The Disappearing Village

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ABSTRACT: The idea of the village has never been more popular. The word is applied across time, and place, and even projected into cyber-space. Yet never has Western society been so cut off from the traditional village, or known so little about it. This paper looks at popular conceptions of the village, and the current view that the village is a place of positive community values. It traces the history of the village in the Western imagination and shows that traditionally, the village was ignored, or denigrated. It considers the motives of developers and planners who call their projects 'villages' and asks if the qualities of human scale, individuality, and community interaction are the very thing they lack.

'The Village' in Current Use

'A village in the south of France' and 'a small village in the Cotswolds' are phrases that will evoke, for many readers, pleasant thoughts of physical attractions, a desirable lifestyle, and a comforting proximity to nature. Villages are popular with visitors, and in season you can barely move in Moustiers-Ste-Marie or Bibury for the throngs of tourists who are dropped off from their buses for the advertised 'one and a half hours: at liberty: visit traditional craft shops.'

For those who can afford to linger, the village may offer much more, in the form of some psychic refreshment for souls damaged by the vicissitudes of life in the outside world. Over the past two decades, a fresh sub-genre of English-language literature has appeared, which relates the true-life stories of women at turning points in their career, who go to a village in Tuscany, or Provence, and buy a terribly run-down house. After many humorous adventures with tradespeople and some false romantic starts, the narrator finds true happiness in the arms the lawyer who did her conveyancing.[1] But Fabrizio, or Jacques, or whatever his name is, is just a cipher. The real

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[1]   See Frances Mayes, *Under the Tuscan Sun: At Home in Italy* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1996); Mary Moody, *Au Revoir: Running Away from Home at Fifty* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 2001); Mary Moody, *The Long, Hot Summer: A French Heatwave and a Marriage Meltdown* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2005); Henrietta Taylor, *Veuve Taylor* (Pymble, NSW: Harper Collins, 2005); and Henrietta Taylor, *Escaping* (Pymble, NSW: Harper Collins, 2006).

agent of change is the village itself, which allows the protagonist the opportunity to discover her true self.

On television the village stars in another sub-genre which is wildly popular, the rural detective story. *Midsomer Murders* is a top-rating show for the ABC, and one of its few offerings that consistently out-rate the commercial channels.[2] Proof of the pulling-power of the village is that every week, in the compass of a few square miles, three or more people are bludgeoned to death with blunt instruments, or poisoned, and nobody goes away thinking any the worse of it. On the contrary, *Midsomer Murders* and the various Miss Marple episodes of detection are regularly set in the village because death seems so strange in the bucolic setting of hedgerows, laneways, half-timbered pubs, stone churches, vicars on bicycles and lovable if eccentric rustics.[3]

Australian Perspectives

An intelligent lay observer, looking back on Australian society in the early 21st century from another time and place, might well conclude from the linguistic and cultural evidence that the village was the most popular and desirable form of community. That conclusion would puzzle the empirical researcher, who could point to the census statistics and archaeological remains to show that the overwhelming majority of Australians live in urban concentrations, whilst the rural countryside is sparsely occupied by isolated farmsteads, and the village nowhere to be seen.[4] The explanation lies in the peculiar form that the village takes in the contemporary imagination. It is no longer regarded as a physical place, discrete and distinct from other habitation. The village is now conceived of as a bundle of types of relationship, which given certain minimal conditions can take place anywhere in time or space.

'The Village' Grows

Commercial ventures that once went by other names are now described and known as villages, these including caravan parks, multi-screen cinema complexes, and industrial areas. Aged-care operators have re-branded themselves and their activities as 'villages', to shift

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2   Screen Australia, Get the picture – Free-to-air TV – Top-rating programs – Drama series <http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/gtp/wftvtopdrama.html> [accessed 22 September 2010].

3   *Midsomer Murders* (ITV1); *Miss Marple* (BBC); *Marple* (ITV).

