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Autor:	Simpson, Deane
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RV Urbanism

Nomadic Network Urbanism of the Senior Recreational Vehicle Community in the US

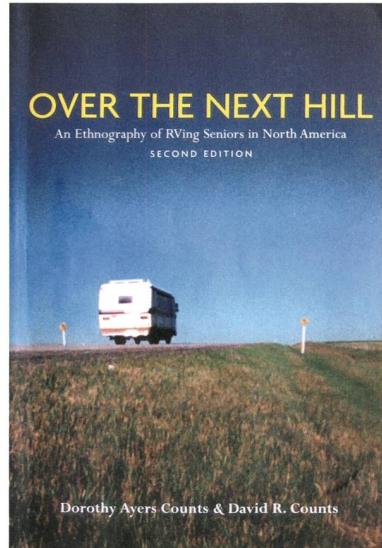
Deane Simpson

In 1963 Buckminster Fuller proposed the end of urbanism as it was typically understood at the time. In a contemporary age of hyper-mobility, Fuller deemed “the notion of self-contained permanent settlements obsolete.” Instead, he outlined “an urban strategy termed ‘unsettlement,’ consisting of a network of hyper-mobile nomadic bodies operating at the scale of the entire world connected through invisible radio links.”¹ Fuller in this case inadvertently described a form of urbanism that would emerge as a reality on an unimagined scale thirty years later.

Between 1990 and 1994, anthropologists Dorothy and David Counts conducted field research into an emerging social formation that would lead to their 1996 publication *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*: “While young people have been spending their energy in sedentary pursuits, buying homes in the suburbs, working in factories and offices, and raising kids, a generation of elders have become nomads. [...] There are literally millions of them. Nobody knows how many because there is no way to count them, but millions (two or three millions appears to be a conservative estimate) do not just leave home to wander a few months of the year. These people live in those motor homes or trailers, they have no other home.”²

This article will address the contemporary phenomenon of the senior Recreational Vehicle Community in the United States as a realization of a specific form of nomadic network urbanism – one literally in-transit – that challenges established urban spatial logics. While nomadic communities are clearly not a new occurrence, one of this size, sophistication and connectivity is unprecedented. Its population – supported by two-way satellite internet – is equivalent to that of a large US metropolitan area (Seattle for example) or twice that of the metropolitan area of Zurich. It continues to grow at a rapid rate – with the expectation that it will more than triple in size over the next 20 years as the Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement age – anticipating a future nomadic city greater in population than the largest city in the US.³ Nomadism – traditionally defined as the negation of sedentary urbanism – will be framed here as an alternate urban formation supported by both physical and non-physical network infrastructure. Within the logic of Manuel Castells’ ‘space of flows,’ the RV will be defined as both network node and network flow – producing an urban field of dense social connectivity of mostly physically disconnected nomadic inhabitants.

A Recreational Vehicle, or RV, is defined as a “vehicle that combines transportation and living quarters for travel, recreation, and camping.”⁴ There are essentially two categories of RVs: towable and motorized. (See diagram attached.) The towable RV is designed to be towed by a motorized vehicle (auto, van, or pickup truck).⁵ Towable RVs most commonly fit into the categories of travel



Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, cover.

Left page: RVs, Quartzsite / Arizona, close up aerial photograph, photo by Deane Simpson, 2008.

1 Buckminster Fuller, “Delos I Conference. 1963,” cited in: Mark Wigley, *Network Fever. GreyRoom 04*, Cambridge/MA: MIT Press Summer 2001, pp. 121–122.

2 Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, p. 15.

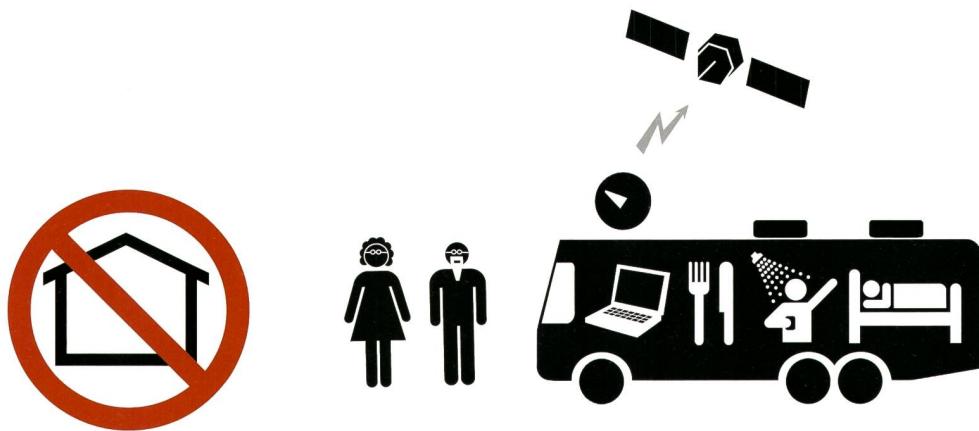
Counts and Counts note that historically it has been very difficult to quantify the population of RVers in the US with any level of precision as the US census has no specific category for RV or motor home residences. Estimates are based upon a combination of Industry sales figures, industry questionnaires, and partial censuses.

3 The Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (RVIA) anticipates massive industry growth based on Baby Boomer ageing. In: www.rvia.org, retrieved April 12th, 2006.

4 Definitions supplied by the RVIA, *Ibid.*

5 A towable RV is also “of a size and weight small enough so as not to require a special highway movement permit. It does not require permanent on-site hook-up.” In: RVIA, *Ibid.*

6 Definitions supplied by: RVIA, *Ibid.*



Fulltime RV Nomad Concept, diagram by Deane Simpson, 2006.

