

## **Representing Suburbia: From Little Boxes to Everyday Practices**

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*Representations of Suburbia*

ed. Daniel Rubey and Christopher W. Niedt

Hempstead, NY: Hofstra University, forthcoming 2011.

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Representations have a marked capacity to shape attitudes toward, and understanding of, almost everything. Visually, musically, and textually, they provide frameworks and paradigms for apprehending and analyzing what we think and what we know. For over three centuries representations have shaped the discourse over suburbia; for the past five decades they have done so in a remarkably narrow and limiting fashion. This essay is an exploration, first, of how negative stereotypes and other conventions in visual and other media have handicapped our understanding of suburbia since the mid-twentieth century. And second, it sets out to explore ways of recasting that understanding, in terms of the everyday lives and practices of those who live there—ways in which representations in one particular medium, photography, have demonstrated longstanding success.<sup>1</sup>

Since suburbia's earliest days, it has been tarred as a landscape of aesthetic and moral dissolution. As early as 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 out of London. Two years later a similar diatribe complained about the "tawdry" décor and aesthetically bereft landscaping of similar suburban "boxes."<sup>2</sup> 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 debilitating 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 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' "Pleasant Valley Sunday" (1966).

The question remains why, in a nominally democratic society, the widespread democratization of housing should have become so maligned. Indeed 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. The answer has much to do with 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 such as 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 elsewhere than on suburbia, but by the middle of that decade the influential psychologist Erich Fromm (himself estranged from the Frankfurt School) singled out suburbia as an epicenter 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.*”<sup>3</sup>

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* (1951), 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....”<sup>4</sup>

As Whyte and Riesman would have objected, critiques such as Mumford’s hardly acknowledged the lives and interests of those who lived there. The disparity that could arise between a locally informed perspective and the critics’ assessment is tellingly demonstrated by the fate of a series of aerial photographs that William Garnett took in 1950 of Lakewood, California. The photographs recorded various stages in the suburb’s construction: bulldozer-cleared landscape, poured foundations and pre-cut materials assembled on each house site, partially assembled houses, and finally rows of fully complete (but not entirely identical) houses. As longtime Lakewood resident D. J. Waldie has noted, the photographs originally were taken as a matter of pride by Lakewood’s developers; for builders and residents alike, they were indicators of optimism and accomplishment.<sup>5</sup> In 1964, however, Peter Blake famously reproduced four of Garnett’s images in his book *God’s Own Junkyard*, to accompany text bemoaning the “massive, monotonous ugliness of most of our Suburbia,” which has become “a series of anonymous boxes that go into a row on row upon row.”<sup>6</sup> Garnett’s photographs were soon transformed into widely accepted icons of everything wrong with suburbia. Ever since, aerial and especially telephoto photographs of suburbia, which exaggerate and emphasize characteristics such as repetition or regimentation, together with associated adjectives such as “cookie-cutter,” “anonymous,” “boring,” and

“homogeneous,” have become clichéd shorthand indictments not only of suburbia, but also, by extension, of suburbanites and their culture.<sup>7</sup>

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 houses housing 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. 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. Nor, as Catherine Jurca has demonstrated, were 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) any less scathing.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, a cynical logic originating in mid-twentieth-century critical responses to the rise of mass culture and mass produced housing has continued, over the past half century, to define the terms in which that very mass culture represents the very same mass housing where the consumers of that mass culture live. Notwithstanding a few voices faintly attesting to the vitality of suburbia, its people, and its culture,<sup>9</sup>

the stock in trade of musical, filmic, and literary representations consistently draws on conventional stereotypes far more commonly than on observant encounters: typified by regimented, endlessly replicated houses and a culture of mass-marketed commodities, suburbia is portrayed as a landscape in which people lead boring, anxious, isolated lives, chronically bereft of identity, community, morality, or taste.<sup>10</sup>

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The plausibility of these stereotypes is nevertheless belied by the continually increasing numbers of Americans who vote with their feet and with their pocketbooks: they willingly move to suburbia and they *like* it. What the stereotypes misconstrue, and what the critics misunderstand, is the *instrumentality* that suburbia affords for the production of selfhood, family, neighborhood, and wider social relations. Rather than exacting conformity or otherwise straightjacketing the resident (a line of reasoning left over from Frankfurt School critiques), the fabric of suburbia is in many respects a *tabula-not-quite-rasa*, a physical and social “field” (in Bourdieuan terms<sup>11</sup>), a *datum* point on and from which suburbanites go about the practice of living. Contrary to the critical stereotypes, rows of identically constructed houses are not factories of homogeneity, conformity, or boredom. Rather, both inside and outside, they afford material opportunities for the construction and modulation of identity, and of relations with society and the world at large.

