From Utopia to Heterotopia: Buffalo, New York

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INTRODUCTION

The western world has, since the Renaissance, set out to consciously study the city both as an object and as a disease; something that can be articulated, something seeking a cure. We have sought to describe it, describe its parts, its internal relationships, its problems, and to prescribe order as a palliative. By striving to obtain control, the possibility of repairing deficiencies remains. With control comes the capacity to simplify, to partition into aspects, to conceptualize, to distill and to diagram. Lurking underneath the frenzy of study and planning is that insistent human trait, to idealize. An ideal, by definition, is elusive to us all, yet is always beckoning. To encroach upon the ideal and to soothe the pain of the recognition that cities aren't working the way would like, we turn to both Arcadian and Utopian visions of the city. These ideal visions are lived, not in the present but in a time outside of daily time.

ARCADIA AND UTOPIA

We look back to arcadian harmonies; to the classical canon; to Paris, the ideal, the perfect Romantic city. Arcadia was a real place in ancient Greece. It was the setting for Virgil's pastoral poetry and has come to symbolize the Golden Age, a period of time infinitely remote, an epoch when things happened differently and existence was amiable and carefree. Arcadia is a place to which imagination turns for solace, consolation and refreshment. And it embodies the idea that we have lost something that at some time in the future we might hope to regain. Witness Francesco Colonna's 15th-century dreamt prose-poem[1] which captures the subjective power of classical antiquity through the dreaming eyes of Poliphilus as he roams the world in search of a lost love, all along conjuring soothing classical interludes in an otherwise feral landscape. The Middle Ages had been a discouraging and desolating time, fueling the early Renaissance with the desire to return to the golden ages of Rome and Athens to find pleasure and personal relief from the spirit-strangling present. Thomas Cole's painting *The Architect's Dream* captures this longing. The hold that the classical canon has had on the hope of redemption even today continues to present itself in architecture, often in distorted form. From the historical quotation used to embellish the speculative commercial box to the earnest classicism of Quinlan Terry, we see a cultural commemoration of the classical as representing something better; it has maintained its status as a vision of an ideal. Colonna was a consummate romantic. Had he been born 400 years later his dreams no doubt would have included Paris. "Paris" is emulated everywhere as a model of the civilized city. Its staid and dignified order seem to resist dirt of any kind. One does not think of slums when imaging Paris.

The Modern Movement found difficulty in addressing the decidedly non-romantic problems of industrial era cities with this vision

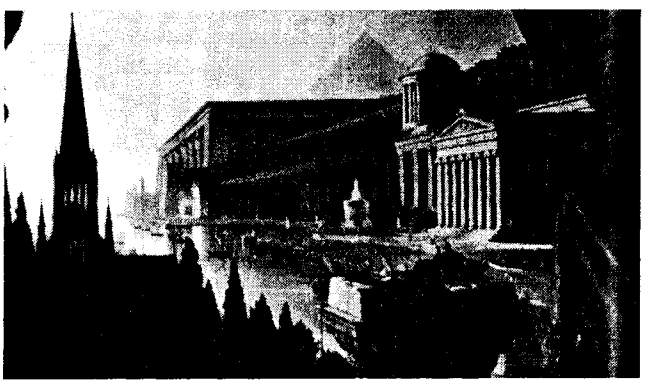

Fig. 1. Thomas Cole, *The Architect's Dream*, 1840.

and so it shifted the direction of its gaze and looked forward, to Utopia, the other ideal, the Future. The scriptural ideal of Paradise exists at both ends of time. It embodies both arcadian and utopian visions. The Limbourg brothers' early 15th-century engraving gives substance to both the unenclosed Garden of Eden at one end of time to Jerusalem, the walled City of Revelation, the eternal resting place, at the other. The city of heaven is a utopian place of ideal perfection representing triumph, power and security.[2] A secular version of this ideal is captured by Robert Ellicott's words:

> Utopia is...man's effort to work out imaginatively what happens – or might happen – when the primal longings embodied in the myth [of the Golden Age] confront the principle of reality. In this effort man no longer merely dreams of a divine state in some remote time; he assumes the role of creator.[3]

The utopian city visions and schemes offered by the minds of the Heroic period of the Modern Movement have left deep traces in this post-modern era; their paragons of positivism filled us with hopeful energy. In Tony Garnier's 1901 project, *Citè Industrielle*, industry was singled out as a prime generator of city form; he presented a progressive model of the nature of the modern world with technology at its center.[4] While we may have dropped the modernist canon to regularize, repeat and separate, we haven't yet abandoned the urge to idealize. That we continue to think it possible to make "new cities," or just better cities, suggests we are still linked to what many consider to be a fading myth of progress.

