Seven American Utopias

The Architecture of Communitarian Socialism, 1790-1975

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I saw a new heaven and a new earth. . . . And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven. . . .

—Revelation 21:1-2, John the Evangelist describing the millennium

Detail of Fig. 11.3
Drive through Jerusalem Corners, New York, or Promise City, Iowa; pass the freeway exits for Elysian Valley and Arcadia in California; stop at the “Garden of Eatin” restaurant in Cozad, Nebraska. American place names revive settlers’ visions of the New World as earthly paradise, dreams about the apocalyptic properties of the American landscape first expressed when Columbus claimed to be the discoverer of a “new heaven” and a “new earth.” The rhetoric of paradise embellishes an adventurer’s map of Eden, Virginia; it decorates the stern sermons Puritan leaders preached to their covenant communities; it obscures the industrial order established in early corporate towns; it suffuses the balance sheets of land speculators with romance. It lingers, ironically, in the title of a recent study of the contemporary American landscape, God’s Own Junkyard. ¹²

Paradisiac preoccupations in the United States have usually rested on the assumption that salvation and material prosperity are earned through an individual approach to the land of promise and its physical resources. This book is about dissident idealists who looked upon the New World as a potential paradise, but insisted on realizing this potential through collective organization and ownership. To demonstrate how the New World should be settled, several hundred groups established communistic societies which planned and built model towns. The Shakers, one of the largest and most successful of these groups, called their society a “living building”; and this metaphor encapsulates the subject of this book, the relationship between the members of these experimental communities, their forms of social organization, and the complex, collective environments they communities sought viable forms of social and environmental organization, they sought suitable terms to describe themselves: “socialist,” “communist,” “communionist,” “communitist,” “communitarian,” “commune.” Marx and Engels, who studied American communistic societies with an eye to supporting “scientific” socialism, ultimately gave these communities their most familiar, if least appropriate, name: “utopian socialist.” In their haste to embrace a collective life style, the members of American communes did anticipate or share the political naiveté of utopian socialist writers who proposed to unite all classes in the immediate construction of ideal communities, but even the most optimistic commune members had to come to terms with real people and real places. Engels pointed out the paradox which utopian theorists such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier ignored: “The more completely . . . [their plans] were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies.”³ Communards encountered a different paradox: the more their communities were worked out in detail, the more they became particular solutions for particular groups and the less they seemed applicable to the larger society.

Even though the communards’ strategy can be criticized, some of their model communities were prodigious feats of consistent social and physical design. Their common sense contrasts with the dreamy extravagance of much utopian writing; their imagination and inventiveness distinguish them from the regimentation of much state socialism. Since the communards’ collective dwellings and workshops were constructed in an American context, they are steeped in our
Thus they challenge American family life styles and American capitalist industries more directly than communes in China, kibbutzim in Israel; or ujamaa villages in Tanzania: they turn our own cultural and historical assumptions upside down. Even more provocative than their collective organization is their feminist organization: those few communes which attempted to change the role of women were designed to include facilities for communal child care, communal cooking, and communal housework. Here one finds arrangements for egalitarian living which possess a liberatory potential unmentioned in most utopian writing and unrealized in most socialist states.

During the past ten years in the United States, communal strategies have been revived by thousands of groups. Some are rural communities attempting to become economically self-sufficient, others are urban groups of individuals working in traditional jobs but living communally to find support for their ideas. Along with the new communes has come new theoretical support for the argument, first advanced by Owen and Fourier, that revolution must replace existing industrial conurbations with decentralized, self-sufficient communities combining industry and agriculture. Although the site plans and housing designs published here may be of use to existing communes and other organizations dedicated to this ideal, I did not seek them out primarily for that purpose. So many architects prescribe novel housing to preclude political conflict that I feel I must disclaim any connection with these utopian “soft cops” and their Corbusian blackmail, “Architecture or revolution?”

My main purpose in this research was to explore the relationship between social organization and the building process in particular community groups. I began this research as an architecture student and working designer. I had been involved in designing self-help housing for migrant workers, cooperative housing sponsored by trade unions, and communal housing for divinity students working with dropout teenagers. I wondered what involvement in environmental design could mean to groups which were committed to larger processes of community organization, and to groups which saw themselves as countercultures. And I wondered what would result from the process of creating an environment to reduce and collectivize traditional “women’s work.”

Historic communal groups had mobilized their economic and personal resources to attempt to answer such questions. By focusing on groups of communards involved in the building process, I hoped to document an idealistic aspect of American history and a realistic aspect of architectural history. Most of the literature on historic communes deals uneasily with the relationship of people to their physical surroundings. Sociologists and historians lacking visual inclinations have often taken communal landscapes and buildings for granted, treating them as background settings for their particular concerns, although building was the major collective activity for many groups. In contrast, when architectural historians have abandoned utopian design (a favorite subject) in favor of experimental utopian communities, they have chosen to look at monumental buildings such as the Mormons’ temples or the Harmonists’ Great Hall. They have usually analyzed these buildings as aesthetic objects isolated from the residential, commercial, and industrial buildings and the landscapes which establish their social context. If the “invisible environment” of history and sociology is not fully enlightening, environment of architecture less misleading.

