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Community as Commodity: Of Rotary Dream Homes and Gated Geritopias as Collective Attempts to Lead a Private Life

Eva-Sabine Zehelein

This essay employs two examples – the Rotary Dream Homes (Calgary, Alberta) and the 55+ community The Villages (Orlando, Florida) – to illustrate contemporary lifestyle migration into places/spaces which cater to the desire for harmonious living in a community of the similarly minded based on an individualized lifestyle package and boxed as real estate investment. Organized as CIDs (Common Interest Housing Developments) with elaborate CC&Rs (Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions) to eliminate internal friction or conflict, these communities tend to produce an extraordinarily controlled environment potentially depriving residents of some freedoms and liberties. Chaparral Valley, Harmony and The Villages (the world's largest retirement community) exemplify the argument that in-, but at the same time exclusive mechanisms are at work in many lifestyle communities where landscape and housing as well as collective memory are created by developers and forged into a brand, a master narrative of exceptionality and lifestyle. The design of an enticing and all-encompassing comfort zone inside the perimeters contributes to segregation from “the world outside” and might be read as the revocation of the social contract in order to engage in a collective attempt to lead a private life.

Lifestyle communities as collective attempts at private, individualized and harmonious living are a remarkable concept. Usually planned, constructed, and at least in the early years governed by developers, they are often advertised as brands with master narratives of exclusivity and com-

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fort and cater to special interest groups seeking individuality and individualized lifestyles in a reliable real estate product. This ideal of home and/as investment comes with an elaborate set of rules and regulations securing, yet also curbing your individuality and individualized lifestyle in many ways. The following will employ the examples of the (not age segregated) Rotary Dream Homes and their communities in Calgary, Alberta (Canada), as well as the notorious 55+ retirement community The Villages near Orlando, Florida (USA) in order to investigate this phenomenon.

I.

July 2013. The Calgary Stampede. In the midst of the fun fair with lots of food and games and music and people and cowboy hats and “Yee-hah!” Rotary was raffling a Dream Home. And in the shadow of the iconic Saddle Dome right between a beer stand, Bratwurst, and souvenir vendors, there it was: a single family home, the Dream Home. And the Stampede visitors could tour it.¹ While queuing for nearly thirty minutes and experiencing “corporeality of movement” (Urry and Larsen 21), *vulgo*: waiting in line and shuffling forward, fully immersed in the whiffs of various fragrances, sweat, garlic, and alcohol emanating from the fellows in front and behind, I tried to grasp what I was about to engage with. In its 101st year, the 2013 Stampede attracted 1.1 million visitors (Duncan n. pag.). Founded as an “agro fair” (an agricultural exhibition), it is “The Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth” (Calgary Stampede) with the world’s largest and – with more than 2 million Canadian dollars in prize money – also the most lucrative of all rodeos worldwide. Here, Calgary, today a hub for international (oil) companies, cultivates its folkloristic heritage built on cattle, where a Marlboro-style cowboy riding into the sunset can still contribute to a collective self-image, self-marketing, and self-narrative as “the Stampede City” or “Cowntown.”² The Stampede is where the Alberta Oil Sands meet the good old cowboy of the prairies. This myth is in itself somewhat problematic, some critics claim. And the glorification of the men and women who work(ed) with cattle can turn rodeo into a creepy event reeking of testosterone

¹ Rotary and AVI have been raffling Dream Homes for twenty-one years (2016 Stampede Rotary Dream Home).

² Various sports teams are called The Stampeders, e.g., the football team (The Calgary Stampeders).

probably not experienced ever since Hemingway wrote about his admiration for the Spanish *corrida*. “Save the Animals”-activists and many people with a weak stomach and a different set of ethics and aesthetics have been sick over Hemingway and probably also at the Stampede – and added some gall, too: How can anyone defend this torture, this terrible treatment of animal and man, much too dangerous, uncivilized, and cruel? What machismo! What an archaic concept and performance of masculinity! How can anyone like or enjoy such a spectacle (cf. Adams; Fricker; Labchuk)?