What doesn't, and can't fade is the mythology of the utopian ideal that steadfastly resides in the corner of our collective existence; it is a mythology that enables the instinct to survive. That utopias are fundamentally unreal, that they exist only in our imaginations, doesn't dissuade us from trying to make inroads on the promise of redemption they offer.

Fig. 2. Pol, Jan, and Herman Limbourg, *Les Tres Riches Heures du Duc de Berry*, early 15th century.

HETEROTOPIA

However, the city is anything but singular. It is a record of human time and is evermore diverse. Even as the utopic Pessac begot Pessac II, Brasilia will develop confusion, slums, and yes, *terrain vague*. The city mutates; it changes over time and accumulates its own history; it is heterotopic. If utopias are sites with no real place, heterotopias are many sites, all in real places. The heterotopic condition is a coincidence of multiple sites, places and coherencies; it is capable of juxtaposing in a single real space several sites which are, in themselves, incompatible. And its relationship to time extends from the infinitely accumulating to the fleeting or temporal. To quote Michel Foucault:

> The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs; the space that claws and knaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.[5]

This condition is shared by all cultures and every specific manifestation of it is like a fingerprint: absolutely unique and impossible to alter in the moment. In the built environment, it is present at many scales, from that of the building, to the city, to the universe. The third in this sweep needs no example; we need only look to the multiple theoretical presentations of the nature of the world: Plato's metaphor of the universe as matter informed by geometry, Ptolemy's geocentric and Copernicus's heliocentric visions of cosmic structure, the Bible, Einstein, Hawking and Gaia, to suggest a few.

At the scale of the city, the topic of this paper, Rome provides a fitting example of a heterotopia. Imperial Rome contained a number of set pieces with very little grid. The enclosed cortile, or piazza and linkages to various piazzi formed the primary organization of its texture. A millennium passed, during which medieval patterns filled in, and sometimes built over these episodes of Roman order. The medieval city grew in response to an entirely different social order, one that had no use for external ordering systems. After the popes returned to Rome from their exile in Avignon in the 15th century, Sixtus V set out to reinforce the Vatican as the papal residence and renovate St. Peter's basilica on the west side of the Tiber River as the symbol of the city and the revived authority of the church. The plan to reorient the medieval city included connecting the seven pilgrimage churches of Rome with avenues and additional piazzi, slightly deferring to, but nonetheless superseding the existing medieval fabric. Giovanni Bordino's late 16th-century engraving of the ordered connection of these new set pieces highlights the power of this new scheme for the city which inserts nodal points as ideal fragments, with definitive connections to underscore their importance. The Nolli map of 1748 graphically reveals this layering of different ordering sensibilities which renders this city heterotopic.

Additionally, heterotopia can be manifest in cultural behavior as well as in the formal hardscape of the city. In Barcelona, this condition is colored by the presence of "duende," a particularly Iberian phenomenon. The duende is part of Andalusian folklore; a mischief-maker, a spirit which "draws near places where forms fuse together into a yearning superior to their visible expression." Thus reports Federico Garcia Lorca in "Play and Theory of the Duende."[6] This Spanish spirit reveals its signature in many ways, among them, the passionate exuberance of Modernisme. From Gaudi's grotesque symbology and daring to Domenech i Montaner's triumphant Palau de la Musica, to the tenacious preservation of a symbol of Catalonia, the Liceu, buildings abound that sing of the presence of Modernisme's duende.

CASE STUDY: BUFFALO, NEW YORK

The European city has a long history. Fragments of Roman invention, the remainder of cities mined and forgotten during the early Middle Ages, served as a palimpsest on which Romanesque inter-

