

SEX AND BUILDINGS

Modern Architecture and the Sexual Revolution

Richard J. Williams

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Contents

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Introduction	7
one The Care of the Body	27
two Inside the Orgone Accumulator	48
three Communal Living	64
four Phallic Towers and Mad Men	85
five Pornomoderism	107
six The Hotel	128
seven What Would a Feminist City Look Like?	146
eight Queer and Other Spaces	167
Epilogue	188
References	195
Bibliography	209
Acknowledgements	217
Photo Acknowledgements	218
Index	219

Communal Living

REICH'S DISILLUSIONMENT with the commune was complete after 1936 – but it remained a powerful idea elsewhere. After all, for the twentieth century's sexual radicals, the bourgeois family was simply a prison. The psychiatrist R. D. Laing, for example, thought that the repressive sexuality of the 'normal' family was in fact the cause of many of the disorders he saw. His understanding of schizophrenia was strongly conditioned by the circumstances in which it was found. His *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, written with Aaron Esterson in 1964, describes a set of schizophrenic women whose madness is indelibly connected with the repressive circumstances of their family settings, particularly when it comes to sex. In one striking case, he described a young girl's blooming libido completely denied by her parents, whose strict religious beliefs could not permit its expression. Was it any wonder, Laing argued, that such patients lost their minds?¹ The normative family, in short, was a jail for human nature, a machine for curtailing desire. (Of course, plenty of sex happens in prisons – perhaps more than on the outside. After all, what else is there to do?) Laing was no architect, but his work is full of architectural description: houses whose accumulation of debris from the past prevents the enacting of desire in the present; hoarding as a substitute for sex.

I could empathize with Laing. Laing was in many respects as deranged as his clients, and many argue now that his work on schizophrenia probably did more harm than good. His private life was also every bit as disastrous as that of Reich, and like Reich he seems to have been able to deal with everyone's problems except his own. But as a Scot, he had an acute lived knowledge of the urban environment in which I was writing, the nineteenth-century Scottish city, its streets, its institutions, its tenements, villas and stairs. In his

case, it was Govanhill, a respectable lower-middle-class suburb on the south side of Glasgow, close to the slum city of the Gorbals, but a place in which people had aspirations. He understood this landscape, as I did, to be a landscape of repression, all twitching curtains and gossip and rectitude, against which he for one was compelled to rebel. Laing described Govanhill frequently, and in the most striking terms, as a landscape where sex was more or less forbidden. Laing was certainly prone to poetic exaggeration, but it does seem likely that his mother, Amelia, only ever had sex once in her lifetime, resulting in the pregnancy that produced him. So shameful was sex that Amelia hid the pregnancy until it had reached term – and even after his birth denied she had ever had sex with her husband, implying an immaculate conception.² As an adult, Laing's career amounted to a long rebellion against the normative family, and his in particular, through whatever means came to hand. It was as complete a rebellion as any.

Once one accepts Laing's analysis of the family, the only way forward is some form of communal living in which the family's tendency to sexual and other dysfunction is attacked with artificial new social structures. Laing in fact did establish a community, Kingsley House (1965–70), in a rented hall in London's East End, to treat schizophrenics in which the boundaries between the mad and the sane, and between staff and patients, were blurred to the point at which they no longer had any meaning.³ It was an extraordinary and excessive place where all members were encouraged to 'let go' as far as possible, sometimes under the influence of officially procured LSD. The community's extreme character was represented most clearly in the figure of Mary Barnes, a former nurse later to become an artist, who at Kingsley regressed to an astonishingly helpless, pre-linguistic condition, requiring round-the-clock supervision. For months she lived naked, screaming, smearing the community's walls with her own excrement. Laing and his followers had dreams of one day spreading the Kingsley House model beyond the medical environment (they thought that every street ought to have such a place). But the reality was Kingsley was a psychiatric experiment, at heart an attempt to treat a pathological condition in a new way. It was not strictly a commune.

Walden Two

The best-known communes in literature (Thomas More's *Utopia*, William Morris's *News From Nowhere*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*) all had a lot to say about sex – and all in different ways imagine

sex removed from the normative family, whatever 'normative' might mean at the time and place of each novel's writing. *Brave New World* is both attracted and repelled by its fantasy of sex wholly removed from procreation, turned into a ubiquitous leisure pursuit, healthy, hygienic and strongly encouraged – a bit like swimming. Huxley's women are 'pneumatic', a mechanistic description that is (I think) meant to be both abhorrent and secretly attractive. The rest of *Brave New World* describes a libidinal utopia, all 'feelies' and 'soma', a landscape in which everything has become eroticized, but at the expense of authentic, uncommodified, life.⁴