4   In 2007, 64% of the population lived in the capital cities, with many of the rest in other cities and towns. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, 4102.0 Australian Social Trends, March 2009.

the emphasis from who their clients are: elderly and often infirm; to how they hope their product will be perceived: dependable and caring. The 'Association of Retirement Village Operators in the United Kingdom' defines the retirement village by three core components. One is housing; another is care; the third is something called 'community,' which means that 'each village makes provision for its community by providing shared facilities such as swimming pools and restaurants.'[5]

The most obsessive application of the word now is to retail clusters. A perusal of the real estate pages of the daily papers would have you believe that a village lies at the heart of every locality in the metropolitan region, wherever there are two or more coffee shops gathered together. Local councils assist by erecting signs to indicate which portion of an otherwise undifferentiated streetscape comprises 'Cremorne' or 'Mosman village'.

In English-language usage, the idea of the village has been personalised. The individual city-dweller can shape their own village experience by choosing to engage in any of a wide range of commercial transactions, some marketed intentionally by their promoters as 'village-like', others to be recognised by analogy. This is, perhaps, a strategy that so many urban Australians have developed to cope with having to live in crowded cities.

At the same time there are limits to how far one can push a figure of speech. When planners and fashion-setters praise 'the village' and seek to duplicate its 'ambience', they run the risk of reviving a set of problems quite different to the ills of the city, which are the ills of the traditional village and the reason it was supplanted as a functional unit in the first place.

Contemporary English-language usage recognises the village 'from Moustiers to Manhattan', and even in cyber-space. Its apparent ubiquity is projected back into the past, and regarded as the norm. Each age and period of human development is considered to have its own form of village. These range from the prehistoric, which precedes the advent of cities; the Biblical and Classical, which gives us Bethlehem; the traditional, where the village is regarded as part of a hierarchy of settlement types; to the modernist, where the village shrugs off its rural role, and, finally, the post-modern, where the 'virtual village' has no physicality, but a bland and patronizing atmosphere.

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[5]   ARVOUK, 'The Association of Retirement Village Operators UK' <http://www.arvouk.org/> [accessed 22 September 2010].

Inherent in these imaginings are two fundamental propositions. One is that the village is good. It is a place of positive social values, which are at risk or lost in larger social units such as the city. The second is that those positive social values are in some way a product of the architecture. If you can reproduce structural aspects of the village elsewhere, in the city, or on the internet, then you can socially engineer the positive values, making these places enjoyable.

The Village Reflected

As a medievalist, I question whether the village was anything like that universal. Its assumed genealogy—according to which it has endured from neolithic times to the present—is a speculative and anachronistic imposition of medieval forms onto an otherwise unintelligible past. And there is a strong clue in the word itself, which appeared in English in the fourteenth century.[6] Earlier ages and other languages got by without it. Even today, English speakers who travel to Italy read into the landscape a series of villages, whilst the Italians themselves use less specific words. Nor is there the same automatic response. Italians are not inclined to place the village at the summit of demographic forms, as Mussolini recognised when he punished his recalcitrant intelligentsia by sending them into internal confinement in what we would call a village, much to their very real discontent.[7]

Forms of the Village Described

The function of the late medieval village was to house labourers and their families. Architecturally, the village consisted of houses, each built of similar materials and with similar techniques, clustered around a church, with few services and no duplication of the services it did have. Within the village, there was no retail competition. The housing itself shows that economically, most of the people in the village were of the same occupation and status. Sociologically, the housing shows that villagers were afforded at least the privilege of living in families, and were to that extent protected from unregulated sexual threats. The existence of individual household economies also shows that families had a degree of financial independence, provided

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6   Chaucer uses the word in the Canterbury Tales (c. 1387-1400), with humble connotations, including the following:
         In which that povre folk of that village (IV E 240)
         To thee, that born art of a smal village (IV E 483)
         Or of the povereste wydwe in a village (VI C 450).
     See G. Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 140, 143, 196.

7   See Carlo Levi, *Cristo si e' fermato a Eboli* (Giulio Einaudi, 1945). [Christ stopped at Eboli].

by property rights to the use of land, and later, by the receipt of wages.