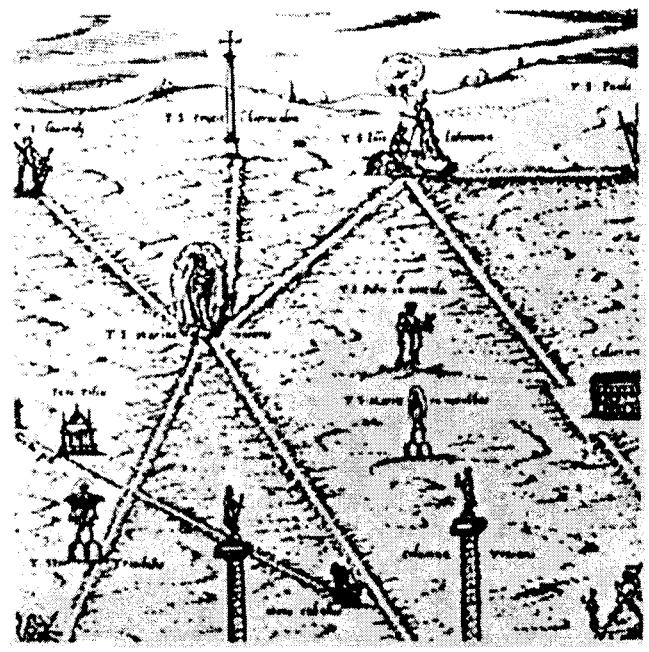

Fig. 3. Giovanni Bordino engraving of the set pieces of Rome, 1585.

ventions were drawn, helter-skelter. The Renaissance ushered in a rediscovery of classical structural determinism only to be re-prioritized by the Baroque city, and so forth. The European city has a checkered past, and demonstrates it. It is by nature heterotopic with many layers and many coherencies indexed in its fabric.

In contrast, the cities of the New World, the Western Hemisphere, are quite young: an eighth the age of most European cities, and a tenth of many. Setting aside the one-thousand-year-old urban civilizations of the Incas, Toltecs and Mayas, such as Teotihuacan, urban development in North America is barely 250 years old. There simply hasn't been the time required for the development of a checkered past. Related to this discrepancy of age between Europe and the Americas is the ideological relationship they maintain. The initial European impression of the New World was one of boundless immensity, seeming emptiness, and as a place without a history; after all, "Columbus Discovered America" only 500 years ago. The manifest destiny of America was to be subdued, settled and made into something – something useful – by the arriving Europeans. A conception of history as a narrative of human progress sees the frontier opportunity presented by America as providing an ideal place to once again pursue utopia. Edward Hicks painted no less than twenty-five versions of *The Peaceable Kingdom* in the early 19th century, all demonstrating the early settler's Edenic aspirations.

The technological notion of progress was a perfect fit for a rapidly expanding country with a rapidly expanding capitalist economy. In addition, this not-quite-yet-civilized land had earned the image of a populace filled with fearless, adventurous risk-takers; a dusty version of the Noble Savage, armed with the industriousness assumed by Protestantism. Eli Whitney's cotton gin; Elias Howe's sewing machine; Oliver Evans' high pressure steam engine (which was to propel Robert Fulton's steamboat, the *Claremont* up the Hudson River in 1807); and Thomas Edison's panoply of inventions such as the phonograph, the transmitter and the light bulb with its electric network are demonstrations of industrial inventiveness associated with the continent far-removed from Europe. In 1830, the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Company sent a steam-powered locomotive down 32 miles of track connecting Philadelphia and New York. It was the Iron Horse soon rumbling across the landscape of the east coast that acted as the crier of the incoming revolution that was to change the way business was conducted and the way society functioned. Yankee ingenuity became all but synonymous with progress.[7]

As well, for many Europeans America represented escape, escape from less than ideal conditions at home. From the turn of the 17th century America has attracted utopian communities. Many immigrants maintained optimistic faith in the perfectibility of humans and came to the New World to develop reform programs designed to emancipate human spirit and improve social conditions. These idealistic communities intended to revolutionize economic and cultural organization and ranged from New England transcendentalists modeling themselves as one of Fourier's phalanxes to religious communities such as the Shakers and the Oneida community of New York.

While the coastal cities of the North American continent derived from European practices and models, most of its major interior cities developed much later and under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and Modern Movement. It is not coincidental that Corbusier, Mendelsohn and Gropius came to the New World to investigate the industry, and the industriousness, underlying the Industrial Revolution. They came to see grain elevators and huge lake boats and steel mills and auto factories. They came to see the future that was to save us all. In his frustration with a European society that simply refused to change its conception of living environments, a society that continued to insist on the decorative arts and notions of style, Corbusier cried out: "your eyes do not see." The working parts of then-contemporary culture: the factories, offices, automobiles, airplanes, steamships, trains, were eager to take advantage of the new spirit of the age and embrace technology, but general cultural consciousness remained trapped in its comfortable images.[8] The United States' image of progression continued, this time as the purveyor of utopian objectives of technology.

