

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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10 Feb 87

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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.

MSF

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.



***In the field of form, the
community plan is the
only important thing.
It must have size and
shape, a center, a
head, heart, a soul,
and a purpose.***

**Robert Evans Alexander
Associated architect,
Baldwin Hills Village**



A stark street view of early Park Forest offers no clues to its visual or social future. The picture (p 4), taken in 1985 suggests the softening effects of use and time.

On one trip to Park Forest I met Jack and Dorothy Star, longtime residents. Jack is a former senior editor of *Look* magazine who wrote about suburban issues. Together they raised five kids who went to Park Forest schools and have taken up varied and successful careers. The Stars have replaced all the plumbing and wiring in the architect-designed tract house they bought in 1948. In the early days, the developers passed out free Chinese elm and flowering crab trees. The elms didn't fare so well, but the crab trees are a mature and distinctive grace note in this new community grown up. The Stars did not move away; they stayed and stayed connected to the changing life of their community and their house. Their example suggests a need for new stories and new pictures.



The argument of this essay is a simple one. A human settlement is a place on the land and in the mind. In both instances the images we have are social products. It is a common assumption that these images are not so important since we have before us the objects. Of course, there are many objects we have opinions about but seldom or never see. But until we examine the visual sources of our prejudices we will neglect one of the most powerful influences on our judgments and choices. This effort requires continuing reference to models both as conceived and as built, to test myth against life.

A suburb, by definition of the U.S. census bureau, is a community within a metropolitan area outside the core city. Its adjectival form is less crisp, however. When used to characterize a setting, it evokes a horizontal and repetitious organization of space—in its domestic version populated with widespread low houses with two-car garages and large yards. It is a cubiform environment of boundary walls, actual and implied, ground planes and canopylike coverings of sky and foliage. Characteristically, it is a green world where the three dimensions of landscaping—depth, width, breadth—take place in the added dimension of time. The word “suburban” has also acquired a dictionary connotation of “lacking in finish or elegance, provincial,” as in, “their taste in furniture is terrible, so suburban.”

In contemporary America the word “suburb” brings an entire world to mind, or, more characteristically, to the mind's eye. It is a world of statistics and studies, of reportage and aesthetics constructed in the past forty years out of a need for large theories to explain, and by semblance contain, large events. In prosaic terms, if the orchards and fields, the remembered hills and dales, the reliable political coalitions vanish overnight, explanations are sought—and distance.

Looking back at the cultural commentary that accompanied the massive post-World War II population movement to the suburbs, the conclusion is inescapable that it is so loaded with value judgment and innuendo as to be useless as description. Yet it is still used to describe, reinforced by photographs and statistics that have had a time-lapse

influence out of all proportion to their original information and are grievously out of whack in their implications for a contemporary view of suburban life.

As an example, in the early years after World War II a young photographer did a flyover for some pictures of the mushrooming Los Angeles suburb of Lakewood. Some 17,000 houses were going up in the then largest house construction project in the country. Four of those pictures, representing the early stages of construction, appeared a decade and a half later in the book *God's Own Junkyard*, written by Peter Blake not "in anger," but "in fury." As a group those four pictures have become something of an icon, still featured as a stand-in for the suburb in America.

Similar use is made of a *Life* magazine picture of new houses climbing a hill in Daly City south of San Francisco. Those houses entered our visual and verbal lexicon as the "little boxes made of ticky tacky" in the song Pete Seeger made famous. (Deeper into the song are verses that make the leap to ticky-tacky inhabitants.) Visual points about taste also accompanied discussions of good design. Under the caption "False faces . . .," The Museum of Modern Art 1946 publication, *If You Want To Build A House*, showed a residential street of what might now be considered interesting examples of "decorated sheds."

Inevitably change took place on such streets. But no revised pictures, or closer examinations, were widely distributed, and the original images entered an enduring belief system. Of course, Lakewood might have become the slum of the future. But, fortunately for a useful point, Lakewood today is a community of modest but pridefully maintained houses. Striking to a daytime visitor is the emphasis on public and publicly used places: the busy schools and well-used parks, the vivid signs of forthcoming civic events, the trim city hall. Westlake Village, part of the maligned Daly City, displays evidence of spanking maintenance. The lively embellishment of its boxy houses makes its cool design-award schools seem curiously forlorn. Such visual information neglects, of course, other indices of stability and social health.

The congruence of several tools of abstraction has abetted this detachment of our perceptions from reality. The aerial photograph and the long lens lent themselves to illicit metaphors of junkyards and conformity. The artist-photographer elaborated this tradition for a convention that equates unlandscaped structures with alienation and violence.

If the long lens can flatten and distort the picture, the statistical lens also distorts reality, distancing and controlling—often framing definitions of problems to imply that they are amenable to general, usually professionally supported solutions. At the same time that photographers—and their editors—could avail themselves of distorting perspectives, the social scientists and planners became mesmerized by statistical information in ever larger aggregations to describe the scale and velocity of change. The numbers were, are, boggling—the population increases taking place outside the central city, the rate of family formation, the proliferation of special government districts. Land-use figures



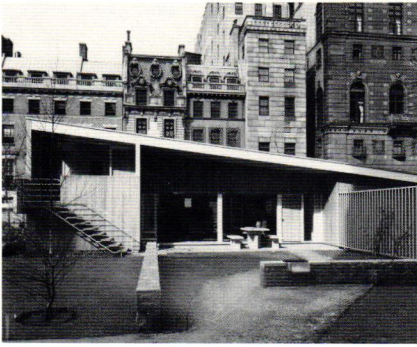
By the 1950s designers and social commentators recoiled from such images of suburban tract development as the construction photographs of Lakewood. Four photographs in this series were used by Peter Blake as evidence in his vituperative attack on the American landscape, *God's Own Junkyard*.





By contrast, artists like Andy Warhol in the early 1960s began through formal means to speak to the issues and feelings of the postwar era with such imagery as his *32 Soup Cans*, 1961-1962. For them, the everyday object and the mass-produced object offered fresh areas of style and subject matter. In

architecture, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, with their students, sought to learn from Las Vegas and Levittown. Their artistic co-opting of ordinary elements expanded the architect's tool kit, but not for tackling design issues of the suburbs.



