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#### **ABSTRACT**

What is the potential of community-based infrastructure for vanlifers? Vanlife is an ever-growing movement across North America and the rest of the world. Driven by high costs of living, mundane desk jobs, poor quality of life, and the urge to be free, thousands of people are packing up their houses and apartments and moving into self-converted full-size cargo vans. Vanlifers tend to gravitate towards each other, creating a community on the road. In the vans there is little space for necessities such as toilets, bathing facilities, room to workout, and space to do work. This article works to use research on intentional communities to design and create a network of vanlife communities across the country.





"Houseless not homeless."

-Forrest River

"Be comfortable with the uncomfortable."

-@thelifeofchance





Vanlife and minimalism have recently become mainstream. Gone are the days of living in ordinary homes in ordinary cities and suburbs. Across the country individuals, couples and families are saying goodbye to their stationary houses and apartments and moving onto a more alternative lifestyle. This is vanlife. Whatever the reason, whether it be high costs of living, mundane jobs, poor quality of life, or just wanting to get away everyone has their own unique story. Vanlifers are nomads who live a life on the road that is full of breathtaking landscapes, beautiful cities, quiet sunrises, and awe-inspiring sunsets.

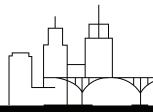
The community that vanlifers find on the road is one of the many reasons that people become full-time nomads. Many people attribute the idea of experimental communities to B.F. Skinner who in his 1968 book named "The Design of Experimental Communities" outlines how the science of behavior might contribute to the design and analysis of experimental communities. Skinner authored another book, this one fictional, which is called Walden Two that has fictional accounts of groups trying to create utopic communities based on ideas taken from his first book.

According to a journal article written by Angela Sanguinetti at the University of California, Irvine dozens of groups in the 1960's and 70's tried to create utopic communities based on ideas from Skinners novel. There are a few surviving communities including communities in Virginia and Missouri. These communities stemming from Skinners writings include ecovillages,











cohousing, urban communities, housing cooperatives, conference and retreat communities, rural homesteading communities, spiritual communities, and income sharing communities.

Some questions that must be asked while creating a community based on common behavior which in this case is living in a van are what behavior on the part of the members of a community is most likely to contribute to its success? And how may the behavior be generated and maintained? The overarching idea of this thesis will focus upon these communities that Skinner theorized about in his writings.

There are currently many examples of intentional communities that are successful in the United States. Most of these communities are ecovillages and cohousing communities. "Creating a life together" is a book I read by Diana Leaf Christian which is a collection of case studies and other information about why certain communities have been successful or not.

The number of people living in self converted vans in recent years has ballooned due to high cost of living, more mobile careers, an urge to travel, and a multitude of other reasons. During the most recent recession is when van life really took off. As people were unable to find new jobs and have steady income some people realized that paying for a house or apartment wasn't realistic anymore. People who













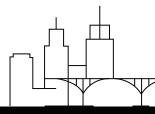
could no longer afford these luxuries turned to vanlife by the thousands. As the economy has strengthened the vanlife movement is still growing as people have decided they like the idea of not having too many material possessions and the ability to change locations on a moment's notice. Extreme sports athletes such as climbers, mountain bikers, skiers, photographers and artists, and people able to work remotely for major corporations. These are all examples of how vanlife can work with many different lifestyles. For people that need to adapt their careers people become bloggers, vloggers, influencers on Instagram and YouTube, work seasonal and temporary jobs. The options to make money on the road are seemingly endless.

Life on the road is pretty great for the most part, however there are instances where vanlifers run into the problem of being unable to easily complete everyday tasks. These tasks include everything from taking showers, doing laundry, working out, having space to cook a meal for friends, and perform maintenance on their homes (the vans). Many people have formed makeshift solutions to these problems such as having 24-hour gym memberships in order to have a place to shower and workout. Vanlifers rely on laundromats to do laundry and workshops of strangers or expensive dealerships to work on their van. Having to go around to all these different places to complete everyday tasks can be cumbersome, especially in cities, with a big van and the costs of services can really add up.



