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### Author

Wortham-Galvin, B. D.

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# Mythologies of Placemaking

B. D. Wortham-Galvin

*We accept the reality of the world with which we are presented.*  
—Christoff (played by Ed Harris), *The Truman Show*

Designers and planners frequently herald the concept of “sense of place.” However, this ill-defined buzzword most often serves to rally support for redevelopment projects that ignore deep patterns of local culture. Advocating for sense of place may sound laudable, but it often implies the eradication of urban fabric or the displacement of residents deemed unsuitable for newly conceived places. The idea of “place” thus becomes a way of conveying value—as if some areas have the sense of place and others do not. Even less understood or appreciated is what happens to places that are remade. Indeed, are there places that are anything but remade?

This essay contends that place (re)making and (re)presentation involve more than physical manipulations. Places are both real and imagined: they depend on mental association as well as physical shape and character. Given this richness of qualities and meanings, how is it possible to evaluate proposals for change?

Frequently, designers and planners turn to a discussion of “authenticity” to sort through such issues. But, as the French cultural theorist, sociologist, and philosopher Jean Baudrillard has noted, when authenticity is evoked, we are already in the world of the fake or fictional.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, because places are defined by the imagination of many, they occupy a realm that cannot be properly judged in terms of authenticity. In early twenty-first-century America, then, the appeal of “sense of place” may have more to say about being caught between traditionalism and (post)modernity than about actual experience.

For designers and planners the key realization should be that a place has truth based not just on the facts of its existence, but also on the things believed to be true about it. Making place is not just about physical creation and destruction; it is also about observation, narrative, association, and ritual. Inevitably, a discussion of place reveals mythologies about the ways we have made and enacted the built environment. And such a discussion invokes a fiction more real, as it were, than any available reality—a conflicting simultaneity of archetypes, models, ideals, and performative tactics.

Guided by various motives, people enact place for many reasons: to disseminate propaganda; to reveal the politics

of context; to perpetuate tradition; to instill beliefs and values; and to rebel against these patterns. Places whose outward form may thus appear permanent and universal are founded on the experiential, associational, and ephemeral nature of dwelling and being.

## Myth and the Placemaking of America

*To retrieve these sources and discard the intervening layers of myth would tell only half the story.... The myths themselves hold hints of New England's character. In fact, they too shaped it.* — Jane Holtz Kay<sup>2</sup>

Mythmaking and place are intertwined with identity. America as a place, writ large, was created out of the ideas of America mapped onto its spatial territory.<sup>3</sup> Thus those who work (popularly, socially, politically, and aesthetically) to reconceive an idea of America are also remaking the place. One of the enduring mythologies of America involves its origins, not only the Revolutionary leaders but also constructed cultural landscapes. One of the most important of these was the idea of colonial New England.

After the adrenaline of the Revolution had worn off, Americans turned toward the crafting of a national identity. In a country founded in *tabula rasa* conditions (if one ignores, as the colonists did, the displacement of millions of Native Americans) the reconstruction of a common past was a logical step. Socially useful myths about the founding of the country were needed to adhere the new (white, land-owning) citizens to one another culturally and politically. An important part of this effort was the colonial revival, which emerged in antebellum America (1814–1864) and continued for the next hundred years. During the nineteenth century, it embodied a willful (if sometimes incoherent) attempt to construct a collective memory. Its many variations went well beyond aesthetic fad, as it used the events, heroes, and aesthetics of the Revolution in an effort to create a common national ideology.<sup>4</sup> The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski asserted that myths are stories “which [have] the function of justifying the present and thereby contributing to social stability.” The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss observed “that myths may be activated or reactivated in order to legitimize a version of history that is useful....”<sup>5</sup> The American cultural historian Michael Kammen has argued that the colonial revival accords with Malinowski’s paradigm of mythmaking, but that the ideas of Lévi-Strauss explain how it sustained itself.

