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A Trek through Pseudo-Utopia: Irvine, CA and Beyond

Irvine, California is a dream come true, a paradise of perfect weather, perfect tans, and perfect family values. Deemed by many the utopia of the postmodern age, Irvine revels in its reputation as the best of reformist suburbia, or postsuburbia as some prefer to call it. Located in the centre of Orange County, the home of Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm, Irvine brilliantly captures the theme park concept and applies it to everyday life.¹ Simulations and recreations of paradisiacal places abound. Do you want to live on Cape Cod? Why not try the Woodbridge neighbourhood. Southern France? The Mediterranean red tile roofs of Westpark are waiting for you. As Edward Soja, the famed geographer of Southern California, glibly remarks, "Orange County leads the way in the very contemporary competition to identify the Happiest Place on Earth.... Suspend disbelief for the moment... and enjoy the strangely familiar ride into paradigmatic postmodernity. It will soon be coming to your neighbourhood."² But is Irvine truly a model for utopia? What can we unearth from postmodern theory to explain the development of this "New Town" with its utopian aspirations? Further, what can we

discover in a drive through the spacious corridors and unique villages that can provide answers for future attempts at utopian design? Perhaps a dual journey, both theoretical and physical, may be in order.

My body, enlarged by the leaking prosthetic that is my ancient vehicle, speeds along the freeways that slice the sixty-mile city/suburb. The 91 to the 55 to the 405; the, to-my-mind, ridiculous “the” that graces the freeway signifiers takes nothing away from the power of the ten-lane exhaust tubes that dump us in our appropriate zones—zones that specify race, wallet girth, or square-feet owned. But I, daring as I am, exit in an inappropriate zone. Irvine, California: heart of Orange County, home of the security mom, the overachieving son, and the high-tech dad. A placeless place. The utopia of the white family. I join my too-porous, white, metallic body to a multitude of sleek, neatly sealed, silver and gold bodies of others and sweep by signs for Irvine’s famous “villages.” On a hunch, I turn onto West Yale Loop (I always wanted to go Ivy) and cruise through bird signs—Heron, Mallard, Whistling Swan—and land on Nighthawk. There, lurking by a curb, I find what I’m looking for. Not that I knew I was looking for it, but nevertheless there it sits. An empty Miller Genuine Draft beer can. Forlorn, abandoned, lost. Maybe waiting for another punctured leaking metal vessel. I chug, chortle, and groan to a stop by my find. My fleshly body unfolds from metal to sit by my newfound friend. I join my skin to the rough curb to ponder my companion’s out-of-placeness.

Irvine is a planned community. Planned as few communities have ever been

planned. The ultimate in the postmodernist, post-Fordist, post-history (Fukuyama-style), new urbanist design. Born through the machinations of the Irvine Company, a huge corporate entity that owns over sixteen per cent of all the land in Orange County,³ Irvine sprang up seemingly overnight in the 1960s when the University of California decided Irvine would be the perfect place for a new campus. William Pereira, hired by the Irvine Company to create a plan for the campus and a surrounding town of 10,000 acres, originally attempted a design for a 100,000-person population that avoided the spectre of large-scale sprawl. Martin Schliesl, a prominent historian of Southern California, claims that the Irvine Company looked with pleasure at Pereira's careful plans to secure the area from uncontrolled suburbanization. But suddenly in 1970 the plan for a small university town ballooned to incorporate space for 430,000 residents on 53,000 acres and concerns over sprawl quietly slipped into the background.⁴ Construction (and profit-making) began in earnest. Parks, greenbelts, a variety of housing types, recreational activities, and commercial and industrial corridors blossomed almost immediately under the loving gaze of the corporate parent and the city of Irvine became the heart of Orange County.

Enthusiasts of Irvine's theme-park lifestyle, such as Nicholas Bloom of Tulane University, dub places such as Irvine "powerful models of reform" or "a potential solution to the suburban crisis."⁵ Not exactly urban and not exactly suburban, Irvine rides a middle ground. Soja terms this ground "Exopolis" or the city without. Including all the amenities of city life, such as restaurants, cultural activities, movie theatres, etc., residents of Irvine have no need to run to Los Angeles for work or for play. High-tech, finance, real estate, and insurance firms litter the county conducting global business from a wonderfully local perspective. World-class music, dance, and sporting events occur mere

minutes away. And, best of all, families can live in their own freestanding palace on a respectable plot of land. Cynics beware! The Disneyland of life may just win you over. Even the critics drool at the postmodern possibilities that ooze from Irvine's pores, sometimes undermining their own critiques. Soja, as the guiltiest of these, borrows from Baudrillard to comment on the hyperreality of Orange County, but ends up lionizing such hyperreality in his vilification. Coining slippery phrases that lounge among the worst of ludic postmodernism, Soja gorges himself on Orange County as the ideal symbol of postmodernity's crisis. "To dig even deeper will bring us back to the surface," he purrs, "to an Orange County that continues to function symbolically as an exceedingly attractive lived space, undemystifiable because its (hyper)reality is mystification itself."⁶ Will I too find myself unwillingly lured toward this simulative wave of the future? And, after all, why not? It's attractive, beguiling, and what's more, it's inevitable.

