

Confederates on the Fairway: A Civil War Themed Subdivision in Rural Ohio

Andrew Shanken

ABSTRACT Union Station, a recent Civil-War-themed subdivision in rural Ohio, challenges landscape conventions by referencing local identities and history as creative compensation for the devastation of an increasingly exurban town. In seeing themed development as an increasingly widespread practice, this paper examines its social costs, the relative critical neglect of it, and the public appetite for it. It extends the work of Gwendolyn Wright on suburbia and Michael Sorkin's critique of themed environments, arguing for a more distant patrimony for theming, showing how far-reaching it can be, especially in its more subtle manifestations, and finally rooting it in the structural conditions of post-industrial capitalism and globalization.

KEYWORDS Themed environments, subdivisions, Civil War, memorials

Two fresh graves rise unexpectedly out of a recent subdivision in LaGrange, Ohio, an exurban town of some 2,000 people about 35 miles west of Cleveland (Figure 1). They challenge the rote answer to the bad joke, "Who is buried in Grant's Tomb?" Here Grant faces off against Robert E. Lee, with bas-relief busts of the two generals on granite gravestones, ornamenting a double cul-de-sac in a golf-course development called "Union Station: An 1800s Architectural Community." After some time, one realizes that these are not funerary monuments, but historical ones. It is a strange place to wage a contest over Civil War memory.

The Civil War ends here, at least metaphorically, because the double cul-de-sac is called Appomattox Court, named after the place where Lee surrendered to Grant, and it culminates a series of house-lined streets called General Lee Street, Ulysses S. Grant Boulevard, Manassas Boulevard, and the longest street, named after one of the longest battles, Antietam Avenue. A golf course called the Blue and the Gray girdles the houses. A would-be Victorian train station acts as a kind of headhouse for the development; it was designed to hold a restaurant (Figure 2). Period houses line the streets, 167 of them rotating through shingled Victorians, Colonials based on prototypes from Williamsburg and Georgia, as well as Greek Revival, Cape Cod, Federal Style, and Western Reserve, the only local reference. The theme continues on the interiors, where wood moldings, period decoration, and what the promotional literature

calls "authentic" floor plans, also nod to the nineteenth century (Figure 3). They sell for \$250,000–\$400,000, well above the median house value in LaGrange of \$136,000, another dissonant note in this landscape of failing farms and rustbelt remains.

In short, Union Station radically upends longstanding landscape conventions in this region, understanding the word region liberally as both the rural fringes of Cleveland and more generically in terms of similar sites outside of most major metropolitan areas. Ironically, the development does so by referencing local icons and identities, veiling the rupture behind the palliative of false historical sensitivity. Beyond contextualizing this change in powerful geo-political and economic forces, this paper aims to examine the social costs of this sort of development, the relative critical neglect of it, and the public appetite for it. In extending the work of Gwendolyn Wright on suburbia and Michael Sorkin's critique of themed environments, I argue that theming is a long tradition unto itself, one that draws into question Jean Baudrillard's idea of the simulacrum. As the built environment has increasingly become implicated in consumer culture over the course of the twentieth century, what lessons might we learn from these sorts of themed environments, which have become commonplace, the rule rather than the exception in both exurban and urban development?

There is a bigger picture as well. Scholars have tended to see globalization and post-colonialization in terms of a binary of western profit and aggression on the one hand, and colonial suffering and economic dependence on the other hand. However, an internal story remains untold. Close scrutiny of the builder's plans and promotional materials, local history, and a questionnaire of the residents of Union Station reveals that theming, at least in this instance, is a failed but creative compensation for the utter devastation of towns like LaGrange, which sprouted in the seedbeds of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, grew to prosperity supplying large cities like Cleveland, and were abandoned by the global forces of postwar capitalism.

These issues, moreover, may be generalized, since



Figure 1. "Tombstones" to Lee and Grant, Union Station, LaGrange, Ohio. (Photograph by author)



Figure 2. "Headhouse" at the intersection of General Grant St. and Route 301. (Photograph by author)

so much of the American landscape is capitulating to imported themes, largely owing to the common experience of the post-industrial urban transformation, which has unsettled practices of land-use and the community practices and bonds that derive from them. As developers commodify formerly productive farmland into subdivisions, demographic patterns radically shift: communities experience new stresses, conventions, and expectations. In turn, the relationship between place and identity deforms. Thus the contribution here is three-fold: to give theming a more distant patrimony; to demonstrate how far-reaching it can be, especially in its more subtle manifestations; and finally to root it in the structural conditions of post-industrial capitalism and globalization.

UNION STATION

The original builder, Calvin Smith, who believes in reincarnation and that he once lived in the nineteenth



Figure 3. Interior with photograph of Calvin Smith. (Courtesy Calvin Smith Builders)

century, told me that the idea for Union Station came to him in a dream (Figure 3). He awoke and sketched out the entire scheme, which included many more symbolic elements than found room in the built version (Figures 4 and 5) (Smith 2004). For instance, he had wanted a 90-degree turn at Gettysburg Avenue, a major turning point in the war (Figure 5); a knoll at the golf course was to be called Missionary Ridge; monu-