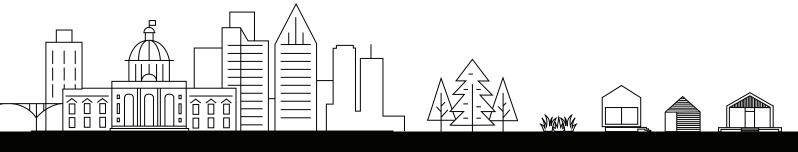








Van in the desert Credit; Gnomad Home





## RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS

What is the potential of community-based infrastructure for van lifers?

How can architecture form intentional community for van lifers?

Is there a way to create a new age rest area that includes spaces to do laundry, work out, perform van maintenance, cook, network, and host guests?



Vanlife gathering drone Credit; Gnomadhome





## **RESEARCH PROBLEM AND QUESTIONS**

Little infrastructure is available for van-lifers and as the movement grows the need for infrastructure will become more critical. There could be a network of these locations across the country that would support van-lifers through a subscription-based service. Combining the modern campground, roadside rest area, and co-working spaces will create a community that will be able to support one another through similar experiences.









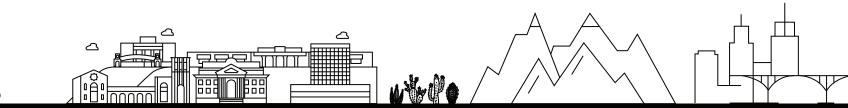




#### **RESEARCH METHODS**

To obtain information about how architecture can form intentional communities for vanlifers research will need to be conducted in several different ways. The system of inquiry for this research is qualitative and abductive, because it depends on research that is subjective and obtained from multiple people based upon their personal experiences. Intentional communities will be analyzed to better understand how physical spaces can encourage intentional communities. The research is abductive because the design and result as well as the processes are unknown.

The epistemology of the system of inquiry is intersubjective which means that knowledge is framed by understanding sociocultural engagement (Groat & Wang, 2013). The knowledge will be acquired mainly through the reading of books and journal articles as well as reading personal blogs and interviewing can-lifers themselves. Multiple case studies on pop-up community gatherings, festivals, campgrounds, and rest areas will also be completed. The compilation of all this knowledge will be tested through the formation of prototypical designs



#### **RESEARCH METHODS**

that will be the foundation of these intentional communities.

The goal of this research is to understand how architecture can create an intentional community for people that are a part of the vanlife movement. To accomplish this, research was conducted on the history and structure behind intentional communities, the history of mobile living, as well as an in-depth investigation into vanlife. Once all the historical research was completed a list of necessary functions for a van rest and relaxation was compiled. That list was then implemented into the beginnings of three prototypical designs of van rest and relaxation centers based on three different settings; urban, rural, and tourist sites.



#### History of Intentional Communities

Intentional communities can be found throughout most of recorded history. (Metcalf, 2012) The earliest communities are believed to have been developed by Pythagoras in about 525 BCE in southern Italy. These people were Homakoeion, lived and ate together, while banding together to create an ideal society. Little is known about their exact governance and other habits.

Many early intentional communities were formed by religious groups as a way to survive oppression and promote Christianity. Christian Monasteries were created in the 4th century and are still very prevalent in today's society. Heretical communal groups were plentiful across Europe in the eleventh century all the way through current times. The first United States intentional community is thought to have been Swanendael, which was created by Mennonites who were escaping persecution in Europe. Since then there have been over five hundred historical intentional communities in the United States. The Fellowship of Intentional Community estimates that there are over three thousand active intentional communities in the United States today.

The movement toward intentional communities began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as many scholars wrote about how intentional communities could solve all kinds of social, economic, and political problems. Scholars such as B.F. Skinner went so far as



to create fictional communities that people later modeled their own communities off of in places such as Europe, North and South America, Australia, and New Zealand. (Sanguinetti, 2012)

Currently in the United States there are thousands of intentional communities that range from cohousing to ecovillages to religious groups and everything in between.



Vans in fog Credit; Gnomadhome

The history of van life is a bit more recent than the formation of intentional communities. In a San Francisco Chronical Article from 2018 Journalist Dan White laid out the timeline of where vanlife started to where it stands today.

