

RV Urbanism: Nomadic Network Settlements of the Senior Recreational Vehicle Community in the US

Deane Simpson

Architect, Instructor, Phd Candidate
Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich
(Swiss Federal Institute of Technology)

Ackerstrasse 31, CH-8005 Zurich, Switzerland.

phone: + 41 (0) 79 533 1944
e-mail: simpson@arch.ethz.ch



Abstract

In opposition to traditional stereotypical images of the elderly, this paper argues that this demographic is the site in which some of the most radical experiments in contemporary urbanism are being realized. Independent of governmental policies and unnoticed by the profession, new forms of elderly subjectivity, social collectivity are emerging. As one exemplary case study, this paper will focus on full-time senior Recreational Vehicle (RV) communities - a new form of nomadic network urbanism that challenges established models of static urban settlement. In the US, this community numbers between two and three million retirees communicating predominantly via satellite internet. This phenomenon may be defined in contrast to traditional spatial logics of urbanism, inasmuch as it is mobile, informal, dispersed, non-hierarchical and network-based. Operating as a contemporary manifestation of the concept of *unsettlement*, RV urbanism will be framed therefore as offering an alternate vision of urbanism challenging conventional notions of collectivity and urban sustainability.

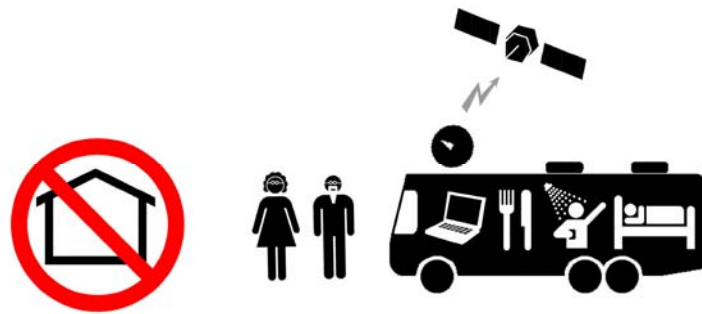


Figure: RV Urbanism. Source: Deane Simpson

1 RV Urbanism

In 1963 Buckminster Fuller proposed the end of urbanism as it was understood at the time. In a contemporary age of hyper-mobility, Fuller deemed “...the notion of self-contained permanent settlements obsolete.” Instead, he outlined “an urban strategy termed ‘unsettlement’, consisting of a network of hyper-mobile nomadic bodies operating at the scale of the entire world connected through invisible radio links.”²² Fuller anticipated a form of urbanism that would emerge as a reality on an unimagined scale thirty years later.

²² Buckminster Fuller. *Delos I Conference*. 1963. Cited in Mark Wigley, *Network Fever*, GreyRoom 04, MIT Press Summer 2001. pp.121-122.

Between 1990 and 1994, anthropologists Dorothy and David Counts conducted field research into an emerging social formation that would lead to their 1996 publication *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*: “While young people have been spending their energy in sedentary pursuits, buying homes in the suburbs, working in factories and offices, and raising kids, a generation of elders have become nomads. (...) There are literally millions of them. Nobody knows how many because there is no way to count them, but millions (two or three millions <in 1996> appears to be a conservative estimate) do not just leave home to wander a few months of the year. These people live in those motor homes or trailers, they have no other home.”²³

The contemporary phenomenon of the senior Recreational Vehicle communities in the United States is a specific form of nomadic network urbanism.²⁴ While nomadic communities are clearly not a new occurrence, one of this size, sophistication and connectivity is unprecedented. Its population is equivalent to that of a large US metropolitan area or twice that of the metropolitan area of European cities such as Zurich or Cologne. It continues to grow at a rapid rate with the expectation that it will more than triple in size over the next 20 years as the Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement age - anticipating a future nomadic city greater in population than the largest city in the US.²⁵ Nomadism, traditionally defined as the negation of sedentary urbanism, will be framed here as an alternate urban formation supported by both physical and non-physical network infrastructure.²⁶ The RV community may be characterized as an urban field of dense social connectivity of predominantly physically disconnected nomadic inhabitants. In challenging conventional notions of urbanism – the RV community also places established notions of urban sustainability in question through the terms of *flexibility* and *sparsity*.



Figure: Fuller (left) Counts and Counts (right)

²³ Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts. *Over the Next Hill : An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. Broadview Press, Ontario. 1996. p.15 Counts and Counts note that historically it has been very difficult to quantify the population of RVers in the US with any level of precision as the US census has no specific category for RV or motor home residences. Estimates are based upon a combination of Industry sales figures, industry questionnaires and partial censuses.

