

Worlds Away

New Suburban Landscapes

Walker Art Center

Edited by
Andrew Blauvelt

Contents

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Suburban Aesthetics Is Not an Oxymoron

John Archer

John Archer is chair of the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota, where he teaches a course titled *Suburbia*. His most recent book, *Architecture and Suburbia* (2005), explores the historical relation between the single-family house and the rise of modern suburbia over the past three centuries.

Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky,
Little boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes all the same.
There's a green one and a pink one
And a blue one and a yellow one,
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same.

Conventional wisdom often recognizes these lyrics—Malvina Reynolds' 1962 acerbic critique of suburban tract housing in Daly City, California—as epitomizing America's exasperation with the ever-growing expanse of suburbia.¹ Not only do the lyrics deride mass-produced housing as fostering homogeneity and conformity, but they also disparage the aesthetics of these houses, both individually and as an ensemble, in abject terms. Reynolds' critique continues to be well-known nearly a half century later, having been popularized in the 1960s by folk singer and activist Pete Seeger, and most recently adopted as a theme song for the suburban dark-comedy television series *Weeds*.

Reynolds was hardly alone in her assessment of suburbia. Just the previous year, urban critic

Lewis Mumford had similarly bemoaned the homogeneity and aesthetic vacuity of suburbia as:

a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis.²

In 1964 Ada Louise Huxtable decried the “regimented hordes of split-levels lined up for miles in close, unlovely rows.” And in that same year, Peter Blake's book *God's Own Junkyard* vilified suburbia's “interminable wastelands dotted with millions of monotonous little houses on monotonous little lots and crisscrossed by highways lined with billboards, jazzed-up diners, used-car lots, drive-in movies, beflagged gas stations, and garish motels.” Blake acknowledged little, if any, hope for aesthetic redemption: “In today's Suburbia, it

is virtually impossible to create outdoor spaces of any character.”³

This concerted spate of critiques, reacting to the proliferation across America of mass-produced tract housing over the previous decade and a half, and setting the tone for the critique of suburbia ever since, is hardly without irony. Here, on the eve of the widespread civic unrest of the 1960s, and the profound social, cultural, and political changes that ensued, the aesthetic establishment circled the wagons against suburbia, outlining a conservative dogma that continues to shape the way in which academic and professional critics try to get us to think about suburbia today.⁴ For while the 1960s ushered in an era of populist, antiestablishment reform (much of which has been reversed by ensuing waves of conservatism) and precipitated far-reaching changes in popular culture, the critique of suburbia has maintained its disdain for the working-class and petit-bourgeois tastes of those who choose, and prefer, to live in developer-built, mass-marketed, tract-house environments.

The conservatism of the 1960s complaints is more evident in light of their origins in more than two centuries of vilification of suburbs, dating to the historical beginnings of modern suburbia in eighteenth-century England. Lines published in 1754 in one popular periodical, for example, denounced, in terms very similar to Malvina Reynolds', the unsophisticated, underfinanced, and underlandscaped sort of “box” that people with no taste were building on the outskirts of London:

A little country box you boast
So neat, 'tis cover'd all with dust;
And nought about it to be seen,
Except a nettle-bed, that's green;
Your Villa! rural but the name in,
So desart, it would breed a famine.⁵

A century later, New York architect William Ranlett wrote in similarly derogatory terms about the suburbs of his own time. Starting from the premise that cities are to be apprehended in terms comparable to a work of art—a genteel aesthetic stance in its own right—he found that American suburbs were little more than visual blight: “The suburbs of our cities are, generally, like a shabby frame to a fine picture. . . . [T]hey are put up in a hurry by careless speculators, and very little regard is paid to their externals.” At the end of the twentieth century, the

refrain was still the same: speaking acerbically, yet in tune with many in the design establishment, James Howard Kunstler described “the building of suburbia” as “a self-destructive act,” a “tragic process” that “is bankrupting us economically, socially, ecologically, and spiritually,” “not merely the symptom of a troubled culture but in many ways a primary cause of our troubles.” A good portion of the blame is directed at the aesthetic “banality” of suburbia: “a fake fanlight window in a tract house is the supposed solution for the problem of a house designed and built without affection for nobody in particular. A Victorian street light is the supposed cure for overly wide, arbitrarily curvy streets that are poorly defined by tract houses.”⁶

Persistent Precepts

Despite the historical persistence and consistency of critiques such as these, mocking uniformity, sneering at shoddy construction, and decrying the absence of taste (or worse), a substantive history of suburban aesthetics—the criteria according to which society has judged the design and appearance of suburban dwellings and landscapes—remains to be written.⁷ Although such a history is not possible here, a preliminary survey of the popular and professional literature on architecture, landscape, planning, and urban/suburban design of the past two-and-a-half centuries does yield four key precepts that have persisted over the history of suburbia.

First, a common factor in assessing the relationship between dwelling and landscape is picturesque design—adopting the English landscape aesthetic known as the picturesque, or at the very least acknowledging an overt pictorial relationship between the dwelling and “nature.” Second, design is recognized as a didactic instrument that is available for improving the morality, taste, and welfare of the populace. Third, preference is best given to the neighborhood or community, not the parcel of private property, as the principal aesthetic object. And fourth, an authoritative role in the evaluation and practice of urban/suburban design ought to be reserved for the professional planner and designer.

Yet despite (or perhaps because of) sprawling developments across the United States and the globe that defy these principles, there is scant counterdiscourse that explores the sorts of aesthetic—pragmatic, everyday, bourgeois, self-oriented, and identity-centered—that do prevail in this *terra abdicata*. Before turning to the grounds and



fig. 1 Short Hills, New Jersey, panorama and vignettes, from *History of Essex and Hudson Counties, New Jersey* (1884), by William Shaw

substance of such aesthetics, however, a closer look at the currently dominant discourse will help to clarify the comparatively elite and intangible premises on which the debate has been conducted so far.