Bristol Wagon Works creates the first vanlife van which is pulled by horses. It is nicknamed the land yacht and was used to travel long distances all over the UK by a wealthy English surgeon. It consists of stained glass windows, instruments, stove, Persian rugs and other luxury amenities.

Pierce-Arrow Motor Car Company introduced the Touring Landau which preceded the modern RV which epitomized luxury complete with sleeping area and onboard toilet. It cost \$8,250 in 1910. American bus manufacturer
Roland Conklin traveled in this
bus across the US from NY to LA
in 1915. The bus was furnished
with a hot-water shower,
dance floor, observation deck,
and a retractable bridge for
going over large gaps in roads.

1880

1910

1915







Land Yacht

Touring Landau

Roland Conklin Bus



The VW van gets a major boos from the Woodstock Festival in NY. Adventurous young travelers would do their best to convert them into cheap rolling homes which typically consisted of a mattress and carpeted walls and ceilings.

1969

Sprinter Vans first appear in the US market. Today Sprinter Vans are the most popular choice of high end conversions because they are very reliable and spacious. Other, more affordable Euro Spec vans such as the Ford Transit are also now in the US market.

2001

In 2012 the hashtag #vanlife appeared on Instagram and posts now exceed 4 million.
Popular vans to convert include Sprinters, Transits,
Promasters, Econolines, and old VW Westfalias.

#### **Present**









Old dodge van

Photo Credits; Dan White













#### **MISCONCEPTIONS**

Most people don't know much about intentional communities or vanlife and there are many misconceptions about these people. Wanderlust is a movie that was released in 2012 that shows a rural hippie commune that is obsessed with sex and other silly clichés. (Metcalf, 2012) This is unfortunately all some people know about intentional communities which is not at all correct as films almost always portray intentional communities incorrectly in one way or another.

Some common misconceptions about intentional communities are that all the members are young, the groups last only a short time with high membership turnover, most are led by gurus who exploit members, and become cults, members engage in strange sexual experimentations, and finally that members are all living in poverty. Metcalf dispels these misconceptions is his journal articles as follows.

In Australia the average age of someone living in an intentional community was in their late 30's and was increasing by about half a year per year. Vanlife seems to be similar as there are people of all ages joining the movement. Like small businesses some communities only last for a short time but most communities that make it to the five-year mark tend to prosper indefinitely. Members of intentional communities and vanlife certainly can live in poverty but

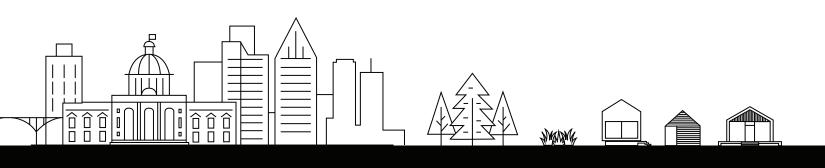


#### **MISCONCEPTIONS**

the majority of individuals are able to find work and support themselves relatively easily because of the low cost of living and few expenses that they must keep up on.

Historically, the reason that intentional communities succeed is that all the members and leaders have a common vision. They may not see eye to eye on everything but they typical are able to resolve conflict easily if they have a strong leadership structure in their communities.

Although vanlife is currently flourishing in the US, without some changes to infrastructure soon the future is uncertain. According to the Vancognito blog municipalities are starting to crack down on unauthorized parking and living in vans. Some issues that arise are the absence of paying property taxes and paying for services that provide municipalities with funds for improvements. Regular homeowners think that people living in their vans parked on the street are bringing down property values and don't look good in front of their homes on streets that the property owners are paying to upkeep.



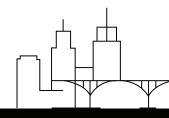
There are a few different preexisting types of facilities that are similar to a rest and relaxation center for vanlifers. These facilities provide services that are applicable to people who live in vans but are not tailored perfectly to their lifestyles. These facilities are campgrounds and roadside rest areas. In relation to this thesis the first mobile communities began as campgrounds which are littered throughout the United States in every place imaginable. Located in the wilderness, suburban areas, and tourist sites alike the network of campgrounds in the US and their specific locations are something that is very relevant to this project.