Right at the heart of this themed site encompassed by the polyphony of multifarious discourses about capital, consumption, nostalgically enshrined heritage, collective memory, and identity construction, Rotary³ had set up its lottery booths and the big trophy: The Dream Home. When I had finally made it through the front door, I realized that there was no way I could philander on my own and imagine living in this interior design. Visitors had to stay in line, walk along roped and undulating paths from room to room and floor to floor. And around every other corner, there were sales representatives happy to answer questions – and surveilling that no one spit on the floor, or rubbed greasy hands on white walls, or used the non-functioning lavatories. Following the prescribed path through this house-as-exhibition I was reminded of Tuan’s contention that “[a]rchitectural space reveals and instructs” (114), but also of the “museumification” of culture (Macdonald 2). Huyssen has so pertinently described the museum as a “catalyst for the articulation of tradition and nation, heritage and canon” (13), now turned “a hybrid space somewhere between public fair and department store” (15). And if museums are also “global symbols through which status and community are expressed” (2) and where experiences of the individual consumer are embodied (Macdonald 7), then this was a special museum indeed. Here, culture was materialized, a modern way of seeing and comprehending the world “as if it were an exhibit” was arranged (Macdonald 7). The visitor was transformed into a more or less passive and other-directed performer instructed how to behave (no food, no beverages), where to walk and where not to take a seat. Walking through or past living and dining room, kitchen, and three bedrooms, and glimpsing at 2.5 baths she experienced a total value of 750,000 Canadian dol-

³ Rotary was established in 1905 in Chicago by Paul Harris, an attorney, as a space where professionals from diverse fields can exchange ideas and experiences, and build friendships. By now, the organization has more than 1.2 million members around the globe. Service for the community is at the heart of their activities, the motto: “Service Above Self” (Rotary International).

lars (2016 Stampede Rotary Dream Home), not, though, as in a classical museum, of “things past,” but of a twenty-first-century architectural phenomenon, displaying everything that was state of the art: kitchen and bathroom appliances, TV room equipment, and a fetishized built-in coffee machine. 2,330 square feet of built living space, completely furnished and decorated, were on display.⁴ This house presented to the visitor a staged museal experience framed as a shrine-meets-market-driven-product,⁵ with appliances and architectural features as objects of our gazes, where we were invited to perform rituals of adoration and reverence. All co-present people could launch an individual mental soul-searching: Do I like the floor plan? Do I like the appliances? Can I imagine myself living here? The individual performances of gazing were “framed by cultural styles, circulating images and texts of this and other places, as well as personal experiences and memories”; also involved were “cultural skills of daydreaming and mind travelling” (Urry and Larsen 17). I overheard some conversations: “Awesome!”, “Beautiful!”, “How nice! Oh, look at that patio, Jack!”, “I like this big bath tub, honey, but where would I store all my clothes?”, “These cabinets are really made of solid wood!”, “And this is real granite here in the kitchen and bathroom!”, “Look at this really gorgeous built-in coffee maker and beverage center, Charlene!” The visitors were emotionally connecting to the displayed objects, but also critically engaging with them. This architectural artefact did not just (re)present cultural identity, but created and framed it. The house was the perfect “site and testing ground for reflections on temporality and subjectivity, identity and alterity” (Huysen 16) where people in Calgary, gathering for a special spatio-temporal moment of communal performance-experience (as theorized, e.g., by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett⁶), were paralleling their individual dreams with the one fabricated and staged here.

This Dream I could gamble for was an odd dream. It was other-created; it was someone else’s idea of what my dream of a home might be. Or it was someone else’s idea of what the average Canadian might consider an ideal home. The house was not an expression of anyone’s

⁴ The house-prize would come without furniture and TVs, but with all appliances.

⁵ “I see the totality of the museum as a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance of some kind” (Duncan in Marstine 10).

⁶ “Exhibitions are fundamentally theatrical, for they are how museums perform the knowledge they create” (3).

personality or style and taste and family history à la Bachelard.⁷ It was a stage setting, a mass-produced generic ensemble, a house waiting to become a home. The Dream Home was and is also a commercial(ized) dream. It was and is not naïve and merely altruistic, but business wrapped in a wonderful narrative of dreams come true, of a better world, of benevolence and charity. The experience was premeditated and arranged and the visitor was lured to make this Dream her own and to let the gaze also glide over the advertising – a not too subtle form of product placement. Every year, all crafts donate their parts and place advertising all through the house. The concept of the house is created by the developer AVI who constructs and sells similar houses on a variety of lots around Calgary. So even if you did not win this home, you could consider buying a similar one from AVI, or maybe just the granite table top or the walnut cabinets or the built-in coffee maker. It might be safe to assume that even if some of the features may not have been everybody's cup of coffee, everybody would have accepted the prize and then, maybe, sold it. Right at the exit door there were more Rotary booths. If the product had stimulated your dreams and convinced you that it was worth your gambling money, then here was your next move: Buy lottery tickets.