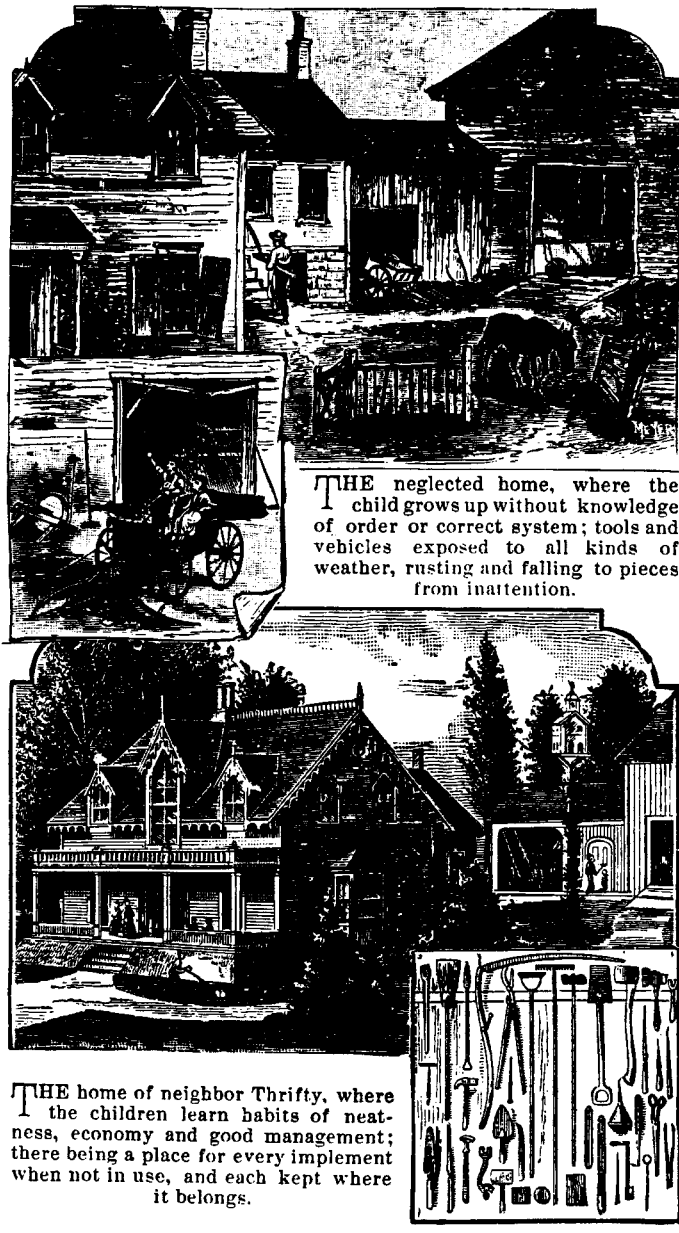
Picturesque Composition

The earliest, and perhaps foremost, of these precepts governing the production of suburbia originated in the eighteenth-century English landscape aesthetic of the picturesque. Tellingly front and center in William Ranlett's mid-nineteenth-century comment that suburbs should serve as a “frame to a fine picture,” the picturesque stemmed from mid-eighteenth-century efforts of English landscape gardener Capability Brown and artist and essayist William Gilpin, among others, to make the natural landscape, whether as fashioned by gardeners or as perceived by spectators, conform to the same rules of pictorial composition that informed the canvases of then-esteemed landscape painters Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin. Brown recast the terrain of large estates by creating country landscapes that were in effect pre-framed pictorial compositions, ready for apprehension by the viewer as static pictures. At the same time, Gilpin, seeking a structured method for tourists to apprehend the beauties of Britain's natu-

ral landscape and historical ruins, transformed the touristic experience into a series of encounters with overtly pictorial compositions. He accomplished this by addressing each scene of landscape-cum-ruins not as something to be observed directly, but rather to be viewed through an amber-tinted oval piece of mirror called a “Claude glass.” This lenslike object rendered the subject in a manner ostensibly comparable to the paintings of Claude or Poussin, which at that time generally were seen through a layer of old, and therefore yellowed, varnish. Landscapes consequently were experienced at one remove, excluding the observer from the composition by means of the implied, or sometimes explicit, frame.

Thus, picturesque nineteenth-century suburbs such as Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, or Short Hills, New Jersey, were extolled as much for their pictorial aesthetics as for their physical comforts and amenities. In 1884 *Lippincott's Magazine* rhapsodized that Short Hills “is scene-painters' architecture in an opera village,” while essayist Alfred Matthews, praising the siting of houses in the landscape, wrote that “each group reveals harmony, and every house gains something from its neighbor as well as from the broad picture formed by natural surroundings.”⁸

fig. 1 More than a century later, the same effect



THE neglected home, where the child grows up without knowledge of order or correct system; tools and vehicles exposed to all kinds of weather, rusting and falling to pieces from inattention.

THE home of neighbor Thrifty, where the children learn habits of neatness, economy and good management; there being a place for every implement when not in use, and each kept where it belongs.

continues to be emulated, in real estate Web sites and marketing brochures that frame idyllic visions of carefree and labor-free pastoral tranquility, and even in promotional prose that, as it typically encourages us to think back to a time when life was simpler and more wholesome,⁹ also appeals to our memory stock of images by Norman Rockwell and Currier & Ives. This pictorializing imperative is presently epitomized in its utmost form by Hiddenbrooke, a development in Vallejo, California, which is marketed as fashioning in three dimensions the romantic-pastoral vision of Cotswold-like cottages seen in the work of artist Thomas Kinkade, even though by all accounts the development bears almost no resemblance to the paintings.¹⁰

Moral Efficacy

Of equal interest to American architects, almost since the founding of the republic, has been the didactic and instrumental capacity of design to influence the moral character of the population. Houses long have been understood to have a close relation to the personality and character of those who lived within: the taste with which a dwelling was designed and furnished would have a corresponding effect on the character of the resident. Thus, as early as 1821 Timothy Dwight observed that "Uncouth, mean, ragged, dirty houses" produce "coarse groveling manners," while beauty can set "coarse society" on the road "towards improvement." At mid-century John Bullock proposed in *The American Cottage Builder* that the proper design of country residences could reduce the number of young men who "precipitate themselves into the dissipated and vitiated follies of a city life." Likewise, Alexander Jackson Downing, the pre-eminent American architect of the time, declared that "in this country . . . we have firm faith in the moral effects of the fine arts. We believe in the bettering influence of beautiful cottages and country houses." And in the mid-1860s, J. J. Thomas wrote that "[a] house is always a teacher; it may become an agent of civilization. While builders minister to deceit and vanity, those vices will prevail; when their works embody fitness, truth and dignified simplicity, these republican virtues will be firmly rooted in the nation. Few are aware how strong an influence is exerted by the dwelling on its inhabitants."¹¹ [fig. 2]

In 1852 Philadelphia architect Samuel Sloan even made a case for good design as a general patri-

otic resource, contending that by erecting "elegant buildings, . . . [t]hus does the national character become infused with refinement." And the influential feminist and reformer Catharine Beecher, in her 1869 tract *The American Woman's Home*, stressed that "the aesthetic element" of dwelling design could have a distinctly positive effect on younger members of the household as well as contribute to the education of all in "refinement, intellectual development, and moral responsibility."¹²

By the end of the nineteenth century, along with the rise of civic and municipal reform movements, reform-minded architects and planners began to extol the moral efficacy of aesthetics on a civic scale. As Richard E. Foglesong has shown, planners associated with the early-twentieth-century City Beautiful movement eagerly advocated aesthetics as a medium of benevolent social control, such that "control by design experts" ultimately could overcome many deficiencies of the market system in fashioning urban space. More generally, as Foglesong notes, turn-of-the-century City Beautiful aesthetics sought to transform the entire city plan into a physical apparatus for legitimating civic ideals—a plan that, at a time of large-scale immigration, could inculcate in the citizenry a respect for country, American culture, and capitalism.¹³

Thus, Charles Mulford Robinson's 1903 treatise, *Modern Civic Art, or the City Made Beautiful*, promoted a form of "civic art" that "stands for more than beauty in the city. It represents a moral, intellectual, and administrative progress as surely as it does the purely physical." Indeed, municipal aesthetics bore an efficacy that bordered on the eugenic: "[a]s this environment is lovely and uplifting, or mean and depressing, as it feeds or starves the brains and spirits whose outlook upon earth it compasses, it may be supposed to influence the battle, to help the forward or retrograde movement of the race." Or as Frank Koester wrote in 1912, tying together aesthetics, nationalism, and morality: "The superior appearance, beauty and harmony of the city will develop artistic taste and will result in increased civic pride and patriotism. This in turn affects the character of the individual favorably, improving moral conditions."¹⁴ By the 1950s and 1960s, considerable concern had arisen over the pernicious effects that suburbia was having on American morality, epitomized perhaps in *No Down Payment*, John McPartland's 1957 tale of

fig. 2 The neglected home, and the home of neighbor Thrifty, from Peale's *Popular Educator and Cyclopaedia of Reference* by Richard S. Peale, circa 1860s

alcoholism, infidelity, and abuse. As late as 1979, Jonathan Kaplan's film *Over the Edge* purported to show the corrosive effects that master-planned communities might have on their youth. In recent decades, the discussion of morality has shifted from an interest in suburbia's good or bad effect on the individual to an emphasis on suburbia's effects on a broader scale, as an engine of sprawl. Dolores Hayden's comments on sprawl, although they do not specifically refer to suburbia, succinctly epitomize the opinions of many. Sprawl, she writes, is "socially destructive. It intensifies the disadvantages of class, race, gender, and age by adding spatial separation. Sprawl is politically unfair as well as environmentally unsustainable and fiscally shortsighted."¹⁵