Marcel Breuer's 1949 suburban house model, in the artificial context of MoMA's city garden, was presumably compatible with any location.

reinforced the visual images of destruction; used in their sober geographic context they would have shown that American land was far from overbuilt.

Another pictorial tradition contributed to this detachment of suburban experience from its moorings. The publications that support and promote the design professions beguiled readers with images of good living, particularly predicating quality of life on quality of the house. The houses chosen were usually presented as so separate from their neighborhoods that they might exist anywhere. Although large numbers of people visited the famed West Coast Case Study Houses, their major influence was through publications where they lost all useful clues about connections. On what street did Charles Eames live? (It should be noted, however, that the role of *Arts and Architecture* magazine, the case study sponsor, was important in encouraging the work of individual architects, especially younger ones.)

The *House in the Museum Garden*, a 1949 exhibition sponsored by The Museum of Modern Art, featured an exemplar of houses detached by their nature as well as their design. Other exhibition and research houses constructed at full scale went up under the auspices of the Guggenheim Museum, the Walker Art Center, *Life* magazine, the Ford Foundation Radio-TV Workshop, U.S. Plywood, U.S. Gypsum. The latter sponsored a "research village" to display six houses as individual products of selected teams of architects and builders.

These sponsors were but a fraction of the interlocking panoply of publishers, building product manufacturers, bankers, universities and professional associations that were and are potent forces of profit and symbolization in the American house/homebuilding industry. Revere Copper and Brass sponsored one of the most tenacious collaborations of industry and architects. For a wartime public Revere enlisted American designers to prepare brochures about the houses, less frequently the communities, of the future.¹ To a greater or lesser extent, all the models were directed at the marvels of factory production rather than at building codes, union rules and consumer preferences. (Walter Dorwin Teague suggested his demountable house could be "turned in on a new model as soon as it is obsolete, or the owner can take it with him when he moves.") After the war Revere endowed a public service housing research foundation at one time or another associated with *Architectural Forum*, Owens-Corning, the Crane Company and the Southwest Research Institute. Its Board of Architecture Review awarded a quality seal to builder house plans that survived a design review process.

In another kind of certification, a consortium of banks and financial institutions organized a House-of-the-Month Club to market designs for small popular-priced custom-built houses. Their preference for traditional design reinforced their opinion that there was a "very limited resale market for moderns."² And builders everywhere promoted model houses, many in a setting of mud and an atmosphere of go-to-the-fair entertainment.

The model master was the Levitt company. Although it sold communities as well as houses, the yearly release of a new house model

¹ Brochures located in Albert Farwell Bemis Foundation Records (MC 66), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

² Harold E. Group, editor, *House-of-the-Month Book of Small Houses* (Garden City, New York: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1946).

was eagerly followed by the press and the building industry. Today the evolution of the earliest model Cape Cod box and the later more elaborate "Country Clubber" can be tracked in the Levittowns where they have undergone some remarkable changes and additions. But their national influence has not been assessed in the context of the migration and transformation of house types. From the West Coast a similar migration, in this case of ranch houses, spread across the land, abetted by the examples of expensive ranch-style houses designed in the late 1930s by Cliff May. May's houses were promoted by *Sunset* magazine, a major agent in the promotion of products associated with a Western way of life. (*Sunset* was also an early supporter of the work of the architect Charles Moore.)

The detachment of house building from community building was probably encouraged by the kind of uncluttered architectural photography favored by architects and journals alike. But that was not new to either. More symptomatically it reflected the inability of the architectural profession to control, or significantly influence, the site planning and community design that accompanied volume building. Some merchant builders successfully collaborated with architects to produce tract house communities that drew on professional design and planning knowledge. Among the notable efforts were Eichler Homes with A. Quincy Jones and Anshen and Allen; Charles Davenport with architect Charles Goodman; Luria Brothers with the architectural firm Keyes, Lethbridge and Condon. Architect Gregory Ain found backers for his community design ideals. The Architects Collaborative experimented with being its own developer. But most builders were more interested in producing houses that responded to marketing studies that showed overwhelming preference for traditional exteriors and state-of-the-art bathrooms and kitchens.

After World War II the American construction industry performed an internationally admired feat in meeting the tremendous demand for new housing. And not without reference to buyers' preferences. But as a whole the leadership of the architecture profession was little interested in forms or arrangements of ubiquitous, mass-produced objects that were the essential building blocks of the post-World War II suburb. After 1945 the historical models of community planning and architecture available from nearly a hundred years of experimentation slipped from view, and contemporary models were obscured in the tidal changes set in motion by the forces of demand, know-how and federal subsidies.

In the 1950s a lot of commentators had their say about the perceived loss of quality control. Images of "dystopia" or "subtopia" were suggested by *The Lonely Crowd*, *The Organization Man*, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, *The Crack in the Picture Window*, *The Split-level Trap*. Symbolic of the design profession's disillusionment and dismay was the 1959 MoMA exhibition of Frederick Kiesler's 1929 *Endless House*, amid rhetoric from its designer about the necessity for control of the entire building process by the architect-artist. MoMA's *Architecture Without Architects* was shown in 1964. The same year Peter Blake



(from top)
Case Study House #8 by Charles Eames, 1949, is located with three other Case Study Houses on Chautauqua Way in Pacific Palisades, California.

House by Anshen and Allen for Eichler Homes, a California building firm that enlisted prominent designers as well as new production economies in its popular housing tracts.

Five Fields in Lexington, Massachusetts, was developed and designed by The Architects Collaborative, 1951—a domestic ensemble in a rural New England pasture.





Over the years the residents of Levittown, Long Island, have chosen to improve the sturdy "Cape Cod" and "Ranch" houses that made housing history, adding dormers, extending and resurfacing sides, building in and building out, adding fences (banned in the original deeds), and adding apartments (illegal). In 1947 when builders believed shelter could not be provided for under \$10,000, the first Cape Cod models sold unadvertised for \$6,990. In the two later Levittowns in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, the models became larger and fancier. With mass purchasing of materials, research, and pioneering on-site mass production methods, Levitt & Sons undersold the competition. With an array of community facilities, landscaping, expansion attics, fireplaces and well equipped kitchens they outsold it. Today Levittown faces the changes of graying. Some owners have moved on to Levitt retirement communities in Florida. Levittown Memorial High School, which opened in 1953, closed in 1983.



published his sweeping indictment of the era. (Ian Nairn's similar attack on the English experience, published as an issue of *Architectural Review* entitled "Outrage," preceded Blake's "junkyard" by a decade.)