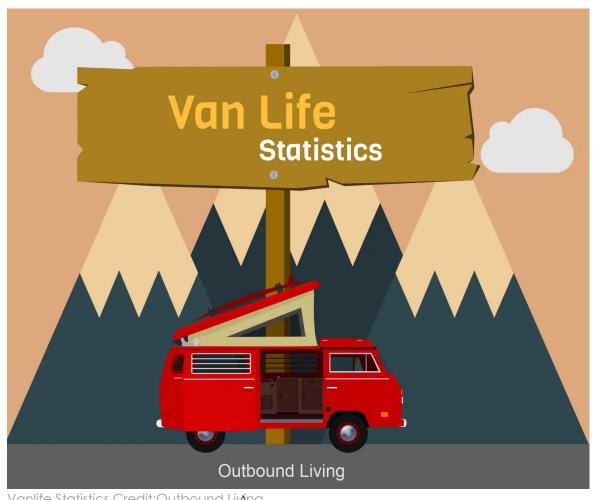
The modern campground is no longer just a place to go park your RV. Depending on the location there are amenities like shower, pools, gyms, playgrounds, and much more. Campgrounds don't appeal to vanlifers because they are designed to accommodate much larger rigs and do not always provide an affordable solution for people. Vanlifers are looking for somewhere to get resituated for a few days and really need their own space to do this, which campgrounds don't currently provide. Vanlifers also have very specific needs which can't be met at campgrounds and are discussed throughout this thesis.

Depending on the state, roadside rest areas have slightly different configurations and intended uses. The most common roadside rest area will include a singular building that houses restrooms, vending machines, water fountains, and information about the surrounding areas. In certain states and more high traffic areas rest areas are much larger and include amenities such as fast food restaurants, gas stations, and state tourism offices. These locations are often on toll roads and receive their funding from travelers themselves instead of just by the state.









This study done by Outbound Living in 2018 surveyed 725 vanlifers from all over the world ranging from part-timers to full-time road warriors. These statistics about van lifer's costs, spending habits, conversions process, travel behavior, and lifestyle questions help to understand what is important to vanlifers.











#### **General Stats**

Do you live in a van full-time or part-time? 51% Part-time 49% Full-time

How many people live in your van? 44% 1 Other 36% Solo 13% 2 Others 6% 3 Others

What van do you own? 43% Cargo van 18% Passenger van 13% Hippie van / VW 12% Other 8% Bus 6% RV

What type of job do you have?
45% Other
14% Remote worker
13% Entrepreneur
10% Seasonal jobs
9% Unemployed
5% Odd jobs
4% Retired

#### **Travel Behavior**

Where do you primarily sleep at night? 50% BLM, National Forests/ Grasslands 24% Other 14% City streets and parking lots 7% Residential neighborhoods 5% City/county parks

Do you travel with a pet(s)? 60% No 40% Yes

How do you primarily bathe? 28% Gym 21% Built in van shower 20% Campsite facilities 16% Other 5% Nature (lakes, rivers, ect.) 4% Baby wipes 4% Beach 2% Gas station

How do you primarily use the bathroom? 39% Public bathrooms 35% Built in van toilet 13% Nature 7% Bucket, jar, some sort of DIY toilet

#### The Conversion

Did you convert your van yourself or have it professionally outfitted? 79% I converted my van 21% I had it professionally outfitted

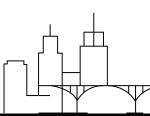
How much did it cost to convert your van (U.S. dollars)?
31% \$1,000 to \$5,000
24% \$5,001 to \$10,000
17% \$10,001 to \$20,000
16% Less than \$1,000
8% \$20,001 to \$40,000
3% Over \$40,000

How long did it take you to convert your van?
42% 2 to 6 months
32% Less than 2 months
14% 7 to 12 months
11% Over 1 year



6% Other







#### **Travel Spending**

What is your weekly budget (per person in U.S. dollars)?
42% \$50 to \$100
35% \$101 to \$300
18% Over \$300
5% Less than \$50

How much do you spend on gas per month (U.S. dollars)? 56% \$101 to \$300 22% \$301 to \$500 15% \$50 to \$100 5% Over \$500 2% Less than \$50

How much do you spend on campsites per month (U.S. dollars)? 38% \$0 26% \$1 to \$30 25% \$31 to \$100 8% \$101 to \$300 4% Over \$300

#### **Additional Stats**

Only 13% of Europeans primarily shower at the gym, compared to 28% of all van lifers.