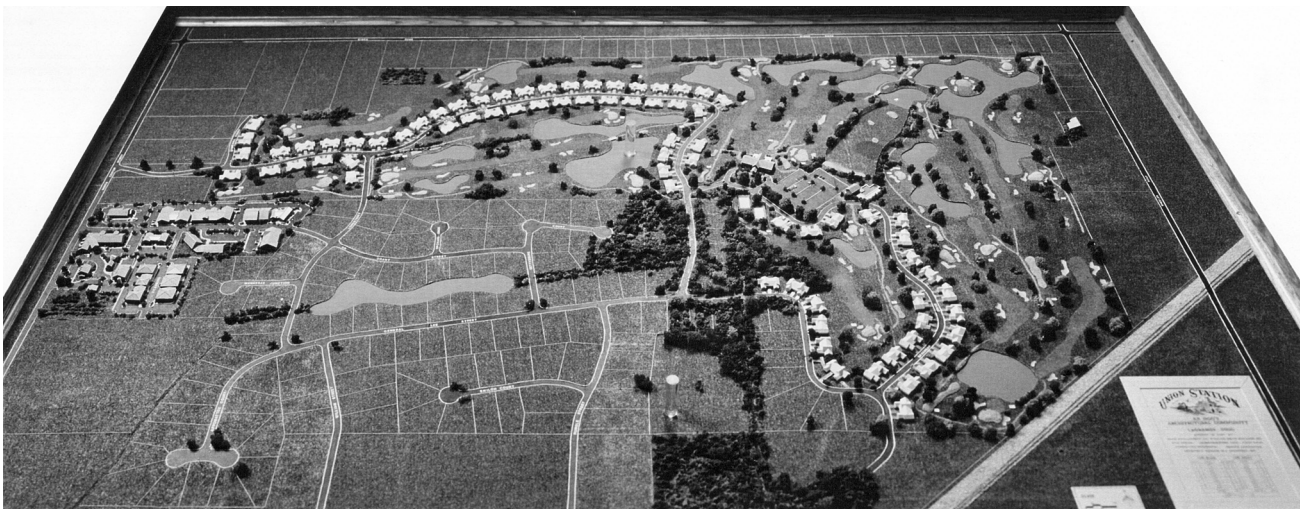


Figure 4. Preliminary Model. (Courtesy Calvin Smith Builders).

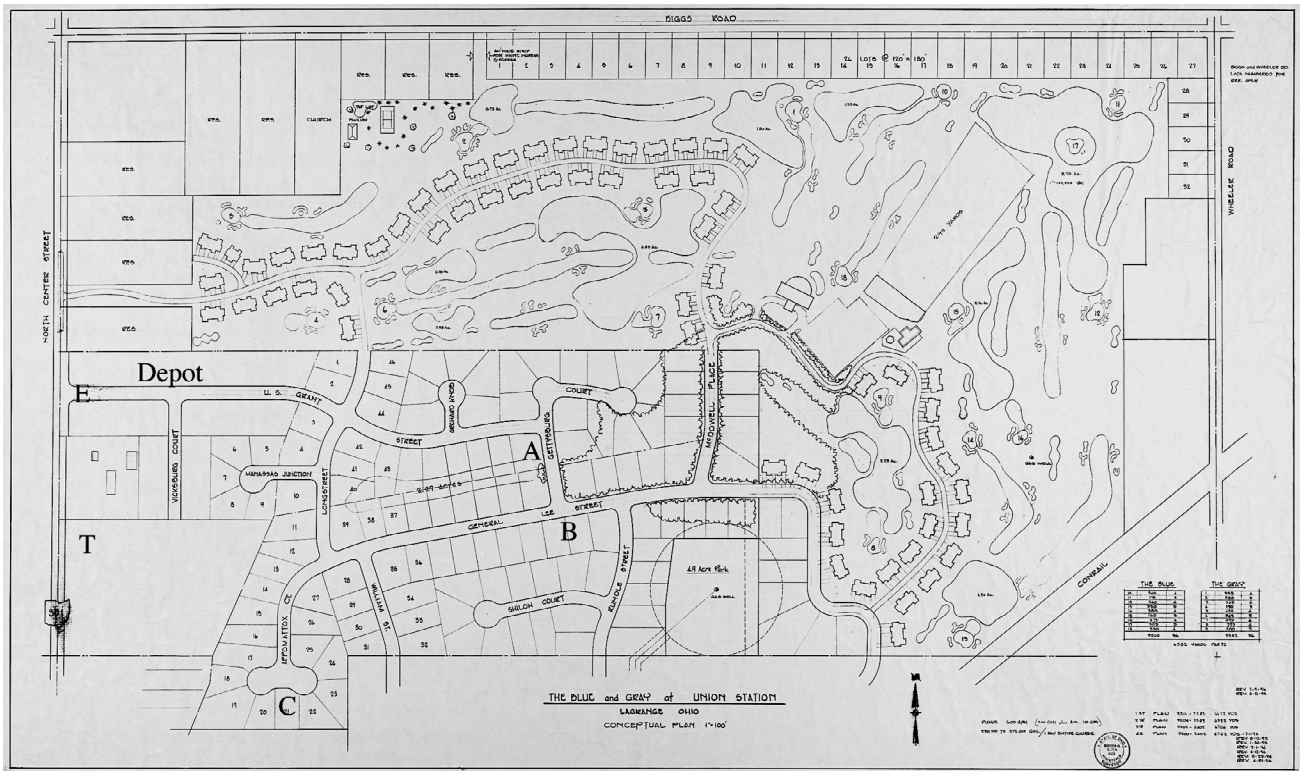


Figure 5. Preliminary Site Plan, The Blue and Gray. (Courtesy Calvin Smith Builders)

ments to other Civil War generals were to mark key points in the subdivision. And the most scenic street was to be, of course, Savannah. Smith, who confessed that he dreams at night of battle alongside Robert E. Lee, placed the Lee monument in front of his own house, which he based loosely on McLean House in Appomattox Court House, Virginia, where Lee surrendered to Grant. The builder thereby made himself the

symbolic arbiter of the contest that he re-enacted in the planters of his public space.

For his model houses, Smith looked south as much as he did north (Figure 6). He traveled to Newnan, Georgia, and Abbeville, South Carolina, two towns that were spared by General Sherman. He excitedly broke into houses in these towns so that he could reproduce them with some authenticity. The same drive for a sense of

CIVIL WAR DAYS FESTIVAL

UNION STATION

La Grange, Ohio
MAY 18th & 19th

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS...

Saturday, May 18, 1996

- Ladies Tea & Fashion Show at 12:30 p.m.
- Battle Re-enactment at 2:30 p.m.
- Log-Sawing Contest at 4:30 p.m.
- Miss Southern Belle Contest at 6:30 p.m.
- Evening Ball with Anonymous String Band at 7:30 p.m.

