free and to see the country unbound by responsibility. At the same time, the American also craves a community, the ability to put down roots, and a home of one's own. With this dichotomy in mind, this thesis draws the parallels between the American spirit and perhaps one of the only designed objects to mirror its contradictions.