20% of Australians travel with pets, compared to 40% of all van lifers.

39% of Australians primarily shower at the beach, compared to only 4% of all van lifers.

For van lifers who had their van professionally outfitted, it cost over \$40,000 for 21% of them, compared to only 3% for those who converted their van themselves.







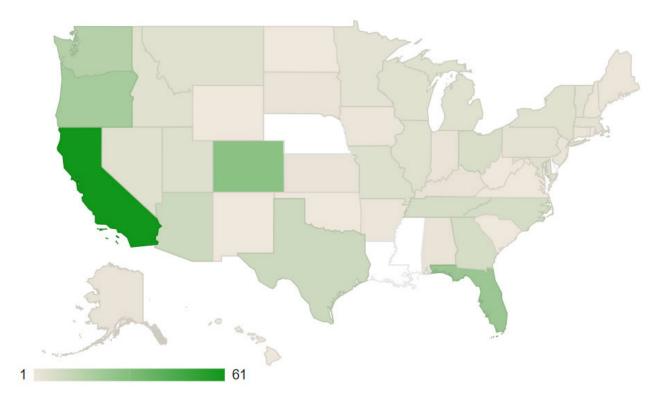






## **WHAT STATE ARE VANLIFERS FROM?**

Continuation of study conducted by Outbound Living with 725 participants



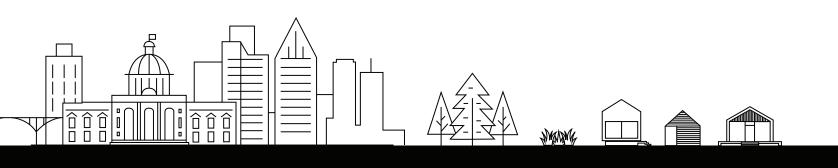
Vanlifers Map Credit; Outbound Living





Although vanlife is currently flourishing in the US, without some changes to infrastructure soon the future is uncertain. According to the Vancognito blog municipalities are starting to crack down on unauthorized parking and living in vans. Some issues that arise are the absence of paying property taxes and paying for services that provide municipalities with funds for improvements. Regular homeowners think that people living in their vans parked on the street are bringing down property values and don't look good in front of their homes on streets that the property owners are paying to upkeep.

Vans currently have few options for places to park in urban areas which is why a network of van rest and relaxation centers would be perfect to implement across the country. There would be fewer vans spread randomly across cities and there would be proper facilities that would discourage illegal dumping and other activities.



#### County Based Implementation System

This thesis project calls for a collection of vanlife rest and relaxation centers across the country with three distinct types of settings. The settings are URBAN, RURAL, and TOURIST locations.

The idea is that a common prototype design for each setting could be placed on each individual site in a build-out over a long period of time. Implementation in each county across the US to provide adequate coverage for vanlifers would be necessary, especially across the western states where the counties are much more spread out. There are over three thousand counties in the United States.

Preliminary, sample site plans are included with each setting. These plans show the direction of layout that should be followed on each individual site. These plans are not finished and will evolve throughout the remainder of this thesis project.

There are commonalities that will be necessary for each settings site which is what will be covered in this section of the article







There are 3,007 counties across the United States. Each would ultimately have a vanlife rest and relaxation center.



