
JOEL STERNFELD SWEET EARTH
EXPERIMENTAL UTOPIAS IN AMERICA
STEIDL

A common human longing, the utopian community ideal has taken root firmly in America over the past 200 years and continues today. In *Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America*, Joel Sternfeld examines 60 historical, ongoing and newly-formed representative American utopias. In this work, Sternfeld continues his practice of chronicling the American landscape, offering here a visual history of the diverse and often ill-understood phenomenon of social experimentation in America. *Sweet Earth* brings together what might otherwise seem disparate, individualized social phenomena and makes visible a community of communities.

The theory behind these communities may have been driven by Industrial Revolution in Europe, but it was in the fluid and unshaped environment of young America that these ideas were able to manifest themselves. No other country in the world has experienced as many social experiments as America. Between 1810 and 1860, there were at least 600 such attempts, both secular and religious, to build a "perfect" life.

So strong is the grip of the utopian ideal on the American mind, that long after the dissolution of the early communes, the 1960s brought a renewed desire to live apart from society at large. During the turbulent time of the Vietnam War, hundreds of communes were formed, some of which still thrive today.

Although it has not been generally recognized as such, the current period, with over 75 co-housing communities completed and numerous others planned, and the adoption of the global ecovillage movement by several communities across the country, may be the most successful communal period in America's history, one in which durable forms are finally achieved.

Sweet Earth is Joel Sternfeld's fourth American survey and is an important part of his research into the landscape as record of human socialization, interaction and imagination. It makes explicit many issues present in his previous work, especially the examination of Arcadian and distopic sites in America and elsewhere. *Sweet Earth* can be seen as a counterpoint to *On This Site* (Chronicle 1996). In both books, the putative meaning of the photographs is supplemented by texts that reveal much of what the photographs cannot. While both books earnestly document real sites, they simultaneously pose deep questions about photographic representation.

Arcadia Cohousing, Carrboro, North Carolina, April 2005.

The home of Giles Blunden is independent of the public power grid. The solar panels visible on his roof provide electricity and heat water. Blunden is the chief architect and founder of Arcadia Homes, a sustainable cohousing community in which all thirty-three residences have passive solar design (non-mechanical solar heating achieved through site selection and large south-facing windows) and some active solar elements (collecting the sun's rays by appropriate technology to provide heat, mechanical power or electricity).

In addition to its solar features, Arcadia is a pedestrian-friendly community that preserved nine acres of climax hardwood forest when it was built, by clustering houses on land covered with secondary-growth pine trees. The distinctive architecture of the community derives from vernacular local millhouse structures.

In 2003 the share of all electricity produced by solar cell technology in the US was 0.07 percent—though as far back as 1979 President Jimmy Carter announced (at a press conference held on the White House roof) the goal of bringing sun, wind and other renewable resources-generated electricity to twenty percent of the US total by the year 2000. In contrast, Japan, where fossil fuels are much more expensive, generated four times the amount of solar electricity produced in the US.

As solar power approaches a cost of $2 per watt, it is becoming less expensive than commercial power. Thirty-eight states, including North Carolina, have enacted "net metering" laws that require utilities to connect residential solar panels into the grid and to compensate homeowners for any excess electricity they produce.

Sister Miriam in front of her Straw Bale Home, Genesis Farm, Blairstown, New Jersey, May 2005.

When 140 acres of farmland were donated to the Dominican Sisters of Caldwell, New Jersey in 1980, the nuns realized they had an opportunity to do something about their growing concern that the Earth was being endangered by environmental degradation.

Under the persuasive leadership of Sister Miriam MacGillis, they built a teaching center and started a community-supported farm. A large solar array was installed and straw bale buildings were constructed, including Sister Miriam's house.

At the heart of Genesis Farm is a commitment to the teachings of Catholic eco-theologian Thomas Berry. His doctrine, Earth Literacy, is based on the belief that the divine is revealed in the vast biological and cultural diversity of this planet.

Berry was one of the first to propose the idea that the Earth's environmental crisis stems from a spiritual crisis. He maintains that we suffer from a kind of spiritual autism, that we no longer feel our kinship with other life on this planet. The challenge now is to satisfy our essential human needs without destroying the biodiversity that makes our world so nourishing and rich. Central to the doctrine of Earth Literacy is the conviction that any viable future for the human species is dependent upon the viability of the Earth.

