

A Village for the New Nomads

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Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection? The pioneers, the immigrants who peopled the continent, were the restless ones in Europe. The steady rooted ones stayed home and are still there...Perhaps we have overrated roots as a psychic need. Maybe the greater urge, the deeper and more ancient is the need, the will, the hunger to be somewhere else.

— John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley*¹

INTRODUCTION

No other country has embraced the use of the trailer like the United States. Beginning in the 1920s, vacationing in trailers became a popular method of travel even during the depression years. Publications promoted the use of these mobile units as a "wave of the future" (Fig. 1). Advertisements displayed the support of family values (Fig. 2) with captions like "Good night, sweet dreams, sonny." By the 1930s, many of these trailers were being used as primary residences because of its affordability. Corwin Willson, an "integrating" engineer and industrial designer, in protest for its use for only the leisure class, supported trailer living as "a good home that the average income [family] can own or rent new and the less than average income can secure at second or fifth hand cheaply just as it now secures a used car, without mortgaging the future of its children's children."² Even R. Buckminster Fuller suggested that housing be considered a service in which people purchased or leased a standardized unit that could be replaced or traded in as more technologically advanced models were introduced, which were first expressed in *4-D Time Lock* (1927) and later expanded in *Nine Chains to the Moon* (1938). However, many of the characteristics of motor home living in its ideal forms were precisely those that detractors found offensive and threatening. Freedom from fixed property, for example, could also be seen as a form of tax evasion, just as the freedom to choose one's neighbors might be interpreted as an abdication of community responsibility. Many nonsupporters deemed the makeshift communities as shantytowns (Fig. 3). Additions to the trailers were shabby in style, sometimes resembling the appearance of a squatter settlement (Fig. 4). It is little wonder that the motor home industry, as it began to consolidate and develop an official position, wanted to distance itself from the idea of trailers as permanent housing. Not until many years later after several legal battles did the trailer on wheels become replaced by the "mobile home" (a pre-fabricated house with no wheels intended for permanent siting and transported by truck) as an acceptable and affordable type of living.

This design proposal attempts to revisit the use of the trailer on wheels, and more specifically the *Airstream* brand, for extended living as an alternative to apartment living and as a way for itinerant workers to migrate together with their families. In this case, the trailers and "park" would have an orderly appearance to gain acceptance with local government in both construction and operation.

THE RURAL HOUSING CRISIS

In many rural parts of America and especially in areas busy with tourism, local residents are finding affordable housing more and more scarce. The work force supporting industries such as ski or beach resorts often cannot afford homes in the local area and must commute to areas far away and in sub-standard conditions. Normally, one associates expensive real estate with that in the city or other urban situations. However, the inability for workers to purchase property in rural areas is becoming a very common difficulty in many parts of the United States. A tight community providing a variety of lease options can provide local residents or migrant workers with very affordable housing.

THE "AMERICANA" CULTURE

Another purely American product, Hollywood can be viewed as an appropriate venue to promote the American trailer house. In 1938, Walt Disney Studios released "Mickey's Trailer." In this movie, Mickey's home miraculously transforms piece-by-piece into a trailer home only to undergo several other ingenious transformations on the road. Predictably, at some point the trailer becomes unhitched, and careens down the mountain, the car in vain pursuit. Further celebrity endorsement of the trailer as an object of popular culture appears several years later in a book by Clinton Twiss called *The Long, Long Trailer*. In 1953, the successful movie-version premiered starring Desi Arnez and Lucille Ball. Peppered with predictable mishaps, the movie presented an appealing image of trailer life and of the people in trailer parks.

Another icon of "Americana" is the *Airstream* trailer with its image of nostalgia and futurism simultaneously. Designed originally in 1936 by Wally Byam (Fig. 5), the "*Airstream*" quickly became a popular way of travel in the U.S. While camping in luxury with color televisions and microwave ovens, Americans could roam free in their hotel-on-wheels, traveling to remote areas in the U.S. and abroad (Fig. 6 and Fig. 7) with the option of touring in caravans organized by Wally Byam which began as a promotional tool. Eventually, the following became so large that rallies were organized for "Airstreamers" to congregate (Fig. 8). It is no surprise that this American "cult" or tribe in their seemingly absurd molded objects had their beliefs reduced to a creed:

The Wally Byam Creed

In the heart of these words is an entire life's dream. To those of you who find in the promise of these words your promise, I bequeath this creed...my dream belongs to you:

- To place the great wide world at your doorstep for you who yearn to travel with all the comforts of home.
- To provide a more satisfying, meaningful way of travel that offer complete travel independence, wherever and whenever you choose to go or stay.
- To keep alive and make real an enduring promise of high adventure and faraway lands...of rediscovering old places and new interests.
- To open a whole world of new experiences...a new dimension in enjoyment where travel adventure and good fellowship are your constant companions.
- To encourage clubs and rallies that provide an endless source of friendships, travel fun and personal expression.
- To lead caravans wherever the four winds blow...over twinkling boulevards, across trackless deserts...to the traveled and untraveled corners of the earth.
- To play some part in promoting international goodwill and understanding among the peoples of the world through person-to-person contact.
- To refine and perfect our product by continuous travel-testing over the highways and byways of the world.
- To strive endlessly to stir the venturesome spirit that moves you to follow a rainbow to its end...and thus make your travel dreams come true.

