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Cities of Desire: Ecotopia and the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary

Introduction

Though this paper is based on my remarks at the Transcultural Spaces conference, its second part diverges vastly from what I said in October 2008. Talking about tactical articulations of Ecotopian desires, I had fallen prey to an aspect of my research, mistaking parts of an imaginary and their articulation for the material reality. In other words, I had accepted narratives of regional exceptionality in dealing with the environment, when in fact the very specific practices I mentioned were neither specific to, nor originally from, the three cities that are the focus of this essay. This shows the power of the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary, the idea of a region that hinges on an axis from Portland, Oregon, via Seattle, to Vancouver, British Columbia. It is not a coincidence, I assume, that the conference program flyer featured the iconic view of the Seattle skyline, with the Space Needle in the fore-, and Mount Rainier in the background. Why is it the city of Seattle which serves as the illustration for the long version of the conference’s title “Challenges of Urbanity, Ecology, and the Environment in the New Millennium”?

The Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary indeed gives expression to desires about postmodern urbanity and its relationship with the vague concept known as nature. In the course of the following pages, I will trace an early formulation of such desires as it appeared in Ernest Callenbach’s utopian novel Ecotopia. Analyzing the novel regarding space-making processes, I will then compare the template advocated by Callenbach to the urban spaces of Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, where the desires taught by Ecotopia are a factor in the debates on how to shape spatial reality. But whose desires are these, into what have they been transformed, and is their impact tangible on the ground?

Ecotopia

First published in 1975, Callenbach’s novel follows the template of classic utopian literature. An outside visitor – in this case, journalist William Weston from the United States – visits a society that must seem alien to him, and is slowly converted to this society’s way of life. In Ecotopia, this alien society consists of parts of California, Oregon, and Washington that have seceded
from the U.S. and are striving for an ecologically sustainable basis of living. Strategic space-making is an essential part of the utopian project portrayed, as is relating the living space to the natural environment. Through this, the nation of Ecotopia becomes a home-place, “Eco- from the Greek oikos (household or home)” (Callenbach prologue), rather than a non-place which the name “utopia” implies and which Callenbach sees as the result of a non-relationship with the environment (Pütz 386).

The novel’s narrator stays mainly within Ecotopia’s capital, San Francisco, and therefore the descriptions of urban locales are limited to this geographical area. Weston’s first impressions of the changed city reveal how his experience of Ecotopian urbanity differs from what he is used to:

The first shock hit me at the moment I stepped onto the street. There was a strange hush over everything. I expected to encounter something at least a little like the exciting bustle of our cities – cars honking, taxis swooping, clots of people pushing about in the hurry of urban life. What I found, when I had gotten over my surprise at the quiet, was that Market Street, once a mighty boulevard striking through the city down to the waterfront, has become a mall planted with thousands of trees. The “street” itself, on which electric taxis, minibuses, and deliverycarts purr along, has shrunk to a two-lane affair. [...]. Over it all hangs the almost sinister quiet. There is even the occasional song of a bird, unbelievable as that may seem on a capital city’s crowded main street. (12)

The details of this passage are worthy of close analysis in their own right, and are exemplary of the novel’s attention to very concrete results of the utopian enterprise. I will, however, direct my attention to the larger scale. The urban space itself is so transformed as to stun the narrator, whom the absence of familiar signifiers of urban space even strikes as “sinister.” The change is so massive that it challenges Weston’s conceptions of what a city is and how it ought to function. This confusion continues as he encounters numerous instances of a spatial order that has reshaped the appearance and character of the city.

The complete change in modes of transportation – private motor vehicles barely exist, and have been replaced by public transit, free bicycles, and citizens have returned to walking – remains an integral part of Weston’s observations. Apart from the ecological benefits that are the goal of Ecotopian policies, this new mobility paradigm allows for but also enforces a restructur- ing of spatial patterns. Downtown San Francisco with its skyscrapers is “strangely overpopulated with children and their parents,” (13) as it has become a mixed-use area while “the former outlying residential areas have largely been abandoned.” In Weston’s perception these new patterns of settlement represent a radical departure from the U.S. norm. The same radical change applies to the new role of nature in the urban fabric.