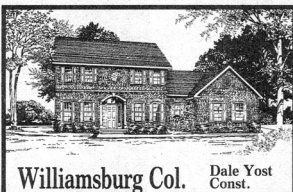
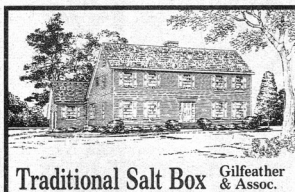
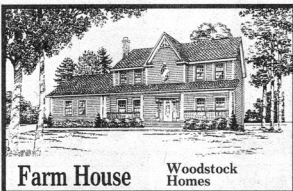
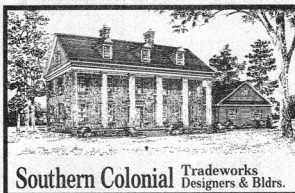
Sunday, May 19, 1996

- Church Service at 10:00 a.m.
- Pie Baking Contest at noon
- Battle Re-enactment at 1:30 p.m.
- Civil War Generals Look-a-Like Contest at 3:30 p.m.
- 1800's Dulcimer Concert at 6:00 p.m.

You are invited to participate in the Civil War festival which offers a great community event with living history, crafters, music, food events, contests and plenty of family fun!

Held in conjunction with Homearama '96, May 18-27. Weekends 12 noon-9 p.m., Weekdays 6-9 p.m. Admission \$5. Kids 12-under, free.

Eight Great Homes...Eight Great Builders!!



To reach Festival and Homearama Site, take I-480 West to Rt. 10, follow Rt. 10 West to Rt. 301, South/LaGrange Exit. Head South on Rt. 301 to Union Station.

authenticity drove his designs of northern prototypes, including his Nantucket house (Figure 7), where he insisted on a porch with no railings because, as he observed, the real ones were built without them. His copies also have stone bases and real cedar, a rarity for local builders in this area. An adjacent shopping center elaborates the Civil War theme, or was intended to do so. But Smith only got far enough to commission a sculpture called the Sentinel (1999), which guards an odd roundabout at the entrance to what turned out to be an ordinary stripmall (Figure 8).¹ Sculptor Michael Kraus carved it out of the local gray Berea Sandstone. Kraus is also a Civil War re-enactor.²

Of course, this is not coincidence. Union Station opened to the public in 1996 with a grand "Homerama," a kind of media blitz-cum-living history, whose main feature Smith called "Civil War Days" (Figure 9). It included 500 men and 200 horses fighting mock battles for several days, demonstrations of company and battalion drills, and a Civil War general look-alike contest. But it also had a domestic side, with log-sawing contests, woodcrafts, women dressed up as colonial belles posing on porches, noseflute playing, an 1800s dulcimer contest, photography of participants in period costume, a ladies tea and fashion show, a Miss Southern Belle Contest, and a Grand Military Ball (Chronicle Telegram 1996). This sort of re-enactment can be understood as part of the landscape, or at very least part of its social construction. The gala launched the community and is recalled mnemonically through the myriad Civil War references that remain, leaving a trace of the performed Civil War on the ersatz built environment. Union Station teeters between using the Civil War theme as a sales strategy and a much more earnest attempt to make a permanent community out of the Civil War re-enactments that have become so popular in recent years (Horwitz 1998). Smith himself, however, is not a re-enactor.

As much as Union Station appears to capitalize on the recent spate of themed environments, the nineteenth-century theme enabled the builder to exercise control over land-use. Smith tried to impose a range

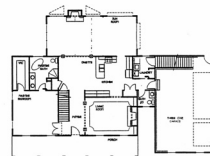
Figure 6. Model Houses, from *The Sun News*, May 16, 1996. (Courtesy Calvin Smith Builders)

of restrictions that never existed in the older neighborhoods in LaGrange. He encouraged pedestrianism and tried to integrate shopping through proximity. Originally he planned a common rear drive with detached garages and carriage houses where people would walk, “eliminating,” as he put it, “the need for hideous looking sidewalks” (Smith 2004). This would also do away with driveways and on-street parking, leaving large areas of green space between houses. The idea recalls Radburn or the Green Towns of the 1930s, but the intention was quite different. These patterns of land use, he believed, would make it more authentic to the period, before the street and garage determined the siting of the house. The Civil War aside, Union Station appears to be at first blush a local builder’s vernacular of New Urbanism.³

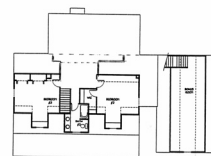
As built, the curtailed subdivision consists of Ulysses S. Grant Street, a long, barren, entrance drive announced by the depot and bereft of the houses once planned for it (Figure 2, and E in Figures 4 and 5). Without sidewalks, this stretch resists the walker. The townhouses and the shopping area to the right as one enters the complex (T in Figures 4 and 5) appear only casually related to the whole. Smith never built the lakes that appear on the model, nor the townhouses to the north of the green. Trees are almost non-existent in this opening run. In the flat glacial till of northern Ohio, the effect is bleak. Sparse houses begin to populate the landscape only as the entrance road intersects Longstreet and gives way to the curvilinear street pattern of the rest of the subdivision. The hodge-podge of house styles turns out to differ little from many traditional suburbs although the houses and landscaping in their homogenous infancy have not been individualized, leaving an eerie sense of continuity maintained more by the close-cropped grass than by anything else. Many of the smaller streets are empty, incomplete, or were never built. Where General Lee Street meets Appomattox Court (B in Figures 4 and 5), a few single houses float in the background, in what is otherwise a transitional space awaiting more houses. A more continuous run of houses begins on Appomattox Court. Here Smith’s vision comes closest to being realized. Driveways spoil some of his intentions, and the

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- New England Cape Cod Architecture
- 2 1/2 Baths
- 3 Bedrooms
- Large Unfinished Bonus Room
- 14 x 32 Great Room - All Glass
- 2 Fireplaces
- Formal Dining Room
- Primitive Oak Flooring
- 9 Foot Ceilings
- 1st Floor Master Bedroom
- Oak Stairs
- 3 1/2 Car Garage
- Garage to Basement Stairs
- Private Stairs to Bonus Room
- Operable Window Seats
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BIA BUILDER
1993, 1994, 1996
OF THE YEAR

Figure 7. “The Nantucket,” promotional materials for Union Station. (Courtesy Calvin Smith Builders)

failure to create the rear drive breaks up the more free-flowing sense of green space. Street and driveway form the matrix. The end of Appomattox Court (C in Figures 4 and 5) is the most surprising element, not only because of the unusual double cul-de-sac, whose sides balance like a scale, but also because of the way Smith has given over substantial space to the planters that fill them and inserted the “memorials” to Grant and Lee on either side of the scale.