Community

An abiding challenge to those who would deploy design as a means of inculcating morality has been the long-standing, uncomfortable tension in American culture between community interest and the private rights of individuals and their property. Designers and critics have long struggled to balance these competing interests and values. Yet in the early decades of the twentieth century, buoyed by the spirit of municipal reform, many came to the conclusion that to prioritize community benefit over private interest was the best way to serve the interests of all. Robinson, in a remark subsequently repeated by many of his contemporaries, set the tone of the discussion in 1903: "The exterior of your home, said Ruskin, is not private property." For although Robinson recognized the need to balance "civic art" with the "rights of privacy," he argued that in some situations the whole could be aesthetically more efficacious than the sum of its parts: "the individual residents . . . are to be encouraged . . . to co-operate, that there may be a harmonious result and that each effect may be heightened by its neighbours."¹⁶

Much the same attitude informed the writing of urban planner Thomas Adams, the first manager of Letchworth Garden City and later director of the Regional Plan Association of New York. In 1934 Adams argued that in order "to improve public taste . . . [i]ndividualism must be controlled"—hastening to add, in tacit acknowledgment of the growing menace posed by the USSR, that this could be accomplished "without the aid of communistic government and architecture." Rather,

perhaps presaging popular enthusiasm for communities governed by private homeowners' associations later in the twentieth century, he proposed that individualism be harnessed not by state or municipal authority, but instead privately, "through cooperative action" in the form of "associations of individuals."¹⁷ And despite (or perhaps because of) the inexorable, ongoing privatization of the American landscape over the rest of the twentieth century, community has become an increasingly common consideration in the planning and marketing of new developments. Commonly proceeding from the unstated presumption that there has been a drastic loss of community in American life, advertisements for new developments ask readers to imagine or recall a time when community flourished—a time and tradition that the new development promises to restore. As a marketing brochure for Clover Field, a development in Chaska, Minnesota, put it in 2005:

The community of Clover Field is reminiscent of an age when picket fences and front porches lined the streets, neighbors gathered in the town square and in their front yards, and children walked to school. Life was a little simpler. The neighborhood was a place where you felt at home.

Older neighborhoods hold a timeless appeal. They awake fond memories of a simpler way of life. Gathering with friends and neighbors on a warm spring day. Sitting on the front porch watching the stars flicker on a summer night. Riding bikes through newly fallen leaves to the corner grocery store. Or, walking to school in the season's first gentle snow. It's a way of life missing in many new subdivisions but the cornerstone of the area's newest neighborhood development—Clover Field.¹⁸

Professional Authority

Long before the invention of modern suburbia, architects commonly insisted that, because of their training and expertise, all matters of building design should be entrusted to them in order to secure the greatest public and private benefit. This sort of self-interest also figured regularly in the writings of nineteenth-century architects who designed for the suburban residential market. City Beautiful planners, however, reached further, making centralized aesthetic control a crucial factor in the larger

enterprise of civic reform. Robinson lamented, for example, that as a city grows, "There is immense scope for the poor taste of untrained individualism."¹⁹ He expected that the public instead would appreciate "the value of an authoritative aesthetic control," and presumably accede, gratefully, to its imposition. Thomas Adams focused more directly on the sorts of buildings that traditionally would have been designed and built by small contractors or owner-occupiers, particularly since they constituted an ever-increasing portion of the urban/suburban landscape. Plainly mistrusting their builders' capacity to conform to an appropriate aesthetic, he recommended large-scale professional intervention: "Until the public obtains a greater appreciation of architecture, too many buildings will continue to be designed by untrained men, and until more architects are employed to design the smaller buildings, which constitute the greater part of cities, the standard of civic architecture will be low."¹⁹

In short, from the nineteenth century to the early twenty-first, architects and planners have promoted the *instrumental* capacity of the built environment, by *aesthetic* means, to shape the consciousness and material life of those who encounter it. As the expansion of America's urban peripheries began to accelerate, first in the 1890s with the expansion of streetcar lines, and again in the 1920s as automobile ownership became widespread, advocates of municipal improvement were optimistic that prescriptions such as those offered by Robinson and Adams would help to tame and order the all-too-rapidly growing suburban landscape. Their exemplary visions of aesthetically managed landscapes, actively contributing to the welfare of residents and community, remained influential, and were largely realized in a number of prominent suburban projects, such as Radburn, New Jersey (1929); Greenbelt, Maryland (1937); Reston, Virginia (1964); Columbia, Maryland (1964); Jonathan, Minnesota (1967); and The Woodlands, Texas (1972).

Yet, by and large across American society, as suburbia expanded ever more rapidly in the decades following World War II, public interest in planning and design as instruments of civic and social improvement faded, and support for control over neighborhood design through municipal (rather than private) means likewise all but disappeared. Nevertheless, simultaneously there was a complementary rise in the popularity of *private*

developments that do incorporate a comprehensive, professionally crafted aesthetic into an overall master plan, the maintenance of which is assured through design regulations and behavior codes enforced by private homeowner associations. But even as master-planned communities (MPCs) have become a leading type of residential development in the United States, the aesthetic imperative has subtly and profoundly changed. Promotional materials for MPCs still boast design features that are consistent with precepts recommended by early twentieth-century planners—affording picturesque engagement with nature, offering neighborhood layouts and amenities that are conducive to wholesome family and community life, and providing covenants, codes, and restrictions (CC&Rs) that have a cachet of professional erudition. Yet compared to the first half of the twentieth century, two differences also stand out. First, all the advantages of these design strategies accrue to, and are enjoyed in, the private, not public, realm. And second, as justification for the expense and for limitations to personal freedoms that these strategies require, a quantitative standard is introduced: property values, which thus become the primary register in which these benefits are valued, not infrequently more so than lifestyle, aesthetics, or community.²⁰

Still, whatever the aesthetic regime a given master-planned community may adopt, the net effect is that suburbia in general is, to many eyes, an aesthetic hodgepodge: countless private enclaves, legally and aesthetically self-contained, which compete with an even greater number of unregulated tract developments, as well as lot-by-lot developments of individually designed houses. The result is that, on balance, suburbia still profoundly disappoints the critics. Many identify master-planned communities as particularly blameworthy—for withdrawing beauty and community from the public realm, both as amenities and as matters of public concern, and for repressing freedom and diversity through CC&Rs that strictly limit opportunities for individual expression and distinction. The large-scale, long-term result is neither social improvement nor community. Other critics find little more aesthetic merit in most master-planned communities than in suburbia at large—which, they argue, is still regimented, repetitive, bleak, and decidedly unpicturesque. Visually, as well as in terms of such factors as

navigation and transportation, they find suburbia incoherent—a problem, they suggest, that begs the intervention of professional authority.

In sum, over the past century the distance between the critical establishment and run-of-the-mill suburbia remains in many respects unchanged. Nevertheless, suburbia itself has changed profoundly, not only demographically but also in other significant respects: as the physical fabric of suburbia consists ever more of manufactured products and marketable commodities, its relation to the lives of its inhabitants and to the culture at large has been transformed. In order to better understand the nature and function of aesthetics in present-day suburbia, it is necessary to explore the relationship of this transformation to broader aspects of American culture and everyday life.