Weston considers the city’s atmosphere “bucolic” (12), as creeks now run along Market Street. The presence of birdsong in the urban soundscape has already been noted. Even hunting, associated with the rural – or the escape
from the city or suburbia – in North American culture, has become an aspect of the urban experience:

Maybe they have gone back to the Stone Age. In the early evening I saw a group of hunters, carrying fancy bows and arrows, jump off a minibus, on which they had loaded a recently killed deer. Two of them hoisted it up, suspended on a long stick they carried it on their shoulders, and began marching along the street [...] I learned the group had been hunting just outside of town. (15)

Weston repeatedly notes that in Ecotopia, the city is a food-producing space on a level that goes beyond the recreational, providing both opportunities for hunting and fishing and the growing of produce. While this is at odds with 20th century notions of urbanity, Callenbach himself has stated that this is a deliberate return to older functions of urban spaces, as cities had not always been only importers of food (Pütz 387-88, cf. Steele). For the purpose of this essay, it is important to see how this inevitably means a much closer relationship of the urban to its environment, especially in the Ecotopian context, which stresses what today is marketed as “organic” food production.

One further observation that will become important in what follows is the physical shape of Ecotopians and the culture related to outdoors exercise. The narrator witnesses not only an official government policy that deliberately encourages outdoor exercise, but also the health benefits of an urban setting in which muscle power – i.e., bicycling and walking – is an essential component of personal transportation.

In the way that urban space is produced and transformed, the strategies portrayed in the book bear an uncanny resemblance to the processes that urban theorist Mike Davis has called “ghetto landscaping” (Davis 380-95). The “benign” neglect that allowed the decay of primarily African American blue-collar neighborhoods during the Nixon and Ford era (cf. Davis 386-95) had one unintended consequence: a massively increased biodiversity in afflicted urban areas, found elsewhere in the West only in the most massively bombed German cities after World War II (Davis 380-86).

In Ecotopia, these forces are at work, too. Though deliberately employed for a very specific purpose, there is an apocalyptic aspect to this abandonment of built environment to nature. “What will be the fate of the existing cities [...] They will gradually be razed [...] The land will be returned to grassland, forest, orchards, or gardens” (Callenbach 27-28). The result goes against the notion of an expanding urban and suburban space, as “The signs of a once busy civilization – streets, cars, service stations, supermarkets – have been entirely obliterated, as if they never existed” (28). The Ecotopian urban template is thus not exclusively one of creating a new space, it is also one of abandoning the old. From this perspective, the break with the imaginary U.S. city becomes most pronounced. Although the Rust Belt’s spaces of decay are disconcertingly similar, the Ecotopian model views them as desirable.
Ecotopia reflects the desire formulated by Edward Soja “that all progressive social forces – feminism, the ‘Greens,’ the peace movement, organized and disorganized labor, movements for national liberation and for radical and regional change – become consciously and explicitly spatial movements as well” (173). On the one hand, the Ecotopian city thus reflects the spatial changes that might result from a strategic reformulation of the urban along the lines proposed by these movements. San Francisco as described by the narrator is therefore the end result of the internal logic of ecological sustainability. On the other hand, there are other equally sustainable models of habitation that dispense with urbanity (cf. Pütz 388), so Callenbach’s choice of basing his utopia’s human settlement patterns on cities can be read as expressing very specific desires for the future of the North American city in general.

The key points of such a city of desire are clear from the descriptions above. Government intervention has created a denser cityscape that is dominated by mixed use, privileges public transit and non-motorized means of transportation over other forms, and has dispensed with suburbia and its forms of land development. The urban relates to its natural environment, even reintroduces it into its center, both for the sake of viewing pleasure and purposes of food production. Finally, the inhabitants literally embody this new urban ideal and its benefits, with the outdoor space – both within the city and beyond its limits – becoming a space for exercising and exhibiting these bodies.