For many reasons the cities of the American midwest came to manifest the idealism and hopes of the heroic period of the modern movement. There was the developmental room to implement large scale planning, a political climate and economy which encouraged the construction of "the new" at often enormous scales and, above all, these cities were seen as emulating the idea and ideal of progress which was to fuel the modern movement. Houston, with its notorious cluster of high rises marking an urban core, is at one end of the era of modernism; figuratively, it is a 21st-century city. Buffalo, New York is at the other end of the movement, that point in time when the Industrial Revolution began to markedly affect the formal nature of cities.

Buffalo is a typical example of a North American industrial city, those 19th-century cities of the mid-west that were in pivotal geographic locations in a rapidly expanding country, just as the Industrial Revolution was developing a full head of steam. The city sits at the eastern end of Lake Erie, the fourth of the five great lakes of the North American midwest. This mighty chain of lakes, connected to the Atlantic Ocean by the St. Lawrence Seaway, has long served as a navigational corridor which spans some 1500 miles from the agricultural center of the continent to its Atlantic seaboard.

For millennia Buffalo's location had been inhabited by various American Indian Tribes. Who really knows how far back these cultures flourished? They lived on the earth, not in it, and left few traces. By the turn of the 18th century a group of these tribes coalesced to form the Iroquois Nations, among them the Seneca, a tribe then known as "the keeper of the western door." Along with the western expansion of the still young US in the early 19th century,

Fig. 4. Edward Hicks, *The Peaceable Kingdom*, c. 1835.

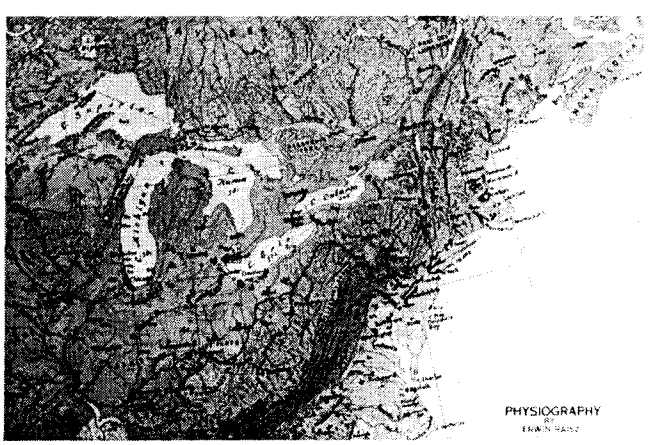

Fig. 5. The Great Lakes basin.

many of these people were displaced by the US cavalry, or bought out in the name of manifest destiny. By the mid-19th century, while the country was still a tangle of dirt roads, the expanding population spread westward, enticed by the promise of fertile and arable land: yours for the taking if you would agree to homestead the land; to settle it and make it useful. Buffalo's location at the pivotal juncture between east and west quickly rendered it a bustling lakeport, a transshipment center for the raw materials coming from the west and going to the growing markets of the urbanized and populous east.

In 1825 the building of the Erie Canal across northern New York state made possible an all-water route across the country. The canal served to bypass one of the souvenirs of the receding Ice Age 12,000 years ago, an escarpment that produces a 175' drop in the landscape between Lake Erie and the last of the five lakes, Ontario. This extraordinary shift in the land is most noticeable at Niagara Falls. Buffalo's location at the head of this canal made it the logical center for grain, coal and other raw material shipment to the east. However, even the smallest lake boats were far too large for the canal while canal boats were too small for lake traffic. Thus, the loads of raw materials had to be transferred to canal boats for passage eastward. In 1842 Joseph Dart invented and constructed the first grain elevator and storage warehouse in Buffalo. Powered by a steam engine and mounted on tracks running the length of the warehouse, the elevator acted as a conveyor belt to hoist huge quantities of grain very quickly into enormous storage vaults. By 1855 Buffalo sported ten such elevator/warehouses and had become the world's largest grain port, surpassing Odessa, London and Rotterdam. By 1860 a local Mechanics Association had formed, calling for Buffalo to "seek safety in manufacture." Its goal, "to bring machinery to the nearest state of possible perfection," is a prescient statement of the ideal of the Industrial Revolution. Industry boomed, and the prime material of the revolution, steel, was in ever greater demand. It soon became obvious that the coal from the midwest, one of the raw materials of steel, need not be transferred from lake boats to fabrication plants inland. Steel mills, followed by the manufacturing of automobiles, railroad cars and copper bloomed, making Buffalo the second-largest (after Chicago) railroad terminus in the US. Concurrent with these developments was the sudden availability of inexpensive electric power. In 1896 the first hydro-electric current was transmitted from Niagara Falls, and its initial beneficiaries were the industries of Buffalo. At the time, Niagara Falls was seen as an exhaustible mine of wealth from which "electricity will flow like warm blood." The Pan-American Exposition, held in Buffalo in 1901, had as its centerpiece the "Electric Tower." Outlined with hundreds of thousands of lights, it stood as a "pillar of jeweled lace... a monument to the genius of man."[9] This event was seen as a heroic episode in the pursuit of progress.

