

iCity

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I lost a whole neighborhood last night to that bitch Holly Grale. The Floradora Heights. Renamed this morning, after its overnight reformation and subsequent QuikPoll accreditation. Now the district was officially “WesBes,” as in “West of Bester.” I *hate* those faddish abbreviated portmanteau names. Where’s the dignity? Where’s the sense of tradition? Where’s the romance? Plus, once Bester Street disappears, as it’s bound to do soon, where’s that leave your trendy designation?

But my tastes were obviously in the minority, since 67.9 percent of the residents of the quondam Floradora Heights had voted to accept Grale’s reformation over my established plan which they had been living in for some time.

Still, I shouldn’t have been so down. Floradora Heights had lasted 2063 hours until suffering the diminishment in popularity that had triggered the reformation. The average duration stats for all iCity sensate neighborhood plans were not quite 1600 hours. So my plan had performed over twenty percent better than average. That result, along with my ten extant accreditations, would certainly allow me to maintain my place in the planner rankings - and maybe even jump up a notch or two.

So round about noon of the day I lost to Grale, after moping and enjoying my loser’s morning sulk, I began to cheer up. I figured I deserved a drink, either as solace for the loss or affirmation of my genius. So I headed out in search of the Desire Path.

I was living then on Dictionary Hill, a district created by my friend Virgule Partch. A very pleasant plan, although I would have oriented the main entrances of Hastings Park north-south rather than east-west. My condo, an older model which I had opted to carry over with me during every reformation over the past five years, was currently incorporated into a building dubbed the Rogue Mandala. Very conveniently situated right next to a Starbucks. (God bless Partch’s thoughtful plans!) So after exiting the Mandala, I stepped inside the Starbucks to grab a tall guarana and a teff cake. No sense imbibing booze on an empty stomach, especially this early.

It was such a nice blue-sky day outside - the faithful faraway pico-satellite swarm had moderated the August sunlight and the ambient temperature to very

comfortable levels - that I took my drink and food outside and let the peristaltic sensate sidewalk carry me along while I ate.

I arbitrarily headed toward the Konkoville district. Or at least what had been the Konkoville district last night; I confess I hadn't scanned the reformation postings for all of iCity yet, checking only on my eleven accreditations (now ten, damn it, thanks to Grale!). Konkoville was where the Desire Path, my favorite bar, had resided the last time I had visited, a couple of days ago.

But as I approached the edges of the district, I could see that it was unlikely I would find the Desire Path here any longer.

Konkoville was now an extensive tivoli named Little Sleazy, full of wild amusement rides and fast-food booths, bursting with the noise of screaming kids.

I took out my phone and got a map of iCity as of this very moment. I queried for the Desire Path and found it halfway across town, in the Coal Sack. Oh, well, I had plenty of time and nothing better to do. So rather than dive underground for a quick subway ride, I continued on the relatively slow sidewalk toward my goal.

I used the time to study the stats on my ten remaining districts.

Resident satisfaction was holding steady in six: Cyprian Fields, Bayside, Crowmarsh, East Plum, Borogroves and Lower Uppercrust. My figures had taken a hit in two: Tangerang and Bekaski. And the remaining two showed an uptick: Disco Biscuits and Nuala's Back Forty.

I immediately scheduled an interim charrette for Tangerang and Bekaski. No sense letting things get bad enough to open up these two districts to a competitive reformation. That'd be just what I needed, the loss of two more of my fiefs to someone like Grale. In Disco Biscuits and Nuala's Back Forty I initiated proxy polling to try to determine what the residents found so newly appealing about life there.

Finished with that, I looked to see if any new postings for competitive reformations elsewhere had come up. I sure didn't want any of my fiefs to be the subject of such a contest. But if some other unlucky planner let his district slide, prompting such a referendum - well, that's just how the system worked. I wasn't going to hold back out of pity. Competitive urban planning was not a game for the weak-spined. And I needed to pick up a new district to make up for my loss of Floradora Heights.