Whether it was antebellum America seeking social stability (Malinowski) or Victorian America attempting to

**Opposite:** Like this stage set, *The Truman Show*, Williamsburg, television shows, and New Urbanist communities all play with the notion of “the real” and “the myth” of placemaking. Photo by W. G. Chase from Flickr.com.



legitimize a past useful for its present (Lévi-Strauss), it was the landscape of preindustrial New England that provided a primary site for the construction of the new American myth(s). The geographer D. W. Meinig has specifically cited the importance of the New England village. According to Meinig, “Every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together.”<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the New England village symbolized how to make community in the new nation.

If landscapes are mirrors in which people see what they need to about themselves, what colonial revivalists saw in New England says more about their desire to construct a narrative of American exceptionalism than to replicate the actual historical record. New England’s invented past stabilized and homogenized a present made socially uncertain by the great waves of migration during the nineteenth century.

The writer and designer J. B. Jackson has described the schism between the romanticization of an “ancient” New England and its reality. He pointed out the experience of

William Dean Howells, who traveled there on assignment from an Ohio newspaper in 1860. Howells observed:

*With its wood built farms and villages, it looked newer than the coal smoked brick of southern Ohio. I had prefigured the New England landscape bare of forests, relieved here and there with the trees of orchards or plantations; but I found apparently as much woods as at home.*<sup>7</sup>

What Howells found was actually a landscape in decline. During the 1860s more than ten thousand farms were abandoned in Massachusetts and Rhode Island. It is not surprising therefore that he did not find the bucolic setting of his imagination. Jackson also described how Nathaniel Shaler made a similar observation in 1869. According to Shaler:

*There is something sad about the look of the land. One never sees an acre gained from the forest; around the pasture lands there is often a belt where the wood marks its gain upon the cultivated tract.*<sup>8</sup>

As Jackson noted:

*...a cycle of sorts was thereby completed: the man-made landscape of New England had got its start back in the seventeenth century on the hilltops cleared by Indian fires; it had slowly expanded, generation after generation, into the wooded valleys. And now, in the second half of the 19th century, the fields were retreating from the hills and leaving them to the forest.*<sup>9</sup>

Despite New England's second-growth forest, visitors there after the Civil War still envisioned an open landscape of meadows and villages dotted with trees; they desired a smallness of scale to contrast with the wide-open, almost scaleless landscapes of the American west. Many Americans thus looked to New England for their cultural patrimony, while they sought their natural patrimony in the landscapes of the west. However, others made no such distinction. According to Jackson, they simply lauded New England's cultural and natural heritage by citing its Virgilian qualities (no matter how common its landscapes actually were).<sup>10</sup>

The image of New England as America's original Elysian Fields became even more powerful as industrialization put pressure on life within cities. Soon, those with means began to leave the city during the heat of summer and seek relief in a "real" America, which they discovered in rural New England.

This image was reinforced in the landscape architecture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Olmsted and Cleveland and Copeland and Eliot would take the New England of their childhood memories (a mix of fact and fiction) and transplant its bucolic rock outcroppings, shallow streams, short grasses, and tended forests to parks in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Omaha, and Chicago. Eventually, Jackson observed, this American park movement would be transformed into the idealized garden suburbs of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup>

Jackson and others have seen this gap between the idyll of New England and its physical reality as evidence of the colonial revival's propagandistic intents. In particular, it defined and asserted an American way of life with specific associated notions of domestic and gender relations. According to Meinig: "Taken as a whole, the image of the New England village is widely assumed to symbolize for many people the best we have known of an intimate, family-centered, Godfearing, morally conscious, industrious, thrifty, democratic community."<sup>12</sup>

Such ingrained values have made it difficult to penetrate the movement. Its generalizations and clichés claim to

embody the American experience. But in the process they obliterated the multitudes of experiences actually lived by Americans during the eighteenth century.

