

Horizontal Cities

Suburbia is finally getting its due from social critics.

By Nick Gillespie

For those of us who grew up in “suburbia”—that geographic and psychic region that has long been synonymous with all that is “plastic” and “soulless” in American life—the April 9 edition of *The New York Times Magazine* was a real stunner. Who would have expected one of the nation’s great arbiters of taste and sensibility to sanctify “The Triumph of Burbopolis” with a special issue that actually had some good things to say about the suburbs? One story even went so far as to praise Levittown, Long Island, that reportedly irradiated Ground Zero of the post-war suburban explosion: “Held up as an example of conformity and monotony, Levittown’s 17,000 identical capes have mutated into an exuberant architectural Babel: the sparrows on a wire have each grown their own distinctive plumage.”

Such thoughts underscore a significant shift in elite opinion regarding suburbia, the place where most Americans—

Updated from time to time, such views continue to cast a long shadow, as evidenced by the reception of films such as *American Beauty* (whose protagonist, in the words of one representative critic, bravely struggles “to awaken from the stupor of 20 years in the suburbs”) and the new book *Suburban Nation* (whose subtitle announces two simultaneous and equally horrible trends: “The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream”).

To fully appreciate the significance of the attitude shift embodied in the *Times Magazine* coverage, it helps to understand what I call Suburban Shame, that pervasive feeling of inadequacy and inauthenticity that comes with growing up somewhere other than a big city (preferably on its mean streets or in its silk-stocking district), a small town (preferably a “village” or “hamlet” lacking any chain stores and house numbers), or a farm (preferably a

Manhattan. To someone just passing through, Middletown is a featureless conglomeration of subdivisions and tract homes that illustrates perfectly what anti-suburb types have memorably described as the “geography of nowhere.”

Despite its suggestive name, Middletown is smack dab in the middle of nothing (there are even two other Middletowns in New Jersey). In fact, my hometown doesn’t even have a middle of its own, unless one counts a series of nondescript municipal buildings that fly by when you’re driving on the divided highway that is one of two main drags through town (the other major thoroughfare is, naturally, a second divided highway).

Yet my parents’ backyard was the perfect spot for the wedding for a number of reasons: I’d lived there from the time I was 2 years old until I left home for good after college, so the location was meaningful in a way that a rented hall, country club, or hotel never could be; the shady, tree-lined backyard was big enough to put up a tent for about 150 people; the relative proximity to New York City made it more convenient for most of our guests than my wife’s hometown in Ohio.

On one score, however, I purposefully inconvenienced our guests—or at least those coming from north of Middletown. When it came time to send out driving directions, I gave the guests a roundabout way of getting to my parents’ house. Rather than have them get off the Garden State Parkway at Exit 117 and take State Highway 35 south for a few miles—the quickest, simplest route by far—I kept them on the parkway for a couple of extra exits and then directed them onto a series of winding, hilly, and confusing country-style back roads that would not only add close to 10 miles to their trip but give them even-money odds of becoming carsick.

Why? Because the stretch of Highway 35 from the earlier exit to my parents’ street in Middletown is nonstop sprawl: strip mall after strip mall, fast-food joint after fast-food joint, kwik mart after kwik mart, gas station after gas station, condo development after condo development. It’s

Understanding the suburbs has become a prerequisite for a full appreciation of American culture.

138,231,000 of them, according to the Census Bureau—now choose to live.

The original critique had been fully articulated by the 1920s, when social critic Lewis Mumford suggested that if “the 19th century American town... was the negation of the city,” then “suburbia was the negation of that negation. The result was not a new synthesis, but a deterioration.” Though Mumford’s archly negative take was among the first, and most influential, he was hardly alone in castigating what historian Frederick Lewis Allen dubbed “the suburban nightmare” and efficiency expert Christine Frederick derided as “sugary and commonplace and pathetic.”

family-run operation under constant threat from both the elements and big-city bankers). Those places and the people who live there, we’ve been told by generations of social critics and artists, are “real.” In contrast, the suburbs and its residents are “fake.”

Suburban Shame can lead to bizarre behavior. Consider, for example, what happened when my wife and I decided to have our 1992 wedding ceremony and reception in the backyard of my parents’ house in Middletown, New Jersey, an amorphous, sprawling township of 70,000 that’s about 50 miles due south from

four miles of asphalt and very familiar, nationally branded light-box signs, with clusters of identical single-family homes tucked back away from the highway on winding streets chock full of cul-de-sacs. You pass through a total of four towns on the short drive. It doesn't get much more intensely—or embarrassingly—suburban than that.

The *Times* is far from alone in recognizing that suburbia has something going for it—that there might be some good reasons why most Americans now live there. The self-styled paper of record is taking its cue from the same sort of intellectuals who in years past helped create the image of the suburbs as mass-produced Potemkin villages lacking literal and figurative depth.

The new book *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened* came about when Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, both of whom teach American studies at the State University of New York at Old Westbury, realized that their suburban Long Island students were “unlike the characters in ‘Leave it to Beaver’ or ‘Father Knows Best.’” In fact, to Baxandall and Ewen’s considerable surprise, they “led lives as intricate as any urban dweller.”