Yes! Bloorvoor Estates, currently accredited to Mode O'Day, was up for reformation! I liked Mode, but I couldn't afford any weepy sentimentality. My mind already churning with plans, I set my sights on Bloorvoor Estates and vowed not to look back.

I was just hoping Mode wouldn't be present at the Desire Path. If I didn't have to see her and commiserate, my life would be a lot easier.

I crossed over the district line separating Boilingwood from the Coal Sack, and within another minute had dismounted the sidewalk to stand at the door of the Desire Path.

The interior of the bar had changed since my last visit two days prior, a complete makeover. A gallery of taxidermied animal heads - and some human ones - filled one whole wall. All utterly realistic fakes, of course, composed of sensate putty. Beneath the glassy-eyed heads, a bunch of my peers sat at a variety of tables. I moved to join them.

"Hey, look, it's Moses!"

"Moses proposes, and the populace disposes!"

"Fred Law!"

I dropped down into a seat and soon had a drink in hand. After a polite interval of small talk, the expressions of pity for my recent loss came. Some were genuine; some were thinly stretched over glee.

"I always thought Floradora Heights was one of your best districts, Moze," said Yvonne Lestrangle. Yvonne and I had lived together some years ago for almost 5000 hours, and retained genuine feelings for each other.

"Thanks," I responded. "I particularly liked how Sparkle Pond reflected the spire of Bindloss Church."

Cristo Rivadavia said, "Yes, quite a pleasant sentimental effect. But really, Moses, whatever were you thinking with that plaza?"

"Which one?"

"The one where the fountain placement created absolutely chaotic traffic

flows.”

“That placement was determined by the best shared-space models!”

“Nonetheless-”

Laguna Diamante intervened before our argument could escalate. “Hey, boys, that’s enough head-butting. We all know that Moses has done plenty of good work. He couldn’t help it that the Floradora citizens eventually tired of his plan. We all know how fickle populaces are.”

A general round of “Amens” arose, and glasses were refilled for a toast.

“To Diaspar!”

“To Diaspar!”

“Diaspar forever!”

With genuine conviviality restored, the talk naturally turned to the Bloorvoor competition.

“Well, I’m out of this one,” said Tartan Vartan. “Unless I get randomly seeded. My stats don’t put me in the top ten any longer.”

Hoagy Spreckles put a comradely arm around Vartan’s shoulders. “Don’t worry. Just run a few more phantom zones like your last one, and you’ll get an invitation from one populace or another. After that, you’ll be in like Unwyn.”

Everyone began to talk at once then, tossing out hints of how they would approach this competition.

And then in walked Mode O’Day herself.

If I had been dragging earlier, then Mode was positively flatlining. Her pretty face resembled a bulldog with dyspepsia. She carried a lump of sensate putty with her that she continually kneaded like a paranoid ship’s captain angry about his missing strawberries.

To massed silence, Mode dropped into a seat like a sack of doorknobs. She plopped the putty in the middle of the table and took out her phone. Still no one spoke. She sent the plans for the Bloorvoor district to the putty and the shapeless

lump instantly snapped into the configuration of that neighborhood, a perfectly detailed miniature we all recognized.

Mode studied the tiny sculpture for nearly a full minute. No one dared offer a word. Then with the swipe of a thumbnail across her phone's screen, she rendered the putty into the semblance of a human hand with middle finger outthrust and the others bent back.

"That's what I think of my populace!" she said.

And we all cheered.

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So I dove right into the work of reifying my plan for the reformation of the Bloorvoor district. After so many years as both an amateur and competitive urban planner in iCity, the whole procedure possessed an intimate familiarity.

First, of course, came the dissatisfied populace. Registering their accumulating displeasure or simple boredom with their district, the continuously polled voice of the populace eventually triggered a Request for Reformation.

At that point the top ten urban planners (barring the one who had designed the failed district), along with a handful of randomly seeded contestants, were invited to enter their designs.

Any district plan arose from a planner's innate creativity, experience, inspiration, and skills, of course. But the charrette process also held importance. Citizens got to weigh in with suggestions and criticisms.