Among the most precise communal fantasies is B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, first published in 1948, important here for three reasons: firstly, it was published right in the middle of the modernist period and it was very widely read, as influential in its way as *Brave New World*. Secondly, it provides an extremely detailed account of the social organization of a future society, expressed clearly enough to be a blueprint. And third, *Walden Two* says more about sex than most preceding utopian fictions. That's not to say it is a piece of erotica – it is hard to imagine a less erotic book – but that it understands the organization of sexual lives as a genuine problem that threatens communal life unless controlled. Unfortunately for the reader, *Walden Two* is a wretched novel, with all the poetic qualities of a tax return. The main characters, the narrator, Castle, a sceptical visitor, and Frazier, the humourless voice of the commune, are ciphers for subject positions. Intellectual arguments are presented in the medium of clunking conversations. Its literary merit aside, however, it is a powerful vision of a commune in which rights and responsibilities are carefully balanced, labour de-alienated, culture made central to everyday life and sexual reproduction carefully controlled. It was seductive enough to inspire the founding of several 'intentional communities' based on its prescription, the most long-standing and successful being Twin Oaks in Virginia, founded in 1967.⁵ It is *Walden Two's* attitude to sex that warrants exploration here, because what is set out is a scenario that for 1948 challenges a whole range of sexual norms but at the same time imagines a time in which sex more or less disappears from the community, except for in reproduction. Each aspect of the community's sexual life has an architectural framing too, so that the creation of a couple is accompanied by 'nesting', the building by the couple of their own private living quarters ('part of the process of being in love in *Walden Two*').⁶ Later stages see the couple routinely adopt separate rooms as a

signal of the maturity of their relationship.⁷ One of Frazier's main criticisms of conventional marriage is the insecurity it breeds around the basic function of shelter – it connects sex and housing in a way that is abolished by the new community. Several aspects of *Walden* challenge the normative American understanding of sex in the 1940s. Most striking is the advocacy of early marriage. Skinner proposed the effective abolition of adolescence at precisely the moment it came into being as a sociological category. Why delay, asks Frazier. 'What is so unwholesome about sex? Why must there be a substitute? What's wrong with love, or marriage, or parenthood? You don't solve anything by delay – you make things worse.'⁸

Youthful marriages are de rigueur at *Walden*, as are early pregnancies, on average occurring at age eighteen, but on a downward trend (how far down they would go, Skinner didn't say). But in no way is it advocacy of sex itself, certainly not sex for pleasure. Skinner writes that if sex is permitted to occur naturally, without shame, and in a timely fashion, then its fascination will if anything lessen. Promiscuity would be abolished. By allowing sex to occur early, and in a socially approved context, a 'sane' attitude develops. Failure to do this means (in the leader Frazier's words) 'the sportive element in sex is played up – every person of the opposite sex becomes a challenge to seduction. That's a bothersome cultural trait we're glad to avoid.'⁹ Frazier goes on:

we have successfully established the principle of 'seduction not expected.' When a man strikes up an acquaintanceship with a woman, he does not worry about failing to make advances, and the woman isn't hurt if advances aren't made. We recognize that sort of sexual play for what it is – a sign, not of potency, but of malaise and instability . . . I'm sure there has been the minimum of mere sex without love.¹⁰

The aim of this is surely the minimization of sex altogether. This is a sex-negative scenario that uses openness about sex as a means of its control. At the heart of Frazier's vision seems to be a desire for sex to disappear except for procreation – the exact reverse of the sex-as-recreation utopia in *Brave New World*. His reporting that in maturity, most married couples do not share rooms any more is presented not as a failure of intimacy (as it might be these days in the West) but a success: sex has been eradicated. And the circumstantial description of *Walden* is of a place that positively resists seduction.

Frazier's own quarters are a shabby mess, dining is a functional activity done quickly and with the minimum of fuss, and entertainment centres on productive, participatory activities done in public. There is, apart from at the beginning of a couple's lives together, practically no space in which sex can occur. Later on in life, it is assumed, to all intents and purposes, to disappear, to be displaced by more productive activity. Walden is by contemporary Western standards pleasure-free. There is plenty of leisure time at Walden – the new working arrangements allow a working week of just twenty or so hours – but the newly acquired free time is filled with work surrogates. Half the community seem to have become virtuoso musicians, including Frazier, who dismisses his considerable abilities as a pianist as merely an example of the natural order.¹¹ Everyone has time, therefore everyone engages in some productive pursuit. In sum, the libido has been sublimated into work. Its true expression at Walden is that brief moment in adolescence in which it is required for reproduction.