Mass Production and the Loss of Selfhood

At the outset of the twentieth century, houses generally were one-off products, built separately and individually, or perhaps occasionally in small series by small-scale entrepreneur builders. A given house could be regarded as a work of craft, which often was presumed to have the potential to embody the character and facilitate the personal interests of the person or family who inhabited it.²¹ As the manufacturing economy became more sophisticated, however, more and more aspects of the house-building process became mechanized and standardized, thus diminishing the individuality of each house, theoretically reducing its capacity to suit the individual resident, and becoming more of a mass commodity. Sears Catalog Homes, shipped as ready-to-assemble kits from 1908 to 1940, were one harbinger of change. Sinclair Lewis' lamentation in *Babbitt* (1922) on the evils of standardized housing production vividly captures the disappointing shift in what a homeowner could expect from a house, epitomized in this excerpt describing George Babbitt's bedroom: "It was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes. Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitts, or anyone else. . . . In fact there was but one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home."²²

A generation later, in the late 1940s and 1950s, the mass-production processes that built Levittown, Lakewood, Park Forest, and other large-scale tract developments accelerated this transformation

of dwelling into commodity. And as Americans became more mobile due to freeways, expanding employment opportunities, and rising affluence, they moved more frequently, rendering the house even less befitting as an anchor of self and identity. Simultaneously, the housing-construction industry has become a major economic sector unto itself, and real estate has become as much a financial and marketing product as it is an apparatus for dwelling.²³ Probably the most concerted criticism of these postwar changes has been found in the medium of popular music, which condemns suburbia in terms far more acerbic than Sinclair Lewis used. From "Pleasant Valley Sunday" (Monkees, 1966) and "Subdivision Blues" (Tom T. Hall, 1973) to "Subdivisions" (Neil Peart, 1982) and "The Valley of Malls" (Fountains of Wayne, 1999), the message is that life and soul have been sucked out of suburbia.

While a common factor in critiques from *Babbitt* to the present day is the loss of selfhood, the underlying basis for these critiques almost always focuses on how, and from what, suburbia is made: specifically, standardized, mass-produced materials, marketed in terms (such as "Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes") that stereotype rather than individualize the resident. "Suburban Home," released by the Descendents in 1982, is quintessential:

I want to be stereotyped
I want to be classified
I want to be a clone
I want a suburban home.²⁴

Even as twentieth-century American popular culture, especially since the 1960s, witnessed extraordinary shifts in the understanding of selfhood (as it turned more privatized and narcissistic), Americans were loath to relinquish the long-standing presumption that a bond prevailed between dwelling and identity—that the house was a material register of selfhood.²⁵

Nevertheless, the nature of that relation between dwelling, identity, and selfhood had changed in three crucial ways. First, houses were no longer individually designed and built; purchasers no longer could expect that such a mass-produced product could be a "personal" fit to the life of any given individual. Second, houses were designed to suit specific marketing categories of consum-

ers, such as "Medium Incomes" in Babbitt's day, or "Kids & Cul-de-sacs," which currently is one of sixty-six clusters in Claritas Corporation's PRIZM NE marketing system. Third, the general mobility of the American population, and the ease with which purchasing and selling houses has been made possible by modern financial instruments and government organizations (such as the growth of thirty-year mortgages following World War II, the FHA and its insured housing loan programs, and the Federal National Mortgage Association), have rendered the act of purchasing of a house, and living in it, ever closer to being just another act of consumption. In short, the standardization and commodification of the house led many to doubt its capacity to serve adequately as a register of individualized American selfhood.

Diminished Community, Absent Authenticity

Such profound changes in the ways that suburban housing was produced, marketed, and utilized were paralleled by a related cultural shift: as modern industrial, economic, and political relations have contributed to a progressive erosion of community in American society, critics likewise identified a corresponding vitiation of *authenticity* in social and personal relations. In 1887 German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies penned a pioneering analysis of this fissure as a structural product of modern, industrial-capitalist society. He differentiated *gemeinschaft*, a comparatively traditional, long-standing form of community based on shared values, familial ties, and customs of mutual dependence, from *gesellschaft*, a form of community that individuals in a privatized, competitive society construct explicitly to facilitate mutual cooperation in the pursuit of self-interest.²⁶ As Tönnies noted, interpersonal ties in *gesellschaften* ordinarily are much weaker, and more impersonal, than in *gemeinschaften*, since they are formed artificially around specific interests, rather than constantly generated, through custom and tradition, across multiple interests among the population at large. The rise of *gesellschaften* thus bespeaks citizens' growing alienation under modern forms of industrial capitalism. Members of industrialized societies are no longer part of a feudal order where everyone's place is fixed in a complex, often hierarchical social fabric, but rather cast as individuals, all given the responsibility of forging their own identities and relationships. There are

positive advantages to this more autonomous status; nevertheless it also has the capacity to alienate individuals from the common interests of other citizens and society at large.

Tönnies' account of economic and social alienation, further developed in the social criticism of Max Weber in the 1920s and by members of the Frankfurt School in the 1940s, blossomed after World War II into a withering critique of the role of industrialized mass production—not least in the form of tract housing—in undermining American society and culture. Sociologist David Riesman's 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd* sharpened the critical polemic, arguing that the rise of individualist consumerism only directed Americans' loyalties away from community and toward a selfish, careerist alliance with corporate interests. William H. Whyte's 1956 book *The Organization Man* echoed much the same fear. In 1957, Riesman's essay "The Suburban Dislocation" became one of the earliest, and most trenchant, condemnations of the mass-produced tract suburb. He warned of the "loss of human differentiation," of "aimless" uniformity and conformity, and of privatization and isolation, especially for women.²⁷

An ensuing generation of critics refocused the question from the loss of community to the loss of authenticity, focusing not simply on American suburbs but on Western urbanism in general. Architects searched distant portions of the globe for structures that might be more demonstrably authentic, as for example Bernard Rudofsky did in the exhibition *Architecture without Architects* that he curated at the Museum of Modern Art in 1964 to 1965, and in a catalogue published under the same title. A decade later geographer Edward Relph, arguing for an "unselfconscious and authentic experience of place as central to existence," chronicled the decline in the very possibility of authentic places in post-Renaissance Western architecture. In what amounted to a funeral for authenticity, Relph declared "that inauthenticity is the prevalent mode of existence in industrialised and mass societies," and charged that "mass values and impersonal planning in all their social, economic, and physical forms are major manifestations of such inauthenticity."²⁸

A number of critics offered a narrower critique, however, identifying the accelerating abandonment of America's cities in favor of suburbia, and the

escalating presence of commodities in American's everyday lives as synergistically contributing to a diminution of authenticity in modern life. Returning to *Babbitt*, for example, T. J. Jackson Lears pointed to suburbanite George Babbitt's realization that standardized, mass-produced products precluded, in Babbitt's words, the "joy and passion and wisdom" that he had sought in life—a life journey that Lears described as a "search for the lost springs of authentic being," a "quest for authenticity that comes to nothing."²⁹ Stewart Ewen, writing in 1989, echoed the title of Riesman's 1957 essay in defining "the central experience of urbanization and modernity" as a "cultural dislocation." At a time of accelerating flight to the suburbs, Ewen did not implicate suburbia explicitly in this disruptive process; yet by tying it to a prevailing malaise over the decline of cities, he left little doubt as to where the perpetrators went and what enticed them to leave. Specifically, those abandoning the cities for suburbia were happily indulging in various forms of commodity consumption that eroded "authentic" culture and replaced it with an ersatz selfhood or, as Ewen put it, a "commodity self," a mere "dream of identity" fashioned, but never delivered, by advertising.³⁰ In a 1980 essay, architectural historian Adrian Forty and architect Henry Moss singled out one of the more prominent ways in which this manifests itself in suburbia, namely the assortment of quasi-vernacular and quasi-historical style choices which, as marketed to suburban house buyers, not only attempt to camouflage the standardized and mass-produced nature of suburban tract housing, but also fashion an ostensible "scenery of permanence" and myth of authenticity for those who live there.³¹