THEMES IN THE LANDSCAPE AND IN HISTORY

As a domestic example of what Michael Sorkin calls “variations on a theme park,” the subdivision has few parallels (Sorkin 1992). Unlike Disney’s Celebration or Ten Huis Bosch, the Japanese development near Hiroshima based on a Dutch Village from Holland’s Golden Age, Union Station is not a tourist site (Treib 2002). It neither requires the inhabitants to be what Dolores Hayden (2004) recently called “lifestyle pioneers,” nor does it invite them to be permanent tourists in a temporal refuge, as Dean MacCannell (1989) argued in *The Tourist*. This is because it is not a simulacrum, in



Figure 8. "The Sentinel." (Photograph by author)



Figure 9. Collage of Homerama, made by Calvin Smith Builders for publicity. (Courtesy Calvin Smith Builders)

Jean Baudrillard's sense of an exact copy of something that never existed (1994). No one suspends disbelief at Union Station. Even Walt Disney would have been hard-pressed to sell the illusion of a Civil War golf course.⁴ The dalliance with re-enactment bore the consumers too close to the fantasy perhaps, or took the consumers beyond the bubble of the historical tableaux, putting them on a stage that is alien to everyday life.⁵ As with Edmund Burke's theory of the sublime, which he defined as comfort tinged with terror, the illusion of the simulacrum vanishes the moment discomfort reminds us of the quotidian hardships of life. Re-enactment is an escape from the everyday; when it threatens to replace ordinary experience, and moreover, to replace our ordinary environments, comfort loses its leash on ter-

ror. However, while it is tempting to see Union Station merely as a misguided attempt at a themed environment, in fact it plays on common traditions in suburban housing that suggest some less examined roots of more contemporary themed environments. To put this in another way, the bizarre theme of the Civil War is but an extreme example of long-standing conventions.

American subdivisions have been themed virtually from the beginning, if only in the pastoral names developers give the streets.⁶ This often extended to the built environment as well. What did A. J. Downing (1850) or Samuel Sloan (1859) propose in their pattern books other than Gothic-themed suburbs, or Italianate or rustic, or, in any case, pre-industrial and anti-urban suburbs. While their houses are one-offs, rather than com-

munities built at once, their most immediate ancestor is John Nash's Gothic Revival Park Village at Regent's Park, a completely new intervention in London's urban fabric from the early nineteenth century. Nash used the Gothic, really the Gothick, with the same scenographic intentions as his more classical terraces. Like the Gothic shams of the picturesque landscape tradition, they broker in association rather than direct reference. Their historicism offers a counterpoint to the city on whose fringe they once sat. Downing's suburban villas hit similar notes, collectively expressing an ideal way of life outside of the city, and one antithetical to it. This, it might be said, is their theme. In fact, why isn't nineteenth-century historicism seen in terms of themed environments where architects and developers invented settings for (and antidotes to) modern life?

Terence Young and Robert Riley (2002) trace the origins of theme parks (but not necessarily themed subdivisions) back to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century garden designs, where landscape architects like Andre Le Nôtre and later William Kent transformed "villages, forests, and fields into spaces rich with visual references, innuendoes, hints, and winks" (2). Not until William Chambers, Young and Riley assert, did these landscapes take on reflexive qualities whereby features of the built environment were linked to "states of mind": "In the 250 years since Chambers, landscape developers have refined this mood-altering process and now calculatedly employ it in theme parks" (2). A staple of nineteenth-century historicism in architecture as well, this self-conscious associationism flourished in key texts and buildings of the century, from Heinrich Hübsch's *In What Style Should We Build?* (1992) to John Ruskin's *Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1848), and from Barry and Pugin's Houses of Parliament in London to Ralph Adams Cram's St. John the Divine in New York City.⁷

The twentieth century has done little to change this. For example, about 50 miles from LaGrange lies Shaker Heights, one of the first comprehensively planned suburbs. The shopping area (Shaker Square) from the 1930s adopts a generalized Colonial or Georgian theme, as do many of the houses. One might reject these compari-

sons on a number of levels, arguing, for instance, that Downing's designs or Shaker Square lack the temporal or geographical continuity of a coherent theme. The same might be said, however, for Union Station, with its general subtitle "an 1800s architectural community" and its variety of house types. Smith used the Civil War to anchor a wider identification with the nineteenth century.

This phenomenon transcends the suburbs as similar tactics have been turned back on the city, especially since post-war decentralization and urban decline have rendered urban environments as bereft of local and communal identity as the rural *tabula rasa* of an exurban site. Heritage sites manipulate urban environments with historical themes, from the Independence Mall area of Philadelphia to the myriad attempts in smaller towns to assemble a critical mass of historical sites to draw in tourists. To push this point to the limit, is not the renaming of streets, squares, and parks in Harlem after Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and other African-American leaders part of the same tradition (Figure 10)? Through this overlay of names, Harlem, a place layered with many communities, ethnicities, and identities, has been themed "Black Harlem," and its use of history is tied as much to the economics and encroachments of the New York City real estate market as to genuine cultural events, personalities, or positions, much as it is at Union Station. The convergence of these great African-American leaders with Denzel Washington in *The Inside Man* speaks to this point. The actor, who played Malcolm X in the Oliver Stone film of the same title, is Hollywood's "inside man" in Harlem, and his face on this billboard, although temporary, is as much a part of this landscape (and theme) as are the street names. One might object that Harlem's theme is firmly rooted in local identity and that it arose out of an organic community acting to celebrate its heritage, which, on the surface, seems to be a world away from that of theming. Admittedly, this is an extreme comparison, but suffice it to say here that commemoration in Harlem, while certainly based in real events and people, is simultaneously a form of



Figure 10. Africa Square, Harlem, with Denzel Washington as the “Inside Man.” (Photograph by author)

theming, one in which locals import or amplify heritage in ways that transcend commemoration. In effect, the theme is so effective that it has manufactured a false image of community, overzealously marking its territory and thereby, paradoxically, casting its credibility in doubt. In Harlem, the identity politics at the core of the theme threatens to trump the memory work done with street names. Union Station’s appeal to commemoration is surprisingly close to Harlem’s. The larger point is that commemoration and theming intersect in ways that have blinded us to the latter’s active role in shaping the built environment. Many of our most hallowed landscapes are themed environments parading as commemorative ones.