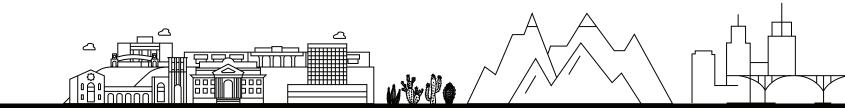
#### List of Necessary Facilities and Amenities

- Van Repair Shop
- Shop Restroom
- Shop Office
- Shop Storage
- Laundry Room
- Restrooms (Individual)
- Restrooms (Family)

- Lounge Area
- Reading Room
- Office Space
- Gym Space
- Kitchen
- Guest Apartments
- Outdoor Living Areas

#### Need for Staff at all Sites

Most of the clients are incredibly self-sufficient and will be looking to utilize the facilities for just a night or two at a time before they go back to living completely off grid. It is not the goal of these rest and recuperation areas to be treated like campgrounds with van-lifers staying for extended periods of time. The only time one would stay for an extended period of time is if there was a guest visiting them that was staying in the guest rooms provided. The clients need areas to do tasks that either aren't possible in their vans or aren't practical to complete on the road. Some of these tasks include van maintenance, family get together, and business meetings. Sometimes people will need to stop at the facilities for just a couple hours to shower or for a couple days to do a full reset and perform maintenance on their





vans.

The need for staff members at the rest and recuperation centers will be minimal but will be necessary for the everyday operation of the buildings. Depending on what sort of services the centers offer will influence how many staff members are needed. For most of the common areas access can be granted through the use of electronic door locks that members of the centers will have access to. This means that there is no need for nighttime staff since most of the functions of the stopping centers like restrooms, showers, kitchens, and living areas do always not need to be monitored. Areas such as maintenance bays and things that pose a danger to the members can be locked and only accessible when staff are on site.

Staff members are needed at the rest and recuperation centers to act as the backbone of the operation. Staff will be necessary for a few different operations at the centers. Someone will be needed to be a mechanic and have the ability to perform maintenance on a variety of different brands of vans. There will need to be administration staff that will assist members with questions about their accounts and surrounding areas. Cleaning staff are necessary for the upkeep of the facilities, especially the restroom and showers, kitchen areas, sleeping areas for guests of the guests, and the general living areas.



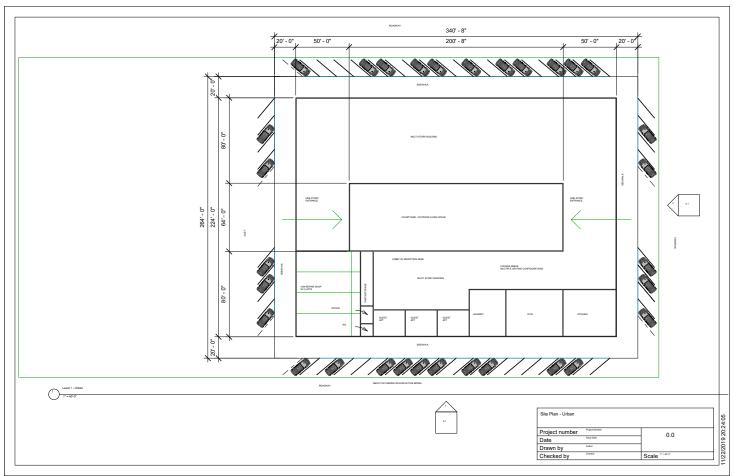








### **URBAN SETTING**



Urban Prelim Layout Credit; John DiGiorno





#### **URBAN SETTING**

One of the biggest concerns for the Urban sites is space. Because of the nature of having so many vehicles near the site, the site must have a large footprint. Ideally the site would take up either half of a city block or an entire block. This large size allows for a larger building that will be able to have outdoor spaces both in a center courtyard as well as on the rooftop.

Depending on the location van parking will either be in reserved spaces on the street surrounding the building or in an enclosed parking area within the first floor of the building. The parking spaces must be easily accessible and provide adequate room around each space to maneuver people and cargo in and out of the large vans. Adequate overhead space must be provided as the high-top vans can easily be over ten feet tall. Landscape planting need to take this into account. At locations where vans will be parked inside there needs to be room to drive the vans both in and out of the building in one direction to limit











#### **URBAN SETTING**

reversing within the building which is very dangerous. Pull thru spots are a must to provide adequate pedestrian safety!

Because people will be sleeping in their vans the site must be in a relatively quiet area of the city and be on a flat lot, so people are not tilted while sleeping.

