Frost in their Mortar: A short story

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In the project's early years, geological blast teams and construction crews largely functioned in a traditional fashion, with a hierarchy formatted similarly to the laborer and supervisor roles used in the construction of the Dwight D. Eisenhower National System of Interstate and Defense Highways close to a century before. Now, though, the arrangement was quite different. Rather than employing human craftsmen to build each of the site's millions of homes, a fleet of hulking, complex machines roamed the land day and night, spitting out buildings behind them at a rate of about three dwellings per hour. These machines were attended to by technicians who could diagnose any issues and make repairs, but all construction work was done by the contraptions themselves. If anything occurred that could not be remedied by a process contained within a technician's manual of potential maladies, an engineer was called in to assess the situation. So far, this hadn't happened. The teams who designed these machines were among the best in the world, so the on-site engineers largely spent their time granting unofficial interviews to members of the press from the confines of their new homes in the most central four communities of the complex.

It was there that Henning found himself on a temperate Friday evening, across a coffee table from a polite, middle-aged woman of Somali origin and her husband, a German twelve years her junior who she had met while teaching at Hochschule Darmstadt. Henning knew neither of their names, since despite the casual nature with which the engineers were generally treated by managerial staff for the project, there could be repercussions for letting slip certain details to press members. He could probably identify them with some basic research based on the stories they had told him about themselves, but it wasn't in anybody's interests for him to have that knowledge. The two had been his editors' main contact point within the vast site since moving in when home manufacturing began three months ago, and Henning had spoken with them in virtual conference rooms many times prior to his physical trip.

They had already been through the motions of gathering information for his assigned report topic earlier that day. Henning had sat down that afternoon with the Somali woman and a few of her neighbors to discuss the automation which underpinned the construction and maintenance of all the homes in this vast system, documenting various ways in which everything from food growth to structure repairs were managed by automated systems complex enough that they had never previously been applied outside a military context. The identical, idyllic communities in the grid were meant to house millions of people living in what they believed to be the beginning of a post-work world, a grand experiment with roots in Jacque Fresco's Venus Project and Peter Joseph's Zeitgeist Movement. They would grow, learn, and prosper in their communities, but they would never have to toil. In fact, many of the initial non-employee residents of the compound were previously employed in fields that the compound's technology would render useless, hoping to find peace by living in a community based upon their own professional obsolescence.

Despite the physically mirrored nature of every community within the complex, the blocks were not designed to be truly homogeneous. Nobody had ever been able to track down whether the directives for the project came from a single source, since the number of intertwined companies working on it was in the thousands, but it was clear from the beginning that a unique pricing structure would be employed for each residential plot. Communities near the outer edges of the cleared land would be expensive to live in, and were being built last in order to capture a particular type of customer. The groups occupying homes in these spaces would likely be those most skeptical of the project as a whole, approaching a drastic shift in their lives with guarded optimism while also forming contingency plans. That said, they were likely the most well-heeled, hailing from professional backgrounds and interested in the complex from a largely academic perspective. Having them near the outside of the compound allowed them to come and go easily if they chose to, while the less expensive inner units weren't expected to see much external travel. At the very center of the compound, the four reserved engineering and technician communities were the only parts of the compound where "work" still had a meaning in the established sense.

Sitting in the kitchen of his hosts, Henning bore witness to an engaged debate the couple was having over some aspect of European history. He had found that the engineer's husband, the German, was constantly at risk of veering off into pseudo-philosophical topics related to any and all aspects of technical discussion about the details of the complex. Henning had gathered earlier in the day that the German had not finished his Civil Engineering degree at Hochschule Darmstadt, choosing instead to complete his education at HafenCity Universität Hamburg, in the field of Metropolitan Culture. This explained in part why he had no professional role in the project he now lived in, but felt free to interpret its every facet in myriad convoluted ways. Right now, it involved the Dark Ages:

…most Europeans in the 8th and 9th Century were keenly aware of the existence of the Roman Empire before them. They lived among the ruins of a civilization that far eclipsed their own capabilities to build or to govern on such a large scale. Roman society had rather quietly disintegrated in previous centuries, and many modern civilizations across Europe were initially formed as wood-and-straw encampments built into the shells of stone structures that their inhabitants could not fathom creating themselves. Granted, the Romans documented their construction methods and political system for future societies to build upon, but no single group would have the concentration of both manpower and willpower to attempt what the Romans achieved until many centuries later. In fact, many early English tribes, living on former Roman land, believed that their inability to recreate the Roman environment meant that they were living in the end times, and that they were among the last human groups to exist before Earth itself would perish…

Henning tuned out the talk; he had heard many such asides in the German's presence that day, weaving their way through metaphors, stories, and omens. The man had made it clear that he had reservations about the entire concept of the development, but those reservations were grounded in a sense of futility: that all this work was bound to wash away with the ages, rendering it ultimately useless for mankind. Henning knew there was practical merit to that view, but it was tiresome to consider such a cynical perspective. If something of this magnitude was futile, then what did that say about the merits of any smaller-scale human endeavor, least of which being the German's own observations?

Tomorrow Henning would return to Seattle with a wealth of information in hand, thoroughly documenting many of the automated processes that made this strange place tick. He had gotten word today that construction was starting on another such site in Vermont, and a third was eventually slated for eastern Tennessee. If this was all bound to be emptied out and left to rot one day, the communal towers of concrete at the center of each little community would likely be the subject of awe for whatever post-technological natives inhabited the place next. It could take those men and women many generations, though, to plot a course around each build site and figure out that the land was levelled in a perfect square; interpreting the machines which made the complex tick would be even harder, since each device might as well be an Antikythera mechanism for somebody without an implicit understanding of its workings. Henning's editors were generally averse to sentimentality, so it didn't matter in the end. His role was to inform the people of the present, and he would relish that opportunity while it still existed.

Holiday season starts with a bang in Millennium Park

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The start of the holiday season in Chicagoland was marked by the 103rd Christmas Tree Lighting Ceremony in Millennium Park on the corner of Michigan Avenue and Washington Street on Friday, November 18. While people waited for the event to start later in the evening, several other events took place around the famed "Cloud Gate" (commonly referred to as "The Bean") inside the park to mark the special occasion. These included the opening of the seasonal skating ring directly below the famed sculpture and the opening of a Virtual Reality (VR) Experience Pavilion by Facebook across from "The Bean." Many of the people in attendance for the ceremony started to line up to take their turn at both attractions while they waited for the main event to begin.

The Facebook VR Experience was only recently set up in Millennium Park, and is a free experience open to anyone ages 13 and up. While many were excited and amazed by their first glimpse at virtual reality, others were more skeptical of the device, opting to voice their concerns and problems with the device through the optional survey that followed their demonstration. Despite some negative remarks, many were still amazed by the technology they had just experienced and were soon finding themselves asking questions about purchasing and using the device at their own homes. The pavilion is scheduled to remain in the park for the most of the remainder of November (excluding holidays).

Across from the Facebook pavilion was the skating rink, which was a less popular attraction for the day through no fault of its own. Despite the opening date of the rink being made at a time when cold weather should have appeared in Chicago, the unusually warm November weather meant the ice-covered rink became more of a watery slurry over time as patrons began to skate across. Despite this setback, many skaters were willing to put up with the watery conditions due to the unique situation they found themselves in: being able to skate in warm weather. With no need for large, warm clothing, skaters found themselves in lighter attire which provided them greater maneuverability. This made for fantastic skating moves and overall mobility in the rink, making the rink popular with experienced skaters. Despite the weather setback on Friday, weather forecasts for the city show colder weather ahead, meaning no such problem will occur again anytime soon.

The ceremony itself included several performances, including music from carolers and the band STOMP, a scene by the cast and crew of Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer the Musical, and a special visit by Santa Claus towards the end. The lighting of the tree soon followed and was itself followed by a surprise fireworks finale emerging from the rooftop of a nearby building. The fireworks were incredibly close, proving a spectacular scene that engulfed the entire sky above the park. When the lighting ceremony was complete, many began to gather around the tree to get up close and personal to the beautiful sight that glimmered and shined across the entirety of the park. It was truly a spectacular sight, and will continue to be for the remainder of the holiday season here in the Windy City.

Photos by Steven Milan Moreno