Mainstreet Cascadia

I would argue that the desires Callenbach articulates have shaped the narratives of this region that shares much of its key features with Ecotopia. Having gone through several permutations in its development, this notion of a region known as Mainstreet Cascadia – the urban axis of Portland-Seattle-Vancouver – is itself an expression of desires for 21st century urbanity in North America. Yet where and how do the imaginary Mainstreet Cascadia – “the images, stories, and legends [...] shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society” (Taylor 23) – and the real cities intersect? Is there an Ecotopian mode of producing space that can be found in these locales? Also, using Taylor’s notion of the imaginary, can it then really be seen as “the common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy,” (23) thus creating desires for certain ways of space-making that would not be feasible otherwise?

In 1981, journalist Joel Garreau used the term “Ecotopia” in his book *The Nine Nations of North America* to describe the region as one of nine North American modes of thought, lifestyle, and economy. Garreau’s journalistic approach to the issue of region serves as a clear articulation of imaginaries of place. The term Cascadia to describe the region is a creation of the 1980s, and
was first used by Seattle ecologist David McCloskey (cf. Abbott 195-96, Haehnle), who drew the borders of the region in accordance with biological and geological factors – i.e. the watersheds of rivers and temperate rainforests. This articulation of a Pacific Northwestern region is meant to evoke a bioregional awareness in which the human impact on the natural environment becomes the center of attention (cf. Sightline Institute). For the purpose of this analysis, however, the key term is Mainstreet Cascadia, described above. Understanding the contemporary debates over the space-making in these cities is only possible if it is based on an understanding of their imaginary.

The Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary

A short glance at the language used to describe these cities – in other words, a brief overview over the narratives that form the imaginary of said places – is revealing. In 1998, Al Gore “held up Portland as the best of all possible worlds” (Abbott 6). Seattle was considered to be the best city for George Clooney’s Emergency Room character to live in, as this would be the most understandable choice for both the character and audiences at the time (Lyons 2). Vancouver – having by the time of publication of this collection been host to the Winter Olympics 2010 – “has emerged as the poster child of urbanism in North America” (Berelowitz 1). The images and associations connected with the three cities – some of them the result of deliberate self-marketing – share numerous aspects with Ecotopian urbanity.

In his introduction to an anthology of Vancouver short fiction, Douglas Coupland states: “quickly, what makes Vancouver, Vancouver? […] mountains; tall trees; outdoor sports; the bodies to match those sports; outdoor clothing to cover those bodies […] some of these items are cliché, yet they remain integral to the city’s character” (2-3). In this short listing of images, the embodied healthiness of William Weston’s Ecotopian San Francisco comes to the surface. These items fall into the category of myths described by Lance Berelowitz: “Vancouver has propagated a number of myths about itself, now well established and accepted in the public mind,” (1) with “an entire mythology […] around Vancouver’s relationship with ‘Nature’” (15).

The Portland Imaginary, in contrast, is not as visual, but more concerned with the political. Lacking an iconic skyline and Pacific Ocean beaches, its reputation stems from concrete policies that have turned Portland into a site which proponents of urban planning and free-market advocates debate, “trying to determine how Portland might serve as a model or warning for other communities” (Abbott 6). In a utopian fashion, it generates demand for government space-making or elicits fears of the same.

Seattle, in turn shared – arguably only until the WTO riots of 1999 and the bursting of the dot-com bubble – its standing as a quality-of-life utopia with Vancouver. James Lyons, analyzing “Seattle’s role as an organizing site and
symbolic repository for an enduring set of fears, hopes and desires relating to the changing form and function of America’s urban centres” (9), underscores this prominent position. Providing one half of the setting of the blockbuster romantic comedy *Sleepless in Seattle*, the city even shared the spotlight with New York on the cultural map of North America as it is represented by Hollywood.