I sit by my orphan friend, left, perhaps, by the construction workers slaving over the ideal four-bedroom house that sits empty across the street. I grow small and gaze around at the BMWs and Chevy Suburbans that line the streets. (I wonder what vehicles lurk inside the two-car garages). The gently curving avenues entice you to meander through the neighbourhood; the front doors open directly onto the street to foster interaction. But no one cavorts along these streets designed for "community." Doors remained tightly bolted discouraging the entrance of unwanted elements. My body, in its juncture between lived interiority and exteriority, wonders at the social relations to which it might connect in such a place. What would happen if I slipped myself through the door of that new house? Would my neighbour come by to welcome me with cookies?

*Would she come to make sure I was sufficiently safe (same) to be accepted? Would my body ease into the smart design (smart bomb) of my new abode with each efficient tool stored in an efficient place for efficient use? Would I cruise the rooms that hang Japanese-style prints and tasteful photographs eventually alighting on a muted divan with my martini in hand? Yanked back from my fantasy by footsteps, I cringe behind my metal prosthetic awaiting the certain security check. Click, click, the heels come closer. They slow. "Is that a comfortable place to sit?" she asks. Accused, I stammer and smile, "It's all right." She begrudgingly moves along wondering at her appropriate response to my intrusion. Surveilled, I guiltily slink back into my chrome extension. I have no doubt at my fate if I was a black man. Twenty questions and then a quick call to the local authorities. My unknown black body would have been too much of an inconsistency in a tightly controlled quarter. Back in the safety of my own home I wander the cyberworld for sites on Irvine and immediately encounter the surveilling methods at stake. In their own heightening words, "What does 'suspicious' look like?...Generally, anyone who seems slightly 'out of place' for an area or time of day may be considered suspicious, and possibly indicate criminal activity....While some suspicious situations could have innocent explanations, the Irvine Police Department would rather investigate than be called when it's too late."⁷ *The power, knowledge, and spatial control: a trilogy of safety to soothe.**

I hark back to a tale of an Irvine acquaintance. On a Saturday afternoon, she left her garage door open after inserting her shiny, boxy SUV. Two days later, a note. The authorities have been informed that your garage door was left open for longer than the allotted twenty minutes. Please be aware of your oversight and refrain from such

behaviour in the future. My skin crawls, my body retreats, I make a quick getaway.

While Soja might slide into a backhanded celebration of Irvine, not all postmodern analyses suffer such a fate. Hold up Irvine to a Foucauldian light and quite another picture emerges, one not so prone to confusion with utopia. In fact, Irvine's meticulous design and spacing, rigid homogeneity, and neighbourhood watch all conjure images directly from Foucault's unnerving view of the social order. A planned, overnight creation, Irvine figures as a premiere institution of spatial control. Each lot, each park, each tree, and each human exist on a master plan to guarantee Irvine's citizens a safe community and "peace of mind." A spatial grid locks each body into its appropriate place ensuring an accumulation of power and knowledge in an orderly system.⁸ A body out-of-place sounds the alarm of the surveilling security mom who is kept securely in the male-created master plan.

Yet somehow, everyday, more bodies vie to enter this confining system. In fact, residence in Irvine has become a highly sought-after goal; competing homeowners believe that this sublime spot will ensure their children's admittance to Stanford and their own inclusion in the golf game of global wealth. But, to enter, you must prove your financial worth; after all, not just anyone can be accepted. It's a simple test really; only one question. Can you afford a house or apartment with a median price tag of \$245,000?⁹ Yes, the perfect entrance exam to create homogeneity. And although a large number of Asians have snuck in (29 per cent by 2000), black admission has been kept to a reassuring 1.45 per cent.¹⁰ Even Nicholas Bloom, a cheerleader of the New Town, admits that Irvine is "an equality among equals... a democratic city for upper income

residents.”¹¹

What can we make of Irvine’s version of utopia? Shouldn’t we consider it more of a dystopia? Or possibly a heterotopia? In his extensively mined article “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault toys with notions of space, but particularly delves into what he calls the heterotopia of deviation. This spatial form consists of places “in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed.”¹² Certainly, on the surface, this appears to be the opposite of Irvine’s homogeneous, normalised reality. Yet, Foucault goes on to list the characteristics of his heterotopia of deviation contradicting himself along the way. For example, Foucault’s heterotopia, verging on Baudrillard’s simulacrum, functions as an illusory space that serves to expose every real space as an illusion. The theme park within a theme park that is Irvine provides these multiple layers of illusion as the uniform society convinces itself, as well as some from outside, of its own diversity. As Bloom points out, “[r]esidents are quite proud of living in what they consider to be a very diverse community....”¹³ Foucault also argues that heterotopias exist as both closed and penetrable spaces with compulsory and/or strenuous entrances and exits,¹⁴ a description akin to the spatial design and admission standards of Irvine. Irvine’s multiple walled villages, marked Eastbluff, Rancho San Joaquin, Woodbridge, etc., and its confusing array of streets inside these walls confounds and discourages those who do not belong. But, once desirous citizens undergo the “rites and purifications” of the entrance exam, the walled communities welcome and ensure placement.