Assessments such as these by Lears, Ewen, and Forty and Moss, that twentieth-century technologies of mass production, marketing practices, and advertising afforded only simulacra of identity, found ready acceptance among erudite critics of suburbia as well as throughout American popular culture. Of the considerable body of twentieth-century literary fiction and film that is set in suburbia, a remarkable portion is devoted to much the same theme, the alienation and inauthenticity that pervade suburbia. Novels and films from *Babbitt* (1922) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (novel by Sloan Wilson, 1955; film, 1956) to *Independence Day* (Richard Ford, 1995) and *American Beauty* (directed by Sam Mendes, 1999), all foreground

the estrangement of their central characters from a world that is ever more artificial, corporate, and regimented.³² Indeed, for many critics of modern capitalist and consumer society, suburbia became Exhibit A, not only because so much of it was mass-produced and mass-marketed, but also because so much of it appeared to subscribe to an ersatz aesthetic, mindlessly forgoing authenticity.

Critiques such as these, however, paid little attention to the lives and practices of the real people who lived there; for those who did pay close attention, such as Herbert Gans, who published *The Levittowners* in 1967, and Bill Owens, whose collection of photographs titled *Suburbia* appeared in 1973 (page 110), the findings often were astoundingly different. Far from sterile and conformist, suburbia harbored people with rich and diverse cultures, who employed the physical housing apparatus in a host of original, personal, and indeed authentic ways.

Objects and Identity

Central to the process by which housing contributes to the articulation of selfhood and identity is the larger role that objects in general serve in human consciousness and daily life. A rich academic literature has explored the production and consumption of goods in human society, and demonstrates how they are in general instrumental to the very real articulation of identity, selfhood, and the relation of self to society. Early in the twentieth century, scholars of structural anthropology and sociology such as Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss identified the significant role of gifts and other objects in articulating the bonds and ranks that tie individuals and larger social groups together. In 1979 Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood extended the analysis to a deeper level, writing that consumption of goods "is a ritual process whose primary function is to make sense of the inchoate flux of events." A critical factor in that process of stabilization is a meaningful built environment: dwellings do not simply protect against the elements, they also constitute an organizing apparatus that through practical, symbolic, and aesthetic means anchors and negotiates the constantly changing relations between self and the world. "Consumption goods," as Douglas and Isherwood put it, "constitute the very system itself."³³

Focusing more closely on the relation between objects and selfhood, marketing researcher Russell

Belk states that "our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities": through investing energy in producing and using objects, they become part of the self.³⁴ Geographer David Harvey views the process in much the same fashion, but more broadly, focusing on the construction of place: here "material, representational, and symbolic activities"—including what people do with objects—"find their hallmark in the way in which individuals invest in places and thereby empower themselves collectively [and, one might add, personally] by virtue of that investment."³⁵ Put another way, what people do with objects, and the meanings that people invest in objects, are fundamental to the articulation of selfhood. Goods and all the things we do in the process of consuming them fashion not only the very structure of everyday life, but selfhood itself.

In the mid-nineteenth century, well before the widespread mechanization of standardized products, American architects and intellectuals understood this instrumental relationship between goods and selfhood. And many of them identified the house as the premier apparatus by which the resident could fashion the many dimensions of selfhood. As the popular and influential preacher Henry Ward Beecher wrote in 1855:

A house is the shape which a man's thoughts take when he imagines how he should like to live. Its interior is the measure of his social and domestic nature; its exterior, of his esthetic and artistic nature. It interprets, in material forms, his ideas of home, of friendship, and of comfort.

And despite the concerns of many that mass-produced tract housing and commodity culture have eviscerated dwellings of any capacity for meaningful articulation of identity,³⁶ the notion of an instrumental relation between house and selfhood still retains considerable credence. As critic Michael Sorkin has remarked, "We trust home to be aid and comfort to individuality," and we place full confidence in the "idea of the home as the preserve of the personal, the terrain of our individuation."³⁷ And as historian Andrew Hurley observed in 2001, in a conclusion that applies to housing and retail goods alike, those who make use of a given product are not bound by the meanings attached to the marketing of the product. "Contemporary

advertisers and retailers pitch their products, not to middle-class families, but to individuals as cultural free agents. Commodities once promoted as instruments of family cohesion and cultural amalgamation are presented as mediums of self-expression and personal transformation."³⁸ Or as architect Sara Selene Faulds puts it, "Our homes provide us with a freedom for personalization of those special places which we nurture into being, and which, in turn, nurture us. It is in our homes that we are best able to display for others our interests, fantasies, aesthetics, and images of self."³⁹

From Standardization to Distinction

Despite the confidence of commentators such as those above that dwellings and their contents readily serve as instruments for fashioning selfhood and identity, there are many who argue, to the contrary, that standardization, mass production, and mass marketing have left suburban housing capable of articulating little more than stock designs, stereotypes, and clichés. Such might be the case if the only way in which to make use of an object were as it originally was intended, or the only way to understand an object was in the way it originally was advertised. But once the product is made part of the purchaser's home, use and significance are open to change: depending on how it is situated and employed, it becomes part of the apparatus by which the residents fashion their own specific interests and daily lives.

As marketing researchers Richard Elliott and Kritsadarat Wattanasuwan have shown, individuals are not confined to the range of meanings and uses that marketers attach to their products. Rather, in articulating selfhood through the practices of daily life, consumers bring with them the potential to "ascribe different and inconsistent cultural meanings" to all sorts of products. Advertisements don't transfer meaning directly to consumers. Instead, consumers are aware of the meanings that they are being "sold," and that they also are able to vary, multiply, ignore, and undercut those meanings, depending on their own interests and circumstances.⁴⁰ This applies equally to the production and consumption (or habitation) of suburbia. The house, contents, and yard are in great measure an assemblage of standardized, industrially produced, mass-marketed products; but far from being prisoners of the menu, those who actually live there are engaged every day in a careful and deliberate

process of selecting and fashioning their material surroundings into an apparatus of selfhood and identity. The ways in which a house is finished and furnished, and the ways in which particular features and spaces are used, maintained, and modified, continually fashion a pragmatic apparatus that binds together the resident's dreams, values, and everyday life. For although elements such as pristine lawns, pedimented porticoes, wood-grain metal siding, great rooms, master suites, multi-paned sash windows, reproduction furniture, and reproduction artwork may be stock products, even clichés, they are also essential instruments of social signification, making multiple statements about social class, economic class, taste, style, identity, heritage, security, and so forth, thus fashioning a rich and complex selfhood.⁴¹ As architect Peter Kellett shows, even in barrios and other informal settlements, the physical attributes of homeplace, fashioned by whatever means and in whatever materials may be available, still "relate to issues of identity, economic and social positions: in short, a person's place in society." "Through the processes of occupation, construction and habitation," he writes, the dweller "is actively reconstructing her place in the world."⁴²

Indeed, far from the presumption that standardized products standardize the users, the trend is very much the opposite. Today the social world is increasingly organized according to the logic of differential distance, which is to say that differences are signs of distinction. In an early exploration of this phenomenon, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction* examined the specific tastes and aesthetic practices that people employ in pursuing individual distinction—a means of differentiating themselves from others in order to establish their position vis-à-vis the various levels and echelons of society.⁴³ Much the same thing occurs in American suburbia: distinction is achieved not only by living in a certain place (e.g., by owning a house in a community with a certain cachet) but also by distinguishing oneself within that community (e.g., by having the showiest plantings, or the most accurately restored historic exterior). Distinction does not necessarily imply substantial outright difference. For example, in a neighborhood of houses that are all similar to each other, distinction may not be a matter of using a paint color that noticeably differs from all the others, or having a unique addition; rather, it may well be a matter of using a

combination of paint colors that is the most tasteful within the local palette, or making additions that coexist most peacefully with the surrounding structures and landscape.

