

## Interpreting Post-World War II Suburban Landscapes as Historic Resources

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The suburban landscapes that developed around American cities after World War II are among the most significant historic resources of the twentieth century; they represent the fulfillment of the dream of home ownership and material well-being for a majority of Americans. In them, a distinctive settlement pattern emerged, centered on the single family house on its individual lot sited within the large-scale, self-contained subdivision with a curvilinear street pattern. It was a landscape in which the free market attempted to meld the attributes of the city and the country into a home environment sought by many Americans. As Richard Longstreth has pointed out, "Never before has such a great segment of society been able to partake of this kind of environment, nor will it again in the foreseeable future."<sup>1</sup>

The post-World War II suburban landscape has also been one of the most condemned of American landscapes. Its architectural uniformity was indicted in the 1950s, as a manifestation of a increasing conformity in American society. In the 1960s, suburban prosperity was blamed for draining cities of their economic and social vigor. Today suburban development has been accused of representing the American dream run amuck as sprawling subdivisions make metropolitan areas less workable. For many then, thinking about the post-World War II suburbs as historically significant is a contradiction in terms.

But that is so also because the suburbs have been seen as a new landscape form. As Peter Muller points out " [t]he scale of suburbanization was so greatly enlarged after 1945 that it quickly became the conventional wisdom that suburbia did not occupy a major position in the national urban life until the opening of the post-war era."<sup>2</sup> Certainly in the extensive territory they occupied, the manner in which they were developed, and the resulting dispersed pattern of settlement, they were new. At the same time, however, they were also the product of a process that had been at work for nearly three-quarters of a century by the time World War II ended. By the end of the 1930s, nearly all of the elements necessary for the post-World War II suburban landscape to develop were in place. This paper looks first at the historic continuum of suburban development from which the post-World War II suburbs emerged and then considers some of the interpretation and preservation issues inherent in how they developed.

Suburbanization first emerged as an important trend in urban development in the 1880s with the electrification of the streetcar. Streetcar suburbs grew until 1918. Early automobile suburbs developed after World War I until the end of World War II. The post-World War II suburban boom created what have been called the freeway suburbs. But it was the streetcar that created the modern metropolitan area as a settlement form--as an urban region made up of a high density central city surrounded by lower-density suburbs whose residents commute daily to jobs in the central city. In short, the metropolitan area is a twentieth century American invention. The streetcar greatly increased the area available for residential development by making it possible to travel ten miles from downtown in thirty minutes.<sup>3</sup> Linear residential neighborhoods grew up along the new streetcar tracks extending radially from the city.

Although still on gridded streets for the most part, the cheaper land beyond the urban core allowed for houses to be built on their own lots. The streetcar not only opened land for residential development, but laid the skeleton for the new emerging metropolitan area: the network of crosstown and circumferential routes created nodes of new development signaling the end of the single-center city and lines into the countryside facilitated the growth of exurban settlements and satellite towns that drew later suburban development.<sup>4</sup> Metropolitan areas were first recognized by the United States Census in 1910.

Conceived of as historic landscapes, suburbs can be thought about on a continuum from the smallest to the largest physical geographical unit that makes up this landscape. The metropolitan area is the largest landscape in which distinctive suburban landscape characteristics can be seen. At the other end of the continuum, the smallest landscape unit is that icon of American suburban development--the single family house on its own lot. But the most critical landscape unit, and the building block of the suburban landscape, is the residential subdivision.

It is, however, hard to capture the sense of the suburbs simply by describing them physically. In a larger cultural sense, suburbs are significant because they represent the fulfillment of deeply held values about home in American society. Robert Fishman in his recent book *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* summarizes the values that created suburbia as follows:

*Suburbia is more than a collection of residential buildings; it expresses values so deeply embedded in bourgeois [or middle-class] culture that it might be called the bourgeois utopia. Yet this utopia was always at most a partial paradise, a refuge not only from threatening elements of the city but from discordant elements in bourgeois society itself.*<sup>5</sup>

Fishman notes how suburbanization in the twentieth century differs from that of the nineteenth:

*If there is a single theme that differentiates the history of [the] twentieth-century suburb from its nineteenth-century antecedents, it is the attempt to secure for the whole middle class (and even for the working class as well) the benefits of suburban development which in the nineteenth century had been restricted to the ... elite alone.*<sup>6</sup>

Historian Kenneth Jackson, author of *The Crabgrass Frontier*, believes that the invention of the balloon-frame method of construction in the 1830s made as important a contribution to lowering housing costs as did the cheap sites made available by the transportation innovations of the electric trolley and automobile.<sup>7</sup> The application of mass-production methods to housing construction by the Levitt brothers in building their post-World War II Levittowns was perhaps the culmination of this trend.