²⁴ Recreational Vehicles (RVs) are defined as “...vehicles that combine transportation and living quarters for travel, recreation and camping” and are typically either towable or motorized. (See diagram attached.) The majority of RVs are equipped to park in remote areas without plug-in infrastructure – this requires self-contained water and waste disposal tanks and a 12-volt electrical system, which for long-term which are normally powered by either solar panels or a generator. Definitions supplied by the RVIA (Recreational Vehicle Industry Association) (www.rvia.org)

²⁵ The Recreational Vehicle Industry Association anticipates massive industry growth based on Baby Boomer ageing. (www.rvia.org)

²⁶ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Frans Rosenthal, Ed. N. Dawood. Princeton University Press, 1967. p.118. In the preeminent text on traditional nomadism: *The Muqaddimah*, medieval Arab social historian Ibn Khaldun (1332-1408) described the two fundamentally different environments in which all human cooperation and social organization developed. For Khaldun, “the very nature of their <nomadic> existence is the negation of building, which is the basis of civilization.” The nomad, or the nomadic society, has therefore traditionally been perceived as anti-urban - as mobile ‘other’ functioning outside of the construction of the state apparatus and sedentary society.



Figure: Domestic bliss: RV interior. Source: Winnebago (<http://www.winnebagoind.com/>)

2 Leisure Nomads

The senior RV community functions according to the traditional logics of both nomadism and nomad space, but with important differences. Rather than relying on nomadic behavior for subsistence - as with the three historical forms of nomadism (*hunter-gatherers*, *pastoral nomads*, and *peripatetic nomads*), RVers could be described with a new fourth term: *leisure nomads*. Thus, the emergence of senior RV urbanism in the US may be understood in the context of wider demographic, sociological and cultural transformations.²⁷

Within an ageing society, an increasing number of active retirees from different social backgrounds are attracted to the RV lifestyle. Motivated by the 3-part maxim: 'freedom, independence and adventure', they give up predominantly suburban sedentary homes for mobile RVs.²⁸ They are forced to leave most household objects, such as furniture, books, art and souvenirs, behind - despite the diminished domestic comfort this implies. There are clear tendencies towards minimizing possessions and towards casual, non-hierarchical forms of dress, socializing and gathering. This turning away from established conventions is partly a critique of traditional retiree lifestyles and partly a break with consumer society's normative codes. In this context, emerging forms of subjectivity and individualization have created new forms of community and social participation. Typical forms of RV community interaction include conventions, coordinated and chance meetings. Common activities include: the welcome hug, the 'potluck dinner', the camp-fire sing along, the 'bake-swap', and various forms of game playing. It is worth noting that the mobility of the senior RVer does not necessarily imply permanent disconnection from family - particularly with increasingly geographically spread generations. This is evident in the case of one RVing couple who RV to visit family spread across the US in Maine, Washington and Oregon.²⁹

These new forms of community are supported by spaces of both physical and non-physical gathering. The traditional model of nomadic space is described as a distribution of individuals in an open and

²⁷ These include: a) the widespread ageing of the population, and the subsequent emergence of a new 'third age' - a new generation of 'young old' who no longer work, but enjoy extended years of good health (See Laslett, Peter. 1989. *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*. Harvard University Press.); b) the process Ulrich Beck terms *individualization* - referring to the increasing freedom of the individual over the constraints of traditional sedentary social structures (See: Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage, London. 1992, and Huber, Andreas and O'Reilly, Karen. 2004. *The Construction of Heimat under conditions of individualized modernity: Swiss and British elderly migrants in Spain*. Ageing and Society 24, 2004. 327-351. Cambridge University Press.); and in turn, c) an intensive shift in social organization in societies from a production-based culture of work to a consumption-based culture of leisure, foregrounding the concept of lifestyle. (See: David Chaney, *Lifestyles: Key Ideas*. Routledge, London. 1996)

²⁸ Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts. *Over the Next Hill : An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. Broadview Press, Ontario. 1996 p.98. When questioned, RVers consistently answered 'freedom, independence and adventure' were the primary reasons why they adopted the RV lifestyle.

²⁹ Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts. *Over the Next Hill : An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. Broadview Press, Ontario. 1996 p.138

borderless space that is indefinite and non-communicating.³⁰ It is precisely the non-communicating aspect of traditional nomad space that is challenged by the contemporary leisure nomad. The wider systems of RV infrastructure support a high level of inter-connectivity suggesting the definition of this spatial formation as a highly decentralized (sparse) network urbanism. The infrastructure takes on two primary forms: one physical and one that could be described as non-physical, forming a network of material and information flow.



Figure: Potluck dinner. RV park. Source: www.carthagegaprvpark.com



Figure: 'under-awning' gathering. Source: <http://anthropology.uwaterloo.ca>

³⁰ The logic of nomad space is described extensively by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Nomadology: The War Machine*. 1986 Semiotext(e) University of Minnesota Press. pp50-51. See also Thomas Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative*. Prentice Hall, 1993, and Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Frans Rosenthal, Ed. N. Dawood, Princeton University Press, 1967 and Jibrail S. Jabbur, *The Bedouins and the Desert*, 1984, trans. Lawrence Conrad, State University of New York Press, 1995.



