

Suburbs

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a sculptural paean to the American family in Mariemont, Ohio, by L. Alliot, 1929; photograph © Corson Hirschfeld, 1986

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Lois Craig



Editor's Notes

In Lois Craig's examination of suburbs she has chosen to concentrate on the physical characteristics of those residential enclaves—how they were, how they are—where wispy rows of saplings have matured to provide deeply shaded streets. But as she points out, it is not possible to look at form without also seeing substance. Social structure asserts a perceptible influence on the physical form of our suburbs where several generations have lived in houses that have undergone a series of remodelings in response to changes in the earlier expanding and more recently shrinking American family.

The term suburb is so message-laden that it is no easy task to clean the slate and reexamine one of the primary ways we have chosen to live. Although the word suburb immediately calls to mind those post-World War II efforts to provide a decent, affordable residential form for young families, suburbs have always been a part of the human community—a diversity of transition settlements between urban and rural areas. Therefore, one misconception Craig disposes of is that suburbs are uniformly commonplace, white-bread environments. She demonstrates that their variety is as broad and as deep as their quality.

In tracing the history of this form in the U.S., Craig points to several issues that have influenced our assessment of suburban architecture. One of these has been the emphasis by the architectural press and the popular media on the house as an isolated object. This narrow approach has denigrated the core of the suburban idea, an idea to which communal values are basic. Other issues revolve around social and political change.

By the mid-1960s, the middle-class virtues of green lawns, neighborhood schools and Saturday night barbecues seemed anachronistic in light of the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggle and the rapid disintegration of our great urban areas. There was renewed concern about preserving our significant public buildings and cities were, once again, seen as desirable places to live, particularly by a generation of young working women released from the traditional obligations of family that had been the backbone of suburban life.

Has the pendulum begun to swing? Do we once again long for many of the values epitomized by the suburban way of life? Lois Craig believes these questions deserve thoughtful answers. She does not advocate more and larger Levittowns, but rather a recognition that suburbs provide opportunities that cannot easily be dismissed, and most significantly, they embody a concern for the public good that is intrinsic to them and difficult to duplicate in the center city, where protective self-involvement is the rule and where size and complexity engender a more remote sense of community.

Lois Craig is Associate Dean of the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT. She is the author of numerous articles dealing with architecture and planning issues and principal author of the book, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and National Design*, 1978, 1984. This essay for *Design Quarterly* is a part of her long-term investigation into the phenomenon of the American suburb.

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Suburbs

Recently, when I reread William Whyte's *The Organization Man*, its setting, the community of Park Forest, Illinois, circa 1950, reminded me of Parkfairfax, a garden apartment subdivision outside Washington, D.C., where I had lived in the 1950s. I am old enough to be interested in my connections to history.

I looked for pictures of Park Forest, but finding none, I went there. Arriving late on an autumn afternoon, I found a suburb looking exactly the way I had hoped it would—the 1950s untouched by time, or rather the way we had imagined it would look when the trees grew up. Changes were apparent. There are fewer tricycles in the apartment courts of Whyte's famous study. The central shopping district, landscaped and maintained, is virtually empty. Racial integration finally happened, sometime after the opposition to the first attempt attracted national media coverage. So it seemed both the same and changed. Although I think of myself as a city person, I was hooked.

With the help of a fellowship I traveled to and photographed suburbs and subdivisions, shopping malls and strips across the country, and poked into the records of local libraries. As a way into the subject "suburb," as vast as "city," I chose to concentrate on residential suburbs and subdivisions that were notable or notorious in their time. These were often the result of collaborations between designers and developers. I particularly sought examples from the period 1945-1960 but went back as far as the 1850s.

The last time I had thought about American suburbs in any sustained way was in the early 1970s, when I spent several months visiting the suburbs of Dayton, Ohio to observe and write about a nationally acclaimed experiment in fair-share housing. I was a city person then, too, working for *City Magazine*, and suburbs to me were places to be opened up regardless of race, creed or income level. This is still a compelling and complex issue, but not the subject of my present exploration. Now I want to learn how to look at the physical aspect of suburbs and at the records of their changes over time. As any student of J.B. Jackson knows, seeing is not just about aesthetics, "the spectator stance," but also about what the landscape offers those who live in it. For me, view is a necessary first step to informing viewpoint.

I returned to Park Forest several times. It was a kind of touchstone for me, reminding me of my own suburban experiences over the years, of where I and friends of my generation had lived in our early married years, where some architects I know remember living, where many students I know grew up, where people I know still choose to live.