2011

You Can't Go Home Again: The place of tradition in "Firefly's" dystopian-utopia and utopian-distopia

Brown, Robert

http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/19494

Traditional Settlements and Dwellings Review

You Can't Go Home Again: The Place of Tradition in *Firefly's* Dystopian Utopia and Utopian Dystopia

ROBERT BROWN

Science fiction has long been a site in which utopian-dystopian visions have been articulated. This article uses one exemplar of this genre as a springboard into a discussion of the desire for a return to origin and of flawed attempts to impose an image of that origin — with discursions into illustrations drawn from contemporary conditions. In opposition to the hegemonic and reductive tendencies inherent in such attempts, the article proposes an alternative which engages with the everyday reality of life. Intrinsic to this proposition is that our traditions and utopias must be founded upon a continual (re)making in the everyday.

> *Humanity is what it is, wherever it goes. No matter how far out we travel, we can't ever escape ourselves.*[1]

> *That's part of . . . [our] . . . way, going back to when it was an unexplored territory and if you got in trouble, your neighbor was your only hope. We'd find a way to make each day a little better than the one before if we could manage it.*[2]

The genre of science fiction has long been a site in which utopian and dystopian visions have been articulated, from Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed,* through Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner.* A common (mis)perception of the genre is that its narratives and settings draw upon the imaginings of its authors to depict some fantasy; a more careful reading recognizes that theirs is a universe whose representations both expand upon prevailing cultural, political and social discourses of their day and reexamine archetypal traditions. It is as if by looking into space (whether literally, or into the figurative space of science fiction), we see ourselves. As Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska have pointed out, science fiction "can be seen as an arena in which we can explore exactly what it is to be

Robert Brown is...

'human.'"[3] It tells us the truth about ourselves and our world through the lens of a created one.[4]

The short-lived (though fanatically followed) television show *Firefly*, which aired on the Fox Network in the U.S. and Canada in 2002, and the subsequent feature film *Serenity* is an exemplar of this convention.[5] Set against mankind's future migration from Earth out into the cosmos, it poses questions regarding family, gender roles, politics, religion, and the nature of our being. For those familiar with the *Firefly* universe, these themes have been well explored in both fan conventions and academic discourse; less examined is what *Firefly* says about where we have come from, and where we want to go. Indeed, buried within the "stuff behind the stuff" is the presence of a challenging polemic: a desire for a return to origins and the inherently flawed attempt to do so.[6]

This dilemma is revealed in *Firefly* through the juxtaposition of a dystopian utopia and a utopian dystopia. The first lies at the center of the *Firefly* universe; echoing modernist tradition, it promises a future built on humanity's enlightenment situated in an idealized landscape. The counterpart is an ostensibly more dystopian archetype — that of the homeless. Displaced from the center, the wandering and seemingly dysfunctional crew of the spaceship *Serenity* eke out an existence at the margins of inhabited space. Their ship literally falling apart around them, they are seemingly dislocated from any of our received traditions of home.

We are reminded through the *Firefly* narrative that the desire for a return to origins, which lies behind the center's utopian vision, however well-intended, is flawed; it assumes that a re-presentation of that origin's image will, *ipso facto*, result in the realization of a utopian way of life attributed to it. By interrogating this predisposition, it becomes apparent that its implementation is only possible through reductive, homogenizing and hegemonic tendencies that disregard alternative views in pursuit of one absolute truth. Such a paradigm is, however, unsustainable. Projected in its place is an alternative — not a singular utopia, but a space which not only recognizes but embraces the fragmentation and diversity of everyday life. Echoing discourse on modernity and the erosion of home, in the context of this dystopia *Serenity's* crew remake home on a daily basis.

In this article I will utilize *Firefly* as a prompt to explore arguments of a common place of origin for humans and of the utopian desire for a return to these origins. I will consider both the potency of tradition and its recurrent resurrections in envisioned utopias, and the failings inherent in such grand visions. In place of such narratives, I propose palimpsest, a construct which acknowledges and aims to navigate the ambiguities, contradictions and complexities inherent in the multiplicity of everyday life. Finally, I will contend that despite its impossibility, our dreams of utopia (and of home and our traditions) remain present through their continual (re)making in the everyday.

SETTING THE SCENE: DISLOCATION AND DYSFUNCTION

Firefly is set five hundred years in the future. The human population, having outgrown Earth and stripped its resources bare, have found and relocated to a new solar system with dozens of planets and hundreds of moons.[7] Each of these has been terra-formed to accommodate human and other animal and plant life. Lying at the center of this system is the Alliance, an interplanetary governmental body that envisions itself as a bastion of civilization and enlightenment. Lying on the periphery are the border planets and moons, more recently settled and less developed. The *Firefly* story starts six years after the end of a destructive civil war won by the Alliance over the Independents — i.e., between the central government which wanted to unify all the inhabited worlds and those at the periphery who sought independence. Though now over, the fundamental sentiments underlying the positions people chose in the war still linger.

The focus of the *Firefly* story is the ship *Serenity*, named after the valley in which the last and most horrific battle of the war took place, and in which *Serenity's* captain, Malcolm Reynolds, fought on the losing side. With the end of the war, Malcolm, together with his former comrade-in-arms, Zoe, headed off to the frontier of the solar system, where they hoped to reclaim a bit of their lost freedom by inhabiting the sky — living on board *Serenity* while ferrying passengers and cargo (sometimes illegally) between various worlds. Along the way they have acquired a crew, a disparate collection of misfits of the universe, including a pilot (now Zoe's husband), a mechanic, a mercenary who provides muscle, a registered courtesan, a preacher, a doctor named Simon, and his prodigiously gifted sister River. Each contributes to life on board, whether through direct involvement in *Serenity's* line of work or through other means. More significantly, each of these characters has fled something in their past, and in his/her own way is somehow both noble and flawed — that is, human (**FIG.1**).

