SUBURBS
DWELLING IN TRANSITION

EDITED BY
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Everyday space, personalized: a suburban front yard in San Diego.
Everyday Suburbia: Lives and Practices

by John Archer

IT IS TIME TO reconsider the terms in which we think about suburbia: how we comprehend and critique its physical fabric, those who dwell and work there, and how they live. For over half a century, narrow conventions have dominated much of the discourse on suburbia, particularly in visual, musical, and fictional media, limiting our ability to understand and assess what is now the predominant landscape of America. To move beyond the constraints of these conventions, this essay begins by sketching their genesis and impact. It then sets out to explore ways of recasting our understanding of suburbia, in terms of the everyday lives and practices of those who live there, in pursuit of a fuller and more constructive understanding of suburbia today.

Suburbia has been the object of harsh critiques since its inception. In 1754 a popular British periodical published a “Letter on the Villas of our Tradesmen” that satirized the unsophisticated, tasteless sort of “little country box” that people with new money were erecting along the roads leading out of London.1 By the first decades of the twentieth century, following the rise of industrial methods of production that standardized housing materials and furnishings, the critique had escalated. Suburbia’s detractors began to portray it as a landscape that sapped its residents of their individuality, morality, and agency, and dignity. As early as 1922, Sinclair Lewis’s novel Babbitt detailed—with satirical disdain—the growing concern over the devaluing effect that standardized production processes had on suburban homes, their furnishings and their residents. Following World War II, the rise of truly mass-produced suburbs was met by a crescendo of ridicule and loathing, advancing much the same complaints, spearheaded by such brickbats such as John Keats’s Crack in the Picture Window (1956), John McPartland’s No Down Payment (1957), Malvina Reynolds’s “Little Boxes” (1963) and The Monkees’ song, “Pleasant Valley Sunday” (1966).

And yet the intensification and proliferation of this anti-suburban critique was paradoxical. Just as an expanding economy, easy financing, and mass production techniques made moving to suburbia possible for a far broader range of Americans than before, just as suburban single-family houses offered the opportunity to achieve the upwardly-mobile American dream, suburbia and its residents were disparaged in ever more abject terms. Bashing the suburbs became ubiquitous and formulaic. The crux of the paradox lay in the fact that, democracy notwithstanding, the culture establishment was profoundly fearful of the rise of mass culture. Along
with other forms of mass culture such as paperback novels, television sitcoms, and popular music, in many quarters mass suburbia had come to be understood as a morally and aesthetically corruptive threat to American society.

Much of the ground for the critique of mass culture lay in the work of Frankfurt School critics including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in the 1930s and 1940s, to be followed in the 1950s by New York intellectuals such as Dwight Macdonald and Irving Howe. Well into the 1950s most of these critics focused their concerns on other phenomena, but by the middle of that decade the influential psychologist Erich Fromm (himself estranged from the Frankfurt School) singled out suburbia as an epicentre of social deterioration. In his bestselling book, *The Sane Society* (1955), he charged that, in the face of the dehumanizing effects of modernity, suburbanites had abandoned their sense of selfhood, instead seeking adjustment in near-pathological conformity. Suburbanites, he wrote, “are not themselves. The only haven for having a sense of identity is conformity.”

Fromm’s argument was rooted in an understanding (or misunderstanding) of suburbia that was, in turn, largely based on a misreading of William H. Whyte’s pioneering ethnography of the new suburban tract community of Park Forest, Illinois—a misreading for which Whyte soon took Fromm to task. Other critics similarly mistook the title and argument of sociologist David Riesman’s book *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), and Riesman’s subsequent essay “The Suburban Sadness” (1958), as indictments of suburbia. But what soon became the prevailing paradigm for the critique of suburbia had already attained too strong a foothold: regardless of the local experience and practices of those who lived there—which Whyte had in fact chronicled in great detail and to which Riesman was sympathetic—suburbia would be understood as a terrain of aesthetic and psychic abjection. Lewis Mumford’s massive study of *The City in History* (1961) epitomized this position, condemning suburbanites as leading effectively meaningless lives amidst 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...

Popular culture—perhaps ironically, given its otherwise anti-establishment propensities—zealously pursued this same orthodox path. Malvina Reynolds’s acerbic song “Little Boxes” (1963), a tale of identical ticky-tacky homes which house people who engage in identical activities and produce identical children, not only crystallized the terms of the critique, but has remained a staple of the discourse on suburbia for almost half a century. The establishment quickly embraced and happily amplified this critique. In 1964 Ada Louise Huxtable loudly complained in the *New York Times* about invasions of “regimented hordes of split-levels lined up for miles in close, unlovely rows.” That same year Peter Blake’s polemic *God’s Own Junkyard* echoed Reynolds’s “boxes” epithet, condemning the “massive, monotonous ugliness of most of our Suburbia,” which had become “a series of anonymous boxes that go into a row on row upon row.”