But our comparison hits a snag when Foucault begins to describe heterotopias as places that juxtapose incompatible sites in a single space.¹⁵ While superficially

accurate—Irvine includes the multiple sites of commerce, industry, recreation and residence all in a relatively small space—the truly incompatible sites of race and class that get juxtaposed everyday in Irvine’s commercial centres seem utterly lost on the Irvine villagers. Although residents may drive the half-mile (is walking prohibited?) to the nearby Chili’s or KFC or Wild Oats or any other of a number of chain stores, do they notice the juxtaposition that occurs across the counter? Do they see a fellow Irvine resident? Do they discuss their kids’ mutual problems in school? Do the janitors that clean the high-tech firms register as neighbours with their bosses at the public pool? Unlikely. For the underpaid service worker cannot afford the minimum requirements for Irvine living. And the local Irvine resident is unlikely to care. Worried about property values, Irvine residents feign concern for affordable housing while fighting tooth and nail to stop the creation of subsidised units.¹⁶ Yet, perhaps Irvine fulfils Foucault’s heterotopic vision only as the ultimate deviation from reality—i.e. a bizarre homogeneity in a very real cauldron of heterogeneity. An absolutely normative society in a non-normative world. A hetero(homo?)topia of blindness, a vacation village that poses for the outside as either the worst or most desirable form of illusion to counter the horror of the real. Either way, Foucault’s notion of heterotopia cannot avoid slipping into an impossibly rose-coloured utopia or a frightening dystopia. A fatal deconstruction of utopia, Foucault undermines all efforts to chase the dream. Is this the intention? David Harvey, the Marxist geographer, finds this theoretical collapse only superficially useful as a destabiliser. “The concept of ‘heterotopia’ has the virtue of insisting upon a better understanding of the heterogeneity of space,” he argues, “but it gives no clue as to what a more spatiotemporal utopianism might look like... [or] how any kind of alternative might

be constructed.”¹⁷ Harvey brings Foucault, who begins to sound disturbingly close to Soja’s equivocation, back down to the domain of the material. In doing so, he delivers Foucault back to his more functional role—particularly for the purpose of analyzing Irvine—as the detective of normalisation, of power, of the space of fear. Using these detective tools, we can continue our exploration of Irvine as the utopia-gone-wrong.

I zoom around the corner on Harvard Street and quickly slip my foot off the accelerator. A giant clock looms over me. Towering on its metal scaffolding over the whole of Irvine, this temporal beast sprouts out of the head of the fortress-like department of surveillance. Glass and brick, cameras and metal detectors line the surface skin of the polis police. The building neatly discourages entrance by its unmarked, sleek sides, a form that some in the Los Angeles School celebrate as “defensive architecture” that reads as “positive alienation.”¹⁸ Positive alienation? Yes, keep my skin from your skin. At all costs. Merging should never be acceptable. Stay in your individual cells in the Carceral City; docile bodies in absolute space. I ponder the clock-face’s gaze as the gaze ponders me. To push my tamed body to the limit, I turn into the parking lot of the agency of control. Oh, somehow I’ve discovered the Civic Centre and City Hall as well. Nothing registers quite so clearly as this marriage of space. Yes, of course the Civic Centre and City Hall rest here with the other admirable civic duty of control. The juridico-politico-economic reality. In any police state, this brooks no surprise. A convention, a sports game, a marriage all occur under the panoptic eye. And the eye’s proximity reassures. You’re safe, it says, we’ve got it under control. As calming as a mother’s hush. Irvine celebrates the benefits of Patriot I and II. “Power of Pride,” “Support our Troops,” the

bumperstickers scream. Ahh, Irvine, John Ashcroft's ideal bedroom community. Keep the populous decentred, contained in their bubbles of domesticity or gathered under the surveilling eye. No central public space needed, thus none exists. I search for it. I wind up at Target, pinned down by consumer culture. My metal body sweeps back onto the corridors of wide, Western boulevards. Corridors of discipline. Keep the citizens inside and the aliens outside the walls, both encased in a world of inescapable, gelatinous fluid. Slow, tame, easy to handle. To watch. Erect larger corridors to define the perimeter. The 5, the 405, the 55 prevent undesirable interaction. "The freeway in Los Angeles is analogous to the road which linked West Berlin to West Germany.... It is an umbilical cord between related bodies."¹⁹ The freeway will take you where you (be)long. The perfect zone for you. But never exit in the wrong place or you may not come home again. I, in my dripping and rusting form, am an egregiously alien body; I try to slip through, but the pressures of space ("activity corridors"), time (the clock-face), and conformity (where are my tennis whites?) refuse me. I divide myself. One lingers, while one escapes. One vaults to her appropriate zone in a state of abject terror, but one is emboldened to stay. Only in this split form can I survive. "We live, have lived, in fragmented cities—fragmented by the wastelands between the heterotopias of compensation and illusion, fragmented by the immediate and fluid boundaries between affluence and poverty, and fragmented by the mandates of zoning—because we are, as subjects and objects, fragmented beings."²⁰ As my one self escapes, I allow my other self, the transparent and fearless, to steal over the wall of Westpark and creep through an open window. A brave new world awaits.

