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# The Architecture of Oppression: Nostalgia and Unimagining the Cold (Hard Truth of) War

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# The Architecture of Oppression: Nostalgia and Unimagining the Cold (Hard Truth of) War

## Abstract

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Being nostalgic is a human characteristic that disturbs one's ability to enjoy the present or work on the future. More importantly however, is realising that memory is imperfect and consequentially so is nostalgia. What we are nostalgic for can be skewed and what we wish for again is devoid of the pitfalls of the time of the memory. This claim is what was concluded after exploring the period of the Cold War which took place between 1945 and 1992 which happens to coincide with the years that surveys have shown are times people are most nostalgic for. This paper aims to understand the dissonance between cold war realities and cold war memories by tracking ideologies, ruling ideologies, how they were proliferated, and what these ideologies were created to hide. Through the examination of two atomic cities, Oak Ridge and Model City, this paper finds that nostalgia is an experience reserved for those who are privileged— specifically for white people of the upper class status. Even further, it suggests that the trouble we have with moving to a truly post racial society stems from nostalgia resulting from successful cold war propaganda campaigns. Current hostile sentiments regarding people of colour, refugees, and immigrants may originate from nostalgia that was manipulated to make a cleansed, white society seem like the safe and healthy society.

## The Architecture of Oppression: Nostalgia and Unimagining the Cold (Hard Truth of) War

In her book *Science Fiction Film and Television*, Sharon Sharp discusses some of the parallels the science fiction genre has with what she perceives is our current reality— an era of retrofuturism. Sharp coined the term retrofuturism to describe society's fascination with past visions of the future. Initial comprehension of the term makes the argument seem convoluted as the argument implies a perception of time that is non-linear. At face-value, this defies the nature of progress that is often utilized in talks about the future: going backwards to construct how progress will be embodied in the future rather than always continuing forward with disregard for the past. It is in breaking down what retrofuturism means for progress that it becomes clear that “retrofuturism” is simply a term contingent on another, more familiar term— nostalgia. Nostalgia being the “pining for times in a particular place...a state of mind and a moment of perception that actually melds times and space, creating a vertiginous space of temporal disruption” (Freeman 9). Nostalgia exemplifies the non-linear time-space disturbance that much like retrofuturism, looks at the past in order to come to a conclusion about what a good future, and good progress will be perceived as.

After the second world war, the Cold War brought on a period of nuclear anxieties. From McCarthyism that prevented liberals from being liberals publicly in fear of social and economic shunning to the the imminent threat of a nuclear war felt as anxiety due to a lack of civilian control of the situation, the people of the Cold War and the subsequent postwar period faced an exorbitant amount of emotional trauma. Nevertheless, a study by the news agency Knight-Ridder reveals that more Americans chose the 1950's as the best time for children to grow up than any other decade. On further questioning, those surveyed became more critical of the 50's, eventually realizing that it in actuality was not as great as they for some reason believed it to be. Uncritical nostalgia regarding the Cold War period manifests itself in the present day obsession with American diner franchises, rollerskating clubs, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and I Love Lucy. However, reconciling the sharp contrast between Cold War realities and cold war nostalgia reveals more scathing implications of retrofuturism and more broadly, nostalgia. Nostalgia is inherently political; what has been chosen to be remembered builds a narrative that rids of marginalized voices who struggled to become a part of this very narrative. Nostalgia is a privileged practice, only available to those who have the ability to envision a glorious past if they were not emotionally and economically brutalized. The ethnic, racial, and class cleansing resulting from the current practice of nostalgia ultimately works in favour of the white American bourgeoisie, whose hegemony is predicated on keeping American victory culture and resulting neoliberalism alive. This paper seeks to explore some of the ways in which nostalgic perceptions have been politicized to perpetuate this victory culture. Although there are many aspects to examine, this paper will focus on the Atomic Cities of Oak Ridge and Model City.

