



Jakub Szczęsny

ASYLUMS, NICHES AND ENCLAVES, or a catalogue of small utopia.

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About the book by Maciej Kropiwnicki, the publisher from Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw (MSN)

It seems that „Asylums” by Jakub Szczęsny came out in Poland in the very right moment. The time of trouble that we are currently facing with consequences of covid pandemics, clash of cultures caused by divisive populist government, climate crisis and most of all the war in neighboring Ukraine seems to be a perfect timing to launch a discussion on the ideas of possible future(s).

Written in a vivid and direct way far from architectural meta-language Szczęsny’s book delivers nineteen stories of past and current visionary social concepts that were turned into architectural and urbanistic projects. Many of them were ridiculed or disregarded as impossible and utopian or at least to wacky to last. Yet, instead of concentrating on the fantastic or unrealistic sides of these concepts Szczęsny points at what that made them possible and turned from: „dear, it’s just a utopia” into: „hell, it really works!”.

Szczęsny describes projects that actually saw the light of day as built and lasting physical structures of different sizes (from one building to entire cities or groups of villages) inhabited by real people. Most of these projects are success stories of how ideological, religious or philosophical principles could be transmitted into social organisations and further, into spatial expressions. Szczęsny draws a direct line connecting all three elements: founding principles, people and buildings. Apart from answering questions on what actually makes people in various geographical, historical and climatic circumstances live this or that way in given structures (or landscapes) Szczęsny tries to find common points and patterns. He intends to answer such questions as: what makes an alternative social concept become a success? How to make an idea of future life realistic enough to survive as long as it makes sense? How to fund, organize, govern and maintain an alternative community?

Here are some of the examples of social and architectural constructs to be found in the book: Jesuite missions in South America, sectarian project of Oneida commune in Upstate New York, French socialist community of Familistere, The Farm and Short Mountain in Tennessee, Russian constructivist community in Moscow’s NARKOMFIN building, Frankist villages in Spain planned and built by Instituto Nacional de Colonización, two social habitat projects in India, MST villages in Brazil and others.

The book ends with a sum-up in which the author tends to encourage the readers to think about their own ideas in spite of an overall feeling of being overwhelmed by everydayness or even worse-being paralyzed by fear caused by negative scenarios of the future. Szczęsny seems to say: „if people in the past dared to build on what seemed at the time to be crazy ideas, why can’t we do it today?”.

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Excerpt translated by Mark Ordon

Chapter 12: *Radical Faeries*, or how not only “heteros” can create communes in the bushes

Tennessee must have a certain specific charm, as it seems to attract artistic and defiant souls in all shapes and sizes. It’s a kind of American version of the Polish Bieszczady region. Low mountains covered in forestland form a beautifully wavy landscape, while scenic streams flow into cozy valleys. I was rather impressed with the contrast between the plateaus and the mountains that suddenly jump out at you only a hour’s drive from Nashville. This geographic peculiarity quite clearly promoted two concepts of how to use the land, both of them quite distinct. The villages and isolated farms are inhabited by farmers, who quite often make up the most conservative communities in North America and who exhibit the effects of a mixture of relative isolation, religious fanaticism and a stationary lifestyle. Yet right around the corner from them, the *hillbillies* – an obstinate breed, quite often entire families who make a living from moonshine, hunting, poaching, and sometimes even robbery – took a liking to the dense and humid woods stretching over the wavy terrain. They cherished extreme liberty and would defend it till the end if need be. Today, to the above list of illegal ways to make a living we could probably add the production and trade of methamphetamine¹.

Yet Tennessee would still be a forgotten state of god-fearing hobbits and frisky rednecks if it weren’t for country music. Tennessee was the birthplace of the genre, and word got around about it thanks to *live* concerts called the Grand Ole Opry. They are held each Saturday, and WSM radio in Nashville has been broadcasting them without interruption since 1925. These radio broadcasts were one of the reasons for which American folk music became a part of pop culture even outside of the United States. Tennessee gave the world an army of talent: Dolly Parton, Tina Turner, Miley Cyrus, Justin Timberlake, Aretha Franklin, the Allman brothers and dozens of others. Today, Nashville, the capital of the state, is a multi-ethnic city with a bustling economic and cultural scene. A hub of musical production houses and recording studios from both coasts is next-door neighbor to the excellent and distinctly left-leaning Vanderbilt University. The incredible flow of tourists fuels the service sector, in particular the outstanding restaurant scene (I’ve never eaten so well anywhere in America!), hotels and shopping with must-have cowboy boots, clothes and popular local brands of whiskey.

