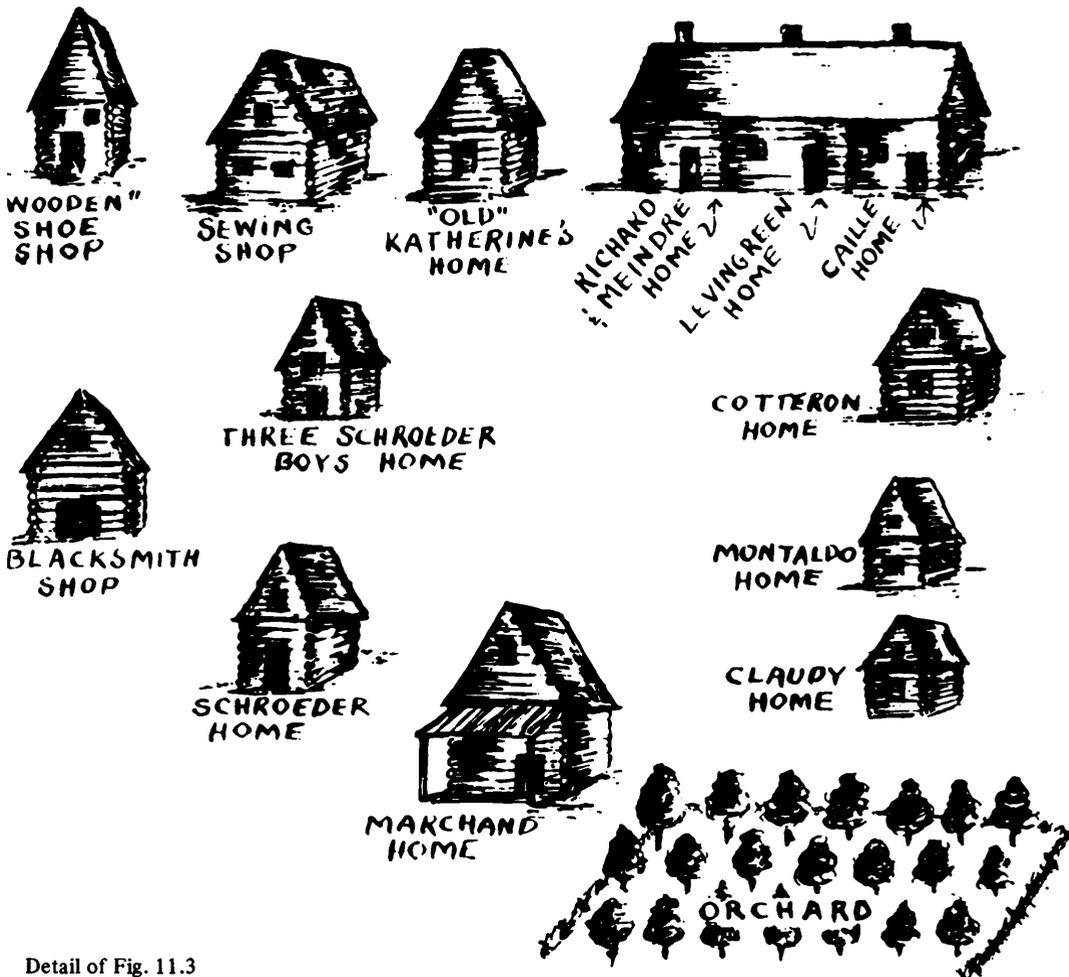


1 Idealism and the American Environment

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

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



Detail of Fig. 11.3

Drive through Jerusalem Corners, New York, or Promise City, Iowa; pass the freeway exits for Elysian Valley and Arcadia in California; stop at the "Garden of Eatun" restaurant in Cozad, Nebraska. American place names revive settlers' visions of the New World as earthly paradise, dreams about the apocalyptic properties of the American landscape first expressed when Columbus claimed to be the discoverer of a "new heaven" and a "new earth."¹ The rhetoric of paradise embellishes an adventurer's map of Eden, Virginia; it decorates the stern sermons Puritan leaders preached to their covenant communities; it obscures the industrial order established in early corporate towns; it suffuses the balance sheets of land speculators with romance. It lingers, ironically, in the title of a recent study of the contemporary American landscape, *God's Own Junkyard*.²

Paradisiac preoccupations in the United States have usually rested on the assumption that salvation and material prosperity are earned through an individual approach to the land of promise and its physical resources. This book is about dissident idealists who looked upon the New World as a potential paradise, but insisted on realizing this potential through collective organization and ownership. To demonstrate how the New World should be settled, several hundred groups established communistic societies which planned and built model towns. The Shakers, one of the largest and most successful of these groups, called their society a "living building"; and this metaphor encapsulates the subject of this book, the relationship between the members of these experimental communities, their forms of social organization, and the complex, collective environments they created.

At the same time that experimental com-

munities sought viable forms of social and environmental organization, they sought suitable terms to describe themselves: "socialist," "communist," "communionist," "communitist," "communistic," "communitarian," "commune."³ Marx and Engels, who studied American communistic societies with an eye to supporting "scientific" socialism, ultimately gave these communities their most familiar, if least appropriate, name: "utopian socialist." In their haste to embrace a collective life style, the members of American communes did anticipate or share the political naïvete of utopian socialist writers who proposed to unite all classes in the immediate construction of ideal communities, but even the most optimistic commune members had to come to terms with real people and real places. Engels pointed out the paradox which utopian theorists such as Robert Owen and Charles Fourier ignored: "The more completely . . . [their plans] were worked out in detail, the more they could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies."⁴ Communards encountered a different paradox: the more their communities were worked out in detail, the more they became particular solutions for particular groups and the less they seemed applicable to the larger society.