7 It is worth noting that the term RV does not extend to mobile homes, off-road vehicles, or snowmobiles. A Mobile Home for example is “essentially a moveable house – often 10 (3,0 m) or 12 feet (3,7 m) in width – and can only be moved by a large tractor.” Mobile homes are commonly located in permanent trailer parks.

See: Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, p. 315.

8 See: “RV Living Survey,” in: *Ibid.*, p. 283.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

10 “University of Michigan RV Study commissioned by the RVIA”, 2005, published on the RVIA website: www.rvia.org, retrieved April 12th, 2006.

11 Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, p. 148.

Counts and Counts carried out a questionnaire of RVers in the mid-1990s. They found that 86% of serious and fulltime RVers are aged 56 or older. 79% were retired. Average ages of RVers for various surveys range from 63,4 for men, 60,9 for women. A 1993 survey of lotholders at an RV co-op park were 65,8 years old on average. A study of the membership of the Family Motor Coach Association (FMCA, a club for motor home owners) depicts the average RV owner as a retired 63 year old man or 60 year old woman with some college education. A 1993 Recreational Vehicle Industry Association study found that the typical motor home owner was 63 years old. The highest ownership rates of RVs on the US population were people aged 55–64, 16% of whom owned RVs. The next highest ownership rates were 12,8% of those aged 65–74. Of people aged 75 and over, 43,4% owned RVs.

12 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, Frans Rosenthal (trans.), Princeton: Princeton University Press 1967, p. 118.

13 Nomadic societies – especially pastoralists and hunter-gatherers have undergone considerable decline during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to a series of technological, economic and political transformations. These included: the increasing dominance of the political goals of the nation state which led to more rigid policing of national boundaries; the emergence of technologies that resulted in weakening the relative military power of the nomadic people and also their political autonomy; and the development of alternative forms of transportation which made areas only previously accessible to nomads accessible to others. See: Thomas Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative*, Englewood Cliffs/NJ: Prentice Hall 1993.

trailers and fifth-wheel trailers. The motorized RV is a “recreational camping and travel vehicle built on or as an integral part of a self-propelled motor vehicle chassis. It may provide kitchen, sleeping, and bathroom facilities and be equipped with the ability to store and carry fresh water and sewage.”⁶ Motorized RVs most commonly take the form of motorhomes. The larger class A motorhomes can be up to 8,5 feet wide, 45 feet long and 13 feet high (2,6 m w x 13,7 m l x 4,0 m h). With ‘slide-out’ expanding walls on both sides of a motorhome, its width can expand to up to 14 feet (4,3 m), producing a home on wheels of up to 500 sqf (46 sqm) in floor area.⁷ In the US, RVs are not only seen as luxury items for the wealthy – fulltime RVers represent a wide cross-section of income levels.⁸ The cost of new RVs are in the range of \$4'000–\$100'000 for trailers and \$48'000–\$400'000 for motor homes – used-RVs can be much less expensive.

The RV is a 20th Century invention. It originated with the first modern automobile trailer dated as early as 1906 in England (effectively two wheeled copies of the gypsy caravan). Its ancestors in the US were the early homes on wheels that included covered wagons and horse drawn caravans, and camping rigs such as the automobile camper and the tent- and cloth-top camper. Earlier commercially available RVs were predominantly towable. The ‘Curtis Aerocar’ in the 1920s was the first commercially produced trailer in the US – foreshadowing modern *fifth-wheel trailers*.⁹ The Airstream became one of the most popular trailers after this period, becoming available in 1936. Early motorhomes were the result of custom conversions of automobiles and buses – they only became commercially available in the US in 1956. The first was the VW van camper, followed by the Chevrolet and Ford van campers and the Dodge house-car in 1961. The first large scale mass-produced motorhomes by Winnebago Industries in 1966. The ‘Winnebago’ became extremely popular, and was the most commonly used term in the 1970s and 1980s to refer to motorhomes. The Recreational Vehicle Industry Association (founded in 1963) promoted considerable growth in RV ownership in recent decades. As of 2005, there were an estimated 8,2 million RVs on the roads in the US, and approximately 30 million ‘RV enthusiasts.’ RV ownership has been particularly high in the upper age-groups – with 8,6% of US households over the age of 55 owning RVs.¹⁰

Three primary categories of RV lifestyle exist: Vacationers, Snowbirds, and Full-Timers. Each is classified according to the duration of time spent in an RV throughout a year. Vacationers own or rent a sedentary residence, spending the majority of their time there, and vacation in an RV for a period typically numbering in weeks. Snowbirds maintain a sedentary residence, in which they typically reside during the summer months – travelling south in an RV in the winter months. Snowbirds, who are predominantly retirees, spend between 4 and 8 months of the year in an RV. Full-Timers relinquish their sedentary

Winnebago, *RV Interior*, photo by Winnebago, 2006.



residence, adopting a full year-round nomadic lifestyle. Full-timers – the vast majority (approx. 80%) of whom are both elderly and retired – are the particular focus of this research.¹¹

Nomadism

Nomadism has traditionally always been defined in opposition to sedentary society. In the preeminent text on traditional nomadism: *The Muqaddimah*, medieval Arab social historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1408) described the two fundamentally different environments in which all human cooperation and social organization developed: a) the desert life of nomadic tribal societies and b) the sedentary life of towns and agricultural villages. For Khaldun, “the very nature of their [nomadic] existence is the negation of building, which is the basis of civilization.”¹² The nomad, or the nomadic society, has therefore traditionally been perceived as anti-urban – as mobile ‘other,’ functioning outside of the construction of the state apparatus and sedentary society.