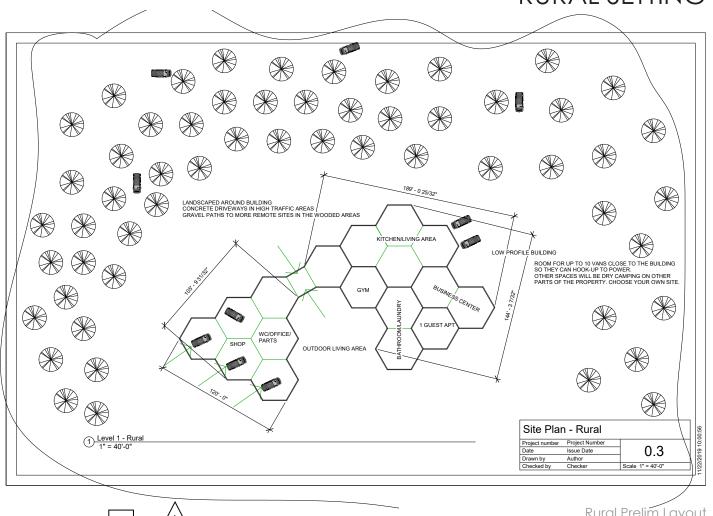
The urban sites should be located in a district within the city that is within walking distance to grocery stores, restaurants, and transit. Not everyone always wants to drive their home around major cities. The sites should be in well populated areas where there is lots of activity on the street and plenty of foot traffic. There does not have to be current green space as that will be implemented into the design

The surrounding buildings should not impede opportunities for sunlight in outdoor areas of the site. The ideal building height of surrounding buildings would be between 3-5 stories. Although views are not super important it would be nice to have vistas from the rooftop areas.





#### **RURAL SETTING**



Rural Prelim Layout Credit; John DiGiorno









#### **RURAL SETTING**

The biggest concern for rural sites is the focus on nature. No matter the landscape whether it be forested, desert, plains, or mountains the site must celebrate the surrounding landscape and provide great views to land features such as rivers, lakes, and rock formations depending on the location.

In rural locations the parking will be all outside to help save on building costs. In open areas the parking areas will need to be protected by either natural or man-made barriers such as tree rows, hills, or walls to protect the vans and members from strong winds. Shade is also important. Where it is not possible to be under large trees shade sails shall be provided in the design to keep the vans cool during the day. The parking will be much more spread out than in tourist locations, so each van has a certain sense of privacy in their parking space. The rural sites, aside from the building, will have much more of a campground feel. The parking areas should mimic BLM lands in that you can park wherever you please







#### **RURAL SETTING**

within reason.

The site should be far away from any major roads or highways so people can take in the serenity of the rural setting.

The building should not overtake the site and will work to blend into nature. Because of this the rural buildings will be much lower, almost like prairie style homes.

The building and van parking locations should complement each other and work to not block any views. The sites relationship with the building should encourage people to get outside and take in their serene surroundings. The site also must be in a location where people are able to explore on foot or on bike. In other words, it should not be surrounded by private property that can't be accessed. It would be ideal for rural sites to be surrounded by public land that can be responsibly explored.



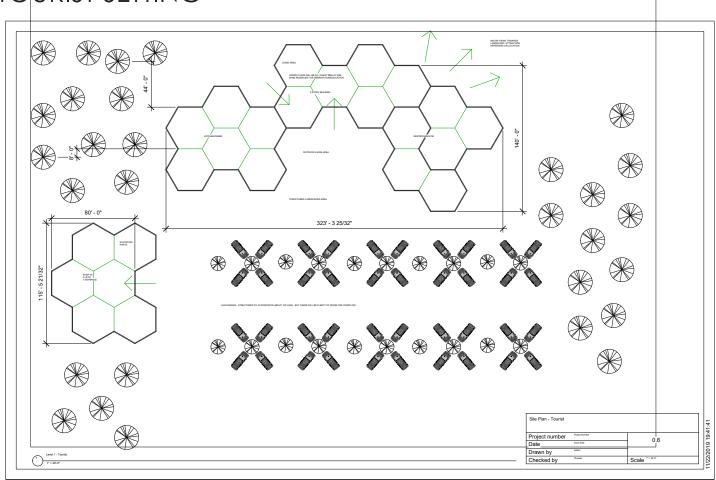








## TOURIST SETTING



Tourist Prelim Layout Credit; John DiGiorno





### **TOURIST SETTING**

Like Urban sites the main concern for tourist sites is space. Because of this in some tourist locations that are in more urban areas it might be necessary to implement and urban site design. In more open tourist spaces, the site must be large and able to accommodate a large number of vans.