Tom Wik and Julia Baum are two photographers whose portfolios testify to the richness with which residents have taken advantage of this instrumentality in recasting and refining the exteriors of their identically built tract houses. Wik’s

“Pinewood Avenue” series portrays each house from the same vantage point, so that from one photograph to the next the profile of the house remains constant.

Nevertheless what the viewer immediately observes are the marked differences from one house to the next. Paint color and texture on walls and trim, fencing, trees, shrubbery, flowers, pavement, awnings, window grills, lawn furniture, and other features render each dwelling not only a recognizably distinct statement, but also become instrumental parts of the larger domestic apparatus of daily living. In Julia Baum’s photographs of originally identical 1950s tract homes in Santa Clara, California, the architectural and landscape modifications are so extensive that in some cases only the photographer’s consistent standpoint in front of each house allows the viewer to detect the original boxy shape. Elaborate, sometimes fanciful additions and landscaping not only visually differentiate each house from the next, but also serve as symbolic and material instruments that afford distinct dimensions in which residents articulate and conduct their lives.<sup>12</sup>

These instruments work in two ways: as *signifiers* (of taste, status, community engagement, fantasy, whimsy, and countless other qualities and aspirations), and as *pragmatic apparatus* for conducting personal and social activities (such as gardening, outdoor lounging, barbecuing, lawn sports, socializing, and so forth). In both these respects, signifying and pragmatic, the house serves as an essential part of the apparatus of everyday life. More broadly, all of suburbia, indoors and outdoors (and in this respect, everywhere else too) is a physical, social, and cultural fabric 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, neighbors, friends, citizens; as entrepreneurs, workers, believers, teammates, playmates, gardeners, cooks, readers, acquaintances, 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.

Two bodies of scholarship underpin this approach to understanding the material and social fabric of suburbia and the lives of its inhabitants. 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 homeplace, 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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 very 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.<sup>14</sup> 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; these all become, in Miller’s words, “dimension[s] through which the particular social position of the intended individual is experienced.”<sup>15</sup> Commodity consumption, in other words, is not necessarily the badge of dishonor that the critics try to pin on suburbia; rather, in suburbia as everywhere else, it is instrumental in the fashioning of selfhood and society.

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The creative arts, especially music, film, and literary fiction, have consistently railed against stereotypes of suburbia, as seen above, rather than directly portray everyday suburban life. Photography stands out as one medium that has countered this trend over the past four decades. Much of the credit for this may be accorded to the work of the New Topographers, especially Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, and Henry Wessel, whose work from the late 1960s onwards afforded a radical re-vision of the suburban landscape. In their 1975 group exhibition, “The New Topographics,” organized by George Eastman House, and in monographs such as Robert Adams’s *The New West: Landscapes along the Colorado Front Range* (1974) or Joe Deal’s *Southern California Photographs, 1976-1986* (1992), 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 labors of signification and material production.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary with the work of the New Topographers, the photographs of Bill Owens, shot beginning in the 1960s and collected in his book *Suburbia* (1973), afford a more complex understanding of everyday life by incorporating verbatim the words of the subjects in his pictures. Thus a photo of a couple in bed in their mirrored bedroom is captioned, “It’s a great pleasure to watch yourself make love in the six dozen mirrors that line the ceilings and walls. I’ve spent a tremendous

amount of thought and planning to get the total effect of the bedroom. It's fascinating to watch our friends' reactions to seeing the luxury and sensuousness of the room. Our bedroom is the most enjoyable in the house." This is complemented by the civic concerns of another group of people, shown working in the median of a four-lane divided roadway: "The best way to help your city government and have fun is to come out on a Saturday morning and pull weeds in a median strip." Yet another, mixed perspective is shown in the testimony of a young African-American woman photographed wearing her housecoat and holding a coffee cup, standing barefoot in her kitchen (which includes a built-in desk with a typewriter and telephone on top of it, an electric steam iron hanging on the wall next to the sink, and various pots, pans, and utensils on the countertop): "I enjoy the suburbs. They provide Girl Scouts, PTA, Little League and soccer for my kids. The thing I miss most is Black cultural identity for my family. White middle-class suburbia can't provide that. Here the biggest cultural happening has been the opening of two department stores."<sup>17</sup>