Historically, three kinds of nomads have existed: hunter-gatherers, pastoral nomads, and peripatetic nomads. Nomadic hunter-gatherers follow seasonally available wild plants and game, and practice the historically most established subsistence method. Pastoralists raise animal herds and move with them to prevent pasture depletion in any single area. Peripatetic nomads, common in more developed nations, travel from place to place offering a trade wherever they go.¹³

RVers function in a similar fashion to the three forms of traditional nomadism inasmuch as they do not reside in a ‘fixed’ dwelling – instead moving from place to place on a predominantly seasonal basis.¹⁴ However, as they do not rely on nomadic behavior for subsistence or survival, but as a mode of leisure-oriented lifestyle, RVers would therefore suggest the need for a fourth term: leisure nomads.

Leisure nomadism and the emergence of senior RV urbanism in the US may be understood in the context of wider demographic, sociological and cultural transformations. These include: a) the widespread ageing of the population, and the subsequent emergence of a new ‘third age’ – a new generation of ‘young old’ who no longer work, but enjoy extended years of good health;¹⁵ b) the process Ulrich Beck terms individualization – referring to the increasing freedom of the individual over the constraints of traditional social structures;¹⁶ and, in turn, c) an intensive shift in social organization in societies from a production-based culture of work to a consumption-based culture of leisure, foregrounding the concept of lifestyle.¹⁷ These transformations are described in more detail below:

RV TYPES

A. TOWABLE



FOLDING CAMPING TRAILER



TRUCK CAMPER



TRAVEL TRAILER



5TH-WHEEL TRAVEL TRAILER

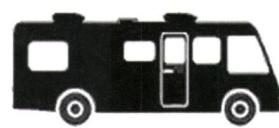
B. MOTORIZED



TYPE-C MOTORHOME

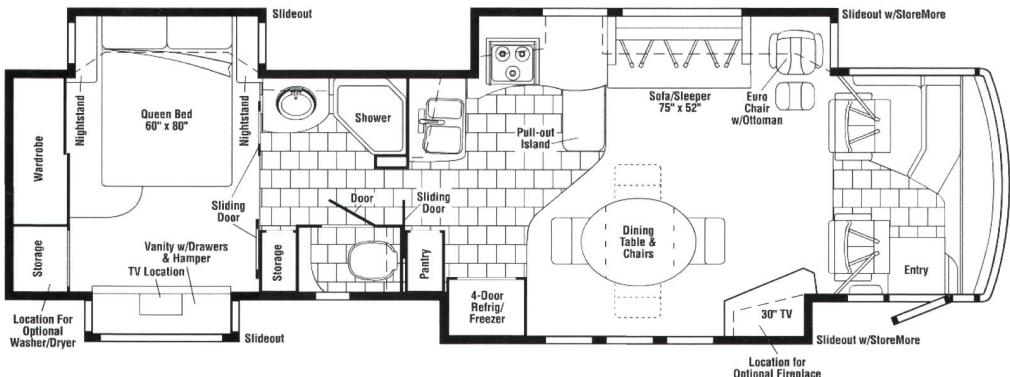


TYPE-B MOTORHOME



TYPE-A MOTORHOME

RV types catalogue, by RVIA, 2006.



Winnebago, RV, floor plan, 2006.

14 "In mountainous areas nomads may spend the winter in the lowlands, move to the foothills in the spring, to the high mountain pastures in the summer, and return in the fall. If they attempted to stay in any one place the whole year-round, they would soon find themselves both short of pasture and subject to climatic extremes that their animals could not easily survive: in the winter the highlands are covered in snow, in the summer, the lowlands are extremely hot." In: Thomas Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative*, Englewood Cliffs / NJ: Prentice Hall 1993, p. 12.

The RV analogue to this situation involves those who spend the colder winter months in the southern states such as Florida or Arizona, and the hotter summer months in the northern states.

15 Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life. The Emergence of the Third Age*, Cambridge / MA: Harvard University Press 1989.

16 See: Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage 1992.

See also: Andreas Huber / Karen O'Reilly, "The Construction of Heimat under Conditions of Individualized Modernity. Swiss and British elderly Migrants in Spain," in: *Ageing and Society* (2004), No. 24, Cambridge University Press, pp. 327–351.

17 David Chaney, *Lifestyles. Key Ideas*, London: Routledge 1996.

18 U.N. DESA, *Population Division. World Population to 2300*, New York: U.N. 2004, pp. 195–196.

19 U.N. DESA, *Population Division. World Population Ageing 1950–2050. Report 2002*, New York: U.N. 2002, pp. 195–196.

20 Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 69.

21 Peter Laslett, *A Fresh Map of Life. The Emergence of the Third Age*, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press 1989, p. 4.

22 Andrew Blaikie, *Ageing and Popular Culture*, Cambridge/UK: Cambridge University Press 1999, p. 69.

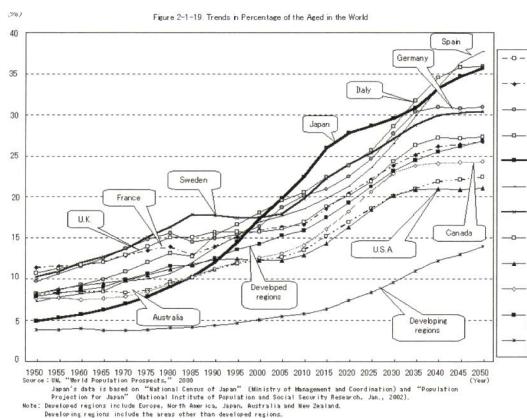
23 Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage 1992.