Over the next four decades, formulaic condemnation along comparable lines became a near universal standard in the treatment of suburbia in popular music: prominent examples include “Subdivision Blues” (Tom T. Hall, 1978), “Subdivisions” (Rush, 1982), and “Suburban
Life” (Kottonmouth Kings, 1997). Likewise in filmic representations, ranging from No Down Payment (1957) and Over the Edge (1979) to subUrbia (1997) and American Beauty (1999), or equally in countless slasher movies, suburbia is reliably stereotyped as artificial, superficial, monotonous, and dysfunctional. As Catherine Jurca has demonstrated, portrayals of suburbia in literary fiction during this same period (by John Cheever, John Sloan, John Updike, Rick Moody, Richard Ford, David Gates, and others) were no less scathing. As the cover blurb of one pulp-fiction novel put its spin on the question in 1964: given the “degenerating morals in modern suburbia,” can suburbanites “be taught to realize the terrible price they are paying for wall-to-wall carpeting—and for neighbor-to-neighbor love-making?”

Perhaps surprisingly, the terms of this combined political and aesthetic critique changed remarkably little in the ensuing half century. Suburbia continues to be condemned as an insidious form of non-community, forged from debased, even pernicious, modes of housing, transportation, and commerce. Even as legitimate concerns over ecology and sustainability gain greater currency, they are often still couched in terms that bespeak an underlying political or aesthetic prejudice. Such is all too often the case with the design and marketing of master-planned communities. For all their emphasis on compact planning and mixed uses, which are sound ecological strategies, such projects are commonly framed as aspirations to certain ideals of what community ought to be—as if planning and design might restore “life as it used to be” and effect “a return to the towns of yesterday.” Not only are such goals implausible, they also respond to the fears and demands of the cultural critics, by projecting an escape from a world ostensibly fraught with depersonalization and aesthetic banality, instead of constructive engagement with that world. Ironically the means to this end is often cast in terms of “neo-traditional design”—bungalow, Victorian, colonial, and other American historical styles—that does little more than render a veneer of faux historical authenticity over the same stock item found in every other suburb: a commodified product industrially fabricated from standardized materials.

What persists nevertheless is the popularity and promise of suburbia. A crucial aspect of that promise, which is embraced by many who move willingly to suburbia and like it, and correspondingly misunderstood by the critics, is the instrumentality that suburbia affords for the production of selfhood, family, neighbourhood, and wider social relations. Well before the widespread mechanization of industrial production and standardization of commodities, in an era of hand carpentry and individualized design, the house was recognized as a pre-eminent apparatus by which a person could fashion the many dimensions of identity and 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 aesthetic and artistic nature. It interprets, in material forms, his ideas of home, of friendship, and of comfort.”

Here Beecher voiced the aspirations of many householders, from the mid-nineteenth century well into the twentieth, whether building their own dwellings with their own labour and materials, or employing an architect or builder, or buying from a subdivider or developer. Among Americans, the house quickly came to be understood as an essential apparatus for fashioning the self-made man, a direct route to achieving the American dream, and a primary instrument
for establishing class, status, personality, character, and even aspects of race and faith. Not only was the house a form of economic capital, it also served as an apparatus for the accumulation of social, cultural, and symbolic capital.

Today the detached single-nuclear-family house, the paradigmatic dwelling type of suburbia, remains a key instrument for this sort of self-fashioning. Nor should it be surprising that, in a society so thoroughly invested in economic and political individualism, housing is so highly valued and widely employed for that purpose. Yet the proliferation of so many individualized instruments remains the basis of many critics’ concerns, which are generally anchored in social and/or aesthetic considerations. In social terms, critics worry over a perceived lack of community, or opportunity for it to develop. Due to the homogeneity of the houses, or the dehumanizing effect of commoditization, or the presumption that individualized efforts resist collaboration, the presumptive conclusion is that suburbia conduces to isolated, regimented, boring lives. Longstanding evidence to the contrary, beginning with the work of William H. Whyte, Benjamin Berger, and Herbert J. Gans, demonstrates that suburbanites commonly do establish and sustain rich and vibrant community life, but it is commonly drowned out by the conventional critique.7

The aesthetic concerns on which critics fault suburbia commonly boil down to taste. For some, suburbia is too stark: aerial views of identically shaped houses lined up in neat rows are routinely assessed as abject and pitiful, all without exploring, or even acknowledging, the very lives of those who have chosen to inhabit them. For others, suburbia is too messy: whether it is kitschy, chintzy, trashy, garish, ticky-tacky, or just plain tacky, critics lament the ostensibly incapacity of residents to articulate their surroundings in a manner worthy of aesthetic approval. Of course this only begs the question of whose aesthetics. Standards of taste and aesthetics are seldom far removed from categories of race and class. And the fastidious harmony advanced in planners’ and developers’ sales brochures, or encoded in master-planned community regulations, is often an ossified moment of static perfection, while messiness can be a necessary dimension for creativity, growth, and change, both personally and socially.

