

Jones, Tobias
"Shelters for the Soul"
Telegraph UK.
October 22, 2006.

LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

Shelters for the soul

Last Updated: 12:01am BST 22/10/2006

America is scattered with would-be utopias - where idealists, dreamers and radicals have flocked together to create alternative worlds. Joel Sternfeld's portraits of these brave new communities leave Tobias Jones enthralled

A quarter of a century ago, the photographer Joel Sternfeld made a pilgrimage to Maine to visit one of his heroes - Scott Nearing, the former economics professor and lifelong pacifist.



Sweet Earth by Joel Sternfeld

Sternfeld had already started to photograph utopian experiments across America and he wanted to show the work-in-progress to the 99-year-old Nearing. Nearing, author of the self-help classic *Living the Good Life*, looked through the photos but didn't like them.

'Picture an ideal world and photograph that,' he said to Sternfeld.

Sternfeld has now published a visionary reply. *Sweet Earth* is a photographic portrait of the places where soaring idealism lands, or often crash-lands, on American soil.

It takes you to such idyllic addresses as 'Tolstoy Farm', 'Zzyzx Springs' or, my favourite, 'Surreal Estates'.

There are ecovillages, co-housing associations and communes; he portrays believers and behaviourists, furrowed homesteaders and frolicking fairies.

The only common link between them all is that they have decided to abandon the notion of the 'nuclear family' and live a communal life as utopian adventurers.

The project is extraordinary because normally photography knows nothing about idealism. It's the least dreamy of all media. Its role is the brutal replaying of reality for us.

Photography can only, by definition, show what's here, rather than what we actually yearn for. Sternfeld's photographs, though, manage

“Shelters for the Soul” Telegraph UK.

LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

to convey the essence of all utopian experiments: the belief that the future can be better than the present.

However, there is an historical depth to the project, too. Sternfeld is sensitive to the hinges of history: 1516, 1517 and 1525 being a triple-jointed one (publication of Thomas More's Utopia, Luther's theses and the foundation of the Anabaptists respectively).

By taking you back to the very earliest congregations on American soil (like the recreated Iroquois Longhouse or the Kaweah cooperative), Sternfeld makes the book as elegaic as it is uplifting.

This isn't a cheery hippy manifesto but a contemplation of how and why humans choose to live together. In accompanying text, Sternfeld explains each community's struggles: some are laid low by government violence, but most disintegrate of their own accord, usually over arguments about guests, finances and sex.

Sternfeld often sees and shares the funny side: one poor communitarian's headstone read 'persecuted for wearing the beard'.

It's striking that the most inspirational communities don't appear in grand mansions or listed buildings.

The truly revolutionary ones grow on dirty, discarded acres of wasteland - often old government properties which have left the local area scarred and impoverished.

The reasons are both political (communities gather to bear witness to the degradation) and financial (the land's dirt cheap). It's on those wastelands that communities find a spiritual calling: recycling the land is only a metaphor for the human healing which takes place there.

Slab City is the name for what used to be called Camp Dunlap, a marine training facility that closed in 1946.

It is flat, baking land and much of it, as the name suggests, is covered in cement. But thousands of 'snowbirds' (campers) migrate here each winter.

There is no ideology as such; it's simply a place which grew up out of people's instinct to flock together and try to turn something ugly into something beautiful.

Sternfeld's photograph of the place shows a Prom Queen with a rueful, tired smile. She's sitting on the front row of a few old theatre seats in the middle of a cement expanse.

That notion of building a utopia from debris is shared by many American trail-blazers. Reinterpreting the 'back to the land' slogan, Adam Purple and Ken Dunn pioneered urban farming, reclaiming for agriculture some of the thousands of vacant lots in New York and Chicago.

It's a similar story with one of the heroes of the book, Samuel Mockbee. An architect from the Deep South, he founded the Rural Studio to build for, and with, poor clients, searching scrapyards for materials to construct churches, homes and community centres.

The resulting buildings are stunning. The one Sternfeld shows is a community centre at Mason's Bend, Alabama: the top third of the walls are made from dozens of overhanging, slightly curved Chevy Caprice windows, all taken from a Chicago junkyard for a dollar.

It makes the building suddenly light, airy yet serious at the same time.

However, perhaps the most radical of all is called North Street Cohousing. What spoils most communal enterprises is over-ambition: 'We'll change the world,' say the pioneers, only to retreat with like-minded people to become, unwittingly, a ghetto.

What has happened at North Street is very different: people have, since the movement started in 1986, simply taken down their garden fences, to be left with one huge communal garden of shared branches and swings and climbing frames.

The radicalism is simply that people have stayed where they were. They have created a community, not by running away but by finding it next door.

What does it say about America that the country has so many wackos and visionaries, madmen and prophets?

Perhaps that there's profound suspicion of federal government which we, in consensual Britain, don't quite understand. Perhaps that there's an abundance of optimism, a feeling that your soil really is on the frontier of the future.

Certainly, the country has always been, at least since the first pilgrims arrived, a utopian crucible, a place where humanity could begin again.

It's a central thread of the American narrative, but one which we snooty Europeans usually deride. We know all about American cults

“Shelters of the Soul”
Telegraph UK.

LUHRING
AUGUSTINE

531 West 24th Street
New York NY 10011
tel 212 206 9100 fax 212 206 9055
www.luhringaugustine.com

and start-up sects and lazily assume that all communal innovation inevitably leads in that dangerous direction.

It takes something like Sweet Earth to show a different side of American idealism: not wacky, but humble and resolute.

Sternfeld includes various religious groupings, from the traditional and Orthodox (Genesis Farm or Eretz HaChaim) to the innovative and original (the Mormons, Oneida and Harmony). Does a community have to develop a religious dimension in order to function and survive?

The sense that emerges from the book is that the only thing that turns a gathering of individuals into a community is the discovery of something sacred.

That is true even of the ecological utopias which, strictly, have no religious content: they too have a precise understanding of purpose and ethics. True community implies fellowship and that takes you into religious terrain.

Many of the communitarian movements in the Sixties and Seventies were concerned with overthrowing the sacred: they were iconoclastic, obsessed with sexual or narcotic experimentation.

In the current wave of communities (which began in the mid-Nineties), the sacred has not only been rediscovered, it's central. Whether the community seeks deliverance from evil or just from the national grid, it finds reverence and purpose.

The word 'community' has come to imply a profound place where individuals make sacrifices and where life becomes once again sacramental.

Utopian experimentation can, like religion itself, be a dizzying, dangerous thing, but Sternfeld sees a lot more baby than bathwater. His portraits convey admiration; they celebrate the fact that, despite all the glib talk of globalisation, we still have huge reserves of localised eccentricity.

You might not change the world, they seem to say, but you might just change the land or street you're standing on.

- 'Sweet Earth: Experimental Utopias in America' by Joel Sternfeld (Steidl) is available for £36 (rrp £40) + £1.25 p&p from Telegraph Books on 0870 428 4115. Tobias Jones's 'Utopian Dreams' will be published by Faber in January