

Heterotopia and the City

Public space in a postcivil society

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A master-planned community as heterotopia

The Villages, Florida

Hugh Bartling

The master-planned community has been a feature of North American urbanism for much of the industrial and post-industrial era. In the late nineteenth century the emerging capitalist city contained concentrations of both great wealth and poverty, making reformist efforts most clearly concerned with balancing the interests of capital with the management of labour. Industrialists like George Pullman developed towns that offered upgraded housing, green space and opportunities for (highly regulated) recreation and leisure, in exchange for a measure of control over the daily lives of workers.

The paternalistic planning typified by Pullman, however, rarely resulted in the promised utopian ends. Tensions between the capitalist imperative to maximize profit and the material and civic interests of the inhabitants in nascent industrial-planned communities proved difficult to resolve. In the end, the industrial-planned community exhibited the same level of distrust between labour and capital that had existed in the industrializing city.

In spite of the failure of the industrial-planned community to live up to its utopian expectations, the idea of creating new towns in response to urban ills persisted. The Progressive Era had its own attempts at developing master-planned communities that looked to temper the excesses of the capitalist city through rational design. Focusing more on consumption than production, New Town and Garden City movements developed the template for the coming suburban revolution. In its post-war iteration, however, the planned suburb became an essential component of the era of mass consumerism wherein the culture industry provided images of suburban life that centred around consumption and social insularity. Civic connectedness retreated in favour of a consumerist solipsism where a landscape of homogeneous consumptive experiences expanded concomitantly with a social landscape of anonymity. The planned community re-emerges in this contemporary era as an arena for mass consumption.

Georg Lukács' argument in *History and Class Consciousness* (1972) is no less apposite today than it was in the 1920s when it was first published: the commodity form is a major prism through which individuals in capitalist

society see the sum of social possibilities. As the symbolic value of commodities has eclipsed use-value as the primary source of importance, ever-expanding mechanisms are developed to distinguish commodities and expand their reach. One of the more prominent examples of this trend has been in the area of 'theming'. Mark Gottdiener conceives of theming as an interrelated process of production and consumption of particular environments whereby symbolic meaning both *reflects* and *is reflective of* larger social relations (1997).

While themed spaces are most commonly associated with decidedly commercial enterprises, such as amusement parks or shopping malls, the process of theming is permeating into other arenas of socio-spatial design. One of the more intriguing aspects of this trend is evident in the development of themed planned communities. Unlike the mall or the restaurant, where visitors are implicitly asked to 'exit reality' to take part in a collective fantasy, the themed planned community is a heterotopia with a 'permanent' quality.

The theme acts as the hook, playing a central role in the marketing, representation and manufactured appeal for the community. With both an increasing standardization of housing construction methods and stylistic patterns characterizing the North American housing market and a somewhat contradictory tendency in post-Fordist capitalism to expand the number and precision of demographic categorizations, theming emerges as a process for resolving the tensions between homogeneity in supply and heterogeneity in demand. Because our relation to commodities is normally marked by the ephemerality of 'planned obsolescence', the fact that the 'product' in the case of a planned community is a permanent residence requires a rethinking of notions of civic engagement. What occurs is a disconnection between the representations and social processes of spatial production. It is in this sense that we can think of themed master-planned communities as heterotopias.

One of the more interesting master-planned communities in the USA is The Villages. With around 40,000 residents, The Villages is an age-restrictive retirement community located west of Orlando, Florida. The original owner, Harold Schwartz, purchased a small mobile home park in 1982 in this largely agricultural region of the state and embarked on an ambitious effort to acquire property and develop one of the largest master-planned real estate ventures in the USA. Keenly aware of the demographic shifts that would see a rise in the demand for retirement spaces and services, Schwartz developed a community that places strong emphasis on maintaining a 'healthy, active lifestyle'. The Villages combines this emphasis with design elements that exemplify an embrace of nostalgic representations, manifest in the community's claim to be 'Florida's Friendliest Hometown'.