I made it to Nashville in 2017, having been invited by my friend Todd, an art curator. Todd normally lives in São Paulo, but he shows up once in a while to visit his family, major land owners, at their estate located around an hour’s drive from the city. During the few days of my visit, Todd revealed to me a world of exotic contrast. We enjoyed delicious burgers the size of Moroccan ottomans at a local restaurant with his parents, while discussing the matters of God, “bearing witness” and

¹ [Meth Use by State 2023, https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/meth-use-by-state](https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/meth-use-by-state) (access: 8/06/2023).

“standing in truth”. With machetes in hand, we chopped our way through the woods on a hill inherited by my friend, to find the ideal place for a small hut. His plan was to have it delivered by helicopter because of the tricky access. In those same woods, we practiced shooting at cans from rifles. We saw the Grateful Dead (or rather whatever was left of the legendary band from time of the counterculture revolution) play at the Bonaroo Festival. And of course, we toured the restaurant scene, which Nashville is famous for. During a visit to one of these sanctuaries of pure delight (for the taste buds), between a main dish of catfish with fries and dessert, Todd told me about the phenomenon of the Radical Faeries. I was stupefied; America’s heartland managed to surprise me once again.

The story could have had a classic beginning: a long time ago in faraway California, there were the hippies. They wandered the streets of San Francisco and Los Angeles, attracting the attention of distinguished and serious citizens, as well as provoking their irritation; although really, both cities were never short on people that serious citizens would keep a safe distance from. These “eccentrics” always felt that they didn’t fit into American reality, which said reality would constantly remind them of, often by brutal means. So, that’s why large numbers of gays, lesbians and transgender persons (you may have already figured out who I was referring to) would seek refuge in seaside towns not only in California, from the intolerance all too common further inland.

They created their own districts. Sometimes they inhabited entire streets, like Christopher Street in New York, or even large neighborhoods, like The Castro in San Francisco. Based on mysterious unwritten arrangements with their environment, they found respite from ostracism, hostility and persecution, and tried to lead a peaceful life, yet one not completely deprived of entertainment. Of course, we need to define what a “peaceful life” means for people thrust into the margins of society, because they do not fit into socially imposed models of behavior or any generally accepted aesthetic norms. They are too sexually undetermined, too colorful, too cheerful or too neurotic, hysterical, erotically excessive, or in turn, too sad and secretive. Too... anything.

Around the same time that hippies appeared, and counter-cultural reaction to American conservatism, the Cold War and the conflict in Vietnam was growing, gays and lesbians, and later other non-heteronormative persons were starting to build pressure groups. The brutal attack of the police in 1969 on patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a famous gay bar in New York’s Greenwich Village, was a catalyst for involvement in the movement. People all over the country took to the streets, riots erupted, which were followed by demonstrations of support and the creation of numerous separate initiatives. These events, as it turned out, accumulated into what became a movement to empower gays and lesbians. Only a year after the Stonewall riots, three pride marches passed in parallel through New York, Chicago and San Francisco. The social machine geared towards the fight for personal rights, and quite often equality, was set in motion. *Gay and lesbian* communities in the United States became

even more tight-knit after Harvey Milk, San Francisco city supervisor and the first openly homosexual local politician in the country, was shot in 1978 by another city supervisor.²

In that same year, Betty Berzon, the first therapist ever to offer psychological support for non-heterosexual persons, invited four gay activists to a conference at the University of Southern California. She then encouraged the four men, which included communist activist Harry Hay³ and Don Kilhefner (first managing director of the Gay Community Services Center in Los Angeles), to organize conferences with activists, psychologists and academics. They discussed the paths that the LGBT community in the United States could take in the future. Should they adapt to the standards imposed by the heterosexual majority, attempt to seek acceptance and assimilation by copying the “formats” of others, including marriage? Should the community continue to disguise themselves and hide, yet nurture their own otherness in safe niches created in more tolerant cities? They would meet at Hay’s home in Los Angeles, but since the discussion group continued to grow, at Kilhefner’s insistence, the meetings evolved into retreats at the ashram of former Harvard University professor and spiritual guru Baba Ram Dass in Arizona. The sanctuary near the town of Benson, basically situated in the middle of nowhere, hosted prayers, meditation and workshops, which among many topics presented the concept of autofellatio, which teases the imagination, yet proves challenging in its technique. Just a year later, two hundred twenty people showed up at their convent. Hay called the event the Spiritual Conference for Radical Faeries.