Here, on the Calgary Stampede fair grounds, an epitome of twenty-first century consumer culture, where people were spending substantial sums for quick gratification – fun, food, alcohol (at 6 Canadian dollars a can), and entertainment – stood a Dream Home, “‘the official story’ of a particular way of thinking at a particular time for a particular group of people.” This “time capsule” (Dion in Marstine 31) consisted of a house with various discursive frames: architectural artifact, museal space and commercial real estate product, potential home, as well as the first prize in a big gamble, a lottery.⁸ The Dream Home came in seven parts on a flatbed truck and would be erected on a designated lot in a suburban

⁷ “On whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being. [O]ur house is our corner of the world. [. . .] An entire past comes to dwell in a new house” (Bachelard xxxvi, 4, 5).

⁸ The concept of a lottery is to entice you to gamble, to invest small money in a promise of big gain; against the odds, with minimal chances of winning anything. Lotteries have been called a “tax on the mathematically inept” – since only those who cannot calculate the risk of losing buy lottery tickets and thus accept to support a state or institution with an amount analogous to a voluntary tax (Perez and Humphreys 936). There are claims that typically less affluent people participate in a lottery and spend disproportionate amounts of their money. This may be true. However, in the case here I argue that many other people also bought into the lottery to support a good cause. The investment is thus not so much a tax as a donation.

development named Chaparral Valley. So one did not only win the house, but also a new community. Chaparral Valley offered you, the potential winner, a community and a comfortable family home, a merchandized product usually for sale, today a great trophy. In a country which prides itself on its size, the vastness of nature and untamed wilderness, here we find tiny lots in a preconceived landscape design for sale. Your dream home had to be either in the style of a Craftsman, a Prairie, or a Colonial house as specified in the architectural guidelines provided by the developer Genstar. This design was not the result of a communal decision of inhabitants or buyers of lots, but the developer's decision and vision – after all, Genstar, as the company motto has it, “bring[s] land to life” (Genstar homepage). According to the guidelines:

The community of Chaparral Valley will be a continuation of the early western heritage theme found throughout the successful Lake Chaparral community. The detailing used on the entry treatments, signage, amenity features and the exteriors of the homes will all borrow from the popular architectural styles of the early 20th century. By utilizing traditional architectural flair the Chaparral Valley area will also acquire the warmth and friendliness of days gone by. (Genstar, *Chaparral Valley* n. pag.)

The amalgamation of comfort through tradition and heritage, and easy identification and solidity through references to a rather unspecified (collective) past evoke an emotional package of “the good old days” of shared memories, of warmth, friendliness, and communal belonging. Chaparral Valley is a pre-planned construction effort financed, organized, and (at least in the early phases) controlled by for-profit companies. This suburban neighborhood is a commercial product with a fabricated narrative of tradition, roots, and heritage as ersatz for what is sorely lacking: tradition, roots, and heritage. What Bellah terms “community of memory” is absent here – as in all lifestyle enclaves:

a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices [which see] that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of its past. (Bellah et al. 333)

This trend, to sell a finished, structured/regulated real estate product and brand it as a “community,” is widespread in North America, especially in the USA. Since the 1990s we have seen the significant increase

of such communities generally organized as CIDs (Common Interest Housing Developments) and often considered as “private governments.” This trend is most pronounced in the USA and, less, yet increasingly so, in Canada (cf. Loomis). In the USA, 68 million people lived in CIDs in 2015, which is 21.1% of the US population; 51-55% of 2015’s 338,000 common-interest communities were homeowners’ associations (Community Associations Institute). According to the 2009 American Housing Survey, there were 10.76 million units located in access controlled communities. Gated communities accounted for 11% of all housing.⁹ In Canada, 10.3% of all dwellings in 2014 were part of a condominium development – a significant increase from 8.9% the previous year (Statistics Canada Table 203-0027).