### **(Re)Presentation of the Contemporary American Place**

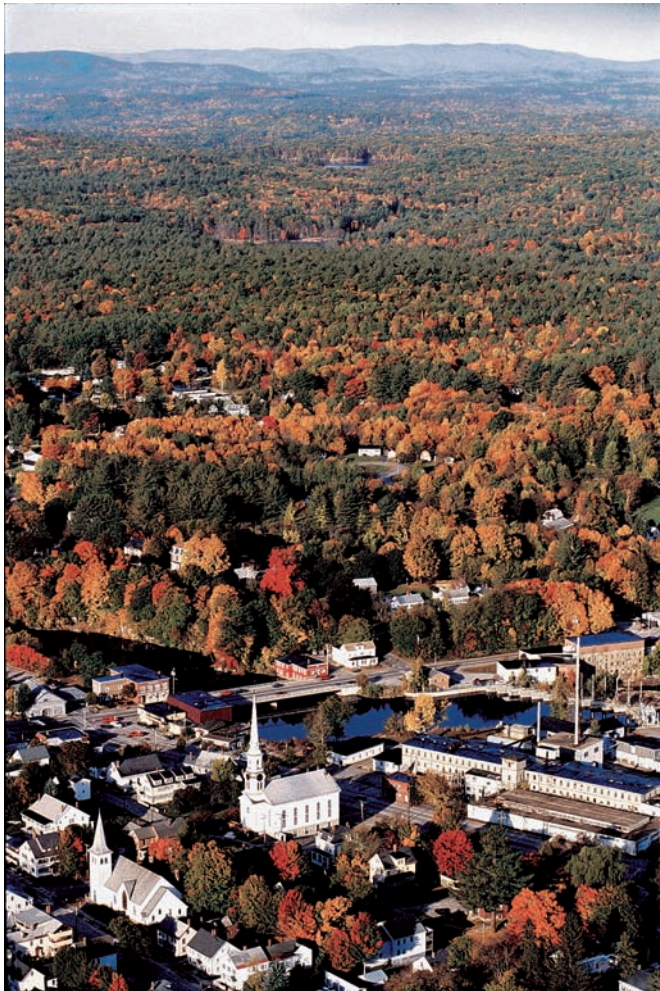
*You have to appreciate authenticity in all its forms.*  
— advertisement for Winston cigarettes, 1999

America's mythologies have continued to affirm a set of values even as those values (and the media used to present them) have changed. This has been true of New England-cum-American idyll representations, from the eighteenth-century engravings of New England town centers by John Barber, to the mid-twentieth-century *Saturday Evening Post* covers by Norman Rockwell, to the contemporary television series *Gilmore Girls*.

The mythology has also been implicit in a contemporary design approach, the New Urbanism. Founded almost thirty years ago, the New Urbanism is arguably the most significant urban design and planning movement to have emerged in the late twentieth century. As the website [newurbanism.org](http://newurbanism.org) notes, "Currently there are over 4,000 New Urbanist projects planned or under construction in the United States alone, half of which are in historic urban centers." New Urbanism's principles address issues as diverse as transportation, health, urban morphology, building typology, and socioeconomics. However, it is not the specifics of any of these that most provoke critics, but the sense that the image of these places and their built forms and spaces serves up one more version of the New England village.

Perhaps unintentionally, the movie *The Truman Show* (1998) best illustrated this mythological conceit. Its main character, Truman Burbank (played by Jim Carrey), doesn't realize that the quaint town of Seahaven in which he has lived his whole life is really a studio set run by the visionary television producer Christoff (played by Ed Harris). He is likewise unaware that his family, friends, and the residents of the entire town around him are actors.

Filmed at the ur-site of New Urbanism, Seaside, on the Gulf Coast of Florida, the movie highlights the simulacra at play in this representation of a New England village. In the opening voiceover, as Truman bicycles past the town green, Christoff declares, "While the world he inhabits is, in some respects, counterfeit, there's nothing fake about Truman himself. No scripts, no cue cards. It isn't always Shakespeare, but it's genuine." Critics have seized on this comment in their attacks on New Urbanism. They claim



the line between Truman’s faux cinematic community of Seahaven and the hyperreality of the developer Robert Davis’s actual Seaside, Florida, is nearly invisible.