Theming is not particularly American either; nor is it strictly historicist.⁸ Even the Weissenhofsiedlung in Stuttgart of 1926, the apotheosis of the heroic period of the Modern Movement, and thus explicitly anti-historicist, looks conspicuously like a *modernist* themed community. This reading is underscored by how easily it was later lampooned, first as an Arab Mediterranean resort, then as a traditional German village replete with a *Münster* and a church with onion domes.⁹ Its white walls and picturesque hillside site plan contrast sharply with the eclectic American suburban development, but it made its point by thematizing itself modern. Union Station is naturally stranger by several orders of magnitude, taking its theme from a war, as opposed to the machine (which now seems like a decidedly strange theme for a housing development), but the point is that theming is a continuous convention of the last

200 years or more. Part of this is endemic to suburban development. Unlike ‘organic’ communities that develop slowly around a parish church or a local natural resource, subdivisions are created *ex nihilo*.¹⁰ By their very nature, they are adjuncts to pre-existing urban nuclei. One might say they demand a theme, a fictional bond in place of the organic one.

Why LaGrange?

LaGrange was particularly susceptible to theming. The town sits on the rural fringe of Cleveland, ten miles east of Oberlin, Ohio, and a number of other tiny rural towns that dot the map of Lorain County, one of Ohio’s poorest counties. It has a median household income of \$50,000, but this figure is deceptively high since it reflects the recent relocation of the Federal Aviation Commission. It is 96.6 percent Caucasian, 12.5 percent of its residents have BAs, and there is only 3.3 percent unemployment. The average commute time to work is about 25 minutes. It is demographically identical to similar towns in the area, except for one fact: LaGrange’s population soared 48 percent in the 1990s, after over a century of stagnation. At the same time, similar towns, like Oberlin, lost population.¹¹ The newcomers are unlike the people who were there before, and they, like Union Station, are changing the fabric of life in LaGrange.

The first white residents of LaGrange were attracted west largely from New York and New England in the first decades of the nineteenth century by the promise of cheap farmland.¹² They broke the primeval forest only to discover that leeks “were about the only edible

vegetable that the settlers could procure. The cows fed upon them, and their milk was tainted by the pungent bulbs" (History of Lorain County, Ohio 1879, 309). Saw and gristmills became a main source of income, as did the four cheese factories that operated in the nineteenth century. By 1877, the town was producing nearly 500,000 pounds of cheese annually. LaGrange narrowly missed becoming a center of silk production when disease killed millions of silkworms imported by an entrepreneur. Thousands of mulberry trees remain. It again escaped industrialization and wealth when Edward E. Beeman moved his gum-making operation to Cleveland.

The railroad came to LaGrange in 1850, on a route connecting Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati, putting the town in touch with the largest markets in the United States in the most dynamic decades of nineteenth-century industrialization and urbanization. After the Civil War, it had daily passenger service to Cleveland although the trip was too slow for commuting. The economic high point came in the late nineteenth-century when its local quarries supplied especially fine sandstone to the vast building projects of post-bellum Reconstruction.¹³ At the same time, it supplied Cleveland with produce and thus was part of the economic hinterland of one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. In 1900, metropolitan Cleveland was the nation's seventh-largest city (it has since fallen out of the top 20). Before the thorough nationalization of the economy, towns like LaGrange made cities like Cleveland possible, and they grew prosperous from this relationship.

LaGrange peaked in these decades, and it was this proud post-bellum citizenry who on Memorial Day in 1903 erected a large Civil War memorial in its central (and only) square, where the four roads that define its place in the larger rural grid meet. The memorial is ordinary, if large—almost every town in the area has one—but the people of LaGrange were atypically zealous about the Civil War for northerners. General Sherman, the local name for their memorial, faced north for the first decade of his life. In 1913, he was turned to face

south, with the explanation given that "a good soldier never turned his back on the enemy" (Smith 2004).

This typical memorial became the rather thin hook on which Calvin Smith hung his subdivision, a kind of heritage industry maneuver, but one that stretched the association (and the associationism of the nineteenth century) to breaking point.¹⁴ In a town of declining industries, with little history worthy of staking new economic claims, the Civil War Memorial would have to do. With the restaurant at the entrance to Union Station, Smith also referred to LaGrange's railroad stations, long since demolished; the name of the subdivision itself repeated the reference, both to the railroad and to the Civil War. With a cruel, unintended irony, the restaurant now sits empty without tenant, abandoned like the railroad stations to which it refers. LaGrange lost its passenger rail service in 1950 as highways made their way through Ohio. Unfortunately, the town was not terribly close to one, and so began its decline.

The town's fortunes shifted radically in the late 1980s when a new highway threw it a lifeline. The main rural route out of town to the north suddenly linked directly to a highway leading east to Cleveland and its conurbation to the west, which had slowly crept towards LaGrange. This cut the commute time to Cleveland, again placing the town within the city's orbit, particularly for white-collar commuters. The new highway explains the town's rapid growth in the period while other towns farther from the highway stagnated. Smith, who had grown up when LaGrange was in decline, placed his development on this route. He also featured this fact prominently in his publicity, centering a map of the highway network at the center just below a nostalgic drawing of the old LaGrange depot. The change in the town's fortunes offers another reason for why he went to Abbeville, South Carolina, and Newnan, Georgia, for inspiration. Abbeville is roughly the same size as LaGrange, with some of the same financial issues. Newnan, while larger, lies 37 miles from Atlanta, with a mean travel time to work of about 25 minutes, a statistical twin to LaGrange.¹⁵ Smith could have found twins throughout the United States, but the South, more than the Midwest, was undergoing

rapid transformation as northern companies relocated there. As Smith planned his subdivision, southern cities were blossoming economically, and the towns in their hinterlands were finding renewed prosperity.