As with its industrial sister-cities, Buffalo's focus on industrial

Fig. 6. View of Buffalo River, 1890.

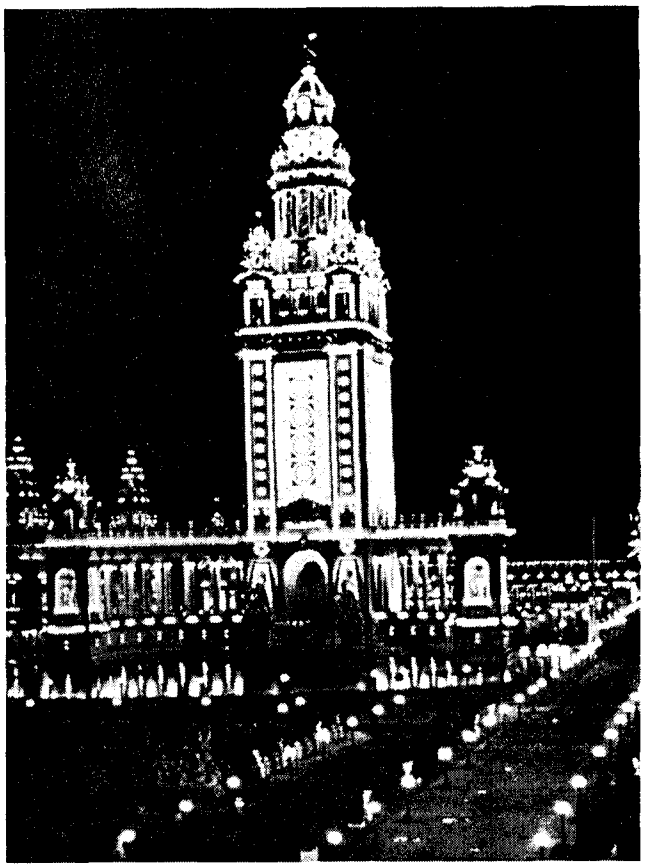

Fig. 7. The Electric Tower at the Pan American Exposition held in Buffalo, 1902.

efficiency led to the development of extensive railway, water and road transportation networks. Industrial complexes which acted like and felt like cities in themselves grew around the hubs of the system and smaller supporting industries sprang up and formed districts of their own. The city's early form was all but a network diagram of an ideal industrial city.

It is no wonder that Buffalo manifests the markings of utopian visions. Its leap was heroic, putting its eggs into one industrial basket. The United States had the opportunity to realize an ideal; not a pastoral or arcadian ideal, but the one that then existed at the other end of time, the dream of an industrial utopia. Buffalo's focused manifestation of the industrial revolution make it one of the models of the transcendental utopian dream, complete with promises of redemption and security. At its root, the dream was one in which a liberating force provided what it promised; an avenue to the future and a means to prosperity through the progressive power of technology.[10] Technology had become a force for creating wonder and abundance. In time, with the appraisal of the influence that an entrenched, technological-scientific mentality had on culture, there emerged a distrust of technology as the route towards utopia. Again, from Elliott:[11] "If the word [utopia] is to be redeemed, it will have to be by someone who has followed utopia into the abyss which yawns behind the Grand Inquisitor's vision." He goes on to suggest that this vision "is the product of 'the Euclidean mind' which is obsessed by the idea of regulating all life by reason and bringing happiness to man whatever the cost." In pondering Ellicott's 1980's thoughts, one can't help but be reminded of Thoreau's much earlier admonishment to be wary of a fatal dependence on machines. He urges us to be mindful of constructing our own fate by developing and glorifying a "system that makes men the tools of their tools."[12] Well, the future has arrived.

