

# Mega-Life in the Midwest



## Essay by Hesse McGraw & Photos by Mike Sinclair

I was brought up in a large suburb of Kansas City. Although the city does not have a large population, it encompasses an enormous land area, which makes it a perfect model for that derided thing called sprawl. I attended a huge high school and later a gigantic university. All of this happened in Kansas, a land of many large things, some of them the world's largest — absurd gigantors such as the largest cow hairball, ball of twine, hand-dug well, and the Big Brutus electric shovel — most of which gather along the roadside to form pitifully epic attractions.

At a certain point in my life, I began to cherish small things and nuanced ideas — walkable streets, mom-and-pop stores, and notepads I could keep in my pocket. One exception to my preference for the petite was the bleary oasis of Kansan nothingness that languidly abuts the highways in between our monuments to bigness. Particularly, I fell in love with the stretch of Wyandotte County farmland that lay along I-70 between Lawrence, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri. This expanse enabled me to feel appropriately human-scaled and reminded me of my place in the world. So I was dismayed to learn in the late 90s that the International Speedway Corporation was planning to build an 80,000+ seat NASCAR racetrack, paired with a 400-acre retail concept called Village West, and all of it would be planted along my beloved stretch of western Wyandotte County farmland. Most curious about their choice of this site, however, was its stifling nowhere-ness — it's 15 miles outside of Kansas City, at the intersection of two freeways. Much has changed in the last five years.

As the area had been entirely ignored by retail developers for 25 years, the Wyandotte County Unified Government was driven to insidious means to make the speedway happen. The 1,200 acres needed for the track were secured by condemning 150 homes through eminent domain and the additional acreage needed for Village West was purchased through the illegal use of "STAR Bond" tax incentives. As County Administrator Dennis Hays recalls, "This was actually assembling land for economic development purposes for for-profit companies, which was particularly controversial and caused a great deal of anxiety among the property owners" — particularly as many of the property owners were operating multi-generational family farms. Despite the sham financing, Village West and the Kansas Speedway quickly became Kansas' most fantastic roadside attraction. Within six months of opening, Village West's anchor tenant, Cabela's, was officially Kansas' number one tourist attraction.

Calling itself the "World's Foremost Outfitter," Cabela's began in 1961 as a mail-order hunting/fishing/outdoor catalog. Although it's now shipping more than 100 million catalogues to 120 countries, tourists are flocking from four states to visit the store. As I toured the store recently, my friendly, camoed guide rattled statistics: 180,000 products in 189,000 square feet; The Mule Deer Country Museum contains the world's largest collection of life-size trophy mule deer and houses 12 of the top 14 ever killed; the 65,000 gallon walk-through aquarium contains nearly all species indigenous to Kansas and Missouri, including two truly shocking and lugubrious 80-pound blue catfish (the world-record 125-pound blue cat died recently in transit to Cabela's). Yet despite the 30,000 square feet devoid of retail, it's futile to just look at the fish, as you have to walk past 12,000 fishing rods to enter the aquarium.

The centerpiece of Cabela's is a 36-foot "mountain" that features multiple habitats and compresses distance and time like no other space on Earth. Directly adjacent to the Kansan prairie dog mound, you enter an African diorama via the threshold of a flying baboon to encounter the orgiastic freeze-frame of a lioness chomping the neck of a zebra as the striped equine kicks another lion in the face! Also amidst the feverish mix is a 16-foot crocodile attacking a blue wildebeest. As I chuckled at the sensationalism of the scene, our guide said, "Cabela's aims to bring the outdoors indoor." It does something like that, but it also welcomes Hollywood camp, corny Ozark tableaux, dead-serious special effects, riotous surrealism and creates psychological reversals. There is no way to get around the artificiality of Cabela's "outdoors." Within the store, there are varying degrees of natural and artificial, and both are made of fiberglass, steel and concrete. As an animatronic rhinoceros stared straight at me and said, "Look at all the wonderful items they're buying, Lion, the management is going to be so happy," I gave into Cabela's logic and figured that robot rhino was probably more real than the concrete tree next to him. Yet Cabela's cares little about these fussy distinctions, it just cares to redirect your experience of the "outdoors." Cabela's says, "Back to nature, but bring a lot of stuff with you."