Making such additional disciplinary bed and recognizing what I have gained from my own as well as from the ideas of those I have learned from has been difficult with pur material as “architectural microbiology,” “physical planet,” and “environmentally and socially conscious.” I am not enough to recognize distinctions between “building” at the level of the individual and the whole and human relation to the city or the human relation to the natural environment. To organize self about the ways their life styles are achieved a balance participation, community, and replicability. Political choice and physical design were built. Since the spatial and workplaces making, and viability of communal groups to explore the theory and practice. It is in terms of the determined to report: Because historic

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more misleading.

Making such allegations and defying tradi-
tional disciplinary boundaries provokes anxiety,
my own as well as my readers’. I think that
what I have gained by taking a broad look at
ideology and built form compensates for some
difficulty with purists who do not accept this
material as “architecture.” I have used the
terms “physical planning,” “landscape archi-
tecture,” and “environmental design” quite in-
terchangeably and loosely, and I am not pre-
pared to recognize any traditional aesthetic
distinctions between the terms “architecture”
and “building.” I am concerned with the chang-
ing, continuous relationship between life style
and life space. I am asking, with the commu-
nitarian theorist Murray Bookchin, “How does
the liberated self emerge that is capable of
turning time into life, space into community,
and human relationships into the marvellous?”

To organize some extended explanations
about the ways that communal groups define
their life styles and their life spaces, I pose	hree communal dilemmas. Every group must
achieve a balance between authority and par-
icipation, community and privacy, uniqueness
and replicability. These are crucial areas of
political choice which lead to problems of
physical design whenever any settlement is
built. Since the spatial organization of dwellings
and workplaces makes questions of order, shar-
ing, and viability very explicit, self-conscious
communal groups often used the design process
to explore the transition between socialist the-
ory and practice. It is this transition, expressed
in terms of the design process, which I have
tried to report and analyze.

Because historic communistic societies de-
fined themselves as models of social and physi-
cal design, many of them kept detailed records
of their design processes. Model communities
were usually bounded, socially and geographi-
cally, and their favored list of accomplishments
was an inventory of the buildings and the
landscape of the domain. While this is all very
tidy in terms of substantiating a group’s activi-
ties, it is necessary to balance the general
optimism of members against the more caustic
comments of outside observers in order to get
at conflicts and problems. Sometimes historic
communitarian buildings and sites themselves
provided the best clues of what was going on in
a community at a given time; discrepancies
between what I read and what I saw were the
most frequent sources of new interpretations
of the history of various communes. The graphic
evidence here is arranged to reveal develop-
ment of each community over time; drawings have
been made at similar scales to allow compari-
sions between communities.

I chose seven groups (Shakers, Mormons,
Fourierists, Perfectionists, Inspirationists,
Union Colonists, and Llano Colonists), and
seven sites (Hancock, Massachusetts; Nauvoo,
Illinois; Phalanx, New Jersey; Oneida, New
York; Amana, Iowa; Greeley, Colorado; and
Llano del Rio, California). Four were religious
communities, three were nonsectarian; together
they provide a fair representation of the ideolo-
gical and geographical spread of the com-
munitarian movement, between 1790 and
1938. Their approaches to economic sharing
varied widely. Five owned all land communally;
two mixed private and communal ownership of
land. Three shared all income equally; two
equalized wages but offered some return for
capital invested; one started on the basis of
total sharing but ultimately permitted private
property; one started with private property mixed with cooperative ventures. In terms of financial stability and longevity all seven groups would rank somewhere between average and outstanding experiments. Two communal industries, Oneida silverware and Amana woolens, are still the basis of active corporations. All of the groups did a substantial amount of building, and ultimately I selected them because their history was well documented by both inside and outside observers, their buildings were sufficiently well preserved, and their members' approach to the environment was animated with idealism and inventiveness.

Frequently I have been asked, “Weren’t all these people crackpots?” or “Weren’t all these experiments hopeless failures?” By the third or fourth generation, members of even the most stable experimental societies usually grow restless and choose to rejoin the outside world. But failure, I think, is attributable only to the most unimaginative experiments, and I am willing to define as a success any group whose practices remain provocative even after the group itself has disbanded. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived at Brook Farm, provided an eloquent statement of a communard’s purpose: “My best hope was, that, between theory and practice, a true and available mode of life might be struck out; and that, even should we ultimately fail, the months or years spent in the trial would not have been wasted, either as regarded passing enjoyment, or the experience which makes men [and women] wise.”7 John Humphrey Noyes, founder of the Oneida Community, offered a more assertive justification: “We made a raid into an unknown country, charted it, and returned without the loss of a single man, woman, or child.”8

The communitarians’ ventures in collective, experimental design are fraught with problems to balance their triumphs. Their idealistic ventures in synthesizing all aspects of community design gain in relevance, as contemporary community groups, as well as planners and architects, become more conscious of the power of environmental design to support or contradict other forms of community organization. The records of early communal “raids into an unknown country” provide us with substantial experience of the rewards and problems of building for a more egalitarian society. Any group involved in environmental design, as part of a broader campaign for societal change, has much to learn from them.