Purging the history of marginalized groups during the intermonde— “the in-between world of cultural production and historical remembrance”— before nuclear catastrophe is ever-present in the real world as well (Yanarella 68). This in-between period is incarnated in the chapter between the invention of the atomic bomb and the first time it was dropped to kill in Hiroshima and was arguably renewed after the drop, but this time with no marked end to the chapter. After Hiroshima, ideology venerating nuclear power did suffer as evidenced by the protests that consumed the United States. Many of the larger movements challenged these ideologies supporting the use of nuclear warfare but suffered from either being excluded or demonized by the mainstream narrative, diminishing its ability to curtail ruling ideals. Others were blind to how they had adapted the dominant narrative of excluding minorities themselves (Coontz 23). The manufactured account of the Cold War fighting to survive after Hiroshima is why the atomic bomb separates two intermondes instead of there just being one. Nonetheless the story remained the same in both periods, concealing the anxieties and difficulties that plagued marginalized groups. This cleansing allowed for building a narrative of the Cold War that championed the white ruling class as saviours from the evils of the world, including communism. It was a successful narrative because what resulted is a nostalgia for the decades belonging to the Cold War era over any other time (Coontz 33). Today, there is nostalgia for a time that seemed safer, cleaner and wholesome—nostalgic feelings for the constructed narrative that was almost exclusively white.

Oak Ridge, Tennessee: A city that came to be because of intentions for a nuclear war. Oak Ridge was established in 1942 as a secret city that would house production for the Manhattan Project. It is this location where “little boy,” the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was designed. Surveillance was heavy in the area and all activities had to be approved by the military (Taylor para. 3). Despite living in a militarized area isolated from the rest of the United States, Oak Ridge residents today often tear up thinking of the old days (Freeman 55). In fact, Oak Ridge residents have developed oral stories that commemorate the heydays of the city. Unforgettably, no records of what happened to residents who migrated after Hiroshima because of layoffs (introduction of technologies more efficient than humans) or change in opinion regarding the use of the atomic bomb exist. Important to note is that of those who left, a majority belonged to the working class group; a group that was mostly female, black, or both. What was left was an elite population dedicated to science proven by their belief in atomic weaponry as a necessity for global security and freedom. As such, the oral stories have no regard for race, ethnicity, or class because they were invented by a group that was predominantly of one race and class. No chance of correction from primary sources exists because those who opposed the city's mandate simply left and no record of them in the city exist; thus, the stories may very well be myths that in their retelling “atomic nostalgia emerges, adopts, and lingers” (Freeman 11). The nostalgia here once more, harking back to stories of a time that is cleansed of anything that is not white life. In building the atomic bomb, the weapon that made the United States victorious in the second world war, Oak

Ridge was sealed as a historic city whose history necessitated preservation. American victory then is associated with a history that poses the white male as the only hero.



*Entrance to Oak Ridge. Photographer: Ed Wescott*

With the Soviet Union becoming less of a threat to America, Oak Ridgers faced an existential crisis. Comprised of people hired from all around the United States, the only connection citizens had with each other was the Manhattan Project. This nuclear weapon was central to the city— a shared experience only for them to experience due to sworn secrecy from the rest of the world. The frontier was the trope that brought Oak Ridgers together. Not a coincidence then is Frederick Turner's observation that the America's collective identity is "wrapped in the collective of the frontier" (Freeman 12). Vannevar Bush dubbed this "the endless frontier" whereby a constant need to sustain and push forward the frontier is only natural when the identity of a country is dependent on it. When the frontier is not expanding, times when it did are looked back upon nostalgically. After all, a growing frontier is equated with superiority as

proven by behaviour of those who win wars. In a sense, Oak Ridge is a miniature version of the greater United States. With the expansion of the frontier at risk, Oak Ridge, and the United