As the tour concluded, my seemingly levelheaded guide proclaimed, "You really got to love a store where you can walk around with a gun and nobody thinks twice of it." You might prefer to cast that sentiment aside as an outsider's delusion, yet it's exactly that brand of hyper-normal permissiveness that draws crowds and re-colors nature. It is astounding that a retail chain could veer into so many other aspects of cultural life — entertainment, education, natural history, recreation, leisure, civic duty — and achieve these functions not through the quality of its merchandise, but for its sheer hubris, the extravagance of its presentation and perhaps most importantly, its size. It achieves multiple functions due to its extreme accessibility. There is no trendiness to the scene here. This is pure classicism — conservative Americana reviving Manifest Destiny with an all-embracing fervor. There is





space for everyone in the new America and it begins in Kansas, where you might learn something, even if you've just come to buy bullets. Conversely, if you're part of a kindergarten tour brought here to learn something, you're bound to bring your daddy back to buy some bullets.

Cabela's isn't the largest operation at Village West, but it sets the tone. As our tour continued, from the Great Wolf Lodge (family hotel and indoor water park) to the Speedway (mind-numbingly massive) to Chateau Avalon (gaudily themed love nests), to the Warren Buffet-owned Nebraska Furniture Mart (the biggest of the big boxes), themes recurred and scale increased. At Great Wolfe Lodge, Wyandotte County's enthusiastic Director of Tourism, Bridgette Jobe, explained the concepts driving the development. "Everything we're doing is huge, big. Everything is oversized... We call it extreme shopping!" She further described the "Northwoods" aesthetic that Cabela's initiated and most of the hotels and restaurants have followed, which manifests itself in massive, overly lacquered, rough-hewn wooden furniture with knurled handrails, rustic end tables, lots of big carved heads and rope made to look like it's holding the furniture together. There are ruins left from the collision of rural and suburban typologies everywhere. This new hybrid lacks the grit of rural life, but embraces the excess of McMansioned suburbia. The efficiency and modesty of the family farm has been replaced by tasteful decadence — smorgasbord restaurants are disguised as tree houses and the sex hotel is dressed up as The Bachelorette's manse.

Nebraska Furniture Mart, in particular, is of sense-depriving scale. Jobe raved about the selection — "there is just so much here, and there is something for everyone" — as a security officer rolled past on a Segway. Then she immediately negated the statement by saying, "I came shopping here and it was overwhelming, we couldn't decide. Sometimes just having two or three choices makes it so much easier." Rather than try to

make sense of that contradiction, I sighed and plopped into the largest La-Z-Boy I could find, at the center of a football field of other recliners. The 55-inch wide Snuggler Recliner reassuringly folded in around my body and I recalled the beautiful, vacuous landscape that Village West and the Speedway replaced. There are still similar landscapes to be found — somewhere in the 712,000 square feet of Nebraska Furniture Mart or under the 1,000 gallon tipping bucket in the water park at Great Wolfe Lodge — where it is possible to find respite from an over-scaled world.

Certainly, Village West isn't just about the allure of extreme shopping, it's about the calculated idea of a big life. It allows the normal American to achieve, or at least get away to, the Mega-Life. But Mega-culture is a demanding beast. It offers no alternatives; it gobbles up the countryside and shrivels the resistant. It thrives on megalomaniacs and dumb decadence: Monster Thickburgers, Donald Trump, George Bush, the Hummer 2, Richard Serra and the Gagosian ilk are its stars. These things get better with age. This is a way of living that is not entirely mediated by shopping, nor eased by leisure — it is a way of living that is wholly augmented by huge things. It doesn't matter whether these things are enormous couches, big laughs, or massive hard-ons, what matters is that you are in the middle of nowhere, the world is at your feet and suddenly it feels much bigger because you've been welcomed into a life much, much larger than you've ever dreamed.