Because tourist sites will typically have higher volumes of vans there must be large open areas for parking. The parking areas also must have vistas towards the attraction if the attraction is naturally occurring. If the attraction is not naturally occurring it is important that the parking areas have views of something interesting to look at, instead of the back of a warehouse or something like that.

The building and the parking lot should work together to provide an aesthetically pleasing location for everyone to see.

Access to the tourist site must be easy whether it be by foot, road, or











#### TOURIST SETTING

public transit. These sites will probably be a little noisier as they are more likely to be by a busier road. To help mitigate sound screens should be implemented where necessary to block as much noise as possible. Views are very important at the tourist sites. Ideally the landscaping will provide opportunities to look at things like land formations or bodies of water depending on the exact location.











Couple in van Credit; Gnomadhome















### RESEARCH CONCLUSIONS

The centers should have spaces that have excellent environmental performance through use of building systems and materials where applicable. Natural light should be heavily utilized to reduce the needs for electricity and heating in the winters. Smart passive design techniques shall be required at every location and be implemented to keep the impact of the building on its surrounding environment minimal.

The building and surrounding parking areas should have a minimal impact on the vegetation and fragile ecosystems surrounding the sites. Care should be taken to preserve our fragile planet as best as possible.

It is very important for the spaces within the buildings to be designed adequately to promote interaction. The whole point of these centers is not only for people to have a place to shower, work out, and do laundry, but also for people to have a place to meet others doing similar things as that can be difficult when you are alone in a van for weeks on end.

The common spaces within the building will promote community in their furnishings and how they are set up. For instance, in the kitchen area there will be large tables that allow for group dining so people can share and swap stories about their travels and maybe make plans to travel together in the future.











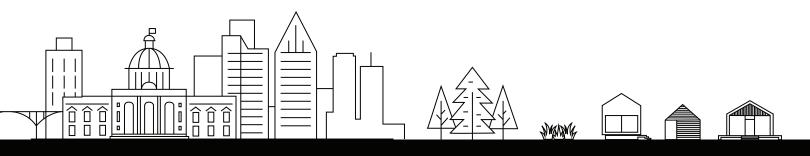
#### **MOVING FORWARD**

The findings that are highlighted in this journal article are still in the beginning stages of design and have a lot more fine tuning, research, and design to go before vanlife rest and relaxation centers can be open to vanlifers across the world.

Moving forward the spaces and square footages will be tailored to each specific setting as each location will have a different standard size. The prototype site plans will be completed with exact measurements including detailed parking lot designs as that is very important when designing for vans which a bit larger than your average vehicle. The interior spaces will be laid out to maximize efficiency and quality of habitation.

To go along with the designs a business model will be created to highlight an implementation plan for the centers across America. Different scenarios will be created and the choosing of sites will be explained along with what else needs to be done to get a vanlife rest and recuperation center off the ground.

Through this research there will meaningful spaces created that are practical for everyday living, meaningful for its inhabitants and sustainable for the world.



# APPENDIX: REFERENCE LIST

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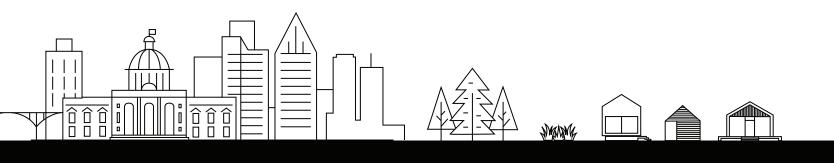
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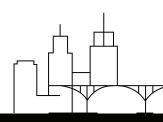
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Eamon and Bec in Front of Toronto Skyline Credit; Eamon Fitzgerald