Figure: Samboree (Convention of Good Sam Club members.) <http://www.goodsams-florida.org>

3 *Collectivity Infrastructure*

Physical RVing infrastructure consists of two main elements: firstly, the road and highway system, and secondly, the parking/camping sites for vehicles. RV vehicles themselves flow within the physical network. The fixed points in the network vary greatly in size: from single RVs parking alone or in small groups on a remote site, to temporary physical cities. Many RV parking sites or camping-grounds are located in the vicinity of scenic attractions, landscape features or leisure amenities, thus seasonally remapping the recreational landscape of the territory they conquer. Guides to the various formal and informal sites, maps and itineraries are extensively published both in magazines, books, and online. A notable informal RVer site is Quartzsite, Arizona, whose population of several hundred fixed inhabitants expands in the winter months, typically peaking at over one million in February. Quartzite during its peak season – as with many large RV gathering points - is the site of a large-scale informal economy focusing on the trading rocks, crystals, and handcrafts. It is important to note that these points or nodes do not only exist in what is traditionally understood as ‘non-urban’ areas. In many cases RV sites are embedded within the existing urban fabric – operating on an unwritten ‘timeshare’ basis. RVs parked in supermarket or big-box retail parking lots are the most visible form of this. These urban sites support new forms of programmatic interaction in which temporarily unused carparking lots transform into impromptu and informal urban communities.

The ‘non-physical’ RVing infrastructure is based upon increasingly sophisticated and widely used on-board RV communication.³¹ In addition to the broad presence of portable and laptop computers, the majority of senior RVers now use two-way satellite internet access. With a satellite dish mounted to an RV, a user is able to access the internet from any remote location in the US with a view toward the southern sky. In recent years, it has become the dominant staging area of RV communities - typically known as RV Clubs - a central aspect of the RVing lifestyle. Many different subcultures and cliques exist within the broad senior RV community, including clubs specifically for singles, gay RVers, retired-military RVers, women RVers and so on. The largest and most well known RV community in the US is the Good Sam Club with over 1,000,000 members. Clubs, such as the Escapees RV Club, not only organize yearly or seasonal rallies and conventions but also keep members in close communication through newsletters and magazines, forums, chatrooms, info sites, etc. Forums offer support on travel itineraries, technical issues, buying and selling RVs, RVer dating, RV friendly

³¹ As early as 1995, over two-thirds of full-timers had computers in their RVs. Farlow, Bill. 1995 Summary of RV Features Survey at Spring Escapade 1994. *Escapees Magazine for RVers* 17(2): 20-21. Farlow found that two thirds of the respondents reported to have a computer on board their rigs. Cited in Counts, Dorothy. 1996. *Over the Next Hill : An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America* Broadview Press, Ontario. p.148. While more recent figures are not readily available, it is estimated that this proportion has increased substantially.

recipes, discount RV merchandise, security tips, rallies and conventions etc. The club conventions and rallies function as one of the primary face-to-face networking events – and in some cases include up to 60,000 participants over 3-4 days. Senior RVer dating as an extension of the online dating phenomenon is also an interesting development in which blind dates take place after driving extended travel distances.

