

When is a Suburb not a suburb? When it is Oak Park.

A Paper to be presented at the 2002 American Anthropological Association Meetings.

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"An understanding of how suburbia was produced...is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century..." from Roger Silverstone, 1997

Visions of Suburbia

The role of the suburb in our society is a strangely ambivalent one. We seem to love and hate it at the same time. On the one hand, there has been a continuous move of Americans away from the city into the suburb. The census shows that we are a suburban nation with urban and a rural fringes. In the last two national elections, suburbanites elected the president.

The suburb has long been touted as an essential component of the American dream. To escape crime, poor schools, overcrowding, racial strife, and, in general, urban decay, the middle class moved to places that were supposedly planned to avoid the mistakes of the cities. They were promised a hint of nature, good services, a safe, if not worry free environment where one could successfully raise children and wage earners find a haven from the stress of their urban place of employment. As Larry Shumsky suggests "The suburban ideal...consists of the belief that the best form of shelter is a single-family detached house with a

garden and ample open space located in a homogenous, locally controlled community on the periphery of a city” (1998:754). According to a National Association of Home Builders survey, “When given a choice, eight of ten home buyers will opt for a traditional single-family home in outlying suburbia over a similarly priced but smaller townhouse located closer to the city, employment centers and public transportation.”

Immediately after World War II, visionary developers constructed planned communities with modestly priced houses well within the economic abilities of the middle class. While these developments shot up all over the U.S., the Levittowns, the San Fernando Valley and later Orange County with their homeowners’ associations and gated communities come to mind as quintessential suburbs. There can be little doubt that the majority of people living in the U.S. over the past 50 years have fantasized about moving to the suburbs and living the good life. A great many realized their dream. Or did they?

Television, which emerged at the same time as these suburban developments, helped create an idealized image of the life awaiting the new suburbanite with shows like “Ozzie and Harriet,” “Father Knows Best,” “The Donna Reed Show” and “Leave it to Beaver.” The immense popularity of the programs attest to how much they reflected the hopes and aspirations of many. Few truly believed that they would really live the life of the Nelson family but at least some must have thought it possible.

What is fascinating is that an almost completely antithetical view of the suburb emerged at the same time as these communities were being idealized and invented. Since the 1950s, the suburb has been vilified in song, film, novels, journalistic reports, and social-science studies.

Popular music has been uniformly anti-suburban for decades. From Malvena Reynolds' Little Boxes in which suburbia was characterized as "made out of ticky tacky, and they all look just the same" to the Eagles' The Last Resort, in which developers are portrayed as villains - "Some rich man came and raped the land, nobody caught 'em, put up a bunch of ugly boxes and, Jesus, people bought 'em." More recently an alternative band sings about "Bombing the Suburbs." In fact, I can find no popular songs extolling suburban virtues.

Fiction from authors like John Cheever, sometimes referred to as the "Chekhov of the suburbs," and films like the Man in the Gray Flannel Suit, The Stepford Wives and more recently, American Beauty and Pleasantville paint a bleak picture of mindless conformity that produces soulless people living meaningless lives.

Journalists have been equally suspicious of the suburban dream. Here is a recent example: in a 1999 New York Times article (May 6) by William Hamilton entitled "How Suburban Design Is Failing Teen-Agers," he suggests that "Created as safe havens from the sociological ills of cities, suburbs now stand accused of creating their own environmental diseases: lack of character and the grounding principles of identity, lack of diversity or the tolerance it engenders, lack of

attachment to shared, civic ideals. Increasingly, the newest, largest suburbs are being criticized as landscapes scorched by unthoughtful, repetitious building, where, it has been suggested, the isolations of larger lots and a car-based culture may lead to disassociation from the reality of contact with other people.” I could cite dozens of other examples.

What is curious about the anti-suburban bias of this intellectual elite is that their antipathy appears not to have deterred many people from moving to the suburbs. Perhaps we are simply seeing the prejudice of avowed urbanites whose cosmopolitan upper middle-class expectations of the good life clashed with the very notion of a suburb which some claim is best suited to lower middle-class values in which there is little need for museums, ethnic restaurants and other cultural amenities. Or perhaps it is a reflection of the anti-white sentiment that has become increasingly fashionable. To make it even more curious, the suburban clichés particularly pertaining to the idea that suburbs are homogenous white bread places is increasingly inaccurate. The critics continue to criticize a world that no longer exists (Freedman 1999).