One critic of New Urbanism, Ada Louise Huxtable, has argued more generally that the replacement of reality by idyllic fantasies at such places as Colonial Williamsburg, Disneyland, and the New Urbanist community of Celebration, Florida, is a particularly American phenomenon.<sup>13</sup> She cited the American desire for “authentic reproduction,” the ubiquity of real fakes, and the culture’s comfort with them. While accepting that architecture has a role to play in mythmaking, she argued that the distinction between sentimental unreality and nostalgic idealism has become increasingly blurred. Above all, she objected to a pervasiveness of simulacra and hyperreality that has made it possible for Americans

to relate increasingly to their environment through consumable spectacle rather than lived experience.

**Left:** Idyllic New England: an aerial photograph showing the center of Penacook, NH, surrounded by a landscape of foliage leading to mountains to the northwest. Photo by Dan Habib/*Concord Monitor*.

**Right top:** Battle Road Farm in Lincoln, MA. This New Urbanist development received national attention for its planning and design. Modeled after a mythical nineteenth-century New England farm village, the development comprises two or four townhouses, 40 percent of which are affordable housing. Photo courtesy of New England Futures, Lucy Chen.

**Right bottom:** Mashpee Commons, MA, reinvented the image of New England using New Urbanist techniques. A “traditional town center” has been built that will include mixed-use neighborhoods with housing, offices, stores, civic buildings, and open space. Photo courtesy of New England Futures, Cornish Associates.

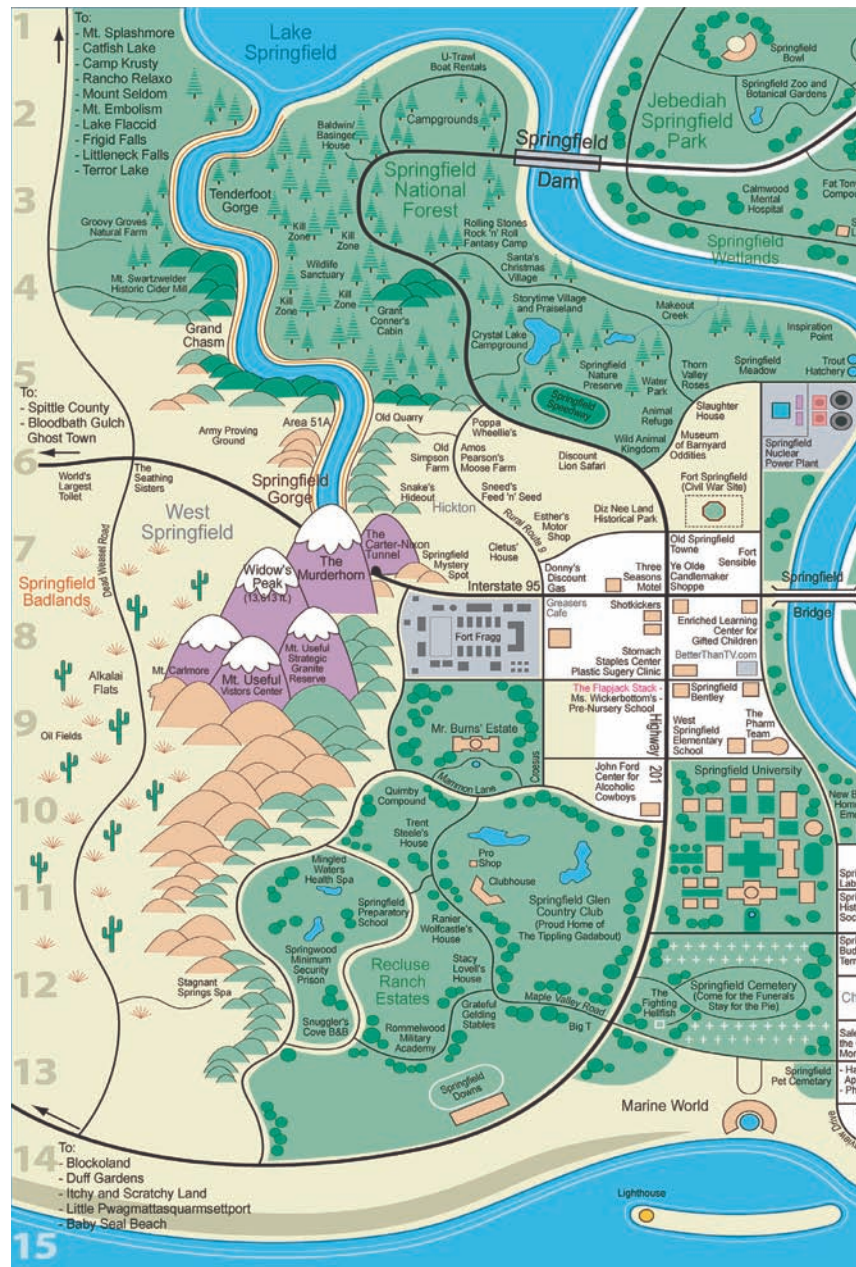
By contrast, Baudrillard has argued that America has invented a place that is more real than reality (i.e., hyperreality).<sup>14</sup> In his America, what are most real are the illusions. His argument is that places such as Disneyland and Williamsburg (and New Urbanist communities) represent the real America. In this conception of place, simulation is the creation of the real through mythological models. Homes, relationships, fashion, art, and music are all dictated by ideal models presented through the media. Thus the boundary between the image, or the simulation, and reality breaks down, creating a world of hyperreality.