On first appearance, the ship *Serenity* leaves more than a little to be desired. A relic of a bygone era, it requires that its mechanic wage a never-ending battle to keep it flying, with desperately needed new parts left unpurchased owing to cash-flow problems (**FIG.2**). The lives of those on board are no less problematic, as they face a constant struggle to avoid trouble with the Alliance, untrustworthy business partners, and marauding savages. Meanwhile, the core of the solar system stands in marked contrast to life aboard the ship. It is home to an advanced society, whose buildings heroically express design creativity and advanced technology (i.e., culture and the wealth underlying it). It is equally a place of enlightenment, if only in its cleanliness (i.e., safety and security).

On closer examination, however, the center has problems too. There is pressure to conform, to keep quiet in the face of unasked and unanswered questions about the

political system and those at the receiving end of its policies and actions. More significant are the steps this "civilized" government takes to manipulate and control both people and information. It is not above coercing its citizens into acquiescence and compliance through propaganda and the formal education of its youth, while its more covert activities extend to planting subliminal messages in telecommunications. More disturbing is an invasive form of mind control that is revealed by the story of River prior to her arrival on the ship. Having being sent to a school for the gifted, she was effectively kidnapped by the government and subjected to an experimental program of drugs, operations and testing, until rescued by Simon. The program was part of a government attempt to exploit her telepathic powers and turn her into a psychic-assassin, the underlying intention of which was presumably to control the populace. That the government would be willing to engage in such an effort is evidenced by its willingness to kill even innocent bystanders who inadvertently discover secrets that might hurt it.

In this sense, *Firefly* reflects traditions of utopia as portrayed in the genre of science fiction. A government sits at the center, projecting itself as an advanced society. Lying beneath the surface, of course, is a far more ambiguous condition, less benevolent and often more insidious. It also echoes Henri Lefebvre's view that "each state claims to produce a space . . . where something is brought to perfection: namely a unified and homogenous society."[8] Yet as King and Krzywinska have pointed out, attempts to engineer a perfect world are doomed to fail.[9] Such states have the potential, and a tendency, to become collectivist and bureaucratic; by their nature, they become institutionalized.[10] That is, as institutions, they do things because that is what maintains them as institutions.[11] What emerges is a controlling entity, one which maintains its position by imposing its own interests on those around it; and this control and influence is exercised not for the public good, but for the privileged interests of the center. This scenario exists, of course, in our cities today in the convergence of political-economic forces. Through plan-
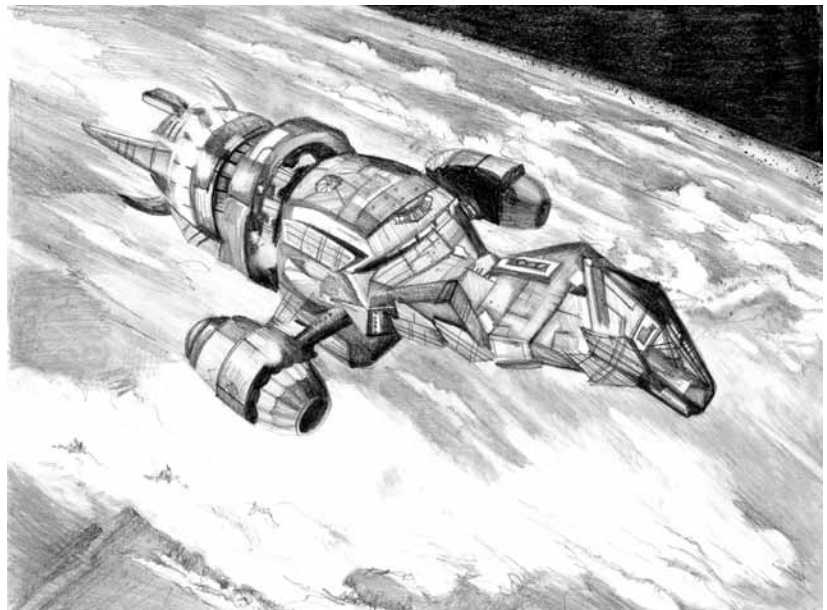
ning policies, funding initiatives, and political positions the sense of the public good has shifted from the well-being of all inhabitants to the establishment of a physical environment that prioritizes economic interests over all others.[12]

Lefebvre suggested that such a government establishes a fixed and privileged focal point, which acts as the locus of information and wealth. Concurrently, it seeks to put its stamp on ever-widening peripheral areas, which increasingly come under its control.[13] As he went on, this state is actually a framework of power that

> . . . makes decisions in such a way to ensure that the interests of certain minorities, of certain classes of factions of classes, are imposed on society — so effectively imposed, in fact, that they become undistinguishable from the general interest. . . . [W]e are speaking of a space where centralized power sets itself above other power and eliminates it; where a proclaimed "sovereign" nation pushes aside any other nationality, often crushing it in the process . . . [and] makes it possible for a certain type of non-critical thought simply to register the resultant "reality" and accept it at face value.[14]

The primary critique here is not, however, limited to the center. Indeed, the center — e.g., the city — has long been positioned in conventions of utopia as physically and socially rotten and corrupting.[15] Nor is it about its traditional opposite (i.e., the rural condition) as some Arcadian ideal in contrast to the overwhelming scale and complexities of the city. As

depicted in *Firefly*, both center and periphery exist as forms of dystopia: the former more covertly, and the latter more overtly in its lawlessness and savagery. While worth noting, what is of far more interest here is what *Firefly* has to say about how we attempt to make our utopias — that is, the models we refer to, and how they are put in place.