Roofless Church, New Harmony, Indiana, May 2000.

In the early 1800s, Robert Owen, a wealthy industrialist, took on the role of social theorist after radically improving labor conditions at a Scottish mill while increasing profits. New Lanark was famous throughout Europe because the minimum working age had been raised to ten, a form of health insurance was initiated, and working hours were shorter than at other mills. Owen came to believe that by changing the conditions of people's lives it was possible to change their character, and that the final aim of character formation should be happiness. Happiness, he held, "will be the only religion of man." He and other similar thinkers of the time were referred to as socialists because they had a theory of society.

The opportunity for Owen to put his theories into practice came in 1824, when he purchased the entire town of Harmony, Indiana, and turned it into America's first secular utopian experiment. But what had worked in a narrow and isolated mill valley in Scotland did not work in the United States. Despite the participation of prominent scientists and of Owen's four highly educated sons, the experiment failed. There were many reasons: the purchase of a ready-made town did not allow members to gain the shared satisfaction and unity of purpose that might have come by building from scratch; deep disagreements churned between Owen and American co-founder William Maclure over education (leading some to dub the town "New Discord"); and the frontier farmers and mechanics who responded to Owen's invitation to join a new "community of equals," took him at his word, and resented the "uppity" standards of speech, table manners and courtly rituals imposed upon them by the leaders. Despite the brevity of its life as a formal experiment, New Harmony proved highly influential throughout the nineteenth century. Without a community against which they might be measured, Owen's ideas could stand for general reformist principles and they did.

The Roofless Chapel was commissioned by Jane Blaffer Owen, widow of a descendent of Robert Owen, and designed by architect Philip Johnson in 1960 to echo the mark left by New Harmony as a place of inspiration. Johnson's concept was that only one roof—the sky—can encompass all worshipping humanity. The dome was built in the form of an inverted rosebud, tying it to the New Harmony Community of Equals, whose symbol was the rose.

May Pole, Short Mountain Sanctuary, Liberty, Tennessee, May 2005.

Short Mountain is a two hundred-acre faerie sanctuary/safe queer space in central Tennessee, fifty miles southeast of Nashville. The tall hill upon which the sanctuary sits is named Short Mountain.

About sixteen permanent residents live there, off the grid, with drinking water from a mountain spring and bathhouse water from a cistern. Solar panels produce a limited amount of electricity. The community grows much of its own food, and goats supply milk. The faeries' deeply sacrosanct and wildly celebratory sense of the earth particularly manifests itself at their May Day gathering, which they refer to as "Beltane" (a tradition of the Druids). The festival can last ten days and draw five hundred guests of all genders and orientations.

Short Mountain Sanctuary got its start in 1981 when Milo, the sole remaining member of the Tick Creek Community, announced a need for new members at the Southeast USA Conference of Lesbians and Gay Men. The sanctuary became the first and longest-running Radical Faerie commune in America. A dozen others exist throughout the country, and more can be found in Canada, Europe and Australia.

The Radical Faeries were formed in response to what Harry Hay viewed as an increasing tendency toward heteroconformity in the homosexual community. The choice of the word "faerie" reclaims a term used to denigrate gay and transgender men; "radical" infers an emphasis on radical politics. As a non-hierarchical organization, the Radical Faeries have no leader and no set definition of what it means to be one. Of the group, the late Bradley Rose wrote, "There are visions we share and celebrate...a belief in the sacredness of nature and the earth; honoring the interconnectedness of spirit, sex, politics and culture; understanding that each one of us has our own path (paths)..."

Since its inception, three new gay-oriented intentional communities have formed nearby—Ida, Sun Valley and Pumpkin Hollow. In the *Communities Directory*, Short Mountain states its policy: "We are a sanctuary and welcome visitors anytime."

Sirius Community during a break in a Paths of Awakening weekend retreat with Mirabai Devi, Shutesbury, Massachusetts, April 2004.

In 1957, three profoundly spiritual people came to a small town in northeast Scotland to manage a rundown hotel, the Cluny Hill. Soon the hotel had four stars and a thriving business. When two of the managers were fired, all three moved to a trailer in the nearby seaside village of Findhorn. There they grew vegetables, including legendary forty-pound cabbages, and their garden became a matter of myth. Around them arose the Findhorn Foundation, a flourishing spiritual and educational center with more than three hundred members—and sufficient enrollees for its courses to warrant purchasing the Cluny Hill Hotel.