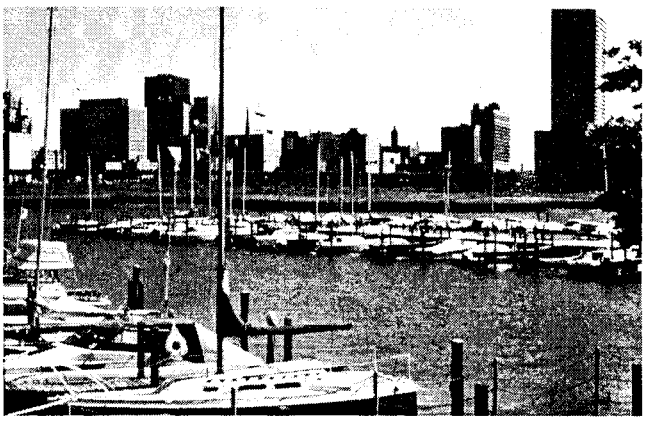

Fig. 8. Buffalo today.

THE HETEROTOPIC FINGERPRINT

This story requires no elaborate conclusion. We all know its next chapter. As the myopic Buffalo grew older, its focus had no choice but to change direction. The economic base of the industrial cities in America's midwest had begun to erode. A series of global economic shifts in the 1940's reprioritized and repositioned both producers and markets, and in the mid-west, fewer materials and products were transported in and out of the city. Factories closed; shops closed; people lost jobs and, weary of waiting for something to do, either left town or settled into the grim life of the underemployed ghetto. While the people, the displaced workers from the steel, milling and transport industries have developed new lives and livelihoods, there remain "districts of distress" in most all of the Industrial Age cities of the U.S. They are but one aspect of the post-industrial landscape, a tapestry that Buffalo now exhibits. Suburbs and park systems emerged, a downtown business core began to develop, transportation infrastructures migrated from water and rail to highway and subway, new industries that made use of the skilled labor market converged into small clusters, and service centers came to dominate Buffalo's economy. Physically and spiritually, the city has recomposed itself. With the purchase of time there has grown the diverse coincidence of multiple sites, places, coherencies and stories. Buffalo may have been built or developed with idealized visions, but its present fingerprint is heterotopic. This is the nature of the city today.

NOTES

[1] John Summerson, *Heavenly Mansions* (New York: Norton, 1963), p. 42-45.

[2] William Alexander McClung, *The Architecture of Paradise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). McClung has written an exhaustive and erudite treatise which examines the development of Biblical and classical models of the ideal state.

[3] Robert Ellicott, *The Shape of Utopia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); p.100.

[4] The concept of a specifically modern city was promulgated by Garnier in his exhibition of the *Citè Industrielle*, a project he developed during his years in Rome as the 1899 recipient of the Grand Prix de Rome. At the heart of this project was an idea of the ideal manufacturing city, a utilitarian industrial city that neatly separated manufacturing from the residential and recreational areas that were to support it.

[5] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 16/1 (Spring 1986): 23. Remembering that it was Foucault, in his introduction to *The Order of Things*, revealed his infatuation with Borges, a master of the mythical narrative, by quoting Borge's discovery in a "certain Chinese encyclopedia" that animals could be divided into a dizzying array which included "...belonging to the Emperor, embalmed, tame, sucking pigs, sirens, fabulous, stray dogs, included in the present classification, frenzied, innumerable, drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, et cetera, having just broken the water pitcher, and that from a long way off look like flies."

[6] Frederico Garcia Lorca, "Play and Theory of the Duende," *Deep Song and Other Prose* (New York: New Directions Books, 1980).

[7] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). In this powerful book on the effect of technology on arcadian idealism, Marx captures the optimism associated with advancing industry by quoting from an 1853 essay, "Statistics and Speculations Concerning the Pacific Railroad":
"By a horse America shall live, saith the Oracle to the New World... And the Iron Horse, the earth-shaker, the firebreather, which tramples down the hills, which outruns the laggard winds, which leaps over the rivers, which grinds the rocks to powder and breaks down the gates of the mountains, he too shall build an empire and an epic."

[8] see Le Corbusier, *Vers une Architecture*, chapter on "Eyes that do not See."

[9] From Walter Page's description of the scene. He was then the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and an enthusiastic booster of the Exposition. Source: Mark Goldman, *High Hopes: the Rise and Decline of Buffalo, New York* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), p.7.

[10] I would like to thank Oscar Newman for an enlightening conversation on this topic while wandering through Buffalo's grain elevator district on a winter's day in 1996.

[11] Ellicott, p.100.

[12] Marx, p.354-355. Marx discusses, quotes and paraphrases Thoreau extensively in this book.

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