Lewis Mumford, long a champion of planned garden suburbs, declared most darkly the now widespread reading of the Lakewood flyover:

In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: 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 respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. Thus the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, a low-grade uniform environment from which escape is impossible.³

The design professions turned their interests to the city and in the mid-1960s to new cities. Kevin Lynch's seminal *Image of the City* came out in 1960, Mumford's *The City in History*, Gordon Cullen's *Townscape*, and Jane Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* in 1961. They celebrated the city "as the form and the symbol of an integrated social relationship." As the 1964 song by Tony Hatch advised: "When you're alone and life is making you lonely, you can always go Downtown. . . ."

Educationally the subject of the suburbs was effectively blacked out by the deluge of pro-city and conservationist literature. In 1965 the White House Conference on Natural Beauty was held, and Urban America Inc. was formed to improve "the quality of life in American cities." In 1967 President Johnson set to work his Commission on Suburban Problems; the anthology of its papers, entitled *The End of Innocence*, was one epitaph for an era.



Historically, the suburb as an ensemble of dwellings outside the city walls goes back to the beginning of urban history, perhaps to a 2000 B.C. settlement adjacent to the ancient city of Ur in Mesopotamia. In the centuries of what we call Western civilization, the suburban pleasure gardens and retreats of the aristocracy achieved a notable place in architectural history. In the early years of the nineteenth century the suburbs of London and Paris had some repute as the places where artists and writers lived and the wealthy played.

From a legacy of villas and embellished farms, American landscape designer Andrew Jackson Downing extolled the independence and freedom, the health, happiness and morality of similar settings, albeit scaled down in their complement of servants, for the middle class. In 1853, Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, one of the earliest romantic suburbs, gave form to his ideals born of English gardens and transformed by American

³ Lewis Mumford, "Suburbia: The End of a Dream," *Horizon*, 3, July 1961, reprinted in Charles M. Haar, editor, *The End of Innocence: A Suburban Reader* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott Foresman and Company, 1972). Mumford's statement should be understood against the background of his bitter disappointment over the failure to achieve major land reforms that he and earlier garden-city planners had envisioned as part of suburban development.

notions of arcadia. The landscaping of Llewellyn Park offered sylvan dells and distant prospects, a narrative of instruction in arcadian delights. It was a narrative enriched by the examples and images of the Hudson River School.⁴

Transportation improvements and their affordability made suburban settings successively available to professional, white and blue collar classes. Streetcar suburbs extended the city grid. No justification was needed to seek a suburban setting for domestic life away from the disease, muck and clamor of the industrial city. Indeed, one construct of the American dream holds that the city was the place of acculturation and the suburb the evidence of social mobility.⁵ In the mid-twentieth century we discovered that this route to progress was not easily traveled by racial minorities and not desired by groups that feared a dilution of their city-based political power.

"No great town can long exist without great suburbs," wrote Frederick Law Olmsted in 1868 to the founders of Riverside, Illinois.⁶ A contemporary observer described nearly a hundred other suburbs contiguous to the city of Chicago, but it was Riverside that made visible an ideological synthesis of social and design elements.⁷ For the next seventy-five years political progressives and reformers of all kinds proposed the gardening of cities to improve the health and general welfare of the populace and, in model projects (with the support of civic-minded developers and foundations) to enhance the shelter of working families.

One of the earliest plans that combined European garden-city aesthetics with social and economic planning was for the Norton Company's 1915 subdivision of Indian Hill in Worcester, Massachusetts. Only a small piece of that plan was realized. But some company housing, like Franklin Court for the Doubleday publishing company (1912, Garden City, Long Island), and many reformers' projects, like Forest Hills Gardens (1911, Queens, Long Island), Mariemont (1923, Cincinnati) and Chatham Village (1932, Pittsburgh), "trickled up" to become sought after accommodations in their localities. From the toney Olmsted suburbs of Riverside and Palos Verdes Estates (1923, Los Angeles County) to the austere but ambitious New Deal Greenbelt Towns, their designers displayed confidence and skills that are, at the minimum, confirmed by current real estate values.

Looking at suburbs today is confused by definitions. Many early suburbs are now city neighborhoods lying near the boundaries of annexation. These escape the net of contemporary census definition. That definition also loses useful physical focus by including too much—visually unbounded development, the industrial suburbs, and what has been called "sacked villages"—the old small towns that were built up and dominated by commuters only as a post-World War II development. The word "village" has itself lost all semblance of correlation to the geographer's precise definition. As an emotional abstraction it is as readily applied to condominium developments as to a proposed cluster of high-rise towers in downtown Boston, which is called an "urban village" by its architect. "Urban village" is also applied to the new



The propaganda of the 1930s represented in this government poster was as anti-city as the commentary of the 1950s and 1960s was anti-suburb.

⁴ The influence of the Hudson River landscape painters on Downing and the development of Llewellyn Park is described by Walter Creese in *The Crowning of the American Landscape* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁵ James E. Vance, Jr., *This Scene of Man, the Role and Structure of the City in the Geography of Western Civilization* (New York: Harper's College Press, 1977).

⁶ Olmsted, Vaux & Co., "Preliminary Report Upon the Proposed Suburban Village at Riverside, Near Chicago, September 1, 1968," reprinted in *Landscape Architecture*, 11, July 1931.

⁷ Everett Chamberlin, *Chicago and Its Suburbs* (Chicago: Hungerford, 1874; reprint, Arno Press, 1974).

(from top left)

At Riverside, Frederick Law Olmsted stressed landscape devices to create a sheltered setting for private houses and public open-air recreation, eschewing attempts to control the form of houses. Engineer/architect William Le Baron Jenney, one of the early residents, designed several houses including his own and the one shown here. A green "long common" was designed to link the suburb to Chicago, but in the event was realized only within Riverside. Trains provided the serviceable connection to the city.

