A COMPARISON OF MORRIS’ *NEWS FROM NOWHERE* AND

LIFE IN THE TWIN OAKS COMMUNITY

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It is the purpose of this paper to explore how Morris’ novel relates to life in Twin Oaks, primarily as depicted in two books: *Living the Dream* (1983) by Ingrid Komar, a long-term visitor to the commune and Kinkade’s *Is It Utopia Yet?* (1996). This comparison will demonstrate that the experiences of contemporary intentional communities such as Twin Oaks provide a meaningful context for reading *News from Nowhere* because of the similarities in goals and philosophy. It will further demonstrate that though Twin Oaks was originally inspired by a utopian novel much more in the tradition of Bellamy’s work than Morris’, the community’s subsequent evolution has brought it much closer in philosophy to *News from Nowhere* than *Looking Backward*. 
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Experiencing the reality of egalitarianism is qualitatively different from merely reading economic theory or a utopian novel.

—Ingrid Komar

When William Morris wrote his utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890), one of his main intentions was to satirize Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), a book presenting a world Morris dismissed as “a Cockney paradise,”* though it was among the most popular books of its day. Morris’ intention was never, as Fiona MacCarthy points out, to produce “a blueprint from which people could plan a working social system” (587). Nevertheless, it is evident that life as portrayed in Morris’s novel represents many of his most passionate ideas about how life in the real world should be. “Nowhere” is a truly egalitarian society: it is anti-authoritarian, it is beautiful. *News from Nowhere* is also a book that has provided a good deal of influence and inspiration in the twentieth-century. Of this MacCarthy has to say:

Its effect is as a catalyst. Morris releases the imagination by suggesting that another form of society is possible. For people suffering political stagnation—then and now—it points a way out. By 1898 *News from Nowhere* had been

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*In his introduction to *Three Works by William Morris*, A. L. Norton explains in a footnote: “Morris always used the work Cockney in the sense of pretentiously vulgar.” He furthermore quotes a review Morris wrote for *Commonweal on Looking Backward* in which he says that Bellamy:

conceives of the change to socialism as taking place without any breakdown of (modern) life, or indeed disturbance of it, by means of the final development of the great private monopolies which are such a feature of the present day. He supposes that these must necessarily be transformed into one great monopoly which will include the whole people and be worked for the benefit of the people...

The great change having thus peaceably and fatally taken place, the author has put forward his scheme of the organization of life; which is organized with a vengeance....

In short, a machine life is the best which Bellamy can imagine for us on all sides; it is not to be wondered at then that his only idea of making labour tolerable is to decrease the amount of it by means of fresh and ever fresh developments of machinery. (24-5)
translated into French, Italian and German, and this ‘slightly constructed and essentially insular romance’ was being read in many more countries than his ‘more important works of prose and verse’, to the disapproval of his first biographer, Mackail. It was widely distributed in Russia in the years just before the Revolution. It was also the Socialist Bible of the supposedly dyspeptic politicians who built the post-war British Welfare State: G. D. H. Cole, Clement Attlee and the rest. (ibid.)

This last statement suggests a degree of societal impact few utopias have achieved.

Moreover, News from Nowhere continues to be one of Morris’ most well-known and widely discussed literary works. Though current trends in the majority of world nations seems to be largely toward global capitalism, the book’s demonstrated ability to instruct and inspire must be regarded as a potential catalyst for future socialist movements. It would not be a shock to see Morris embraced in South America, just as Whitman has been adored in struggling democracies such as Chile.

The novel also continues to possess remarkable predictive ability in terms of non-economic cultural trends. MacCarthy goes on to observe:

For the late-twentieth-century reader the message we recognize in News from Nowhere is ‘the personal is political’. Morris shows an almost uncanny prescience of many of the issues addressed by the feminist and gay liberation movements in Europe and the USA from the 1960s on. Nowhere is a place of real sexual equality. Women do work traditionally regarded as men’s work and vice versa. Ideas of possessiveness and ownership have vanished. In all sexual liaisons the partners are free to come and go. (587-8)

The cultural changes MacCarthy mentions here have occurred more quickly and more markedly in places like the American intentional community Twin Oaks than in society as a whole. Twin Oaks was founded in Louisa, Virginia in 1969 and is perhaps the most successful of those communities which arose in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In her 1994 account, Is It Utopia Yet?, founding member Kat Kinkade explained the group’s preference for the word “community” over “commune” while providing a basic description of their way of life:
Twin Oaks is a commune, not in the sense that was stereotyped by the press in the Sixties, (sex, drugs, and cockroaches) but in the nineteenth century sense of a place where the inhabitants share things communally—including, and especially income. It is highly organized but very flexible. Its labor system is unique, its money economy fairly conventional but entirely controlled by the Community’s members. By the way, we tend to avoid the word “commune,” because of its misleading connotations, and generally use the word “community” instead, but for an income-sharing group like ours, both terms apply. (4)

A review of the community’s publications shows that from the earliest days community writers addressed topics of sexual equality frankly and as part of discussions on the widest range of issues, just as the achievement of such equality was a constant goal in everyday life. Inclusive language to a degree not commonly known in the popular press until the early eighties appears in these publications in the 1970s. It might be said that mainstream culture has still not completely caught up with Twin Oaks, which in the early seventies had already replaced the sexist “his” for the gender neutral pronoun “cos,” skipping the awkward “his or her” phase entirely.

The point of such language choices is of course to remove gender distinctions to the greatest degree possible. Ingrid Komar tells how:

In February of 1982 Batya Weinbaum (1981), author of The Curious Courtship of Women’s Liberation and Socialism, visited. She posted a scholarly paper on the Opinion and Idea Board in which she credited Twin Oaks with achieving the aims of feminist socialism to a degree she’d failed to ascertain in visits to China, Cuba, or Allende’s Chile. Each and every example Weinbaum cited to buttress her ecstatic conclusions was unfailingly accurate and, even though it was not exactly surprising news to the communards—her analysis was graciously received. (52)

More recently, Ashley Spalding’s study of gender roles at Twin Oaks offers the following anecdote as an illustration of the extent of gender equality there, an incident which occurred as she and other guests were led on their initial tour of Twin Oaks, by their guide, Nate:
Listening to Nate’s commentary and looking around at the community’s lush fields, trees, and rustic buildings, I paid very little attention to Ren, a male visitor, taking his shirt off in order to adjust to the heat. Nate had been telling us the history of each building we passed and pointing out landmarks and property lines, but when he noticed that Ren was no longer wearing a shirt, he stopped our group abruptly in the middle of the path. Nate firmly suggested that Ren put his shirt back on as this was an area where women are not allowed to take off their shirts, and they would not appreciate Ren taking off his. Ren complied, and while I’m sure everyone in our group noted the incident, I was especially intrigued. This was my first indication that gender roles really were constructed differently at Twin Oaks. In all of the United States social contexts I had ever been in, women always kept their breasts covered, and, conversely, it was acceptable for men to go shirtless in many contexts. (2-3)

Twin Oaks is then a place where ideals in human relations are pursued to degrees not seen in mainstream society. And it is in how humans relate toward another that constitutes the strongest resemblance between this social experiment and life as Morris imagined it might be in News from Nowhere.