But perhaps we are dismissing the benefits of Irvine too readily; perhaps it *is* the utopia that insiders proclaim. After all, can we just ignore the praise of those enclosed (imprisoned)? Gabrielle Pryor, a former mayor of Irvine, is just one of many to proclaim the joys of Irvine. As mayor, she voiced her desire “to make Irvine so attractive as a community and as a society... that they won’t want to go anywhere else.... I get very upset when someone leaves. I really think it’s almost kind of traitorous.”²¹ And such a sentiment rings true for many other Irvine residents concerned with the stability of their family values’ utopia. But what about the opinion of those outside? Of the working class who commute for a half-hour or more to their jobs at Irvine’s Taco Bell or Burger King? Or the random stray that drops off in an inappropriate zone? In other words, is there a way to envision Irvine as a utopia for those enclosed and a dystopia for all others? Is such a place really a utopia? Again, David Harvey quickly dismisses this idea. For Harvey, no place can be separated from the material and social relations within which it is embedded. Irvine may appear to be the perfect place to those inside, but all the processes that create and sustain Irvine open it up to a much wider sphere, belying any notion of perfection. As he so adroitly puts it, “what goes on in a place cannot be understood outside of the space relations which support that place.”²² Thus, Irvine, relying as it does on a large, outsider population of the working poor, does little to bolster its image as a postmodern utopia. As Mike Davis, Los Angeles historian extraordinaire, acerbically notes, Orange County specialises in “hysterical homeowners’ associations, supported by local businesses, [that] wage war against the very immigrant labour upon which their master-race lifestyles depend.”²³

Yet, interestingly enough, in the original, utopian plans of Irvine, the planners tried

to address issues of class and social relations and truly believed they were creating an integrated community. In the 1970s, Raymond Watson, one of the first planners of Irvine and later a president of the Irvine Company, loudly proclaimed his progressive stance: “Without diversity, you can’t have a real village.... That’s what we believe in and we’ll do everything we can to pursue that belief even if it’s politically unpopular.” Yet, when his idealised plan took on material form, his statement transformed into “as much diversity as a capitalistic society can provide,”²⁴ demonstrating the impotence of his earlier assertions. The reality of only ten per cent “affordable” housing and absolutely no subsidised housing falsifies any claims of equality across income brackets. Again, Harvey would find this unsurprising. After all, with a corporate backer as the midwife of a utopian form, the spatialisation inevitably leans toward company profit. As Harvey notes, “the purity of any utopianism of process inevitably gets upset by its manner of spatialisation.”²⁵ And the Irvine Company’s plan proved no exception. As they solidified their utopian ideals, the Company recognised that it was more convenient to craft high-end homes with the possibility of payback. Thus, ideals put into play get twisted toward a particular end. Harvey sees this as a fundamental weakness of the new urbanism, of which Irvine is a part. The urban village idea realised in Irvine necessarily fosters a restrictive community spirit, one that facilitates a dangerous exclusionary spirit. Harvey worries that “[i]n its practical materialization, the new urbanism builds an image of community and a rhetoric of place-based civic pride and consciousness for those who do not need it, while abandoning those that do to their ‘underclass’ fate.”²⁶ Thus, the working poor that support the Irvine underbelly get shuttled off to the ghettos of Santa Ana, Anaheim, or even further afield, excluded from the benefits of the “new towns” that

lie safe under the wings of their corporate parents.

And, as if this did not provide enough cause for alarm, a further issue sneaks into view couched in the rhetoric of “power of place.” In the creation of Irvine, promotion relied heavily on a symbolic language that constructed Irvine as the new paradise. In fact, many of the utopian claims of the new urbanism continue to depend on such rhetoric to paint postsuburban attempts as both divinely communitarian and rooted to place. But as “power of place” discourse is co-opted by capitalistic ventures, it only serves to augment damaging cultural and economic divides. Further, as this “sense of place and community” discourse meshes with the homogeneity caused by wealth exclusivity, political power frequently accumulates in hyper-conservative hands. As Harvey explains, “[p]laces constructed in the imagery of homogeneity of beliefs, values, ideals, and persuasions coupled with a strong sense of collective memory and spatially exclusionary rights can be extraordinarily powerful players upon the world stage. The effect is to convert the dialectic of community solidarity and repression into a quagmire of violence and oppression.”²⁷ In Irvine’s case, “power of place” stems from pure commodity fetishism and hastens the journey toward, as Harvey calls it, uneven geographical development. As the inhabitants of Irvine continue on their path of fetishising place as the site of safe, financially-plump, homogeneous family values, they trip down a path too often travelled in the past toward dangerous ends. Irvine’s unwavering efforts to ignore the social and ecological processes that support it while revelling in its mystical sense of community and place can only lead toward a dystopia of hatred, fear, and inequality.