2 Peter Blake, God’s Deterioration of Man, 1964.
3 The historical antecedents by Arthur E. B. Socialist Vocabulary (June 1948), 259-30
4 See Lewis S. Feuer, “Communist Colonies in Political Quarterly, 19 political revolution,” the terms “communist” and “commune,” since least in the past century.
5 The term “soft cops After The Planners, New York, 1971, p. 44.
6 Murray Bookchin, Poli
ey, 1985, p. 76.
7 Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1851-1876, Syracuse
Notes to Chapter One

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The historical antecedents of these terms are dis-
cussed by Arthur E. Bestor in "The Evolution of the
Socialist Vocabulary," *Journal of the History of Ideas*,
9 (June 1948), 259-302, and in *Backwoods Utopias:*
*The Sectarian Origins and the Osweite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America: 1569-1829,* 2d
the terms "communitarian" and "commune," since their meaning has changed
least in the past century.

4 See Lewis S. Feuer, "The Influence of the American
Communist Colonies on Engels and Marx," *Western Political Quarterly*, 19 (Sept. 1966), 456-474; Fried-
rich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880),

5 The term "soft cops" is Robert Goodman's, from
revolution" is the rhetorical finish of Le Corbusier's
influential work, *Vers une Architecture*, Paris, 1928,
p. 241.

6 Murray Bookchin, *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, Berke-
ley, 1971, p. 44.

7 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, Bos-
ton, 1859, p. 76.

8 John Humphrey Noyes, quoted in Constance
Robertson, ed., *Oneida Community: An Autobiogra-
2 The Ideal Community: Garden, Machine, or Model Home?

Now if we can, with a knowledge of true architectural principles, build one house rightly, conveniently and elegantly, we can, by taking it for a model and building others like it, make a perfect and beautiful city: in the same manner, if we can, with a knowledge of true social principles, organize one township rightly, we can, by organizing others like it, and by spreading and rendering them universal, establish a true Social and Political order.

—Albert Brisbane, *A Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association, or Plan for a Reorganization of Society*, 1843

2.1 “We are all a little wild here with numbersless projects of social reform”; locations of United States communitarian settlements by type and decade of founding, to 1860, are shown here and on following pages. Present state lines are drawn to aid identification; see Appendix B for exact locations, keyed to numbers on map.

"We are all a little wild here with numbersless projects of social reform"; locations of United States communitarian settlements by type and decade of founding, to 1860, are shown here and on following pages. Present state lines are drawn to aid identification; see Appendix B for exact locations, keyed to numbers on map.

As the creators of the "communards described Architects" redesign a complete restructure response to the environment by the Industrial Revolution, both societies tried to equal the philosophers who attempted to describe progress and they wanted successes of invention had influenced American industry. Using symbols of the and as machine, they synthesize many a
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"We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform," Ralph Waldo Emerson commented to Thomas Carlyle in 1840. "Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket." Emerson was referring to the second of several phases of communitarian excitement which swept the United States during the nineteenth century and involved at least one hundred thousand idealistic citizens in hundreds of communistic experiments. Although these idealists have often been dismissed as dreamers, their intense involvement with environmental design demonstrates the practical energy behind their movement. These reformers advocated diverse programs ranging from absolutism to anarchy, spiritualism to atheism, speculative land development to collective industry, but they agreed on their strategy. All believed that social change could best be stimulated through the organization and construction of a single ideal community, a model which could be duplicated throughout the country.

As the creators of model communities, some communards described themselves as "Social Architects" redesigning society. They proposed a complete restructuring of city and country in response to the environmental problems created by the Industrial Revolution. Their goals incorporated both social and physical design. They tried to equal the visionary scope of philosophers who attempted to define human nature and describe programs for its finest expression, and they wanted to match the promotional successes of inventors and entrepreneurs who had influenced American land development and American industry. By adopting the encompassing symbols of the model community as garden and as machine, the communitarians hoped to synthesize many aspects of pastoral and technological idealism which characterized American attitudes toward land and life. In the equally powerful symbol of the ideal community as model home, they hoped to fuse idealism about family and society displayed in facade, hearth, and plan.

Although there were precedents for the communitarian strategy—monasteries established in Europe as models for a new Christian society, and Puritan covenant communities founded in New England in the colonial period—widespread secular and religious acceptance of communitarian tactics occurred for the first time in the United States during the first half of the nineteenth century. Settlers were pushing the line of the frontier westward very rapidly, and it seemed to many reformers that a mobile, expanding society existed which could easily be influenced by new concepts of community design. Victor Considérant, a French socialist and a disciple of Charles Fourier, expressed the communitarian view of America’s development quite plainly: "If the nucleus of the new society be implanted upon these soils, to-day a wilderness, and which to-morrow will be flooded with population, thousands of analogous organizations will rapidly arise without obstacle and as if by enchantment around the first specimens..."

