

Meet Todd and Mindy

IN 1981 THE WHITE STUCCO HOUSE, I designed for Janice and Nelson Byrne on the beach at Del Mar was finished. They named the house “Briar Heath” on the theory that everything in California has to be something it isn’t. Some months ago, I met for the first time with the marketers for a suburban town-house project on which we were beginning work. Tod’s card said “Market Analyst” and Mindy’s said. “Vice President.” Tod is clean-cut and very large, like the linebacker who leads the team in prayer on game day. Mindy had on one of those long-skirted herringbone suits cut to go with running shoes. Mindy is one of those people who seems absolutely and unequivocally in-charge, like Katharine Hepburn or Mikhail Gorbachev in their respective heydays. Is it carriage? Is it gesture? Is it voice? Is it genetic? Can it be learned?

Mindy thought it essential that we look together at some “first class product” so that I could see where she was coming from. We drove at noon down a jammed six-lane arterial that goes from San Jose to Milpitas and arrived at a condo project called Villaggio. I’m not sure what town we were in (maybe it was Sunnyvale). Hard to tell, but if one needed to give an intergalactic visitor a quick picture of American life at the fin de siècle, Villaggio would do.

Villaggio is intended to evoke Italy, and it does. Its principal material is a substance that looks exactly like zuccotto, those Italian frozen ice-cream cakes that are tinted with raspberry juice. Only the color is pinker—less blue than raspberries—like zuccotto made with bubble gum ice cream.

Everything about Villaggio evokes something. It is a whole technology of evocation. There are cultured marble bathtub surrounds and stamped concrete that really does look like paving stones, except for the expansion joint that runs diagonally and gives away the trick like a shifted toupe. Curious that “cultured” has become a synonym for fake. The units all have Mindy’s favorite door, Colonist six-panel-embossed by Masonite Corporation.

In 1931 Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson wrote that the advent of mass-produced metal window frames was “a happy augury” for the future of modern architecture. Metal window frames mounted flush with the outside of a wall could express the essential thinness of the modern wall—that was the whole idea. Villaggio has mass-produced metal window frames and thin walls. But around each window, underneath the zuccotto there are little pillows of styro-foam, like shoulder pads, to make the windows look recessed and the walls thick. What type of augury is this, Mr. Johnson?

On some levels Villaggio is really brilliant—in the same way that Tod and Mindy are brilliant, especially Mindy. As soon as we met, she unfolded a sheet of our drawings—tiny little pre-

liminary drawings with the plans of units drawn at one-eighth of an inch to the foot. Within seconds—literally seconds—she said, “You’d better straighten out the angled bay in the second bedroom of the ‘A’ unit.”

“Why?” I asked “Well, this way, you can have a queen, two end tables, and a little armoire, but if you straightened out the wall you could fit a full-sized one.”

I took out a scale and a calculator and fiddled for a couple minutes. She was right. In seconds. At one-eighth inch scale, no less. So much for chamfered bays.

Villaggio shows what the Tods and the Mindy’s have done for “product” in the last decade. “Product” is the private world par excellence—sunlight, comfort, security, sanitized luxury beyond the works, even beyond the dreams of the masters of modern architecture. Somewhere, somehow, the designers of these dwellings learned all the tricks from the masters, from Le Corbusier, from Frank Lloyd Wright, from the Case Study Houses; they learned about stepped sections and open plans; they learned about efficiency and the union of indoors and outdoors. They learned everything from the masters but their dogma and their passions. Without dogma, without values, liberated from inhibiting beliefs about what the world should be or look like, they are Tod and Mindy’s ideal collaborators. Together they are on the march across the landscape of consumerism. Villaggios are everywhere—pink ones, grey ones, white ones. It is America’s true ethnic pluralism: Italian, Spanish, Tudor, Cape Cod, maritime themes in the desert, Pueblos by the sea, mixed themes like Pueblo/Swiss in Colorado. Didn’t de Tocqueville have something to say about all this?

The basic morphological unit, the building block of the new American landscape, is the Planned Unit Development—the PD, as they are now called. Villaggio is a PD, as are Glen Cove, Hacienda Village, Cedar Ridge and Mar Vista Highlands. PD’s have names, themes, walls, one way in and out, and one breach in the wall, frequently a guarded breach. Like the station break that separates one TV show from the next, walls separate one developer/architect team’s hyper-reality from the next. The walls are the key.

Tod and Mindy want two things, and Tod and Mindy speak for the culture. One thing they want is private luxury, the other is rootedness—a sense of origin. Modern architecture provided the first just fine, but denied the second. That is why modern architecture vanished from Tod and Mindy’s world. The modernist proposal—the search for real substance without reference to some other, earlier, already legitimated world—was turned down cold. People didn’t want it, felt lost in it; and in the end Joe Eichler went broke. There are no new Case Study Houses, Usonian Houses, or Maison Citrohans.

But private luxury run amok turns the quest for origin into chaos. The wall of the PD, the wall that separates one PD from the next, is the denial of the possibility of a tacit agreement about meanings and origins. Privatization, in the form of the walled PD, and the quest for origins

which breeds the architecture of reference are like two incompatible drugs that produce a terrible sickness when taken together. The sickness is the collapse of the American town, and a situation in which there is no way that an architect can do anything but make disembodied items for a landscape that is like a vast miniature golf course.

What is demanded now is a simulation of origins that must be produced in a cacophony of simulations—some subtle, some gross—of multiple and long hidden origins. As each referent or potential source of origin is buried under an avalanche of simulacra each seeking different referents, the task of the architect/archaeologist/simulator becomes more and more impossible. We live in a society that systematically obscures, even obliterates, its roots, the very thing it has clearly refused to do without.

The simulation of origin, which is so much in demand, only works when there is tacit agreement. To take an extreme example, there is agreement amongst the citizens of Santa Barbara that Santa Barbara should look like Santa Barbara, and little disagreement about what it consists of. Planning law and land ownership do not allow private developer/architect/marketing teams to make their own private imaginary constructs. Different conceits (Pueblo, Tudor) demean and negate one another and expose the artifice of each. San Francisco may be less precious than Santa Barbara, but still there is agreement about what it consists of and some general agreement about what is good or bad to build there. In post-1960 planned towns like Irvine or Valencia, there is neither tacit agreement nor the possibility of it. People can and do build almost anything, referring to almost anything that has ever been built anywhere. No part, no single private simulation is any more correct, convincing, or rooted than any other. Without tacit agreement there is no basis for judgement, and the making of architecture becomes a pointless game of dress-up.

In this environment intelligent architects keep sane by taking refuge within the hermetic covers of books, magazines, and other forms of information culture where the tacit agreement that no longer exists amongst the citizens of the new towns does exist among small, widely dispersed cabals of readers. What establishes the terms of agreement in a traditional city is an urban structure of streets and property lines, an urban form that is larger than the individually owned piece of private property. The idea of urban structure as it is discussed in this book has many practical benefits. It also has much to do with making the direct experience of daily life competitive in interest and meaningfulness with the indirect experience of information culture.