Under Foucault's understanding of heterotopia, there is an emphasis placed on the simultaneity of contested representations that reflect the incongruities of social relations at a particular historic moment. The Villages operates

as a contested space where corporate visions of the past intersect with the lived experience of residents' everyday lives and the fundamental social processes animating the town's development pose significant challenges both for the developer's profit motive and for the residents' pursuance of their civic interest.

At the core of this contestation is the strategy of representation employed by The Villages' developer to distinguish the community from other communities/commodities in the competitive retirement development market of Florida. As Foucault has argued, 'heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable' (1986: 26). In The Villages, the first 'line of distinction' comes through its representational aspect as a thematic conception of the community's identity and, by implication, its desirability as a commodity.

The developers of The Villages use two primary themes to distinguish the community. The first is guided by an appeal to a selective understanding of history. The Villages advertises itself as 'Florida's Friendliest Hometown' and, through both the built environment and its aggressive marketing, the town appeals to nostalgic renderings of American 'small town' life. These nostalgic renderings, of course, rely on shared understandings of abstract concepts. Because of their abstractness, the forms of representation are not simple, offering ample spaces for residents to act upon their own – often antithetical – understandings of the same concepts.

The second theme employed by The Villages is more straightforward: that of a space of recreation and consumption. In its promotional material it touts 'The Villages Lifestyle' as being marked by recreational opportunities found in many of Florida's planned communities: golf, tennis and swimming. Additionally, the town expands the parameters of commonly held understandings of older adult recreation by supporting more 'active' sports and activities such as softball, rollerblading and dancing.

A recent sales brochure exemplifies the discursive invocation of these two themes. In its dramatic opening, the brochure provides an introduction to the community based on nostalgia:

Welcome to our hometown. Remember enjoying good times while on vacation with family and friends? The excitement of what to do each day and the possibilities of tomorrow and wishing that it didn't have to end? Life at The Villages is like being on a permanent vacation! Here you'll discover the perfect place to enjoy life as you've always dreamed.

(The Villages 2004: 2)

The most immediate discontinuity is between the invocation of 'hometown' immediately followed by a nostalgic discussion of leisure, for the spaces of vacation are – almost by definition – decidedly not 'hometowns'.

Furthermore, The Villages, being a new master-planned community, inhabited primarily by people at or close to retirement, cannot be called a hometown at all – at least not in accordance with popular understandings of the term as being the place where one was born or has roots stemming from early life experience. In order to negotiate this apparent contradiction, the second page describes the ‘Hometown Happenings’ in The Villages:

In the heart of every great community there’s a special place ‘where good friends gather for a great time’. In The Villages you’ll discover two charming destinations for old-fashioned fun all year long: Spanish Springs Town Square and Lake Sumter Landing Market Square. These turn-of-the-century squares will make you feel like you’ve taken a step back in time to a simpler, more enjoyable way of life. Stroll along the quaint streets . . . do some shopping, grab a bite to eat, see a movie or sample one of ‘Florida’s Best’ at our microbrewery.

(The Villages 2004: 3)

As this passage indicates, ‘hometown happenings’ are almost exclusively acts of consumption; and in a way similar to exercises in theming evident in spaces like Disney World, they satisfy a nostalgic yearning for the ‘old-fashioned’ and a ‘simpler, more enjoyable way of life’ with market-mediated practices, linking nostalgia with commodification.

While other master-planned communities have also marketed themselves using themes such as ‘community’, they rarely attempt to engage with marketing affectations through the built environment, preferring instead to ignore the unavoidable contradictions that would be evident in any effort to theme contested abstract affectations. In The Villages, however, the developer has attempted to pursue ‘hometown’ theming with particular relish.

From a town planning perspective, The Villages assumes a modified New Urbanist framework. Much like the proponents of New Urbanism call for ‘traditional neighbourhood design’ (for instance Duany and Plater-Zyberk 1992), the designers of The Villages have adopted a pedestrian-oriented environment in the two showpiece business districts: Spanish Springs and Lake Sumter Landing. Each district has a ‘town centre’ replete with gazebos, benches, landscaping and, in the case of Spanish Springs, a monument to The Villages’ founder, Harold Schwartz. They act as flexible public spaces, serving as sites for informal conversation as well as for more organized events. Surrounding the centres in each district are, most prominently, the sales offices and, secondarily, restaurants, clothing and gift shops.