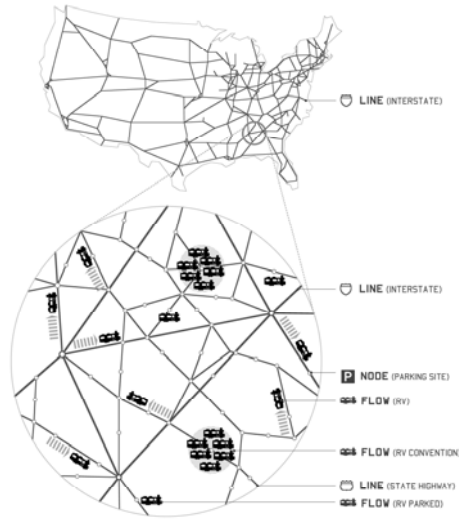


Figure: RV Physical Network. Source: Deane Simpson

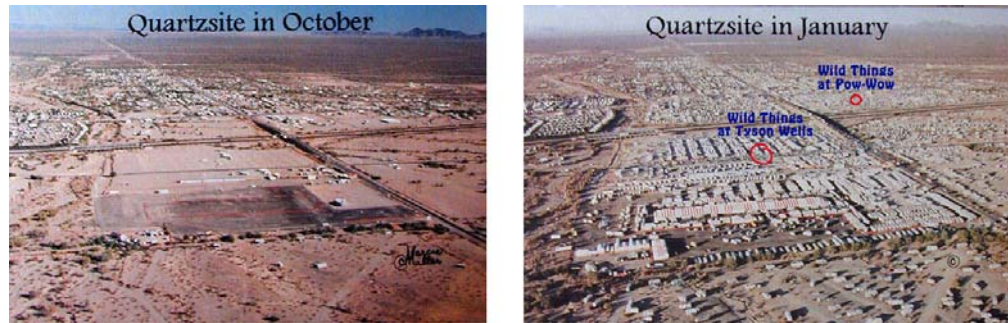


Figure: Quartzsite, Arizona. Source: www.dakinivisions.com



Figure: Quartzsite market. Source: <http://www.rversonline.org/Quartzsite.jpg>



Figure: RV overnighting, Walmart. Source: www.murrah.com

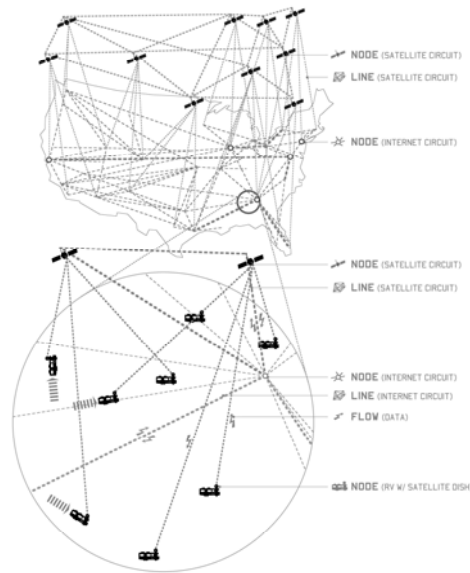


Figure: RV Non-Physical Network. Source: Deane Simpson



Figure: RV satellite dish (left) and US satellite internet coverage (right). Source: www.mobileuniversepr.com

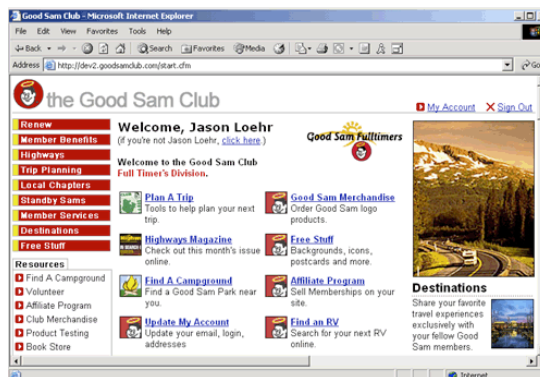


Figure: RV websites: The Good Sam Club, the world's largest online RV community with over one million members. Source: www.goodsamclub.com

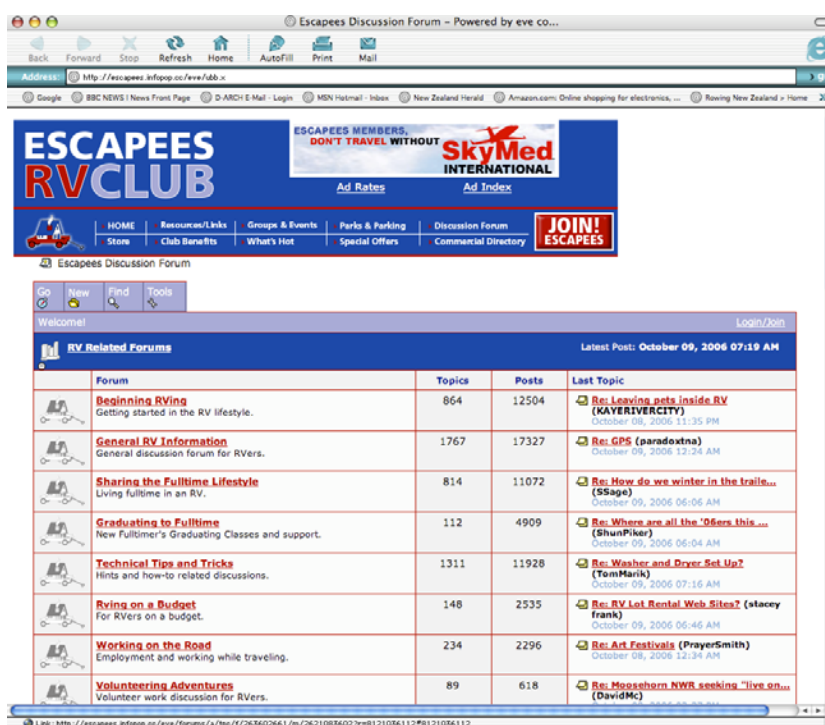


Figure: RV websites: The Escapeses RV Club: forum directory. Source: www.escapeses.com