Also see the excellent description of similar social transformations related to retirement migration on the Spanish coast by: Andreas Huber / Karen O'Reilly, "The Construction of Heimat under Conditions of Individualized Modernity. Swiss and British elderly Migrants in Spain," in: *Ageing and Society* (2004), No. 24, pp. 327–351.

a) Ageing. The phenomenon of population ageing according to the UN is unprecedented in the history of humanity. This extensive 'graying' of the world in the past half century has been driven predominantly by both an increase in human life expectancy and a decrease in human fertility rates. As an indication, from 1950 to 2000, the world's average life-expectancy increased from 45 to 63 years and is projected to reach 73 years by 2050, whilst the world's average fertility rate of children per female decreased from 5.02 to 2.69 from 1950 to 2000 and is projected to reach 1.96 by 2050.¹⁸ Rather than being a temporary local event, population ageing is defined by the UN as an enduring global one, likely to have profound consequences on all facets of human life, from the social to the economic, from the political to the urban.¹⁹ Despite being a 'younger' country than many of the western European nations, the US is also encountering a significant growth in its over 60 population.

In parallel to the widespread expansion of the elderly population is the extension of the period of time that the elderly are living in a healthy and active condition. For the first time ever, according to the sociologist Andrew Blaikie, this is leading to "the emergence of a large (and potentially vast) social group whose daily experiences do not consist of work or schooling – at least, not in the traditional sense of socialization for work – and who, crucially, can expect to live up to a third of their lives in this state."²⁰ This has supported a shift away from the conventional three-phase life stages consisting of childhood, adulthood, and old age. Whereas in the past, the third age was seen as a period of decommissioning and institutionalization of the elderly, the social historian Peter Laslett proposes a shift toward a four-phase life-course through the bifurcation of the third phase. Following the conventional first and second ages of childhood and adulthood is a "third era of personal fulfillment, and a fourth era of final dependence, decrepitude, and death."²¹ Similarly, Blaikie describes these new Third and Fourth Ages as those of the 'young old' and the 'old old,' or of extended active leisure (independence) followed by a shorter period of decay and senility (dependence).²² The leisure nomads of RV urbanism are clearly a product of this new Third Age.

b) Individualisation. The process that the German sociologist Ulrich Beck calls individualisation refers to the social transformation occurring in Western countries in recent decades in which dominant traditional social hierarchies have become increasingly subordinated to individual choice and freedom.²³ This supports a progressively more differentiated and pluralistic society. Full-time senior RVers are clearly tied to this process – they consciously decide not to perform the traditional roles of sedentary retirees, whether as the central member of an extended family structure or in another expected role (grandparents take flight.) This individual freedom is linked also to the third aspect of transformation: the increasing weight placed upon lifestyle.



Trends in percentage of the aged in the World, in: UN: *World Population Prospects*, 2000.



THREE-PHASE LIFE-COURSE
(TRADITIONAL)



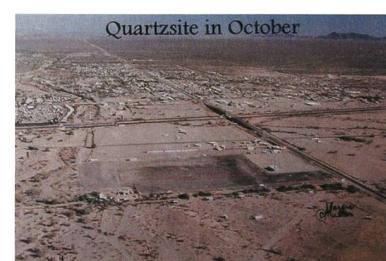
FOUR-PHASE LIFE-COURSE
(1969 PETER LASLETT (SOCIAL HISTORIAN), A FRESH MAP OF LIFE: THE EMERGENCE OF THE THIRD AGE)

New Third Age, diagram by Deane Simpson (after Peter Laslett), 2006.

c) Lifestyle. The emergence of the term coincides, according to the sociologist David Chaney, with the mid-20th century shift in social organization from a production-based culture of work to a consumption-based culture of leisure.²⁴ For Chaney, lifestyle is a distinctly modern form of social grouping, based upon modes of consumption. Chaney here uses the term consumption to refer to "all the types of social activity that people do that we might use to characterize and identify them, other than (or in addition to) what they might 'do' for a living."²⁵ The elderly – who generally no longer function as producers, but primarily as consumers, are the exemplary subjects of this shift from a societal mode of production to consumption – retirees are the emblematic lifestyle subjects.

The phenomenon of population ageing in the developed world is exacerbated by the arrival at retirement age of the generation known as the 'Baby Boomers.' Born between 1945 and 1965, this generation emerged, in the US especially, at a time of major social and economic change. The shift from the war-time logic of military production to a peace-time logic of domestic consumption coincided with an intensive period of (sub)urbanized development, producing the first generation in the US that was predominantly urban rather than rural – one fully integrated into a quickly developing global media culture. This period also saw the development of urbanism as a consumer-based lifestyle product incorporating mass production, and mass lifestyle-marketing – Levittown would be the most emblematic example of this. Marketing associated with RVs is predominantly couched in terms of lifestyle – and it is the most common term used to describe RVing.²⁶ The arrival at retirement age of the Baby Boomer generation suggests also an impending explosion of new leisure nomads in the next two decades.