Down on the Collective Farm

Walden is a fiction, but it is striking how much its puritanical approach to sex is mirrored in real-life communal living projects. This might be expected in the U.S. where the connections between the most austere Protestantism and communal living date back to the very founding of the nation. Among the better-known intentional communities of the northeastern U.S. are those of the Amish and the Shakers, both of whom consciously suppress sex in order that erotic energy be redirected into labour, and prayer. The Shakers enforce celibacy, maintaining sect numbers purely through conversion. Skinner knew these communities well: they were part of the Pennsylvania landscape in which he lived and worked. In non-religious intentional communities, a certain Puritanism of approach is also common. Twin Oaks, Virginia, the community most closely modelled on Walden, is a serious place in which communal ownership, 'income sharing', is the driving principle. The website's advice for potential members stresses the lack of private space and the centrality of productive, communal labour. Their official bumper sticker, available from the website, reads: 'My other car isn't mine either.'¹²

Such American intentional communities suppress sex in a programmatic way. In intentional communities elsewhere, however, even where a liberal attitude to sex is expressed, it remains a real problem. Rarely is the commune an erotic utopia, even when that is

partially the aim. In the early USSR, in spite of Lenin's well-documented dislike of sex, several key members of the revolution advocated a reconfiguring of sexual life in direct opposition to the institution of the bourgeois family: the logic was, and is, straightforward – you cannot have a complete revolution without destroying all of the institutions on which the existing order was based. The key figure was Alexandra Kollontai, head of the women's section of the Central Committee Secretariat who pushed through liberal reform of laws on marriage and related areas, and advocated 'free love' and 'erotic friendships' between men and women. To Kollontai's assertion that the satisfaction of sexual desire in a communist society 'should be as straightforward as drinking a glass of water', Lenin is said to have replied: 'thirst has to be quenched. But would a normal person lie down in the gutter and drink from a puddle?'¹³ Kollontai's difficulty in promulgating the sexual revolution any further than her bedroom is encapsulated by another story, in which her decree was taken a little too seriously by the authorities in the southern Russian city of Saratov. The local authorities issued a decree 'nationalizing' women, abolishing marriage and giving men state-sanctioned rights at official brothels. It was not exactly what Kollontai had in mind. In Vladimir a similar decree apparently 'declared all women to be "state property", giving men the right to choose a registered woman, even without her consent, for breeding, "in the interests of the state".'¹⁴ And as we saw in the last chapter, Wilhelm Reich's observations of communal life in the USSR showed – to his intense disappointment – the development of a profoundly sex-negative society.¹⁵ From an early stage, the revolution appears doomed, at least in erotic terms.¹⁶

The problem of sexuality in the commune appeared immediately: in many communes sex was effectively prohibited. In the State Library in Moscow, where a full commune was in operation, they even had underwear in common. If one of the communards wanted to wear their own overcoat or underwear, the behaviour was condemned as 'petit-bourgeois'. There was no personal life. It was prohibited to have a closer relationship with one communard than with all the others. Love was outlawed. When it was found that a girl had taken a liking to a certain communard, both were attacked as 'destroyers of communist ethics'. In an account of another Moscow commune of the 1920s, Reich quoted from a communard's diary, in which the writer asks for 'frankness in sexual matters' or sex will take place furtively and unhealthily: 'there will be the desire for secrecy and dark corners, flirting and other undesirable manifestations'. The problem,

Reich described in summary was this (unwittingly paraphrasing Virginia Woolf):

the commune was confronted with the problem of youth in all countries and all social strata: *the lack of a room of one's own*. Every room was crowded with people. Where could there be an undisturbed love life? In founding the commune, nobody had thought of the multitude of problems which would be presented by the fact of sexual living together.

Later, Reich describes another negative case, another communitard, Tanja, writing to her husband:

all I want is a bit of simple, personal, happiness. I long for a quiet corner where we could be together undisturbed, so that we would not have to hide from the others, so that our relationship could be freer and more joyful. Why cannot the commune see that it is a simple human necessity?

In all of these cases, Reich points to the failure of the Soviet sexual revolution, a failure that is intimately connected with its housing. With its emphasis on industrial production at all costs, the revolution in general had – literally – no space for sexuality, demanding its literal abolition in some cases, or making its expression furtive. From the top (Lenin, and later Stalin) the demand for a social (including sexual) revolution was forestalled by the refusal of the leadership to give literal space to it. So, for Reich, housing and sexuality are intimately connected. The commune by and large cannot accept sexuality as it feels it cannot afford, in times of scarcity, to devote space to it. Marriage might be grudgingly permitted but had to 'remain without offspring', therefore implicitly asexual in these pre-mass contraceptive times.¹⁷ The key problem is 'the lack of a room of one's own', not for the literary life (as it was for Woolf), but for sex.