All CIDs bring forth a community of land owners. CIDs are characterized primarily by three parameters: automatic membership in the Homeowners Association, and thus, secondly, acceptance of and adherence to a very detailed catalogue of so-called “CC&Rs” (Covenants, Conditions and Restrictions),¹⁰ and, thirdly, common ownership of land and property. All CIDs organize and finance many municipal tasks themselves: Lawn work, pool-maintenance, snow removal, trash pickup, etc., and many services are contracted with the municipality. Instead of sliding down the slippery slope of “private *vs* public space,” it has been suggested we conceptualize the nature of the CID as a club community where local public goods are provided by the HOA and financed via ownership based fees establishing exclusive use rights (Cséfalvay and

⁹ The highest number of gated communities in the EU can be found in Poland. Warsaw alone in 2007 already had four hundred (Wyczalkowska and Janda-Debek 12). Security, cleanliness and social segregation, plus investment seem to be the motivating factors and sales pitches here (Johnsson; Polanska; Gadecki). In this context and in this form, we may rightly speak of communities of exclusion and othering. Cf. Cséfalvay and Webster: “What has been found in the European comparison is that gated communities seem to flourish in countries with a relative low level of economic development; moderate redistribution and a moderate public sector; highly centralized financing of local governments; low taxing and spending power at the local level; high social inequalities; and a high density in metropolitan areas” (306).

¹⁰ A sample of the Chaparral Valley Restrictive Covenant specifies that “no fence or retaining wall shall be constructed on the front yards of the lots, exempt as permitted by Genstar in its sole discretion,” that “no satellite dish over 18 inches in diameter, clothes line, television antenna, short wave radio antenna or any communication antennae of any size or type shall be installed, erected or be allowed to remain on any of the Lots. [N]o carport, playhouse, gazebo, shed or other storage structure shall be erected on any of the Lots” (Anon., “Restrictive Covenant” n. pag.). And this is just a minute excerpt from the real covenant a home buyer has to sign.

Webster 296¹¹), therewith creating micro-territories at the intersection between market, state, and civil society (Woo and Webster 2541). In the case of gated communities, less ideologically charged also called “guarded housing units” (Glasze et al. 6), we have to add separations such as fences, walls or hill-like constructions, and always access restriction. McKenzie speaks of “American privatopia,”¹² a “hybrid of [Ebenezer] Howard’s utopian ideas and American privatism” (12) and Blakely and Snyder, who have shaped the academic debate and discourse, of “Fortress America” (vii).¹³

With John Locke, man in the state of nature has the right to property, and enters into a social community in order to secure his life and property, a community which is based on the consent of all its members (think of life, liberty, and pursuit of property). The case is the reverse with the CIDs: Here the rules exist first, just as much as the physical realization, a form of ghost town, and then the concept is sold to individual people who live in this setting, according to rules which have been pre-set, and not passed by the group of residents by mutual agreement. McKenzie puts it nicely: “[A] CID is a prefabricated frame-

¹¹ The conceptual difficulties caused by terms such as “private” and “public” cannot be addressed here. Studies such as those by Webster and Glasze, in a mélange of public goods theory, economic theory of clubs, and property rights theory, argue against any simplistic understanding of “public space” à la Habermas and against the easy dichotomy between “private” and “public.” Instead, they suggest various “publics” according to usage of space (Webster speaks of “public realms”) and degrees of “privateness,” and understand private neighborhoods – building on James Buchanan’s work – as “clubs.”

¹² I did my first research on this topic in 2008, right around the time when Lehman Brothers came down and the financial crisis began. For years, the real estate market had been waxing strong, also because of sub-prime mortgages and toxic financial products such as CDOs (Collateralized Debt Obligations) traded around the world. Americans had been buying and flipping homes on a large scale and on credit. Revisiting the theme in 2016, it appears to me that the CID market has recovered and prospered in the USA and Canada, and budded in Europe. For Germany, Arkadien (Potsdam), Prenzlauer Gärten (Berlin), Central Park Residence (Leipzig), and The Seven (Munich) are some random examples of forms of gated communities. Then, most academic literature came from US scholars and was about the USA. Meanwhile, a veritable proliferation of work has applied American scholarship to other parts of the world, predominantly to South East Asian and African countries. This has met with criticism. For example, C. P. Pow argues for a way to “decentre the dominance of the LA School model of urban fragmentation and its ingrained dystopian orientation” (473) and aims to “complicate the over-coded mono-logic of urban gating and segregation” (476).