When we turn to the social-science literature the bias is even more curious. As David Popenoe suggests “The bulk of this literature...was highly critical of suburban life. A move to the suburbs was alleged to foster overconformity, hyperactivity, anti-individualism, conservatism, momism, dullness and boredom, and status seeking, as well as a host of specific psychological and social ills including alcoholism, sexual promiscuity, and mental illness....The suburbs were portrayed as a kind of national scandal” (1977:3).

When David Reisman in his 1957 article “The Suburban Dislocation” openly acknowledges that he is “one who loves city and country but not the suburbs,” he begins an almost half century of overtly ethnocentric sociological pronouncements about the ills of the suburbs that include such classics as Crestwood Heights and The Organization Man (1956). Jane Jacobs, a prominent urban sociologist, apparently feels at ease recently telling a New York Times interviewer that “I don't especially like suburbs.” And in Glenna Matthews’ 1998 analysis of suburban America she poses the question, “Do suburbs as currently constituted possess any socially valuable characteristics?”

Herbert Gans’ The Levittowners and Bennett Berger’s Working-class Suburb form part of a minority tradition of sociologists who found some merit in these communities. More recently scholars like Joel Garreau have defined a new type of suburb, the Edge City, which is being extolled as a workable antidote to both urban and suburban problems.

As an anthropologist trained to avoid even the hint of ethnocentrism I find a literature that begins with an overt prejudice astonishing. Lest you think I am chastising our sociological colleagues too harshly and presenting our profession as somehow better, I should point out that anthropologists have simply ignored the suburbs altogether. When we began to study our own society the emphasis was on the urban not the suburban. We created a new object of study, “the domestic exotic other,” that is, we studied the poor, the dispossessed, the oppressed, the pathological and avoided the middle class, particularly in the

suburbs. Laura Nader's admonition to study "sideways" has been virtually ignored. That is, we never thought about studying communities that resembled those anthropologists inhabited. A panel such as this would have not been possible a decade ago.

I now wish to turn to my own research as one example of auto-ethnographic explorations into a relatively successful middle-class suburban community that bucks the trend outlined above. It concerns my hometown, the village of Oak Park near Chicago, founded before the beginning of the twentieth century. Kathryn Ratcliff, in her unpublished dissertation, suggests that "While no single community can serve as a prototype of the diverse suburban landscape which developed during these years (1890-1920), we can see Oak Park as broadly representative of predominately Anglo-Protestant, bourgeois communities like Brookline, Massachusetts, Orange, New Jersey and Evanston, Illinois" (1990:1-2). In fact, local son, Ernest Hemingway once called Oak Park, the "middle-class capital of the world."

Oak Park is one example of a first suburb ignored by most researchers who assume the term suburb means a post-World War II development with cookie cutter architecture, malls, sprawl, and ethnic homogeneity populated primarily by the lower middle-class. These so called "first suburbs" have only recently been the subject of research and only because their aging housing stock, failing infrastructure, lack of services and growing poverty is now regarded as a new urban problem. Again we have another example of researchers' needs to locate something pathological to study.

Let me briefly describe the attributes that make Oak Park unlike the prototypical suburb. It is only 4 and a half square miles; has about 50,000 inhabitants with over 70 percent of its buildings constructed prior to World War II. Therefore it cannot contain any large malls. Sprawl is impossible as is “out of control growth.” Forty percent of its housing stock is apartments. In contrast to the classic boring tacky-tacky houses, Oak Park is one of the homes of modern architecture with twenty-five Frank Lloyd Wright houses including his own home and studio. Like many first suburbs, the look of Oak Park is urban not suburban. Unlike the prototypical conservative Republican suburb found in Orange County, California, Oak Park is a haven for liberals with a lesbian as village president and a gay man on the school board. But most importantly, Oak Park is one of the more stably integrated communities in the U.S. This diversity is the result of a thirty-year-long proactive set of policies, institutions and ordinances that were designed to prevent the resegregation that seemed inevitable in the 1960s. As a consequence of these efforts to make the community diverse, Oak Park has become known a truly gay friendly community and has a considerable home-owning and organized gay population that is a major force in local politics. I am in the process of producing a series of digital family portraits that explore this community’s somewhat unique character. In the interim, I maintain a periodically updated web site where Oak Parkers and others can critique my view of their lives (<http://astro.temple.edu/~ruby/opp/>).

So what is the point of all this? Perhaps a broadly based conclusion can be made - that anthropologists need to overcome their antipathy toward the suburbs and

white culture and take a look at some of the non-pathological aspects of our society. It is quite amazing what we will find. Take a look at the papers we heard today.

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