Even though the communards' strategy can be criticized, some of their model communities were prodigious feats of consistent social and physical design. Their common sense contrasts with the dreamy extravagance of much utopian writing; their imagination and inventiveness distinguish them from the regimentation of much state socialism. Since the communards' collective dwellings and workshops were constructed in an American context, they are steeped in our national lore of earthly paradise, frontier self-reliance, democracy, and moral superiority.

Thus they challenge American family life styles and American capitalist industries more directly than communes in China, *kibbutzim* in Israel; or *ujamaa* villages in Tanzania: they turn our own cultural and historical assumptions upside down. Even more provocative than their collective organization is their feminist organization: those few communes which attempted to change the role of women were designed to include facilities for communal child care, communal cooking, and communal housework. Here one finds arrangements for egalitarian living which possess a liberatory potential unmentioned in most utopian writing and unrealized in most socialist states.

During the past ten years in the United States, communal strategies have been revived by thousands of groups. Some are rural communities attempting to become economically self-sufficient, others are urban groups of individuals working in traditional jobs but living communally to find support for their ideas. Along with the new communes has come new theoretical support for the argument, first advanced by Owen and Fourier, that revolution must replace existing industrial conurbations with decentralized, self-sufficient communities combining industry and agriculture. Although the site plans and housing designs published here may be of use to existing communes and other organizations dedicated to this ideal, I did not seek them out primarily for that purpose. So many architects prescribe novel housing to preclude political conflict that I feel I must disclaim any connection with these utopian "soft cops" and their Corbusian blackmail, "Architecture or revolution?"⁵

My main purpose in this research was to explore the relationship between social organization and the building process in particular

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

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

fully enlightening, the monument-dominated environment of architectural criticism is far more misleading.

Making such allegations and defying traditional disciplinary boundaries provokes anxiety, my own as well as my readers'. I think that what I have gained by taking a broad look at ideology and built form compensates for some difficulty with purists who do not accept this material as "architecture." I have used the terms "physical planning," "landscape architecture," and "environmental design" quite interchangeably and loosely, and I am not prepared to recognize any traditional aesthetic distinctions between the terms "architecture" and "building." I am concerned with the changing, continuous relationship between life style and life space. I am asking, with the communitarian theorist Murray Bookchin, "How does the liberated self emerge that is capable of turning time into life, space into community, and human relationships into the marvellous?"⁶

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

Because historic communistic societies de-

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

I chose seven groups (Shakers, Mormons, Fourierists, Perfectionists, Inspirationists, Union Colonists, and Llano Colonists), and seven sites (Hancock, Massachusetts; Nauvoo, Illinois; Phalanx, New Jersey; Oneida, New York; Amana, Iowa; Greeley, Colorado; and Llano del Rio, California). Four were religious communities, three were nonsectarian; together they provide a fair representation of the ideological and geographical spread of the communitarian movement, between 1790 and 1938. Their approaches to economic sharing varied widely. Five owned all land communally; two mixed private and communal ownership of land. Three shared all income equally; two equalized wages but offered some return for capital invested; one started on the basis of total sharing but ultimately permitted private

property; one started with private property mixed with cooperative ventures. In terms of financial stability and longevity all seven groups would rank somewhere between average and outstanding experiments. Two communal industries, Oneida silverware and Amana woolens, are still the basis of active corporations. All of the groups did a substantial amount of building, and ultimately I selected them because their history was well documented by both inside and outside observers, their buildings were sufficiently well preserved, and their members' approach to the environment was animated with idealism and inventiveness.

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

The communitarians' ventures in collective,

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

Notes to Chapter One

1 Charles Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise*, Urbana, Ill., 1961, p. 40.

2 Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape*, New York, 1964.

3 The historical antecedents of these terms are discussed by Arthur E. Bestor in "The Evolution of the Socialist Vocabulary," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 9 (June 1948), 259-302, and in *Backwoods Utopias: The Sectarian Origins and the Owenite Phase of Communitarian Socialism in America: 1663-1829*, 2d enl. ed., Philadelphia, 1970, pp. vii-viii. I will rely on the terms "communistic society," "communitarian" and "commune," since their meaning has changed least in the past century.

4 See Lewis S. Feuer, "The Influence of the American Communist Colonies on Engels and Marx," *Western Political Quarterly*, 19 (Sept. 1966), 456-474; Friedrich Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880), tr. Edward Aveling, New York, 1969, p. 36.

5 The term "soft cops" is Robert Goodman's, from *After The Planners*, New York, 1971. "Architecture or revolution" is the rhetorical finish of Le Corbusier's influential work, *Vers une Architecture*, Paris, 1928, p. 241.

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

7 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, Boston, 1859, p. 76.

8 John Humphrey Noyes, quoted in Constance Robertson, ed., *Oneida Community: An Autobiography, 1851-1876*, Syracuse, 1970, p. 26.