It is the purpose of this paper to explore how Morris’ novel relates to life in Twin Oaks, primarily as depicted in two books: Living the Dream (1983) by Ingrid Komar, a long-term visitor to the commune and Kinkade’s Is It Utopia Yet? (1996). As both of these book length analyses are written by Twin Oaks insiders, this paper will also consider two views of the commune from outsider perspectives: “Positioned Within ‘The Outside World’: The Cultural Construction Of Gender In An Egalitarian Intentional Community” (2000), a masters thesis by Ashley Spalding at the University of South Carolina and “The Other American Dream” (1998), an article written by Tamara Jones for the Washington Post. This comparison will demonstrate that the experiences of contemporary intentional communities such as Twin Oaks provide a meaningful context for reading News from Nowhere because of the similarities in goals and philosophy. It will further demonstrate that though Twin Oaks was originally inspired by a utopian
novel much more in the tradition of Bellamy’s work than Morris’, the community’s subsequent evolution has brought it much closer in philosophy to *News from Nowhere* than *Looking Backward*. This seems a particularly remarkable fact, that practical experience should push the community away from its original model, a book in direct lineage of *Looking Backward*, and toward *News from Nowhere*, a book in many ways that model’s opposite.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that Morris’ novel has apparently had no direct influence on Twin Oaks. The founders of the community used as a blueprint a later utopian novel, also not expressively offered for that purpose: B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two*. In the first three paragraphs of her Foreword, Kat Kinkade outlines the Community’s lineage as follows:

When I was 17, I thought I was a communist. What I meant by that was that I believed every human on earth had a right to an equal share of the world’s goods and advantages, and any arrangement short of that was a cheat. I never gave much thought to “Capital C Communism,” didn’t follow world events, didn’t join any organizations. All my inspiration had come from the writers of Utopian fiction, in particular Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*. I couldn’t see anything wrong with Bellamy’s vision for America.

My own life became busy with marriage, jobs, childbirth, college, divorce. It wasn’t until I was 34 that I first conceived of utopian communism as anything more than an ideal. That was the year I read B. F. Skinner’s *Walden Two*.

*Walden Two*, like *Looking Backward*, is fiction, but it is set in the here and now, in ordinary rural America, and it concentrates on a single community. The seductive element of *Walden Two* is that it reads like a practical guide to a community that could actually exist. (i)

Kinkade and her fellow communards set about building an intentional community while attempting to use the novel as just such a guide. The group soon discovered the severe practical limitations of their blueprint and piece by piece quickly abandoned it. By 1983
it is clear from Komar’s account that Twin Oaks retained few of its *Walden Two* influences.

Part of the reason for this movement away from the notions of B F. Skinner and toward those of Morris, however unconsciously, has to do with the lack of practicality of Skinner’s ideas. However, a greater part has to do with the influx of new blood into the community as the years went by. The founding members held a devotion for *Walden Two* that newer members did not share, as Kinkade explains:

> When I tried to start a Walden Two community, I didn’t expect it to turn away from the scientific and rational and embrace popular movements. But we did not have a lot of choice in member selection. Who was available to join the fledgling community of 1969-1972? Hippies, that’s who. I know one group that was very serious about *Walden Two* and tried to build a community without any hippies in it. It failed for lack of people. At Twin Oaks we took the people we could find, regardless of their ideas and opinions. Most of them had never heard of behaviorism, or if they had, they didn’t like it. What we see at Twin Oaks today is the natural result of the essential early choice. Half the community is still somewhat attracted by the original vision, the other half by the New Age theory and practice that overlie it like an ill-fitting coat. (202)

While by no means anything resembling a New Age mystic, Morris is part of a larger romantic tradition that holds many attractions for these latter 20th century seekers. His utopianism, his interest in things medieval, his deep involvement in the arts and crafts movement, and his fantasy novels—all hold the potential for great appeal to the counterculture. Also, Morris would have shared the communards’ dislike for behaviorism and what it represents for human dignity and freedom.

Furthermore, though Morris would likely have been even more outraged by Skinner’s vision of an ideal future, with the cold calculations of its behavioral engineering, than he was by Bellamy’s, it seems clear that comparing the consumer culture of mainstream society on the one hand and the simple living of the admittedly
(and by Kinkade herself) aesthetically challenged communards on the other, Morris would applaud the community’s rejection of consumerism. It also seems likely that he would look well upon those who put their ideals into action. Unlike Skinner and Bellamy, Morris was a utopian who was willing to take to the streets for his ideals. In the last years of his life, Morris was frequently involved in organizing workers and participating in political demonstrations on behalf of the socialist cause, not to mention the labor he put into the various arts and crafts projects he engaged in at Kelmscott. His desire for radical change is also indicated by the final line of News from Nowhere: “Yes, surely! And if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream” (401).

The communards share Morris’ willingness to take steps toward radical change. Unlike Skinner and Bellamy, Morris and the communards are interested in far more than playing with ideas. As Komar puts it: “The utopian problem is to actualize the utopian ideal somewhere, and this requires giving it form and substance. There is no other method for getting from ‘nowhere’ to somewhere” (14). While actively supporting many progressive causes and participating in political activity such as protest demonstrations with regularity, the communards see their very way of life as constituting revolutionary change.

One surviving feature of Walden Two is Twin Oaks’ position of existing within a larger society while separate from it. It must pay its taxes to the larger state, just as it must heed that state’s laws. Komar discusses this predicament through the eyes of certain guests:

The droves of German visitors seemed especially worried about political isolation. One after another they expressed concern about something they called
an “island syndrome,” as if this imaginary, unhealthy mental state afflicted rural communards as inevitably as children come down with measles. Clearly, Twin Oaks is a socialist island in a sea of capitalism. That hardly renders the islanders deaf to the roar of ocean waves beating on their shores. At Twin Oaks the activists maintain a large bulletin board directly across from the O & I Board that has enough challenging announcements from current protest movements—newsletters, clippings, calls to action… to keep large contingents of the most energetic radicals hopping. The communards have connections and meet with activist groups in cities less than an hour away and even the small gay minority visits their contacts there as well as plays host to them on the farm. (260)

The community hopes for eventual growth and for the development of more communities like itself so that the larger society might be someday transformed. In 1979, the community spelled out its general philosophy in the following values statement:

VALUES STATEMENT FROM SOCIAL PLANNING—APRIL 19, 1979
We are trying to form a community which:
  will survive
  has a collective economy and government
  cares for the basic needs of its members
  and is egalitarian

We choose to:
  be both a home for our members and an example of communal living and experimentation
  exercise intentionality in our decision making and day to day functioning
  raise our children in common
  be non-punitive
  honor members’ privacy
  tolerate and embrace diverse beliefs
  act with concern for the environment
  work towards self-reliance
  offer choice of work to our members

We expect our members to behave:
  non-violently
  with honesty, gentleness, responsibility, and commitment
  to exhibit cooperation
  and to work their fair share

We expect our behavior as individuals and as a community to eliminate the attitudes and the results of:
sexism, racism, ageism, and competitiveness (Qtd. by Komar 51)

To further this end, the community has nearly since its inception engaged in hosting conventions for people interested in being involved in community, in co-founding the Federation of Egalitarian Communities, and in publishing Communities magazine as well as other publications providing advice and resources to communities across America and abroad. The community is engaged then in a slow and deliberate non-violent revolution.