Sirius Community was founded by three former members of the Findhorn Foundation, who hoped to create a similar environment in the United States. Not only has Sirius become a spiritual center, but the community, which strives to embody "the new planetary consciousness that honors the interconnectedness and sacredness of all living things," is an aspiring ecovillage as well.

An ecovillage is "a vision, an ideal, a goal," but as Tony Sirna notes in the *Communities Directory*, there are really no examples of fully realized ecovillages now except for some aboriginal communities. Generally speaking, ecovillages are committed to sustainability, which implies an ongoing and future-oriented dedication to living in concert with nature. Typically small ("human scale"), they can exist in urban as well as rural areas—even a few miles from downtown L.A., where the Los Angeles Ecovillage carries out an extensive and admired program. While honoring "the highest truths common to all religions," Sirius also generates electricity using solar and wind power, runs vehicles powered by vegetable oil, and builds environmentally friendly buildings, including one of the largest cob houses in America (an ancient and incredibly durable building method employing a hardened mixture of clay, sand, and straw).

The community is named after the brightest star in the sky.


EXIT

Queen of the Prom, the Range Nightclub, Slab City, California, March 2005.

When Camp Dunlap, a World War II Marine training facility near Niland, California, was closed in 1946, all of the buildings were completely dismantled, leaving numerous cement foundation slabs in the desert.

Almost as soon as the government abandoned the site, "snowbirds" (campers from northern states in recreational vehicles) began to winter on the slabs, even though no running water, electricity or sewage facilities were available. Today at least five thousand snowbirds arrive each winter, and a few have become permanent year-round residents, despite summer temperatures that can reach 120 degrees. The snowbirds come with motor homes costing half a million dollars and they come with tents.

Over the years, a true self-governing community has arisen, including a mayor, the Slab City Christian Church (in a trailer), the Lizard Tree Library (used paperbacks on an honor system), the Gopher Flats Country Club (gravel greens), the Oasis Social Club (combination meeting space/junkyard), a CB radio station (one half hour of purely local news, nightly at six p.m.) and the Range, an outdoor nightclub built by "Builder Bill," complete with stage, lighting, bar, communal outhouse and several rows of salvaged airliner seats. The Range takes its name from an active bombing range located a few miles away, which makes the sight and sound of F-16 sorties a part of life at the Slabs.

Moira, the Queen of the 2005 Prom at the Range, never got to go to her high school prom.

Sonora Cohousing, Tucson, Arizona, March 2005.

In many ways Sonora Cohousing is typical of all cohousing—numerous environmentally sound practices are woven into the thirty-six homes and throughout the 4.7 acre site. Townhouses sit in groupings of three or four units around highly landscaped "placitas," forming natural conversation points in the landscape. The "green-built" homes are energy efficient, with active and passive solar energy elements and are structured to facilitate water harvesting. The community's three thousand five hundred square-foot common house is built from straw bale. Sonora's social practices are also typical of cohousing: community, collaboration, conservation. But the most unusual aspect of the community is no longer visible to the eye: Sonora cohousing is intentionally built on an urban infill site.

"Infill development" refers to the practice of making use of underutilized or empty sites within urban areas. The founding members of Sonora wanted to avoid destroying untouched desert—"blading unbladed land"— or becoming part of the suburban sprawl that requires new roads, sewers and schools every time a developer "leapfrogs" to build a community further out from the city center (developers are motivated to do so because the farther land may be less expensive—and offer better "access to nature"). The founders of Sonora not only made a choice for infill, they also adhered to the criteria that the site must be accessible by public transportation (in this case bus transportation) and that shopping must be within walking distance. What's more, they chose a neighborhood with a high crime rate by Tucson standards, and yet they refused to become a gated community. This has meant that bicycles, and charcoal grills and watermelons, are occasionally stolen—but it also allows for meaningful interactions with neighbors (the three nine-year-old girls who stole the watermelon came back and sought out its grower to apologize).

Something else invisible in this photograph: when the garden was being built, resident Don Arkin helped to create a compost area by building a wall around it. The much-disliked, stucco-like material he used was referred to as "doncrete." An artist resident, Kendra Davies, created the mural that covers it without going through the community approval process. To date no one has objected.