This relative independence of the family units that made up the late medieval village is a vital point of distinction from other European forms of labour housing, such as slave camps, monasteries, and barracks. The villager was neither slave nor clan member. In this respect, it is difficult to equate the medieval village with prehistoric and early historical settlements known only by their physical remains, where we cannot be certain of their social and occupative arrangements. English-speaking archaeologists and anthropologists are in general agreement with each other in describing the more modest of these sites as villages. They are however deeply and bitterly divided as to what it is possible to say about their actual use. Australian archaeologists David Frankel and Jennifer Webb believe that the physical remains of the prehistoric village reveal 'a remarkable level of social history,' including the positive reading that 'families can be seen successfully negotiating with their neighbours'.[8] By contrast, Julian Thomas cautions against cobbling together what he calls a 'uniform image of "the Neolithic economy"' from 'isolated and perhaps atypical phenomena,' because such a 'definitive or final account' is not really possible.[9] Marija Gimbutas has argued from the ideograms that the Neolithic village was a matriarchy, and, for that reason, was harmonious and free from aggression and conflict.[10] Lyn Meskell objects that Gimbutas, in her search for a social utopia, is 're-weaving a fictional past with claims of scientific proofs,' a procedure she describes as 'simply irresponsible.'[11]

Modern historians refer to the existence of villages in archaic and classical times, and English-language Biblical scholars in particular have provided an image of the landscape of antiquity which is much like the England of James the First. Again, it might be argued that this usage is anachronistic. By classical times written languages had been developed, providing a concept that can be matched against the remains. Literature of the time scarcely mentions the village, and never by that name. Roman literature describes the countryside in terms of farmsteads or estates, and proposes a direct link between the farmstead and the city, without consideration of the village.[12] Given

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[8]   D. Frankel and J. Webb, 'Neighbours: Negotiating Space in a Prehistoric Village', *Antiquity,* 80 (2006), 287-302 (p. 287).

[9]   J. Thomas, *Understanding the Neolithic*, rev. 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 221-222.

[10]   See Marija Gimbutas, *The Language of the Goddess: Unearthing Hidden Symbols of Western Civilisation* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989).

[11]   Lyn Meskell, 'Goddesses, Gimbutas and "New Age" Archaeology', *Antiquity,* 69 (1995), 74-86, (p. 74).

[12]   See Virgil's *Eclogues* (37 BC) and *Georgics* (29 BC).

the pattern of land ownership and the social structure of Roman agriculture, it is not clear that an agricultural village, in the late medieval sense, could have existed.

When the medieval village did appear, and when it became the subject of literature, its depiction was overwhelmingly negative. It is well documented how English travellers to the Continent gradually developed the taste for the picturesque.[13] Their sensibilities became attuned to mountains and waterfalls, but they found the villages of Europe unpalatable. Cities and ruins were the destination, and villages were unfortunate incidents of the way. The word most commonly used to describe them was 'dirty'. Tobias Smollett, English translator of *Don Quixote,* described a night he suffered at a small village, whose name he does not recall, in Italy in 1765.

> The house was dismal and dirty beyond all description; the bed-cloaths filthy enough to turn the stomach of a muleteer; and the victuals cooked in such a manner, that even a Hottentot could not have beheld them without loathing ... in the morning, I was seized with a dangerous fit of hooping-cough.[14]

John Morgan Cobbett, whilst perhaps finding less dirt in France than his brother James did in Italy,[15] nevertheless remarked of Limoges during his tour of 1825 that

> the villages ... in which most of the chateaux are situated, are dirty little holes.[16]

Seven months later, toward the end of his journey, he was still unimpressed:

> Any thing is better than the villages. The dirty nasty villages of Lorraine are enough to infect the population.[17]

Nor were the villages of England regarded in a better light. An American traveller to England in 1810 was amazed to find that the

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13   Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View* (London: Cass, 1967).

14   Tobias Smollett, *Travels Through France and Italy*, ed. by Thomas Seccombe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), p. 456.