An American Gothic cottage, the boyhood home of architect Charles McKim, favors the form and "cheerful mellow hues" promoted by Andrew Jackson Downing. The setting of Llewellyn Park provided residents a natural refuge for pursuing personal renewal and domestic felicity.

Forest Hills Gardens, a railway suburb sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation and designed nearly fifty years after Riverside by the Olmsted firm with architect Grosvenor Atterbury, recalls Hampstead Garden Suburb outside London and conveys an ambience that depends on strict architectural controls.





LEVITTOWN
A Garden Community
**DRIVE SLOWLY
AND CAREFULLY**



People don't buy a house. They buy a neighborhood. People will buy a backyard, they'll buy friendly neighbors who smile, they'll buy well-kept lawns. People buy attics ('I've always wanted an attic'). Or a woman will buy a kitchen facing the street. People buy birch trees. We're all the same.

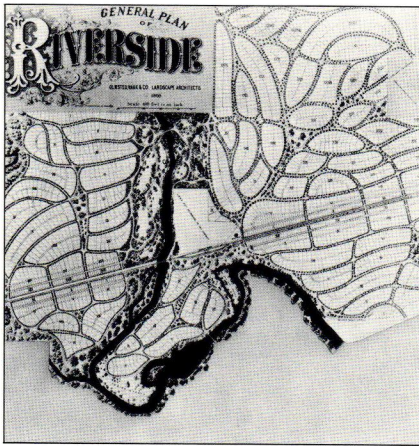
**John Milligan, real estate broker
Needham, Massachusetts
The Christian Science Monitor
24 May 1983**



Chatham Village, an experiment in low-cost housing sponsored by the Buhl Foundation in 1932, was the last collaboration of Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. Although following through the experience of Radburn, new techniques were devised for large-scale hillside siting. A decade later after experience with the federal

Greenbelt program, Stein worked on Baldwin Hills Village (at right), noted for its skillful integration of private and public outdoor living areas. In both ensembles the grouping of design and landscape elements reduced costs and contributed to the cumulative impression of community.





The subdivision platting of the American grid meets the curving lanes of the English park in the 1869 Riverside plan by Frederick Law Olmsted.

suburban megacenters of stores, hotels, offices and apartments in such places as Princeton, Dallas, and California's Orange County.

A residential grouping that can be taken in by both sight and mind is the intentional ensemble originally built outside the older city, between the city and countryside. To the question of how big it is, the practical answer is that you know it when you see it. Symbol and form and function can be congruent in an ensemble of fifty housing units or one of 10,000 with its own schools and other public services.

Portals and enclaves characterize these ensembles in a visible hierarchy of elements that mark edges and entries. From the literal or virtual wall and gate to the property boundaries and doorways, the architecture, siting and landscaping codify communal intentions. These enclaves are invisibly maintained by like-mindedness that is often written into rules of association. As is all too well known now, like-mindedness can lead to illegal exclusionary practices. But it is worthwhile trying to separate the dastardly from the elements that valuably reinforce communal cohesion—including diversity.

Local namings are clues to aspirations, reasonable or hyperbolic, which are part of the place spirit. In Riverside Olmsted honored his mentors, naming streets Downing, Repton, Uvedale and the like. In Green Meadows, a post-World War II subdivision of Palo Alto, California, the street names include Mumford Lane and Nelson Court; here it is no surprise to find a high representation of well-known designers in both domestic and public facilities. In a mobile home village in Santa Rosa, California, Tiffany and Eden mark an intersection of flower-lined streets. Builders are known to name streets after members of their families. The overwhelming predilection in this world of naming, however, is for connections, real and fancied, to village life and the world of nature. (The only other American residential enclaves so predominantly marked with botanic and topographic names are cemeteries.)

Over the history of the American suburb a larger trace of its culturally codified design is the balance between private and public life. This balance, the "villageness," can be endorsed in the pattern of the plan, in the obvious reservations for parks and roads, schools and shopping. But plan is corrected in use and by visual quality. A dank, weed-filled lot is no mark of publicness whatever the deed or the plan may claim. In contrast, private property may be treated as visual common space. Another shading of the relationship between private and public is experienced in the individual's sense of lostness and foundness. Within the sinuous plan of curving streets and paths, the native can more easily discover a destination than a stranger.

Considerable commentary has remarked the source of curved roads in the picture making of the romantic English landscape tradition. Curved roads can also be more sensitive to topography, can eliminate through traffic, and can be a factor in reducing the area, and therefore costs, of utilities and maintenance. It is also true that curved patterns are found overlaid on grids in the meanest subdivisions.

◁ All that acknowledged, in America the grid is a more public pattern than the curvilinear. The publicly mandated rectangular survey covers some three-quarters of the continental United States, affecting its lot lines, its rights-of-way, its efficiencies, its straightforward aesthetic, its remarked melancholy of endlessness, and the very sense of identifying location. In this ubiquitous landscape of straight lines, the curved line especially reads as opposition, as defiance, as signifying the domains of leisure and privacy. ▷

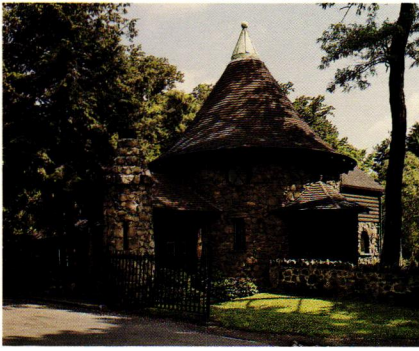
In the suburban spatial arrangement between communal street and private door, the siting, landscaping and stylistic elements constitute the last ring of public/private boundaries. (Within the house, the plan describes more immediate social relationships.) At one extreme is an open grid with houses sitting four-square, the front door visible, the windows looking both out and in, the kempt lawn. At the other extreme of presentation are houses tightly backed up to the street with forward looming garages and squinting windows, the entry door visually insignificant. This is a private world, one often fraught with security problems as "armed patrol" and "armed response" signs attest. Of a different type entirely is the effect of the substantially fenced, possibly electrified, but visible front grounds that lead to an enormous front door. The welcome is ambiguous at best.