These two common indictments of suburbia, and their rebuttals—that suburbanites of all stripes commonly can and do sustain community, and that the terms in which they do fashion rich, complex lives are entirely legitimate—have become part of a larger discourse over what community means and the place of taste in a democratic society. In both cases, suburbia has become the chief bête noire. While resolving those larger questions is well beyond the scope of this essay, it is nevertheless still possible to rescue our understanding of suburbia by recasting the terms in which we approach it. Instead of acceding to terms established to suit other critical discourses, we may instead choose terms that recognize the integrity, identity, and meaningful activity of those who live and work in suburbia itself.

To understand suburbia in this fashion is to acknowledge that suburbia (in this respect, like everywhere else) is a nexus of everyday life. Suburbia is a physical, social, and cultural fabric (landscape as well as ethnoscape) that people both employ and produce as part of their practices of everyday living. This fabric, and these practices, are the essential means by which people fashion their lives in multiple dimensions—as individuals, families, neighbours, friends, citizens; as entrepreneurs, workers, believers, team mates, playmates, gardeners, cooks, readers, acquaint-
tances, buddies, networkers, performers, audiences, tastemakers, enemies, activists, and leaders; as Asian- (or other-) Americans, as adherents of particular religious and political perspectives, and as connected to history and heritage. To engage in all these dimensions of everyday living necessarily requires that on a daily basis people engage in a nearly unlimited array of signifying and materially productive practices: from making home improvements, choosing décor, and arranging family photographs, to cooking a meal, working in the garage, gardening, telecommuting, visiting with neighbours, attending a potluck, using the playground or basketball court, walking the dog, driving, or just sitting in a favourite chair. In all these respects, the suburban physical and social fabric is instrumental in the practice—indeed the very definition—of everyday life.

At this point the critics of commodity culture—dating back to the Frankfurt School—worry that the materials available to the everyday individual for fashioning that life are so thoroughly commoditized—so thoroughly predetermined by manufacturing and marketing considerations—that in choosing and using them the ordinary person has no degree of freedom or authenticity. They argue that the diner, in effect, is a prisoner of the menu. From the diner’s point of view, however, the situation is hardly so dire. Picking and choosing from the wide variety of commodities available, and the nearly infinite combinations in which commodities can be selected and used—many of which are entirely unanticipated, let alone prescribed, by the commodity producer—the individual is entirely capable of producing spaces and undertaking activities that articulate countless different dimensions of identity and being. A brief example demonstrates the point: houses come with garages, which are purposefully designed to shelter cars and to facilitate their entry and exit. Such is the official bill of fare. Yet it is widespread practice that garages are partially or even entirely taken over for other purposes, such as home businesses, hobbies, gaming, or storage. More to the point, such is the case with the entire range of objects and materials across all of suburbia: the multitudinous ways in which uses are adapted, invented, and combined bespeak the inhabitants’ appetite and capacity for original and diverse modes of living.

This focus on signifying and material practices points up the need to understand built space (including but not limited to suburbia) as a material and social field that people engage and harness as producers of everyday life. Two bodies of scholarship underpin this approach. First is the theoretical analysis of everyday life pioneered by Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, and others, who analyze the material world as a terrain that individual actors have the agency and capacity to appropriate (within limits) to their own purposes, and within which they can articulate their own layers of meaning, notwithstanding meanings embedded by official authorities, manufacturers, or marketers. Ethnographically oriented field analysis, such as the work of Setha Low and Margaret Crawford, has highlighted the advantages and extended the implications of these theoretical arguments. Perhaps most fruitful is Crawford’s introduction of the notion of “everyday space”—as applicable in suburbia as anywhere—that casts the built environment as “a zone of possibility and potential transformation,” ready and available for engagement by human actors in the course of their daily activities, and indeed central to the conduct and advantage of those activities. Thus as architect Peter Kellett details in his examination of barrios and other informal settlements, all the physical attributes of
home, assembled from whatever materials may be available, become part of the dweller's purposeful everyday shaping of self and social relations: these materials, and what the user does with them, all "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."