The courageous me slips up and over stucco walls, rough to keep me awake, rough

to scare me away. Gliding soundlessly over AstroTurf, I search for a crack, a narrow ledge, a relenting passageway. My imperceptible self finally discovers a careless cavity and I slip inside. I freeze and listen. Assured of my solitude, I glance around. Soft carpet buoys me along in a sea of pale ivory. Has anyone walked here before? I search for evidence of living, for signs of use. None exist. I worry at the silence of the walls, the roof. “[T]he building [is] an organism with its surface being the third skin of the occupants. For the organism to be healthy, the skin should be allowed to function naturally: breathing, absorbing, protecting, insulating, regulating, communicating....”²⁸

I’m used to the groaning, the creaking, the play of my own third skin. But here, the air, the surfaces do not converse. These beautifully manufactured, planned, perfect homes bloom so quickly, but die before fruition. They lie inert, impeccably decorated, but dead. Yet, the spatial design tries desperately to coax some movement from me. Come down this suggestively curving corridor into a light-filled, airy family room. Look at the photographs of smiling children as they line the geometrical shelves so absent of dust. Gaze out the back window onto a lawn of neatly trimmed grass. Open the identical beige cabinets to find the latest in technological gadgetry. But where are the secret nooks, the lopsided window seats, the wobbly wooden handles? Where’s the stair that creaks so loud I wonder when I will fall? Where is the peeling linoleum under which a daring creature may crawl? “A building is an incitement to action, a stage for movement and interaction. It is one partner in a dialogue with the body.”²⁹ But I stand unmoved. I cannot touch the facade of the unliving, the skin of the stillborn. I have no desire to offer my own vitality in a one-way communication. A home of arrogant, unflagging stability gives nothing in return; it’s only a box within which to deny the world’s uncertainty. “The

house is supposedly a stable vessel for the personal identity of its occupant(s), a home for, and mirror to, the self. But the concept of home is also a response to insecurity and the fear of change. The home must appear to be stable because social norms and personal identity are actually shifting and slippery.”³⁰ *Yes, stability may provide reassurance, but it only pushes the fear into deeper, more dangerous places. I hate those places. I must move and converse to render change acceptable, fear manageable, anger beneficial. But movement seems so difficult in a building of unenlivened matter. Somehow I drag myself down soft, still hallways to complete this mission of reconnaissance, this inquest. Microwaves, blenders, toaster ovens, salad spinners, Cuisinarts, utensils stand in reserve on kitchen counters awaiting their appropriate use. What would happen if I made glue in the blender, dug dirt with the grill fork, employed the spinner as a bug house? These thoughts trickle through my mind as I probe for leftover crumbs in the trash disposal.*

“Placing things and bodies in unusual combinations, positions us in new uncharted territory. Lost in space, our cognitive mapping devices de-stabilised, we imagine a new poetics of space and time. We understand anew the world we occupy, the relations between dreams and realities, between mental life and social relations, between objects and subjects.”³¹ *My already transparent self begins to further disappear as I feel myself blend with the neutral tones. My deadened appetite and desires question my very subjectivity. Forcing myself back to consciousness, I know that I must end this mission. Abort, abort. I rediscover the orifice to the external and slip through.*

Fetishism of place, of cars, of houses, of children, of life; fetishism is akin to pure oxygen pumped into Irvine’s precious activity corridors. In an impressive leap even for

America's exceedingly consumerist culture, Irvine, and Orange County in general, has driven commodity fetishism to new heights. By 1987, Orange County, a county that thirty years before had been a mere blip on the radar screen, jumped to spending more at retail stores than any other county in California.³² And South Coast Plaza, a mall a mere stone's throw from the automobile-crazy Irvine, leads the country, and perhaps the world, in shopping centre sales.³³ Fashion Island and the Irvine Spectrum, Irvine's local "entertainment" malls, fall not far behind. Inspired by Disneyland and the theme park motif of Orange County in general, Fashion Island and the Irvine Spectrum lure shoppers into the consumer embrace with a combination of fantasyland spectacle and shopping adventure. Alladi Venkatesh, a management professor at the University of California at Irvine, sees these shopping experiences as the postmodern rendition of consumerism, where customers daily encounter a juxtaposition of high art and mundane consumption. Venkatesh depicts the Orange County shopper as a whole new breed of consumer, what he calls the "metaconsumer." "A metaconsumer is not only a consumer of products and symbol," he claims, "but also an active participant in the shopping spectacle. The individual becomes both consumer and consumed."³⁴ But, to guarantee funds for these shopping extravaganzas, the residents of Orange County and the corporations that profit must keep more money in the pockets of these citizens. Why tax away money for social services for the repressed underclass when it could go toward driving the American economy after all? The late 1970s revolt in California against taxes, of which Proposition 13 to limit property taxes was the most famous, went a far cry to ensure Orange County residents the necessary pocket change to frequent the nearest fantasy mall. As such, Irvine inhabitants can gather at their favourite form of public space and buy the requisite

happiness offered therein. As historians Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster cryptically suggest, consumption, rather than family interaction, has become the County's "core cultural value."³⁵