◁ Within and between communities are centers of social, educational and commercial activities. Even the strip, although geometrically uncentered, has the ambience of a theme park unto itself. Enclosed shopping centers, in both geometry and mood, are the ultimate enclaves, "toy garden cities," wrote Joan Didion, "in which no one lives but everyone consumes, profound equalizers, the perfect fusion of the profit motive and the egalitarian ideal."⁸ ▷

Institutional and visual qualities of the suburb are, finally, bounded by rules, explicit and implicit. The October 1925 issue of *Landscape Architecture* presents elaborate tables, prepared by the Olmsted brothers, of the restrictions imposed in practice in selected land subdivisions designed by the firm in the forty years from 1883 to 1923. The tables are guides to classification but also to the growth of rules in numbers, complications and severity. They also show the ways in which, in the interest of overall amenity, "the detriment to the individual lot from precluded possibilities of development" was balanced against "the gain to the same lot through security from undesirable neighboring development." A section in the tables describes the rights, power and duties of the development companies.

Although the legal positions have shifted since 1925, in one form or another those communities that attend to plans as an expression of community values also attend to rules. At their most visible they can be seen in the all masonry buildings with red tile roofs at the Olmsted-planned Forest Hills Gardens. But even in later communities, public and publicly viewed spaces record common understandings about appearance, use and maintenance. In the most insistently community-oriented designs of places like Chatham Village and Baldwin Hills Village (1941,

⁸ Joan Didion, "A Nation of Malls," *Esquire*, Special issue: "How We Lived 1933-1983," June 1983.



(from top)
An imposing romantic entrance lodge guards the private preserve of suburban Llewellyn Park.

The architecture of Chatham Village captures the picturesqueness popular in early twentieth-century English garden cities.

The shopping area of Mariemont is the central focus of the 1923 model garden suburb for white-collar workers, sponsored by patroness Mary M. Emery.

Los Angeles), the most prevalent warm weather sounds are the sounds of maintenance. In the Greenbelt town of Green Hills (1936, near Cincinnati) village officials contribute personal exertion to the upkeep of the town common.

The design conventions associated with the appearance of American suburbs today can be traced to early practices and zoning, to a later mélange of federal requirements and public health recommendations, and to developing ideas of civic art. But finally American suburban design comes down to co-opting the constraints, the regulations, the opportunities into an ideal about village and neighborhood, worked out with or without professional designers.

One line of these villages comes down from American interpretations of the English rural park set with singular homes—in places as lush and verdant and umbrageous, as castled as money will allow. Another comes from turn-of-the-century European town-planning aesthetics and garden-city principles that were wedded to reforms for improving the contentment—and productivity—of labor. Here designers put needed economies to use to reinforce communal activities visually and socially. And here the progressive met the conservative, for both espoused a stake-in-society approach to social betterment, and viewed crowded living conditions as destructive of civic virtues. You could not, the belief went, Americanize the immigrant who was badly housed.⁹

Forest Hills Gardens is an early American mix of Ebenezer Howard's garden-city concepts and Camillo Sitte's street pictures. Such European village forms found their first laboratory in the United States in the federal government's workers' housing program of World War I. Mariemont outside Cincinnati captured that experience in the first major garden suburb after World War I.

Two remarkable American publications show the influence of European visions on suburban design. The report of a competition, held by the City Club of Chicago in 1913, presents the competitive designs for subdividing "a typical quarter section of land in the outskirts of Chicago."¹⁰ Recommended readings for competitors were mostly about English garden-city planning; a few were about German planning; none were about American experience. The results today seem an exercise of ornament in plan—with the exception of a "non-competitive" submission by Frank Lloyd Wright, which forecasts his 1935 model for Broadacre City. Of the entries generally, one commentator wrote, "A plan dominated by curved streets will produce the effect of monotony as surely as will a gridiron, and will engender a spirit of restlessness. A plan which functions perfectly for use and convenience will admit of, but unfortunately will not compel, a beautiful expression in elevation and perspective."

Another volume, by planners Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets, is a veritable catalogue of mix and match elements of civic design. *The American Vitruvius: An Architects' Handbook of Civic Art* was published in 1922. There has been no work since that compares in encyclopedic compilation of existing works of civic art—"an atlas for imaginary

traveling with a client," wrote the authors. For suburban design, the authors preferred "the European method, employing compact groups formally planned" to "the older American ideal for suburban extensions, the imitation of the 'rural' park." Peets would later be a major figure in the planning of the Greenbelt towns and in the early planning of the new community of Park Forest.

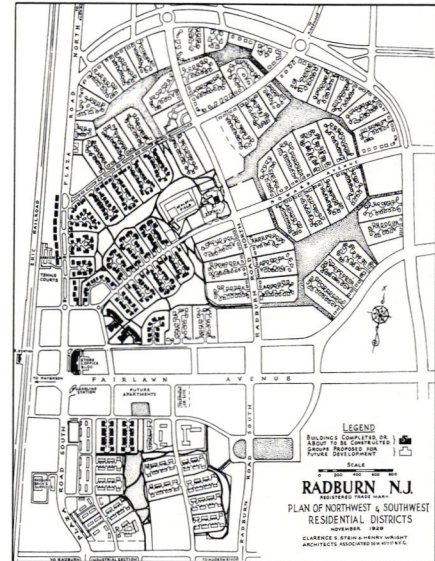
The American emblem of garden-city planning remains Radburn (1928, New Jersey), which was planned to accommodate the "motor age." Radburn spawned a progeny of communities, including the Greenbelt towns of the New Deal, which variously borrowed the superblock sliced into by cul-de-sacs with turned-around dwellings faced onto a common green space, sheltered from traffic and encouraging, proponents passionately believed, social interaction. Recent feminist writings remark the value of this design approach for the support of shared services and communal activities.¹¹

The destruction of conventional lot lines in Radburn, the separation of cars and pedestrians, the elimination of grade crossings (a device borrowed from Olmsted's Central Park) captured the imagination of reformist planners and critics in America into the 1940s. Today the resulting array of community common space, individual neighborhood commons and extensive pathway systems suggest more than protection from automobiles. One is seldom out of sight in this landscaped reinforcement of social linkages. Eyes-on-the-path has useful implications for personal safety—as does the distinctly different form of an open grid.