¹³ Vesselinov et al. speak of sites and vehicles of urban neoliberalism, a transnational gating machine that transforms cities into fortresses. See also the classics by Atkinson and Blandy (*Gated Communities*), Setha Low (*Behind the Gates*), or Bagaen and Uduku, or more recent articles such as by Lai, Le Goix and Webster, Radetskiy et al., or Tanulku.

work for civil society in search of a population” (145). The state of nature is here closer to Genesis than Lockean philosophy; in the beginning, there was the developer, who creates a community on a piece of land – the houses, the infrastructure, the rules and regulations – and then the people are put into this setting with an “interlocking of spatial, legal and social system” (Le Goix and Webster, “Inequality” 619).¹⁴

The CC&Rs regulate primarily what is prohibited. They regulate the three “Ps”: people, pets, and parking (Barton and Silverman 140). They transform the liberal minded into a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard), who vehemently opts for the Banana principle (Build Nothing Anywhere Near Anything) (Duany et al. x). By necessity, one is tempted to say, these rules and regulations bear interesting fruit, which is devoured with relish by the CID critics: In Santa Ana, a retiree received a warning by her condo-association because she had kissed a friend good-bye on her own private driveway. Details of the event and the performance of the schmoozing active adults are not known (Louv A2; see also Stuart or Klein).¹⁵ Why do at times rather bizarre conflicts such as this emerge? It seems that we witness in many areas the shift from fate communities to communities of choice. In times of conspicuous consumption, people as “consumer-voters” are often “voting with their feet” (419), as Charles Tiebout has argued. They identify their key needs and priorities, and shop for a place-centered lifestyle concept that comes with a bundle of goods and amenities (Florida 11). “Communities as commodities” or “commudities” are, in slight variation of Lewis Mumford (in Fishman x), topographical manifestations of a collective attempt to lead a private life. A dream of collective bliss based on private prop-

¹⁴ CIDs in general do have political clout. Two aspects are crucial here: Over the last decades, all Republican presidential candidates and their running mates have campaigned in retirement communities such as The Villages. Secondly, all municipalities are financed to large extents by the local tax payers. A municipality thus has a vital interest in zoning regulations which encourage a certain clientele and discourage another from moving in. Only those who can actively help generate a good tax revenue and at the same time do not cause too many expenses are desirable new neighbors. Cf. for example, McKenzie; Rüb; Le Goix and Vesselinov 2134.

¹⁵ Century Woods Estates in west LA advertises itself as “a contemporary tribute to human aspiration [. . .] created especially for individuals of supreme accomplishment.” A single family home with three bedrooms can sell at 3 million dollars. Every homeowner who desires to celebrate this supreme accomplishment with a party of more than fifteen guests has to apply for permission from the residents’ association (Anon., “Government by the nice” 25).

erty; an interesting paradox.¹⁶ Zygmunt Bauman's romanticized depiction of community holds to a point and describes fairly well the fundamental dilemma at the core of all these communities: They promise a focus on the individual and its needs and freedom or autonomy, yet at the same time deprive it of sovereignty or autonomy by subjecting it to strict rules and regulations, norms and sanctions. You cannot freely decide whether, where, and what kind of patio to add to your house, or at what time to pull the trash can to the curb.¹⁷ People subject themselves to additional restrictions to their freedom and liberty on the basis of pragmatic decision-making strategies: Stable or increasing real estate assessments, prestige, comfort, and high recreation value combined with a minimum of responsibilities and household chores in a group of similarly minded and affluent neighbors. Underneath this analytically graspable surface, however, there lurks a desire; a desire to return to the ideal of the harmonious (small town) neighborhood idyll characterized by togetherness and solidarity, of one's childhood, or maybe of a TV reality (e.g., Hayden 184). Even though today's American urbanization rate is comparable to that of Spain or France (82%¹⁸), the topos of the small town or home town has not lost its appeal. Connotations might be: transgenerational family roots, belonging, rural or suburban harmony (some might claim this is mutually exclusive), peace, and coziness through proximity and face-to-face contact between similarly minded and extended families. A cluster of emotions is projected onto a smallish geographical area and triggers lifestyle migration.