As important as reducing the cost of land and buildings in making suburbia affordable to large segments of the American population was the change in the way housing purchases were financed. The long-term, fixed rate mortgage was invented in the 1930s. With the Federal Housing Act of 1933, the federal government stabilized housing finance by insuring mortgages through the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). The lowering of down payments and monthly payments through federal insurance reached its ultimate after World War II as part of the benefits provided to veterans by the federal government.

It was, however, the introduction of the automobile, in many ways the most important event in American landscape history, that triggered large-scale suburbanization. Automobile ownership in the United States went from four vehicles in 1894, according to the Federal Highway Administration, to nearly twenty-seven million by 1930. Henry Ford introduced the Model T in 1908.<sup>8</sup> In *Making a Middle Landscape*, Peter Rowe asserts that the two most intense episodes of suburban expansion took place from 1918 until after the Wall Street crash of 1929, and from 1945 to the present.<sup>9</sup> It was during the first period that two of the hallmarks of the American suburb took their modern form adapted to the automobile: the subdivision and the single-family house. As the automobile freed developers from building within walking distance of streetcar lines, they were able to adapt the principles of the low-density, self contained, curvilinear residential developments of the elite to the middle-class and working-class automobile-oriented suburb.

Jackson has described the American suburb in one sentence: “affluent and middle-class Americans live in suburban areas that are far from their work places, in homes that they own, and in the center of yards that by urban standards elsewhere are enormous.”<sup>10</sup> Fishman stresses that “[t]he suburb must be large enough and homogeneous enough to form a distinctive low density environment defined by the primacy of the single family house set in the greenery of an open parklike setting.”<sup>11</sup> According to Spiro Kostof, the first picturesque suburb in the United States was probably Glendale, Ohio, founded in 1851.<sup>12</sup> Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, designed by Alexander Jackson Davis and built in 1857, is more commonly acknowledged as the picturesque prototype. In its design, Davis introduced the curvilinear road and natural open space in the center, two features that, according to Jackson, were unprecedented in modern residential experience.<sup>13</sup> When we look at the evolution of the modern suburban subdivision, however, we are also looking at the evolution of modern urban and town planning.

If the picturesque upper-class developments, such as Llewellyn Park in New Jersey or Riverside near Chicago, provided the template for the site plan of the modern subdivision or suburban community, other events articulated it. The Chicago World’s Fair of 1893, beneath its Classical Revival facade, promoted the idea of comprehensive planning. In Great Britain, Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City movement provided instruction for combining the best qualities of city and countryside.<sup>14</sup> In the United States, planners sought

to find design solutions to the onslaught of the automobile, which was not only killing more and more pedestrians, but according to a leading planner of the time, Clarence Perry, cutting the city up into cellular blocks. To counter this, Perry proposed something he called the "neighborhood unit" as the basic unit of urban residential development. The neighborhood unit was a self contained neighborhood of about five thousand residents centered on an elementary school. Bounded by arterials, the neighborhood unit would be bypassed by through traffic and have an internal street system of varied layout. Defined this way, the neighborhood unit became a basic design template for laying out residential neighborhoods in North America, Great Britain, and Australia.

The principles of the neighborhood unit concept were immediately refined in Radburn, New Jersey, designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright in 1928 and opened in 1930.<sup>15</sup> Even more so than the neighborhood unit, Radburn was designed to incorporate the automobile into residential development in the safest way possible. It did so by introducing the superblock and separating pedestrian and vehicular traffic. Radburn also introduced the cul-de-sac. In the superblock, the houses faced on to a park and a system of sidewalks for pedestrians. Automobile access was provided to the rear of the houses by a roadway that formed the spine of the superblock. The houses were clustered around cul-de-sacs along this central road. Pedestrians could go from superblock to superblock by tunnels under roadways.