In a similar vein, Ernest Pascucci has taken issue with the influential writings of Richard Sennett and Kenneth Frampton that associated television with the death of public life.<sup>15</sup> Pascucci argued that there is now greater accessibility by many publics to a variety of places because of a fluidity between physical and virtual architectures. He has narrated this elision between the physical and the fictional as placemaking:

*Shortly after the completion of New York's Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center in 1966, the building made its network television debut on the opening credits of That Girl. Wallace Harrison's building was upstaged by That Girl's leading lady, who danced between the placards in front of the Opera House ... In September 1973, when The Mary Tyler Moore Show began its fourth season, the opening credits announced the malling of Minneapolis, replacing the outdoor location shots that lead up to Mary's famous toss of her blue hat with a thoroughly majestic image of Mary reaching the top of the escalator in Philip Johnson's IDS Center.... A full two months before Philip Johnson proudly presented his recently completed project as Minneapolis's new indoor downtown in Architectural Forum, The Mary Tyler Moore Show enacted the transformation of downtown in front of a much larger audience than Architectural Forum could ever hope to attract.<sup>16</sup>*

Such collisions between real architectural products and televisionary construction illustrate two ways of making place, and this duality is equally applicable to the New England village. The most current enactments of New England occupy the commonly shared cultural space of television (even as the Internet is transforming and replacing that medium). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, shows such as *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007), *Ed* (2000-2004), and *Everwood* (2002-2006) were set either in New England villages or in small towns meant to simulate them. Contrary to high-culture belief, television (and

now the Internet) is not less authentic, less public, or any less of a place than physical forms and spaces. As Pascucci has observed, space is not an "absolute precondition for authentic public life," or placemaking.<sup>17</sup> In fact, as the world becomes more mediated by the ubiquity of the screams of digital visual communication, placemaking will depend ever more on the interdependence of the physical and the mental—of the made and the imagined.