Morris certainly hoped for revolution, so much so that it is the narrator’s desperate wish in chapter one, “If I could but see a day of it…[I]f I could but see it!” (182) that leads to the visionary glimpse of the future News from Nowhere purports to represent. The narrator awakens the next morning in the early 21st century to discover that the revolution has been an enormous success. He immediately falls in with companionable locals who accept his story of having been simply away from Europe for many years and who are eager to be his guides.

The narrator gives his name as William Guest, though it is clear to characters and reader alike that the surname at least is a pseudonym. That he is William suggests he could be Morris, and he certainly proves to share Morris’ views, not to mention fairly specific details of his childhood. The first chapter of the novel has already begun Morris’ playful hemming and hawing about the authorship of his tale. The opening sentence suggests that the actual narrator is relating someone else’s story:

Up at the League, says a friend, there had been one night a brisk conversational discussion, as to what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution, finally shading off into a vigorous statement by various friends of their views on the future of the fully-developed new society. (181)
The friend was terribly agitated and excited by the discussion and, after uttering his wish, goes home to fall asleep, to soon awaken, and then to lay for some time half-awake while “the entanglements before him, which he saw so clearly, began to shape themselves into an amusing story for him” (183). Afterwards he fell asleep again to awaken the next morning in the 21st century. All of these details preface the telling of the tale. The narrator speaks as himself for the final time with the last lines of the first chapter:

Our friend says that from that sleep he awoke once more, and afterwards went through such surprising adventures that he thinks that they should be told to our comrades and indeed the public in general, and therefore proposes to tell them now. But, says he, I think it would be better if I told them in the first person, as if it were myself who had gone through them; which indeed, will be the easier and more natural to me, since I understand the feelings and desires of the comrade of whom I am telling better than any one else in the world does. (183)

The tension created by Morris’ stirring up authorial ambiguity serves to tantalize the reader with the possibility that the story is true. Since he’s pretending not to be the author when evidence suggests he is, the reader is left with a general feeling of playful uncertainty which extends to the nature of the tale itself: Is it fiction or a vision? This playfulness also highlights that, though a work of fiction, the ideals found in Nowhere represent a very personal vision for Morris. As such, its status as fiction is truly ambiguous.

In any case, the narrator is led through 21st century England and witnesses his fondest dreams for humankind realized. Society is organized so that there is no poverty. All is produced efficiently and work has become a pleasure. People are everyday surrounded by beauty, with the architecture, fashions, and craftwork reflecting Morris’ enthusiasm for the Middle Ages. Without capitalism there is no adversarial aspect to human relations and consequently there is a sense of kinship among everyone. There is
no war and very little crime. Moreover, there is no waste, neither of materials nor of people’s time. Useless toil has been has been entirely obliterated. William Guest learns, however, that such changes were not wrought peacefully but entailed much suffering and bloodshed. It is even now not completely free of pain either, for the normal heartaches of unrequited love and jealousy still prompt lovers to harm themselves or others.

While the community’s active stance to promote change in one sense allies it with Morris, its identity as “a socialist island in a sea of capitalism” is an important difference from News from Nowhere. In Morris’ vision, the revolution is complete. This is a critical distinction as it means that in Morris’ Nowhere there is nothing of the external pressures that the communards’ Somewhere faces. Having known life outside of Twin Oaks, inevitably feelings of self-denial arise for people having grown up with air conditioning and television and the multitude of pamperings encouraged by consumer culture. This results in a somewhat unstable population, though the trend is toward greater stability.

Kinkade describes how in the first few years stability lowered to the point that:

The average new member stayed about 3 months. An “underground” developed among the youngest members, who stayed up late in the smoking room, listening to the popular music of the time and criticizing the “Establishment,” meaning me and others who were deeply invested in the Community. (11)

In 1996 when she wrote Is It Utopia Yet?, the average new member’s stay was four years and rising (112). Kinkade writes that of the one hundred members, “(a) t least forty current members have lived here for five years or more, and nine of us for over ten years” (2). Two years later Tamara Jones writes for the Washington Post:

The current population hovers near 100. In the commune’s fledgling years, the average member was 23 years old with two years of college, and left in less than a year. Now the average Twin Oaker is 42, has a college degree and stays for eight years…. Some 600 people have joined Twin Oaks since its inception, yet there
are no second generation members. As one recruiter puts it, “Communards do not breed communards.” (5)

Despite the trend toward greater stability, Twin Oaks is admittedly quite unstable when compared to the society Morris portrays. In many respects the commune might be more comparable to some of the earlier, more revolutionary stages in Nowhere’s fictional development. On the other hand, it is those aspects of the culture of Twin Oaks which share the most in common with Morris’ society which also seem most stable.

Both Nowhere and Twin Oaks display strong romanticist tendencies. Both communities value nature and view daily involvement with it to be of vital importance. Both have also experienced a transition from a consumerist urban life to a rural egalitarian one. The management of resources is thoughtful and aims for creating spaces in which to live and work in nature. This need for a closer contact with nature is part of what drove the revolution in Nowhere. As a result, basically all of England was transformed into “a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt.”

Komar discusses similar feelings at Twin Oaks, noting “(b)ack-to-earth romanticism was rampant among the flower children, very few of whom grew up on a farm” (165). The passion for nature at Twin Oaks begins at times to seem almost like religious devotion. Komar describes how, when a communard found some particular wildflowers he had been searching for, “…he got down on his hands and knees and just looked at it, and he goes, ‘Hi, Sweetheart,’ and he kissed it…You could feel his love for nature and for flowers…” (305) This feeling is generally shared and not peculiar to just a few individuals. Komar further relates that, “News of a spectacular sunset is relayed to indoor workers with urgency. Towncrier shouts of ‘Rainbow! Rainbow!’ empty the hammock
shop within seconds, and bring everyone else within earshot to ooh and aah at the shimmering arc on the horizon” (180). Such passages echo one of the more emotional incidents in Morris’ novel when his idealized woman exclaims, “O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it…” (391)

In Twin Oaks, so strongly are the communards affected by their contact with nature, their emotions tend to move in cycles parallel to the seasons. Energy levels are high for most of the year, as Virginia generally enjoys pleasant temperate weather, and the communards tend to be active lively people who enjoy being out of doors. Of this Komar comments in Whitmanesque fashion:

Bird watchers and bicycle riders, joggers, campers, friends, and lovers head out in all directions to dozens of special destinations down woodland paths, into the meadows, along the creeks and the river. In hot weather it is a special treat to take an outdoor shower with solar heated water. The solar shower is located at a well-screened site that spreads the romantic view of a rolling pasture before the bather. Recalling the spring’s and summer’s procession of rare wildflowers—the orchid and purple of the field pansies, the deep orange butterfly weed sprinkled at the edge of the road, the glowing red of the cardinal flower amid the dark green vegetation of the river banks—I am tempted to lose myself in an endless catalogue. The Virginia earth and sky add immeasurably to life within the community’s residence—work complexes, where space sometimes admittedly appears cramped. Communal blues, depressions, and crises hit almost exclusively in the winter months when rain and mud tend to keep all but the very hardy indoors. (181)

In Nowhere the people experience a strikingly similar relationship to the changing tides of the seasons. For example, Morris presents the following exchange:

“Now we are in a fit mood for dinner,” said Dick, when we had dressed and were going through the grass again; “and certainly of all the cheerful meals in the year, this one of haysel is the cheerfullest; not even excepting the corn-harvest feast; for then the year is beginning to fail, and one cannot help having a feeling behind all the gaiety, of the coming of the dark days, and the shorn fields and
empty gardens; and the spring is almost too far off to look forward to. It is then, in the autumn, when one almost believes in death.”