A design concept influenced by Radburn that arose in the greenbelt communities built by the federal government in the 1930s, according to Peter Rowe, was the use of loop roads and cul-de-sacs, or motor courts, leading off major collector streets.<sup>16</sup> In later practice the houses were turned around to face the cul de sacs and common park land allocated to individual lots. Out of these developments in the 1920s and 1930s evolved the curvilinear subdivision layout that became the standard site plan of post World War II subdivisions. Descended from the organic curves of the nineteenth-century picturesque developments, the curvilinear plan, when compared to the grid by its advocates, provided greater privacy, could be adapted to a greater variety of topography, and avoided dangerous four-way intersections. It also, when built at large scales, according to neo-traditionalist planners and critics such as Philip Langdon, led to the loss of community in residential neighborhoods.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the subdivision was only the setting for the dominant feature of the suburban landscape, the single-family house. Rowe has reflected that, "No other artifact is as pervasive or carries the same emotional charge as the detached house in its suburban garden."<sup>18</sup> Although the streetcar suburbs made the free-standing house more common, reaction against the Victorian style of display and early twentieth-century reformist pursuit of a good and proper American home led to the development of a series of new, single-family house types. Among the six identified by Rowe as having been built since the 1920s, the bungalow, the Colonial Revival house and the ranch house best illustrate the trends in suburban housing.

Consequently, just as the form and plan of the residential subdivision evolved during the first four decades of this century, so too did the single-family house that it sited. As important as the model subdivision plan developed in the 1920s and 1930s was its institutionalization through zoning and subdivision regulations. In 1928, the US Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of zoning in which the exclusively residential development of single-family houses was supported as the most inviolate of land use zones.

Thus, although we tend to think of suburbs as a post-World War II phenomenon, they have a rich history of evolution for almost a century before the war. Many would argue that the quality of American residential design--and town planning, for that matter--reached a peak in the late streetcar and early automobile suburbs. We find the prototype of the post-World War II and contemporary subdivision almost fully developed by 1940. What was required for the second period of explosive growth was the post-World War II baby boom and pent-up demand for housing.

Post-World War II suburban growth was indeed monumental. From 1918 to 1940, suburbanites grew modestly from seventeen to twenty percent of the nation's population. By 1960, however, they had doubled to account for forty percent of the nation's total and far more than doubled in absolute numbers.<sup>19</sup> Physically, the post-war suburban landscapes differed in five ways from the pre-war prototypes according to Jackson.<sup>20</sup> First, they were in more peripheral locations relative to the central city; second, they were of lower densities than their prewar counterparts; third, architectural singularity characterized both houses and subdivision design nationally; fourth, suburban housing was more easily available economically than ever

before; and fifth, and perhaps the most important characteristic of the postwar suburbs in Jackson's view, they were economically and racially homogeneous.

While suburbs built after 1945 exhibited a great increase in the numbers of properties, they also appear to manifest fewer types of properties both in house types and subdivision designs. As mentioned earlier, Rowe identified but six major types of suburban housing as having been built since the 1920s, of which three--the bungalow, the Colonial Revival house, and the ranch house--are the most common.<sup>21</sup> Larry Ford traces the decline of the regional diversity of American housing types to the introduction of the bungalow at the turn of the century.<sup>22</sup> Because of this simplification of housing types and subdivision design, frequently denigrated as "cookie-cutter tracts," post-World War II suburbs have frequently been dismissed as not worthy of preservation and condemned as "lacking the character, scale, variety and even sense of purpose possessed by the standard products of earlier generations."<sup>23</sup>

Yet, as has been shown, these developments have a long history embedded in significant trends in American history. Even the most modest bungalow, reflecting the need for an affordable single-family house for households without servants, finds its architectural origins in the ideology of the Progressive movement about home and in the work of architects such as Wright and Greene and Greene.<sup>24</sup> The trend to fewer, more straightforward suburban house types culminated in the quintessential American suburban single-family house of the 1950s--the ranch house. Yet even in its simplest, even tacky form, it too claims a long architectural lineage. Presumably tracing its origins to western ranch houses, the architectural inheritance of the ranch house owed much to Frank Lloyd Wright's Prairie Style houses and later Usonian houses of the 1930s.