THE SAVANNAH AS ORIGIN

At the beginning of the film *Serenity* viewers are presented with a defining image of the central planets. Accompanied by a voiceover that "the central planets . . . are the most advanced, embodying civilization at its peak," the film shows futuristic buildings set apart from each other in a greened landscape.[16] Within this space lie pools of water and scattered groups of trees with low, spreading canopies, between which we might wander to discover something new or momentarily seek privacy or refuge from the elements. Though partially enclosed, this space is also open, allowing views across it and vistas of distant hills, and it offers variety in its forms and textures — but not with so much complexity as to become illegible (**FIG.3**).[17] This savannah-like landscape is similar to other projections of an idealized future — for example, a Star Fleet Academy training compound depicted in the television series *Star Trek: Voyager*.[18] Fundamental to each of these views is not any particular building, however idiosyncratic, but the landscape itself. That this image is used by to depict the Alliance's vision in *Serenity* is not coin-
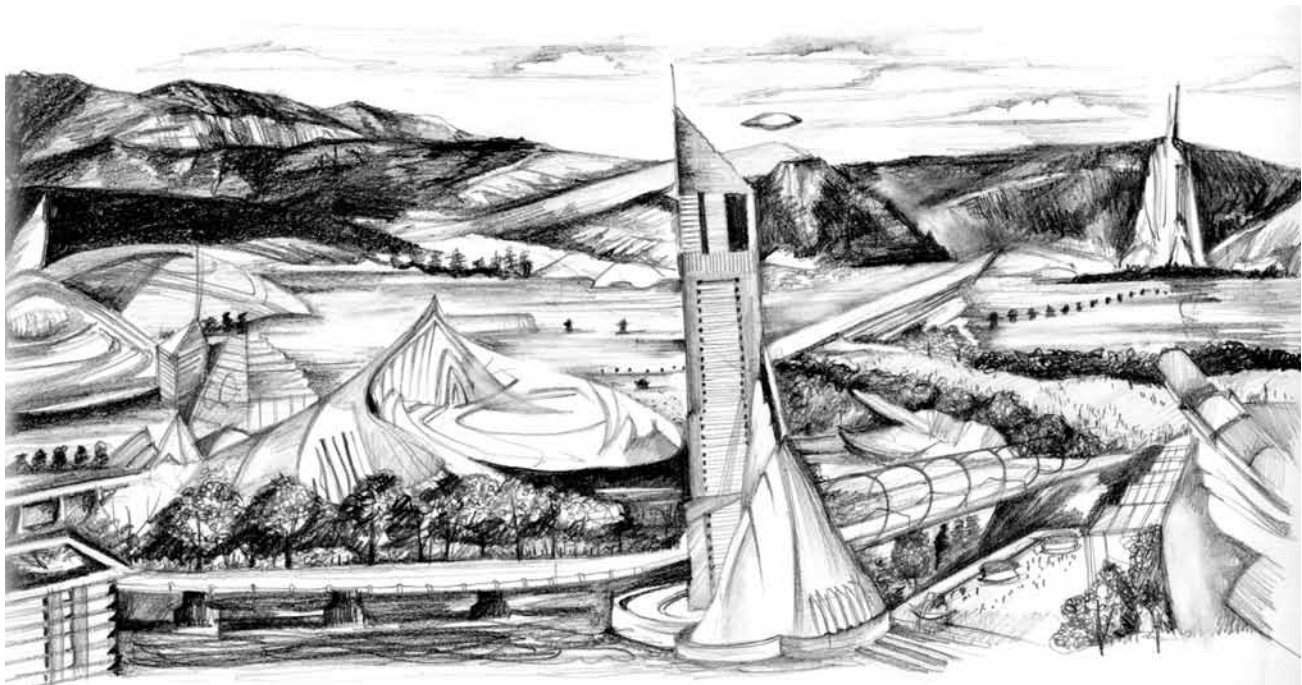

FIGURE 3. *The familiar landscape of the central planets. Artist's impression, courtesy of K. Sammons.*

FIGURE 4.   *The savannah of eastern Africa. Image courtesy of iStockphoto LP.*

cidental; even when representing another world, it offers the sense of something familiar and appealing, evoking allusions to an Arcadian past.

The theory of biophilia suggests that human beings have a seeming predisposition toward the environment in which we evolved; evidence of human evolution suggests that much of this took place on the savannahs of East Africa, and that only relatively recently have we moved into other ecosystems.[19] The argument continues that the prehistoric savannahs of Africa were an environment that provided primitive humans with what they needed: food that was relatively easy to obtain; trees that offered protection from the sun or that could be climbed to escape predators; distant, uninterrupted views; changes in elevation allowing for orientation; and water (FIG.4).[20] A landscape that offers such qualities

today is, as Ian Whyte suggested, "something that appeals to ancient survival needs buried deep in the human psyche."[21] Whyte has also cited arguments that this evolutionary bias translates into an aesthetic appreciation of landscape, even if the importance of evaluations for basic survival has vanished.[22] Gordon Orians has reinforced this contention, suggesting that the landscape features characteristic of African savannahs have continuing appeal to humans and evoke strong positive emotions — as evidenced in the design of parks and gardens, which are generally savannah types.[23] A similar argument has been made for another typology: the golf course (FIG.5).[24] I would extend this argument further to include another setting — the campus — whether with regard to colleges and universities or the grounds of business and research parks.

FIGURE 5.   *The golf course as a re-creation of the savannah landscape. Image courtesy of iStockphoto LP.*

"All over the world," Darwinian aestheticist Christina Suetterlin has noted, "people want to see grassland, a lake, some trees, but not a solid forest, and some distant mountains for refuge."[25] Moreover, cross-cultural research examining distinct landscapes types (and particular features associated with those landscapes) has given credence to the argument that savannah-like environments are consistently better liked than others.[26] And studies measuring both physiological response and aesthetic preference have found that a savannah setting is markedly more effective in reducing physiological stress than other settings — even among study participants who claimed to dislike it.[27]

There are, of course, both exceptions and objections to this hypothesis. Orians has noted that responses to an environment can vary with a person's age, social status, and physiological state.[28] Suetterlin has suggested that landscape preference is greatly influenced by the setting one experienced during the formative years of puberty.[29] And William Bird has argued that the hypothesis does not recognize variants such as fear or hostility toward nature or love of manmade environments.[30] Perhaps most emphatically, however, cultural geographers such as Denis Cosgrove have argued that "in landscape we are dealing with an ideologically-charged and very complex cultural product."[31] Thus, as Orians and Judith Heerwagen have conceded, not all people or cultures may identify the savannah as a preferred or even ideal type. But they have noted that the evidence does suggest that the savannah environment is positively experienced by many people.[32] The point in all of this is not to position the savannah as the quintessential human landscape. While there are some strong findings to suggest it has qualities which appeal to many people, the evidence is not conclusive. What is significant is the reoccurring adoption of the savannah as an idealized landscape image and what this suggests about a desire for a return to origins.