Communitarian thinking was most popular in the United States between 1820 and 1850 (Fig. 2.1), decades of agitation for abolition, labor rights, equitable land distribution policies, women’s rights, educational reform, and penal reform. Citizens and reformers of various persuasions chose communitarian experiments to express their ideas about social change because alternative strategies of individual dissent, revolution, or gradualist reform seemed ineffectual. Communitarian reform was novel. It was non-
violent, yet total in scope. Thus it offered hope to those Americans, skeptical of violent conflict after the wars of 1775 and 1812, who were committed to developing new institutions through reasoned choice. It was supported by those conservatives who believed that new communities founded in the West would serve as a safety valve to preclude class conflict generated by urban workers in the East. At the same time it appealed to activists who felt that the social and environmental problems created by industrialization were beyond individual effort or gradual reform. The strategy gained adherents in times of economic distress—after depressions of 1837, 1854, 1857, 1873, and 1893—when desperation motivated farmers and workers to call for complete social reorganization. Middle-class citizens were more curious than desperate. Two Presidents and various members of the Supreme Court, the Cabinet, and Congress attended addresses by Robert Owen in 1825; business leaders and intellectuals followed Fourierist propaganda on the front page of the New York Tribune in the 1840s.

Not only Americans felt encouraged to launch communal ventures. Although most American communards were native born, a substantial minority were emigrants from England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, and eastern Europe, whose leaders considered the United States the best location for their experiments. Frequent encouragement came from European tourists like James Silk Buckingham and Harriet Martineau. Although the seaboard cities offered educated Europeans limited entertainment, experimental communities provided them with lively anecdotes and the occasional profound insight. Journalists' firsthand reports of successful ventures then encouraged other European groups to follow these examples.

The appeal of communistic societies was not restricted to American reformers or touring Europeans. The ideal community became a symbol of broad persuasive power. It could be presented as “garden,” in terms of horticultural and agricultural productivity and its placement in an idealized landscape. It could be presented as “machine,” in terms of its efficient design, industrial productivity, and its relationship to an American tradition of political inventiveness; or it could be presented as “model home,” in terms of its design and life style. Sectarian communities tended to emphasize pastoral themes; nonsectarian ones, technological themes; but most successful experiments united pastoral and technological symbolism in support of the larger goal of an ideal home. If they joined design practice to theory, their ideals sometimes became surprisingly real.

The American continent was heaven on earth as paradise. C. W. Dana of 1856 entitled “The Great West,” d the Allegheny Mountains as “The Land of Promise” our time... with human agriculture having been balmy and healthful, other zones can claim nineteenth century known, mapped by trappers and explorers which hopeful ideal geography of fecund sufficiency.

Such idealism could inhibit commu pietist sects were anxious about the site of Eden. The spiritual re munity at Mountain 1851 also claimed the original location. It readers of a Los Angeles were encouraged to join which would cultivate “called the People’s Garden of Eden,” "work in the garb of the Union Colony of offered an analogy g ditches and the river t this same colony was a miniature, where the beds and the streets, g

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The Community as Garden

The American continent was often conceived of as heaven on earth, a new or rediscovered paradise. C. W. Dana, for example, in an essay of 1856 entitled “The Garden of the World, or The Great West,” described the area between the Allegheny Mountains and the Pacific Ocean as “The Land of Promise, and the Canaan of our time.... with a soil more fertile than human agriculture has yet tilled; with a climate balmy and healthful, such as no other land in other zones can claim.” In the first half of the nineteenth century this was a land scarcely known, mapped along a few trails cut by trappers and explorers, a spatial vacuum on which hopeful idealists imposed an imaginary geography of fecundity, equality, and self-sufficiency.

Such idealism could be rather literal and inhibiting to communal groups. Some German pietist sects were anxious to locate their experiments on the site of the original Garden of Eden. The spiritualists who founded a community at Mountain Cove, West Virginia, in 1851 also claimed that their site was Eden’s original location. In an equally literal vein, readers of a Los Angeles communitarian paper were encouraged to join the “People’s Army” which would cultivate a farm of 1,000 acres “called the People’s Garden, also called the Garden of Eden,” where they would enjoy “work in the garb of play.” Recruits joining the Union Colony of Greeley, Colorado, were offered an analogy between their irrigation ditches and the river which watered Eden. And this same colony was described as a garden in miniature, where the residence lots were flower beds and the streets, garden paths.

Abandoning literal Edenic references in favor of more diffuse pastoral fervor, many communards posed the virtues of the country against the vices of the American or European city. Images of the communitarian settlement as a pastoral retreat were introduced by the Shakers in contrast to the “great and wicked cities” of the world, and by the Fourierists in contrast to the “unnatural life of our crowded cities.” Yet settlements were also described in the religious tradition of the Sermon on the Mount: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set upon a hill cannot be hid.” The Shakers dealt with the conflict between city and country very neatly, by giving each of their settlements two names, one corresponding to the rural village where it was located, and the other, a “spiritual name” suggestive of the Heavenly Jerusalem, such as “City of Peace,” or “City of Love.” A similar uncertainty existed, but was not resolved, among the members of the anarchist Kaweah colony, who built “Arcady” and “Progress” side by side.