The three traditional forms of nomadism align to a particular spatial model that functions in contrast to that which is defined as sedentary space. Several accounts are relatively consistent in their description of how nomads operate spatially.²⁷ Nomad space is characterized by the dominance of the trajectory of movement (pathway or line) over the destination (node or fixed point). Points are secondary – inasmuch as one is arrived at only to be left behind. Therefore, the space between points is critical. This functions in contrast to sedentary space that privileges the fixed point over the line. This is no clearer than in the definition Counts and Counts offer for the senior RVer disease known as 'Hitch Itch': "After a week or two in one place they begin to feel its symptoms – restlessness and dissatisfaction. Once it starts, the only recourse is to hitch up the rig and head down the road. The relief is only temporary. The next time the sufferer is in one place for a while, he or she will suffer a relapse."²⁸ The nomad functions according to a territorial occupation of space rather than one that is codified, divided, and controlled. Nomad space is defined by character-



Quartzsite/Arizona, postcards, Source: Marcia Miller, in: http://www.dakinvisions.com/dakini/b_pages/quartzsite/quartzsite.html, state 2006.



Destination Boondocking, Wal-Mart, Arizona, photo by Deane Simpson, 2008.

RV satellite dishes for TV and two-way internet, Quartzsite, photo by Deane Simpson, 2008.



istics rather than borders, as in the case of sedentary space. The nomadic trajectory that defines a line differs from the sedentary route. It distributes people in an open borderless space without fixed enclosure, in contrast to the function of the sedentary road that divides precise shares of space, controlling communication between the individual properties. Nomads therefore, according to these accounts, promote a form of space that is both indefinite and non-communicating.

It is precisely this non-communicating aspect of nomad space that is challenged by the contemporary leisure nomad. The wider systems of infrastructure of the RVer support a high level of inter-connectivity – suggesting the possibility to define this spatial formation as a form of network urbanism – albeit a highly decentralized one. This infrastructure takes on two primary forms: one physical and (more importantly) one that could be described as non-physical. Each is constituted by a system of autonomous elements (points or nodes) and relations (lines) – forming a network supporting the flow of material or information.

Network (P)

The physical RVing infrastructure is essentially a fixed system. It consists of two main elements: firstly, the road and highway system (constituting a system of lines or circuits); and secondly, the parking/camping sites for vehicles (constituting a series of points or nodes.) The RV vehicles themselves operate as mobile elements that flow within the physical network.

The road and highway system in the US is a critical aspect of RVing infrastructure as the vehicles have limited off-roading capabilities. Operating as a system of lines, it is formed by overlaying the various road and highway networks including the primary roads of the Interstate Highway System, and the secondary and tertiary roads of the various state and county systems. The sheer scale and extent of the road system is an important factor in the growth of the RVing lifestyle in the US. For example: the Interstate Highway System is the largest highway system in the world at 42'787 miles (68'860 km) in length, and is ten times larger than the next largest highway network (Germany). The US National Highway System, incorporating the Interstate Highway System and other principal roads is a total of 160'000 miles (256'000 km) long.²⁹

Parking and camping sites function as a series of infrastructural nodes within the US road and highway system. These nodes are either formal or informal sites. Formal campsites include: public parks, membership or coop parks, and private parks. As of 2005, there were over 16'000 public and privately owned park/campground sites in the US, operating as a series of nodes within the road and highway system. Privately-owned campgrounds include chains such as

24 "Lifestyle. Definition: the way of life that is typical of a person, group, or culture." Cited in: *World English Dictionary*, Seattle: Encarta 1999.

25 David Chaney, *Lifestyle. Key Ideas*, London: Routledge 1996, p. 14.

26 Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996.

27 The logic of nomad space is described extensively by: Gilles Deleuze / Felix Guattari, *Nomadology. The War Machine*, New York: Semiotext(e) 1986, pp. 50–51.

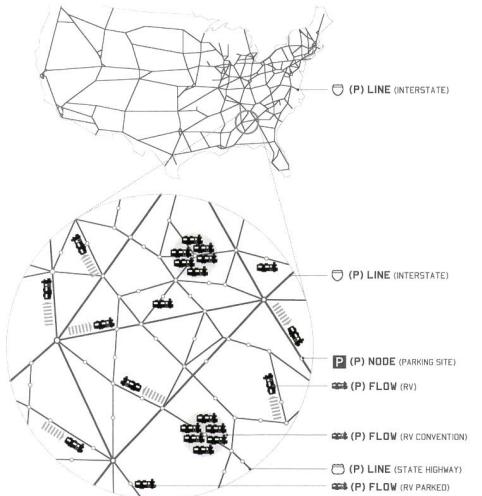
See also: Thomas Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative*, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs/NJ 1993.

See also: Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, Frans Rosenthal (trans.), New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1967.

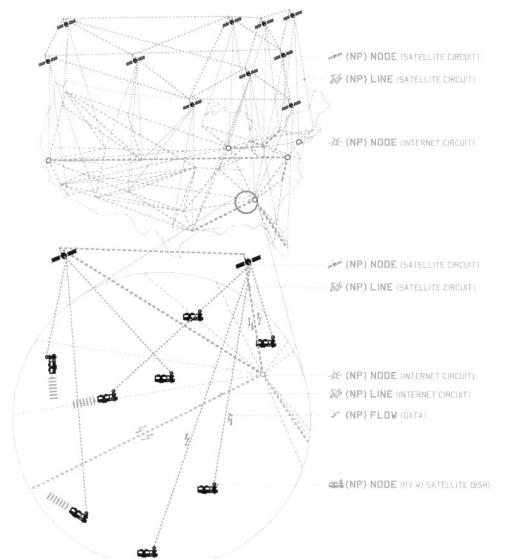
See also: Jibrail S. Jabbur, *The Bedouins and the Desert*, Lawrence Conrad (trans.), New York: State University of New York Press 1995.

