

Inventing Los Alamos: The Growth of an Atomic Community. By *Jon Hunner*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. xi + 288 pp. Maps, photographs, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN: 0-806-13634-0.

Reviewed by Charles Thorpe

Invented as a tightly controlled military-techno-scientific compound during World War II, Los Alamos, argues Jon Hunner, was reinvented after the war as the ideal all-American suburb. It was a “model community” and an image of the pristine world of the “atomic utopia” promised by optimistic visions of technological abundance in the postwar era.

But if Los Alamos was the suburban American dream, then, as we have come to expect from B-movies since the 1950s, there was also a dark side to the small-town idyll. Even if the community’s dark secret, the “doomsday machines” (p. 231), were hidden behind laboratory walls and rituals of secrecy—their presence was nevertheless felt beyond the Tech Area walls. Yards from the children’s school playground was “Acid Canyon,” where radioactive sludge from the laboratory accumulated for ten years after the war (pp. 140–43). Visitors noticed that the hopscotch games at Los Alamos had a nuclear-age twist: the squares to avoid were marked with the words “contaminated.” And the laboratory to which the scientists disappeared during the daylight hours was at one point recruiting their children as subjects for human radiation experiments (p. 142).

Los Alamos’s character as a surreal version of the conservative small town is accentuated also by the evidence of a bunker mentality among the Los Alamos population. So entrenched were they in their status as a protected compound that when, in 1954, the Atomic Energy Commission proposed removing the fences that encircled the town, residents feared that visitors entering from the outside world would bring a crime wave (pp. 186–87).

Los Alamos as nuclear suburbia is presented in fascinating detail in this absorbing study of its community life in the first two decades after World War II. Hunner emphasizes that just as the work of the laboratory was central to America’s

cold-war military power, so the community in more complex ways became an ideological symbol of the American way of life. The description of Los Alamos as suburb is reminiscent of the critique of 1950s suburban conformism in C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* or William Whyte's *Organization Man*.

The book should be read alongside Peter Bacon Hales's *Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project* (1999), which is a study of the quotidian life and organizational and political culture of the Manhattan Project. Hales takes a more critical perspective than Hunner, highlighting the forms of discipline and control that went into manufacturing the social solidarity that grounded the postwar suburban ideal.

Compared with Hales's book, Hunner's work provides greater detail about Los Alamos itself and extends the story into the postwar period. But his perspective is less critical. At times he seems to try too hard to avoid controversy but paradoxically ends up making needlessly controversial statements. For example, after listing the variety of cold-war human radiation experiments on children, pregnant women, prisoners, and mental patients, Hunner writes, "Unfortunately, some of the subjects of these experiments never gave their informed consent for the procedures" (p. 142). One has to ask, Did any? Only, it would seem, if one adopts an extremely loose definition of "informed consent." The author writes, "Los Alamos' mission remained vital to the nation's security" (p. 197), and he refers to the laboratory's "vital national security role" (p. 236). But the extent to which the work of the laboratory was "vital" for "security" might seem questionable when one also reads, "From 1945 to the middle 1980s, the nuclear laboratories in the United States designed and built over 23,000 nuclear weapons, capable of killing everyone on the planet several times over" (p. 230). The antinuclear movement has countered with a different understanding of "security." But as one man who grew up on "the Hill" commented, "You were seen as being stupid if you couldn't rationalize nuclear defense....If your mind doesn't get to the level where you could see the complexity behind it, you must be an idiot" (p. 224).

However, this historical account contains an underlying critique of the laboratory's institutionalized rationalizations. As I read the central argument, the

conscious manufacture of Los Alamos as an ideal suburb was one of the ways in which nuclear technology and its accompanying institutions were normalized in American culture. The image of Los Alamos as the nuclear suburb made the new technology palatable to Americans. Hunner frequently employs the term “code-switch,” which describes how the nuclear suburb enabled the popular understanding and imagery surrounding the bomb to shift from violence to prosperity and order. However, Hunner also suggests that less palatable realities of the nuclear project were not so easily susceptible to air brushing.

The book should be of considerable interest to historians examining the economic and cultural transformations of the Southwest by military Keynesianism. Economic and business historians will appreciate Hunner’s attention to the site’s culture and community life outside the laboratory, particularly since wartime Los Alamos continues to be held up as a management model (see, for example, Warren Bennis and Patricia Biedeman, *Organizing Genius*, 1998). Building Los Alamos became a matter not only of making and running a laboratory but also of manufacturing a particular form of life and culture that was advertised to the cold-war American nation as utopia.

Charles Thorpe is lecturer in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at University College, London. He is author of numerous articles on the historical sociology of Los Alamos and the wartime and postwar relationship between science and the American state. His book Oppenheimer: The Tragic Intellect will be published by the University of Chicago Press.