Radburn is also an exemplar of an American focus on play and recreation as an essential part not only of good personal life but also of good community life. In a kind of democratic version of the American country club (which originated in the suburb of Brookline, Massachusetts), the Radburn plan provided playing fields and courts, swimming pools, centers for avocational instruction and day care.¹² Over time the swimming pool has proved one of the most enduring community attractions in American suburbs of all varieties.

To combat concerns about sameness and monotony, Radburn's architect-planners, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, deposed clusters of single, semi-detached, row and multi-unit housing and garages in arrangements that would not have been possible with conventional lot zoning. Such clustering would later be hard-won in local struggles for Planned Unit Development ordinances. In addition, the designers used varying rooflines, colors, textures to picturesque effect. The American garden-city concept early abandoned the European aspirations for significant reform in land ownership.

The Museum of Modern Art in 1945 summed up the influences of Radburn tempered by the passage of time and an interest in the singular, architect-designed house. Predicting the need for a million and a quarter new dwellings each year, MoMA hoped to stimulate interest in the quality of the vast jump in construction activity with an exhibition entitled *Tomorrow's Small House*. Included were scale models of houses by Carl Koch, William Wurster, Hugh Stubbins, Frank Lloyd Wright, et al, from



The lot lines and streets of the American grid are abolished in the 1928 Radburn plan by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. Houses are grouped and turned to face away from traffic and toward large communal parks.

9 The concept that social control was the motivation for housing reform is developed by Roy Lubove in *The Progressives and the Slums* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1962).

10 Alfred B. Yeomans, editor, *City Residential Land Development: Studies in Planning* (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1916).

11 Dolores Hayden cites Radburn and Baldwin Hills Village in "What Would a Non-Sexist City be Like? Speculations on Housing, Urban Design, and Human Work," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5, spring supplement 1980. In the same volume Susan Saegert argues that ". . . the symbolic dichotomy of female/male and suburban/urban may reinforce and reflect a variation of an actual segregation of much private life from public, socially organized productive life that perpetuates inequalities." ("Masculine Cities and Feminine Suburbs: Polarized Ideas, Contradictory Realities.")

12 Daniel Schaffer, *Garden Cities for America: The Radburn Experience* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982).



She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radio than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate.

the *Ladies Home Journal* collection of house models. For the exhibition Serge Chermayeff and Vernon De Mars designed a neighborhood model to house the houses.

The Chermayeff-De Mars design was basically an adaptation of the landmark Radburn plan of two decades earlier—with a seasoning of Le Corbusier's city-of-tomorrow. In the model itself the row house predominated over the detached house "because of its economical land use and its suitability to various orientations. Another virtue is the positive, rhythmic definition which it gives the street." Behind those images were the legions of critics, architects and planners attracted to the aesthetics and notions of progressive reform of the garden-city movement in this country and Europe. On the hill of the MoMA model, there rose on pilotis "the thin, proudly isolated slabs of the two apartment blocks." Down the hill was a neighborhood shopping and recreation center such as would serve the other neighborhoods of the larger community. This was about to be Park Forest—and two decades later, by way of Scandinavia, the new towns of Columbia and Reston.

But it was not the larger picture of mass-production community building nor did it anticipate the vast shopping centers that would spring up to serve the great numbers of consuming settlers of the automobile suburbs. The examples of Radburn and Riverside left their traces across the suburbs of America but did not prevail. They were overlaid and intermixed with another model born of the grid and the automobile. The essence of this model is located in the landscape and climate of southern California and in the mind but not the direct influence of Frank Lloyd Wright.

That southern California exaggerates the typical American qualities is a truism so colorfully embroidered in prose and picture that no non-Californian would dare restate it. Some of the schemes for luring new residents and investors to California, directed particularly to the midwestern states, read like a script for a sting operation. Suburban paper towns had a heyday in the twentieth century unmatched since the West was won by an earlier wave of speculators. Before the smog rolled in, the pictures, the postcards, the movies depicted the houses and lifestyles, grand and small, of southern California amidst gardens and groves with backdrop scenery of ocean and mountains. The house, its lot and its leisure, were sacrosanct, the imagery of health and recreation as rampant as a rain forest. The example inspired a rash of Hollywood place names across the country.

People came and stayed and made ever newer suburbs down the valleys and up the canyons. Between 1920 and 1930 an immense influx of new residents arrived in southern California at the time when the automobile became economically available to the middle class. D.W. Meinig makes the tantalizing proposal that although the Levittowns and other massive suburban creations of the 1950s have been the focus of sociological study, it is the "citrus grove suburbia" of southern California of the 1920s that provides the visual prototype for the American suburb today.¹³

13 D.W. Meinig, "Symbolic Landscapes: Models of the American Community," in D.W. Meinig, editor, *The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

According to Meinig, three regional landscapes successively evolved as powerful and influential national landscape symbols, widely assumed to be typically American: the New England village, the midwestern main street, and the southern California suburb. The last was intimately connected to the history of the automobile, which, Meinig argues, was such a potent force that, once widely available, it created its own landscape in southern California. Offering a desirable place of health and recreation, balmy weather and vast uncharted areas of undeveloped land, southern California was available to be designed by the car.

Planning for the Los Angeles freeway system began in the 1930s; by 1941 the Los Angeles Regional Planning Commission forecast a multi-centered city predicated on the single family house and the private car. Today the suburban enclaves spin off high-speed freeways that allow residents to create whatever realm, whatever regional enclave of services and society their cars, impulses and habits can describe. In this version of the construct of the mind meeting the construct of the land, lifestyle defines ever larger enclaves, and where you live becomes of less moment than where you drive.