While the town centres exhibit at least the pedestrian-centred aspect of New Urbanism, they depart from that framework in significant ways. Unlike textbook New Urbanist design, all residential development is situated in subdivisions a fair distance from the town centre, making travel from a Villager’s home by foot challenging. As a way to minimize the inevitable



Spanish Springs town centre, The Villages, Florida (photograph: Hugh Bartling). 'Instead of specific memories, the associations the Generic City mobilizes are general memories, memories of memories; token memory, a *déjà vu* that never ends, generic memory' (Koolhaas 1995: 1257). Here the *déjà vu* is the film set for Los Angeles half a century after *Zorro*.

problems with parking and traffic, the developers made The Villages a 'golf cart community'. This entails providing separate trails and parking for golf carts. From the point of view of the developer, this type of design allows for the requisite mobility of residents as well as being a literal symbol of the idea of permanent vacation. The golf carts are ubiquitous and many residents customize their carts, adorning them with stickers showing allegiance to their favourite football team or having their names painted on the hood.

The separation of residential districts from the 'town centre' districts is further dramatized by gating the residential subdivisions and the establishment of more traditional suburban strip mall shopping centres on the outskirts of the community. The latter house the essential supermarkets, gas stations and discount stores that are absent from the town centres. The culmination of these spatial arrangements is a replication of the modern North American suburban landscape under the subterfuge of the 'friendly hometown'. While the developer showcases the town centres in its promotional material and situates its sales offices there, the development would be almost uninhabitable without the sprawling shopping centres.

As an implicit recognition of this, The Villages goes to great lengths to downplay the generic sprawl by investing a considerable amount of effort



Gated entrance to residential district, The Villages, Florida (photograph: Hugh Bartling). The golf cart might become the ultimate vehicle of the (post-historical) suburb and (post)historical city centres. It is ecological, slow, therefore pedestrian, smooth and almost silent. Behind the friendly vehicle we see the gates with a little gatekeeper's house, to keep things friendly.

in making the town centres spaces of spectacle. Architecturally, the development adorns the main concrete block buildings with faux-historic façades. To further the theming, placards claiming to be historical markers are placed in front of the various buildings, encouraging pedestrians to go on a self-guided tour of the town's 'history'.

This deliberate myth-making is, on one hand, a playful gesture that is clearly cognizant of the ironic practice of constructing a fictitious 'history'. In the sales centre for the newest town centre, Lake Sumter Landing, visitors are given a 'Historical District Map', which contains a message from 'Frank Butterfield', the 'Chairman Pro Tem, Lake Sumter Historical Preservation League':

Uncovering and, in some cases, interpreting the history of Lake Sumter Landing has been a protracted labor of love for members of the Historical Preservation League. In instances where uncovering and interpretation have failed us, we have resorted to invention. Where invention has faltered, we have borrowed . . . from Florida history, from American history, from local legends and from family stories.

(The Villages n.d.)

While on a literal level the fictitious nature of the constructed history is obvious, the discourses appealed to in these efforts speak to a particular vision

of urbanism that reveals assumptions about urban space and social relations. In an interview with The Villages, Inc. Vice President Gary Lester, he indicated that the 'idea was we were creating a small town. Not a city, not a suburb – a small town'. Authenticity was less a concern than 'something people could relate to' (interview with author, 16 August 2004). Creating something that potential residents could 'relate to' requires adhering to a different set of criteria than if the desire were for historical accuracy.