“How strangely you talk,” said I, “of such a constantly recurring and consequently commonplace matter as the sequence of the seasons.” And indeed these people were like children about such things, and had what seemed to me a quite exaggerated interest in the weather, a fine day, a dark night, or a brilliant one, and the like. (396)

It is particularly interesting to note Guest’s remark that “these people were like children about such things;” in that, even as a sympathetic observer he must still adhere to the views of his own world on this matter, to some extent implicitly rejecting Nowhere’s values. Such views are echoed by the very phrase “flower children” along with the overall judgments of mainstream society which generally dismiss the counterculture from which Twin Oaks sprang as immature and naïve. The citizenry of both societies are liable to be dismissed as such by tough minded capitalists in the 19th century as well as today.

Not surprisingly, both societies encourage a deep respect for nature in their children, whose apprehensions and general outlook they are conceived of as so strongly sharing. In News from Nowhere children spend weeks at a time in the forest with no adult supervision, William Guest’s guide Dick explains: “We rather encourage them to it; they learn to do things for themselves, and get to notice the wild creatures; and you see, the less they stew inside houses the better for them” (207). Such sentiments are somewhat paralleled in Komar’s account as she describes walking through the forest with the children:

When snack time was over, Violet took me by the hand and insisted that I go along for a walk to the tree house. We trooped through the woods on a path bordered with ferns, ground pine, and teaberry, the red berries contrasting with the dark green ground cover, and here and there the white and pale tan quartz rocks accenting the rich brown of the forest floor…The line halted as in turn, one or another of the children discovered a toad, a box turtle, and a red newt. Encountering all this animal life also inspired them to run back and tell me about
the praying mantis they had raised in a jar and the turkey chicks who had lived in an incubator at Degania until they were old enough to take up residence in a special pen near the pigs. Violet proudly recited the names of trees she recognized: yellow poplar or tulip tree, oak, sassafras, pine, and beech. (236)

The above description is also suggestive of the commune’s educational philosophy, of which more is said below. Suffice to say for the moment that the kind of hands-on experiential learning suggested above is typical of both Twin Oaks and Nowhere. Precocity is typical as well. Komar further remarks on how a very young boy demonstrates his inherent communal values regarding wildflowers: “Wildflowers are a big thing with the children. Franklin was quick to ask them not to pick these so that other people in the community could enjoy finding them there” (236). It would appear that the quintessential romantic expectation that children flourish in close contact with nature have at least somewhat been confirmed at Twin Oaks.

Romantic philosophy is also reflected in the general appearance of both societies. On the appearance of Twin Oaks, Kinkade comments: “Perhaps the strongest visual impression is that Twin Oaks is very green. We have made small clearings in our forested land and built our houses in them. Several acres that were once cultivated or used for pasture have been returned to woods. Even the courtyard is dotted with trees and ornamentals” (3). Morris would certainly appreciate the space given to greenery. In News from Nowhere William Guest observes: “One change I noticed amidst the quiet beauty of the fields—to wit, that they were planted with trees here and there, often fruit trees, and that there was none of the niggardly begrudging of space to a handsome tree which I remembered too well” (Morris 379-80). This shared value for daily contact with nature is perhaps one of the more valuable traits these two societies have to offer the world at
large. As the world faces likely catastrophe resulting from its failure to come to terms with the destructiveness of its technology, Nowhere and Twin Oaks both provide models for less destructive, more sustainable ways of living. Nowhere suggests and Twin Oaks shows that a more responsible society is possible, at least on a small scale.

Though the greenness of Twin Oaks would appeal to Morris, its architecture might disappoint him. For while Morris is principally known today for his lifetime of arts and craftswork, it is important to note that he began his career as an architect. Guest spends chapter two meeting some locals and having breakfast, but by chapter three he is looking about and describing the beauty of the architecture in Nowhere. The chapter opens:

I lingered a little behind the others to have a stare at this house, which, as I have told you, stood on the site of my old dwelling. It was a longish building with its gable ends turned away from the road, and long traceried windows coming rather low down set in the wall that faced us. It was very handsomely built of red brick with a lead roof; and high up above the windows there ran a frieze of figure subjects in baked clay, very well executed, and designed with a force and directness which I had never noticed in modern work before. The subjects I recognized at once, and indeed was very particularly familiar with them.

However, all this I took in in a minute; for we were presently within doors, and standing in a hall with a floor of marble mosaic and an open timber roof. There were no windows on the side opposite to the river, but arches below leading into chambers, one of which showed a glimpse of a garden beyond, and above them a long space of wall gaily painted (in fresco, I thought) with similar subjects to those of the frieze outside; everything about the place was handsome and generously solid as to material; and though it was not very large (somewhat smaller than Crosby Hall perhaps), one felt in it that exhilarating sense of space and freedom which satisfactory architecture always gives to an unanxious man who is in the habit of using his eyes. (192-3)

Throughout the novel, a similar attention to architectural detail points not only to William Guest’s interest in it, but also to Nowhere’s value of it.
The architecture of Twin Oaks is limited somewhat by the community’s finite resources and by needs of practicality. The community values aesthetic qualities, but unfortunately other concerns must sometimes be given more weight. An excellent example would be the large workshop called Emerald City, named for its green exterior. Komar comments on this building: “Green or not green, the steel exterior was opposed by quite a number of the members. It was finally approved, principally because it was sorely needed, cheap, fireproof, and capable of being erected quickly” (48).