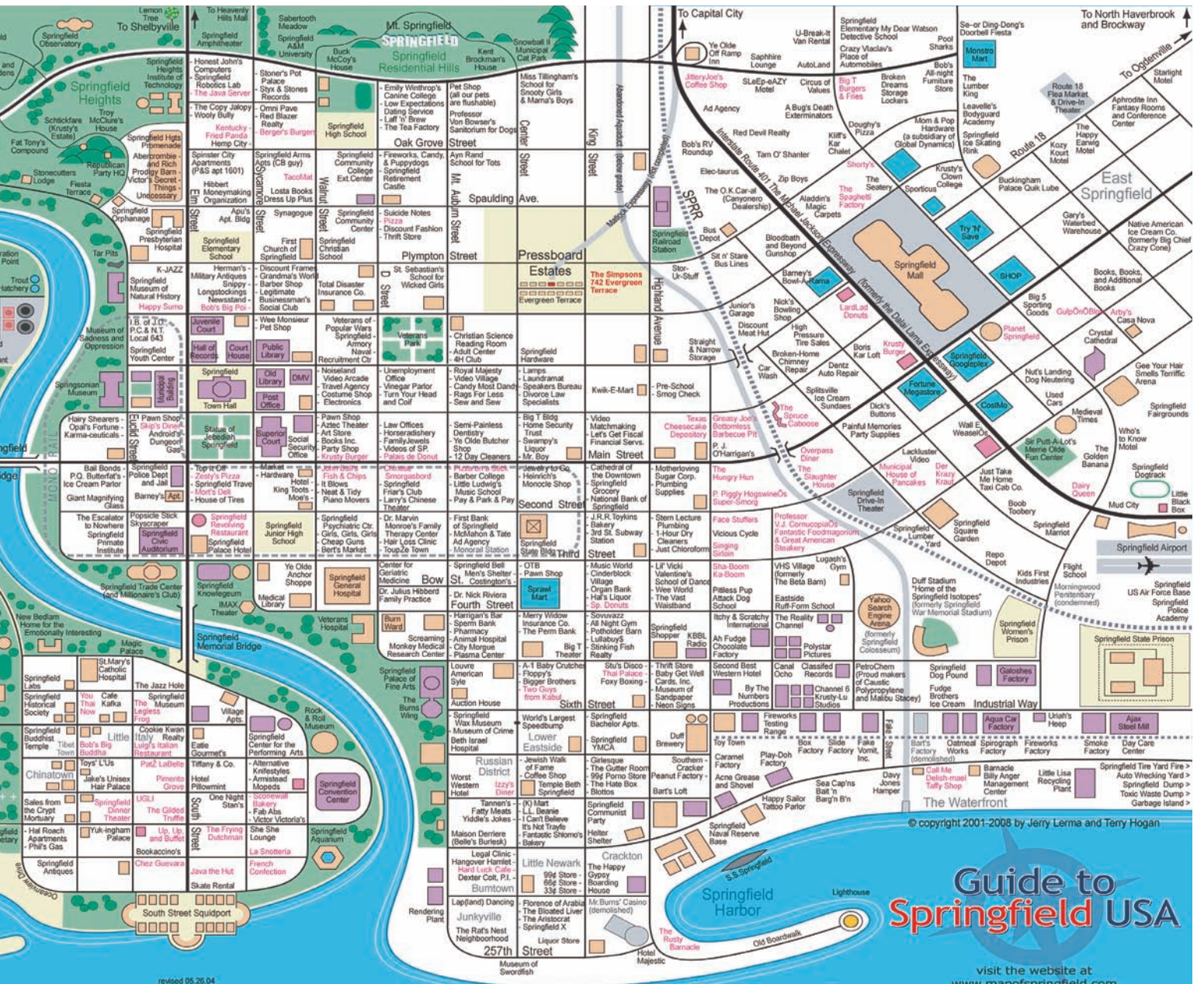


Designed by Myth

When subject matter is forced to fit into preconceived patterns, there can be no freshness of vision. —Edward Weston<sup>18</sup>

One of the most complex exercises in placemaking in recent American culture has been an animated television series, *The Simpsons*. Released in December 1989, the show

is now the longest-running prime-time comedy on television. What began as a sitcom about the dysfunctional antics of the Simpson family, with the son, Bart, as an anti-hero, smart-mouth, protagonist, has expanded to become a socio-cultural and political commentary on postmodern America, with Bart's father, Homer, a working-class everyman, as its central figure. The power of *The Simpsons* lies in its enduring popularity; it is not a subculture, it is culture. This



mainstream hit has now been viewed by a broad American (and international) audience for nearly twenty years.