— Wally Byam, Founder of Airstream, Inc.³

This natural instinct to gather to form communities even for a limited time is a part of that nomadic life where many can find an end to isolation, loss of purpose and boredom. Many even sold their conventional homes to use these motor homes as their prime residence. An estimate of 10-25 percent of the trailer population was year round users.⁴ Today, this preference is still exercised widely with the great varieties of motor, mobile and pre-fabricated homes available on the market.

THE PROPOSED SITE

Even though this proposal for a "nomadic village" is designed for a specific gravel pit in upstate New York (Fig. 9), the same concept can be applied to a multitude of rural sites across the U.S. Instead of allowing exhausted gravel pits to scar the rural landscape, they can be reused as havens for new communities. As the floors of the pits begin to be developed with a combination of built and landscaped areas, it will be the walls of the bowl that will be the final remnant of its previous use and provide a dramatic spatial closure for an entire community. At the lowest point of the site, a pond capturing drainage becomes a focal point for residents as well as visitors, whereas the highest point becomes a group campsite and gathering area with spectacular views of the village and the landscape.

THE VILLAGE COMMUNITY

Like all other communities, the village has central community facilities. Located near the main office are the grocery store, laundry facility, game room, community room, auto/trailer service and parts facility, playground and other recreational platforms. Scattered around the village would be bathroom and shower facilities at locations that would not require great distances to walk. The remainder of the property would be allocated to the layout of units with a portion of the natural surroundings preserved.

The layout of the units is very critical to healthful living, both physically and psychologically. In the open land, the favorite

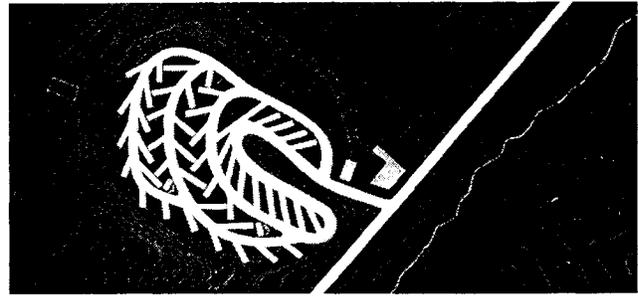


Fig. 1. Proposed site plan.

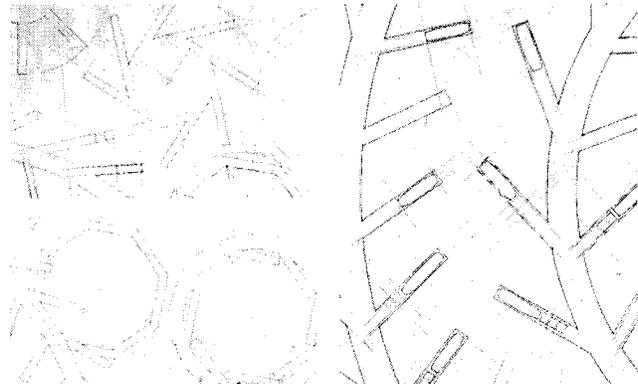


Fig. 2. Layout studies.

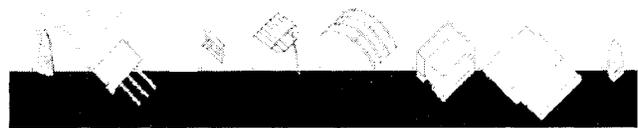


Fig. 3. Kit-of-Parts.

campsite layout for small gatherings was commonly the roundup, in which trailers formed a circle, wagon-train fashion. Like the covered wagon style trailer, the roundup evoked images of the Wild West and the open frontier. However, as autocampers grew, such informal arrangements along the roadside or on private property (farmland) became unsuitable. Commonly, farmers grew hostile to the frequent, uninvited guests, who trampled the sites and left their trash by the roadside. Eventually, the business of trailer parks grew and layouts began to accommodate and attract travelers. Some early designs render the close relationship between the early motel and progressive thinking about what trailer camps might be like. The design for this proposal would take this idea, apply it to an entire village of aluminum-clad "capsules" and provide a distinct image that can be appealing to residents as well as visitors.

THE LIVING UNITS

By the use of a "kit-of-parts", this nomadic community can provide infinite number of layers ranging from the temporary to the permanent where no two sites/homes would look the same. The temporary sites are transformed regularly by the short-term visitor more commonly found in trailer parks. They may stay from one day to one week and are provided with the minimal accoutrements: a deck, a barbecue pit and a built-in awning to pull their vehicle and trailer up to. However, this type of traveler would be savvy to the new potential to accessorize their vehicle so that portions of their *Airstream* would already be altered to accommodate this way of life.