Other scholars, such as Ohio State’s Jack Nasar, Syracuse’s Robert Thompson, and Rutgers’ James Hughes, have reached similar conclusions after actually investigating their subject. “The suburbs today are really cities in horizontal form,” Hughes told the *Times* late last year. “You don’t have the density of the city, but all the economic functions that were once in cities are now in suburbs. There are hospitals, universities, cultural facilities and a wide variety of housing choices and therefore a multiplicity of household types.”

To put it in slightly different terms, what such researchers are recognizing is that suburbs, like cities and small towns, are populated by people dreaming and striving, yearning and hoping, living and dying. Critics are finally recognizing that suburbs are in fact places with pasts, presents, and futures as varied as the increasingly diverse people who are streaming into them in ever greater numbers.

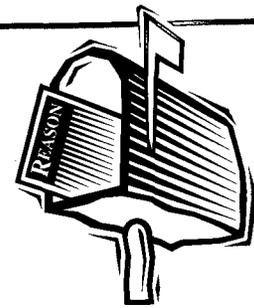
As gratifying as such belated attention from elites may be, the recognition that real people live real lives in the suburbs is

not news to those of us from the Middletowns of America. Nor is the understanding that so-called bedroom communities can in fact be real communities, the kind in which meaningful human dramas play out.

In the years since my wedding—since my Suburban Shame got the better of me—my parents passed inevitably into old age, and with it, sickness and death; my father died in 1997 and my mother just last summer. In their last years, they needed more and more help simply to make it through the days, and they benefited greatly from all the new stores and services that had come to Middletown since they had moved there in the mid-'60s—not just better pharmacies and home-delivery arrangements but gourmet coffee shops; massive, always-open supermarkets; book superstores; and ethnic restaurants that ranged beyond pizza joints and the occasional Human Palace. Their quality of life was immeasurably improved by the same forces of development that are still alternately ignored and castigated by the anti-suburb crowd.

More than anything, though, my parents benefited mightily from their neighbors, some of whom had lived side by side with them for decades, others who had moved in far more recently. My folks had helped these people out over the years, and that kindness was more than repaid. At my mother’s funeral last summer, my parents’ neighbors and friends—many of whom helped raise me, many of whom I hadn’t seen in years, and most of whom I will in all likelihood never see again—came out to pay their last respects, to tell me what my parents had meant to them.

As I left Middletown a few days after the funeral, I drove out on State Highway 35, passing the strip malls, the fast-food restaurants, the kwik marts, the gas stations, even the cemetery where my parents now rest. It is understandable, perhaps, why such landscapes failed to make any sort of positive impression on commentators for so long. Similarly, it is exciting that such landscapes—and the people who inhabit them—are beginning to get a longer, more informed second look. As the suburbs grow in size and population, such understanding will increasingly be a prerequisite for a full appreciation of American culture. 



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Letters



Spectacular Strategy

Not only did Charles Paul Freund's article ("Secrets of the Clinton Spectacle," April) confirm my own observations and suspicions, it served to renew my frustrations with the current political climate.

Imagine my reaction when the very next day a TV news clip showed U.S. Senate candidate Hillary Clinton here in New York state responding according to "formula." The news story was about the recently released report on the campaign finance practices of the Clinton administration and the involvement of Al Gore and Hillary. She responded to questions with a wide-eyed smile and said it was "old news," "people know all about that," and it's time to "move on." The American people, especially New Yorkers, need to be reminded that the Clintons are still at it.

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Charles Paul Freund's brilliant analysis of the Clintons' modus operandi in scandal management left out an essential tactic: the realization that if an issue is sufficiently complex, you can lie with impunity. Neither the public nor the press have the pa-

tience to sort out complicated issues regarding financial regulations and legal procedures.

You can laugh in the face of the 10 percent of the people who understand the issues if 90 percent of the people dismiss any discussion of them as the incomprehensible legal jockeying of paid flacks. If matters seem in danger of coming into focus, obfuscate and complexify with an air of injured rectitude.

But the most important Clinton tactic, I believe, will be left to future historians to analyze: the systematic use of blackmail.

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Green Resolutions

Thanks for the interview with Norman Borlaug ("Billions Served," April). I've been a believer in organic gardening for years, although I'm not a fanatic about it. I don't use chemicals when gardening, but I do buy conventionally grown produce—it's too expensive to do otherwise.

We seldom hear the other side of the food production argument, especially so clearly presented and (I hope) not biased by ties to an agriculture-based business.

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I do not disagree with Dr. Borlaug's statistics and I have great respect for his contributions to agriculture. I don't, however, have his faith that agricultural technology can solve the food needs of an ever-increasing population. The resources of the earth are finite.

I did advanced studies in plant and soil sciences at Iowa State with a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota. I have worked in production agriculture and agricultural research and development in the U.S., Central America, Africa, Haiti, and Saudi Arabia for more than 50 years. From what I have seen, the Green Revo-