Each town centre is themed according to particular understandings of a potentially 'relatable' small town. The older of the two town centres is Spanish Springs, which uses, as its name suggests, a historical and architectural template that speaks to Florida's legacy as a site of exploration and settlement by the Spanish. While Lester asserts that the Spanish theme was an afterthought and could not remember if any alternatives were contemplated, its appositeness for imparting a nostalgic 'small town' feel that would appeal to a retiree demographic is undeniable. While most Spanish settlements were situated near coastal areas miles away from The Villages, the theme is recognizable as being 'Floridian' due to its prevalence as a motif in larger, more well-known Florida cities, such as Miami. Additionally, the Spanish Springs motif fits nicely with the myth surrounding Ponce de León's quest for the Fountain of Youth, which allegedly motivated his 1513 expedition to the peninsula. For a development that stresses a reconsideration of old age along the lines of youthful vitality and that, curiously, was planned without reserving space for a cemetery, the fantasy of perennial youth is appealing. This is reinforced in numerous ways that relate synergistically with other aspects of the built environment and the decorative theming.

The Town Square is adorned with a gazebo that hosts bands and dancing nightly, a fountain meant to symbolize the Fountain of Youth and the only memorial to an actual 'real' person – founder Harold Schwartz. A variety of restaurants surround the square, including the Spanish Springs Brewing Company, whose proprietors claim that the town has 'the highest consumption of draft beer in the state of Florida' (Mackie McCabe, quoted in Kunerth 2002).

A major component of theming The Villages as a 'Florida Hometown' has been through the actual creation of a historical narrative for the two town centres. Placards are placed in front of buildings that speak of fictional early residents of the town, their exploits and the role they played in the growth of the region. These placards not only portray a cohesive story, but they reflect a selective discussion of history, economics and social interactions that reflect dominant understandings of an American myth that is based on the uncritical invocation of individualism, capitalism and social progress. This mythos reinforces particular social, political and economic prejudices that form the substance of much of the country's contemporary political and social malaise, but that simultaneously act as effective theming strategies.

The Villages' 'history' follows a familiar allegorical path of European settlers conquering a fierce frontier, acquiring wealth and developing a civilized society out of uncharted wilderness. The earliest 'figure' discussed on the faux monument is Maria Portiz Fontana 'Silencio' Sanchez, a woman who arrived at 'what was then only a wide spot in the trail in 1788' and assumed a position of distinction in the community for developing a 'recipe for the potent local brew known as "Mosquito Juice" and opened the budding settlement's first tavern, The Blind Mosquito' (see frontispiece of this chapter).

For the purist, the discussion contains significant historical inaccuracies. Homesteaders and 'young immigrant[s]' would have been an anomaly in the area during the late eighteenth century as the central interior region of Florida was inhabited primarily by runaway slaves and Seminole Native Americans who were hostile to the European presence (Benwell 1853; Weik 2002). Similarly, the Spanish architectural style adopted in The Villages – adopted from similar efforts in the state dating back to the 1920s – is not regionally accurate. The Spanish Colonial Revival style owes more to a hybrid vernacular developed and popularized by Anglo boosters and real estate speculators during San Diego's Panama–California Exposition of 1915, which found its way to Florida during the period of real estate speculation and growth during the early 1920s (Newcomb 1937; Amero 1990).



Mural in The Villages, Florida (photograph: Hugh Bartling). A reference to Native American culture: history not as tragedy but as innocent fantasy.

The historical representation of people who were actually prevalent in the region – Seminoles and runaway slaves – is generally absent in the constructed historical story. This is especially ironic given the fact that Sumter County – the site of the largest section of The Villages – was also the site of one of the largest defeats of US forces in the decades-long war against the Seminoles. The only Native American presence in The Villages is in a mural advertising ‘Billy Bowlegs Buffalo Beer’, reinforcing offensive stereotypes endemic in American culture with regard to native peoples and denying the violent reality of the European conquest of North America.

Realizing heterotopia – beyond representation

The image of The Villages as a ‘hometown’, of course, belies key omissions in the town’s development. As a restricted age community, there are no children living in the town; while there are commercial districts along the model of Traditional Neighbourhood Design, the general pattern of the development mimics post-war patterns of suburbanization, replete with uniform architecture, a housing stock dominated by single-family detached homes and gated entry to the residential districts. Furthermore, The Villages is not a ‘hometown’ for the simple reason that it is not an actual town. Mechanisms of municipal governance, such as a town commission, city council or elected mayor, are absent.