4 From Infrastructure to Urban Field

Whereas in a conventional network where human subjects operate as fixed points in space, the RV suggests a more complex network of flowing nodes functioning both in the physical and non-physical realms. For Manuel Castells, the network urbanism of the 'space of flows' refers to the emerging spatial logic in which social interaction occurs between people distant from each other in time and space.³² Here, living, inhabitation and social connectivity transgress immediate physical distance. This suggests the possibility of perceiving the physically spread but densely networked mobile inhabitants of the RV community as a socially coherent – and perhaps socially sustainable - urban field.³³

³² Manuel Castells (1996) in *The Rise of the Network Society* describes in some detail a shift in the dominant mode of urbanism supported by the increasing prevalence of various forms of networks. Castells suggests the subordination of the traditionally defined urbanism of the 'space of places', to that which he refers to as the 'space of flows'.

³³ See Penelope Dean, *Outback Metropolis – Time Sharing Urbanism* in *Architecture Australia*, January/February 2000. pp86-91. This article is indebted to Dean's paper on the Australian Royal Flying Doctor Service as an important case study precedent in dispersed urbanism. According to Dean, given the rise of the network society "...it seems necessary to rethink what urbanism

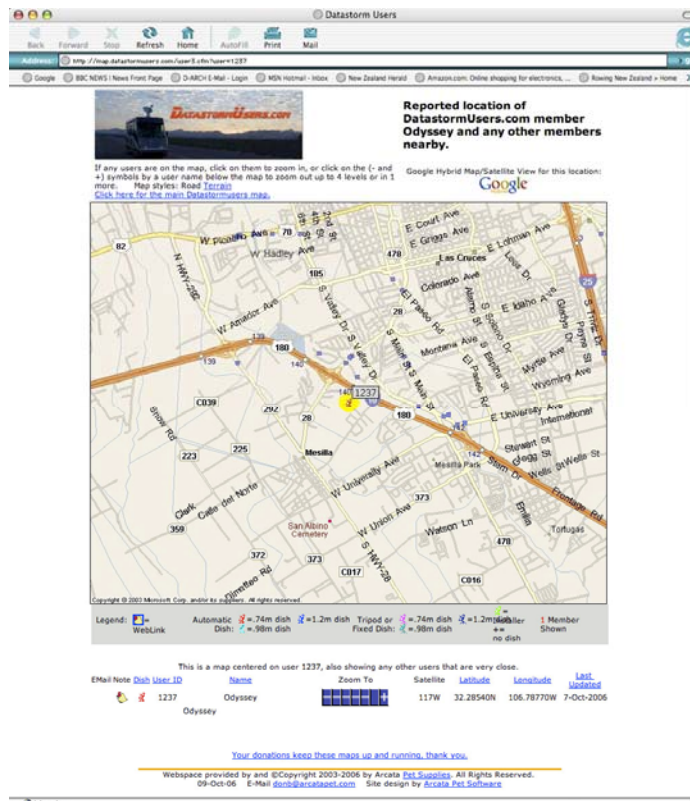


Figure: Automatic satellite locator blog. Source: <http://map.datastormusers.com>

5 One of Many Urbanisms

In this case, *unsettlement* - to use Fuller's term - need not imply the opposite of urbanity - but an alternate form of hyper-sparse urbanity - one that aligns to a fourth dish beyond the boiled, fried and scrambled eggs of Cedric Price's analogy. Within this framework, RV urbanism operates as an egg crepe (the infra-thin Japanese "usuyaki tamago" for example.) This shift from fried and scrambled to crepe focuses upon distributed infrastructure and to a lesser extent, landscape; whilst substantially reducing the dependency on permanent built fabric - in effect, the image of a serviced form of arcadia already envisioned by architects of the 1960's.³⁴ (It is important to consider that this mode of urbanism is being realized by the same cohort (the baby-boomer) originally responsible for its speculation.)

Contemporary discourse is relatively consistent in defining a directly proportional relationship between urban density and urban sustainability - but could this be questioned when one considers the extreme sparsity of RV urbanism, beyond that normally defined as 'sprawl'?³⁵ Despite obvious questions concerning the ecological performance of such vehicles and the little research conducted in

is and how to practice it. The RFDS (Royal Flying Doctor Service) is an interesting example. Whilst it bears no historic reference to the evolution of the 'city' as we know it, it is an extreme example where minimum density is coupled with maximum social cohesion." p.87. If the RFDS functions as a fixed decentralized network, the RV community operates as a mobile distributed network. David Green. *Children's Primer* (first published in Architectural Design, May 1969) in Archigram: A Guide to Archigram 1961-1974. Academy Editions, London. 1994. p.297.