28 Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, pp. 313–314.

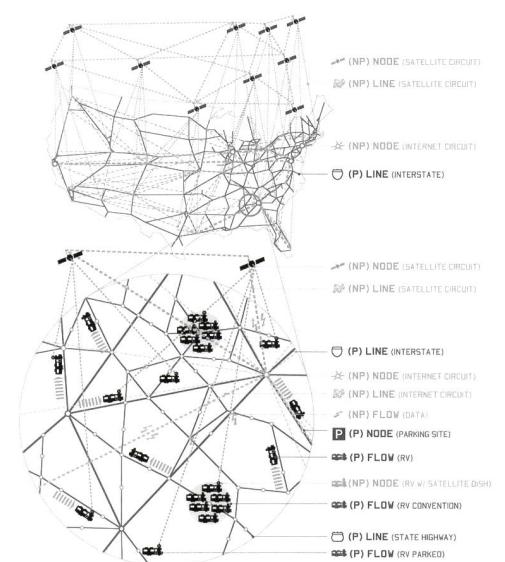
29 Federal Highway Administration Website, www.fhwa.dot.gov/hep10/nhs/, state 2006.



RV network (physical infrastructure), diagram by Deane Simpson, 2006.



RV network (non-physical infrastructure), diagram by Deane Simpson, 2006.

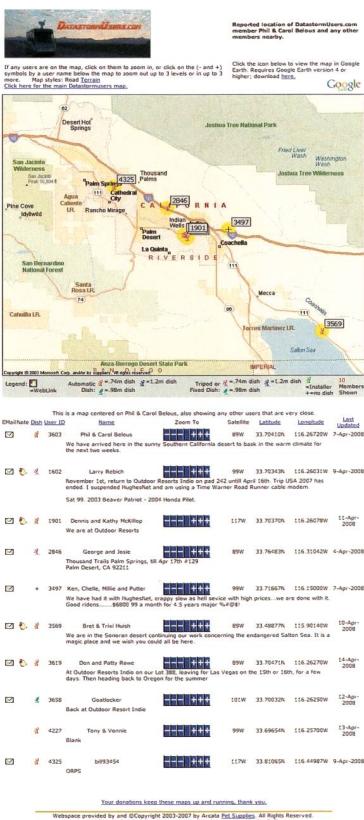


RV network (physical & non-physical infrastructure overlaid), diagram by Deane Simpson, 2006.

the Kampgrounds of America (KOA) a franchised RV park group. RV Membership Parks are profit-making associations of affiliated parks that offer sites on a time-share basis. RVers pay annual membership fees for inexpensive but limited period use of sites. Public campgrounds include city or federally owned and operated sites. Formal sites typically offer what is referred to as a hook-up. A hook-up supplies electricity and water and sometimes sewerage services directly to the RV. Informal sites do not offer these services. Common informal sites are Long-term Visitor Areas (LTVA) that are administered by the US Department of the Interior. These sites are available to 'boondockers' – or those who stay in areas where there are no power or water hook-ups and no charge for occupying the space (for up to six months). The term comes from the phrase 'docking (parking) out in the boonies (remote areas).' The majority of RVs are equipped to boondock – this requires self-contained water and waste disposal tanks and a 12-volt electrical system, which for long-term boondockers is normally powered by either solar panels or a generator.³⁰

The points or nodes in the network vary greatly in size: from single RVs parking alone or in small groups on a remote site, to temporary physical cities numbering up to one million people. Notable informal sites include Quartzsite, Arizona – a small desert town approximately 50 miles (80 km) north of Yuma. Its population of several hundred expands in the winter months, typically peaking at over one million in February. The majority of winter RVers at Quartzsite boondock on US government designated Long-Term Visitor Areas. SlabCity is an abandoned US military base near Niland, California. It is named after the concrete foundation slabs for temporary (now demolished) WWII buildings. While some RVers live there permanently, the area is most densely populated with RV residents from November or December until early March.³¹

These points or nodes do not only exist in what is traditionally understood as 'non-urban' areas. In many cases RV sites are embedded within existing urban fabric – operating on an unwritten 'timeshare' basis. The sight of RVs parked in supermarket or big-box retail parking lots is the most visible form of this – Wal-Mart is a common free parking site. This phenomenon is commonly referred to as destination boondocking, as it involves parking for temporary overnight accommodation along the way to a distant destination. According to one RVer, these sites include "in the winter, hotel/motel parking lots. In the summer, school yards. Anywhere else that is quiet and that we won't be in anyone's way. Shopping centers, church parking lots (except on Saturday night), and our all-time favorites are old roads that have been straightened. They are often level, drive-in and drive-out, paved and quiet. Also gravel pits, boat launches, etc."³² This leads to the informal and temporary inhabitation and transformation of existing urban sites – effectively the generation of a thin nomadic layer increasingly infiltrating fixed, built-up urbanity.



Automatic reported locations (close up),
source: <http://map.datastormusers.com>, retrieved April 2008.

30 Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, p. 311.

31 Ibid., p. 86.

There is no fee for staying at Slabcity.

32 Ibid., p. 173.

33 Bill Farlow, "1995 Summary of RV Features Survey at Spring Escapade 1994," in: *Escapées Magazine for RVers* (1994), No. 17, p. 20–21. Farlow found that two thirds of the respondents reported to have a computer on board their rigs. Cited in Dorothy Ayers Count / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, p. 148.

