

Introduction

Suburbs in Transition

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The suburb is not an American invention, but Americans have embraced it like no other society in the world.

The first suburb, according to historian Kenneth Jackson, grew up outside the ancient city of Ur some 4,000 years ago. For centuries, suburbs were the last resort of the poor, who were unwelcome in the central city, home to the civic elite. Then, gradually, the center-periphery relationship was inverted, with the poor left in a center city surrounded by wealthier suburbanites. As early as the seventeenth century, wealthy London and Paris residents began fleeing the city for small communities in rural districts.

As William Baer shows (*see* page 128), even when the rulers of England wanted to stem that tide, they failed miserably. American colonists soon emulated Europe, establishing suburbs almost as quickly as they did cities. By the time of the Revolution, Greenwich Village was drawing people out of what Jackson calls the "crowded, unhealthy town below Wall Street."

The modern suburb is a far cry from these premodern communities. Beginning in the last half of the nineteenth century, suburbs began to change the very nature of American urbanism. In such disparate places as Riverside outside of Chicago, Medford outside of Boston, Reston outside of Washington, and Irvine outside of Los Angeles, the suburb has been redefined repeatedly to meet the needs of changing generations.

The earliest suburbs, as Robert Fishman reminds us, grew out of a "total transformation of urban values: not only a reversal of the meanings of core and periphery, but a separation of work and family life and the creation of new forms of urban space that would be both class-segregated and wholly residential."

In these "romantic suburbs" was born the mythic suburban vision of the family

home surrounded by a natural landscape, away from industrial nuisances and commercial pressures. Away from work and in touch with nature, the American middle-class family could be enveloped in its own domestic life, rather than assaulted by crowds, irritated by strangers, and bothered by unexpected urban events. For Frederick Law Olmsted, the suburbs were salvation from the two "savage conditions" that plagued late nineteenth century America — "the dense poor quarters" of the city and the "sterile parts" of rural life. (Fishman)

Carefully designed, romantic, residential suburbs were increasingly a minority of the new developments. The push to the periphery, propelled both by the hope for a better quality of life and the incessant demands of commerce on central city property, led to new, more flexible settlements encompassing residential, commercial, and even manufacturing uses. As my colleague Greg Hise has shown, mid-twentieth century suburbs were more likely to be mixed residential and commercial developments built around new industrial manufacturing sites. And, as the articles in this Lusk Forum confirm, today's master planned communities worry as much about their jobs-to-residents ratios as park acreage-to-population ratios.

During the suburbanization of the United States, the opportunity to spread out from the city has been greatly facilitated by evolving modes of transportation. The "walking city" of the eighteenth century was bound by how far a person was able or willing to walk. By the end of nineteenth century, such bounds had been exploded, first



Suburban development often demands extensive amounts of land for parking and multi-lane two-way streets.

by railroads, then by streetcars. In places such as Los Angeles, the scope of the city was expanded far beyond what had been imagined possible fifty years earlier; indeed, the outlines of the modern city were firmly fixed even before the automobile appeared. Jumping on the big red cars, a resident could ride from Pasadena to Santa Monica, Long Beach to Glendale.

The automobile simply raised the sprawl to a new level of intensity, allowing a greater number of families to move a greater distance from where they worked, went to school, and shopped. As Richard Longstreth has recently demonstrated in his wonderful chronicle of changing commercial landscapes in Los Angeles, by the end of the 1920s downtowns were already losing their primacy to slowly emerging commercial districts oriented toward the car. The advent of the shopping mall in the 1950s simply signaled the completion of the evolution from downtown-centered cities to polycentric, commercial metropolitan areas.

The earliest of the new shopping districts, such as the one that grew up on Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, seem very urban, not suburban to us today. So it is

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with many of the earliest suburbs, which lost their suburban identities when they were swallowed up in city annexation campaigns. Most cities grew through annexation until the last decades of the nineteenth century. Only after Brookline rejected annexation into Boston in 1873 was the suburban-urban divide clarified politically. Since then, animosities between city and suburb have increasingly grown rigid, as suburbanites fear urban disorder and its perceived consequences of lowered property values, deteriorating educational systems, and class heterogeneity. City and suburb, suburb and suburb, compete for commercial enterprises, residents, and other amenities that will bring in taxes and raise a community's prestige.

Planners, architects, and others have long had mixed feelings about the suburbanization trend. In early America, the suburb was viewed as an extension of republican values, which proclaimed that a true citizen lived on the land, typically as a farmer, but at least as a suburban landowner. Later, Olmsted and other reformers hoped that the suburb would relieve social and economic tensions in the industrial city.

Ebenezer Howard's pathbreaking *Garden Cities of To-Morrow*, published in 1898,

argued for a system of "garden cities" where small, inter-related cities replaced the sprawling, unwieldy industrial giants then rapidly and haphazardly expanding both in England and in the United States.

Howard's ideas were particularly intriguing to a group of urbanists associated in most people's minds with Lewis Mumford. In the 1920s, the "decentralists" recognized that the car would become the standard method of travel, and cities were largely unprepared for such a future. They argued for new suburban developments to spread the population and to reduce pressures on the center. Further, in those new developments, housing should be separated from commerce, manufacturing from both, and cars carefully controlled through a system of street hierarchies ending with the cul-de-sac. In such developments as Radburn, New Jersey, and later a wide variety of master planned communities, developers and designers attempted to implement the ideas of the decentralists, whether consciously or not.