As Elizabeth Cohen suggests, the apparent simplification of the suburban house was influenced by complex social change. Conceived as a temple to the family, space in the 1950s suburban home was not divided into public and private or family areas as in the nineteenth century middle-class home. "[A]ll domestic space was intended for family use--not reserved for formal self preservation to the outside world through parlors and dining rooms, nor for official business, through libraries and offices."<sup>25</sup> Cohen sees the changes in the layout of the home as a transition from patriarchal space to female space with reproduction at the center. Others interpret the social implications of the ranch house differently. The point is that beneath the stereotypes about post-World War II suburbs is as rich and varied an historic resource as any yet encountered.

Even the impression of the uniformity of the suburban tract houses can be found to be misleading upon close inspection, as demonstrated by a survey of a subdivision in the suburbs of Wilmington, Delaware, of what appeared to be basically uniform ranch houses built in the 1950s.<sup>26</sup> Intensive survey revealed that the developer had managed to produce forty-seven different versions of the same house by flip-flopping floor plans, by varying the placement of houses on their lots and by applying five different schemes of architectural ornament. In fact, there may have been more variety in that neighborhood than in many eighteenth-century city neighborhoods cloaked in Georgian uniformity, which no one would question as being architecturally significant.

The thesis here is that there can be no question that post-World War II American suburbs are historically significant. The real question is in determining what range of resources best represents suburban development and how these resources are significant. In determining significance, we must let the results of our research define the objects, structures, buildings, and landscapes that are important, rather than starting with preconceived notions of what is "historic." In this, we need to balance the recognition that the post-World War II suburban landscape is rooted in long-term trends of American urban development, while at the same time taking a unique mid-twentieth century form.

In addition to subdivisions and homes, the list of suburban properties that are becoming historic is long. As the physical manifestations of what he called the "drive-in culture," Jackson includes the garage, the motel, the drive-in theater, the gasoline service station, the shopping center, the house trailer, and the mobile home.<sup>27</sup> Recently, Larry Ford has outlined a topology of commercial strips.<sup>28</sup> It starts with Main Street as the original strip, moves to the "Early Automobile Strip," to the "Streamlined Automobile Strip," and finally, to the "Classic Automobile Strip." For those who need stylistic designations to deal with these suburban historic resources, Tom Wolfe's "Boomerang Modern," from his book *Kandy-Kolored Tangerine Flake Streamline Baby* may yet find its way into the National Register of Historic Places. For those

committed to keeping preservation in contact with the most significant historical events in the twentieth century United States, the post-World War II suburban landscape will be the defining resource.

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#### Notes

1 Richard Longstreth, "When the Present Becomes the Past," Past Meets Future: Saving America's Historic Environments, Antoinette J. Lee, editor (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press), 219.

2 Peter O. Muller, Contemporary Suburban America (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1981), 51.

3 Paul L. Knox, Urbanization: An Introduction to Urban Geography, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1994), 89.

4 Kenneth T. Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 90.

5 Robert Fishman, Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia (New York, New York: Basic Books, 1987) 4.

6 Fishman, 15,

7 Jackson, 124-138.

8 Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics: Summary to 1985; Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics 1990; as cited in Knox, 107.

9 Peter G. Rowe, Making a Middle Landscape (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991), 4.

10 Jackson, 12.

11 Fishman, 5.

12 Spiro Kostof, The City Shaped: Urban Patterns and Meanings Through History (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 1991) 73.

13 Jackson, 78.

14 Edward Relph, The Modern Urban Landscape (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 56.

15 Relph, 65.

16 Rowe, 200.

17 Philip Langdon, A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb (Amherst, Massachusetts: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1994).

18 Rowe, 67.

19 Muller, 51-52.

20 Jackson, 239-241.

21 Rowe, 68.

22 Larry Ford, *Cities and Buildings: Skyscrapers, Skid Rows and Suburbs* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 151.

23 Longstreth, 214.

24 Rowe, 68.

25 Lizabeth Cohen, "Middle-Class Utopia? The American Suburban Home in the 1950s," a paper presented to the Delaware Seminar in American Art, History, and Material Culture, 4 May 1993, 5.

26 Susan Mulcahey Chase, David L. Ames and Rebecca J. Siders, *Suburbanization in the Vicinity of Wilmington, Delaware, 1880-1950±: A Historic Context* (Newark, Delaware: Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, University of Delaware, June, 1992). Survey done as part of fieldwork for the report.

27 Jackson, 246-271.

28 Ford, 228-246.