If we consider that the 2016 Rotary Dream Home in Calgary will be situated in "Harmony," we see that a market is, indeed, catering to a projected desire for higher quality of life. "Live in Harmony" (Live in Harmony) is more than the planned community's slogan, but a holistic human aspiration, the wish "to live, learn, work and play" (Live in Harmony), to cater to all senses and all socio-demographic groups. To build the perfect environment for people to "[re]connect with what matters most" and to find their individual "work-life balance," the developer and the team "sat at a kitchen table and got honest about the vision of what community could be" (Live in Harmony) – a city built from scratch, speaking to a perceived communal desire by merging myth,

¹⁶ Dolores Hayden in *Building Suburbia* argues that the conflict between residents, builders, and developers is at the heart of suburbia's history (9).

¹⁷ For a more detailed depiction of the protean character of CIDs cf. Zehelein 24-28.

¹⁸ Urban population (% of total). Germany: 75%, Spain: 80%, Euro zone: 76%, Japan: 93%, France: 80% (The World Bank).

imagination, landscape, and architectural design, sketched out and constructed by a profit-oriented and market-focused company, couched in the folksy, down-to-earth, rustic image of the gathering around the kitchen table. What D. Stanley Eitzen once called “the atrophy of social life” finds here its potential antidote – rethinking urban design, bringing people together, investing in infrastructure to facilitate communal activities (15). But this is a planned community, a vision of a self-enclosed gathering of similarly minded who escape to this space for (individually defined) self-fulfillment and a new life, where recreation, rediscovery of the self and of one’s desires are possible in the context of transgenerational communal living. Harmony is strongly branded¹⁹ as a modern lifestyle community-product aspiring for holistic planning and sustainability, spreading a whiff of the New Urbanist smart-growth vision formulated for example by Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk as a walkable town accompanied by the battle cry: “Neighborhoods or nothing!” (243), of Jane Jacobs with her call for density and diversity to make a community work, or even of David Owen’s tripartite credo: live smaller, live closer, drive less (46-48). The center is envisioned as a “bustling European village” (Live in Harmony), pedestrian friendly, with quaint mom-and-pops, and transgenerational gathering places, surrounded by a lake, a golf course, and beautiful landscape; close to Calgary’s downtown, yet a bucolic peaceful retreat.²⁰ Tuan was right: “[I]dentity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life” (178). And in Harmony, the target residents will perform an ideal of individualized serene living with a rich variety of amenities and face-to-face contact, in (alleged) communal togetherness.

Although the concept “community” carries a deceptive quality of harmony and homogeneity which, in fact, rarely exists, and although the effectivity of the invocation of community is often “conservative, disciplining, and exclusionary” (Joseph xviii) – here there is a vision and narrative of just this looking for buyers and performers. Eager for internal

¹⁹ “The significance of developer brand indicates a preference for living among like people, with brand being a surrogate for income and preference for exclusivity and quality” (Woo and Webster 2550). Cf. Kerr and Oliver.

²⁰ The fact that Harmony will be situated in the immediate vicinity of Springbank Airport, Alberta’s second busiest airport, might make us wonder a little about the “Live in Harmony” theme. Springbank is a 24-hour, busy, and growing airport for smaller aircraft (Code A and Code B planes), with more than 150,000 aircraft movements in 2015 (Springbank Airport).

harmony and cohesion, these communal efforts automatically fall prone to measures of exclusion and potential discrimination:

[R]esidents and developers manipulate what is perceived as a positive value and employ it to exclude and identify others, often with negative and even racist consequences. [. . .] Further, these ‘purified communities’ redefine community as an intensely private realm, and in doing so, reinforce the boundaries of social acceptability and group acceptance in narrow, and discriminatory ways. (Low, “A multi-disciplinary framework” 198-99)

II.

Harmony’s most prominent and successful predecessors in collective lifestyle-oriented living are retirement or “active adult communities” for “Silverliners” or “Golden Agers,” people aged “55 or better.” And if we consider a number of trends, then the constant proliferation of 55+ communities is not the least surprising: “geriatrification” of Western societies, diversification of lifestyles, decrease of transgenerational geographical family togetherness, a high average degree of health and wealth.²¹ The 78 million Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, have had an impact on society that started with their childhood and continues through their transition into retirement. For the real estate business, a huge market has opened up since the late 1980s which has been catered to by the construction of retirement communities. The pioneer in this segment on a large and professional scale was Del Webb with Sun City in Arizona. In 1960 Sun City opened its gates; by 1977 it was the seventh largest city in Arizona with 40,000 residents. Webb then built an additional settlement, Sun City West, for another 30,000 retirees. Today, Sun City, Sun City West, and Sun City Grand are home to nearly 80,000 people (American FactFinder).