*The Simpsons* focuses not on issues of lifestyle or personality, but on institutions and ideas.<sup>19</sup> These have been rendered visible as a source of cultural and political satire through the invention of a fictional place, Springfield, U.S.A. Springfield is described as having been founded by Jedediah Springfield, near Shelbyville and Capitol City, in a state whose name is never mentioned.<sup>20</sup>

The series' creator, Matt Groening, chose to name its principal setting Springfield not only because he was raised in Springfield, Oregon, but because of its ubiquity as a place name. There are seventy-one Springfields in thirty-six states in America.<sup>21</sup> Groening was clear, however, that his Springfield is not based on any real place; it is entirely fictional. It is the *idea* of America that Groening is invoking.

Despite its global reach, then, what *The Simpsons* represents is "not a form of global culture, but of local culture," that is accessible world wide.<sup>22</sup> *The Simpsons'* Springfield thus resonates as both reflection of and oppositional tool to present-day America, as it uses social and physical archetypes to tell the stories that describe contemporary America.

The social commentary of *The Simpsons* also extends to the (re)making of the quintessential American place. Yet, episodes and seasons of the show contradict a singular mapping of Springfield as a city, town, or suburb. Because it includes the mythologies of all of these, it is not a neatly drawn version of any of them. Springfield also pushes on notions of what constitutes those place types: is it the forms, demographics, activities, economics, or cultural rituals and institutions?

Recently, an Internet plan of Springfield was constructed by *Simpsons* devotees Jerry Lerma and Terry Hogan based on their exhaustive viewing of the show.<sup>23</sup> The map reveals a morphological bricolage of American urban, suburban, and small-town stereotypes: the gated community, the land-grant university, ethnic enclaves (Chinatown, Tibet Town, Little Italy, Russian District), impoverished neighborhoods (Bum Town, Crackton, Junkyville), the cultural-institutional core, the town green, the Cartesian grid, the cultural park on the river, the CBD, the mega-mall, the Interstate that divides the community and creates residual zones, the military base, factories on

the river, the stadium in a sea of parking, the historical tourist waterfront, the suburban strip, etc. These physical types represent a complex palimpsest. But what is significant is not just the plan but the commentary involved in the show's enactment of place. The town's many qualities are reaffirmed because they represent the reality of the contemporary American built environment. But the show simultaneously questions the values that drive this design.

### Mythmaking

In contemporary Western usage, myth has come to mean falsehood, a story that is not true. The word, therefore, carries a dismissive, pejorative connotation. As a complex cultural process, however, mythology can be utilized as a method of stewarding and engaging design of change. Thus, the stories of the placemaking of America have contributed to the shaping of the nation's values and belief systems, and what is significant is not their veracity but their purpose.

Myth, whether it is concerned with secular or sacred narratives, derives its power from being believed and deeply held as true.<sup>24</sup> Myths that are based on events and actions over time become imbued with symbolic meaning, transformed, or even reversed. What people think, feel, and say about a place becomes more important, while the facts become less germane, to the point where the original conditions become irrelevant. This process occurs in part because the places described become detached from their original context and a new context is substituted.

Mythology can become a powerful design tool if deployed judiciously, as it has been by Groening and his team, not to unquestioningly reinforce naturalized notions of how to make America, but to reveal beliefs and values and bring them into tension with counter-currents and American subcultures.

Under this paradigm, it is not New Urbanism's engagement with fiction or myth that should be troublesome. Certainly, much other contemporary design traffics in its own mythologies of modernity and postmodernity. It is rather unwillingness within the New Urbanism to allow tensions and conflicts to develop within the narrative of making place. It should be noted that this same unsatisfying quality in New Urbanist work is also present in that of such counter-contemporaries as Daniel Libeskind and Zaha Hadid.