In the ensuing decades, other photographers have since added to the documentation and understanding of everyday life in suburbia; this includes the work of Tom Wik and Julia Baum, mentioned above, which clearly references, and builds upon, the work of the New Topographers. Alternatively, photographs produced by Gregory Crewdson over the past decade, which have moved in a very different direction from the unvarnished plainness of much of the New Topographics, afford perhaps the richest exploration to date of the stuff of everyday life in suburbia. His work consists of indoor and outdoor scenes staged in elaborate

and meticulous detail, with actors carefully posed amidst the domestic goods and effects of suburbia. At the moment the photograph is taken, the characters are engaged in a complex action or event that the viewer can begin to understand only by exploring and trying to unravel the relations amongst all the characters, objects, and spaces in the scene. In effect Crewdson invites the viewer to vicariously participate in the scene, an effort that in the end may still fall short of fully understanding the anxious, poignant, or epiphanous moment in which the characters are engaged. Nevertheless in the process, in purposefully engaging the symbolic and material apparatus of everyday life in suburbia, the viewer necessarily comes to a fuller understanding of suburbia itself as a terrain that is fraught with, and instrumental to, the symbolic and material fabric of its residents' everyday lives.<sup>18</sup>

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What these photographers of suburbia offer, and what artists in other media are now beginning to address,<sup>19</sup> is a turning of the critics' longstanding stereotypes of suburbia 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 standardized and commoditized material environment may stereotypically constrain and debilitate the inhabitant; rather, the stuff of the environment 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.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay originated in an invited presentation at “Mourning the Suburb: A Symposium on Dwelling, in Transition,” held 5 March 2010 in Toronto, Ontario, and funded by The Leona Drive Project, to the organizers and funders of which I am grateful for support. An essay based on that presentation is forthcoming in the journal *Public: Art Culture Ideas*; the present essay is a partial revision and extension. I am also grateful to Benjamin Wiggins and Holley Wlodarczyk for research assistance with this project.

<sup>2</sup> “Letter on the Villas of Our Tradesmen,” *The Connoisseur* 1:33 (17 September 1754). “The Cit’s Country Box,” *The Connoisseur* 4:135 (26 August 1756).

<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1955), 154, 155. For a more extensive history of the critique of mass culture and its extension to suburbia, see John Archer, “The Place We Love to Hate: The Critics Confront Suburbia, 1920-1960,” in Klaus Stierstorfer, ed., *Constructions of Home* (New York: AMS Press, 2010), 45-82.

<sup>4</sup> William H. Whyte, “The Transients,” *Fortune* (May 1953), 112-117, 221-222, 224, 226; “The Future, c/o Park Forest,” *Fortune* (June 1953), 126-131, 186, 188, 190, 192, 194, 196; “The Outgoing Life,” *Fortune* (July 1953), 84-89, 156-158, 160; “How the New Suburbia Socializes,” *Fortune* (August 1953), 120-122, 186, 188-190. David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950). David Riesman, “The Suburban Sadness,” in William M. Dobriner, ed., *The Suburban Community* (New York: Putnam, 1958), 375-

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

<sup>5</sup> D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: Norton, 1996), 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 17, figs. 104-107. Blake credited the passage concerning “anonymous boxes” to Frank Lloyd Wright. A fuller excerpt of Wright’s text, originally published in 1954, is found in Edgar Kaufmann and Ben Raeburn, ed., *Frank Lloyd Wright: Writings and Buildings* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1960, 292-296). 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).

<sup>7</sup> Aerial photography has seen widespread use in the critique of suburbia, with advantageous as well as problematic results. See for example Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (New York: Norton, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Jurca, *White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>9</sup> William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956). Bennett M. Berger, *Working Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia*

(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969). Herbert J. Gans, *The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community* (New York: Pantheon, 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Although the focus of the present discussion does not encompass considerations of environment and sustainability, they do form an increasingly important and urgent part of the critique of suburbia that cannot be ignored.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> For Tom Wik, see <http://www.tinylenses.com>. For Julia Baum, see <http://juliabaum.com/artwork/949914.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991). Setha Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2003). Margaret Crawford, "Everyday Urbanism," in Rahul Mehrota, ed., *Everyday Urbanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2005), 19. Peter Kellett, "Constructing Informal Places," in *Constructing Place: Mind and Matter*, ed. Sarah Menin (London: Routledge, 2003), 90, 89.

<sup>14</sup> 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). See also Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic, 1979), 65, 72, and 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. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* [1979], trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> “The relation between [a given] object and others provid[es] 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.

<sup>16</sup> Further on these photographers see *New Topographics: Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Bernd and Hilla Becher, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Nicholas Nixon, John Schott, Stephen Store, Henry Wessel, Jr.*, 2nd ed. (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, [1973]), n. pag.

<sup>18</sup> On Crewdson see Stephan Berg, ed., *Gregory Crewdson 1985-2005* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), and Gregory Crewdson, *Beneath the Roses* (New York: Abrams, 2008).

<sup>19</sup> For example in music, see the album “The Suburbs” (2010) by Arcade Fire. In film, see *The Kids Are All Right* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010). Each offers a nuanced, complex portrait of suburbia without dwelling on dysfunction.