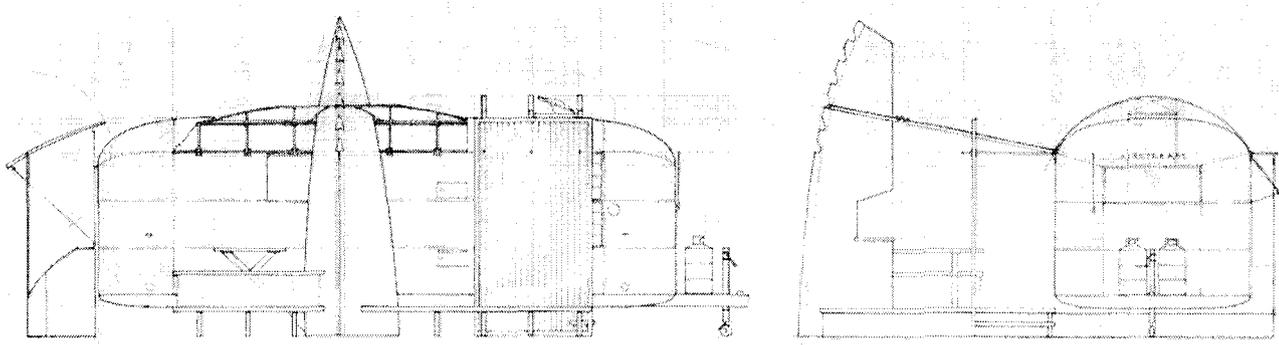


Fig. 4. A nomadic unit.

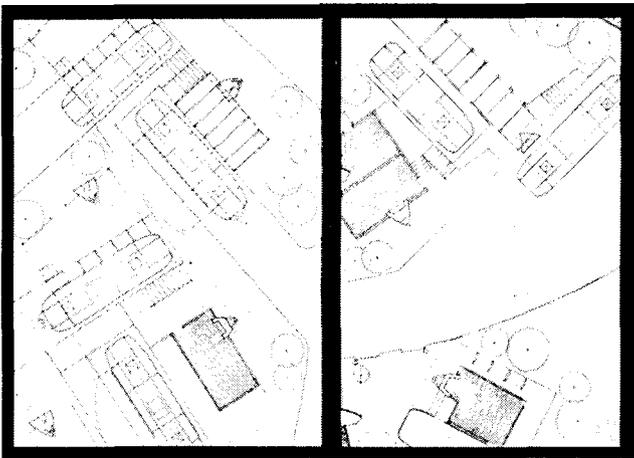


Fig. 5. Plan for temporary and permanent units.

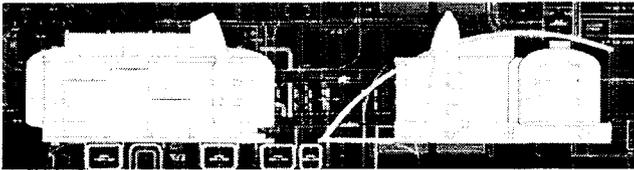


Fig. 6. A permanent, non-mobile unit.

The user of the opposite extreme would be looking for a more permanent type of situation where the automobile no longer pulls the trailer. In this situation, the wheels of the trailer are removed and the remaining compartment becomes a more integral part of the house structure. In some cases, the "capsule" can be completely absorbed into the inner cavities of the house. The remainder of the units would vary between these two extremes. However, all residents, temporary or permanent, would have to agree with lease contracts at the appropriate level.

CONCLUSION

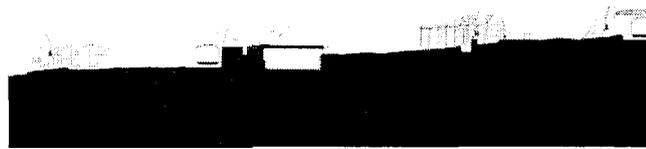


Fig. 7. Site section through various units.



Fig. 8. Village Rooftop Collage.

With aesthetic uniformity attained by the use of a "kit-of-parts" system, this village can provide housing of fairly high density at very affordable prices. The *Airstream*, a ready-made object that could be used to achieve instant villages, is celebrated here in a heroic manner not unlike the "Freetime node: Trailer cage" project proposed by Archigram's Ron Herron and Barry Snowden in 1973. This project, along with others designed by Le Corbusier, John Habraken and Paul Rudolph, circulate in the high cult of design in a search for a new hybrid form of housing and community that would meet the needs of modern society. At one level, these schemes appear to be hopelessly utopian, but, at another, they are simply attempts to give visual form and order to lifestyles that were already highly evident.

NOTES

- ¹ John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charley* (New York: Viking Press, 1962), pp. 91-92.
- ² Corwin Willson, "Diagnosing Trailer Fever." *Automobile and Trailer Travel*, 1:4 (July 1936), p. 17.
- ³ Robert Landau and James Phillippi, *Airstream* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1984), p. 5.
- ⁴ Allan D. Wallis, *Wheel Estate: The Rise and Decline of Mobile Homes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 58.