During the convent, the activists experienced enlightenment. They looked around them and realized that, as far as the eye could see, there were no heteros. They could finally be themselves, in all their complexity, radicalism and spiritual beauty. They did not have to explain themselves in front of anybody, they didn’t hide anything, nor did they attempt to gain anybody’s acceptance. Hay gave a welcoming speech with the memorable call, which best captures the nature of the Radical Faeries: “Throw off the ugly green frogskin of hetero-imitation to find the shining Faerie Prince beneath!”

The reaction of the crowd was enthusiastic: Hay expressed their own thoughts out loud, thoughts they concealed even from friends. He quite explicitly invited all of them to take the radical path, steer far away from polite assimilation and attempts to fit into somebody else’s game. Many of the radical faeries were attracted by the spiritual aspect, supported by the “return to nature” and the associated effort to reconnect with nature. The urban homosexual mainstream pursued the secular technocratic model that portrayed ideal Americans as happy consumers, while Hay’s vision proposed a peculiar mix of neo-pagan group rituals: engaging in maypole dances⁴, or greeting the rising sun

² Harvey Milk served a very short time in office, but gained wide popularity and became an icon in the fight for political rights of homosexual persons. His story was told in Gus Van Sant’s movie *Milk* (2008).

³ Harry Hay is a multi-faceted and complex figure. There is also a dark side to him, as he is a member of a group that lobbied for the legalization of sexual intercourse from the age of ... thirteen. It was due to this mainstream activity that the activists finally boycotted him.

⁴ Inhabitants of a village dance around a pole decorated with flowers, while holding sashes attached to it. They do so to express their joy with the returning warm season. The theme of the decorated pole appears in various

together. The faeries followed this line of thinking: “Since the heterosexual majority views us as weirdos and we consider ourselves as such, and we do not accept their standards as our own, let’s enjoy the status of shamans at the edges of their soulless technical world.” And this has been their logic to this day.

The faeries established their first outpost in 1979 on Short Mountain in Cannon County, only a two-hour drive away from the commune of The Farm. They bought eighty hectares of land along with some huts from an anti-war activist group from North Carolina and quickly settled down there. The residents of neighboring villages and farms quickly got used to the strange colorfully dressed skinny boys, so the faeries didn’t really make an impression on them. In addition, they were living on their own land, and as we all know, in America the sanctity of private property is indisputable. A local public official explained to a *New York Times* journalist that “here in the South, we respect privacy, so until somebody starts meddling in our matters, we do not meddle in theirs.”⁵ And that’s how an unbelievable neighborhood came to be: inhabiting Cannon County were conservative evangelists along with people dressed as faeries, nuns⁶ and butterflies or as nothing at all, because if they were in the mood, they would wander through their property naked as a jaybird. Today, after more than forty years of coexistence, contemporary Tennessee farmers and Radical Faeries share not only a feeling of respect for privacy and the sanctity of ownership, but also an objection to same-sex marriages, which have been legal in the United States since 2015. The first group believes they are against divine law, while the second sees them as a naive attempt to bend to the heterosexual mainstream.

The new inhabitants built their Sanctuary here. The *New York Times* journalist said that the dwellings brought to mind “unknown species of mushrooms,” which was quite accurate, given the dietary regime of the faeries and the locally acquired substances they would take. The largest building, a barn covered with cheerful paintings, had a sign saying “Welcome Homo.” Many of the buildings are hidden from view from the main meadow, situated behind bushes, because after all, individualism and the right to unrestricted intimacy are the foundation of the community’s operation. Todd also told me about cemeteries hidden in the thick forest. It seems that in the 1980s, many AIDS sufferers joined the residents of the commune on the mountain to spend their final days with kindred spirits.

forms in many European countries: maypoles are put up in Germany on May 1, in Great Britain on the seventh Sunday after Easter, or in the middle of summer (during the Midsommar holiday) in Scandinavian countries. The equivalent in Poland are tall structures set up for Palm Sunday, for example on the main square in the town of Łowicz, although they are not accompanied by dances. These traditions have their roots in pagan tradition, which as many other elements, were assimilated by Christianity.