³⁴ In the 1969 text *Children's Primer*. Archigram's David Green refers to trailer nomads as 'node-owners' plugged into camouflaged 'logplugs' and 'rokplugs' in the wilderness. Logplugs, for example, would offer vital services such as water and power, and most importantly what was referred to then as 'international information hookup' - an Archigram-ism for the yet to be invented internet. According to Green: "Plugs will increase the service to these <instant and remote> communities... The whole of London or New York will be available in the world's leafy hollows, deserts and flowered meadows."

³⁵ This directly proportional relationship between density and sustainability is a position proposed in MVRDV's FARMAX for example.

the field, perhaps this extraordinarily thinly spread layer of mobile and temporary inhabitation could be more sustainable than suburban sprawl, especially in terms of social coherence, but potentially also concerning ecological factors such as fuel consumption and the intensity of the human footprint.

RV urbanism is characterized by a high degree of flexibility – in spatial, temporal and economic terms – particularly in comparison to conventional sedentary urbanism. The spatial aspect of RV flexibility refers to the level of mobility allowing for low- or high-density settlements to be formed in locations with only basic road infrastructure. This allows for certain scenarios, including the relocation of dwellings to preferred seasonal/climatic conditions; the potential for mobile full-time, part-time or volunteer workforces; and perhaps most importantly, the flexibility supporting immediate reaction to various forms of crisis - whether natural, economic or social. One recent example includes both the use of RV's as temporary homes for displaced homeowners, and the arrival of senior RVers as volunteer aid workers immediately after Hurricane Katrina. Temporal flexibility supports both short term, seasonal or temporary events; and the possibility of benefiting from 'time-sharing' efficiencies – such as the use of territory not otherwise required at particular times, eg. use of church parking lots on days other than Sundays, and overnight parking in big-box retail parking lots, etc. RV living offers the possibility for low-cost living suggesting also economic flexibility.

Formed from the collision of the most urban and the most anti-urban of conditions, senior RV communities suggest the emergence of an alternate form of urbanism that implies the necessity to formulate alternate methods to assess urban sustainability as well as new methods with which to define it.

I would like to thank Marc Angéilil, Ida Richter-Braendstrup, Jörg Stollmann, Eyal Weizman and Reed Kroloff for their inputs and suggestions in the development of this research.