The experience of the Dom Kommuna in the early USSR overlaps with that of the post-independence Israeli kibbutz, an object of fascination for left-leaning observers everywhere, for whom it represented authentic communism.¹⁸ The kibbutz movement had a lot to say about sex, about family life, about childrearing, and about relations in general between men and women. Where the USSR failed in Reich's eyes because it had not given due attention to sex, the founders of the kibbutzim assumed from the start that sex was an

inevitable part of communal life. As such sex needed to be organized – and the organization could be minutely prescriptive. Unlike their counterparts in the early USSR, the kibbutz pioneers were mostly well read and middle class. They were well acquainted with the literature on psychoanalysis, Freud's writings in particular. An early pioneer, quoted in one study, stated: 'we came upon psychoanalysis and it was as if Freud had written specially for us'.¹⁹ So the kibbutz's innovations in social structure were developed in relation to Freud's conclusions about the sexual life of the Viennese bourgeoisie. But it should be said that the pioneers responded to Freud's analysis rather than his conclusions, for the father of psychoanalysis, whatever his thoughts about the difficulty of family life, never advocated a departure from tradition.

The key features of the kibbutz's sexual experiments were 'free love', the de-eroticization of everyday relationships between men and women and the replacement of the conventional family with a system of communal childrearing. None of these innovations were universal, or entirely successful, and the later history of the kibbutz describes the more or less complete normalization of sexual relations.²⁰ But in the early years, the experimentation was real enough, and the subject of much informed debate internationally for the implications it held for normative family life everywhere. How it all worked in practice varied. 'Free love' was an aim of most kibbutzim, but meant not polygamy or polyamory, but simply the free choice of sexual partner, and the acceptance as normal of sex outside of marriage. There were in some places more exotic experiments. In 1956 Melford E. Spiro described the attempts by some kibbutz pioneers to reinvent sexual relations from the ground up:

they were convinced . . . that it was possible to create a relationship between the sexes on a sounder and more natural foundation than that which characterized 'bourgeois' marriage and they experimented with many substitutes including informal polygyny and polygamy.²¹

More regularly, the kibbutz's commitment to free love meant simply marriage based on love and sexual attraction rather than the extraneous social factors determining bourgeois marriage. One writer declared of the early kibbutz: 'sexuality should be anchored in spontaneous love. Marriage was to be a voluntary union between free persons . . . who place a strong emphasis on personal autonomy and erotic gratification.'²²

So even if the kibbutz did not experiment with sexual extremes, it was a decisive attack on the bourgeois family. The architectural organization of the kibbutz universally reflected this: couples were entitled to a room they could share together. But no larger architectural unit was permitted, no architectural form that might represent, or house, the forbidden nuclear family. The couple became a mere love association, based on spontaneous sexual attraction.²³ All other kibbutz relationships were to be communal.

The second sexual experiment in the kibbutz was the de-eroticization of male/female relations, in the hope that it would make more efficient use of kibbutz labour. In other words, if kibbutz members were not distracted by sex (in what were often physically challenging circumstances), they could channel their libidinal energy into the development of the commune, and by extension the new Israeli state. The early youth movements were often actively hostile to sex for this reason. However, given that the youth movements were nerdy and angst-ridden, it is hard not to surmise that this was a post-hoc rationalization of their own sexual hopelessness. In the pre-kibbutz phase, the youth movements even condemned flirting between the sexes. They were 'too serious' for sex. In any case, there was a serious demographic problem: the two to one ratio of males to females. In architectural terms, as various writers have noted, the de-eroticization of male-female relationships was represented by the institution of a mixed shower, and attempts to challenge 'sexual shame'.²⁴ This experiment, reported in various kibbutzim, and in various age groups, was striking but rarely welcomed. More successful in de-eroticizing relations was the near-universal adoption of mixed-sex dormitories. Other related innovations included the widespread adoption of male clothing by female kibbutz members.²⁵

The kibbutz's most dramatic development was perhaps a system of communal childrearing, a direct challenge to the status of the nuclear family, a major topic for sociologists.²⁶ At birth babies were reared communally, and babies forbidden from sleeping with their parents until the age of six months. Children would sleep, be educated, and socialize more or less entirely separately from their parents, with living accommodation provided by mixed-sex dormitories. For the child, the nuclear family was replaced by the dormitory group, and parental relationships by a series of more or less professional adults. The new system involved a high degree of micromanagement: from birth parents were discouraged, and sometimes forbidden, from putting their children to bed. Time with birth parents was possible,

but limited, although it became more common and accepted with the loosening of certain controls on the kibbutz. As one (feminist) kibbutz member noted: 'All we have left is our children, and we don't even have them for they are in the children's house.'²⁷

There is an odd tension in these remarks between the asceticism of the commune seen in the American experiments and a genuine engagement with the problem of sex, which is not. The kibbutz therefore arguably represents asceticism, but not Puritanism; there is a wish to control sex, to put it in its place, but not proscribe it. The prehistory of the kibbutz suggests a strongly sex-negative attitude, analogous to what Reich found in the USSR. Yet the instigation of the communal shower, whatever the stated aim, carries with it an undoubted erotic charge.²⁸ It is indicative of the curious nature of the kibbutz that it should deal with sex head on, but that it should also somehow fail. It is a neurotic, ambiguous relation with sex, enshrined in architecture.