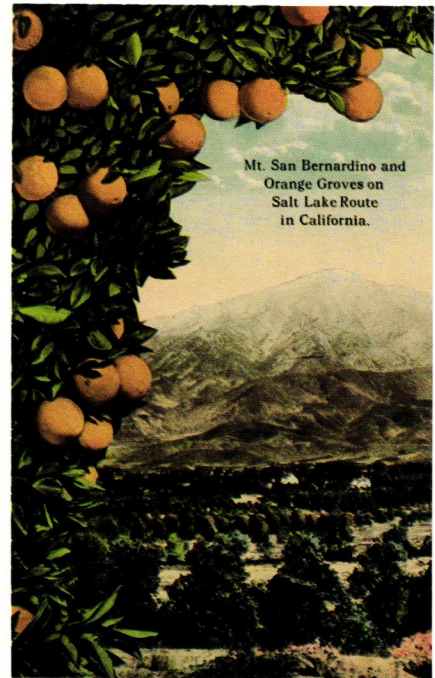
Only one American designer of stature imagined this event and gave it imaginary form. Paradoxically, the 1935 public exhibition of Frank Lloyd Wright's model for Broadacre City took place in the anti-thetical setting of New York City's Rockefeller Center. Broadacre City was planned upon the basis of "general decentralization as an applied principle and architectural reintegration of all units into one fabric." Wright called for "little" built units that could be changed incrementally and reflected that ". . . architecture is landscape and landscape takes on the character of architecture by way of the simple process of cultivation." The architect should, therefore, be the agent of the state in matters of land allotment and improvement. Factory fabricated houses were to range from "one car" to "five car" models—a gradation curiously reminiscent of Downing's 1850 houses scaled to the number of servants.

Wright's script described three major forces the model accommodated: mobilization, electrical intercommunication and standardization.¹⁴ Half a century later, with the suburbanization of southern California part of our experience, Wright's predictions are stunning. In detail, Broadacres also is as old-fangled now as it was contrary then. Who in modern America has the time or resources to cultivate a one-acre yard? But in vision no architect has matched it.



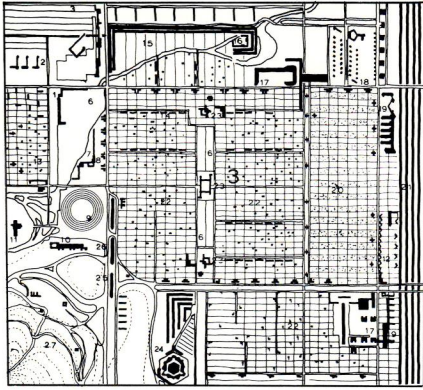
By not grappling with the phenomenon of southern California or the vision of Broadacres, designers lost the opportunity to influence the massive suburban growth that followed World War II. And although that growth was marked by new forms and new qualities it continues to be viewed mostly from afar, if at all, by leaders of the design professions.

In retrospect, the anti-suburban literature and imagery, the intellectual and visual neglect add up to something more than a curiosity.



One of the postcards that were part of the vigorous selling of southern California to people in grayer climates. After 1895 the fruit growers were among the persistent promoters of the region, contributing the Sunkist image and trade name.

¹⁴ Frank Lloyd Wright, "Broadacre City: A New Community Plan," *Architectural Record*, 77, April 1935. For an analysis of the sources of Broadacre City in contemporary American thought, see Lionel March, "An Architect in Search of Democracy: Broadacre City" in H. Allen Brooks, ed., *Writings on Wright* (The MIT Press, 1981).



Schematic diagram for Broadacre City project, begun in 1934. Frank Lloyd Wright's theoretical proposal exploits the capacity of the American grid to accept extendable, repeatable systems of community building. Wright's community module is four square miles of countryside developed on the acre as a unit and accommodating 1,400 families.

15 Cesar Graña, "Social Optimism and Literary Depression," *Fact and Symbol: Essays in the Sociology of Art and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

16 For a description of the views of geographers Brian Berry, Wilbur Zelinsky and James Vance, see Peter O. Muller, *Contemporary Suburban America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1981).

17 Marilynne Robinson, "Writers and the Nostalgic Fallacy," *The New York Times Book Review*, 13 October 1985.

Rather, they suggest a profound class resistance grounded in cultural and aesthetic considerations. Cesar Graña makes a compelling argument that the vacuum left in Western society by the passing of an aristocracy based on both power and privilege resulted in the inevitable strain of creating an aristocracy based solely on cultural exertion.¹⁵ Such a class, he states, has no choice but to bend every passion to attacking the principle of utility. Members of the cultured class, then, "recoil from the commonplace, as the first line of defense in the battle for spiritual dignity and self-identity," denigrating the materialism and technology that are important to the upward mobility of poor people.

What the second generation wants to forget, it has been said, the third wants to remember. Hardly a week passes without a feature article in *The New York Times* on one suburban subject or another. And in recent years historians and sociologists have been telling newer stories about the suburb; the physical and social changes of the last forty years are reflected in a growing body of suburban studies. The voice of the sociologist Herbert Gans has finally been joined by others to question the prevalent mythology of misery. These accounts are virtually devoid of pictorial illustration, however.

Other contemporary engagements with the suburb vary. Geographers have developed some newer conceptual pictures of settlement patterns, which replace cartographic images of rings and zones and sectors.¹⁶ Filmmaker Steven Spielberg uses the suburb as a setting in an off-handed, affectionate way, viewed out of the corner of his eye. Television makes the suburbs glitter and remarks the status of objects. The original title sequence for the series *Knots Landing* showed an aerial view of a California cul-de-sac of houses, all with swimming pools but one—which belonged to the most insecure character. The movie *Ordinary People* was shot in the affluent, and not ordinary, suburb of Lake Forest, Illinois. In quite another stance, author Marilynne Robinson created a remote setting for her novel *Housekeeping*. Such words as "suburb," she said, suggested too many images prepared by other commentators. "The story it tells I do not want to tell."¹⁷

Architects and physical planners are slow to reassess the suburb, possibly because they are particularly gripped by aesthetics, and therefore images, although their art in the event is a social art tested by use—and by users. Not only the suburbs of the post-World War II era await reappraisal. The pictorial cloud that surrounds that period has obscured earlier suburbs. Although many are thriving today their existence is barely certified by a few grainy pictures, if pictures exist at all. Descriptions are fragmented and scattered, which suggests that the store of images must not only be better understood but should be replenished to develop new theories and metaphors useful to design—and to life in all its variety as it is lived in the suburbs.