A CRITIQUE OF ORIGIN AS A PLACE OF UTOPIAN RETURN

At the beginning of the *Firefly* story, the human race has fled Earth, looking to escape the failings of the past and start anew. This narrative is part of the utopian tradition; yet, embedded in humanity's attempt to create a new home is another tradition, that of trying to forge something new by going back to and resurrecting something from the past. The search for and reaching back to origins is a recurrent theme in the utopian tradition.[33] The makers of *Firefly* evoke it by choosing the landscape of the savannah as the setting for the Alliance's utopian vision. It presents an image that is appealing and familiar, and it echoes a place where, and a time when, life was (seemingly) simpler, less compromised, and more authentic.

A similar aspiration runs through design discussions about the making of place, involving both appeals to and proclamations of a sense of origin. In architectural literature this belief is exemplified most notably by the idea of the primitive hut. Positioned as the first architecture, this mythical dwelling has been envisioned as pure and unspoiled, undistorted by the various forces that defile architectural authenticity.[34] Claims to its ethical, moral, and/or spiritual authority and calls for a return to it run strongest at times of crisis, when it is sought as a source of rebirth and salvation.[35]

Such tendencies are paralleled in (re)constructions of identity and the embedding of identity in place. Notable in this regard are not the actions of socio-cultural groups in the everyday, who tend to pursue their livelihoods through an enculturated and (generally) unconscious practice.[36] Rather more determining are the policies and pursuits of various governmental and quasi-governmental authorities to forge a shared sense of identity and inscribe these upon the physical landscape.[37] This intention is reflective of Lefebvre's contention that all subjects are situated in space, and that every society creates its own space.[38] It further resounds with views that such spatial representations are underpinned by ideologies which posit absolute truths to justify both their claims to authority and right of autonomous reconstruction of the landscape.[39]

Inherent in the appeal to origin is a belief that the meaning of the thing is synonymous with the thing itself. That is, an object in and of itself carries an implicit denotation of specific beliefs and values. This frequently parallels the conviction that the provision of a physical setting, whether as building or landscape, will in some positivist sense, *ipso facto*, automatically generate a certain way of life. In the utopian tradition of ideal cities, architecture is thus conceived as ". . . the physical embodiment of . . . all that is needed for the cultivation of the good life."[40] Inherent in these propositions is a belief that the architecture equates to the ideal life. The visions of ideal cities throughout history — from the Greeks and Romans through the Renaissance, to some notable modern examples such as Ebenezer Howard's Garden City or Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City — represent a long tradition of linking physical form with a particular ethos. In drawing upon the utopian tradition of the savannah for the landscape of the central planets in *Firefly*, the suggestion is that this setting itself embodies the "comfort and enlightenment of true civilization."[41] This is the question that *Firefly* challenges us to consider. Can the positioning of a utopian image intrinsically enable the fulfillment of a utopian life? Can a setting, by the very form of its spaces, foster cultural and political enlightenment and social well-being and serve as a site of ethical, moral and spiritual authority, as presumed by the Alliance in *Firefly*?

When depicted on the television or movie screen, we can, of course, immediately see the fallacy of such convictions. Yet these very same principles have been consistently invoked in architectural discourse, starting with the very first known treatise on architecture by Vitruvius some two thou-

sand years ago. Other examples include the implications of authority in Augustin Pugin's advocacy of "honesty of expression" in the nineteenth century and Le Corbusier's call in the early twentieth century for an architecture which "rings within us in tune with a universe whose laws we obey, recognise and respect."[42] The theme continues in more contemporary discussions, such as Alberto Perez-Gomes's claim that "architecture is the re-creation of a symbolic order."[43]

These declarations are paralleled in the way landscape design has been positioned. For example, James Corner has noted how "eighteenth-century developments in European landscape equated images of landscape with wealth, high culture and power, an equation that was encoded not only in garden art but also in painting, literature and poetry."[44] As Cosgrove has further insisted, landscape is "'a way of seeing' rooted in ideology."[45]

Firefly communicates a counterpoint to such beliefs, notably in the episode "Objects in Space." Throughout the episode questions are raised about the substance of things, both organic (i.e., the crew and the episode's antagonist, the bounty hunter Jubal Early) and inorganic (e.g., even the ship *Serenity*). Equally examined are what these objects convey and how people interpret them. A notable example are two guns which appear in different scenes. For the bounty hunter, his own gun is a tool, the beauty of which is that it allows him to carry out a task (shooting another person — which he, in fact, does in the episode). However, another misplaced gun, which River stumbles upon, appears to her as a branch; it is just an object, as she points out when she says, "It's not

what you think." This dialogue echoes director Whedon's own meditations on the nature of things. In a commentary on the episode, he drew on Jean-Paul Sartre, who wrote that things have no inherent meaning; the only meaning they have is what we bring to them.[46]

Some commentaries on contemporary architecture reflect this challenge. A telling example is Greig Crysler's critique of the architectural avant-garde's adoption of Deleuzean aesthetics and its assumption that physical forms ". . . are presumed, by virtue of their formal qualities alone, to be capable of inducing liberatory political conditions."[47] Equally challenging is Andrea Kahn's critique of business improvement districts in the U.S., in which she attacked the appropriation of architectural forms as totalizing representations of urbanity. It is as if the reproductions of form alone could carry all the underlying cultural, economic, political and social interaction that once informed their making, when in reality they are only simulacra.[48] Corner's critique of traditions of landscape design is equally sharp. He noted how both the state and its allies (e.g., designers) tend to regard landscapes as objectified scenes, aestheticized images, which displace and distance viewers.[49] The result is to veil both the underlying hegemonic ideology and specific interests that generate their formation and the "inequities and problems of the present."[50] The landscape image is thus intended to control viewers and "foster in them the feeling that they are in possession of a beautiful and innocent past" **(FIG.6)**.[51]

Corner's reference to the objectified scene alludes to another failing that the makers of architecture and landscapes