But wait just a minute. Who's to say that consumerism is not a type of empowerment? Can't the financial decisions we make as well as our methods of product use entail a certain level of creativity and strength in the face of corporate greed and political disenfranchisement? That's the news from Michel de Certeau anyway. De Certeau, famed postmodern theorist and advocate of the consumer in the face of all-powerful production, seems ripe for application to the consumer culture of Irvine. In his analysis, de Certeau creates an image of shopping and of product use as the activities of clandestine creativity employed by the masses. As he remarks, "[t]he tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices."³⁶ But who exactly are the weak and strong in this case? Is the shopper at Gucci or Salvaggio truly making a statement by the weak when she purchases a blouse for three hundred dollars or more? Particularly when that same shopper may be using money earned through her ownership of Prudential or Motorola or Wendy's? In other words, are the Irvine consumers part of the marginalised masses? No, on second thoughts, de Certeau would be absolutely inapplicable in such a case. In fact, when the Irvine consumers zero in on Fashion Island with their median income of \$72,057,³⁷ they figure as the epitome of the strong, not the weak. Their political vocalization rings loud as they cruise the aisles of Nordstrom's and Sak's: only the capitalistic utopia is acceptable, a false utopia where the few benefit at the hands of the many. This is what the residents of Irvine express as they send yet another Republican

politico to sit on the throne of America's empire. And it is from this position of power that the residents of a wealthy paradise continue to craft our space in the model of commodity fetishism. Kept in our boxes, surveilled by the powers that be, we can purchase to our heart's content, but we will never gain the freedom of movement outside the consumer grid. We will never be allowed to traverse the wide, smooth spaces of a non-capitalistic utopia.

Back outside on the AstroTurf, no wait... this isn't AstroTurf. This is actual grass. Eastern, water-fat, kelly green grass. But so flawless and neat. No blade beats his brother in height or width. Each appears cloned. Surreal. Ideal. Awful. I scamper to the next fully enclosed yard. The same. A grill, a deck, and grass. The next, a grill, a swing set, and grass. I saw none of this from streetside. For each yard is completely sealed like the garages and the metal boxes inside the garages. The Irvine resident can rest secure in their own backyard cubicle without interaction with such undesirables as neighbours or friends. But do they use these cubes of green? The unmarred and water-greedy lawns show no marks of spoiled children's feet or lazy dogs' sleeping forms. I continue my transparent journey up and over fences until I reach the famous "greenbelts" of town. The semiarid ground across which live oak and sagebrush, wild tarragon and elderberry used to dance has vanished to be replaced by occasionally used bike paths and lush green growth. These little gardens of play that improve the postsuburban utopia serve so many functions. They ensure the city's aesthetic appeal. They ring the town to keep degenerates away. They divide city and university for fear of those wild students and too-liberal faculty. They keep home prices high. And they add to yet another illusion, one that

lures me to lie on the luxuriant carpet of green. I feel stability in the human future, a loving partnership between humans and the land. Relishing this sense of security, I slip into a sleep of the satisfied. But soon I begin to toss and turn in a nightmare of fiery proportions. “Industrial civilization, which eviscerates the hills and forests for fuels and materials, swallows up the fields for urbanization, and exhausts the land with high-yield farming, unconsciously consecrates the innocent garden as a ‘landscapegoat.’”³⁸ Nearby non-native trees droop in guilty collusion; grass withers with remorse. “Gardens, as desperate offerings that try to extract one’s complicity with accelerated entropy, cushion the fear of the end of nature.”³⁹ I thrash awake with images of wastelands. But here I lie on a peaceful, carefully crafted slope. Shaking off such horrible illusions, I jog down the path and eventually wind through smartly managed land where chia sage and blazing star have been replanted. Lizards dart across the path and gopher snakes have returned to their previously damaged homes. Certainly the Nature Conservancy management cannot be framed in any negative manner. (Can it?) Surely the future looks grand if Irvine residents understand the importance of preserving indigenous life forms. (Doesn’t it?) I prepare to end my invisible mission and return to my other half. As I leave the tiny zone of authenticity, I trip down seamless cement walks that line the eight lane road, pleased at the prospects of protection. But as I hack and cough at the camouflaged exhaust, I wonder....

Irvine exists as the poster child for Euclidean spatial construction. Although it tries to create a curvilinear approach to residential neighbourhoods, the superimposed grid of “activity corridors,” major thoroughfares, and police apparatus undermines any attempt to

subvert the tightly managed space. Fragmented into easily maintained partitions, Irvine appears as the realisation of what the inventive French theorists, Deleuze and Guattari, call “striated” space. Within striated space, there is no experience of leaving the system, no ability to escape the eye of state control, no true space to wander. Striated space is formalised, homogeneous, and universal, eating up all remaining free, or “smooth,” space. Smooth space, on the other hand, which Deleuze and Guattari depict as the opposite of absolute, quantifiable space, cannot be counted or easily delineated.