In this way the housing market, instead of surrendering to the tyranny of standardization, is expanding the available means by which individual owners can shape their material surroundings and simultaneously fashion aesthetic statements that suit and express their own distinctive tastes and aspirations. As Witold Rybczynski details in the book *Last Harvest* (2007), the ever more ample option menus that builders offer their clients are a significant avenue of personal differentiation, serving to "give buyers the opportunity to personalize their homes."⁴⁴ Features such as elaborate ceilings, skylights, additional rooms, fireplaces, chair rails, exterior stylistic packages (bungalow, Victorian, colonial, etc.), appliance packages, various window types, and different grades of trim, all are part of the ever-expanding range of products by which houses serve not simply as apparatuses of social signification (tying the owner to certain class echelon, for example), but also become instruments of personal distinction.

Some will argue that such products are not "genuine," or authentic, but rather a smorgasbord of ersatz veneers and simulacra, and therefore nothing of genuine distinction can result—that however the household is configured, all that it can amount to is imitative representation. But this, as with other arguments concerning authenticity, again denies the reality of everyday life as lived amidst, and through, commodities. A parallel argument denies *aesthetic* legitimacy in circumstances when multiple standardized units, especially those that may be obvious stereotypes or clichés, are employed. Yet to do so risks drawing a specious distinction between such techniques when they are employed under the aegis of "art" and their use in common everyday life. The work of Andy Warhol is a case in point. His serial repetition of mechanically reproduced images and objects readily captivated both the public and the art establishment—beginning, not incidentally, in the very same year that "Little Boxes" appeared. Warhol's own little boxes—his Brillo boxes (1964)—followed by Campbell's Soup cans (1968) and more, and his confidence that distinction, in the form of "fifteen minutes of fame," would accrue to everyman, were lasting and widely accepted statements of confidence in the aesthetic value of commodity culture.

But in the longer history of artistic production, Warhol was hardly a pioneer in the appropriating standardized elements to a larger whole. As Walter J. Ong has shown, the epic works of Homer survived from storyteller to storyteller in part because they were constructed from clichéd expressions and standardized themes, which rendered them sufficiently memorable to be learned and recited from one generation to the next. As Ong puts it bluntly, "Homer stitched together prefabricated parts,"⁴⁵ yet the aesthetic distinction of these poetic works has been an article of faith for centuries. In this light, the widespread censure of prefabricated suburbia appears ever more problematic. At best, it has all the trappings of a class-based critique: what is hallowed by the golden glow of history or by the prestige of the New York art scene is entirely acceptable, but when much the same process is found amongst the bourgeois (or nouveaux-bourgeois) masses, the establishment demurs. Yet in terms of performance as well as pragmatics, there is no intrinsic difference between Pop Art or Greek epic and what suburbanites do, on a daily basis, with their fifteen hundred square yards (about one-third acre) of distinction.

Thus in a culture such as ours that is centered not only on an economy of consumption, but also on delineating distinction, the vocabulary and syntax for articulating selfhood and identity are the object of considerable attention. Not only is there incentive for constant invention and innovation (products that instigate new activities, fashions, or styles, for example), and to devise products that may be readily individualized and customized, but there is also a corresponding incentive for marketing practices to address each person in terms that are as individualized as possible, and to offer new avenues to personal distinction as well. This approach characterizes the marketing of real estate as much as any other commodity, as is seen in the incorporation of several standard marketing practices into the marketing of real estate. These include market segmentation, lifestyle marketing, branding, and theming.

Prefiguring present-day marketers' interest in consumers' pursuit of distinction, marketing researchers of the 1960s began to identify a spectrum of "life style concepts" to help explain the social and psychological frameworks in which individuals tended to fashion personal identity and identify with particular social classes. In the 1970s,

researchers expanded and refined this mode of analysis into a more refined methodology termed "market segmentation"; this in turn served as a crucial foundation for mass customization and personalized marketing, and it remains a predominant, ever more sophisticated apparatus for identifying consumers according to increasingly precise criteria. A key principle of market segmentation is that there is no "average" consumer. Rather, it is the differences among consumers that market-segmentation analysis seeks to elucidate: the more axes of difference, and the more degrees of difference along the scale of any given axis, the more highly differentiated (one could also say *distinguished*) is any consumer. And although it is generally not (yet) realistic for marketers to target any single individual, it can be highly effective to address specific consumers in terms that identify respects in which they already are differentiated from others, and in which a given product can conduce to even greater degrees of distinction. Claritas Corporation, working in this field of market segmentation since the 1970s, has developed the leading system for identifying, and marketing to, specific market segments, or clusters of individuals. Known by the acronym PRIZM NE, the system assigns Americans to fourteen groups that are further divided into a total of sixty-six clusters. Significantly, residential location (urban, suburban, or country/rural) is one of the two factors that are considered in PRIZM's top-level classification into groups, the other being income level, ranging from "affluent" to "downscale." Further refinements in residential location are part of the definitional framework for the sixty-six clusters—for example, cluster 34, "White Picket Fences."⁴⁶

Developers and builders are keenly aware of these marketing conventions, and design their products accordingly to appeal to identifiable and thus receptive market segments. There is a risk that this can degenerate into a stagnating, circular process if developers and builders cease to refine their understanding of market segments, or search for new ones. If market segments are associated with specific types of housing, and builders simply replicate those specific types in order to appeal to the same market segments, there is little innovation—and what had been distinct, over time becomes commonplace.

In real estate, as with marketing in general, segmentation commonly focuses on *activities* rather than personality, although consumers'

“lifestyle attitudes” remain a central consideration.⁴⁷ The sorting and grouping of people according to lifestyle—practically speaking, a combination of activities, interests, and opinions—has been central to market segmentation since the beginning. As a standard text on the marketing of places states, “people are able to define where they live to work rather than where they work to live.” Thus “places must learn to market to various individual life-styles.”⁴⁸ Each of the PRIZM NE clusters is in large measure a lifestyle analysis, identifying specific lifestyle attributes, the popularity and unpopularity of which identify each given cluster. Thus in the “Middleburg Managers” cluster, college football ranks high (two and one-half times the national average) and pro basketball ranks low (less than a third of the national average), while in the “White Picket Fences” cluster, distinguishing lifestyle characteristics include owning a treadmill, dining at Carl’s Jr., and subscribing to baby magazines.⁴⁹ Real estate developers and marketers correspondingly orient their projects around specific lifestyles, identifying a specific “target market” of consumers, assessing local competition for that market, developing a coordinated marketing campaign that features advertising in selected media, and furnishing a model home and its surrounding landscape with features intended to appeal to the prospective customer’s lifestyle interests. Often marketing is less about the physical attributes of the home and site than about who and what the resident can become, given the opportunities afforded there. The following, for example, appears in a Web advertisement for Standard Pacific Homes in Fort Collins, Colorado: “Harvest is about so much more than houses. It’s about creating a sense of community. It’s about personal style and promising relationships, born of intricate planning and attention to detail. It’s about connecting with people in a place where ‘home’ goes beyond the borders of your front lawn.”⁵⁰