FIGURE 6. *The landscape objectified: Claude,* Landscape with Aeneas at Delos © *The National Gallery, London.*

have too often been party to. The objectified scene inherently gives primacy to the formal qualities of place and the meaning these forms are intended to represent (as envisioned by the designer) — that is, it emphasizes what it is rather than what it does. Marginalized or even negated in this process is what it means to inhabit that place on an everyday basis. As various critical theorists have noted, this implies valuing abstract, formal, geometric, mathematical space over lived space.[52] Such actions are equally reflective of the utopian tradition. As Krishan Kumar has pointed out, "the central feature of . . . (utopian) conceptions was that they elevated the land, the physical landscape, over the people."[53] In *Firefly* this is embodied by the emphasis the Alliance places on abstract values over (indeed, at the expense of) lived values.[54]

Further intrinsic to the objectified scene is its failure to deal with the realities of the everyday. Instead, it demands conformity to a singular vision. Thus, in lieu of addressing problems or critiques — or even acknowledging them — it brushes them aside, suppresses and hides them from view. By its very nature, the singular proposition can't deal with the ambiguities, contradictions and complexities that are a part of quotidian life; these in effect "spoil" the desired nonambiguity of the picture and its intended message. The message is clear: don't look under the surface, but accept it and the values being presented. Reduced to simplistic metaphorical conceptualizations that are easily and uncritically absorbed, these spatial representations are intended to obscure the ideologies and interests that underpin them.[55] In a related vein, Ian Whyte has observed how, in the context of landscape, similar spatial formations represent

> . . . a way in which certain classes of people have signi-fied themselves and their world . . . and through which they have underlined and communicated their social role and that of others. . . . It is an artist's, an elite, way of seeing the world.[56]

Omitted from consideration are alternative values, typically those marginalized from the prevailing and hegemonic cultural establishment. Thus, there is inherent danger in the plea for a return to some state of origin; left unconsidered is the prospect that this identified essential is not commonly shared, but rather represents a worldview that is fashioned and authorized by a self-defined elite, which is then imposed upon others.[57]

The position of a singular universal is within the tradition of utopias. Michel de Certeau has articulated how in their making (and as reflected in traditional approaches to urban planning), all the existing conditions of place and inhabitation are ignored. Thus, instead of working with and building upon found conditions, the site is sterilized, freed of the limitations these conditions might impose. On this purified ground, architects, planners, and the economic-political powers behind them can '. . . write in cement the composi-tion created in the laboratory. . . ."[58] Place is treated as an abstract space, as a *tabula rasa*, upon which might be projected the hopes and aspirations of its makers.[59] Utopias thus produce their own space in their own time, repressing any other spatial and temporal actions.[60]

Something similar is apparent not only in *Firefly's* depiction of the "utopian" central planets, but in our own cities today, notably those which operate as or aspire to become global cities. These sites situate themselves within a much larger (i.e., global) network tied into an exchange not only of goods and financial capital but of culture as a form of economic currency.[61] The systems behind these forms of exchange operate syncretically to generate a new, marketable identity for these urban constructions. What is projected is an elitist view of the city as a place of cultural and economic vitality, the primary aim being to attract further capital investment and consumerist consumption. The inhabitants who once occupied these sites, and the activities that once took place there, are soon displaced; the residual landscape is buffed and polished to appear new, so that any lingering vestiges of its past are reduced to only momentary and romanticized (i.e., sanitized) echoes. What is projected is the city not as a place in which different interests and values come together to negotiate a common ground, but a privileged center for those who can afford it.

In opposition to the imposition of a singular view — which, as Robert Fishman has noted, is intrinsic to utopian visions[62] — what is necessary is recognition of the diversity, complexity and individuality present in real lives and communities. We need to reject proclamations of essential truth grounded in a self-defined and authorized spiritual core. As Peter Madsen has argued, the idea of such an absolute stands in contrast to the world "experienced as moving, changing and continually in flux."[63] Doreen Massey has also warned of the dangers of grand narratives, arguing that life is not reducible to such visions.[64]

What is necessary then is to engage with the multiplicity present in any found condition. Instead of trying to create a single space underpinned by universal truth, designers and planners need to recognize place as composed of a plurality of cultural, ecological, economic, political and social forces. Discourse from Lefebvre through Andrea Kahn has understood our world not as a predetermined absolute, static, homogenous or singular, but as constructed, changing, heterogeneous, and operating at multiple scales simultaneously.[65] Such a conceptualization enables acknowledgment and engagement with the multiplicity of alternative actions, beliefs and narratives generated in, by, and projected onto place. Consistent with this proposition is recognition that place is in a continual state of becoming, the product of various interactions of people with each other and with that place. As Massey noted, space is a product of dynamic relations always under construction.[66] In a literal sense, this reading equally recognizes landscape as an active surface, one which allows

new relationships and interactions to occur, as opposed to conceptualizations which would fix understanding according to a unified spatial-temporal narrative.[67] Perhaps most significantly for the present discussion, this proposition reflects our understanding of tradition. Recent scholarship has repositioned "tradition" as permeable and malleable, shifting and evolving in response to changing conditions.[68]

(RE)MAKING HOME IN THE EVERYDAY

When viewers first meet Malcolm Reynolds in *Firefly*, he is on the losing side of the last battle of the civil war. Despite the numerically and technologically superior forces he faces, he retains his faith that they will survive and win the day; it is only when he realizes that his leaders are not going to support him and his comrades, and instead leave them behind, that he despairs. His world having come crashing down around him, he flees where he is from (not only physically but spiritually) and attempts to start life anew. Like the inhabitants of Earth-that-was, he has been displaced from his place of origin and is now homeless. Yet unlike them, Mal "has no rudder" — he has no false faith to guide him, no power that presents him with a representation of home in which to live out simulacra of the good life. Indeed, he has no faith; like the rest of the crew on the *Serenity*, he has lost something of who he is and was. Yet in wandering around seemingly homeless, Mal and his crew create for themselves a home. However flawed they might be as individuals, they come together as a family — not a real one, but one constructed from new relationships. Ultimately, it is in making this family, first with each other on the ship, and then with others who they don't even know outside the ship, that, as director Whedon noted, they become whole again (**FIG.7**).[69]

Firefly reminds us that home is not merely an object and that it cannot be spontaneously generated merely by the projection of an image. As Juhani Pallasmaa has noted, home is a set of rituals, personal rhythms, and routines of everyday life; it is not produced at once but rather has a time dimension, and is a gradual product of the dweller's adaptation to the world.[70] He added that essential to the construct of home is a process of discovery.[71] This process is something more, however, than merely a slowly unfolding spatial experience as one moves through a dwelling; nor is it just the build-up of experiences over time that foster a changing perspective. More significantly, this discovery is generated through making. In a literal sense we make a place, constructing both its structure and its content, and through this effort, invest ourselves in that place. In a more figurative sense, we construct ourselves through this making, finding something of ourselves through that act.