With the exception of a few religious groups which eschewed industry as worldly or corrupting, most communards wished to establish self-sufficient settlements, based on both industry and agriculture, offering the advantages of both city and country. For many early sectarians, the ideal was a tidy village with a range of craft industries, but later experiments attempted more elaborate settlements with communal dwellings and factories surrounded by collective gardens and fields. Even the most isolated communes created centers of community life which were far more urbane in character than the isolated homesteads which surrounded them. Charles Nordhoff, a traveling journalist, cited cheerful, busy people, small shops, and musical performances as communal assets, and claimed that in the 1870s Amana, Iowa; Zoa, Ohio; Icaria, Iowa; and Aurora, Oregon were all “more like a small section cut out of a city.”
than like villages (Figs. 2.2, 2.3).

At least part of the conflict between pastoralism and urbanism was resolved by where the communards chose to locate. Expansionist communes based their optimism on the idea of a spatial vacuum beginning at the frontier and extending west, but they did not often establish themselves there. Most groups selected sites in the settled areas short of the frontier, sometimes moving their communities farther west with each succeeding generation. They had to be close enough to civilization to proselytize new recruits and to demonstrate the superiority of their way of life to that of the cities which they denounced. But they could not risk being overrun with visitors. A few communes, such as Oneida and the North American Phalanx, set up urban branches as agencies marketing their products, but urban-based communes, like Stephen Pearl Andrews’s “Unitary Home” in New York, were very rare. Most groups settled into the “middle landscape” of agrarian republicanism, that area of cultivated farms, midway between the cities and the wilderness, which has been described by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* as representing the ideal life style of the colonial period. But instead of a middle landscape of independent farmers, each pursuing his or her own livelihood, the communitarians wanted a collectively owned and organized middle landscape with industry to complement agriculture, a middle landscape organized on a scale to resist the pressures of change and urbanization.

Whatever form a communitarian group decided that its settlement was to take, the members committed themselves to developing land, which they saw as unique and perfectible, something for which they were accountable. In this respect communitarian practice was closer to the careful, balanced land use practiced by the seventeenth century Puritan groups than of the more careless, individualistic approach typical of many nineteenth century homesteaders. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the difference between communitarian attitudes toward the land and the attitudes of other Americans seems striking. In that period most American farmers made money through the rising prices of land, not through successful cultivation. Thus, while many farmers waited for a chance to sell out at a favorable price and move west, they impoverished their land by cropping it constantly to its most lucrative staple.

In contrast to mobile, independent farmers, the communards became very skillful cultivators, concentrating their energies in chosen places. Nordhoff observed:

I know of some instances in which the existence of a commune has added very considerably to the price of real estate near its boundaries. . . . Almost without exception the communists are careful and thorough farmers. . . . Their tillage is clean and deep; in their orchards one always finds the best varieties of fruits. . . . A commune is a fixture; its people build and arrange for all time; and if they have an ideal of comfort they work up to it.

Communitarians could not always afford to purchase good land, but they almost always transformed the land they were able to obtain. In successful communes, scientific methods of agriculture and horticulture were studied diligently. The most up-to-date practices were put into effect by the Shakers, the Mormons, the Perfectionists, the members of the North American Phalanx, and the Greeley Union Colony (among others). Experiments to develop new techniques were also conducted.
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2.3 A communal village centered on a symbolic garden with evergreen trees representing eternal life and the twelve gates of heaven: Zoar, Ohio, founded 1817.

2.2 Icarian Community, Corning, Iowa, 1870-1871.
communards made mistakes—the Harmonists thought Lombardy poplars would improve the fever-ridden Indiana climate and the Silville Fourierists followed the silk culture fad of the 1870s in Kansas—but misconceptions were clarified when communal groups joined in public debates on agricultural and horticultural topics. The Shakers published guides to farming and gardening; other groups submitted articles to well-known agricultural journals.

The art of landscape design also interested communards. Oneida Perfectionists were constantly involved with ornamenting as well as improving their land. Theosophists in Point Loma, California, collected exotic plants from all over the world to develop their domain as a replica of Eden, although their technique was more suggestive of Noah filling up the Ark. Mormons, who were also preoccupied with Edenic imagery, planted thousands of fruit trees. Harmonists built greenhouses and developed elaborate garden plans (Figs. 2.4, 2.5) symbolic of the community’s relationship with the outside world; a Zor garden reflected the members’ religious beliefs with a radiating geometrical pattern (Fig. 2.3). Residents of Zion City, Illinois, combined radiating streets with picturesque landscape elements reminiscent of Frederick Law Olmsted’s plan for the suburb of Riverside, Illinois. Cemeteries were another preoccupation of communitarian landscape designers, and communal projects included Hope-dale’s attempt to imitate the picturesque planting of Mount Auburn Cemetery. Aman’s even rows of identical graves surrounded by evergreens, and Salem’s reflection of the Moravian choir system in cemetery landscaping.