15   See James Cobbett, *Journal of a Tour in Italy, and Also in Parts of France and Switzerland* (London: 1830).

16   John Morgan Cobbett, *Letters from France, Containing Observations Made . . . During a Journey . . . Commencing in April, and Ending in December, 1824* (London: 1825), p. 49 (30 April, 1824).

17   Ibid., p. 257 (22 November, 1824).

houses in the villages were old. He found that even respectable citizens lived in 'very small, old habitations, of which the apartments resemble the cabins of vessels. A new house is a phenomenon.'[18]

The Romantic Response

It comes as a stunning coup when in the space of a few decades there was an abrupt turn-around in the popular conception of the village, at first in England, and then across Europe. Attitudes that had endured for centuries were overturned. From an object of derision, or ignored, the village became an ideal place and way of life. In England, Oliver Goldsmith and William Blake exemplify the change.

In his poem *The Deserted Village* of 1770, Goldsmith praises the village prior to enclosure as home to honest labourers, who live a life of health and plenty, balanced between work, culture, and sport. Goldsmith blames enclosure, the privatisation of previously common lands and the switch from arable to animal husbandry, for the loss of the peasant's livelihood. The once joyous village falls silent, as the young people are driven away to find what employment they may, the men to exile in foreign lands, and the women to lose their virtue in the city.[19] William Blake, in his turn, penned the most oft-quoted words about the English countryside, when he compared the 'green and pleasant land' of rural life to the 'dark satanic mills' of industrialisation.[20]

Of course, these two men were incorrigible city dwellers. Goldsmith chose to live in London, from when he was 25 until his death at 43. The village life he recommends to others was unsuited to his own tastes as a man of letters, a gambler, a perennial debtor, and, his biographer states, a drinker who 'could not resist the siren song of temptation.'[21] Blake spent a few years in the village of Felpham, in Sussex, which turned out rather badly when he fell out with his patron and with the law. His biographer notes the Blake 'was born and bred in London, lived there for all but three years of his life, and died there. Nor can I discover that he ever went further out of London, except on that one excursion to Felpham, than he could walk in a day. And he was not a walker.'[22]

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18   Louis Simond, *An American in Regency England* (London: Pergamon, 1968). [See for 24 December 1810].
19   Oliver Goldsmith, *The Deserted Village* (W. Griffin, 1770). ll 325-336; 341-344. See also the painting by Thomas Stothard, 'Leaving Home: From Goldsmith's Deserted Village', 1811.
20   William Blake, *Milton: A Poem in 2 Books* (Printed by W. Blake, c. 1811), preface.
21   Washington Irving, *Oliver Goldsmith: A Biography* (London: John Murray, 1849), p. 293.
22   E.A. Thomas, *Literary Pilgrim in England* (Methuen, 1917), p. 11.

This new vogue for the village, and its re-imagining as a place of positive values, was essentially a conservative one. Progressives argued that the village was dirty and unsanitary, that villagers were tied to plots of land too small to be economical, that food production and the national good would be improved by a switch to larger-scale agriculture, and that the city offered better scope for education and moral oversight.[23]

The lower classes did leave their villages, in their thousands. Agriculture increased in scale and productivity. Because villages were emptied and no longer required to house the local labourers, the middle classes were able to move in, pave the streets, improve sanitation, bring running water, and later, gas and electricity, and improve transport links, enabling the provision of goods and services. The new village was enmeshed in the structures of the modern economy, used as a dormitory suburb for white-collar workers, and, in its new cleaned-up guise, became an attractive destination for tourists.

Externally, the village was cleaned and landscaped to look as traditional as possible, as it never had in the past. Internally, houses were gutted and rebuilt, either in the terribly expensive faux style of arts and crafts, or with the latest fashions from the city. The result is a physical parody, the modernist village, which has kept the facade and altered the internal architecture and functions. In the West, our contemporary vision of the village is based on this modernist replica and its interpretation at the hands of artists and poets. Arlington Row in the Cotswolds, one of the most photographed scenes in England, is not a medieval village. It was built in the 1300s as a woolstore, and converted to housing some centuries later.