The grand moment for the American suburb was the 1950s. Postwar prosperity, government spending on home mortgages and the national highway system, and growing racial tensions combined to propel

dramatic growth in suburbs throughout the nation. As Elaine Tyler May and others have chronicled, the result was a new suburban culture of backyard patios and swimming pools, dens and TV dinners, roomy garages and manicured lawns, drive-ins and car hops, malls and more malls. Cities received fewer mortgages, paid a disproportionate amount for new highways, lost a large part of their tax base, and suffered a general decline as the

High-rise office development moves into the suburban fringe where land is cheaper and auto access is easier.



suburbs prospered and expanded.

By 1980, more Americans were living in suburbs than cities. The large, diverse, suburban population could no longer escape the problems associated with the city. Especially in the last decade, questions have been raised about the environmental, political, and social costs of suburbs. Has decentralization ruined metropolitan America? Has it left suburbs

without community centers? Are the suburbs home for a superficial television culture that discourages people from reading, engaging in political debate, and establishing and maintaining close emotional relationships? Have they isolated ethnicities and races, separated the wealthy from the poor, and created physical environments antithetical to public culture?

Today's Suburbs

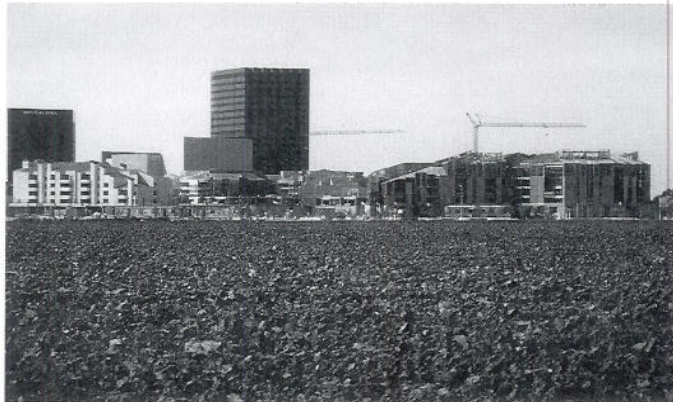
The Lusk Forum articles engage these questions directly. Does gang migration signal the continued deterioration of suburban life? Has the Newhall Land Company finally



Mixed use development and higher densities have evolved in more mature suburban communities.

found an appropriate design for a suburban community center? Or, will the trend to gated communities defeat any hope for a public culture in the suburbs? Does the Reston model for development produce sufficient profit for developers that citizens can be sure the promised amenities will be built? Can Urban Growth Boundaries control sprawl and focus and shape development in ways which previous planning regulation has failed to achieve? Finally, is New Urbanism the answer to the myriad of design and development, social, and political questions that have plagued the suburb and the sprawl that accompanies it?

Suburbia relentlessly marches on, frequently at the expense of prime agricultural land.



The new ideas tackle long established issues: how to control growth or more importantly, sprawl, how to develop and maintain community, and how to ensure profitability and quality. Baer's description of growth control regulations in seventeenth century London will sound too familiar to developers and policymakers in the 1990s. When Garvin

Fishman, Robert. 1987. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. New York: Basic Books, pp. 8, 129.

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Kunstler, James Howard. 1993. *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-made Landscape*. New York: Touchstone, p. 119.

Longstreth, Richard. 1997. *City Center to Regional Mall: Architecture, the Automobile, and Retailing in Los Angeles, 1920-1950*. Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press.

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References

The future of the suburb is uncertain. Older suburbs find themselves confronting an array of urban ills, such as rising crime, deteriorating infrastructure, declining economic opportunities, and changing population demographics. New suburbs are constantly appearing, but most continue the same practices that have led to the uncertain future of the older suburbs. As has been happening for the last 150 years, on the urban fringe, in the newest settlements of suburbia, the shape of future American communities is being envisioned. In Santa Clarita, Celebration, and other experiments in suburban design and development, new ideas are being tested to see if they will provide answers. We will have to wait and hope that some of them work. ■

Suburban Futures

sterility of suburban life while maintaining the land must be developed as quickly as possible, because, as a project's residents increase in number, the likelihood that they will try to stop further development increases. Sayer extends the argument, asserting that communities need to establish Urban Growth Boundaries as part of a comprehensive regulatory plan to shape and direct development within their communities.

Sprawl presents difficult problems for the future, despite the existence of attempts to limit growth. The very nature of suburbanization is the spreading outward of the population from a central settlement. New Urbanism, like the reforms that preceded it, might offer a way to direct sprawl, to shape it so that residents could have a better quality of life, but it does not deny that sprawl will continue to exist. Neither does the trend towards gated communities, which will shape individual developments but not development itself.

Likewise, the absence of community is central to all of these articles. John Howard Kunstler defines the problem when he argues that a "suburbanite could stand on her front lawn for three hours on a weekday afternoon and never have a chance for a conversation." In such a vacuum, suburbanites crave even pseudo-communities like those provided by shopping malls or other commercial enterprises whose primary purpose is profit.

In Reston, Valencia, Irvine, and Celebration, developers and planners have been trying to establish communities that don't require a wall to surround and define them. Through innovative shopping center and community center designs, each development hopes to answer questions about the