A similar tension can be found in the organization of child-rearing. Its communal organization supposedly freed up couples for other things, while marriage was driven by free love. These aspects of the kibbutz's social organization should have made sex more central. But sex was curtailed by the tendency to organize labour irrespective of private relationships. Married couples would frequently find their time together curtailed by labour practices that could see them work different schedules, with different times for leisure. Unsurprisingly, the birth rate in the early decades of the kibbutz movement was lower than in normal Israeli society. In spite of the outward liberalization of sex, there was simply not the time, nor the energy, nor space to do it. The emphasis on physical labour produced some common kibbutz neuroses. Women fretted about ageing. The loss of sexual attractiveness mattered deeply, wrote one commentator, for 'the marriage bond is based only on love'. Kibbutz marriages, in other words, lacked the 'extraneous factors that conspire to perpetuate a marriage in our society long after love has passed'. Along with these organizational factors was a residual puritanism in the kibbutz, strongly opposed to both promiscuity and homosexuality. Both are in theory permitted, but for cultural reasons both were rare. Sexual relations seem frequently to have an undercurrent of shame: 'Couples attempted to keep the special ties between them as a secret as long as they could', she writes.²⁹ The same sexual conservatism is reported in other studies too. Variations seem temporary and local, with the kibbutz culture in general strongly opposed to anything resembling

promiscuity.³⁰ The kibbutz, in other words, may have had the infra-structure for an alternative sexuality, but it was in the end rarely any more a sexual paradise than the Puritan communities of Pennsylvania.

Drop City Blues

Forward to the western U.S. in the mid-1960s, and images of sexually libertarian communities abound. Aided, for certain, by the invention of female contraception, the hippy communes produced an image of sex completely separated for the first time from reproduction – and also separate from the regime of health. Sex might – or might not – be good for you health-wise, but it was fundamentally an *experience* to be consumed as liberally as possible. As good a place as any to start is Haight-Ashbury, the district of San Francisco where the hippy scene evolved. Many of the key figures in the scene lived communally: the rock group the Grateful Dead were a good example, their lead guitarist Jerry Garcia presiding over 710 Ashbury Street, a rambling nineteenth-century house that also served as the scene's unofficial headquarters. The Dead also lived communally for a while in a big adobe mansion with a pool in an idyllic ranch, Olompali, on the Marin peninsula, about ten miles north of San Francisco. Here, during the summer of 1966, they lived and played what in retrospect much better describes the so-called 'Summer of Love' than the Summer of Love itself. It was a perpetual party, fuelled in large part by the productions of the Dead's sound engineer and one-man drug factory, 'Bear', aka Augustus Owsley Stanley III. In one version of events, the 'pool was filled with naked maidens, and under it was a mountain of Bear's best and shiniest electronic equipment. There was also a jug with Bear's best and shiniest chemistry and it all made for a happy day.'³¹ In 1967, following the Dead's return to San Francisco, Olompali was leased by Don McCoy who founded a more serious commune, The Chosen Family. The Dead did however memorialize their stay at Olompali with a strange and compelling photograph by Thomas Weir on the back of their 1969 album *Aoxomoxoa*.³²

In retrospect, however, the Dead were more interested in music and drugs than getting laid. Far more sexually libertarian was the Haight-Ashbury offshoot of Morningstar, a ranch commune founded in 1967. *Time* magazine featured Morningstar in July 1967, and for readers the most shocking aspect of the community was the general state of nudity.³³ The article was sensationalist in tone – but retrospective accounts of the place in the words of a member, Pam



Grateful Dead, *Aoxomoxoa* (1969). The circular image, reproduced the same size as the vinyl record the sleeve contained, depicts the band and much of its entourage in the setting of the Olompali ranch. Those depicted include Jerry Garcia in the background with a horse, and Pigpen (Ron McKernan) reclining in the foreground wearing his trademark cowboy hat. To his right is a 5-year-old Courtney Love.

Read, and the commune's founders Louis Gottlieb and Ramon Sender are no less lurid, describing a chaos of drugs, pregnancies, accidental deaths, hopeless farming, made-up religions, dysentery, crabs, militant vegetarianism, nudism, sun-worship, police harassment – and lots and lots of sex. More than anything, sex seems to have been Morningstar's *raison d'être*. It was here that any and every sexual possibility was tried out and debated. At one end of the erotic spectrum was a group of neo-medieval celibates, who flatly resisted desire.³⁴ Somewhere in the middle were monogamous couples who remained somehow faithful to one another amid the libidinal chaos. But according to most of the surviving accounts, the ranch's defining character was a freewheeling polygamy. For



Olongapo ranch, c. 1966.

the most part this meant a regular trade in sexual partners, with 'open marriage' the norm.