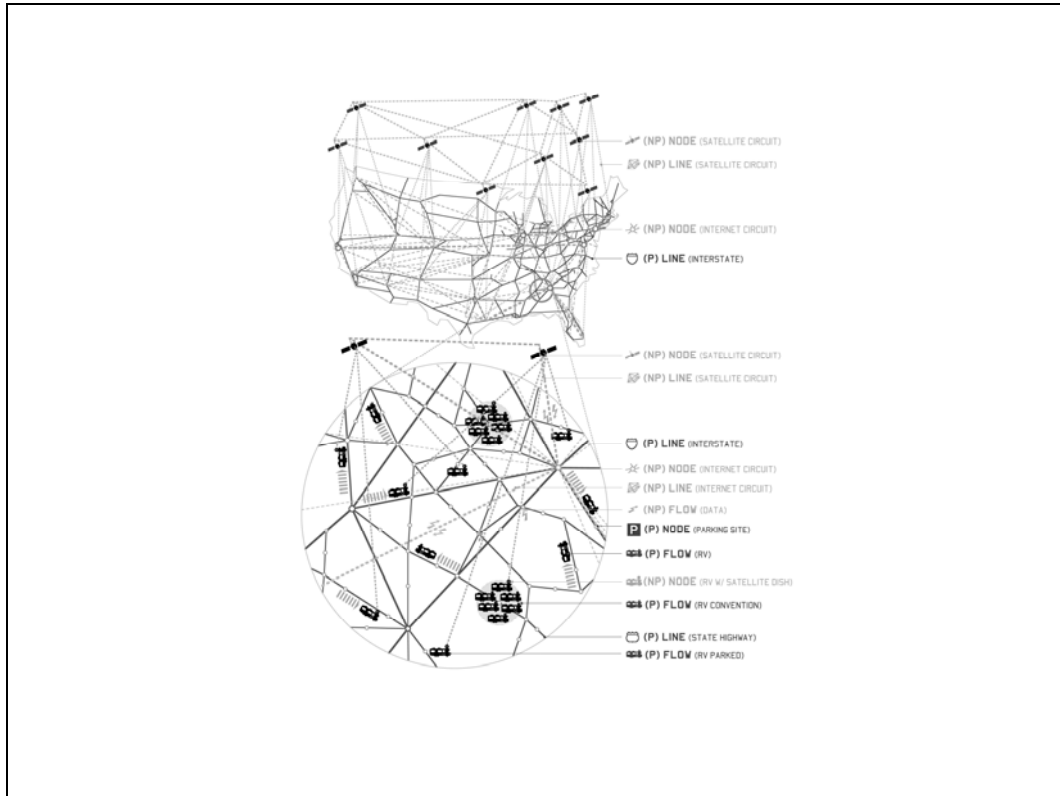


Figure: Physical + non-physical infrastructure. Source: Deane Simpson

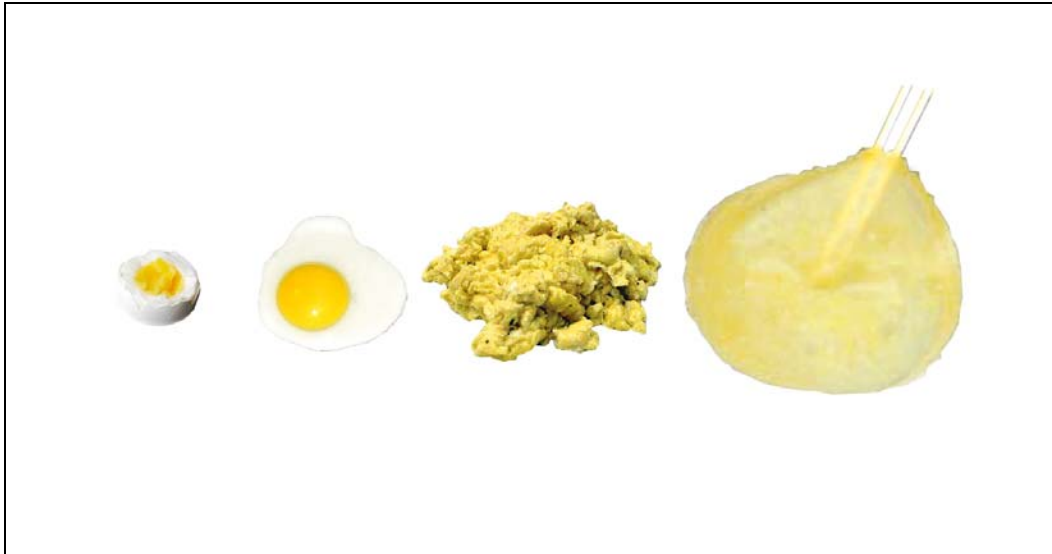


Figure: Usuyaki tamago (japanese egg crepe) (far right). Source: Deane Simpson

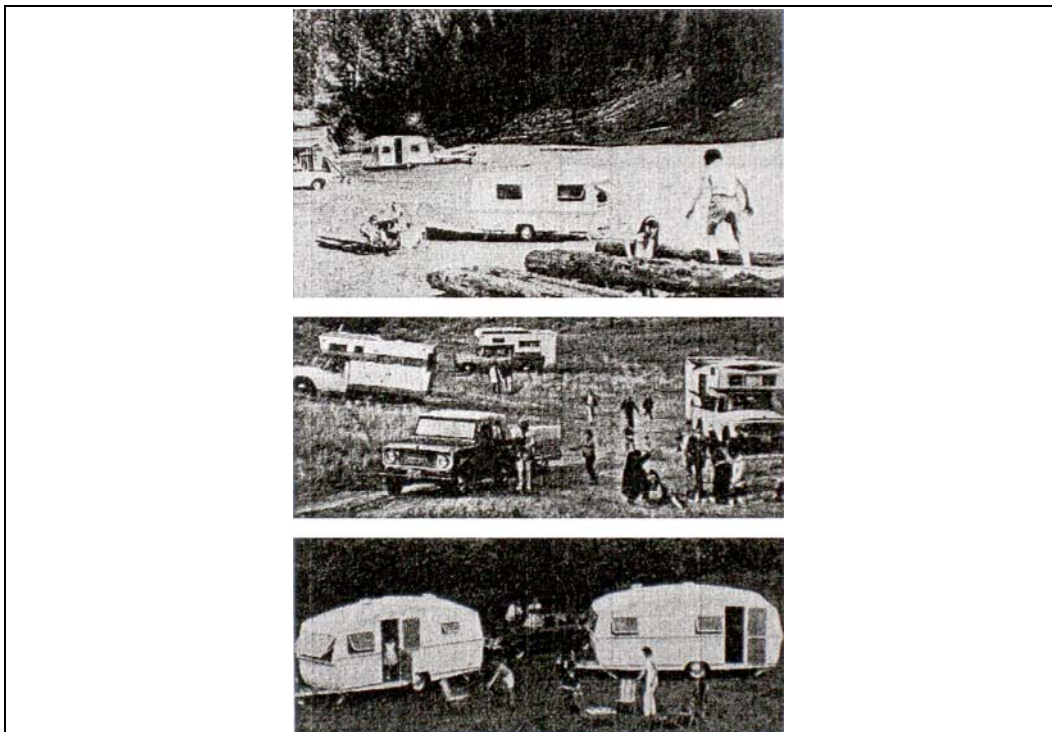


Figure: David Green, Archigram. Trailer nomads as Node Owners. 1968. Source: (Green 1969)