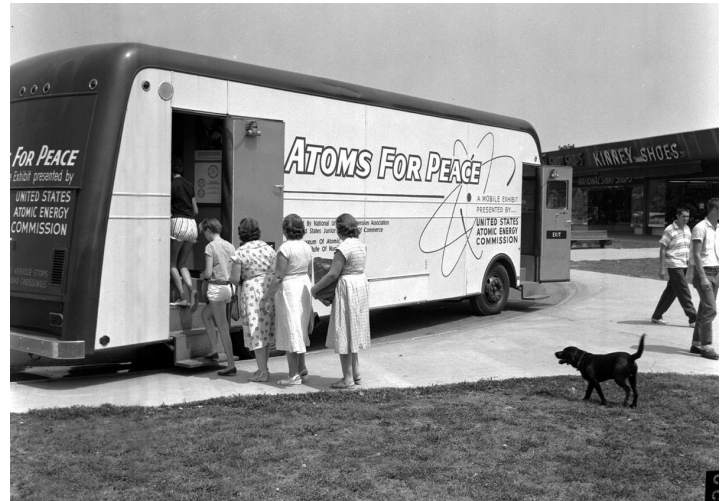
*"Your Stake In The Atom" dome informing residents why nuclear power is integral to a better society. Hosted by the Atomic Energy Commission. Photographer: Ed Wescott*

States, looked back upon the zenith of its power and yearned for it. Without this version of power under its belt, what was America? Risking loss of identity, the American government needed a way to honour America's frontier and thus its superior frontier so it would not be forgotten, encouraging it to be sought after again.

The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) established by the American government to control the development of atomic science were left to control the messages surrounding the atomic bomb and atomic energy in general. Since the need for the Atomic City decreased and a social awakening was causing resistance to the nuclear, nostalgia needed to persist as it became the only vehicle for propaganda that could garner favour for nuclear power (Freeman 113). The AEC decided to educate the public on all things atomic, including the use of museums to prove why progressive technologies that would produce progressive societies needed nuclear energy. Nuclear power being the last symbol of American power became the core of these museums— The Museum of Atomic Energy Oak Ridge, The National Museum of Nuclear Science and History, Atomic Testing Museum, B-Reactor Museum, and the Rocky Flats Cold War Museum were only the few among many that came into fruition. Frontier imaginations became intertwined with

utopian imaginations in these museums, combined physically in the exhibits of these museums. Museums are the most public cultural institutions regarding nuclear weapons. The influence it possesses over the American public's ideas about the history of the bomb and its relation to the present day cannot go unnoticed— museums legitimize history. Exhibits summoning material that elicit nostalgia for this utopian past that was made possible by atomic power legitimize a utopia that not only never existed, but also eradicates minorities from the picture.

Ed Wescott, famously Manhattan Project's official photographer, published his photos in a book and exhibited them in atomic museums during the Cold War. Wescott was tasked by the American government to produce snapshots that would normalize atomic culture. The shoot location for this project was Atomic City itself: Oak Ridge. The images enjoyed by millions of Americans even today idealized the war with subjects tending gardens, smiling



*Program that delivered supplies and information to schools, hospitals and institutions to encourage research of atomic energy. Photographer: Ed Wescott*