Communal dwelling places tend to be more aesthetically pleasing. They are principally constructed from wood harvested on the property and are designed to be as energy efficient as possible. Of these, the building called Tupelo might be the most lovely. Komar describes a large room, designed as a social space and lit by day through gigantic picture windows. She continues:

In order to open the shutters some Tupelonian has to climb up a wooden ladder, made of homegrown river birch—beautifully crafted and magnificently grained—and cross a small loft nestled under the gable. When the sun rises above Tupelo and the shutters are opened, a stained glass window high up in the gable across from the loft refracts a rainbow-spectrum of light into the room, onto a wall paneled with the same birch. (43)

The same building has its own workshop space, the description of which provides an excellent example of the ways in which aesthetic desires are often combined with efficiency concerns:

In the new workshop area, the central part of the ceiling is cut away, revealing hundreds of recycled gallon jugs that are suspended from steel rods. The jugs are filled with colored water. The water in the bottles absorbs heat much the same way a closed car in a parking lot does on a hot day. Layers of these glass bottles extend up towards the skylight to form a rainbow-wall for a second story office. Radiation and convection from this heat source furnish up to fifty percent of the heat for the two work areas. Since light as well as heat can pass through the water in the bottles, a certain amount of electricity can also be saved. Tests with
different dyes revealed that green absorbs the greatest amount of solar energy, but for aesthetic reasons red, blue, black, and clear water is also being used. (42)

The community is not devoid then of aesthetic standards, however short of Morris those standards may fall. The use of recycled materials represents values Morris would in any case have likely understood. Matters of practicality must nevertheless trump aesthetics. For example, Komar offers the following description of Twin Oaks’ first communal building: “Harmony—built just like an airplane hangar—is architecture at its most basic level. None of the inside walls bear any of the weight of the roof. However rudimentary this may be, it makes it easy to change the interior arrangements” (32). Such changes have no doubt been frequently necessary over the years as the population at Twin Oaks has fluctuated.

An area in which both societies have more in common would be labor. It is important in both places that each worker have the option of varying his or her type of work. The weaver, one of the first Nowhereans Guest meets, tells him:

I only do the most mechanical kind of weaving, and am in fact but a poor craftsman, unlike Dick here. Then besides the weaving, I do a little with machine printing and composing, though I am little use at the finer kinds of printing; and moreover machine printing is beginning to die out, along with the waning of the plague of book-making, so I have had to turn to other things that I have a taste for, and have taken to mathematics; and also I am writing a sort of antiquarian book about the peaceable and private history, so to say, of the end of the nineteenth century—more for the sake of giving a picture of the country before the fighting began than for anything else. (Morris 199)

The variety of employment reflects not only the great freedom Nowherean workers enjoy, but also the broad range of interests that develop with this freedom. A similar flexibility is offered at Twin Oaks. Komar remarks:

One of the most appealing features of the labor credit system as it was administered, was the variety of work it offered. Though a good portion of the
jobs were no less humdrum than the tasks most mortals perform daily to sustain civilized existence, these labors appeared in an entirely different light when one’s obligation to them ended with a few hours a week. (63)

A key difference is that in Nowhere the worker has the widest possible choice of labor. One is free to engage in whatever labor one pleases; there is never any coercion whatsoever. In contrast, at Twin Oaks the types of work available depend upon the shared perception of what is necessary or especially desirable. The planners have a complex system for taking into account each member’s work preferences as they create work schedules for everyone. Ultimately, certain tasks must be completed, regardless of people’s preferences. Also, each worker must meet a weekly quota, and since failure to do so can eventually lead to expulsion, this requirement must finally be viewed as a form of coercion. Above all else, this requirement and the planners who enforce it represent a bureaucratic system from which Nowhere is blissfully free.

Compared to the work requirements of the typical worker in mainstream society, however, those of Twin Oaks are paltry. Twin Oakers typically have to meet a labor quota of something slightly above a forty hour week. On this Kinkade remarks:

To people accustomed to a forty-hour work week, this may sound high at first, but it turns out to be a leisurely pace when one considers how much it covers. The following things are here considered creditable work: house cleaning, shopping, childcare, laundry, cooking, mowing the lawn, doing household repairs, volunteer work for charitable organizations, going to the doctor, voting in local elections, writing letters to Congress, going to relatives’ funerals, and repainting our own rooms, in addition to virtually unlimited sick time. Every year we add some new projects to that list. Dozens of administrative and planning meetings are creditable, too.

Counting our work in hourly units gives us a great deal of flexibility. Members may and usually do choose to vary their days and weeks by doing several different jobs. Some people specialize in their own special areas, but others deliberately alternate active physical work with clerical tasks or meditative production routines. To as great an extent as possible, members choose their own work. (29-30)
While there may a fair amount of grumbling at Twin Oaks about having to do undesirable tasks such as washing dishes, communards generally appreciate the amount of leisure they enjoy, as compared to the average American citizen, and this value for leisure is another aspect of the community that Morris would appreciate.

It is also one of Morris’ most basic assumptions that work should be pleasurable. In fact, one of the chief problems Nowhereans face is an increasing work shortage—not that this causes any economic hardship, people simply have the desire to be engaged in useful work. One of William Guest’s chief guides through Nowhere expresses extreme dismay about the very notion that people would not want to work, saying, “‘Fancy people not liking to work—it’s too ridiculous’” (220-1). For Morris, one of the chief sources of pleasure from work derives from the production of beauty. Old Hammond, another of Guest’s principal guides describes it thusly:

The art or work-pleasure, as one ought to call it, of which I am now speaking, sprung up almost spontaneously, it seems, from a kind of instinct amongst people, no longer driven desperately to painful and terrible overwork, to do the best they could with the work in hand—to make it excellent of its kind; and when that had gone on for a little, a craving for beauty seemed to awaken in men’s minds, and they began rudely and awkwardly to ornament the wares which they made; and when they had once set to work at that, it soon began to grow. (319)

What Morris is describing, at least in part, is his own experience as a craftsperson. Clearly he expects that others will experience the same sense of artistic satisfaction from their labor once the drudgery of work is removed and people become free to pursue their own interests. Morris expects that ultimately everyone will become artists, leading to the point that:
...all work is now pleasurable; either because of the hope of gain in honour and wealth with which the work is done, which causes pleasurable excitement, even when the actual work is not pleasant; or else because it has grown into a pleasurable habit, as in the ease with what you might call mechanical work; and lastly (and most of our work is of this kind) because there is conscious sensuous pleasure in the work itself; it is done, that is, by artists. (274-5)

Twin Oakers are less romantic in their attitudes toward work. Whereas Morris imagines workers motivated not by profit, sustenance, or any other means of compulsion, but instead by their own inherent desire to be useful and to create beauty, Twin Oakers are required to meet their labor quotas. They also must contend with the reality that some types of work are particularly unpleasant. Such is not the case in Nowhere. Old Hammond tells Guest:

All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery; and in all work which it is a pleasure to do by hand machinery is done without. There is no difficulty in finding work which suits the special turn of mind of everybody; so that no man is sacrificed to the wants of another. From time to time, when we have found out that some piece of work was too disagreeable or troublesome, we have given it up and done altogether without the thing produced by it. (280)

While it is the ideal at Twin Oaks that workers are not compelled to do any particular type of labor, it was finally found that an exception had to be made when it came to washing dishes, a piece of work which can clearly not be done without. It was finally decided that everyone would have to take a turn at this unpopular task. This decision led to what for Twin Oaks amounted to civil strife, as Kinkade relates:

The move to a mandatory kitchen shift did not take place without a struggle. Two members adamantly refused to go along with it. They claimed that they not only hated kitchen work, but they hated it more than other people did. This was proved, it was said, by the fact that they were willing to make a public issue of it. Why would they deliberately subject themselves to resentful criticism if not because staying out of the kitchen was very important to them? Joshua stood on principle. He had joined the Community, he said, under the conditions that work
was distributed according to preference. He saw the switch to a mandatory rotation as a violation of principle, and he, for one, would not consent to it. He would not wash dishes, and that was that. If we put it on his labor credit sheet, he would ignore it.