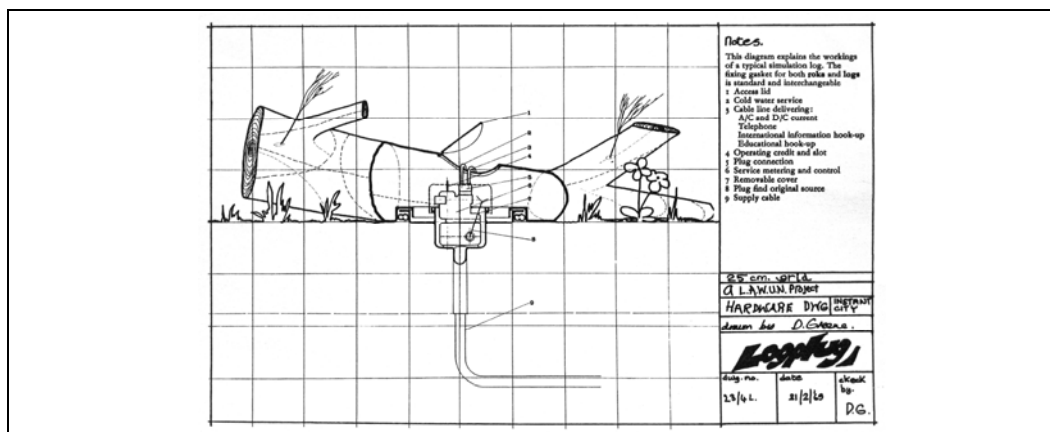


Figure: David Green, Archigram. Logplug Project. 1968. Source: (Green 1969)

Literature review

- Barfield, Thomas. 1993. *The Nomadic Alternative*. Prentice Hall.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Sage, London.
- Castells, Manuel. 1996. *The Rise of the Network Society (Vol. I)*. Blackwell Publishers.
- Chaney, David. 1996. *Lifestyles: Key Ideas*. Routledge, London.
- Counts, Dorothy Ayers and Counts, David R. 1996. *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. Broadview Press, Ontario.
- Dean, Penelope. 2000. *Outback Metropolis – Time Sharing Urbanism in Architecture Australia*, January/February 2000. pp86-91
- Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. 1986. *Nomadology: The War Machine*. Semiotext(e) University of Minnesota Press.
- Fuller, Buckminster. 1963 *Delos I Conference*. Cited in Mark Wigley, *Network Fever*, GreyRoom 04, MIT Press Summer 2001.
- Green, David. 1969. *Children's Primer* (first published in *Architectural Design*, May 1969) in *Archigram: A Guide to Archigram 1961-1974*. Academy Editions, London. 1994.
- Huber, Andreas and O'Reilly, Karen. 2004. *The Construction of Heimat under conditions of individualized modernity: Swiss and British elderly migrants in Spain*. *Ageing and Society* 24, 2004. 327-351. Cambridge University Press
- Jabbur, Jibrail S. 1984. *The Bedouins and the Desert*. trans. Lawrence Conrad, State University of New York Press, 1995
- Khaldun, Ibn. 1967. *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Frans Rosenthal, Ed. N. Dawood. Princeton University Press.
- Laslett, Peter. 1989. *A Fresh Map of Life: The Emergence of the Third Age*. Harvard University Press

[1] Quiamuddin Djallazada (Deputy Minister, MUDH Kabul), April 2004, Planning the Future Development of Kabul, pg.19-22, Development of Kabul Reconstruction and Planning Issues, 10th Architecture and Behaviour Colloquium, Switzerland.

[2] AWN-Afghan Women Network-List of NGOs working in Afghanistan.

[3] UNDP Afghanistan report.

[4] Marc W Herold, Dec 2006, An Island Named Kabul: Trickle-Up Economics and Westernization in Karzai's Afghanistan.

[5] UNDP and UN HABITAT report, August 2002.

[6] Marc W Herold, Dec 2006, An Island Named Kabul: Trickle-Up Economics and Westernization in Karzai's Afghanistan, pg.3.

[7] Marc W Herold, Sep 2003 , Afghani Scam: *Living Karzai's Reconstruction Bubble*.

[8] *Afghan Scene*, issue 19,February 2006

[9] AIMS Kabul, reference of locations of UN offices in Kabul for illustration.

[10] Hoelun's Adventures in Afghaniland, May 2005. The Kabul Bubble-Housing for Foreigners.

[11] Dominic Medley and Jude Barrant, 2003. The Survival guide to Kabul.The Bradt Mini Guide

[12] DCS News-issue no.10, June 2006

[13] World fact book (2005. est)

[14] Jan Mohamed, Sep 2005 Kabul: An Eye Witness Account.

[15] Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. and Foreword by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987.