A Small World: Smart Houses and the Dream of the Perfect Day
(review)

Patrick Devlin

Davin Heckman. ***A Small World: Smart Houses and the Dream of the Perfect Day.*** **Durham: Duke University Press, 2008. 224 pp. Paperback, $22.95.**

Reviewed by Patrick Devlin, London

Davin Heckman begins his promenade through the well-traveled streets of utopian technofascination by calling to mind the 1960s vision of a future of tail fins and rocket ships, before warning us not to "laugh too hard at history . . . as though we were too bored to make the same mistakes again." Our fascination with the aesthetics as well as the ideas that might characterize the future shows no sign of waning. The gloomy outlook of skeptical adults in the second half of the twentieth century was perhaps sparked by the annihilation of Hiroshima, with Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* giving us new, less tangible grounds for terror nearly twenty years later, just as the Cuban missile crisis redirected our attention to the most likely calamity.

In fact, we have never lacked an interest in fear of the future or ingenuity in finding evidence to support our gloomiest imaginings, from Nostradamus to swine flu, so *A Small World*—a title that seems to derive both from Pepsi-Cola's exhibit at the 1964 world's fair and from Disney's long-running nostalgic/macabre theme show—offers a valuable counterpoint by chronicling the strenuous efforts of manufacturers to persuade the public to buy their own personal technical solution to dystopian forebodings. Without Androbot Incorporated's B.O.B. (1983), "who" can "retrieve a beer or soft drink from an optional AndroFridge, and bring it to wherever its master may be waiting," we might well all have succumbed to terminal, thirsty depression. But unpack that sentence, from the interesting coinage "AndroFridge" to the master–servant relationship of human and robot, and some of the underlying tropes of our—or at least our parents'—ideas of the future are laid out for examination. They remain unexamined, never mind challenged.

There are many such interesting possibilities in *A Small World*, but Davin Heckman seems disinclined to waste much time on any of them. Those with a learned interest in the study of Utopias may well be tempted by the subtitle and attractively cheesy cover, suggesting as it does a breezy disquisition on the history of the vexed relationship of technology and cultural history, but they would be well advised to check their possession of

a steely discriminating eye and advanced speed-reading technique if they wish to profit from an evening in front of the fire with *A Small World*. Architects (I declare my interest here) and other students of the built environment may pass by with a clear conscience.

Assiduous reading will determine a central thesis to *A Small World*: Capitalism demands that technology is promoted with exaggerated claims that inevitably lead to consumer disappointment. This tendency, exhibited across the spectrum of consumer products, is particularly marked in "smart" domestic technologies. So far, so good. However, the "perfect day" of the subtitle suddenly assumes that a point is near at which the dehumanizing potential of smart technologies is realized, contrary to the run of evidence that forms the bulk of the book. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the author's reluctance to state his thesis clearly, or to spend time examining it, has fatally compromised the development of his argument.

And yet . . . there are fascinating ideas here too. Some are developed a little, and others are left for the reader to pick up and expand. The word *smart* is interrogated at various points, none more telling than in this alert to the military implications of the term: "The smart bomb is smart because it assumes the warrior's responsibility. It looks so we don't have to." Among the long but rather cursory descriptions of advances in "smart" kitchen and entertainment technology, this insight indeed has something of the force of a smart bomb. The resonance remains, faintly, in the peroration that forms the final chapter: technology will absolve individuals of responsibility for bad decisions by editing the reality available to them, if they allow it to determine their domestic environment. These individuals will be living "the good life"— an existence of material ease and denial of the problems of the less fortunate facilitated by control of (or possibly by) information technology that will raise an ironic smile from British readers' memories of game seekers after self-sufficiency in 1970s Surbiton.