This idea of making, of the act, is one that was well articulated by Mari Hvattum in her insightful critique of the idea of the primitive hut. In contrast to conceptualizations which emphasize the form of the artifact, she drew on Gustav Klemm, Karl Boetticher, and Gottfried Semper, who, though writing individually, articulated a shared alternative. Central to it was the idea that the origins of architecture should not be sought in form itself, but in the urges and ritualized acts that give shape to form.[72] This dialogue was echoed by John Turner, who declared, "the most important thing about housing is not what it is, but what it does in people's lives."[73] The idea of home is grounded in our making of it and the meaning we find in that making.

The making of home is, however, fraught with challenges; indeed, drawing on discourses of modernity, and related concepts of super-modernity and hyper-modernity, it is possible to question the very viability of the concept of home. Hilde Heynen has suggested that the modern condition has affected our lives so significantly that it is questionable whether any authenticity of dwelling still exists.[74] Meanwhile, Bernd Happauf and Markien Umbach have claimed that the concept of home is the antithesis of the modern.[75] While dwelling as a place of inhabitation is still a physical construct, what these critiques propose is that the underlying meaning of home has been eroded both from within and without. In Western culture the concept of home has traditionally been imbued with associations of comfort, security and warmth. Yet, as Kimberly Dovey has remarked, "to speak of the experience of home in such universal terms is also problematic.

FIGURE 7. *Making* Serenity *into a home. Artist's impression, courtesy of K. Sammons.*

The 'home' is too often where the horror is; its 'sanctity' deployed as a cover for violence . . . and oppression."[76] Sarah Kent has further warned of tyranny, domination and abuse.[77] Pallasmaa has added that home can be a place of distress and fear.[78] Meanwhile, social injustices happening outside our door permeate within, and render us mentally, emotionally and spiritually incapable of being at home.[79] Thus Happauf further suggested that the notion of home, when applied in a broader context of the region/state, while defining a sense of belonging, has also been manipulated and abused throughout history for purposes of exclusion and xenophobia toward those outside — i.e., the *other*.[80]

It has also been posited that the notion of home, both in relation to and within the urban realm, has come to end. With the infiltration of the public domain inward (via, for example, the Internet, mobile telephones, and television), the private domain has become ever more open to the outside world. Concurrently, what has traditionally constituted the public domain has been eroded — as, for example, through the privatizing of public space and economic segregation.[81] Such conditions have led to proclamations that the dialectic of inside and outside (that is, home) is no longer relevant.[82] In this context, as Neil Leach, drawing on Paul Virilio, has noted, "the paradigm of the dynamic 'wanderer' has replaced that of the static 'dweller.'"[83]

Home is not an easy option; it requires constant attention, commitment and tolerance. Otto Bollnow thus warned against taking the safety of home for granted: "Man must keep an inner freedom that makes him strong enough to survive the loss of home, but . . . we must on the other hand find a trust in the world, strong enough to survive to build homes."[84] As Tomas Wikstrom added, the home is "something that is continually re-created by everyday praxis, by daily routines which to a large extent are not reflected on but become clear in a situation of change."[85] Witold Rybcynski has further remarked that home "is something repeated daily, and is evidence of how individuals can transform a place, and hence make it particular, not by grand design but by the small celebrations of everyday life."[86] Indeed, as Heynen proposed, to be at home we must continually rewrite and renew its forms and meaning through our own actions in the everyday.[87]

AN UNATTAINABLE RETURN AND A CONTINUAL (RE)CONSTUCTION

In positioning his work in a philosophical context, the architect Stanley Tigerman alluded to Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden. In exile, they were confronted by oppositions — good and evil, the sacred and profane, purity and sin — which they were not able to resolve. In a continuous quest to try and achieve closure of these polemics, the place of origin is cast as an ideal, a place in which humans

FIGURE 8. *Albrecht Altdorfer, German, c.1480–1538,* The Expulsion from Paradise, from the Fall and Redemption of Man, *n.d., Woodcut on paper, 73 x 49 mm. Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Potter Palmer Jr., 1926.38, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago.*

once lived in a state of innocence and were not conflicted by the challenges and uncertainty of life. This origin remains elusive, however; though a figurative return is an understandable human desire, it presents a task that is intrinsically flawed, a goal that is ultimately unattainable (**FIG.8**).[88]

Firefly reminds us of the impossibility of any attempt to return to a place of origin — to search for, define and (re) create some spiritual core. Though the place itself may still exist as a remnant of what it once was — or even as something that has been re-created — it does not hold that it will retain the same meaning. The meaning of a thing is what we bring to it — in terms of past associations and experiences, yes, but also in terms of how we interact with it and remake it through that interaction. It is equally subject to changing cultural, ecological, economic, political and social conditions and beliefs. Thus meaning is never fixed or certain but always in a state of flux. Sense of place, therefore, cannot

be attained through the imposition of tradition grounded in any real or imagined origin; nor can it be achieved through the deification of any supposed singular universal truth as reified in any spatial form. It can only be achieved through a constant process of making that deals with everyday realities. Indeed, the form of the object — dare I say architecture and landscape — are not as important as many might like to think they are.

Place is not just what it is (i.e., the meaning of the form), but equally — and I would argue, more significantly — what it does, and what that doing means to us. Home, tradition, utopia — these are not embedded by their very nature in an

object. If they are anything, they are an intention, an act, and finally a belief, and meaning (however flawed) emerges only through our making of them.