⁵ Alex Halberstadt, “Out of the woods”, *New York Times Magazine*, 8/06/2015. The title makes reference to “coming out of the closet,” when homosexual persons reveal their sexual preferences to people around them.

⁶One of the factions of the Radical Faeries are the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. They look like a blend of drag queens, nuns and bearded patriarchs. Their mission – quoted from the organization’s website www.thesisters.org – “to expose the forces of bigotry, complacency and guilt that chain the human spirit.” Their locations, the Sister Houses, are appearing in many countries, and it seems there is already one in Poland!

Anybody who happens to enter the Sanctuary without an invitation is usually politely requested to leave. The exception here are festivals organized twice a year. That is when hundreds of “pilgrims” come here, most of them clad in exquisite apparel, to celebrate their closeness with Mother Earth and other people. The events have a country fair feel to them, and the program includes group dancing (the faeries are particularly fond of the traditional English *line dance* and *circle dance*, which have their roots in the Middle Ages) as well as meditation, singing, concerts, mental health seminars, contests and all kinds of workshops. Visitors come from all over and they are not exclusively homosexual Americans. Similar events take place in related communes, often located nearby. One of the closest, Idyll Dandy Arts, organizes a popular festival each year called Idapalooza. These “colonies of radical outcasts,” which had cropped up in numbers throughout the US, are now getting a new life thanks to the enterprising young generations. Contemporary gays and lesbians, usually not so radical anymore, are opening alcohol distilleries, coffee roasting plants and agritourism guest houses. For a few years now, locals have been mockingly referring to the Sanctuary as Gayborhood. To add a bit of spice to the story, one of the summits of Short Mountain is the venue of an annual Christian youth convention, where members of nearly one hundred forty protestant groups registered in the state come together.

If we were to map the actions inspired by the radical and anarchist activism of the faeries, we could conclude that a marginal movement turned into a constellation of entities spread all over the world. They nurture individuality and privacy, while adjusting to modern times; their official rituals and commercial “wrappers” help them abide. Most of the ventures currently operating in the United States are part of a *land trust* – land ownership funds especially established by LGBTQ activists to help ensure financial independence for the “intentional communities” in the mountains. What we are therefore looking at are organizations, and not just groups of “voluntary outcasts” hiding in the bushes. There are currently at least fifteen sanctuaries, eight of which are located in the United States. On a different note, the faeries are not too crazy about construction projects and they steer far away from the logic of conquering nature and shaping it for their own use through ever more developed infrastructure and exclusive homes. These people really still live in single-room huts slapped from a few boards. They do not have power, running water or sewage. Life as a faerie on Short Mountain inherently involves certain inconveniences such as trips to the stream to fetch water or walks to the outhouse to take care of one's needs.

Yet despite these inconveniences, the population of faeries living near pious farmers and *hillbillies* in rural Tennessee is slowly growing. All three groups avoid conflict and obsessively defend their privacy. Todd summed it all up like this: “Life flourishes in the bushes, and we've got pretty thick bushes down here, so hell⁷ knows what's going on there!”

⁷ I am sure that some fiendish evil spirit is sitting in those bushes. A farm in Grahn, not far from the Sanctuary, is the birthplace and childhood home of Charles Manson, a diabolical murderer and worshiper of Satan.

Jakub Szczęsny is the first Polish architect who's project, Keret House, was included in the permanent collection of MoMA in New York. In his work he blends social practice, art and architecture working on affordable prefabricated housing and public projects around the world, from Gustaw Zieliński square in Kazakhstan's capital to UFO-alike chicken coop designed for Saint Louis Science Centre. „Asylums...” is his second book published by Modern Art. Museum in Warsaw. More here: www.szcz.com.pl

below: Szczęsny's illustration for chapter 12 on Radical Faeries