Heterogeneous and polyvocal, smooth space can only be experienced through the tactile, i.e. the body. Smooth space returns us to a physical wandering where we relearn place by attending to the environment and its idiosyncrasies through bodily inhabitation.⁴⁰ Thus, smooth space contains potential for our utopian quest beyond the borders of capitalistic state control.

But what does Irvine offer us in our search for smooth space or utopian form? Why even journey through such a severely striated pseudo-utopia? After all, Irvine, in many ways, is diametrically opposed to our dream of equity and inclusion. True. But Irvine provides us with an excellent foil in our utopian pursuits. And it serves as a cruel reminder of the dangers of materialising utopia in general. Exhausting social, economic, and ecological resources, Irvine shows the damaging direction that newly crafted communities imbued with utopian lingo can take. Hidden behind walls, recreating the perfect neotraditional villages that harken back to some idealised Euro-communal past, Irvine residents have sealed themselves off from the realities of an extremely mixed, democratic society. And by living in this idealised past, one that proves so destructive to the present, Irvine ensures its own demise. As Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder,

authors of *Fortress America*, blatantly point out, homogeneous communities are inherently brittle, weak, and “too easily harmed by a single trauma.”⁴¹ In addition, such communities with their exclusionary homogeneity undermine attempts at environmental sustainability. Roger Talbot and Gian Carlo Magnoli, two among many environmental ethicists walking this path, urgently conclude, “inequity and exclusion simply do not make ecological sense.”⁴² These sentiments echo David Harvey’s as they bemoan the continued uneven geographical development that characterises our existence at multiple scales, from the city of Irvine to the world as a whole. By exploring rather than avoiding Irvine’s pseudo-utopia, we discover firsthand the necessity of heterogeneity and equality to secure a sustainable future.

Yet, if we are to walk a new path toward the future, one that includes heterogeneity, social interaction, ecological sustainability, and the potential of smooth spaces, how will we get there? Can we prevent ourselves from floundering in yet another pseudo-utopian venture? What types of places can we build to realise our dreams? And, perhaps most importantly, how will we escape the jaws of dystopia? As Jeremy Till, a London-based architect, warns, “today’s utopia becomes tomorrow’s dystopia.”⁴³ But should this danger choke our desire for an improved future? No, claims Till, but it should inform our decisions. As we begin to build our future communities, we need to relinquish any “delusion of purity and accept contingency and the reality of social construction.”⁴⁴ Till prefers the concept of impure community, a community where we continue to encounter the very real politics of space production as well as the daily instances of social tension, selfishness, and, of course, dirt. As he points out, a “pure” architecture can never be process-oriented or user-friendly, but an architecture of the impure community relishes in

the process by which architect and user constantly interact and intervene in their joint projects. Other architects jump into the dialogue with their own aspirations. James Wines demands that buildings should act as “environmentally responsible extensions of their own contexts.”⁴⁵ Bob Fowles, borrowing from Malcolm Wells, demands that our buildings should not only be contextualised, but should copy the ecological processes of the land on which they sit. In this case, a building “creates pure air, creates pure water, stores rainwater..., creates rich soil, uses solar energy, stores solar energy, creates silence, consumes its own waste..., provides wildlife habitat, moderates climate and weather, is beautiful and provides human habitat.”⁴⁶

Architecture as form, as process, and as metaphor litters the literature on utopia. For example, David Harvey names anyone prepared to take the plunge into the truly progressive politics of utopia an “insurgent architect.” He even goes so far as to see this figure as the ultimate agent of change. For Harvey, the architect, by traversing the thicket of dialectical utopianism, can demonstrate “how to deliver on the promises of considerable improvement in material well-being and democratic forms..., how to develop the collective mechanisms and cultural forms requisite for self-realisation..., and how to bring the social order into a better working relation with environmental and ecological conditions.”⁴⁷ But even as we look to ourselves as the architects of a brighter future, of a utopia of heterogeneity, smoothness, equality, and sustainability, we must look to the body as utopia’s producer. Site/inciter of action, interaction, and creation on both macro and micro scales, it is our bodies, with their immense capability for movement, for protest, for production, for joy, that can realise our designs for utopia. And it is our bodies that will inform us about the appropriate structures to create.

Flexible, fluid, tactile, and enlivened, it is in such forms that our bodies will continue the quest for an endlessly improving society. For only with the integration of our physical and mental selves into the very interstices of architecture and community will these spaces breathe and thrive and grow in sustainable and enjoyable ways. Robert Mugerauer, professor of architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, rubs his hands in pleasure at the possibilities for this new dance toward utopia. “This dance is a dance of disassembly,” he muses. “It also is a dance that may promise a freer and more careful mode in which people can belong to each other and to the sustaining earth.”⁴⁸ As he so eloquently enunciates, we must begin this journey toward utopia with one question: “What kind of place should we make for the dance that we now welcome, or await, or resist?”⁴⁹