The mythologies of places lived in reveal a richer environment than morphological circumscriptions or economic statistics. Place has actions, characters, a setting, and points of view. This is precisely Holtz Kay's lament—that

**Previous page:** This map of Springfield, USA, is based on the animated series *The Simpsons*. It maps the various typologies of the twentieth-century American city, suburb, and town. Available on the Web at [www.mapsofspringfield.com](http://www.mapsofspringfield.com). Image courtesy of Jerry Lerma & Terry Hogan, 2005.



people sacrifice meaning and memory, often complex layers in conflict, in order to uphold the veracity of the physical object itself.

Should placemaking be about the purity of a space, or about the relationship people have with, within, through, and beyond it? Are these purposes mutually exclusive, or can they coexist? Place has an indeterminacy and creative potential that can be seized or taken advantage of, and prompted instead of swept away or denied. If mythology and fiction are always embedded within place, then should not the designer engage them directly, and build upon or play with them in the shaping and remaking of space? A “sense of place,” then, should embrace experiential and associational narratives as well as physical attributes.

Place is always a remaking process, never a product.

#### Notes

1. Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, originally published in French by Editions Galilee, 1981 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 1–42.
2. Jane Holtz Kay, *Preserving New England* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 214.
3. The term “America” is used here to refer not only to the political-geographical area known as the United States of America but also to establish an ideological construct.
4. Ideology is used here in its common definition as a body of ideas reflecting the social needs and aspirations of an individual, group, class, or culture. During the nineteenth century the colonial revival grew with and strained against another great American trope, that of progress and modernity.
5. Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1991), p. 17.
6. D. W. Meinig, “Symbolic landscapes: Models of American Community,” in *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes: Geographical Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 164.
7. As quoted in J. B. Jackson, *American Space: The Centennial Years, 1865–1876* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), pp. 87–88. William Dean Howells (1837–1920), author, editor and critic, became editor (1871–1881) of the *Atlantic Monthly*, a post that gave him enormous influence as an arbiter of American taste. Publishing work by authors such as Mark Twain and Henry James, Howells became a proponent of American realism.
8. Ibid, pp. 88–89. Nathaniel Shaler (1841–1906) was an American paleontologist and geologist who wrote extensively on the theological and scientific implications of the theory of evolution.
9. Ibid, p. 106.
10. Ibid, Chapter X.
11. Ibid, pp. 107–111.
12. Meinig, “Symbolic landscapes,” p. 165.
13. Ada Louise Huxtable, *The Unreal America: Architecture and Illusion* (New York: The New Press, 1997).
14. Baudrillard pioneered the popular use of the terms “simulacrum” and “hyperreality” in their postmodern context. See his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) and *America* (1986). The novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco should also be acknowledged for his contributions to the concept of hyperreality in the postmodern literature.
15. Ernest Pascucci, “Intimate (Tele)visions,” in Steven Harris and Deborah Berke, eds., *Architecture of the Everyday* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997).
16. Ibid, p. 39.
17. Ibid, p. 41.
18. Edward Weston et al., *The Daybooks of Edward Weston* (New York: Aperture, 1990), p. 256.
19. John Alberti, “Introduction,” in John Alberti, ed., *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), p. xiii.
20. In the “Behind The Music” episode the state is mentioned; but there are several versions of the show, each with a different state name (including Kentucky and Missouri) to keep the not-revealing-the-location-of-Springfield joke going.
21. Fairview is the most common American place name; there are 275 Fairviews in 42 states. According to the USGS, Springfield is in the following states: Alabama x4, Arkansas x2, California, Colorado, Florida x2, Georgia x9, Idaho, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana x2, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Maryland x4, Maine, Michigan x2, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina x4, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey x2, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania x2, South Carolina x3, South Dakota, Tennessee x2, Texas x3, Virginia x8, Virgin Islands, Vermont, Wisconsin, West Virginia.
22. Duncan Stuart Beard, “Local Satire with a Global Research: Ethnic Stereotyping and Cross-Cultural Conflicts in *The Simpsons*,” in Alberti, ed., *Leaving Springfield*, p. 290.
23. www.mapofspringfield.com. The map was started in 2002 and last updated on May 25, 2004.
24. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. by Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972).