Network (NP)

The non-physical RVing infrastructure consists of two main elements: firstly the (mobile) RV-based communication equipment (computer and two-way satellite internet technology) in which each moving vehicle operates as a node or point; and secondly, the series of circuits or lines of communication – in particular the web-based RV club sites and the internet that supports them. This infrastructure serves as a platform for the flow of information between RVers. It supports a high level of social connectivity, constructing a dispersed urban field at the scale of the entire United States.

On-board RV communication equipment is increasingly sophisticated, and remarkably widely used amongst the senior RV community. As early as 1995, over two-thirds of full-timers had computers in their RVs.³³ While more recent figures are not readily available, it is estimated that this proportion has increased substantially. In addition to the increasing presence of portable and laptop computers, the majority of RVers now use two-way satellite internet access. With a satellite dish mounted to an RV, a user is able to access the internet from any remote location in the US with a view toward the southern sky. Two-way satellite internet allows the transmission and receipt of data from remote areas via satellite to a hub, which then sends the data to the internet. Download speed as of 2006 is up to 2 Mbps with contemporary satellite technology. Commercially available to consumers from the mid-1990s, satellite internet access has radically improved the ability of remote and mobile civilians to communicate.

In recent years, the dominant staging area of RV communities – typically known as RV Clubs – has become the internet. RV Clubs are one of the central aspects of the RVing lifestyle. As of 1994, the RVIA listed 12 'national' RV clubs and 32 clubs organized for owners of RVs of particular brand-names. These numbers have grown substantially since then. Clubs not only organize yearly or seasonal rallies and conventions but also keep members in close communication through newsletters and magazines – many clubs supply park spaces and some redirect mail. In general the clubs have increasingly cemented a web-based presence with forums, chatrooms, info sites, etc. Forums offer support on travel itineraries, technical issues, buying and selling RVs, RVer dating, RV friendly recipes, discount RV merchandise, security tips, rallies and conventions etc. The largest and most well-known RV community is the Good Sam Club, founded in 1966 to allow RVers to get to know and help one another. It publishes Highways Magazine and has a considerable web presence on www.goodsamclub.com. As of July 2006, there were over 1'000'000 Good Sam Club members. Large rallies of the Club are known as *Samborees*. Escapees was one of the first RV clubs exclusively for full-time RVers. It was founded in 1978 and as of early 2006 it had 65'000 members. It has two large-scale rallies each year known as *Escapades*.³⁴ Many other clubs are based upon RV brands (but generally offer the same serv-



ices such as networking, newsletters, mail forwarding etc.) – these include the Winnebago-Itasca Travelers (WIT) with 19'000 members in 2006.³⁵

Camp-fire, Quartzsite/Arizona, photo by Deane Simpson, 2008.

Network (P + NP)

The overlaying of these two networks defines the RV as both a node and material flow. Whereas in a conventional network (characterized perhaps by our typical understanding of the internet for example) where human subjects operate as fixed points in (office or domestic) space, the RV suggests a more complex network of flowing nodes functioning both in the physical and non-physical realms, and in-between.

Manuel Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* describes in some detail a shift in the dominant mode of urbanism, a shift supported by the increasing prevalence of various types of networks.³⁶ Castells suggests the subordination of the traditionally defined urbanism of the ‘space of places,’ to that which he refers to as the ‘space of flows.’ For Castells, the ‘space of flows’ refers to the emerging spatial logic in which social interaction occurs in between others who are both absent and distant in time and space – in other words: living, inhabitation, and social connectivity transgress immediate physical distance. This suggests the possibility of perceiving the physically spread but densely networked mobile inhabitants of the RV community as a socially coherent urban field.³⁷

One of many Urbanisms

The nomadic senior RV community in the US must be understood in urban terms, rather than as a purely anti-urban phenomenon – or to use Fuller’s term, unsettlement need not imply the opposite of urbanity – but an alternate form of decentralized urbanity.

The interpretation of the phenomenon of RV urbanism within a wider framework would involve a negotiation between two opposing positions. On the one hand, the RV lifestyle could be perceived as a mass-consumed product supporting a second phase of American ‘escapism,’ after the first that began in the post-war period with the white middle-class abandoning the inner city for the suburbs.³⁸ The behavior of many of America’s largest generation – the Baby Boomers – could therefore be associated with two waves of urban migration – the first from the center to the periphery, and the second from the periphery to everywhere, and anywhere.³⁹ If the first wave of migration was driven by fears of violence and the loss of property value, and the promise of freedom in owning one’s own house and piece of land; then one could speculate that the second wave is driven by a fear of boredom, stasis and death, and the promise

³⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

See also: www.escapees.com, retrieved April 20th, 2006.