On my last spin through the space of pseudo-utopia, I happen upon another lost companion, a final thread of hope. I streak by, my metal body looking for a resting place. But, of course, stopping here on the fast passageways would only mean more strangers, more undesirables. No parking anytime, you filthy beast. You are only able to rest in the walled interior where we can keep track of your unwanted body. I circle back. My once-again-whole-and-fleshly body leans forward in the rusty metal box to see closer. Yes, there it is. Lonely, gleaming, tearful. The shopping cart sits on a field of green, far from its appropriate zone just like me. I squirm in delight at its presence. For it, and its partner MGD, can signal possibility in this utopia-gone-wrong. Flung in the face of order, standing up to the repressive powers-that-be, these solitary metal beings refuse to bow to homogeneity, to false perfection. Although I can only wish that these protests were

more substantial (riotous buildings, solar panels, entire communities of mixed race and class), nevertheless, they send me back to my own zone grinning at the inevitable “choreography of collision”⁵⁰ that our future communities can only hope to be.

¹ Paraphrase from a California Office of Tourism brochure quoted in Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Read-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 237.

² *Ibid.*, 238.

³ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴ Martin J. Schliesl, “Designing the Model Community: The Irvine Company and Suburban Development, 1950-88,” in Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, eds., *Postsuburban California: The Transformation of Orange County Since World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 59-66.

⁵ Nicholas Dagen Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy: 1960s, New Towns, and the Transformation of the American Dream* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2001), 4, 13.

⁶ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 279.

⁷ Irvine Police Department, Preventive Services Bureau, [pamphlet online] susp.pdf, <<http://www.cityofirvine.org/ipd/divisions/crimeprev/default.asp>>; accessed 16 June 2005.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

⁹ A 1999 statistic quoted from Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy*, 180.

¹⁰ Statistics from 2000 census recorded at <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Irvine,-California>; accessed 16 June 2005.

¹¹ Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy*, 180.

¹² Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” (*Diacritics* 16.1, 1986), 25.

¹³ Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy*, 206.

¹⁴ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁶ Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy*, 180.

¹⁷ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 185.

¹⁸ Charles Jencks, “Hetero-Architecture for the Heteropolis: The Los Angeles School,” in Nan Ellin, ed., *Architecture of Fear* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 219.

¹⁹ Jonathan Hill, “An Other Architect,” in Jonathan Hill, ed., *Occupying Architecture: Between the Architect and the User* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 136.

²⁰ Dora Epstein, “Abject Terror: A Story of Fear, Sex, and Architecture,” in Ellin, *Architecture of Fear*, 139.

²¹ Mike Stockstill, “The Mayor is Hometown Girl,” *New Worlds* (August 1974), 15-24; quoted Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy*, 126.

²² David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 316.

²³ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Verso, 1990), 208-209.

²⁴ Raymond Watson, quoted in Bloom, *Suburban Alchemy*, 179.

²⁵ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 179.

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- ²⁶ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 170.
- ²⁷ Harvey, *Justice, Nature...*, 323.
- ²⁸ Bob Fowles, "Transformative Architecture: A Synthesis of Ecological and Participatory Design," in Warwick Fox, ed., *Ethics and the Built Environment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 108.
- ²⁹ Kent C. Bloomer and Charles W. Moore, *Body Memory and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 59.
- ³⁰ Hill, "An Other Architect," 11.
- ³¹ Jane Rendell, "Doing It, (Un)Doing It, (Over)Doing It Yourself: Rhetorics of Architectural Abuse," in Hill, *Occupying Architecture*, 245.
- ³² Rob Kling, Spencer Olin, and Mark Poster, "The Emergence of Postsuburbia: An Introduction," in Kling, et al., *Postsuburban California*, 17.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ³⁴ Alladi Venkatesh, "Changing Consumer Patterns," in Kling, et al., *Postsuburban California*, 153.
- ³⁵ Kling, Olin, and Poster, "The Emergence of Postsuburbia," 8.
- ³⁶ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xvii.
- ³⁷ Statistics from 2000 census recorded at <http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Irvine,-California>; accessed 16 June 2005.
- ³⁸ Richard Ingersoll, "Landscapegoat," in Ellin, *Architecture of Fear*, 253.
- ³⁹ Ingersoll, "Landscapegoat," 258.
- ⁴⁰ Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 361-387.
- ⁴¹ Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, "Divided We Fall: Gated and Walled Communities in the United States," in Ellin, *Architecture of Fear*, 98.
- ⁴² Roger Talbot and Gian Carlo Magnoli, "Social Inclusion and the Sustainable City," in Fox, *Ethics and the Built Environment*, 94.
- ⁴³ Jeremy Till, "Architecture of the Impure Community," in Hill, *Occupying Architecture*, 65.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.
- ⁴⁵ James Wines, "Jewel in the Balance," in Amerigo Marras, ed., *Eco-Tec: Architecture of the In-Between* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 114.
- ⁴⁶ Fowles, "Transformative Architecture," 108.
- ⁴⁷ Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 194-195.
- ⁴⁸ Robert Mugerauer, *Interpretations on Behalf of Place: Environmental Displacements and Alternative Responses* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 9.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁵⁰ Bloomer and Moore, *Body, Memory and Architecture*, 106.