The introduction is promising, sketching out the fascinating tension between Walt Disney's 1966 vision of Epcot, its 1980s realization, and the 1990s New Urbanism Counter-Reformation embodied in Disney's Celebration and Seaside, star of *The Truman Show*. A truly astonishing, coexisting, capital-intensive if apparently profitable exploration of U.S. (and by extension Western) attitudes to progress as embodied in technology and aesthetics, Epcot and Celebration would have formed a perfect framing device to the

themes that *A Small World* is concerned with. This seems at some point to have been the author's intention, and given the context of Epcot—an aesthetic style explicitly referencing popular ideas of the technologically driven future—the setting of *The Truman Show*, with its perfect prefiguring of Heckman's technically mediated unreality, in the retro-utopian architecture of Seaside seems perverse. And yet it is just this contrast between the aesthetics of reassurance and the technology of control that gives the film its almost unbearable resonance.

It may be that this insight is old news to students of utopian ideas, but it is of critical importance to our understanding of how new things—ideas, products, technologies—become, or are made, acceptable to us. The narrative of *The Truman Show* would make no sense if filmed on the sets of *Blade Runner*, and this tells us something very important about social acceptance of technological change. This tension underlies *A Small World* but is never, unfortunately, made explicit. This is characteristic of a book that suffers from a lack of a defining thesis but nevertheless, or possibly as a result, ends up assembling an engagingly random selection of views on the relationship of ideas of technological progress to cultural change from the early twentieth century to the present. Much of the text consists of the chronological listing of technological advances toward artificial intelligence, more or less undifferentiated in their significance, referenced to contemporary marketing material boosting each new product, and is valuable for making this source material available. The range of reference to pioneers of technology, and philosophers of its application, is impressive, even if we are not always convinced that their ideas have been fully digested. The reader feels a compulsion to add more commentators as ballast. Richard Sennett's explorations of public social space, for example, would have contrasted nicely with Heckman's nonspatial "perfect day," particularly as they share deep concerns about the desocialization of contemporary society. The writings of Reyner Banham on the technological mediation of the physical environment must also claim a prominent place in any rigorous analysis of the idea of the smart house.

After the lively introduction *A Small World* proceeds with this regular alternation of lists of technical advances, quotations from the manufacturers' advertising copy, and sections of literature review, including quotations, from twentieth-century and contemporary authors. Reference is made, and possibly

considered obligatory, to Baudrillard, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari back to Gramsci and indeed Lewis Mumford, as well as less familiar names from the fields of robotics and popular culture. Sadly, there is a resolute refusal to discuss what the physical building and its environment might be, as implied by the smart technologies that are constantly alluded to.

While this preponderance of secondary material constitutes a pleasantly eclectic primer to the study of cultural modernity, it does seem to prevent the author developing a distinctive view on the history of and prospects for the smart house. Heckman offers conclusions at the end of each chapter that are perhaps more suggestive than analytical. However, to try to isolate some unambiguous statements, one version of the narrative as embodied in these chapter conclusions might run: the introduction of machines into the domestic space in the first half of the twentieth century (chapter 1) was a necessary precondition to the subsequent infiltration of information technology (chapter 2), which tends to make people define themselves by their choice of services and commodities, rather than their interaction with other people (chapter 3). The demands of servicing this information technology are becoming so extreme—control of automated appliances, number of television channels, e-mail accounts, news feeds, and so on—that people are in some cases already living lives effectively determined by the need of manufacturers to sell affluent white suburbanites hip-hop boots that allow them to believe they have proved themselves in the mean streets of Watts or Compton (chapter 4).

There may well be something in what Davin Heckman says. He is evidently well read, and when he allows his ideas to raise their heads above the mighty parapets of bolstering reference he has built, a passionate advocate for the enjoyment of the rich, contradictory social and material world we humans have up to now inhabited can be glimpsed. We stand at a crossroads in our relationship to our environment, found and modified by our forebears and ourselves, and surely have much to learn from our past expectations of technology's ability to conquer and neutralize it, in one strand of thinking with a long and influential past—"it would be foolish to laugh too long or too hard at history." It would, however, be fascinating to read what Heckman really thinks of it, if he would focus more and delve a little deeper into the evidence of his own experience, forsaking the temptation to rely on the insights of others, however impressive.