

Bella Riviera: City upon a Hill

Walking into this apartment for the first time last November, I immediately noticed a smell. Or, rather, a lack of one, save for a hint of new carpet. All our stuff-- the rolled-up Turkish rug, the green glass lamp, the framed prints of Moscow I'd looked at so often as a child I could draw them from memory-- still sat unceremoniously on the living room floor, a heap of luggage waiting to be unpacked. It's weird having your family move while you're at school. You say goodbye to them in one place and reunite a few months later in another. Instead of my typical flight back to New York for Thanksgiving break, I made the five-hour drive south through Steinbeckian farmland, arriving after nightfall at an unfamiliar Santa Barbara address. My parents, my dog, and my belongings I knew. The apartment, and the newly-built complex it was part of, I didn't.

I've always been a spatial thinker, and when I moved cross-country the first time at 15, I brought with me sense memories of the Los Angeles bungalow I'd grown up in. The feeling of back deck splinters in my foot was a particularly potent one, as were the sounds of leaf blowers and helicopters. When I felt homesick, not only did I take daydream visits back to that house; I also personified it, talked to it, and listened as it answered me. With time, I built up a similar memory bank for my new house, a lopsided, half-1860s-half-1990s farmhouse in New York State that creaked like a pirate ship from head to toe. Neither building was new, and for me, part of their existence was tied to their age. The houses each had an inhabitant lineage. They were inseparable from the fact that others had lived in them before, had scratched the floor, had used the space and made their mark on it.

Bella Riviera, the hilltop development my parents moved to last year, seems the exact opposite. Even though the homes were built between seven and eight years ago, they still feel brand new. Everything about the apartment I'm sitting in now feels optimized, standardized, and neat. Rather than the slight give of aging wood floors, every step I take in my new room is met with the solidity of concrete because there is a level slab of it right below the stainless, oatmeal-colored carpeting. The fixtures in my bathroom-- including initially inscrutable shower controls-- wouldn't feel out of place in a Marriott. They're nice, impersonal, and compact. The whole unit feels this way. Like a hotel room, it's a space meant to be comfortable but detached, one that conforms to the general taste of many people and the specific taste of few. "Unit" feels appropriately mechanical here; it's easy to imagine the iterative design process that resulted in this collection of buildings. I can picture the construction schedule: "Unit 12-20 tile floor install, Duration: 2 working days."

My unit, situated at the bottom of the complex, stands shoulder-to-shoulder with its neighbor, each comprising half of a building resembling a red barn. This barn is repeated a couple of times up the hill, along with other "Craftsman" homes (the other design style one can choose is "Spanish"). Brick roads and footpaths meander between the houses, and a staircase bisects the complex along its north-south axis. There is a dog park as well as a tiny playground wedged behind a retaining wall near the top.

Even though it initially wasn't familiar, I really like Bella Riviera. From the perspective of an architecture student, the development is an excellent study in density and multifamily projects. The buildings themselves are part of the hillside-- my apartment is partially underground, with a staircase connecting the lower and upper levels that mirrors the slope outside. The structures stack up neatly, like a cliffside village in coastal Italy. The development manages to pack 115 units into a relatively small pocket of desirable land, and the houses are designed in a way that doesn't feel like an afterthought. Despite the necessary uniformity, the architects clearly tried to create variety, and when I walk around these days I'm constantly surprised by little tree-lined pathways or small porcelain fountains I hadn't noticed before.

My parents' apartment also aligned perfectly with the stage of life I was in two months ago. On breaks from school, I could come to this clean, comfortable, anonymous space that housed all of my things and my big old dog. I could be here but not present, and my mind usually wandered to things that were happening back at school. When break was over, I'd return, well-rested, to the familiar pace of Stanford life. Over my parents' year-long lease, I never expected to spend more than five cumulative weeks at Bella Riviera.

Then, all of a sudden, I was stuck indefinitely in a place I always saw as transitory.

When classes were first cancelled, I, like most of my friends, was so unsettled I found it hard to focus too hard on anything, including where I was living. Every day I'd see a disturbing new headline or statistic. Finals were happening and then they weren't. I was also struck with a mysterious malady that left me woozy on the upstairs couch for three days (and the panic associated with potential infection kept me bedridden for another week). I passed the month of March in a stupor. In those moments, like before, the apartment offered me comfort, but this time it was more than just a respite from college life. It was a small space of control within the insanity. In the apartment, I have my own room and bathroom, and keeping those spaces clean became a sort of ritual for me. At the same time, the hotel-like atmosphere and my unfamiliarity with it helped me pretend I was just on a long vacation. I was and am grateful every day that I get to spend this difficult period in a place where I am safe and comfortable and with my family, even if it isn't my childhood home.

As things have settled with the start of the new quarter, I'm often occupied by the macro and the long term. I'll sit on the patio in the late afternoon watching the sun dip below the increasingly familiar skyline, but my mind will be on different skylines. I think about the impacts of the virus around the world, and (more selfishly) I think about the next few years and the places I hope to go, and my mind is thousands of miles from Bella Riviera.

But in other moments, this period of confinement turns my thoughts inward, to my immediate surroundings and the history that lies invisible under firm concrete slabs. After some research, it's become clear to me that the story of Bella Riviera and the land it sits on is far more complex, and far more relevant to the present moment, than I'd originally thought.

The Santa Barbara area was the home of the Chumash people for 13,000 years before any Europeans arrived, and that's a history inextricable from this land. I just live a ten-minute walk away from the Santa Barbara Mission, and the building, while grand and beautiful, is a concrete reminder of the messy, violent past that occurred in this idyllic place, including where I sit now.

In the centuries following the Spanish arrival, the town of Santa Barbara grew, and by the early 20th century, the Bella Riviera land had been developed into the Saint Francis Hospital. The small hospital, run by the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart, stood on this site for 98 years, from 1905-2003. It housed a main hospital building and a sanitarium, novel for the time as mental illness was usually treated in the home. In 1925, the main hospital building was destroyed in an earthquake that devastated the city, and the future of the hospital looked uncertain. However, after community fundraising efforts, a new building was constructed, and the hospital remained in service of the city for 70 years, until new, stricter building codes forced its closure in 2003.

In 2010, after St. Francis Hospital had been closed for nearly a decade, ground was broken on the Bella Riviera development. The new owner of the property was Cottage Hospital, now the main hospital in the city, and they retained 75% of the units in the complex. When Bella Riviera opened a few years later, Cottage leased the subsidized units to its employees. There is a dedicated shuttle stop down the road from me for healthcare workers traveling to and from the hospital every day. The complex is so full, I live in one of the only apartments not occupied by someone who works at Cottage.

When I think about my neighbors, and the sacrifices they and frontline workers around the world are making every day to fight this virus, I'm brought to tears. When I think about the history of the place I live now, I'm taken aback at how fitting it is. I'm reminded that pandemics, while new to most of us alive today, changed the lives of our ancestors and those who lived where we do now.

My house still feels plush and new and a little unfamiliar. But the experience of confinement has forced me to build a relationship with this space quickly. I'm learning its cycles and idiosyncrasies: the way the sun rises over a bend in the road and diffuses through the window over my desk; the exact combination of windows and doors to open to make my ceiling fan most effective in a heat wave; the noise the dryer makes that rattles the entire house. My dad has even trained a Bella-Riverian crow to land on our wall every day for food. This period in my life-- in the world's collective life-- is difficult, painful, and strange. But I know my memories of right now will be forever housed in the space of this apartment.