LaGrange and Newnan are part of what Dolores Hayden (2004) recently classified as the seventh vernacular pattern of suburban development, the rural fringe; they lie on what Michael Sorkin calls “capital’s promiscuous nodes” (1992, iii). These areas are in flux, if not in a state of economic crisis of sorts. Older industries are often failing or dead, farms are foreclosed, the demographics are rapidly shifting, and the local citizenry tend to be desperate for development but disempowered to direct that development as they wish. LaGrange is a better target for development than, for example, Oberlin, which, as college town, has a more empowered citizenry. To bring this point home, Union Station was built on four farms that Smith bought in part from descendants of the original family who settled them in 1849, Harriet and Dale Wise. He thus disrupted patterns of land use and tenure that had persisted for 150 years and which were a link to LaGrange’s actual history and lent the town part of its character as a discrete break between the town and the flat farmland of northern Ohio. “Anti-growthers,” as Smith put it, fought him all the way to the Ohio Supreme Court. The case curtailed the development, but failed to stop it.¹⁶

History to the Rescue

Smith imported history to rescue the loss of history. He appropriated the town’s meager but very visible Civil War past to help narrate and soften these socio-economic shifts. The historical theme helps to obscure the conspicuous absence of continuity in a town where agro-business and development have nearly pushed local agriculture out of existence, and the highway has completely reoriented a former train-centered town. The Civil War rushes in to fill this void, flooding the empty context with imported sentiment. Manufactured history—a gravely serious history about war and national identity—attempts to compensate for the lack of gravitas of the site or for the losses that cannot be

memorialized. Smith’s original intention to hide the car also veils the socio-economic and geographical realities of the town, which are now bound up with the commute.

Smith was able to play fast and loose with this history because we have reached a statute of limitations on much nineteenth-century history. In Ohio, the Civil War has become what David Lowenthal (1985) has called “a foreign country,” an almost archaic past whose factual basis matters less than its associative value. After all, the Civil War was neatly contained in a single site in LaGrange for almost 100 years; it scarcely needed amplification. But very few contemporary uses of the Civil War have very much to do with the historical Civil War (Cullen 1995). Here, the big house is an inoffensive manse, a note of formality, and a columned frontispiece to a three-car garage. And Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant are not heroic generals leading the rebel cause or fighting to save the Union, respectively; rather, they are generalized founding fathers, their historical specificity drained away. The same may be argued for nineteenth-century architecture, whose specificity was long ago flattened under the weight of modernism.

The Civil War and ante-bellum southern architecture never came to northern Ohio, but Union Station is site-specific in a different way. As metropolitan Cleveland has spread west into Lorain County with robust suburban growth on its fringes, its eastern side has withered. The creep of development follows a predictable racial pattern: the new western suburbs are predominantly white, and the eastern city is black. There are, however, no Civil War themed housing projects in East Cleveland, and this brings out the historical limitation on which Union Station depends. Imagine a subdivision based not on the Civil War, but on the Civil Rights Movement. As the example from Harlem has shown, the idea is not as ludicrous as it first appears. Many cities rightfully have their Martin Luther King boulevards, but few places go beyond the superficial device of street names. A proud monument to Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., sits at African Square in Harlem, but not faux grave-stones of Malcolm X and Strom Thurmond, their more

memorable speeches engraved in granite below their bronze likenesses. Admittedly, the Civil Rights theme would be difficult to translate architecturally. Where the ante-bellum south conjures up images of 'gracious living' that suit contemporary subdivisions almost anywhere, the neighborhoods of urban protest and riot fail to provide a ready metaphor for development of any kind. In fact, just the opposite: they recall post-war white flight and the failures of urban renewal.¹⁷ Yet the Civil Rights Movement carried on the work of the Civil War, and by comparison it did so in an astonishingly bloodless and peaceful way. We are just too close to it to see that the Civil Rights Movement provides us with a much more appropriate model for domesticity and communal harmony than does the Civil War. Both are inappropriate as models for a subdivision, of course, yet time has dulled the rancor and pain of the first to the point that it can now be appropriated, albeit with limited success.¹⁸ What freed the Civil War for this sort of use also allowed Howard Dean to campaign for the votes of southerners who brandish the Confederate flag while remaining a viable candidate for the Democratic Party in 2002. The Civil War is not what it used to be.

The statute of limitations on history takes on a regional and local cast, as well. The local use of the idea of the Civil War in memorials, commemorative practices, historical societies and organizations, and even reenactments naturally plays a much larger role in states that once belonged to the Confederacy, whereas the industrial nineteenth century continues to scar many northern landscapes. Ohio can banalize the Civil War because it has not kept the conflict in its short-term memory in the same way that the South has done. New subdivisions in Abbeville and Newnan may allude to ante-bellum architecture, but certainly not to the Civil War itself. Even in Ohio, the theme seemed far-fetched to many residents, and Calvin Smith admitted that the idea failed to attract homebuyers. The period houses were not the problem—residents almost uniformly like the architecture; they have less affection for the theme, which most tend to ignore (Smith 2004; Questionnaire 2006).

In spite of its failure, Union Station must not be dismissed on charges of artifice alone. The Civil War Days Homerama, while not based explicitly on anything from LaGrange's past, comes out of a tradition of small town boosterism tied to the history of the town and a part of a larger competition with neighboring towns.¹⁹ The original war memorial of 1903 undoubtedly opened to great ceremony, the sort of local gala that draws in the energy of a town's hinterlands. Although it took place more officially on Memorial Day, the memorial sprang from civic-minded businessmen competing economically with their counterparts in other small towns in the area, and doing so by reference to the town's past. Smith's efforts belong to this tradition. Long before he conceived of Union Station, he had been involved in the preservation of nineteenth-century buildings in the town. In his mind, the subdivision carried on this work: "I have had the world's greatest intentions," he explained to me, "but I have been shot down by naysayers who didn't understand what I was doing. . . . I have tried to preserve the integrity of this little town" (Smith 2004).