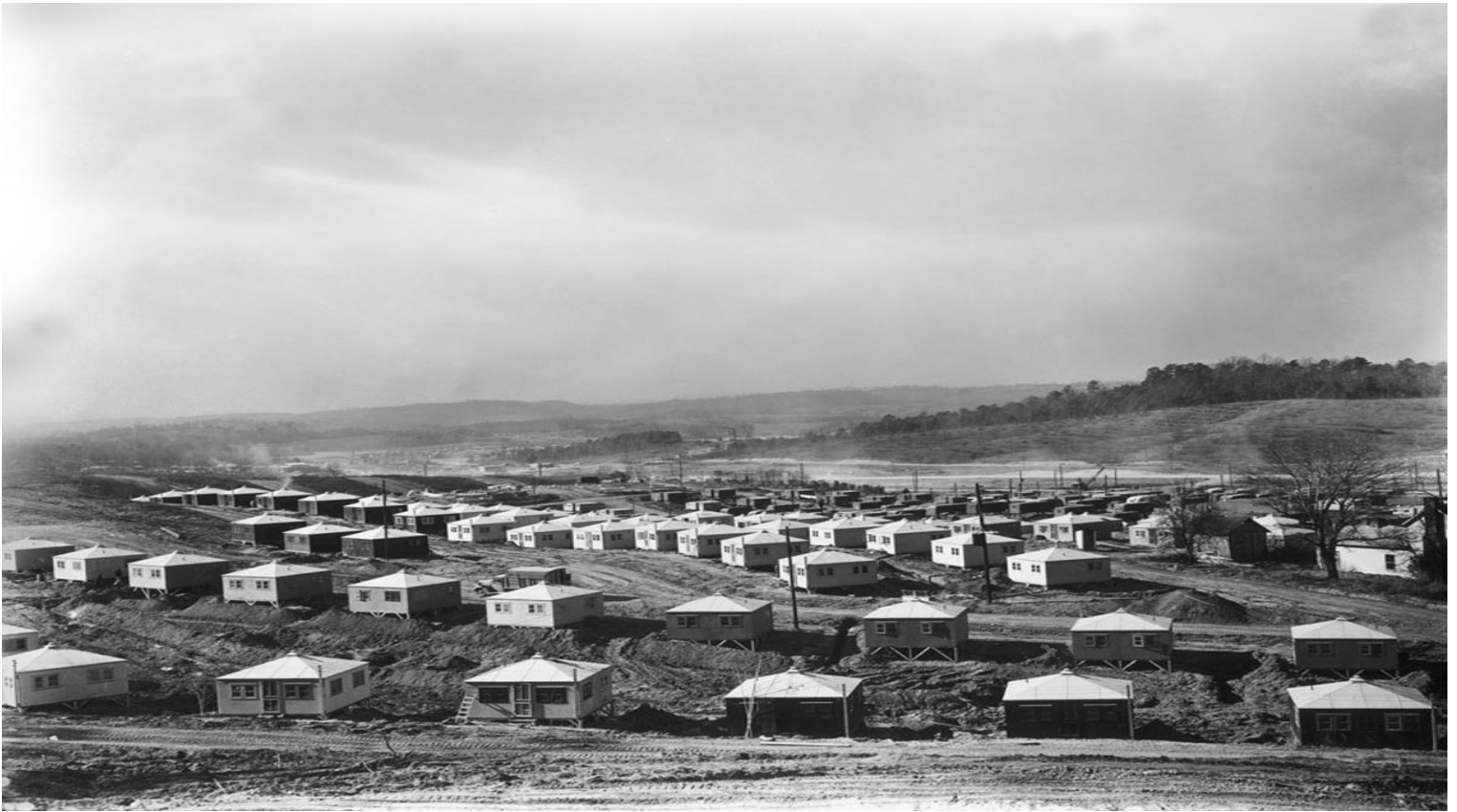
*What became Manhattan Project's most popular image— the Calutron Operators. Photographer: Ed Wescott*

workers and joyous operators. Engrained in these photographs were patriotic sentiments and wholesome family values that today “elicit nostalgic feelings for the Manhattan Project era” (Freeman 113). Danger exists in this because in none of these pictures contained subjects of

marginalized groups. Undoubtedly, most of these photos were posed because for the working class and minorities in the city, the Manhattan Project “didn’t seem to [have] much to get nostalgic about” (Freeman 55). Stories from victims of this American victory culture did not even make it into these museums; the destruction resulting from Hiroshima, the attack that Oak Ridge contributed to, was absent from museums. According to sources, only one image of a lone atomic bomb survivor hung on the wall of one museum— conveying that nuclear dangers were essentially nonexistent (American Museum for Science and Energy). The narrative of a specific American narrative is afresh in this example. National pride, the nuclear family, a normal happy life, was correlated with a land of home owning, cleanly, working towards expanding American power livelihood that was largely only accessible to a group of privileged white individuals. Moreover, discussions of American superiority often refer to these photos as proof of the good life that once existed— before mass immigration, when people were economically sound with riches brought by a war economy, and when whites narrative of their country in which they were the main character was not threatened by minorities who would later gain an acknowledged voice (Yanarella 67). Oak Ridge’s success evoking nostalgia for triumphant days although xenophobic, warrants a culture that wants to return to these days: allowing proposals of violent policies to further spread American power to easily gain public approval since these policies would allegedly return stability to the country. It is this success that made preservation of Oak Ridge and its identity crucial even when Cold War relations began to thaw.