The pensioners’ general preferences are predictable: nice warm weather, low taxes, excellent health care and medical services, good infrastructure (connections to airports and Interstates), stable or increasing real estate prices as well as a low maintenance lifestyle. Add to this comfort zones of recreation (often golf), entertainment, distraction, harmony, and occasionally visions of eternal youth (cf. e.g. Bekhet et al.;

²¹ In 2015, some 83 million Americans were “55 and better” – 27.5% of a population of 321.4 million (US Census Bureau).

Crisp et al.; Graham and Tuffin).²² These soft factors are extremely powerful and feed into the emotionally charged concept and performed practice of community.

A fascinating contemporary example is the world's biggest retirement community, the gated geritopia (Blechman) The Villages – “Florida’s Friendliest Hometown” near Orlando (The Villages). In 2016, The Villages was again America’s fastest growing retirement community with a population of 110,000; by now, it is the size of Manhattan and has more golf cars than New York has taxis (Olorunnipa). The Villages is, like all other new developments, without a usable past, the members cannot re-member in a process of collective memory; the past is constructed by the creator/developer/owner in language and brick as a biographical narrative in the attempt to forge roots and identification. Centrally located, we find the large water basin styled as Ponce de León’s fountain of youth, because, according to local legend, León came through this very area during his famous quest. León’s fate falls prey to selective memory or an early form of Alzheimer’s. The mantra repeated all over in the promotional videos and materials are variations of one theme: rejuvenation in the Golden Years. You can be anyone you want to be. You can reinvent yourself. You stay young, healthy, energetic, fun-loving, and sex-loving²³ etc. No one anywhere mentions issues such as health plans and treatment facilities, strollers, hearing aids, incontinence, blood pressure-related issues such as cardiac arrests or strokes, diabetes, dementia, or, for that matter, death. Instead, “everything you could possibly want, need, or dream of doing in your retirement years, is just a golf car ride away” (The Villages). There is fun, sun, and entertainment galore (Rüb), in a garden Eden regained, in “*the place to live*” (The Villages promotional DVD, 2008). Active Adults go to great pains for a special and exclusive lifestyle, which also incorporates at times negations of age and aging, and attempts to deny one’s mortality. What happens here is the perversion of centripetal forces, the creation of ho-

²² The National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) and the MetLife Mature Market Institute (MMI) jointly completed a major research project that closely examined the 55+ population – many Boomers as well as older age cohorts – and their preferences in homes and communities, as well as the housing industry’s response to consumer demand. The first part of the research, *Housing for the 55+ Market: Trends and Insights on Boomers and Beyond*, was released in April 2009, the second, *55+ Housing: Builders, Buyers, and Beyond*, in September 2009. One of the most comprehensive reports dedicated to this market segment, the research included analysis of data from the most recent American Housing Surveys (AHS) from the US Census Bureau.

²³ A number of reports over the years have stated that the degree of STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) has risen decisively among the elderly. Cf. e.g. McCormack.

mogeneity which simultaneously excludes life “out there.” You can choose a limited number of homes, and one of the pitch selling arguments is, of course: “We guarantee that your home will be surrounded by a product line just like yours” (The Villages promotional DVD, 2008). 98% of the population identify as white, and social status comes via the preselective tool of real estate prices. One indicator is the omnipresent golf car which can easily cost some 15,000 US dollars (used!) (The Villages News). The Villages is quasi autonomous, provides all services and amenities and thus minimizes the inhabitants’ contact to the outside world. Most of the trips a senior makes are within The Villages, and all can be made with the golf car (Yoffe). All this taken together seems to create an enticing comfort zone, so constitutive of the common definition of the ideal community, leveling difference to prevent friction and to create harmony, friendliness, and peaceful neighborhoods, yet bordering on an eerie Stepford-meets-Little-Boxes-meets-Disneyland stereo-type.