The Unexpected Civil War Landscape of Northern Ohio

History, and specifically Civil War history, resonate regionally in unexpected ways that make the developer's fabrication of an historical landscape seem less peculiar and his sincerity seem, well, sincere. While northern Ohio played a marginal role in the Civil War, Oberlin competes nationally with Harpers Ferry as the town that started the Civil War (Brandt 1990). There, in September 1858 Oberlin residents along with students and professors from Oberlin College made a daring rescue of an escaped slave who had been captured and held in a hotel in nearby Wellington. The Oberlin mob stormed past a posse guarding the entrance and spirited the slave back to Oberlin and eventually to Canada. Already by war's end, Oberlin had begun to commemorate this event and its abolitionist past. More recently, the town self-consciously built on its Civil War past to put itself on the heritage map with a "Walking Tour of Civil War Monuments." This memorial landscape is detailed on a

website, the sort of cyberscape that now accompanies many historical landscapes and prepares visitors for their reception of the “analogue” landscape (Oberlin College, nd). The tour includes the local meetinghouse, represented as an important abolitionist stronghold, as well as key houses on the Underground Railroad, an Oberlin-Wellington Rescue Monument, the Oberlin War Memorial (originally a Civil War Memorial), and a Martin Luther King, Jr. Monument from 1957.²⁰ Civil War and Civil Rights thus become intertwined.

Further complicating the story, Oberlin College reluctantly added a monument to the Underground Railroad by Cameron Armstrong in 1977, a gift of the artist. At first the college put it in an inconspicuous site and let it vanish beneath plantings, but more recently, they moved the railroad track that rises out of the ground, an overly literal symbol of the underground railroad, to a more prominent site and allowed it to emerge. As part of Oberlin’s cultivation of its African-American past, another Underground Railroad Monument was dedicated in 1993, and in 2001, a local gallery held the exhibition, “Threads of Freedom: The Underground Railroad Story in Quilts.”²¹ While many of these sites are strewn throughout the town, some of the memorials have been gathered together in Martin Luther King, Jr. Park, including the memorials to those who died at Harpers Ferry and to the Oberlin-Wellington Rescue. Oberlin thus has stitched together a subdivision of memorials into its ordinary landscape, a generalization of the town’s black history more in keeping with the values of late twentieth-century multiculturalism than with a continuous landscape tradition. It is precisely this sort of heritage, real and fabricated, and geographically discontinuous with actual events that allowed Smith to take liberties in LaGrange and Harlem to do the same. The Civil War landscape of Union Station exaggerates the historical license exercised in neighboring Oberlin at about the same time, and for some of the same economic reasons.

Oberlin created what Ada Louise Huxtable (1997) might have called the *real fake* while LaGrange constructed a *fake fake*. Huxtable raises important ethical

concerns about this sort of illusionism. Where people buy the fake as real, and in fact prefer it, putting their consumer power behind it, their neglect endangers the real but less sexy sites of American history. However, the statute of limitations on history suggests a different reading. Historians sometimes refer to the “long nineteenth century,” meaning the yawning moment between the French Revolution and World War I. Yet the public, tutored in the anti-canonical, theme-based, and thus episodic history curriculum of recent decades, receives a “short nineteenth century,” one born out of the womb of the Gold Rush and the Civil War and struck a mortal blow by the Gilded Age. The American nineteenth century is now but a few decades long: it has mansard roofs and bustles, and a steam engine pulls it. In this light, Oberlin and LaGrange’s appropriation of the Civil War might be seen more profitably as inhabiting opposite ends of a continuum of this usable past, that socially available reservoir of common associations that becomes increasingly drought-prone over time, especially in a multicultural society which lacks common knowledge.²² While LaGrange overreaches much more than Oberlin, both market themselves by playing on nostalgia for the nineteenth century.

Huxtable understandably deplores this gimcrack history because she believes that people buy into the illusion. They take the fake on faith. The residents of LaGrange, however, do not. When asked if they had any special interest in the Civil War, no one answered positively. When asked if living in Union Station had changed their knowledge or views of the Civil War, all answered no, with the exception of one patriot who wrote, “Yes. We know what a great country we live in and that men fought to make it that way.” When asked, finally, what they thought of the memorials to Grant and Lee, most people were irked by them, calling them “not necessary” or “kind of tacky” (Questionnaire 2006). This response hardly surprises. As a stage set, Union Station lacks virtuosity. But do simulacra created with greater illusionism stupefy the public into historical submission? Are we to believe that people walk down Main Street in Disneyland or take the world tour in Las Vegas

and suspend disbelief? For this they would need an alternative training, the sort that enables devout Catholics to feel the ecstasy of St. Theresa in front of Bernini's altar in the Coronaro Chapel in Rome. Have two centuries of themed suburban landscapes trained the public to make such leaps of faith?

CONCLUSIONS

Why then buy into an isolated subdivision with an illegible Civil War theme, a second-rate golf course, no communal functions, and restrictions on property? The cynic would malign the American public as tasteless and oblivious, naively buying into a manufactured American pedigree, a life of false leisure, and the sort of privacy where we are alone together. Yet the development demands more sympathy. The first point to concede is about priorities. People buy houses *in spite of* the failed simulacrum and all of its drawbacks. The security and equity of home ownership are powerful stimuli. In a society that has forsaken its cities, making them dangerous places—and where many suburbs are not far behind—an isolated plot is safe. Also, in a world in which home and workplace can be geographically distant, where a substantial commute becomes a defining element of one's life, the proximity of leisure, no matter how limited, becomes important. This is, in fact, the trade off at Union Station, where some inhabitants commute for up to an hour to Cleveland. The presence of the golf course in this context acquires specific meaning. Golf, moreover, represents a particular kind of leisure. Even with its recent popularization, it retains its associations with the country club, and thus with the upper classes, and it still suggests retirement, both literally and figuratively a retreat from work.²³ Green rings once figured prominently in American planning. The Regional Planning Association of America in the 1920s and 1930s girded communities from commerce and industry with green rings, a device borrowed from the Garden City Movement in England. Retirement communities such as Sun City in Arizona replaced the green ring with a golf course. The green ring of the golf course

at Union Station marks off the domestic sphere from the work sphere and from the larger world beyond.