Upholding a fabricated narrative took more than just museums. The utopian depiction of the Cold War needed to pervade the homefront in order to be truly effective. In the aftermath of the mushroom cloud, new community planning inspired by the Atomic City would spread across the United States. Suburbia, was engineered and used in Oak Ridges. Suburbia is often critiqued for the elitism and racism it stands for. However, suburbia was not an arbitrary form of architecture that somehow was ascribed this issue. When the grounds of suburbia in Oak Ridges was contaminated with xenophobia then it is not surprising that the suburbia that spread functioned in the same way. Within Oak Ridges the quality and style of house one was assigned was correlated to their importance to the Manhattan Project (Freeman 51). Inequality ran deep in Oak Ridge’s neighbourhoods: black people only receiving hutments made of flimsy plywood, regardless of stature. Happy Valley and Gamble Valley, two neighbourhoods within the cities that were constructed for blacks have been described as “deliberately planned slums” (Freeman 55). These communities were enclosed by 300 feet foot ridges and city dumps, isolated from the main part of the city and closed off from whites. Black women had curfews and were not seen out in evenings and black children were not allowed on the federal reservation until much later. Instead black women lost their jobs if they became pregnant and were dropped at a bus stop to be shipped away from the community. It was an effort to segregate black populations from the whites and control their populations. This is problematic because in segregating the population physically, minorities stories were segregated from the narratives that spread across the United





*The only published image of Gamble Valley Photographer: Ed Wescott*

States. One white Oak Ridger commented that, “one [could] easily forget any of the unpleasant aspects [t]here because you become absorbed in your own social circle and become quite isolated from general life here” (Taylor 2012). Exemplified in this comment is the missing acknowledgement of lives outside of white lives in the main part of the city.

When it is the main city that became the storytelling hub and site for museums, this becomes especially problematic. The inequalities that came with suburbia were overlooked. By spreading this version of suburbia, the rest of the country fell victim to neighbourhoods of racism. This is evident in today when we observe the living conditions of those in suburban communities relative to those in inner-cities. The inner-cities being a parallel in architecture to a place like Happy Valley and in how they are left out of the bigger picture when talking about the United States. Furthermore, when the American government wanted to incorporate Oak Ridge into America officially, they were met with resistance from richer folk who stated that they “didn’t want to share” their beautiful enclave (Freeman 113). After negotiations, it was decided that Oak Ridge would be opened to the public but would remain gated with heavy monitoring of the gates. Keep in mind that these gates were for the white elites and not the hutments belonging to mostly people of colour. This is the predecessor of the modern day gated community which aims to keep out unwanted groups of people that are seen as a threat to the communities wholesome living. By forgetting these nuanced ways that would cause the unimagining of an entire group of people from the imaginations of nostalgia in the future, white superiority became the ideal symbol of

national superiority.

The idea of fabricating a narrative that encourages a specific image of America that is white, clean, safe, protected by the powers of atomic energy may be a stretch for some. However, analyzing the case of Model City, the Atomic City on the flip side of Oak Ridge's love for the nuclear, hammers in this point. Model City was the site of one of the biggest environmental disasters in American history known as the Love Canal disaster. Model City was settled to be a utopian city, or a "model city." Due to financial strain the city and the canal that was being built had to be abandoned. Hooker Chemicals Company came in the 1940's, scooped the canal, and used it to dump its chemical waste in, including waste from the Manhattan Project (Blum 5). Eventually the land was sold back to districts school board for one dollar, but Love Canal's history had just begun. Chemicals began to leech out of the concrete they were buried in and into the basements, soil, and water supplies of the residents (Levine 197). Cases of chromosome damage, infertility, and cancer exponentially grew in the population, empowering residents to finally stand up to the government's ignorance of their communities problems. Lois Gibbs became the leader of the Homeowners Association which was the leading advocacy group for Love Canal (Levine 197). The media frenzy that the story instigated focused on Gibbs and her stated concerns. Nevertheless, this association disregarded the environmental rights of the largest group in Love Canal- the renters.