What makes these cities Mainstreet Cascadia, however, is an assumed similarity and connectedness, a loose collection of images that reflect the desires that have been instrumental in forming this imaginary. The following list of these images is by no means exhaustive: Mainstreet Cascadia hosts a hi-tech white-collar economy, which includes Vancouver as Hollywood North, Seattle as the city of Microsoft, and Portland as hosting both ad-agencies and the creative talent that cannot afford the cost of living in Vancouver. All three cities feature impressive natural scenery and access to the outdoors that in turn engenders the bodies that represent such quality-of-life narratives. After the decay of North American urbanity in the 1970s and 1980s, the three cities became symbols of a different, futuristic urbanity, the “hopes” of Lyon’s diagnosis of Seattle. The privileging of ecological over political boundaries, implied in the name Cascadia, and previously recognized by Garreau in his use of ‘Ecotopia’ as a name for the region, is also an integral feature of the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary. The question of urbanity’s relationship to nature is contained in this, since “the bioregional movement is not just a rural program: it is as much for the restoration of urban neighborhood life and the greening of cities” (Snyder 47).

Yet is this idea of a region, embraced by public officials such as Seattle mayor Schell (cf. Moody 7) a reality experienced by its inhabitants? Or is it an artificial construct that has no bearing on the daily lives of the region’s urbanites or its rural inhabitants (cf. Haehnle)? One further question complicates the discussion of this imaginary: whose desires have been at work in articulating Mainstreet Cascadia, and what are its uses?

Today’s imaginary of the region would not be possible without massive changes that have taken place regarding the economic basis of the Pacific Northwest. The supposed white-collar urbanity in which the outdoors becomes a space of leisure, and in which nature is not something to be exploited, is a result of the relative decay of extractive industries. The emergence of a changed perception of the three cities relied on a changed material reality (cf. Schwantes 341-85). Filming, writing, and advertising Mainstreet Cascadia into being was therefore also the work of new economic forces. To give one example of such a process: “the rhetorics of Northwest lifestyle” (Lyons 49) have been a major marketing instrument for the outdoor-equipment industry. Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver are among the major markets for outdoor-leisure related products (cf. Abbott 56, Lyons 56-61); manufacturers that serve these markets and have achieved global reach are based in the region’s urban centers themselves (cf. Schwantes 383), and are actively using the location of their headquarters as a marketing tool. The marketing of the urban
space – as a space of consumption or as a site to consume the space – also reveals the economic basis of the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary. It was "pivotal to the revitalization of Seattle's downtown," (Lyons 91) and is an essential aspect of the way Vancouver is "consciously selling itself [as a city of desire] on the global marketplace of cities" (Berelowitz 163).

Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver have managed to profit from the economic shifts of the 1970s and 1980s. More than that, however, they – their local economies and the various agents interested in marketing their cities – have used this shift and remade themselves as model cities. The resulting imaginary enables a quality-of-life utopia that policymakers, businesses, and citizen initiatives embrace and use for their purposes. Mainstreet Cascadia as a utopian space can educate desires of a dialogue between urbanity and nature. The tensions that result from such desires, the issues that are left out of discourses of quality of life, and the problems and failures of making spaces that articulate Ecotopian hopes, however, challenge such meanings.

The ‘Real’ Mainstreet Cascadia

As the imaginary has been shaped by privileged narratives of space – of cities that offer unrivalled quality-of-life as it is determined by major magazines, of a ‘clean’ white-collar economy, of an ecological sensibility and the great outdoors as a playground for urbanites who want to remain in touch with nature – other narratives have become marginalized, being ill-suited for such a utopian perception of the urban locales in question, or even opposed to it. The ways in which space is produced in Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland intersect with Ecotopian desires, yet both on the strategic and tactical level, there are failures, dissonances, and challenges to, and struggles over, the meanings of Mainstreet Cascadia as a space of desire.