After a good deal of indignant grumbling, the Community decided to put the new rotation into effect over the objections of the two holdouts. Everybody else would wash dishes. Those two men would not be assigned. Eventually one of them offered to clean bathrooms as a substitute, an offer very welcome to the Community, since we had almost as much trouble getting bathrooms cleaned as we did getting volunteers for dishwashing. Joshua held out to the end, but when he left after many years as a member, there were those who still remembered his rebellion and who said, “Well, at least now there are no exceptions.” (32-3)

In Morris’ utopia, it is not laziness, but instead a lack of work (without a lack of consumer goods or the means to acquire them) that is the problem. However, Morris does acknowledge the reality of the problem, wryly presenting it as a form of illness that has long been cured, as Dick explains:

It is said that in the early days of our epoch there were a good many people who were hereditarily afflicted with a disease called Idleness, because they were the direct descendents of those who in the bad times used to force other people to work for them—the people, you know, who are called slaveholders or employers of labour in the history books. Well, these idleness-stricken people used to serve booths all their time, because they were fit for so little. Indeed, I believe that at one time they were actually compelled to do some such work, because they, especially the women, got so ugly and produced such ugly children if their disease was not treated sharply, that the neighbors couldn’t stand it. However, I am happy to say that all that is gone by now; the disease is either extinct, or exists in such a mild form that a short course of aperient medicine carries it off. (219)

At Twin Oaks, the planners must deal with the realities of human nature. Inevitably, some people are going to be lazy. Officially, the response to habitual laziness is supposed to be expulsion, however the communards loathe to go to such extremes, as Kinkade relates:

In 1972 I claimed that if a Twin Oaks member consistently worked less than quota, we would eventually ask him or her to leave the Community. I believed it when I wrote it, but the idea has been severely tested in the intervening years.
Twin Oaks is just comfortable enough that it can support a few dependents. When an adult slides into dependency, we don’t always rise up in indignation against him or her, not right away at least. (33)

This tolerance reflects the communards’ reluctance to fully utilize its own bureaucratic power to compel. Such power has occasionally been necessary, occasionally with highly unpleasant results. Jones writes of a communard who consistently fell short of her labor quota because she suffered from clinical depression. When the bureaucratic process led to her being ousted, she committed suicide. As a result, writes Jones, “Commune policy was changed so expulsion is no longer automatic when someone falls too deeply into the hole” (14).

Kinkade experienced far more severe problems with laziness when she left Twin Oaks for a time during the mid-seventies to help found a second community called East Wind. The attitudes she encountered there eventually resulted in her leaving communal life altogether for a few years before finally returning to Twin Oaks. She describes the problem as follows:

Part of my disillusionment came from watching the worst aspects of communism in action. Some of my friends were able to overlook the glaring flaws rooted in the system itself and dismiss them as temporary aberrations, but I couldn’t. I saw a larger and larger part of the community sitting around on the front steps of the dining hall smoking cigarettes and drinking the wake-up coffee at 11 in the morning, and heard them ridicule as “workaholics” the people who made the money and kept the organization together. (Kinkade 88)

Kinkade further comments on the situation, “I knew that this phenomenon was not happening at Twin Oaks, and the difference seemed to be that Twin Oaks selected its members with some care” (Kinkade 89), and this brings up a further interesting and important difference between Twin Oaks and Morris’ Nowhere. In Nowhere, since all of
England (and apparently most of the rest of the world as well) is part of the community, there is no selection or rejection of members. Since Twin Oakers do carefully select their members, this implies that certain potential troublemaking types never appear in the first place. In a social system that makes up the entirety of society criminals and other deviant types would have to be dealt with.

The labor credit system which is used to divide labor at Twin Oaks as comes with its own problems. Kinkade writes about how some people, used to the rigid requirements of work schedules in mainstream society, have difficulty developing the self-discipline necessary to accomplish their work when given the freedom and flexibility Twin Oaks’ system provides. She goes on the recount the far more drastic problem:

The system’s most serious flaw is one it shares with the wage system. There are sometimes people who set about earning labor credits as if they were dollars, and their whole attitude toward their work is colored by the thought of the credit. This distracts from the intrinsic worth and enjoyment of the work they are doing. They begin to feel that labor credits are the way the Community expresses its approval or indifference, and therefore if an activity isn’t labor creditable, that means the Community does not value it—or them.

The labor credit is so central in some people’s thinking that they want labor credits for everything they do—going to meetings, participating in local good works, doing art and music, talking to their children—everything, we sometimes say, except brushing their teeth, and that will probably be next. This is one reason that Twin Oaks’ labor system is controversial in the communal movement. People are put off by what they call the “labor credit mentality.” (36)

Again, in Nowhere, money is non-existent. Work is done for no other reward than its own inherent pleasure.

Also, while one of Twin Oaks’ main sources of income is a kind of craftwork—the making of rope hammocks, it is not work that provides the kind of self-expression that Morris seems to have in mind. The hammocks are produced in an assembly line fashion and are made with synthetic rope. Despite the fact that Twin Oaks, as well as its
sister community, East Wind, has depended on the income from this industry for several
decades now, there has always been a certain displeasure with it. Komar writes first of
philosophical concerns communards have with the basic materials used:

The synthetic rope, however, a petroleum based product, has been one of the most
objectionable aspects of the hammocks business for both communities. The goal
of both in new product development has been to phase out the use of this material
manufactured from a non-renewable resource. A whole new line of “Furniture
that Moves” came out of this collaboration. In 1981 the Twin Winds Collection
was displayed in a handsome color brochure put out with community talent. Along
with hammocks, the brochure offered eight chairs which progressively
increased the use of wood and concomitantly reduced the proportion of the
objectionable rope. Each community contributed new models to the furniture
collection. The pendulum chair, rope rocker, and deck chairs were East Wind
creations; backpacker hammocks, the hanging chair, and four designs of a
standing chair using brass, chrome, metal, and four designs of a standing chair
using brass, chrome, metal, and oak bases came out of Twin Oaks. Although each
community manufactured its own creations, both have marketed all of each
others’ products. (143)

She later describes other problematic issues with this work:

There are, of course, valid objections to the industry besides the ecological ones
concerning the synthetic rope. A portion of the membership considers hammocks
a bourgeois luxury item and wants the community to produce something that is a
genuine necessity of life. The pro-hammock people argue that the synthetic rope
is appropriate technology for the product since natural fibers, such as cotton, are
not nearly as durable as polypro and that hammocks promote relaxation for
families. Relaxation, they point out, is close to a necessity for harried Americans.
The New Industries Criteria were formulated after Twin Oaks got hooked on the
hammock economy. In many ways hammocks served as a negative model, an
example of what was not wanted, as illustrated by the criteria for regional
marketing which is negated by distributing the product through the national chain.
There are inevitably fundamental conflicts in the relationship of an egalitarian
community and a large capitalist enterprise, another of the economic details that
Walden Two simply omitted. For several years the community felt trapped by its
dependence on this single big customer, a fact which aggravated ideological
feelings of discomfort. It took the combined labor of Twin Oaks and East Wind to
handle the big account. No matter how unsophisticated the communards might
have been as to business practices, they knew enough to realize that the large
purchase orders were submitted on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. Either the
communities could produce in sufficient quantities to make it worthwhile for the
chain to deal with them, or the chain would go elsewhere, because by this time, there was definitely an elsewhere. (145)

It seems fairly certain that Morris would share the communards’ concerns about the ideological implications involved with the hammock industry. In the final analysis the compromise the communards make on this issue must point back again to the critical difference that Twin Oaks must exist within a larger society. As such, its survival depends on such compromise. As a self-contained society, Nowhere does not face such problems.