A typical residential district in The Villages, Florida (photograph: Hugh Bartling). *The Truman Show* as ‘realized utopia’.

It is in the development's regional impact, however, where the existence of The Villages as a heterotopia reliant upon rather dystopian practices is most apparent. The Villages extends into three counties: Lake, Sumter and Marion. During the first phase of development the fragmentation of land uses coupled with the fragmentation of political boundaries created a curious phenomenon. The town centre of Spanish Springs and an adjacent shopping centre as well as the petrol stations serving the town's residents are located in Lake County, while the vast majority of residential districts are situated in Sumter County. Because the development is in unincorporated territory, most of the essential municipal functions are borne at the county level. The spatial configuration of businesses results in Lake County getting essential sales tax monies to support infrastructure while Sumter County – where most of the residents live – gets minimal revenue. While the developer paid impact fees that go to offset many costs borne by the county as more people move to the area, the lack of sales-tax revenues has caused significant strains on Sumter County government's resources, particularly in the area of road maintenance and expansion.

In the area of affordable housing, the county is similarly suffering from the pains of growth. The Villages employs more than 3,000 people, making it the largest private employer in Sumter County. However, due to the fact that the developer has not built any rental properties and restricts its market to people older than 55, there is literally nowhere for most workers to live in the community. Because many of the jobs associated with the growth of the town are in low-paying service industries, the lack of rental properties creates significant costs in community time and traffic congestion for many of The Villages' employees who live outside the development.

While the developer of The Villages has displaced many of the costs of growth on the surrounding region, residents of the town have also had to bear unforeseen costs associated with the development's expansion. Most explicit in this regard is the financing scheme underpinning The Villages' expansion. The developer took advantage of a Florida state law establishing community development districts (CDDs) to secure significant amounts of capital for expansion. The CDD is established by the state following an application by a petitioner. Upon establishment, the district is able to assume many of the planning, development and revenue-generating functions of a local government. For the developer, this allows for the issuance of tax-free bonds at the early stages of a development by the CDD, freeing up capital that would otherwise go towards building the basic infrastructure. Bonds are paid off through gradual monthly assessments of landowners in the CDD over the period of the bond's life.

CDDs, being governmental bodies, are technically subject to democratic accountability. However, representation is based upon land ownership rather than conventional norms of citizenship. Owners of land in a CDD are allocated one vote per acre when electing the CDD's Board of Supervisors.

Since the developers generally own virtually all of the land at the beginning of a project, they have effective control over the CDD until the point at which new residents' land outweighs that of the developers. However, much of the debt accrued by the CDD is generated in those early years of the CDD before residents move in; because of the long servicing of the bonds, financing is paid off by future residents. This allows the developer access to a risk-free source of capital.

One of The Villages' CDDs has purchased numerous amenities, properties and utilities from Gary Morse, The Villages' CEO, and companies associated with The Villages' development arm. Because this CDD excludes residential property, it is perennially controlled by the developer since it is the primary property owner in the district.

Many of the properties that this CDD has purchased from Morse are the golf courses and utilities that serve The Villages' residents. When the CDD purchases improved property it can negotiate directly with the property owner. In one case in 2004, the CDD issued a \$50 million bond to purchase two golf courses from Morse that were assessed at \$8 million. Not only was the purchase price excessive, but the golf courses are revenue generators. Homeowners are not only assessed monthly for debt-servicing payments in their own residential CDDs, but they also pay monthly assessments for golf course access and maintenance. Thus, in this case, Villagers will be paying indirectly for an overpriced land transfer through increases in the recreational amenities fees (Curry 2004a). A similar transfer from Morse's Little Sumter Utility – the provider of water and wastewater treatment in The Villages – to the Village Center CDD in 2003 has resulted in The Villages' homeowners indirectly servicing Village Center CDD bonds through their water and sewage fees (Curry 2004b).