At stake here is a larger question about the 'public sphere,' as distinct from what Sorkin intended with the subtitle of *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*. Where the old Civil War memorial in LaGrange marks the shared identity of the town in a public square, the developer privatized that identity through its imagery, sequestering it into a subdivision of private homes aimed at capturing some of the centrifugal energy and capital of Cleveland. The monuments to Grant and Lee are more than anomalous kitsch: they are part of a hapless search for appropriate symbols to mark these indeterminate spaces. They disturb us because they highlight the absence of context. They single out inadvertently the artificiality of the cul-de-sac in suburbia and the planter's disingenuous attempt to be a town green. The planters where Grant and Lee nobly lie, so to speak, provide a foil to the private space of the home. They should be mundane, in the literal sense of that word, meaning "of the world": common, public, free, and open, even a bit unscripted and unpredictable.

Instead they extend the stiff, polite language of the front lawn. Tight shrubs and plantings forbid trespass, clipped grass suggests a golf green rather than a picnic area, and while the gravestones present themselves as objects intended for viewing, the absence of seats or a viable public space in which one can become a spectator or an actor precludes their public use. The whole bespeaks a deep discomfort with public space, indeed, with the public sphere. At least the illusion of history in Oberlin takes place in truly public spaces. The more we invest into our private spaces, the less we seem to understand the importance of these shared spaces, disowning them, to use a metaphor that gets to the heart of the dilemma of public space under capitalism. Who owns the cul-de-sacs of Union Station is a central question for this generation.

In a moment inclined to believe in the moral rightness of privatization, land use (and, consequently, landscape) becomes a crude calculus of property rights and

property values when it should also be an abstraction about human rights and community values. The artifice of theming, even in its most didactic form in New Urbanist developments, will never substitute for the lack of community in the suburbs (or the city), just as the revival styles of architecture in the nineteenth century failed to create cultural cohesion. Too often, themes obscure the processes through which communities forge common cause and shape their identities: the town hall meetings and commemorative practices that bring people together to decide their fate, mourn their losses, and celebrate their lives.

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NOTES

1. The roundabout echoes the way the Civil War Memorial sits in the center of LaGrange.
2. According to Smith, Kraus was in charge of the re-enactors for the film *Gettysburg*. He has sculpted a number of Civil War themed statues (Smith 2004).
3. The builder cited Disney World as a source, but he also admires New Albany outside of Columbus, Ohio.
4. Or, if we accept it as a simulacrum that veered off into kitsch, then we have to question the very basis of the simulacrum.
5. M. Christine Boyer linked the thematic environment of South Street Seaport to nineteenth-century historical tableaux. See Boyer (1992).
6. The absurdity of subdivision names is lampooned on a random name generator website for subdivisions: <http://adrian.gimp.org/cgi-bin/sub.cgi>, which creates names like Ivy Country Hollows, Spruce Bridge Farms, Dogwood Bridge Estates.
7. Not coincidental, scholars began to re-examine the nineteenth-century battle of the styles in the late twentieth

century, with the waning of Modern Movement and the intensification of interest in themed environments.

8. For multiple examples of theming outside of the American context, see Young and Riley (2002).
9. For the first, see Figure 85 in Pommer and Otto (1991); and for the second, see the cover of Krisch (1997).
10. These ideas were developed in conversation with Michael Lewis of Williams College. Gillian Darley (1975) makes similar points about nineteenth-century developments.
11. Lorain County grew only five percent in the same period. See the Ohio History Central Online Encyclopedia, Ohio Historical Society (www.ohiohistorycentral.org)
12. My main sources on LaGrange are *History of Lorain County Ohio* (1879); J. R. Johnson (1995); and Dorothy McKee Buswell (2000).
13. The sandstone of this region, variously called Berea or Ohio Sandstone, was considered one of the best sandstones in the country and can be found in late nineteenth-century buildings throughout the United States. Frank Furness used it in his 1873 Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, as did Henry W. Miller in the Uris Library at Cornell University in 1891.
14. Smith had been keenly interested in his hometown, saving and preserving the Victorian firehouse on the square.
15. Newnan's population spiked in the 1990s and continues to grow, expanding 39 percent between 2000 and 2004. While it is demographically different, Newnan's prospects were perhaps more similar to LaGrange's than other towns in Ohio that lacked the distinct advantages of proximity and access to a major metropolitan area.
16. After he completed the first phase of development, a mere handful of houses, he sold off the golf course and part of the subdivision for other builders to fill in, without the restrictions of the Civil War theme. Quite sensibly, Smith put the Wises on his architectural review board.
17. Part of the appeal of urban "homesteading," a popular metaphor, derives from a romantic association with urban grit.
18. Few residents expressed strong attachment to the subdivision's theme when asked in a questionnaire distributed to Union Station residents in 2006.
19. Daniel Bluestone of the University of Virginia first suggested this line of inquiry.
20. The Harpers Ferry Memorial from 1865 must be one of the first abolitionist memorials.
21. The exhibition was held May 13 to August 26, 2001 at the Fava Gallery, Oberlin. A symposium was also held.
22. This is an admittedly bleak view of American cultural knowledge and it has no quantitative basis. However, it is drawn

from seven years of teaching undergraduate courses in architectural history to students for whom the Vietnam War provides a cut-off of accessible history, in part because they are the grandchildren of people who fought in or protested the war. Anything older fades into dust.

23. Several of the respondents to the survey were retired and several were avid golfers.

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