The new inhabitants and the new visitors to the village had the time and means to sing its praises. This is the golden age of the village, the period of its depiction in novel and painting and, later, in radio, film, and television.

One of the many famous inhabitants of the modernist reconstruction of the village is Rupert Bear.[24] Rupert, depicted in the *Daily Express* since 1920, lives in a detached bungalow with a thatched roof on the edge of the village of Nutwood, somewhere in the south of England. Rupert's father wears a suit and reads the newspaper. His mother is a homemaker. Nutwood is surrounded by open fields and woods, where Rupert loves to play with his pals.

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[23]   See A. Young, *Observations on the Present State of Waste Lands of Great Britain* (1773); and J. Laurence, *A New System of Agriculture* (1726); and compare J. Cowper, *Essay Proving that Inclosing Commons and Common-Field-Lands is Contrary to the Interest of the Nation* (1732).

[24]   See Alfred Bestall, *Rupert: The Daily Express Annual* (London: Oldbourne Book Co., 1961).

Rupert has many crazy adventures, but is always safe. Nutwood is quiet and green, and well served by local roads as well as a train station in the nearby town. Nutwood has no apparent industry, or working class, or violent crime. The inhabitants of Nutwood are very accepting of different races and animal species in their midst. It must indeed be a wonderful place to live.

The Village Transported

European settlement of Australia coincided with the high point of enclosure in Britain. During the reign of George III there were 3,554 private enclosure acts passed, the numbers peaking in 1811.[25] Typically these acts caused land to be aggregated amongst fewer owners. They recognised the rights of landowners in respect of land held of the Crown, but did not recognise the underlying series of rights, held by the 'occupiers of common right cottages' in respect of the lord.[26] These latter rights have been described by Peter Butt as 'manorial,' and were the glue that held the traditional village together.[27]

There was never any doubt as to which model Australia would follow. Land settlement was, from the start, in the form of the new pastoralism. Subject to the doctrine that all land was held of the Crown, grants were made in NSW and Van Diemen's Land entailing full rights of ownership. Strictly speaking, there was little enclosure in the sense of fence-building. The ready availability of land meant that stock was allowed to roam free.[28] The labour needs of the pastoralists were provided at first by convicts, and later by indigenous stockmen, and by itinerant shearers and harvesters. Today, agriculture in Australia continues to be labour-poor, and the labour that is required for harvesting and fruit-picking is seasonal. As a result, there has been little cause for a village infrastructure, and the village, as a discrete form of settlement, is rare. Rural settlements are called towns, and when they are small, they are called small towns. Even when they are completely deserted they are known as 'ghost towns', and not as 'villages'.

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25 F.M.L. Thompson, Thompson, F.M.L., *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 213-214.

26 J. Chambers and G. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1800* (London: Batsford, 1966), p. 97.

27 Peter Butt, *Land Law*, 2nd edn (North Ryde, NSW: LDC Information Services, 1996), pp. 56-57.

28 Max Staples, 'Comparative Landscape, European Settlement, and the Myth of Little England in Tasmania', *Tasmanian Historical Research Association: Papers and Proceedings*, 49.3 (2002), 192-202 (pp. 196-198).

The idea of the village comes to Australia much later, from people's travels to Italy and France, from the English modernist dormitory village, and from the model of New York. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the word was applied with conscious affectation to the area around Washington Square, which was repackaged as Greenwich Village.[29] Other cities eventually discovered their own village roots, not just as part of their history, but as a continuing part of their civic identity. Both London and Sydney are now claimed by their civic authorities to be 'cities of villages.'[30] From there, the word has proliferated.