At some prearranged point all the plans were locked down. At that stage they were instantiated as both phantom zone walk-thru models and physical tabletop versions. (The phantom zone was littered with thousands of other amateur walk-thrus compiled on a freelance basis.) A period of inspection by the populace lasted a week or so. Then came the first and most important vote. The winning plan would govern the overnight reformation of the district. A final pro forma poll on the morning after the reformation, once the populace had a short time to verify the details of the full-scale instantiation, would award final accreditation to the planner.

Simple, right?

If you think so, you've never been a competitive urban planner.

I spent several nerve-stretched weeks subsisting on a diet of daffy-doze and TVP bars, trying to design the best, most exciting district I had ever designed, a brilliant mix of utilitarianism, excitement, surprise, grandeur, and comfort. What governed me? Well of course I wanted to please the populace. But I was working just as hard to please myself. The esthetics of my plan were actually uppermost in my instinctive choices and refinements and calculations.

Urban planning was my artform, iCity my medium.

I sought advice from a couple of my compatriots whom I trusted and who also weren't involved in this competition. (I trusted any of my peers just so far.) Virgule and Yvonne saw my roughs and offered suggestions.

"You really think the tensile parms of the senstrate will support a pylon that high?"

"You used that same skin last year in Marple Cheshire, remember?"

"Siting the Jedi Temple within a hundred yards of the Zionist Charismatics? What were you thinking!"

The long hard slog to a final plan took all my concentration and energy. But still, I spared a little attention pinging the grapevine and trying to learn what the other contestants were doing.

That included Holly Grale of course. That stinker ranked two spots below me, but still within the top ten. Right this minute, as I struggled to balance greenspace with mall footage, taverns with schools, she was doing the same.

But her security was tight, and no news filtered out about her design.

Not even when I bumped into her at the reformation of Las Ramblas.

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Back when the announcement that Bloorvoor was up for reformation appeared, the Las Ramblas remodeling was already in the populace-inspection period. The eventual popular vote awarded the honors to Lafferty Fisk and his plan, and tonight Lafferty was throwing the usual party to witness and celebrate his triumph.

The venue was a restaurant named Myxomycota that cantilevered out from the side of Mount Excess. Mount Excess held all the extra mass of sensate substrate not currently in use by any neighborhood. It was in effect a solid vertical reservoir which could be drawn down or added to, and thus its elevation and bulk was constantly changing. Tonight Mount Excess was pretty substantial - minimalist designs were hip just then - affording us a good panoramic view of iCity and Las Ramblas, the neighborhood lit up all red as a sign of the impending transformation.

The food and drink and music were splendid - I seem to recall a band named the Tiny Identities was playing - the company was stimulating, and I was just beginning to relax for the first time in ages. My plan for the competition was almost finalized, with a day or two to spare till the deadline. As midnight approached, a wave of pleasant tension and anticipation enveloped the room. Everyone clustered against the big windows that looked out over the brilliant city.

I turned to the person at my elbow to make some innane comment, and there stood Holly Grale.

Her black hair was buzzed short, she had six cometary cinder studs in each earlobe, and she wore a cat suit made out of glistening kelp cloth, accessorized with a small animated cape. Her broad, wry, painted mouth was ironically quirked.

“Well, well, well,” she said in a voice whose sensuous allure I found distractingly at odds with my professional repugnance for this woman. “If it isn’t Frederick Law Moses, once the baron of Floradora Heights.”

My name sounded so pretentious coming from her lips. I suppose “Robert Olmsted” might have been a less dramatic alternative to honor my heroes, but when I had chosen my name I had been much younger and dreamier.

“Oh, Holly, it’s you. I didn’t recognize you for a moment without your copy of *Urban Planning for Dummies* in your hand. Shouldn’t you be home trying to master that ancient emulation of *SimCity*?”

My jibes had no effect. “I have plenty of down time now, Moses. I’ve just locked in my design for the Bloorvoor competition.”