Pam Read, a commune member who became a minor celebrity after being photographed nude in *Time*, described the situation in relation to her own partner, Larry:

By mutual agreement, we had an open marriage before the idea was generally bandied about as a bold new experiment. Morningstar people were refreshingly open about the matter. There were much more judgmental vibes about food on the set in those days than there were about sex.³⁵

(The communards' diet, all concur, was wretched, and produced widespread poor health.) According to Bill Wheeler, another Morningstar resident, a typical experiment in polygamy involved two couples trading sexual partners each night.

If any generalization could be made about the family on Open Land, it was that the traditional model of father, mother and child was the exception rather than the rule. The nuclear family rarely stayed intact when bombarded by the intense interpersonal energies of alternate culture. It seemed as if greater affiliations and loyalties were being demanded of us than those of the blood level. Couples attempting to stay together would give each other the freedom to have outside relationships, ultimately shattering the marriage.

Morningstar's founder, Lou Gottlieb, in fact refused to perform marriages after a time because he felt he was 'merely erecting a No Trespassing sign'. There were also periodic orgies, but they were more of a joke than anything else... someone always had the clap.³⁶ And there was the Phantom Fucker, an enigmatic nocturnal visitor. A resident, 'Friar Tuck', wrote: 'On at least one occasion, almost everyone I knew at Morning Star [sic] was visited in the middle of the night by the Phantom Fucker. Whether it was the same Phantom Fucker or not I don't know, but I doubt it.'³⁷ The architectural frame for this was informal in the extreme – simple lean-tos or A-frames that gave Morningstar the look of a Depression-era 'Hooverville' slum.³⁸ Sanitary arrangements were somewhat primitive – at best 'one took a shovel in hand and a brief walk in the fresh country air to select the perfect spot for a donation to Mother Earth'.³⁹ This method did not suit those with urgent needs, or the plain lazy, and one ongoing battle with local buildings inspectors concerned the disposal, or not, of human faeces. Morningstar so upset Ronald Reagan in 1967, then running for office as California Governor, that he made an election promise that there would be 'no more Morningstars', a promise achieved in 1973 during his second term, although more likely the result of the commune's own implosion than any concerted political action.⁴⁰

The colourful, but excellent, first-hand accounts of Morningstar published on the web underwrite *Drop City* (2003), a novel by T. C. Boyle.⁴¹ It describes a California commune with a charismatic leader ('Norm Sender', modelled directly on Morningstar's Ramon Sender), which decamps to Alaska with predictably disastrous consequences. Sex is ever-present in Boyle's novel – it's a sacrament, an article of faith, more important than anything else. It's also sex that ultimately brings the commune down. The flight to Alaska follows a series of catastrophic sexual allegations, and an outbreak of crabs finally seals

the communards' fate. The death of the most objectionable (and predatory) character, Ronnie, is accompanied by an intolerable scrotal itching, in one of the book's many tragicomic moments.

However, Boyle's use of the name *Drop City* referred to another, quite different, commune – and in fact the libidinal chaos of his fictional commune provoked the wrath of several of the 'real' dropers.⁴² The 'real' Drop City was founded in Trinidad, southern Colorado in 1965 by two hippies from New York City, Gene Bernofsky and Clark Richert, along with Gene's wife Jo and Richard Kallweit. Peter Douthitt ('Rabbit') was the most vocal of the later residents. The commune lasted until the early 1970s, but its high point was the June 1967 Joy Festival, when the commune became a key node in the global hippy network. It wasn't technically an offshoot of Haight-Ashbury but was, albeit briefly, on the grid. For the architectural historian Felicity Scott, Drop City, along with Olompali,

formed an interconnected field of experimentation in new forms of social and political participation. Withdrawn from an identification with 'America' they set out (like the Roma) to create their own modes of citizenship and belonging within a post-national territorial organisation connected by an informal network.⁴³

The Grateful Dead's experiments in communal living were friendly but haphazard. By contrast Drop City had a plan. Bernofsky and Richert, former art students, had seen Buckminster Fuller speak at the University of Colorado, and concluded that his geodesic dome was what they were looking for. Drop City's name alluded to then current hippy slang – to drop out, or to drop acid (LSD), the psychedelic drug most commonly associated with the movement – but it was also an allusion to the founders' experiments as art students in which they would routinely drop unlikely objects from high windows to observe the reactions of passers-by. Fuller approved of their ideas for the dome, and in 1966 sent them an award, plus a cheque for \$500.⁴⁴ But Drop City departed considerably from Fuller. It was a ramshackle settlement made from whatever came to hand. The chief materials were wood salvaged from nearby mine workings, and the roofs of cars which the early settlers discovered could be had for free – or at most 40 cents a piece – from local scrapyards: they evolved a technique with an axe for cutting them free of the car body. It was crude, but effective. A story of the dropers slicing the top off a

parked Cadillac outside a Colorado bar was probably apocryphal, but it illustrates both their opportunism and industriousness.