This is a lesson that *Firefly* assuredly conveys in its very last scene, one tinged with both hope and challenge. Mal is, if not whole again, at least in some sense restored. Together with and through his crew he has once again found his faith through the making of home. Yet as the ship flies off into the horizon of space, a part of it flies loose. It tells us once again that making and maintaining our homes, our traditions, our utopias, are not easy endeavors, but rather must be (re)made constantly in the everyday reality of life.[89]

REFERENCE NOTES

1. L. Adams Wright, "Asian Objects in Space," in J. Espenson, ed., *Finding Serenity: Anti-Heroes, Lost Shepherds and Space Hookers in Joss Whedon's Firefly* (Dallas: Benbella Books, 2004), p.35.
2. L. Dixon, "The Reward, the Details, the Devils, the Due," in Espenson, ed., *Finding Serenity*, p.14.
3. G. King and T. Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London: Wallflower, 2000), p.12.
4. M. Burns, "Mars Needs Women: How a Dress, a Cake, and a Goofy Hat Will Save Science Fiction," in J. Espenson, ed., *Serenity Found: More Unauthorized Essays on Joss Whedon's Firefly Universe* (Dallas: Ben Bella Books, 2007), pp.15–25.
5. I use the term *Firefly* throughout the article; unless specifically stated, however, the reference is to both the television series and the movie.
6. *Firefly* writer Jane Espenson notes that *Firefly* creator Joss Whedon "is never about the stuff, but about the stuff behind the stuff." J. Espenson, "Introduction," in Espenson, ed., *Finding Serenity*, pp.1–3.
7. I would suggest not spending too much time debating the veracity of such a solar system, and instead simply acknowledge the artistic license of *Firefly*'s creator. Moreover, focusing too closely on scientific and/or technological aspect of *Firefly* misses the point of the show.
8. H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, D. Nicholson-Smith, trans. (Malden: Blackwell, 1991 [1974]), p.281.
9. King and Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema*.
10. J. Whedon, *Firefly: The Official Companion, Volume 1* (London: Titan Books, 2006).
11. C. Rogers, *Freedom to Learn for the 80's* (Columbus: Charles E. Merrill, 1983).
12. See, for example, A. Minton, *Ground Control: Fear and Happiness in the Twenty-First Century City* (London: Penguin Books, 2009); and A. Kahn, "Imaging New York," in P. Madsen and R. Plunz, eds., *The Urban Lifeworld: Formation, Perception, Representation* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.237–51.
13. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.
14. Ibid, p.281.
15. See, for example, R. Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977); K. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987); and J. Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).
16. J. Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion* (London: Titan Books, 2005), p.42. For this vision of the future, Whedon notes that they looked at recent architecture in Germany and Holland for inspiration. See J. Whedon, "Director's Commentary," *Serenity* (Universal Studios, 2005). A later scene in the movie also draws upon contemporary architecture to provide an image of the future: for the setting of Miranda, the filmmakers used Diamond Ranch High School in Pomona, California, designed by Morphosis Architects.
17. This description is drawn from the scene in *Serenity*, but it equally owes a debt to descriptions of the landscape underlying this scene in W. Bird, "Natural Thinking," A Report for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (June, 2007). Available at: http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/naturalthinking_tcm9-161856.pdf. Accessed March 23, 2010.
18. "In the Flesh," *Star Trek: Voyager*, Episode 98, Season 5 (CBS Paramount, 1998).
19. G. Orians, "An Ecological and Evolutionary Approach to Landscape Aesthetics," in E. Penning-Roswell and D. Lowenthal, eds., *Landscape Meanings and Values* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), pp.3–22; and G. Orians, "An Evolutionary Perspective on Aesthetics," *Bulletin of Psychology & the Arts*, Sample Issue Evolution, Creativity, and Aesthetics, available at http://www.apa.org/divisions/div10/articles/orians/html, accessed March 23 2010).

20. G. Orians and J. Heerwagen, "Evolved Responses to Landscapes," in J. Barkow, L. Cosmides, and J. Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.555–79.
21. I. Whyte, *Landscape and History Since 1500* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p.19.
22. J. Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London, 1975), as cited in Whyte, *Landscape and History Since 1500*.
23. Orians, "An Ecological and Evolutionary Approach to Landscape Aesthetics."
24. S. Sailer, "The World According to Golf" (2002). Available at: http:www.isteve.com/Golf_the_World_According_to_Golf.html. Accessed March 23, 2010.
25. C. Suetterlin, as cited in Sailer, "The World According to Golf."
26. P. Kahn, "Developmental Psychology and the Biophilia Hypothesis," *Children's Affiliation with Nature Development Review*, 17 (1997), pp.1–61, as cited in Bird, "Natural Thinking," p.29; S. Kaplan, "Environmental Preference in a Knowledge-Seeking, Knowledge-Using Organism," in Barkow, Cosmieds, and Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind*, pp.581–98; Orians and Heerwagen, "Evolved Responses to Landscapes"; and R. Sommer and J. Summit, "Cross-National Rankings of Tree Shape," *Ecological Psychology*, 8 (1996), pp.327–41, as cited in Orians which one?.
27. Wise and Rosenberg, 1988, cited in D. Relf, "Human Issues in Horticulture," *HortTechnology*, vol.2, no.2 (April/June, 1992), pp.159–71.
28. Orians, which one?.
29. Suetterlin, cited in Sailer, "The World According to Golf."
30. Bird, "Natural Thinking."
31. D. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, 1988), p.11.
32. Orions and Heerwagen, "Evolved Responses to Landscapes."

33. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*.

34. A. Forty, "Primitive: The Word and Concept," in J. Odgers, F. Samuel, and A. Sharr, eds., *Primitive: Original Matters in Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.3–14; and J. Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972).

35. S. Cairns, "Notes for an Alternative History of the Primitive Hut," in Odgers, Samuel, and Sharr, eds., *Primitive: Original Matters in Architecture*, pp.86–95; and Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise*.

36. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, R. Nice, trans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

37. See, for example, N. AlSayyad and M. Massoumi, eds., *The Fundamentalist City: Religiosity and the Remaking of Urban Space* (London: Routledge, 2011); I. Powell, *Ndebele: A People & Their Art* (London: New Holland, 1995); and J. Robertson, ed., *A Companion to the Anthropology of Japan* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005).

38. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

39. T. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, K. Tarnowski and F. Will, trans. (London: Routledge Classics, 2003 [1973, 1964]); N. AlSayyad, "The Fundamentalist City," in AlSayyad and Massoumi, eds., *The Fundamentalist City*, pp.3–26; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; and D. Massey, *For Space* (London: Sage Publications, 2005).

40. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, p.6.

41. Whedon, *Serenity: The Official Visual Companion*, p.42.

42. Le Corbusier, *Towards A New Architecture*, J. Rodker, trans. (Dover: Mineola, 1986 [1931]).

43. A. Perez-Gomez, "Architecture as Embodied Knowledge," *Journal of Architectural Education*, 40 (Spring 1987), p.87, cited in D. Ghirardo, "Introduction," in D. Ghirardo, ed., *Out of Site* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), pp.9–16.

44. J. Corner, "Introduction: Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice," in J. Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscape* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p.7.

45. Denis Cosgrove, cited in Whyte, *Landscape and History Since 1500*, p.20.

46. J. Whedon, "Objects In Space: Director's Commentary," *Firefly*, Episode 15 (Twentieth Century Fox Television, 2002).

47. G. Crysler, *Writing Spaces: Discourses of Architecture, Urbanism, and the Built Environment, 1960–2000* (New York: Routledge, 2003). See also G. Kester, "(Not) Going with the Flow," in A. Kumar, ed., *Poetics/Politics: Radical Aesthetics for the Classroom* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp.17–38.

48. A. Kahn, "Defining Urban Sites," in C. Burns and A. Kahn, eds., *Site Matters* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p.281–96.

49. Corner, "Introduction: Recovering Landscape as a Critical Cultural Practice."

50. Ibid., p.156.

51. Ibid., p.157.

52. I. Borden, "Architecture, Not," in A. Hardy and N. Teymur, eds., *Architectural History and the Studio* (London: ?uestion Press, 1996), pp.135–48; M. de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); K. Dovey, "Putting Geometry in Its Place: Toward a Phenomenology of the Design Process," in D. Seamon, ed., *Dwelling, Seeing, and Designing: Toward a Phenomenological Ecology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp.247–69; Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*; and T. Wikstrom, "The Home and Housing Modernization," in D. Benjamin and D. Stea, eds., *The Home: Words, Interpretations, Meanings and Environments* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1995), pp.267–82.

53. Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, p.71.

54. E. Greene, "The Good Book," in Espenson, ed., *Serenity Found*, pp.79–93.

55. R. Shields, "A Guide to Urban Representation and What to Do About It," in A. King, ed., *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp.227–52.

56. Whyte, *Landscape and History Since 1500*, pp.20–21.

57. R. Brown, "A Critique of Origins, or the Case for Palimpsest," in J. Savage and M. Miles, eds., *Nutopia: A Critical View of Future Cities* (Plymouth University Press, 2011).

58. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p.200.

59. Ibid.

60. Ibid.

61. S. Sassen, "Analytical Borderlands: Race, Gender and Representation in the New City," in King, ed., *Re-Presenting the City*, pp.183–202.

62. Fishman, *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century*.

63. P. Madsen, "Introduction," in Madsen and Plunz, eds., *The Urban Lifeworld*, p.10.

64. Massey, *For Space*.

65. Kahn, "Defining Urban Sites," p.281–96; and Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.

66. Ibid.

67. A. Wall, "Programming the Urban Surface," in Corner, ed., *Recovering Landscape*, pp.233–49.

68. R. Brown and D. Maudlin, "Concepts of Vernacular Architecture," in G. Crysler, K. Heynen, and S. Cairns, eds., *Handbook of Architectural Theory* (London: Sage, 2011).

69. J. Whedon, "Serenity: Director's Commentary," *Firefly*, Episode 1 (Twentieth Century Fox Television, 2002).

70. J. Pallasmaa, "Identity, Intimacy and Domicile: Notes on the Phenomenology of Home," in Benjamin and Stea, eds., *The Home*, pp.131–47.

71. Ibid.

72. M. Hvattum, "Origins Redefined: A Tale of Pigs and Primitive Huts," in Odgers, Samuel, and Sharr, eds., *Primitive*, pp.33–42. The use of the word "ritualized" here draws on Catherine Bell, who defines it as a process of expressing and mastering meanings, not as a static thing but as part of an ongoing process of making, remaking, and transforming shaped culture. C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

73. Colin Ward citing John Turner. C. Ward, "Preface," in J. Turner, *Housing By People: Towards Autonomy in Building Environments* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976), p.5.

74. H. Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: A Critique* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999).

75. B. Happauf and M. Umbach, "Introduction: Vernacular Modernism," in M. Umbach and B. Happuaf, eds., *Vernacular Modernism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp.1–24.

76. K. Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.140.

77. S. Kent, "Ethnoarchaeology and the Concept of Home: A Cross-Cultural Analysis," in Benjamin and Stea, eds., *The Home*, pp. 163–80.

78. Pallasmaa, "Identity, Intimacy and Domicile."

79. Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*.

80. Happauf and Umbach, "Introduction: Vernacular Modernism."

81. G. Bridge, *Reason in the City of Difference: Pragmatism, Communicative Action and Contemporary Urbanism* (London: Routledge, 2005).

82. M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

83. N. Leach, "Virilio and Architecture," in J. Armitage, ed., *Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p.77.

84. O. Bollnow, *Mensch and Raum* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990), as cited in Wikstrom, "The Home and Housing Modernization," p.280.

85. Wikstrom, "The Home and Housing Modernization," p.276.

86. W. Rybcynski, *The Most Beautiful House in the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).

87. Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity*.

88. S. Tigerman, "Introduction," in S. Mollman Underhill, ed., *Stanley Tigerman: Buildings and Projects, 1966–1989* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), pp.8–14.

89. Though this discussion is my own, I defer to Loni Peristere's similar observations, which are expressed far more eloquently than my own. See L. Peristere, "Mutant Enemy U," in Espenson, ed., *Serenity Found*, pp.117–29.