This news unnerved me. Only a very confident or foolish planner wouldn’t be making changes right up till the last minute. I tried to dissemble my anxiety with a quip, but then events outside precluded all conversation.

The reformation of Bloorvoor had begun.

The entire red-lit district began to dissolve in syrupy slow-mo fashion, structures flowing downward into the sensate motherboard like a taffy pull. The varied cityscape, the topography of streets and buildings and all the district's "vegetation," was losing its stock of unique identities as all constructions were subsumed back into the senstrate from which they had once arisen.

Of course, all businesses, clubs, cafes, workshops, restaurants, and other establishments had closed down early for the evening prior to the change, and people had retreated to their homes and condos, if they had not left the district entirely. These domestic units were autonomous permanent nodes and had sealed themselves off, locking their occupants safely away. Those inside would ride out the reformation without a jolt or qualm, cradled by the intelligent senstrate. Many people even slept through the whole process. And anyone absent-minded enough to be caught out during the change would be envaginated by the senstrate in a life-support vacuole and protected till the reformation was over. Inconvenient, but hardly dangerous.

Now the district was a flat featureless plain, a hole in iCity, dotted with the capsules of domestic units and the occasional person-sized vacuole, awaiting the signal to transform.

Lafferty Fisk proudly transmitted the impulse from his phone.

Cascades of information coursed through the senstrate.

iCity: a lattice of pure patterns.

Just like the time Mode O'Day had instantiated the old model of Bloorvoor on the tabletop in Desire Path, so now the new version of Las Rambias (to be named Airegin Miles) commenced to be born. Structures composed of pure senstrate arose amidst a matrix of streets and other urban features, incorporating the autonomous domestic units into themselves where planned. (I swore I felt Mount Excess drop by a centimeter or three.) The sensate material assumed a variety of textures, and skins, right down to a very convincing indestructible grass and soil. Water flowed through new conduits into ponds and canals. Normal-colored lights came on.

Within less than an hour, Airegin Miles stood complete, iCity's newest district.

A huge round of applause broke out in the restaurant. Lafferty Fisk stood at the focus of the approbation and envy. Memories of being there myself flooded powerfully through me.

When the tumult died down, I looked around, feeling I could be generous even toward Holly Grale.

But she was nowhere to be seen.

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All the tabletop models and phantom zone walk-thrus for the Bloorvoor reformation went live a couple of days later. So I saw what Grale had accomplished.

Her design was magnificent. There was no denying it. Just the way Alpha Rapha Boulevard looped around and flowed into von Arx Plaza - this was genuine talent at work.

Was her design better than mine and all the others?

Only the populace could say.

And soon they said yes.

Grale's was the winner.

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I moped around for forty-eight hours in an absolute funk, a malaise that was hardly alleviated by the fact that my plan for Bloorvoor had garnered the second highest number of votes. Doubt and despair assailed me. Was I losing my touch? Had I plumbed the depths of my art and hit a stony infertile bottom? Should I abandon my passion?

I spent an inordinate amount of time inside the phantom zone walk-thru of Grale's winning plan. I kept comparing her accomplishment, her sensibilities, to mine, fixated on discovering what had made her entry so appealing to the populace. Was it this particular cornice, this special wall, this juxtaposition of tree and window? The way sunlight would strike that certain gable, or wind funnel down that mournful alley?

And by the end of my fevered inspection, I had decided something.

The taste of the populace was debased. The residents of Bloorvoor - soon to become (yuck!) "QualQuad" - had voted incorrectly. My design was indeed the superior one.

I realize now how crazy that sounds. The citizenry is always the ultimate arbiter. Without them, we urban planners would have no reason to exist. There can be no imposition of our tastes over their veto, no valorizing of a platonic perfection over perceived utility. We all offer the best we have, and they choose among us.

But in my anger and jealousy and despair, I lost sight of these verities. I was more than a little insane, and that remains my only excuse for what I did next.

I went to see Sandy Verstandig.