Morris also regards it as essential that the workplace be tolerable, even pleasant. When Guest asks about some factories as they pass them, Dick informs him that they are now called banded-workshops. The particular workshop Dick and Guest look at is one in which they make glass and pottery. Dick points out: “It’s a nice place inside, though as plain as you see outside. As to the crafts, throwing the clay must be jolly work: the glass-blowing is rather a sweltering job; but some folk like it very much indeed; and I don’t wonder: there is such a sense of power, when you have got deft in it, in dealing with hot metal.” (227) A certain amount of hard work can have its own pleasure if it brings with it a sense of power or of accomplishment. One of the more uncomfortable jobs at Twin Oaks is the making of tofu, which involves working in close quarters in a very hot environment. Nevertheless, a certain number of people choose it regularly as Kinkade explains: “Although the work of making tofu is not particularly easy, some of our members like to do it because they believe in it” (57). Such work is also less unattractive when no one is forced to engage in it for back-breaking stretches of time, or as Kinkade
put it: “No matter what the work, it will attract workers unless and until there is too much of it. Then it suddenly becomes ‘undesirable.’” (32)

Twin Oakers are also concerned about having tolerable working conditions. When the weather is nice, as apparently it often is in Virginia, as much as possible work is conducted out of doors (29). In other ways as well, working conditions at Twin Oaks are generally far superior to those of the typical worker. Continuing her description of Emerald City, Komar remarks:

In contrast to its uninspired exterior, indistinguishable from any other factory in the U.S., working conditions inside Emerald City reflect its worker management. For starters, no one there is required to work more than a four-hour shift, although apprentices are asked to make a minimum twelve-hour per week commitment. Crews assemble in the courtyard, and those who show up on time may include the commuting time in their labor credits. (48)

Twin Oaks has a problem with management, however, which apparently does not exist in Nowhere. As Komar puts it, “Twin Oaks has been so paranoid about hierarchy, power, and authority that it has a tendency to victimize management or leaders” (152). She further comments:

Twin Oaks management, burdened with totally conventional responsibility and, according to egalitarian norms, stripped pretty radically of any authority, exhibits a high burn out rate. So far the community has not found a way to recognize, reward, or “reinforce” skill, experience, excellence, or seniority within the confines of egalitarianism. Managers without formal authority, managers who are not permitted to be more important than workers even in their sphere of responsibility, often find it difficult and sometimes impossible to manage. In the absence of rewards for management, the managers are left largely with the burdens of office and at best peripheral, but certainly no formalized compensations. As a result, there is a perpetual management crunch exacerbated by egalitarian rhetoric. (Komar 151)

No such conflict appears to exist in Nowhere. There the people seem to automatically recognize necessary leadership and tasks are completed without strife. The lack of
ambition to have power over others is perhaps one of the least realistic aspects of Morris’ society.

The education of the young is a matter which is conducted with an amazing lack of structure in both societies, though more so in Morris’ utopia. It does not seem as though there is organization enough to speak of an educational system in Nowhere. When Guest inquires about it, his guide, Old Hammond is puzzled:

“School?” he said; “yes, what do you mean by that word? I don’t see how it can have anything to do with children. We talk, indeed, of a school of herring, and a school of painting, and in the former sense we might talk of a school of children—but otherwise,” said he laughing, “I must own myself beaten.” (208)

Not only is he thrown by Guest’s use of the word “school,” Old Hammond is perplexed by the word “education” as well. When Guest explains the word, the reply points to some unfortunate assumptions about education that have been discarded in Nowhere:

“Well, education means a system of teaching young people.”
“Why not old people also?” said he with a twinkle in his eye.” (208)

Education in Morris’ vision does not end in a particular place nor at a particular age. It is practical and global, as Hammond explains:

…you expected to see children thrust into schools when they had reached an age conventionally supposed to be the due age, whatever their varying faculties and dispositions might be, and when there, with like disregard to facts, to be subjected to a certain conventional course of ‘learning.’ My friend, can’t you see that such a proceeding means ignoring the fact of growth, bodily and mental? No one could come out of such a mill uninjured; and those only would avoid being crushed by it who would have the spirit of rebellion strong in them. (245)

Hammond continues:

All that is past; we are no longer hurried, and the information lies ready to each one’s hand when his own inclinations impel him to seek it. In this as in other
matters we have become wealthy: we can afford to give ourselves time to grow. (246)

Just as with their labor, then, Nowhereans are free to pursue their educations as their own natures and interests incline them.

A similar philosophy is apparent at Twin Oaks in terms of the notions that education is for everyone, a lifelong process of growth and discovery and that it involves the whole person. The education of the young in particular has been somewhat more systematic and somewhat less successful, however. Several approaches have been tried through the years, originally beginning with a model based on Skinner’s ideas, though, as with so many aspects of Skinner’s conception, these ideas were quickly dropped. As Kinkade comments, “…the influence of Walden Two on our children’s program is minimal” (141). What has developed is a hodge-podge of strategies, reflective of group ambivalence perhaps, or as Komar expresses it in more positive terms, “It would be completely out of character for Twin Oaks to commit itself to one educational philosophy” (249).

One issue debated early on was whether or not the children would be poorly served by not being exposed to the public school system. Komar provides the following account of the issue:

Occasionally some of the “child people” alluded to the fact that Twin Oaks children would not have a large peer group during their early school years. The teachers, of course, had a strong desire to teach the children themselves, and no interest in sending them to a public school in Louisa County. They were also of the opinion that the Twin Oaks kids were much too sophisticated and free thinking to adjust to the conventionality and restrictions of a small town classroom. It was anticipated that the children would have difficulty with authoritarian concepts, miss a spirit of free inquiry, and that they would feel ill at ease with dress fashions and other pressures to conform. (250)
An attempt at mainstreaming Twin Oaks students proved the above concerns valid, and as a result, Twin Oaks continues to educate its children on-site. Several have grown and gone on to college, for which the community pays the tuition. But as in Nowhere, “(t)he education of Twin Oaks children is by no means confined to the classroom” (Komar 253). Children learn by watching adults at work and through their own uninhibited play.