*The only published image of Gamble Valley Photographer: Ed Wescott*

The LaSalle Housing Development built to accommodate low-income families consisted of 250 apartments and was a group comprised of a residency that was 65% black. Separated by a fence from the property owners who were almost all white, minorities were not included in the Homeowners Association fight. "Homeowners" by name connoted a language of citizenship and exclusionary rights. Members of the LaSalle understood that "[Homeowners Association] forgot us low income people, they think we're trash" (Levine 200). In response, LaSalle formed its own advocacy group called the Concerned Love Canal Renters Association. Unlike the Homeowners Association who was primarily concerned about the loss of value of their properties, LaSalle's association's chief concern was in regard to the uncertain matter of Love Canal's health effects (Levine 201). While the homeowners wanted their property to be bought by the government and lowered mortgage interest rates to permit an affordable move, LaSalle did not care as it did not even have the resources to leave. Finding tenants from LaSalle to join the Association was a struggle in itself because tenants dependent on public assistances hesitated to complain about the government then

between the two groups would have been beneficial, but when LaSalle members attended Homeowner meetings they were often greeted with derogatory comments. Homeowners Association even refusing to sign a petition that demanded the government to consult LaSalle Housing residents before pursuing remedial construction. The lack of minority voices in the larger narrative of the Love Canal Movement meant that the disaster is remembered as one that caused suffering for a white population. When Gibbs went on *Good Morning America* to talk only about the Homeowners Association she cemented this fate.

Although making it an exclusively white problem may be seen as a strategic way to receive the attention of a biased media and a government playing its own superior white narrative, it is also a whitewashing of history which minorities have to face the consequences of. Absent from the nostalgia for a period during the Cold War that was ruled by student protests and local resistance to government actions are marginalized groups. More people remember the hippy movement than when the civil rights movement took place. Much like Oak Ridge, Love Canal is celebrated and remembered by many for its perceived bravery and success. Both even subtracting disenfranchised voices from its story. Unlike Oak Ridge however, Love Canal did not receive a museum or memorial for the lives lost. Public government records of this part of American history do not even exist. What can be found is a few books published primarily by those from the Homeowners Association and archived photos on the New York Heritage website that in its hundreds of photographs have no trace of LaSalle tenants (ringing similar to Oak Ridge in this aspect).



*Children were used regularly in rallies to rake in greater concern. Courtesy of New York Heritage Digital Collections*

Nostalgia arguably aids in perpetuating a belief that life was better before the introduction of minorities and other marginalized groups in the larger society. Of course, this is untrue because these groups existed before the Cold War and during it; however removing their history attributes to this belief. This is evidenced through the examples of two Atomic Cities, Oak Ridge and Model City, that stitched together narratives that framed atomic power as a miracle protecting white privileged Americans' nuclear families. The communities, their institutions and thus its memories played a censorship with its past in order to preserve a tale that assured continued domination of the privileged. In this a binary was created: the white as the clean, moralistic, and heroic versus the working class minorities who are unlawful, morally corrupt, and live in breeding grounds for unsavoury conduct. During the Cold War the economy was at all time high and Americans had a buying power unmatched by any other nation. If there were convictions that minorities simply did not exist in a time of wealth, it is believable that

individuals today looking back at this time to understand what went wrong to lead to the economic downfall today identify immigration and thus minorities as the source of the problem. American nostalgia, in conclusion, is merely an illusion concealing the pieces of the bad days in the good old days utilized by the elite as a tool for personal interests. The implications of the nostalgia persist in today's politics that has made minorities a scapegoat for America's troubles. It should therefore be no surprise when I say this— the present and the future was created yesterday. Furthermore, we must question the appearance of this American ideal 27 years after the end of the Cold War. If America's collective identity—initially created to shield against communist threat— is still the same as it was in the Cold War period, did America ever leave the Cold War?

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