Take David Oates' meditations on the tension between urbanites enjoying the outdoors as a space of leisure and the reality in which their hopes and uses for nature are in direct conflict with those who have been written out of visions of a 21st-century urbanity in harmony with nature. It is on Ecotopia Lane on Portland’s Urban Growth Boundary that Oates considers the class aspects of Ecotopian desires:

The ahistorical Arcadia: ecotopia built on ignorance of who has lived here or how anyone might, indeed make a living here. How effectively has the environmental movement reckoned with the lives of people who labor in the country, those who bring timber for our houses and meat and grain for our tables? Answer: not at all. Muir and his followers – and I am certainly one – have seldom noticed them. We’re looking somewhere else, looking for that picturesque view, even if it means looking right over the heads of these inconvenient people. It is college kids and urban professionals who feel put-out when pickups and chainsaws appear in the woods with their Pabst Blue Ribbon, their bad manners, and cigarettes and dogs and guns, and their fundamentalist bumper-stickers. And then, of course – once
they are safely out of ear shot – the trailer trash jokes are brought out by the Goretexed urbanites. (Oates 73)

Mainstreet Cascadia and its uses ignore those for whom the outdoors does not equal a space of leisure, who cannot afford the products offered by the outdoor equipment industry, and whose livelihoods – dependent on extractive industries or fields connected to them – present a challenge to the ecological sensibilities that are such an essential part of the urban image of the region. When “hundreds of logging trucks converged on downtown Portland” in April 1990, it was lumber industry workers who “took their protest into the stronghold of their perceived enemies, the city-based environmentalists whose support of the Endangered Species Act seemed to value birds over working families and their way of life” (Abbott 112-13). Whether it is named “Ecotopia” or “Mainstreet Cascadia,” the ecological space of desire, the model city of the 21st century in which nature and urbanity enter a symbiosis, is a space of struggles and challenges. The processes of making it ‘real’ can draw on utopian narratives, but the Ecotopian model of a strategic, centrally-directed reshaping of the urban landscape to incorporate nature and attain sustainability, stands in stark contrast to the social realities of Vancouver, Seattle, and Portland.

Ultimately, re-making space strategically and in ways that redefine the relationship of the urban with nature is a slow legislative and administrative process. Desires of better cities can guide discussions, yet in the words of Carl Abbott’s reflections of Portland and ideas of Ecotopia and Cascadia: “All this inspiring rhetoric being noted, we find ourselves back at the bureaucratic realization that environments at the beginning of the twenty-first century are protected through laws, regulations, and plans” (196). Ecotopia as a how-to guide for creating cities has to fail, as it assumes a unity of purpose between all agencies involved in shaping the urban space, such as the city in question as much as its neighboring administrative unit and the larger legislative bodies they are embedded in. One of Mainstreet Cascadia’s essential aspects – that of region – becomes a hindrance, as neither Vancouver, nor Seattle, nor Portland exist in a solitary manner surrounded by wilderness. Even a comparatively successful example of creating a regional body for decision-making guided by a framework of containing sprawl and protecting spaces of relative wilderness, the Greater Vancouver Regional District, shows the complications and compromises involved in such efforts (cf. Harcourt 128-48).

Still, the exact kind of inspiring rhetoric criticized by Abbot remains an integral element of debates over the urban setting of Vancouver. For example, former Vancouver mayor and British Columbia premier Mike Harcourt’s and local planner Ken Cameron’s book about “Nine Decisions that Saved Vancouver” is titled City Making in Paradise. Yet one of their tales of success – the development of False Creek, the body of water establishing downtown’s southern border – carries ironic footnotes. It is not only the legacy of what
they consider Vancouver’s entry on the world stage as a city of desire, Expo 86, it also occupies sites which were once instrumental to the timber industry and its suppliers, and would therefore not have been possible without the decline of these industries. Also, the sediments at the bottom of False Creek are toxic (Berelowitz 34). Vancouver may market itself as a model city; the reality, however, is full of “dirty little secrets” (op. cit. 33-37) of a space-making that neither sufficiently relates the urban to its environment nor successfully creates ecological sustainability. Building codes do not take into account the likelihood of major earthquakes in the region; houses are constructed for a Southern-Californian climate and then need extensive repairs after the first rainy season. And despite a municipal push for a more bicycle-friendly environment, and the city having a sophisticated though patchy network of buses and the Skytrain system, “the number of cars is rising faster than the rate of population growth” (Berelowitz 36). And yet, these are only some of the problems that the municipality itself is confronted with on its own terrain. Greater Vancouver Regional District – and in Ecotopian space-making, the smaller and greater regions are part of the equation – as well as its twenty other municipalities present even more conflicts and struggles over urban and suburban space that need to be resolved.