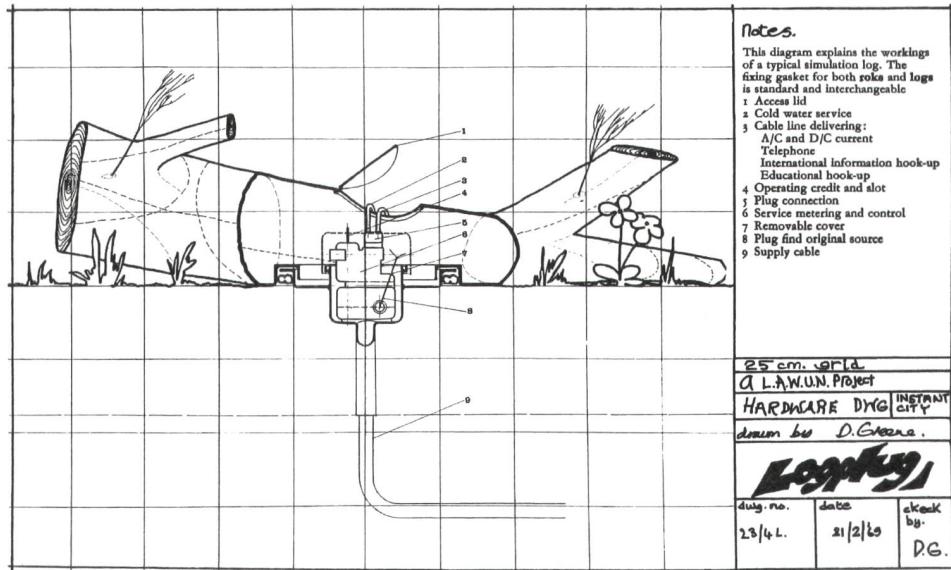
³⁵ In: <http://www.winnebagoind.com/clubs/wit/>, retrieved 2006.

³⁶ Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, London: Blackwell 1996.

³⁷ See: Penelope Dean, “Outback Metropolis. Time Sharing Urbanism in Architecture,” in: *Australia* (2000), No. January/February, pp. 86–91.

This article is indebted to Dean’s paper on the Australian Royal Flying Doctor Service as an important case study precedent in dispersed urbanism. According to Dean, given the rise of the network society “it seems necessary to rethink what urbanism is and how to practice it. The RFDS (Royal Flying Doctor Service) is an interesting example. Whilst it bears no historic reference to the evolution of the ‘city’ as we know it, it is an extreme example where minimum density is coupled with maximum social cohesion.” (see especially: p. 87) If the RFDS functions as a fixed decentralized network, the RV community operates as a mobile distributed network.

³⁸ See for his reading of American escapism: Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, London: Blackwell 1996, p. 400.



Archigram, *Logplug*, 1969.

Right page: Quartzsite/Arizona, aerial photograph 2008, photo by Deane Simpson.

39Archigram's David Green alludes to an extreme vision of this: "We will have to wait until the steel and concrete mausoleums of our cities, villages, and towns etc., decay and the suburbs bloom and flourish. They in turn will die and the world will perhaps again be a garden. And that perhaps is the dream, and we should all be busy persuading not to build but to prepare for the invisible networks in the air there." In: David Green, "Children's Primer," in: *Archigram. A Guide to Archigram 1961–1974*, London: Academy Editions 1994, p. 297, first published in: *Architectural Design* (1969), No. 5, pp. 276.

40Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, pp. 39–58. See chapter 2: Ageing, Retirement, and RVing.

41David Green, "Children's Primer" in: *Archigram. A Guide to Archigram 1961–1974*, London: Academy Editions 1994, p. 297, first published in: *Architectural Design* (1969), No. 5, pp. 276.

42In a letter to the *Escapees Newsletter*, Dave Weston compares the contemporary builders of Escapees co-op parks to early pioneers: "To me, we are the 'pioneers' of our century – building new communities where none have been before, and creating brand new social structures at the same time." In: Dorothy Ayers Counts / David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill. An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*, Ontario: Broadview Press 1996, pp. 95–96.

of freedom to live anywhere.⁴⁰ Both motives are undeniably tied to an individually-focused rather than collectively-focused view of the world.

RV urbanism, on the other hand, could be understood as a potentially liberating experiment – one challenging traditional social, economic, and urban models of collective life that have become increasingly limiting, and in certain cases obsolete. It could even be seen as a contemporary realization (literally in practice) of the early thought experiments of the architectural avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s – one that is paradoxically being realized by the demographic assumed to be the most conservative and least experimental. Perhaps unconsciously, RVers have picked up a thread that has been dropped during a period of highly conservative and reactionary urban practice. As Mark Wigley points out, the theorization of networks and network urbanism is not a recent phenomenon – but one with a strong history in the discourse of the 1960s, particularly in the work of Buckminster Fuller, Marshall McLuhan, and Constantin Doxiadis. These theoretical discussions and the discourse surrounding them also influenced a number of architects active in the 1960s and early 1970s. There are many parallels between these propositions and RV urbanism as it is being realized. Apart from the obvious connection to the statement of Fuller introduced at the beginning of this article, there are clear parallels also to the work of Archigram and projects such as *Walking City*, *Instant City*, *Underwater City*, *Living Pod*, and *Freetime Node*. The themes of networks, mobility, nomadism, and transience are recurring in their work, alongside a preoccupation in exploiting technology for the purpose of personal choice and freedom. In the 1969 text "Children's Primer" Archigram's David Green refers to trailer nomads as 'node-owners' plugged into camouflaged 'logplugs' and 'rokplugs' in the wilderness. Logplugs, for example, would offer vital services such as water and power, and most importantly what was referred to then as 'international information hookup' – an Archigram-ism for the yet to be invented internet. According to David Green: "Plugs will increase the service to these 'instant and remote' communities. [...] The whole of London or New York will be available in the world's leafy hollows, deserts, and flowered meadows."⁴¹ Imagined is a utopia formed from the collision of the most urban and the most anti-urban of conditions – one that the contemporary RV community we could say has at least partially realized – albeit as a work heavily in progress.⁴²

Deane Simpson is an architect currently based in Zürich. He is a Master's graduate from Columbia University, and from 1997 until 2003 was a project architect with Diller + Scofidio in New York. Simpson is currently teaching at the ETH Zürich, in parallel to conducting research and practice in architecture and urbanism.