So much for the domes. Drop City was a sexy place. Its inhabitants were young, good-looking, keen to throw off as much of the baggage of ordinary society as possible, and its members (some of them, at least) set to exploiting the erotic potential of the new arrangements. Rabbit wasted no time, writing pornography with his commune partner Poly Ester, which he had printed up (with some reservations from other commune members) in the first issue of the *Drop City Newsletter*. He also made a short art film depicting Poly Ester performing fellatio on him, which along with communally made painting, was one of the main exhibits at a Santa Fe art gallery in 1966, an event Rabbit also masterminded. Its screening at the opening led to the immediate closing of the show by the police, an action that gave the event a notoriety out of all proportion to its scale.

Meanwhile, back at Drop City, Richert (now become 'Clard') was given to speak of the ambitious Theater Dome in erotic terms. Speaking to John Curl ('Ishmael') on the occasion of the latter's arrival in Drop City, he described an immersive environment of strobes, electronics and film loops, designed to produce 'constant orgasm'.⁴⁵ Curl, fresh from New York's Lower East Side, was mightily impressed. Aspects of the design of Drop City at least help frame this impression: the domes themselves were tiny for the population they eventually housed, and barely subdivided – privacy barely existed in conventional terms. Rabbit's dome in particular was densely populated, with a steady turnover of sexual partners. The informality of Drop City was conducive to libidinal thinking, with no explicit pressure to organize, just a vague sense of being part of an art experiment. And as Curl reported, there were certain sexual experiments involving multiple partners – though these were few, and seem to have arisen as much out of necessity, as the result of the shortage of available partners, as anything else.

For the most part, however, Drop City conformed to sexual convention. A BBC2 documentary of 1966, fronted by Jacob Bronowski, described an earnest bunch of idealists, pioneers in a historic sense, re-invoking an old American tradition. They were earnest, resourceful and hard-working; nothing at all was said of either their drug use (unexceptional, it turned out) or their sexual behaviour. Bronowski rather approved.⁴⁶ Accounts of the sexual politics of Drop City paint a picture a long way from any kind of libidinal excess. In fact the close proximity of residents coupled (in the case of female commune

members) with some half-digested feminist theory seems to have produced some awkward moments for visitors expecting the ready availability of sex. This was certainly Curl's initial experience: the production of new behavioural norms not wholly unlike those that they ostensibly replaced. Reflecting on the awkwardness of his first interactions with the Drop City women, he described how 'primary relationships' seemed unaffected by the commune environment. 'Everybody still maintained, or wanted a special relationship with one other person, just like in the big outside world.'⁴⁷ Gene Bernofsky wrote:

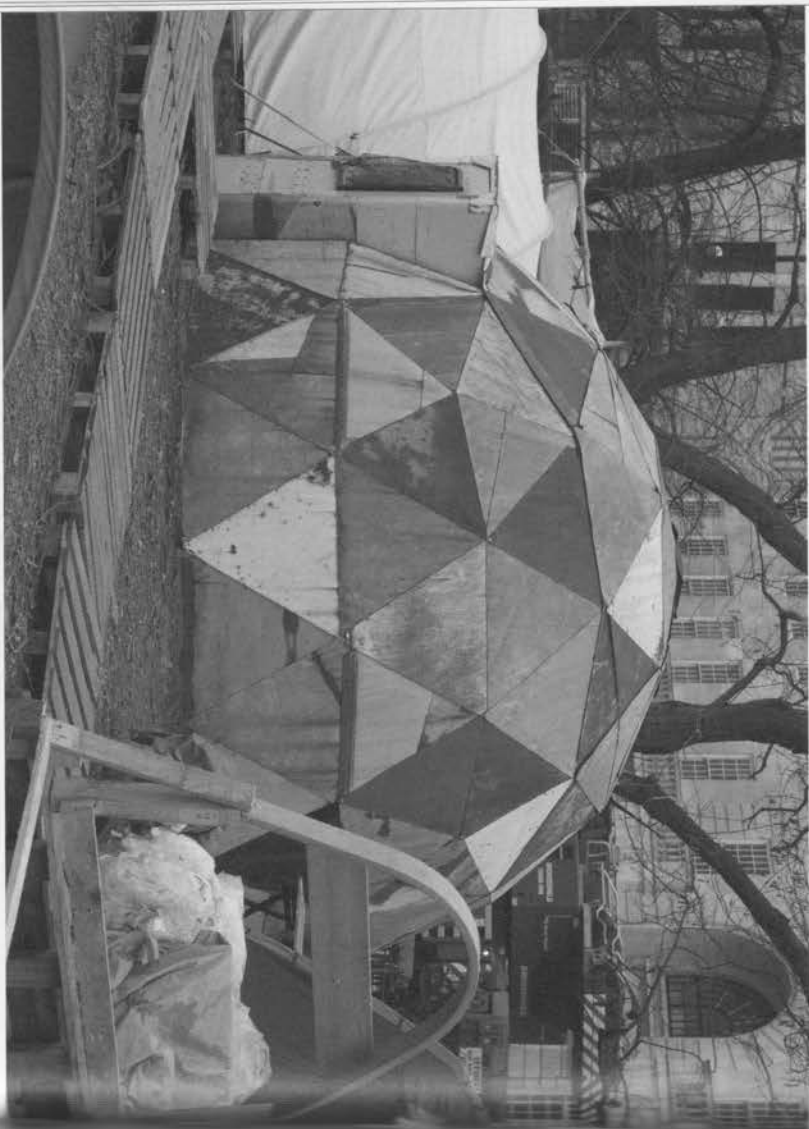
it was kind of a straightforward middle-class deal. The sexual politics were pretty conservative and strait-laced [sic]. We talked about how we wanted to keep that part of our lives simple. Not to get involved in fiery cross-relationships. We disciplined ourselves so that it didn't go on. We were mostly college graduates and had a little maturity, and we realized how complicated and difficult life would be with any partner trading. That was one of the disciplines we had that helped us in our achievements on the land.⁴⁸