Branding and theming are two interrelated techniques that are complementary to lifestyle marketing. Instead of addressing potential customers in terms of distinctive lifestyle attributes, developers and builders can also offer distinction on their own terms, through branding and marketing. Yet as marketing expert Mark Stevens put it, “until recently, builders had been brain-dead about branding”; few homebuilders put much effort into developing and maintaining a brand name. To do

so meant maintaining consistent, distinctive standards across regions and over time. But around 2000, builders began to realize the opportunities that branding could provide. For example, in 2002, Beazer Homes, as reported by real estate editor Pat Curry, headed down a path soon trod by many: the company realized that although it basically made good homes, “there was inconsistency between regions,” and that “retaining the local names of the builders Beazer acquired diluted the firm’s name recognition.” By 2003 the company had not simply sharpened and consolidated its brand identity, but also shifted its marketing focus from near-meaningless terms such as quality and value to the particulars of the experience that customers would have in “buying, building, and owning a home.” A similar rebranding at Epcon Communities adopted this strategy of “purposeful branding,” focusing not simply on price or quality, but on the appeal to the customer of something more significant (or even distinctive). As the marketing director for Epmark Communities put it, “In any industry, the focus so often is on the product instead of the consumer. . . . If I’m focused on the consumer, I know I’m going to deliver a product that will satisfy the consumer.” Thus a critical factor in home building is “that our customers have a great experience.” As real estate branding expert David Miles asserts, branding is not only about “creating an experience” for the customer, but also about honing and refining that experience so that it will stand out as distinctive in the eyes of the consumer. As Curry notes, the process of developing a real estate brand “helps a company focus on what it does best and connect with customers who value that focus, instead of trying to be everything to everyone and not satisfying anyone.”⁵¹ In other words, the goal is to develop a distinctive brand, in anticipation of customers seeking that particular kind of distinction.

Probably the most publicized of recent housing brands is that announced in the *Wall Street Journal* in October 2005, the joint venture between KB Home and Martha Stewart, for whose “Martha” series of houses the marketing focus is suggestive of the customer’s experience once moved in. As the *Journal* reports, “The houses are meant to evoke the bucolic splendor of prosperous suburbia,” although, as the *Journal* also points out, there is a considerable difference between most KB homes and the “prosperous suburbia” of multi-acre lots from which Martha hails. Still, the fact that the KB homes are explicitly

“inspired” by three of Stewart’s own houses points to a critical aspect of branding in a consumer society based on distinction. The KB home acts synecdochically because the customer does not purchase a real house owned by Martha Stewart, or even an entire facsimile. Nor can the “Martha” house render for the purchaser a lifestyle just like Martha’s. Instead, there are specific elements and aspects of the KB home that correspond to Stewart’s ideals and standards of domestic living, which then stand in for the whole. Both materially and aesthetically (notwithstanding those who would say inauthentically⁵²), purchasing a “Martha” house does, however, afford the resident at least some of the requisite apparatus for fashioning a lifestyle that is aligned to ideals and standards associated with Martha Stewart and the rest of her branded oeuvre. That association can be subtle and yet both significant and pragmatic, as Stewart indicated in a comment on her furniture collection that might equally apply to a “Martha” house: “When you’re sitting on this couch, you don’t know it’s a Martha Stewart couch unless someone tells you. . . . But you can be sure it will last, it’s well made, it’s covered in beautiful fabric, it’s comfortable and it fulfills the homeowner’s dream of having a comfortable, practical, usable piece of furniture.”⁵³

Finally, just as Martha Stewart’s branding goes hand in hand with lifestyle marketing, it also shares some characteristics with theming, a related marketing approach that, as Witold Rybczynski writes, “provides a coherent and instantly recognizable set of visual cues, to the home builders as the development is being created, and later to the people who live there.”⁵⁴ Frequently, theming is dismissed as inauthentic or shallow, particularly when it amounts to little more than a name such as “Mountain Estates” or “Eden Fields.” But if the design of houses and surroundings maintains a theme of some aesthetic or cultural significance, or if a consistent design theme sustains elements of a certain lifestyle, the result is an apparatus that, aesthetically and materially, can augment residents’ lives in practical and meaningful ways.

Conclusion

By the end of the twentieth century, suburbia became the place where more than half of all Americans live and work. Suburbia is where their lives are centered and where they select and fashion the surroundings in which they choose to live.

Suburbia also is a quintessential product of a mass-production economy, on a wide range of scales, from neighborhood and community, to house and yard, to the contents of the kitchen cabinets, the bedroom closets, and the entertainment center library. Everyday life is a constant process of engagement with mass-produced commodities. Critics of commodity culture argue that modern life is diminished owing to the demise of authenticity; but in actuality the expanding variety of commodities offers individuals (suburban and otherwise) increasingly rich opportunities to fashion lives that may fulfill their chosen ideals and standards, or may achieve desired degrees of distinction—or, equally valid, to accept and maintain the status quo.

As Margaret Crawford observes, “everyday space”—which I would argue includes the space of everyday life in suburbia—is not an “aesthetic problem” to be resolved by professionals, but rather “a zone of possibility and potential transformation.” Unlike the New Urbanism, which she considers to be more of a design project that is “sceanographic and image-driven in its production of familiarity,”⁵⁵ everyday urbanism is a pragmatic process that encompasses the daily activities and the aesthetic conventions of the locality and the people who live there. As James Rojas has shown, the entire domestic apparatus, including house, yard, driveway, fences, sidewalks, and streets, is instrumental in the fashioning of everyday life. Focusing on the largely Mexican and Mexican American suburban district of East Los Angeles, he demonstrates how residents employ the building stock, much of which consists of small bungalows with fenced front yards, a shifting array of objects (signboards, tables, chairs, yard art, and so on), the presence of other people (vendors, musicians, visiting friends, passersby), and decorations (murals, graffiti), to fashion an aesthetically complex, vital daily existence.⁵⁶

But everyday life is not simply a matter of the energy and creativity of a particular ethnic group. Even the banal is a legitimate aesthetic dimension of everyday life. As John Chase notes, “The stucco apartment box,” despite its plainness, is well adapted in its own way to serve “the pragmatic and hedonistic character of Southern California.”⁵⁷

Everyday practices such as these are simultaneously material and aesthetic: furnishing a room, landscaping the yard, and preparing a meal, to give just a few examples, all involve the deployment of

material resources as an apparatus for conducting everyday life in a certain intended manner. They also employ resources in a manner that unapologetically accords with personal taste. Much of the recent concern over the appearance of suburbia arises from this privatization of aesthetics: that is, the concentration of aesthetic prerogative in the hands of individual homeowners, or in the hands of private developers—thus forgoing benefits oriented toward the public realm that reformers such as Charles Mumford Robinson advocated a century ago. In truth, the front lines in the battle between public and private interests in modern society have been centered in suburbia for centuries, and aesthetics constitute just one of the complex dimensions in which this battle continues to be fought.

Yet outright condemnation of any given aesthetic practice in suburbia just because it fails to conform to a larger public interest, or even because it is discordant with a preferred suburban aesthetic, is patently unfair. Suburban aesthetics are true to the conditions in which they operate—a culture in which the production of selfhood and identity is increasingly understood to be a private, individual endeavor. Aesthetics play an important and necessary role in this endeavor, not least in fashioning the framework of one's daily life. Understanding suburban aesthetics from this perspective neither discounts the importance of concerns over the fate of the public interest in modern society, nor does it pretend to apologize for aesthetic efforts that any given observer may find to be half-baked, tasteless, or worthless. But it does afford grounds on which to better understand the very real role that aesthetics play every day in fashioning the lived environment of suburbia.

Notes

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1. Excerpt from "Little Boxes," words and music by Malvina Reynolds. Copyright 1962 Schroder Music Co. (ASCAP); renewed 1990.

2. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 486.