The other body of scholarship that helps to frame the study of everyday practice in suburbia is the sociology and anthropology of consumption. At the beginning of the twentieth century the work of Durkheim and Mauss recognized the fundamental importance of commodities, through gift exchange, in sustaining social structures. More recently Pierre Bourdieu's book *Distinction* (1979) laid important groundwork for understanding commodity consumption as instrumental to the specific tastes and aesthetic practices that people employ in articulating positions for themselves vis-à-vis others in the various levels and echelons of society. Perhaps more than any other, anthropologist Daniel Miller's work on consumption has broadened understanding of the role of commodities in the social positioning of the self. In a suburban context such commodities can include everything from the choice of trim packages and finish materials to furniture, bedding, electronics, toys, landscaping, patio equipment, clothes, and food; and these all become, in Miller's words, "dimension[s] through which the particular social position of the intended individual is experienced." Commodity consumption, in other words, is not necessarily the badge of dishonour that the critics try to pin on suburbia; rather, in suburbia as everywhere else, it is instrumental in the fashioning of selfhood and society.

The creative arts have long been among the most vicious in the condemnation of suburbia, as seen above. But in some instances, particularly photography, they also afford some of the most compelling accounts of the role of the material fabric of suburbia in constituting the everyday lives of its residents. Among the earliest pioneers in this vein was Bill Owens, whose work beginning in the late 1960s, and published in 1973 as *Suburbia*, chronicles the heterogeneous sorts of practices that actually prevailed among inhabitants of nominally "cookie-cutter" houses. Captions to the photographs relay in residents' own words how the particular ways in which they have fashioned their material surroundings have been instrumental in shaping their lives, identities, and relations with others. Not long afterward, the work of the New Topographers, especially Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and Henry Wessel, documented the suburban landscape in a fashion as close to face value as possible. These photographers produced a dispassionate record of tract housing, mobile homes, and the landscape of development that—precisely because it reveals the imperfections, irregularities, and blemishes of the suburban landscape amidst its mechanized uniformity, and highlights its tenuous semi-permanence—also reveals a facticity in the landscape, an inscription of the material presence and activities of the inhabitants, that attests to ongoing labours of signification and material production.

Photographers have not been alone in chronicling the degree to which people define themselves and fashion their lives through everyday spatial and material practices. For example, a sardonic song from 1982 by David Frizzell, "I'm Going to Hire a Wino to Decorate our Home," describes a dispirited wife's intentions to hire a wino to redecorate their home in a way that would accommodate her husband's penchant for barroom behaviour, and other unsavoury
activities, without allowing him to leave the house. More recently, a passage in Colson Whitehead’s novel *John Henry Days* (2002) vividly portrays the instrumentality of furniture in defining and contesting personal relations:

Putting clothes in any old drawer feels like a political act because recently in the Migges’ household, 1244 Violet Lane, there has unfolded a cold war over spaces. It happens in every household of course, someone picks out a favorite chair or side of the couch; over time someone comes to a choice, or all at once—on the first day the new chair arrives in the house and is claimed. In Alphonse’s home the usual pattern of domestic boundary erection has attained the aspect of warfare, with the attendant gamesmanship of posturing, deployment, arcane strategy.12

Perhaps the richest exploration to date of the stuff of everyday life in suburbia is the body of photographic work that Gregory Crewdson has produced over the past decade. His work portrays complex moments in the lives of suburban residents, depicted amidst elaborately detailed settings staged by the photographer, momentarily freezing anxious, poignant, or epiphanous moments for us to engage. We can do so because of the richness with which Crewdson stages the material setting, allowing us to understand the depth of the character fully only if we explore and try to unravel the complex relations amongst all the characters, objects, and spaces in the scene. In the process, we necessarily come to understand suburbia itself as a terrain fraught with, and instrumental to, the symbolic and material fabric of its residents’ everyday lives.13

What these artists and many others have done is to stand the critics’ objections on their head. Instead of asking how given objects, such as rows of mass-produced housing, or standardized mass-marketed commodities, define and limit opportunities for the user, they explore the *processes* by which, and *purposes* to which, people *make use* of given objects. No longer is this a question of how the material environment (or the conditions of its production) constrains and debilitates the inhabitant; rather, the environment (despite the conditions of its production) serves as a platform, or basis, for the inhabitant’s own signifying and productive activities. Recognizing this, in turn, affords an approach to understanding, evaluating, and even living in suburbia that engages its built and material fabric, as continually fashioned and reshaped by the people who live there, as the symbolic and material nexus of everyday life.

4. Ada Louise Huxtable, “Clusters’ Instead of ‘Slurbs,’” New York Times Magazine (9 February 1964), 37. Peter Blake, God’s Own Junkyard (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 17, figs. 104-107. Blake indicated that the aesthetic criteria he employed here—monotony, ugliness, anonymity, repetitiveness—were also meant to be exemplary of commodity production and consumption: “the developers who built [suburbia] are, fundamentally, no different from manufacturers of any other mass-produced product: they standardize the product, package it, arrange for rapid distribution and easy financing, and sell it off as fast as they can” (17).


10. “The relation between [a given] object and others provide[s] a dimension through which the particular social position of the intended individual is experienced.” Daniel Miller, Material Culture and Mass Consumption (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 147, 175, 190.