If Vancouver does not measure up to its (self-)image as a model for Mainstreet Cascadian urbanity, Seattle has been a negative model of non-relation to the environment from the outset. The main characteristic of space-making was the commodification of the public space, phrased cynically by local journalist Fred Moody: “Downtown Seattle had spent the 1990s undergoing a depressing renaissance. By 1999, it sported arguably the spiffiest, newest, most fashion-forward and prosperous major urban retail core in the country”(4). Not ecologically-aware governance, but booming economic forces have determined the shape of Seattle. The city has in fact been established in a constant struggle against the forces of nature, with the grading of hills and the filling-in of tidal flats, in an arduous process that kept the size of the city small for a long time (cf. Sale 7-32). The visually most drastic example of the non-incorporation of the natural environment is the physical separation of downtown from Puget Sound by the Alaskan Way viaduct – being at risk of structural failure from earthquakes, however, it is now slated to be replaced by a tunnel between 2011 and 2015, with the goal of establishing “a new waterfront surface street and public open spaces, transit investments, and other city street improvements” (cf. Washington State Department of Transportation SR 99). The public transportation network, long limited to buses and the tourist-attracting monorail stub, is currently being supplemented by a light rail system that has been voter-approved and is set for expansion (cf. Sound Transit Link). The city’s status as the one member of the urban triad of the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary that had, in contrast to both Vancouver and Portland, no basis in progressive urban planning is slowly changing. Still, Seattle’s position in this imaginary is first and foremost a result of marketing and media trends (cf. Lyons). In the larger public awareness, it is, however, a
less controversial model of turn-of-the-millennium urbanity than its neighbor metropolis to the south.

Portland’s reputation is, as mentioned above, the one most strongly connected to Ecotopian desires of strategically re-made space. Not having been as drastically affected by urban renewal and freeway-building as other urban centers – a five-mile stretch of freeway was defeated by citizen initiatives in the early 1970s (Abbott 89-90) – its practices of urban planning were more strongly influenced by neo-urbanist thinking, that is the creation of dense, pedestrian-friendly cityscapes similar to the model advocated in *Ecotopia* (cf. Abbott 141-42). A light rail network that is free of charge in a central zone, and the relative privileging of bicycle and pedestrian traffic are two major components of urban Portland that come closest to the Ecotopian ideal. The most prominent, and also most controversial example, however, is the Urban Growth Boundary. A state-law measure, Oregon Urban Growth Boundaries (short: UGBs) are an anti-sprawl measure that aims to protect downtowns and their businesses, facilitate efficient planning, creating a clear boundary between urban and rural uses for the benefit of both sides (Metro, cf. Abbott 163). Maintaining and administering the Portland UGB currently includes three counties, “24 cities and more than 60 special service districts” (Metro, cf. Oates 3). Such strategies are vulnerable to shifting political climates – numerous agencies are involved in setting UGBs and accommodating new land needs, and measures that weaken such statutes have been successful at the ballot in the new millennium (Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development). Ecotopian urban desires are heavily politicized, the criticism from the right vocal and strong, involving media heavyweights such as George Will and think tanks such as the Cato Institute (cf. O’Toole).

The strategically made urbanity of Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, diverges from the hopes and ideas expressed in the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary. Ecotopian desires inform the debates in the respective cities to varying degrees, and play a role in the struggles over the meanings and goals of fashioning space in them. Giving meaning to urbanity is not, however, an exclusively strategic exercise. The city’s inhabitants themselves can articulate desires and use space in ways that match Callenbach’s template. The following remarks will therefore address the tactical Cascadia, the daily – or extraordinary – practices that re-make or challenge strategic space and its discourses (cf. de Certeau).