3. Ada Louise Huxtable, "'Clusters' Instead of 'Slurbs,'" *New York Times Magazine*, February 9, 1964, 37; Peter Blake, *God's*

Own Junkyard: The Deterioration of America's Landscape (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 8, 20.

4. More recently, the term "sprawl" has been appropriated in the negative appraisal of suburbia, but often as not the specific faults and the proposed remedies are aesthetic. See, for example, Andrés Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), and Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (New York: Norton, 2004).

5. On the origins of suburbia in eighteenth-century England, see John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

6. William Ranlett, *The City Architect* (New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1856), 12. "Letter on the Villas of Our Tradesmen," *The Connoisseur* 1, no. 33 (September 17, 1754). James Howard Kunstler, *Home from Nowhere* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 17–18.

7. Emily Talen and Cliff Ellis have made a substantial contribution in "Cities as Art: Exploring the Possibility of an Aesthetic Dimension in Planning," *Planning Theory & Practice* 5:1 (March 2004): 11–32. Also see Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*.

8. "Some Suburbs of New York," *Lippincott's Magazine* n.s. 8, no. 1 (July 1884): 23. Alfred Matthews, "Short Hills," in *History of Essex and Hudson Counties, New Jersey*, comp. William H. Shaw (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1884), 709–710.

9. For an example, see the discussion on page 134 below of the marketing of Clover Field in Chaska, Minnesota.

10. Jeffrey Vallance, *Thomas Kinkade: Heaven on Earth* (Santa Ana, California: Grand Central Press, 2004), 121–140; Janelle Brown, "Ticky-tacky houses from 'The Painter of Light,'" *Salon.com*, http://archive.salon.com/mwt/style/2002/03/18/kinkade_village/index.html, accessed May 13, 2007.

11. Timothy Dwight, *Travels; in New-England and New-York* (New Haven: Timothy Dwight, 1821), 2:494–495. John Bullock, *The American Cottage Builder* (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1854), 223. Alexander Jackson Downing, *Rural Essays*, ed. George William Curtis (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1857), 210. John J. Thomas, *Illustrated Annual Register of Rural Affairs, for 1864-5-6* (Albany: Luther Tucker & Son, 1873), 130. See also Sarah J. Hale, *Manners; or, Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round* (Boston: J.E. Tilton, 1868), 81; and Walter R. Houghton et al., *Rules of Etiquette*, 6th ed. (Chicago: Rand, McNally, 1883), 43.

12. Samuel Sloan, *The Model Architect* (Philadelphia: E.S. Jones, 1852), 10. Catharine Beecher, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869), 24–25.

13. Richard E. Foglesong, *Planning the Capitalist City* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 134; see also 125, and in general chapters 4 and 5.

14. Charles Mumford Robinson, *Modern Civic Art*, 3rd ed. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), 14, 17, 229. Frank Koester, "American City Planning," *American Architect* 102 (October 23, 1912): 141–146, <http://www.library.cornell.edu/Reps/DOCS/koester.htm>, accessed August 18, 2007. See also Robert Swain Peabody's remark that "a good and beautiful arrangement for a city . . . pays not only in the current coin of commerce but in the refinement, the cheerfulness, the happiness, the outlook on life of the poorest citizen." In defining city planning, Peabody quoted Arnold Brunner: "It means . . . elevation of the standard of citizenship." "Notes for Three Lectures on Municipal Improvements,"

Architectural Quarterly of Harvard University 1 (September 1912): 84–104, <http://www.library.cornell.edu/Reps/DOCS/peabody.htm>, accessed August 18, 2007.

15. Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl*, 11.

16. Robinson, *Modern Civic Art*, 230, 234–235, 239–240. The passage referring to Ruskin is identical in the 1903 first edition.

17. Thomas Adams, *The Design of Residential Areas* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1934), 116–117.

18. Marketing brochure for Clover Field, Chaska, Minnesota (Legacy Communities LLC, 2005). On the importance of community in New Urbanist design, see Emily Talen, "The Social Goals of New Urbanism," *Housing Policy Debate* 13:1 (2002): 165–188.

19. Robinson, *Modern Civic Art*, 21. Adams, *The Design of Residential Areas*, 323.

20. Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1997). Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). Robert H. Nelson, *Private Neighborhoods and the Transformation of Local Government* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 2005).

21. Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*.

22. Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922), 14–15.

23. John Chase, *Glitter Sucko & Dumpster Diving* (New York: Verso, 2000), 207. Christopher B. Leinberger and Robert Davis, "Financing New Urbanism," *Thresholds* 18 (1999): 43–50.

24. "Suburban Home," by Tony Lombardo. Copyright 1982 Cessone Music (BMI), c/o New Alliance Music (BMI).

25. The notion of the dwelling as a lifelong anchor of a given individual's identity was preeminent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century architectural theory; see Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia*. After World War II, the notion has become ever more nostalgic; Gaston Bachelard's 1958 phenomenological analysis is perhaps the most eloquent postwar treatment of the subject: *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

26. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), 2nd ed. revised and expanded (Berlin: K. Curtius, 1912). An example of *Gesellschaft* would be the labor union, formed for the purpose of advancing the employees' mutual self-interest against owners and management.

27. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), and "The Suburban Dislocation," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 314 (November 1957): 123–146.

28. Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976), 75, 81–82, 142.

29. T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance* (New York: Basic, 1994), 352.

30. Stuart Ewen, "Advertising and the Development of Consumer Society," in *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, ed. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York: Routledge, 1989), 82–95; Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977), 47; Stuart Ewen, *All Consuming Images* (New York: Basic, 1988), 103. Along similar lines, see also T. J. Jackson Lears, "Infinite Riches in a Little Room: The Interior Scenes of Modern Culture," *Modulor* 18 (1987): 3–27,

and Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991). Edward Relph was among the earliest to treat authenticity in architecture and landscape in considerable depth, in *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976).

31. Adrian Forty and Henry Moss, "The Success of Pseudo-Vernacular," *Architectural Review* 167:996 (February 1980): 73–78.

32. See Catherine Jurca's discussion of the "suburban jeremiad" in *White Diaspora* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

33. Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1915], trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1992). Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (New York: W.W. Norton, 1925). Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic, 1979), 65, 72. Also see Rolland Munro, "The Consumption View of Self: Extension, Exchange and Identity," in *Consumption Matters*, ed. Stephen Edgell, Kevin Hetherington, and Alan Warde (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 255–256.

34. Russell W. Belk, "Possessions and the Extended Self," *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (September 1988): 139, 144. See also Helga Dittmar, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992). See also Walter Benjamin's remark that "ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them." *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 67. Also see Daniel Miller's discussion of consumption as integral to processes of personal distinction, including individuation. He argues that people appropriate objects—including those industrially manufactured—to "utilize them in the creation of their own image." Commodities thus play a role in the social positioning of the self: "the relation between [a given] object and others provid[es] a dimension through which the particular social position of the intended individual is experienced." *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 147, 175, 190.

35. David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 323.

36. Henry Ward Beecher, "Building a House," *Star Papers* (New York: J.C. Derby, 1855), 285–292. Among the critics of suburbia who decry the sterility of mass-produced houses and their standardized contents, many point to the incapacity of formulaically replicated industrial products (e.g., "ticky-tacky boxes") to serve as an apparatus for individualizing identity. Such is the argument that, for example, undergirds Malvina Reynolds' critique:

And the people in the houses
All go to the University
And they all get put in boxes,
And little boxes, all the same.
And there's doctors, and there's lawyers,
And business executives,
And they're all made out of ticky-tacky
And they all look just the same.

(Excerpt from "Little Boxes," 1962.) Of course Reynolds' commentary also is an exemplary case of the determinist fallacy, suggesting that an architecturally regimented environment produces a regimented, homogeneous population, limiting the dimensions