The political response on the part of the citizens to corporate excesses in The Villages has been complex and, in some sense, contradictory. Residents have organized an independent Property Owners' Association (POA), which has maintained consistent critique of the developer. Due to the nature of the legal arrangements described above, the POA has little access to formal mechanisms of objection to CDD activities; thus, their main role is as an educational and advocacy group. Their ultimate goal is expressed in their 'Residents' Bill of Rights', which calls for the election of governmental supervisors and top administrative officers, and voter approval of property purchases and debt expansion, ceasing relationships that can be construed as having a conflict of interest and other related demands for accountability.

The Villages-Lake Sumter, Inc. has not publicly attacked the POA, but has instead been adept at channelling political energy elsewhere. In July 2003, residents backed by the developer established a political committee called One Sumter. The purpose of the committee was to promote a referendum that would change the way in which commissioners in Sumter County were chosen from a district-based system to one where commissioners were

voted for at-large. Given the fact that The Villages is the largest community in the county, critics of the developer viewed the initiative as a shameless power grab by the developer, Gary Morse. Funded primarily by contractors and other businesses with identifiable economic interests in The Villages and, often, headquarters outside the county, the developer-appointed administrative head of the CDD, Pete Wahl, sent residents a letter informing them of rising maintenance assessments explaining that they were forced to raise the costs due to decisions made by the Sumter County Board of Commissioners and conveniently enclosed an application for an absentee ballot to be used in the August 2005 election (Curry 2004c).

While the POA is an active voice of opposition, the ambiguity of living in a commodified space limits the scope of political consciousness. As implied by the discussion of the 'Residents' Bill of Rights' above, the political rhetoric of the POA emerges from a fundamental sense of unfairness generated by the unrepresentative nature of the CDD legislation, which directly affects homeowners' self-interest. Efforts to link unfairness and democratic accountability to other struggles outside The Villages, however, are negligible. The phlegmatic nature of politicized opposition, I would argue, is indicative of the power and effectiveness of The Villages' production as a heterotopian space.

The Villages is successful as a capitalist enterprise precisely because it produces a commodity that speaks – however superficially – to the major factors of alienation in modern life. The developer offers the promise of 'community' in a 'friendly hometown' to a generation that found the utopian promise of suburbia unrealized. They offer 'permanent vacation' and 'free golf for the rest of your life' – in spite of the hidden costs of such freedom – to a generation of people who experienced the USA's economic growth and stability of the 1950s and 1960s and the insecurity and growing gap between rich and poor that marked the globalizing decades of the 1980s and 1990s.

The Villages as a heterotopia rationalizes the inconsistencies evident in the town's representations of its manufactured history and the concomitant heavy-handed profit-making by the developer at the expense of town residents. The Villages offers a space of familiarity through its theming and an elevation of leisurely consumption that resonates with the dominant values promoted by American cultural and political institutions.

However, the theming also offers the seeds of a counter-narrative exemplified by efforts such as the POA: The Villages' developer asserts that Villagers are getting a 'real American small town'. When the 'small town' lacks mechanisms for governmental accountability and employs mechanisms that enhance the developers' profit at the expense of the residents, many residents are inspired to question certain components of the developer's theme. But, in summation, The Villages is not a space separated from the real processes of spatial production guiding political, economic and social relations in the USA. It is a space that is simultaneously completely fabricated

and extraordinarily real; a space that generates significant profits through manipulating the institutions of public governance that enrich a developer who is a strong supporter of a political ideology of 'limited government'; a space where vacation is permanent, but where residents of a town and region are faced with the costs of growth that threaten the very viability of their 'vacation'. But, above all, The Villages is a space where the reactions to these contradictions become resolved in the (nearly always false) promise of gratification by consumption; where golf courses are substituted for cemeteries and the promise of a leisurely 18 holes extends into eternity.

Note

- * A version of this chapter appeared as Bartling, H. (2006) 'Tourism as everyday life: an inquiry into The Villages, Florida', *Tourism Geographies* 8(4).

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