Though not a prominent part of the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary, practices from Ecotopia that enjoy increasing popularity worldwide are guerilla gardening and urban foraging. The specific climate of these cities favors such endeavors. In guerilla gardening, the urban space is used to reintroduce plants, as gardeners embed flower seeds in cracks in the concrete, plant flowers or vegetables on unused lawns in the public space, or ‘seed bomb’ vacant lots and inaccessible spaces. Where nature has already provided edible plants, urban foraging becomes possible, either for sustenance, out of culinary adventurism, or in a search for hallucinogenic mushrooms (Berelowitz
Though not seriously advocating the practice of hunting in the city, Brendan Kiley’s “The Urban Hunt” in the Seattle city magazine The Stranger serves to show the theoretical possibilities for hunting offered within city limits – a practice that Callenbach’s utopian template deliberately includes. The Cascadia Guerilla Gardening Brigade articulates what these tactical appropriations of space have in common: not that they are exclusive to the Pacific Northwest, but that they tap into the Cascadian Imaginary of a city that relates to nature as a framework for such practices.

A completely different mode of shaping Mainstreet Cascadia from the bottom up depends on the political framework of the respective municipality. Both in Portland and Vancouver, freeway projects were stopped by citizen initiatives (cf. Abbott 89-91, and Harcourt 33-55, respectively). Private involvement in political decision-making processes also takes the form of establishing think tanks that articulate and further Ecotopian desires. Sightline Institute, formerly Northwest Environment Watch, has given itself the mission to “bring about sustainability, a healthy, lasting prosperity grounded in place. Our focus is Cascadia, or the Pacific Northwest” (Sightline Institute website). A more radical bottom-up form of challenging the strategic space infamously found its outlet in the 1999 WTO riots in Seattle. Though this is not the place to debate the global political dimension of the riots, the interpretative frameworks of two chroniclers of Seattle’s 1990s boom – Fred Moody and James Lyons – both perceive them also as a revolt against the commodification of the urban space. Moody, from his position as a journalist and commentator sees them as a logical response to the boom years that re-shaped his city for the worse (1-11); thus the subtitle of the book, “the Demons of Ambition,” and the lower half of the cover: a hooded person dressed in fashionable outdoors wear stepping through the broken windows of a looted Starbuck’s franchise. In Selling Seattle, Lyons comes to similar conclusions. Analyzing the spatial politics of Seattle-based Starbucks and their relation to the WTO riots, he ends that particular chapter with the observation: “If Starbucks profited from inviting the customers to ‘eat the street’, then events in Seattle witnessed the streets bite back” (163).

Outlook / Conclusion

The current economic crisis has already re-shaped North American space in one of its manifestations, the housing crisis. Cities of the Rust Belt have been shrinking and keep doing so, some are now yielding to nature. Some are deliberately reduced in size, with suburbia becoming wilderness again as the bulldozing of derelict neighborhoods has emerged as one of the approaches practiced in the hardest-hit locales, and debated in the media as a possible solution on a national level (cf. Leonard). It is a time of fears and dystopian scenarios for North American cities, mirroring – in this aspect – the state of urbanity at the time Ernest Callenbach wrote and published his utopian vi-
Callenbach’s Ecotopia articulated ideas and desires for making space from a wide range of sources and for a variety of purposes. In the book’s treatment of urbanity, however, a clear model evolved that challenged traditional binaries of city and nature and the very structure and functions of 1970s North American urbanity itself. These desires remained at work in imaginaries of the Pacific Northwest, and formed an essential part of what became a mode of framing the urban axis Vancouver-Portland-Seattle. In the Mainstreet Cascadia Imaginary, however diffuse it is, Ecotopian desires for the city-nature relationship can be articulated.

The issue is not whether Mainstreet Cascadia will become Ecotopia. Nor is it whether Portland, Seattle, or Vancouver will become the one model for the future of North American urbanity. The main challenge for Ecotopian thought is to shape the agendas of agents in space-making processes, strategically and tactically, so that they use their imaginaries of region in ways that ultimately help create more sustainable cities that will in turn educate the urban desires of a globalized world. Even if the real space on the ground does not measure up to the ideal and carries toxic legacies of the past, this desire alone is an achievement and a way of preparing for the challenges of urbanity, ecology, and the environment in the new millennium.
Works Cited