Some leading designers grew up in suburbs, as did many student designers-to-be. (We should recall, incidentally, that Llewellyn Park was the boyhood community of Charles McKim; that William Le Baron Jenney built his romantic house in Riverside.) There is a striking anomaly: for

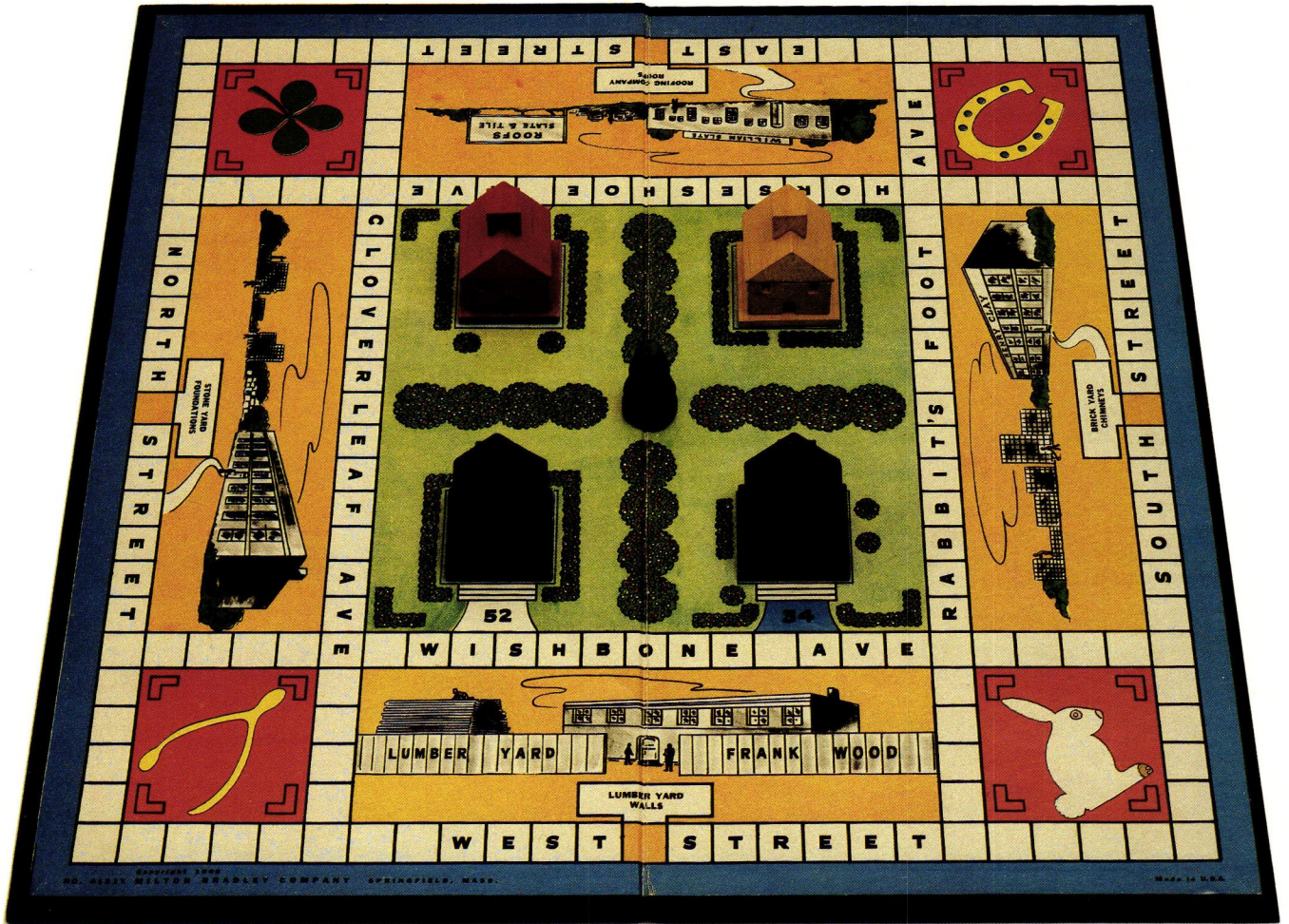
two decades the majority of Americans in metropolitan areas have lived in suburbs and numerous studies report that they like living there. But no design journal or curriculum deals expressly and routinely with the design issues of suburbs.

Although American house forms and siting have responded to technological and social changes (particularly those that reduced storage needs and the drudgery of housekeeping), there is compelling evidence that the interest in progress and its products does not extend to the exterior style of the house. At the level of community design, the architecture of ensemble depends on a team that combines the skills of development, siting, architecture and landscape architecture. And at the level of civic design, consigning traffic and ground water problems to some vague evil labeled "developer profits" misses the point. Unless the will to design is joined to the will to govern, the design professions are trapped in a stylistic critique that cannot tangle with vested interests.

There have been a lot of changes since we last looked. All the organization men didn't move out and on. And the man in the gray flannel suit doesn't commute anymore from Westchester County to New York City. Studies show he overwhelmingly works in the suburbs. Renters have joined owners. The flora has filled in; the pioneers are demanding new services for the aging. Residents may add a story or two, a wing or so, inside or outside the local building restrictions. Some may turn the garage into an "echo apartment." The adventurous, and flush, newcomers may gut their house, hire a famous architect and create a "suburban loft." Some houses have worn out. Some schools and convenience shopping centers are closed. Some early shopping centers are being roofed over.

In an increasingly multi-centered outer city, so-called omnicenters are visible evidence of a suburbanization of economic activity. Office and industrial parks are going up in new scale and complexity, enclaves among enclaves. A new resort, a suburban exclave, features professional design in plan, in elevation, and in occupancy, and, within the parameters of Victorian ambience, requires fences, bans metal trim, and discourages grass in favor of natural landscape materials. Weeds? The desire for space, on the curve or on the straight, does not disappear. Grass is still planted and watered. No one, as someone has remarked, goes to the suburbs because of an interest in botany.

For the planners of Riverside and Radburn and the theoretical Broadacre City, it was not the abandonment of the idea of city but a new configuration of it that interested them. The evidence before our very eyes argues the need to abandon old metaphors that no longer have any connection to their origins. "To see," wrote Paul Valéry, "is to forget the name of the thing one sees."



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Bibliographic Note

Several writings were consulted to gain a general understanding of the important ideological strands in American suburban design. The influential European sources were: Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902); Raymond Unwin, *Town Planning in Practice* (1909), especially the chapter, "Nothing Gained By Overcrowding;" and Camillo Sitte, *The Art of Building Cities* (1889 original translated by Charles T. Stewart, 1945).

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***The dream
is a lie,
but the
dreaming
is true.***

Robert Penn Warren