In all these practical ways, communistic societies planted and pruned their way to earthly paradise. Thus the founders of communes who first revised traditional utopian thinking in light of their collective vision of the American landscape, then enriched and developed the American landscape with their collective efforts. The ideal of a paradisiacal garden provided a symbolic explanation for each settlement’s location and sustained the members’ commitment until their domains had been developed. Then the communards could draw strength and inspiration from their own landscapes, the real gardens which they had developed.
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2.4 Harmonist garden maze with meditation hut, New Harmony, Indiana, founded 1814.

2.5 Harmonist garden, meditation hut, Economy, Pennsylvania, founded 1824.

The Community as Garden
The Community as Machine

When communitarians described a model settlement as an “invention,” it was as a social invention, analogous to a mechanical invention which could be designed and then mass produced. In 1820 the British social theorist, Robert Owen, presented a plan for a model community (Fig. 2.6) in this light: “If the invention of various machines has multiplied the power of labour . . . THIS is an invention which will at once multiply the physical and mental powers of the whole society to an incalculable extent, without injuring anyone by its introduction and its most rapid diffusion.”17 In the same vein Albert Brisbane prophesied that Fourier’s theory of communal “Association” (Fig. 2.7) would do for household organization “what the mariner’s compass did for navigation, the telescope for astronomy, and steam for machinery.”18

In terms of politics, the communitarian analogy between social and mechanical inventions had been drawn before. The Constitution had been described by its framers as “the most beautiful system which has yet been devised by the wisdom of man.”19 Several heroes of the revolutionary period were inventors in a broad sense: Thomas Paine (who designed bridges), Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. Thus, the communitarian socialist Robert Owen was more credible in American society as an inventor than as a corporate manager; and Charles Fourier carried more weight as a “Social Architect” than as a psychologist. In terms of the physical environment, the invention analogy, popularized by the Utilitarian Jeremy Bentham with his “Panopticon” in 1791 (Fig. 2.8), enjoyed credibility untarnished by the confusion of physics and psychology.

The assertion that the invention of a settlement pattern could solve social problems also reflected Americans’ wider confidence in environmental inventions. Jefferson’s 1785 Land Ordinance established a physical grid as a social equalizer. Between 1820 and 1850 prison reformers vaunted the social and moral benefits of more architectural “inventions,” the punitive designs of the Auburn and Pennsylvania penitentiaries. American mental asylum directors invented curative environments during the same period, often based on qualities sought by communal experiments: isolated sites, buildings designed to express stability, and advanced mechanical equipment.20 Communitarians had the advantage of belonging to voluntary societies which could resist inappropriate designs; prisoners and the mentally ill were, in some cases, helpless victims of mad inventors (Fig. 2.9).

If the model community plan represented an inventor’s theory, the settlement itself represented a working prototype, a “patent office model”21 which proved that the theory would work in practice. A pioneering spirit, coping and practical, sustained experimental communities in the short run. In the long run, as an extension of the “invention” simile, the successful prototype was expected to inspire national demand. Here theory changed from practicality to vagueness with groups like the Oneida Perfectionists, who ultimately relied upon “the silent action of truth and the Providence of God.”22 Only communities which actively organized duplication of the model, such as the Shakers, the Moravians, and the Mormons, succeeded in reproducing the original settlement to any great extent.

Like the concept of the community as garden, the ideal of the model community as invention found its best expression in practical, direct efforts. The communitarians who be-

The Ideal Community 20
2.6 Community designed by Robert Owen, model by Stedman Whitwell, 1825. The model is raised off the prairie on a platform; family houses under peaked roofs surround the square; dining halls and communal facilities extend toward a central greenhouse; corner buildings are schools and "conversation rooms."

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2.7 Phalanstery designed by Charles Fourier, view by Jules Amoutt, ca. 1848. Industrial buildings and dovecote tower in foreground, across open square from communal dwelling with enclosed courtyards.
2.8 Section and plan of a "Panopticon," designed as an "industry house" (workhouse) or jail, where a single jailer using mirrors can supervise 2,000 inmates. By Jeremy Bentham, 1791.

2.9 Communitarians could resist inappropriate designs (Fig. 2.6), but prisoners and the mentally ill were, in some cases, helpless victims of mad inventors: Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia, designed by John Haviland, 1829. Each prisoner is isolated in a private cell with private exercise yard.

The Ideal Community 22
2.10 Improved Shaker washing machine, 1878.