On first glance, government would seem to be an area of great variance between the two communities, but a closer look proves the differences to be of little importance. Morris’ society is basically anarchist. Old Hammond tells Guest, “I must now shock you by telling you that we have no longer anything which you, a native of another planet, would call a government” (257). Hammond goes on to describe the means for making decisions.

…let us take one of units of management, a commune, or a ward, or a parish (for we have all three names, indicating little real distinction between them now, though time was there was a good deal). In such a district, as you would call it, some neighbors think that something ought to be done or undone: a new town-hall built; a clearance of inconvenient houses; or say a stone bridge substituted for some ugly old iron one—there you have undoing and doing in one. Well, at the next ordinary meeting of the neighbors, or Mote, as we call it, according to the ancient tongue of the times before bureaucracy, a neighbor proposes the change, and of course, if everybody agrees, there is an end of discussion, except about details. Equally, if no one backs the proposer—’seconds him,’ it used to be called—the matter drops for the time for the time being; a thing not likely to happen amongst reasonable men, however, as the proposer is sure to have talked it over with other before the Mote. But supposing the affair proposed and seconded, if a few of the neighbours disagree to it, if they think that the beastly iron bridge will serve a little longer and they don’t want to be bothered with building a new one just then, they don’t count heads that time, but put off the formal discussion to the next Mote; and meantime arguments pro and con are flying about, and some get printed, so that everybody knows what is going on; and when the Mote comes together again there is a regular discussion and at last a vote by show of hands. If the division is a close one, the question is again put off for further discussion; if the division is a wide one, the minority are asked if they will yield to the more general opinion, which they often, nay, most commonly do. If they refuse, the question is debated a third time, when, if the minority has not perceptibly grown, they always give way; though I believe there is some half-
forgotten rule by which they might still carry it on further; but I say, what always
happens is that they are convinced, not perhaps that their view is the wrong one,
but they cannot persuade or force the community to adopt it. (Morris 270-1)

That Morris’ ideal society should be basically anarchist reflects changes in his own
socialist group. Also, the meeting the narrator attended just before his adventure had “six
persons present, and consequently six sections of the party were represented, four of
which had strong but divergent Anarchist opinions” (181).

In Twin Oaks there is more of a centralized authority in the form of a council of
planners. In practice, however, things are not so different from the system described
above because the council has very little power. This, however, results in problems not
foreseen by Morris in that sometimes necessary changes are very difficult to make. Also,
it is occasionally felt that there is a certain degree of a tyranny of the majority.

Interestingly one of the areas which both societies most resemble one another
seems to be their views on sex. Not only do both share very broad views on what is
permissible, both also experience the issue as one their greatest societal problems. As Old
Hammond puts it:

’Tis a good job there are so many of them that every Jack may have his Jill: else I
fear that we should get fighting for them. Indeed,’ said he, becoming very grave,
‘I don’t say that it does not happen even now, sometimes. For you know love is
not a very reasonable thing, and perversity and self-will are commoner than some
of our moralists think. (215)

It is not surprising that Morris, who had known so much unhappiness in his own love life
would appoint the issue as one of the few problems plaguing his utopians. Morris’
tolerance of his wife’s love for Rossetti also makes this issue one of the areas in which
Morris can be seen as living his own ideals. He would likely see as wisdom, Kinkade’s
attitude toward the issue when she declares: “Twin Oaks drops all its communistic idealism in this matter. We compete with each other for mates and few acknowledge any rules in the competition” (186). Indeed, Old Hammond makes it clear that in Nowhere people are free to follow their passions:

You did not seem shocked when I told you that there were no law-courts to enforce contracts of sentiment or passion; but so curiously are men made, that perhaps you will be shocked when I tell you that there is no code of public opinion which takes the place of such courts, and which might be as tyrannical and unreasonable as they were. I do not say that people don’t judge their neighbors’ conduct, sometimes, doubtless, unfairly. But I do say that there is no unvarying conventional set of rules by which people are judged; no bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their minds and lives; no hypocritical excommunication which people are forced to pronounce, either by unconsidered habit, or by unexpressed threat of the lesser interdict if they are lax in their hypocrisy. (Morris 240)

He is not, however, naïve about the problems that might arise from such unbridled passions, nor about the violence that can arise from jealousy.

Problems related to jealousy are also among the most serious at Twin Oaks. In fact, unhappy love affairs rank among the chief reasons prompting people to leave the community. Kinkade reports, “People may leave because they cannot stand watching their old romances played out before them with an understudy taking their place in the lead role” (184).

Morris and Twin Oaks also have remarkably similar views when it comes to crime and punishment. As with so many things, the chief differences have to do with Twin Oaks existing within a larger society and being subject to external laws. Otherwise both see punishment as something abhorrent and also have very few restrictions on the personal freedom of their citizens. Both also have very optimistic romantic views on human nature. In Morris’ society crime (excepting again crimes of passion) has all but
ceased to exist, as Old Hammond explains: “Well, private property being abolished, all the laws and all the legal ‘crimes’ which it had manufactured of course came to an end. Thou shalt not steal, had to be translated into, Thou shalt work in order to live happily. Is there any need to enforce that commandment by violence” (263)?

At Twin Oaks, communards are expected to obey the laws of mainstream society, as the community does not wish to be the target of harassment by law enforcement. This does restrict behavior more than it might otherwise, and more than is the case in Morris’ vision. Twins Oaks’ experience by and large confirms Morris’ view that when want is removed, so too for the greater part is the motivation for crime. Kinkade concludes her chapter on the subject with the following revealing remarks:

That about sums it up for 25 years. Three or four thefts of money, some ice cream bars and fried chicken not accounted for, some children seeing what they can get away with, a temporarily crazed arsonist, a little minor cheating, and some angry words. The response: Locking up the cash, having some Feedbacks, some angry feelings, some worry. Not much. (Kinkade 221)

When crime does take place, both societies are in accord as to the undesirability of punishment. Discussing the case of a rare thief, Kinkade ponders: “Even if the man was guilty, was he so guilty that he had to be punished? Punishment is not usual at Twin Oaks” (246). This sentiment very close parallels the following exchange from News from Nowhere:

“But as to these days,” I said; “you don’t mean to tell me that no one ever transgresses this habit of good fellowship?”

“Certainly not,” said Hammond, “but when the transgressions occur, everybody, transgressors and all, know them for what they are; the errors of friends, not the habitual actions of persons driven into enmity against society.” (262)
As these examples indicate, there are many similarities between the two communities despite the lack of direct influence of Morris on Twin Oaks. That Twin Oaks should have unconsciously moved toward Morris’ vision, while having taken its initial inspiration from a source so at odds with it, seems in itself a validation of that vision. Morris may not have intended to provide a blueprint for an ideal society, but he did most certainly intend to nudge the world away from consumer capitalism. The lifestyle being practiced at Twin Oaks would seem far superior to Morris than that of the typical 21st century American or Englishman. Furthermore, if the intentional community movement continues to survive and develop, it is clear that Morris’ views could offer useful guidance.
WORKS CITED


