

Leisure Nomads of the New Third Age: Nomadic Network Urbanism of the Senior RV Community in the US

Deane Simpson

Liberated from the responsibilities of the first and second phases of life – education during childhood and work/childcare during adulthood – and uninhibited by the physical or mental limitations of the fourth phase of life (the *old-old*), the demographic segment known as the *new third age* (or *young-old*) has emerged as the site of some of the most radical experiments in subjectivity, collectivity, and urbanism.

The senior Recreational Vehicle (RV) community in the US is one exemplary case study of this tendency.¹ Producing a form of nomadic network urbanism, it challenges established models of sedentary urbanity, inasmuch as it is mobile, informal, non-hierarchical, and network-based. In the US, this community conservatively numbers between two and three million retirees communicating predominantly via satellite internet. While nomadic communities are clearly not a new occurrence, one of this size, sophistication, and connectivity is unprecedented. It continues to grow at a rapid rate with the expectation that it will more than triple in size over the next two decades as the Baby Boomer generation reaches retirement age – anticipating a future nomadic *city* greater in population than the largest city in the US.² Nomadism, traditionally defined as the negation of urbanism, in this case produces a sparse flexible urban field of dense social connectivity.³

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 'un-

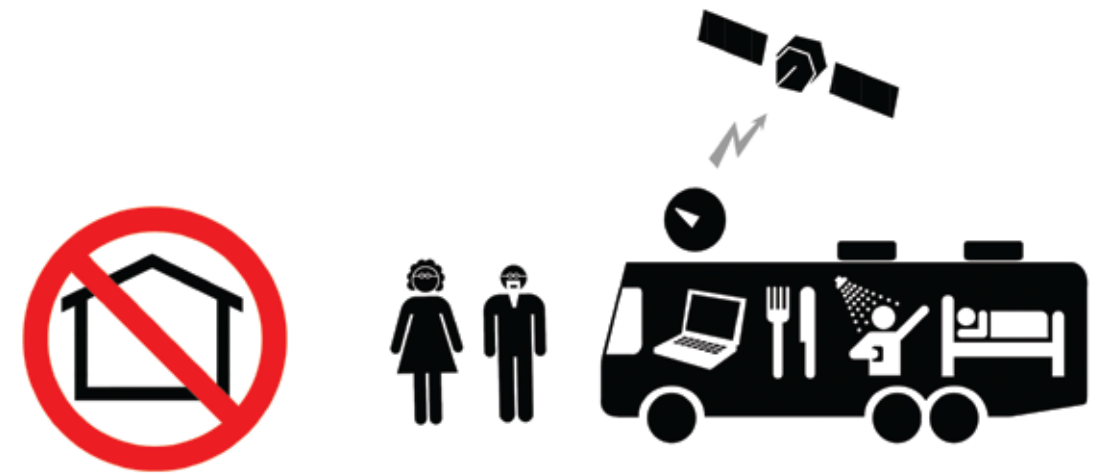


Fig. 1: RV Urbanism.

settlement,' consisting of a network of hyper-mobile nomadic bodies operating at the scale of the entire world connected through invisible radio links."⁴ Here Fuller anticipated a form of urbanism that would emerge as a reality on an unimagined scale thirty years later.

Between 1990 and 1994, Canadian 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."⁵

Leisure Nomads

The senior RV community operates similarly to the conventional logic of nomadism, but with two important distinctions: the first concerns the theme of categorization, the second of interaction.

While the three basic categories of nomadism (*hunter-gatherers, pastoral- and peripatetic nomads*) rely on nomadic practices for subsistence, the nomadic RVer does not. This would suggest the need for a fourth term: *the leisure nomad*, the emergence of which may be understood in relation to broad demographic, sociological, and cultural transformations. 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; b) the process Ulrich Beck calls *individualiza-*

¹ 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 are normally powered by either solar panels or a generator. (Definitions from the Recreational Vehicle Industry Association – www.rvia.org).

² The Recreational Vehicle Industry Association anticipates massive industry growth based on Baby Boomer ageing. (www.rvia.org).

³ Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Frans Rosenthal, ed. N. Dawood (Princeton: 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.

⁴ Buckminster Fuller, "Delos 1 Conference 1963", in Mark Wigley, *Network Fever*, GreyRoom 04, (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press Summer 2001), pp. 121-122.

⁵ Dorothy Ayers Counts and David R. Counts, *Over the Next Hill: An Ethnography of RVing Seniors in North America*. (Ontario: Broadview Press 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.