2.11 Shaker window sash lock, 1878.
believed in inventions developed supportive communal industries which enhanced creativity immensely. They produced dozens of real mechanical devices designed by men and women who considered their patentable inspirations as justification for their social optimism. Among the Shakers (Figs. 2.10, 2.11), inventions were considered gifts from God; among the Oneida Perfectionists, inventions provided the basis of the community economy and filled their mansion with labor-saving devices. Josiah Warren, a member of the New Harmony community and the founder of Modern Times, an experiment in anarchism on Long Island, designed a web press and a variety of stereotyping devices. Other communitarian inventors include Tabitha Babbitt, a Shaker who designed a circular saw and cut nails; Jonathan Browning, a Mormon who designed a repeating rifle, and Sewell Newhouse, a Perfectionist who invented animal traps. Nordhoff observed that “the communist’s life is full of devices for personal ease and comfort...” and also that “ingenuity and dexterity are developed to a surprising degree in a commune...” Viewed in light of the multiple environmental perfections achieved by the communitarians, the concept of the community itself as an invention seems less naive or simplistic. Whatever the theorists’ intentions, the analogy became the symbolic framework for developing, in concrete ways, the most innovative possible groups.

Garden and machine represent nature and technology; home symbolizes family, in hearth, facade, and plan. When communities issued tracts or posters to recruit new members, they often illustrated them with sketches of their dwellings as tangible proof of their achievements. Along with these illustrations, slogans appeared on the mastheads of communal papers. Oneida’s American Socialist was “devoted to the enlargement and perfection of home.” Topolobampo’s The New City declared itself for home, “home money, home employment, home protection, home franchise, home virtue, home worship, home ideals, home people, and home day.”

Communal affection and security could be evoked by a hearth; prosperity and permanence projected on a facade; equality and efficiency suggested by a plan. The model home directed attention to sexual politics, and, like garden and machine, found its truest expression when idealism influenced life style.

In choosing an ideal dwelling as a symbol of social and economic success, communards emulated other Americans, but they resisted the national acceptance of isolated family dwellings located on individual farms. Those communes which favored model family homes wanted them clustered in model villages, reminiscent of Puritan covenant communities. Those communes which advocated small collective dwellings were a bit more unorthodox; those which aimed to house hundreds of communards in a single collective dwelling aroused the greatest incredulity and outrage among their neighbors.

All groups criticized isolated, individual houses as lonely, wasteful, and oppressive; many groups compensated for this attack by attempting to exceed the standards of private dwelling design. Oneida Perfectionists complained of “the gloom and dullness of excessive family isolation,” a “circle,” where one’s waste attendant or our separate house was unwilling to “t hullahbye” as her west-eyed the tradition bed” which maligned stupid” arranging men’s labors. When model communities dictated a place within the economy, and some prevail. The ideal words of the Oneida mentally and spiritually. The ideal and aesthetic pleasurable services were put together in the institution of domestic women of the community.

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family isolation," or the "little man-and-wife
circle," where one suffered "the discomfort and
and waste attendant on the domestic economy of
our separate households." 25 A Shaker Eldress
was unwilling to "bend over the cradle and sing
Lullabye" as her work; a Llano designer criti-
cized the traditional home as a "Procrustean
bed" which maimed women, an "inconceivably
stupid" arrangement which confiscated women's
labors. 26 When communards described the
model community as an ideal home they
predicted a place where conviviality, collective
economy, and some leisure for women would
prevail. The ideal hearth was expected, in the
words of the Oneidans, to "knit us together
mentally and spiritually," as a "love organiza-
ton." 27 The ideal façade would inspire respect
and aesthetic pleasure. The ideal plan for col-
lective services would enable all to live better
together than in isolation, with the reorganiza-
ton of domestic work lightening the toil of the
women of the community.

Images of garden and machine were often
summoned to support testimonials for com-
munards' model homes. At Oneida and the
North American Phalanx, members were con-
stantly at work improving the gardens adjoin-
ing the collective dwellings. In Nauvoo, Greeley,
and Amana, colonists competed in planting
trees and flowers on private plots surrounding
the houses. This form of beautification was
straightforward; at Economy and Harmony gar-
dens created a complex symbolic context for a
model home. Hedges and shrubs formed mazes,
suggesting the paths of life. At the center of
the mazes were meditation huts, symbolic houses,
reminding members that the community pro-
vided a model home in a confusing world.

Mechanical inventions combined with beauti-
ful or symbolic gardens to reinforce the view of
the community as an ideal home. Heating, light-
ing, and sanitation devices contributed to
perfect health. The Shakers made domestic la-
bor lighter with removable window sash for
easy washing, round ovens for more even cook-
ing, conical stoves for heating irons more effi-
ciently. The Harmony Society constructed
floors which could be removed so that it was
never necessary to carry furniture up or down
stairs in a dwelling. 28 The Oneidans created
"lazy susan" tables so that food could be
turned instead of passed. In the case of their
"pocket kitchen," described in Chapter 7, do-
mept perfection came not from a new inven-
tion, but from recognizing the singular virtues
of an old, symbolic hearth.

Domestic inventions were perhaps the com-
munitarians' best advertisement. In most nin-
eteenth century communes "women's work" re-
mained sex stereotyped, but men and women
benefited when cooking, cleaning, and child
care were collectivized (Figs. 2.12, 2.13, 2.14,
2.15). Labor-saving devices and regular sched-
ules allowed communal domestic workers to en-
joy far more leisure than individual home-
makers, and this aspect of communal life was
reported in detail in popular illustrated maga-
azines.