If Drop City reproduced some helpfully stabilizing characteristics from the outside world, it also reproduced a lot of its more negative characteristics. So for female droppers, the sexual revolution could simply seem fraudulent – a means for otherwise undesirable males to get laid, claiming refusal of sexual advances as refusal of the revolution itself. This is a major theme of Curl's history. He quotes a commune resident, Miss Margarine: 'the truth is, this whole so-called sexual revolution is really something made up by guys and for guys. It tells women we're suppose to feel liberated by having sex with all of you. It just doesn't work like that, at least for women.'⁴⁹

Worse still, Drop City and the other hippy communes that followed could reproduce the sexism that existed in the real world, with well-documented division of labour between men and women. As one woman reported to Matthews, how come it was that only the women had to cook at Drop City?⁵⁰ Even worse was the implicit racism – in a recent account, Drop City represented a highly sophisticated example of so-called white flight.⁵¹ Bernofsky's sexual conservatism was perhaps a form of denial, or submerged regret: 'If there was any

Drop City, Joy Festival poster, June 1967.





Alex Hartley, reconstructed Drop City dome at Occupy London protest, Finsbury Square, 2012.

sleeping around or trading partners I didn't know about it. And it didn't go on as far as I could tell.⁵² When Drop City held its Joy Festival in June 1967, Bernofsky retreated to his dome, refusing – in stark contrast to Rabbit – to join the revelry. He left Drop City shortly afterwards, implying in interview that the Joy Festival in effect marked the end of the commune as a valid project. It certainly marked the end of the project as something that could be controlled by Bernofsky himself. In a curious parallel with the fictional *Drop City*, the Trinidad commune's demise seems to have been presaged by a decline in sexual morality; later arrivals could be unsavoury, including an older (male) sexual predator whose sole interest in the commune seems to have been its supply of young girls.⁵³

Drop City has had a curious afterlife in the 2010s via the Occupy movement. Here the British artist Alex Hartley built a dome adapted

from the Drop City design, lived in it for the duration of his Victoria Miro Gallery exhibition in the winter of 2011–12 and donated it at the end to Occupy, who used it as a shelter in Finsbury Square. In image at least, Drop City's libidinal utopia survives.⁵⁴ The dome was removed in mid-June 2012 along with the rest of the camp, some of which reappeared on Hampstead Heath. Hartley transported his dome back to his studio in Devon where it became clear it had been a place of some excess – the interior was coated in vomit, and the remains of an exploded beanbag, concealing a good scattering of used sex toys and condoms. A period of disinfecting and decontamination ensued.⁵⁵ Hartley's re-enactment of Drop City in the gallery's garden was a fascinating, but essentially polite project based on a genuine affection for and knowledge of the original. His enthusiasm for Drop City was evident to visitors, and the experience of recreating it helped explain – in a straightforward architectural-historical sense – how the original had actually worked. It was a historic recreation in a long, worthy tradition, a counter-cultural Colonial Williamsburg.⁵⁶ In the hands of Occupy, it became a zone of dystopian excess, an apocalyptic party space. The transformation from one to the other parallels many things in this book (the plot of Ballard's *High Rise* is one). But it also curiously parallels Drop City's own history. A high-minded utopian scheme in the beginning, it was brought to earth by Eros. Peggy Kagel, one of the original droppeers, wrote of sex at Drop City: 'we call it the evil black snake. It just tears everyone apart.'⁵⁷