The *Sydney Morning Herald* quotes a resident of Woollahra, described as 'a recently divorced mother-of-three,' who says that living in Woollahra is 'like being in Manhattan; it's like a real village.' According to estate agents, Woollahra has 'a lovely village-like, boutique environment,' with 'upmarket designer stores,' and the maturing population likes to 'walk to the village and have a coffee.' Mosman, by contrast, according to its inhabitants has 'a real village atmosphere' and is 'so rich culturally,' because it has 'restaurants of every culture.'[31]

It is a curious feature of this usage of the village that people rarely live there. Instead, it is a place they go, and where they conduct consumer transactions such as buying coffee. Membership of the urban village is ad hoc, and contractual. The hypothetical consumer of the village is an individual, 'I walk my dogs to the village,' occasionally a couple, but rarely a family or a group. In fact 'the village' is promoted as the source of a personal relationship with the retailer, and a sense of belonging, to make up for the fact that the subject is otherwise socially isolated. At the same time, there is a class element in the construction of the 'urban village'. The word is widespread, but it remains a marker of a claim for exclusiveness. The village is on the street and distinguishable from the enclosed shopping-mall, where a lesser class of people buy fast-food that is packaged with soft-drink, rather than with coffee.

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[29]   L Harris, *Around Washington Square: An Illustrated History of Greenwich Village* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. ix.

[30]   See City of Sydney, 'The Sydney City of Villages Art Exhibition and Prize', 6 July 2009,
       <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/Community/GrantsAndAwards/SydneyCityof Villages.asp> [accessed 22 September 2010].

[31]   S. Wellings, 'War of the Worlds,' *Sydney Morning Herald: Domain,* 31 January 2009, p. 8.

Settlers' Village, Wagga Wagga, NSW. 'The Village was established in October 1998, offering the ideal Lifestyle with luxury and security for over 55's.' (http://www.settlersvillage.com.au/) Photo Max Staples

'The Village' as Rhetoric

When property developers talk to local government, and when they sell their wares, their case is pitched in the form of a narrative about the positive community benefits of the proposed land use. When local government acquiesces, it does so with the explanation that its decision meets 'community needs'. The word 'village' is bandied about to suggest the presence of the very qualities that urban development might seem to lack: beauty, human scale, a relaxed pace of life, and community support. The planning will include some physical feature, like a side-walk café, that vaguely relates to our nostalgic conception of the traditional village.

Members of the traditional village were born, or married, into it. They had certain rights of usage of the land. In England, villagers were reliant on their own local parish for poor relief. Their membership of the village was life-long and could not be renounced. People felt intense connections with their native village, even if they travelled away. If you valued social connectedness, the village gave it.

The down-side of the traditional village equates to Alejandro Portes' critique of social capital, when he notes that community networks are not an unmixed blessing, and have the negative consequences of 'exclusion of outsiders, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedoms, and downward levelling norms.'[32] The traditional village was a small community of people, who spent most of their time in each other's company. Hence they shared the same experiences, at the same time. The village economy was single-stream, with one of any service, or none at all.

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[32]   A Portes, 'Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998), 1-24 (p. 15).

There was no competition. The village was unitary in its attitudes, and ill-equipped to deal with difference. Village life may have been deeply comforting, or it may have been insufferable.

Lewis Mumford is one of the few writers who has made a sociological appraisal of both the city and the traditional village. His conclusion on the village is negative. He argues that it is by definition indrawn, and hostile to the outsider.[33] Mumford's view is supported by the architecture. The function of each space is carefully delineated. There are no places set aside for the convenience of the visitor. The traditional common, erroneously interpreted by subsequent generations as public, was available, for specified purposes, to the villagers, not to the world at large. The city, in contrast, is open, and attracts non-residents. It wants them, and has facilities to draw them in. The noted impersonality of the Western city is also an index of the degree of freedom it offers to its occupants.

The current rhetoric of 'the village' ignores the disadvantages of the traditional form, and exaggerates the benefits. But it does not try to critique modern society and the city. Instead, it panders to them as well, by claiming that they can and do consist of villages. This is 'happy talk' which serves the commercial interests of speculators, and it deserves to be contested.

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[33]   L. Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, its Transformations, and its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), p. 18. See also L. Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, 1938).

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