An indication of how much communal model
homes were admired is offered by Catharine
Beecher's and Harriet Beecher Stowe's domestic
economy manual, The American Woman's
Home, published in 1869. 29 Although the
authors are not sympathetic to communal ex-
periments, they adopt the concept of the ideal
community as a model to be mass produced
when they describe the single-family home (Fig.
2.16) as a Christian "commonwealth," a model
which can be duplicated to achieve the
"Heaven-devised plan of the family state." 30
2.12 The model home directed attention to sexual politics: communal child care facilities, Familiistère, Glaize, France, founded 1859.

2.13 Communal laundry, with Shaker-designed conical stove to warm flatirons, New Lebanon, New York, 1873.

2.14 Women in the commu...
2.14 Women in the communal bakery, Oneida, 1870.

2.15 "If you have pleasure and love for anything all effort and labor are light." Men and women working in a Moravian bakery, surrounded by Christmas loaves.

Shaker-designed conical ebon, New York.
This description is accompanied by excellent plans for a cottage equipped with flexible furniture, a streamlined kitchen, and a range of heating, ventilating, and sanitary inventions similar to those enjoyed by communal groups. Elsewhere Catharine Beecher suggests that these "model family commonwealths" can be grouped in model neighborhoods around cooperative bakeries and laundries.34

Another attempt to emulate communes' model housekeeping arrangements was launched by the Cambridge Cooperative Housekeeping Society in 1870-1871. Members organized a cooperative bakery, general store, and laundry service available to subscribing housekeepers in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and they argued for the inclusion of such facilities in the new apartment buildings then being constructed for the middle class.35 The effect of these proposals was mixed: they influenced new groups of commumards to reexamine the "unitary home" (Fig. 2.17) and idealize the single family house and cooperative housekeeping, more than they influenced private families to adopt any cooperative practices (Fig. 2.18).36 The architecture and domestic inventions of the Shakers, Fourierists, Oneidans, and Inspirationists remained a challenge to American domestic design which has not yet been met.

2.15 The single-family home, presented in a communitarian vein, as a Christian "commonwealth," a model which can be duplicated to achieve the "Heaven-devised plan of the family state": The American Woman's Home, 1869.
2.17 The Resident Hotel or "unitary dwelling" designed by Albert Kinsey Owen with Deery and Keel, Architects, Philadelphia, proposed for the Pacific Colony (Topolobampo), Sinaloa, Mexico, ca. 1885-1895.

2.18 An alternative to the unitary dwelling, "model family commonwealths" grouped in "model neighborhoods," with centralized kitchens and laundries, proposed for the Pacific Colony.

Presented in a commonwealth, "a model of the "Heavenly City": The American..."
Notes to Chapter Two


5 The Industrial Democrat, 1.1 (Aug. 21, 1914), 1.


7 Matthew 5:14. This same Biblical phrase is quoted in the Covenant of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which defined the first Puritan covenant community.


11 Nordhoff, Communist Societies, pp. 391-392.


23 Nordhoff, Communist Societies, p. 401, p. 415. See also John S. Williams, Consecrated Ingenuity: The Shakers and Their Inventions, Old Chatham, N.Y., 1957.

24 The American Socialist, 1.4 (1876-1879); The New City, 1.1 (Dec. 8, 1892), p. 1.


26 Mary Antoinette Doolittle, Autobiography of Mary Antoinette Doolittle, Mount Lebanon, 1880; see also Chapter 10, n. 31.

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28 Wilson, The Angel a

29 Catharine E. Beech, The American Woman: Domestic Science; Being Maintenance of Economy, Christian Homes, New


33 See the proposed homes and residential units, Utopia, El Cajon, Cal., Topolobampo community, which combined a combination of family cottages in a town, Cambridge, M. P. Eck, The World A i (1890) and Henry Oles World: An Outline of utopianism (Holstein, Iowa, New York in 1971 in a by Arthur Orcutt Lewis apartment houses with existing urban dwellings.

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27 John Humphrey Noyes, address on "Dedication of the New Community Mansion," Oneida Circular, Feb. 27, 1862, p. 9.

28 Wilson, The Angel and the Serpent, p. 41.


32 Cambridge Co-operative Housekeeping Society, Prospectus, Cambridge, Mass., 1869. See also Chapter 9, n. 30.

33 See the proposed combination of single family homes and resident hotels in Ray Reynolds, Cat's Paw Utopia, El Cajon, Calif., 1972, a discussion of the Topolobampo community. Another work which suggests a combination of unitary dwellings and single-family cottages is Beta (E. B. Basset), The Model Town, Cambridge, Mass., 1869. See also Bradford Peck, The World A Department Store (New York, 1890) and Henry Olerich, A Cityless and Countryless World: An Outline of Practical Co-operative Individualism (Holstein, Iowa, 1893), both republished in New York in 1971 in a series on utopian fiction edited by Arthur Orcutt Lewis. Both recommend cooperative apartment houses with many of the features of Fourierist unitary dwellings.