The Villages is furthermore a company town and family operated with a highly complex organizational structure; the Morse family owns the local newspaper, radio station, and TV channel, and holds a controlling interest in Citizens First Bank. The holding company “is the landlord of more than 4.5 million square feet of commercial real estate, including dozens of restaurants and retailers”; and they sell homes, too (Olorunnipa). Andrew Blechman has summarized it very succinctly: “You name it; they probably own it” (111). Visitors receive a pass with a bar code with a “best before” date which functions like a visa; it determines the maximum number of days you are allowed to stay on the premises: thirty days per year (The Villages n. pag.). Age segregation is real. One chops off one’s roots and revokes the trans-generational contract. This contract is substituted by highly regulated life with common interest groups to celebrate the Golden Years individually, fueled by the silent hope that the Golden Years might be Golden Decades. Life is in the *hic et nunc. Carpe diem*. 55+ communities are thus a discursive lifestyle practice of ex- as well as inclusion based on enclaves of real estate property, drawing disciplining lines as well as discriminatory borders.

III.

It remains to be seen whether this growth of geritopias will continue on this scale. The Baby Boomer cohort is very diverse in itself, and so is its retirement experience. Some recent analyses show a trend towards lifestyle or retirement communities in Costa Rica (Guanacaste), Guatemala, and Ecuador (Cuenca) – a new form of transnational mobility and agency, a form of geographic arbitrage where people sell their labor in high-cost labor countries and then buy labor power, goods, and services in low-cost labor countries (Hayes; Van Noorloos and Steel). However, lifestyle migration is not a phenomenon restricted to snowbirds or empty-nesters. The general idea to shop for a lifestyle, and to express oneself via belonging to an ex- and inclusive “commudity,” has not abated. There is a future for Harmony.

All CID communities, whether age segregated, themed, or not, are first and foremost investment projects and lifestyle products. They are created/constructed by developers, architects, and builders, and sold to consumers. The sales pitch is a combination of exclusive assets such as leisure, golf, and other amenities. These are priced into the real estate as premiums. Thus they cater to a particular segment of a buyers’ market – comparable income/affluence, similar leisure activities – and create or predetermine at least a thin veneer of homogeneity and communal interest. Nonetheless and indisputably, internal difference and friction often exist despite all efforts to curtail them via elaborate CC&Rs. These found an alternative world whose rules and regulations tend to be more restrictive than any encountered in life “outside”: “We have a generation in this country that doesn’t know you should be able to paint your house any color you want” (Louv in McKenzie 144). CIDs are topographic manifestations of strategic alliances bundling a number of interests many individuals have; they are thus not only a constant process, but also a number of communities/shared relationships in one. Community in this case is very space/place centered, a place onto which – with Bauman²⁴ – a cluster of emotions and fantasies, dreams and desires is projected, boxed as a real estate product often with an amenities package that comes at an extra premium; a “commudity.”

During the summer of 2013, Calgary had been hit by a terrible flood of the Bow River and its tributaries. The Stampede grounds were de-

²⁴ “In short, ‘community’ stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us – but which we would dearly wish to inhabit and which we hope to repossess” (Bauman 3).

stroyed, the Saddle Dome was flooded. The damage turned out to be so severe that a demolition of the entire site was deliberated. But The Stampede took place and ran under the appropriate battle cry: “Hell or High Water.” 2.4 million Canadian dollars were donated to the Canadian Red Cross Alberta Flood Fund through the sale of some 150,000 T-Shirts with just this slogan (Toneguzzi). Considering how seriously the city of Calgary and its inhabitants were affected by the flood, the idea of a brand new Dream Home acquired even more allure and the dream aspect of it transformed from a lifetime achievement ideal or simply a nice-to-have to one of socio-economic survival. Many insurance companies denied payments to people who had settled in flood endangered areas. Many did not even have insurance – either due to lack of personal funds or due to insurers’ abjuration of coverage for properties built in the Bow River valley (Nelson; *The Canadian Press*). In this context, the 2013 Dream Home could, indeed, be the symbol for a new start, a fresh opportunity, the prospect to move out of destruction, destitution, and homelessness into a new life. It could be more than just a real estate flip or a cashed-in prize. If community might indeed be located in the “contingent practices of everyday involvements in which reason and emotion are not so easily separated” (Brydon in Brydon and Coleman 252), then the Dream Home might be hope and prospects for a better future where a house can be converted into a home and a commodity might, indeed, become, through processes of constant (re)negotiations, if not a community, then at least a pleasant neighborhood.

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