Sandy was one of the tech gnomes who kept the senstrate bubbling and ready for use at top efficiency and reliability. A rough-edged petite woman who favored a strong floral perfume and employed more profanity than any random half-dozen athletes. I say "gnome," but of course that designation was just a nickname for her job. She didn't live literally underground. There was no need for her to be in physical proximity to the intelligent material that formed the substance of iCity. Except for the occasional regular maintenance inspection of various pieces of subterranean hardware, she could handle all of her duties via her phone.

Duties such as establishing the order of the reformation queue.

I knew Sandy from frequent help she had given me in the past, when I had had questions about the senstrate that only a hands-on expert could answer. In our face-to-face conversations, I had always gotten the sense that she would not be averse to a romantic relationship.

I'm ashamed now to describe how easy it was to get Sandy Verstandig into bed. How easy it was to secure access her phone while she slept.

And finally, how easy it was to substitute my plan for Grale's in the reformation queue, and conceal all traces of my crime.

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Crowding against the windows at Myxomycota once again, as the final seconds ticked away until midnight, I almost shivered with anticipation. There was Bloorvoor down below, all lit in red. Soon it would be rechristened Bushyhead, when it assumed the lineaments of my visionary design. It was all I could do not to chuckle aloud at the shock Grale was about to receive.

Of course, the mix-up would be immediately apparent, the unmistakable substitution of my superior design for her inferior one. But it would not be totally improbable that the second-place entry might have been mistakenly inserted ahead of the winner in the queue. Yes, Sandy Verstandig would take some minor blame. But no lasting harm done. And then, in the morning, the populace would see just how wonderful their new neighborhood was, and vote to keep it. I'd get the accreditation, and be back up to eleven. Grale would look like a whiner and sore loser if she contested the results.

As I said, I wasn't thinking too clearly.

Various people addressed me in those last few minutes, but I don't recall anything they or I said.

And then midnight arrived.

The deliquescent "demolition" of Bloorvoor occurred perfectly, rendering the district featureless. All the condo nodes and vacuoles awaited reincorporation into the new buildings. Our room held its collective breath for the manifestation of the winning design.

And that's when all chaos erupted.

The senstrate began to seethe and churn, tossing out irregular whips and tendrils and geysers. Condo nodes bobbed about like sailboats in a typhoon. I could barely imagine the ride the inhabitants were getting, although I knew that automatic interior safety measures - inflatable furniture, airbag walls and such - would prevent them from being harmed.

The watchers were stunned. I saw Grale with her eyes wide and mouth agape. That image alone was sufficient reward. But also my only tangible satisfaction.

Because what happened next was utterly tragic.

My design emerged, but hybridized with Grale's!

Somehow I had botched the queue, overlaying and blending the two plans. I never would have thought such a thing would be possible. But the reality stood before us.

The most outré buildings began to self-assemble, mutant structures obeying no esthetic code, arrayed higgledy-piggledy across the district. A nightmare, a surreal canvas-

I backed away from the window. "No, no, this wasn't supposed to happen!"

I have to give Grale credit for sharpness of hearing and intelligence. She was on me then like a tigress, bearing me to the floor and pummeling me half-senseless, while outside our sight the mashup reformation surged on. We rolled around for what seemed a bruising eternity, until other planners managed to separate us.

Restrained by Partch and O'Day, almost growling, Grale confronted me. "Moses, you don't know what a huge fucking mess you've gotten yourself into!"

And I certainly didn't.

But neither did she.

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Of course you know how the new hybrid district of QualBushy (sometimes also known as Head-Quad) broke all duration records. Approved the morning after by a shocking 97.6 percent of the populace. Not falling to its next reformation for an astonishing 10,139 hours.

Mashup designs became the *sine qua non* for all reformations. iCity experienced a renaissance of design fecundity and doubled in acreage. Mount Excess was joined by Mount Backup. Partnerships formed, broke up, and reformed among the planners at an astonishing rate.

Except for one pairing that endured.

Grale and Moses.

I give Holly top billing because I'd never hear the end of it at home around

the dinner table if I didn't.