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The Post-World War II Suburb in the United States

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The entrenched and, in some ways, deleterious presence of "overgrown" suburbia in the United States is rarely given a second thought.[1] Emerging after the conclusion of the Second World War, suburbia revolutionized the architectural, residential, and economic condition of the 1950's United States with unexpected and dramatic aftershocks. Presently associated with wholesomeness and homogeneity, few inquiries delve past these widely accepted conceptions of non-urban living to reveal the true forces responsible for the suburbs' inception. Through a didactic analysis of the origins of suburbia, the uniform nature and features of the suburbs, and their rippling consequences, the hidden side of the suburb can be unveiled.

The birth of the American suburb dates to the Allied victory in World War II. As masses of men returned from combat, the need for immense quantities of housing "was intense."[2] This demand was compounded by the marked rise in marriage rates. Not long after the war's end, the number of births grew to "the highest amount in four decades."[3] As consumer retail activity was immensely limited in the war-driven economy, a widely employed populace now had disposable income and unsatisfied material desires. Federal policy, additionally, hastened the retreat to suburbia. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 and congressional allocation of funds to the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) created a mortgage program that increased newly married servicemen's ability to purchase homes.[4] The persistent efforts of the automotive lobby and related organizations came to fruition with the construction of a vast interstate highway system; Cold War paranoia added leverage to the lobby's persuasive arsenal. For instance, many freeways were constructed to facilitate the evacuation process in the event of a nuclear attack. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 provided for the federal building of these "elaborate expressways."[5] In respect to the suburb, freeways, along with the increased ability to afford personal automobiles, made peripheral living more accessible than hitherto possible. This legislation was particularly influential in the suburbanization of the San Fernando Valley in Southern California.[6] Large businesses were eager to satisfy the demand for cars, as defense manufacturing dwindled with the surrender of Germany and Japan. The components for an unparalleled housing transformation were perfectly in place.

World War II benefited industry.[7] After the turn of the mid-twentieth century, the home building industry was dominated by conglomerate corporations, which used clever schemes to decrease expenses and lower prices. The most notable firm was Levitt & Sons.[8] Some precedents of mass-produced housing existed at the time. Companies under government contracts to supply

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[1] Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 128.
[2] Ibid, 131.
[3] Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 232.
[4] Ibid, 233.
[5] Ibid, 249.
[6] Ibid, 239.
[7] Ibid, 233.
[8] Hayden, 133.

combat vehicles, ships, or armaments often provided "war workers'" housing.[9] Abraham Levitt and his sons capitalized on the notion of hastily built, low-price housing. It is not unreasonable to characterize the iconic company's practices as resourceful and, in some ways, unethical. Pushing additional costs onto local government institutions generated significant profits. "Physical infrastructure" was not constructed on the developer's budget.[10] Similar businesses reduced expenditures at every opportunity; to illustrate, homes were moved closer to the street to save on piping in Park Forest, Illinois, a Chicago suburb.[11] Urban-scale sewage disposal and trash removal were not planned for. Residents were financially burdened with these services as a consequence. The Levitt corporation hired non-unionized workers and de-skilled assembly labor to decrease wages. By incentivizing "subcontracting," the pace at which building could take place quickened, which meant that more homes could be sold to an ever-demanding public.[12] In the absence of stringent government regulation, these operating tactics were used recurrently.[13] Expense-cutting methods extended beyond the direct erection of homes. The Levitts controlled the price of economic inputs: growing their own timber and making their own concrete was incredibly economical.

By using "economies of scale," the Levitts were able to build quickly and cheaply.[14] However, the rapidity of their operations had ramifications. The homes built were lacking in artistic and architectural diversity. Miles of "identical" Cape Cods, among other styles, characterized the firm's plots.[15] Through homogenizing the style and systematizing construction, the cost of construction was slashed. Mass production lowered the firm's prices; the affordability appealed to middle class consumers. As expenses were minimized, the Levitts were free to charge less than otherwise possible. Besides large-scale building, a sweeping media campaign lured mid-twentieth century Americans from their urban dwellings to the uniformity of the suburbs. The Levitts' homes were highly publicized; televised commercials used suburban residences as settings when advertising products such as washing machines, refrigerators, and automobiles. In fact, homes for sale, such as those in Levittown, Pennsylvania, included many of these utilities—attracting further consumers. Appealing to the McCarthyist sentiment of the era, the Levitts publicly boasted that private homeownership was essential to preserving an individual, capitalist identity. These various explanations de-fog the complex origins of the postwar suburb.

As the suburb became a new phenomenon itself, a set of observable features and a unique nature mushroomed along with the settlement. One distinction is the "low-density pattern" of settlement.[16] The open land on which suburban residences were developed provided for reduced numbers of humans per square mile; this fact is a marked contrast from urban settlement tendencies. As a result of this openness, residential subdivisions form in "clusters."[17] Most often, these subdivisions adhere to single-purpose zoning codes that prohibit the mixed-use residential construction common in urban areas. As a result of land use policy, another feature of unchecked

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[9] Ibid, 130.
[10] Ibid, 146.
[11] Ibid, 146.
[12] Ibid, 134.
[13] Ibid, 136.
[14] Ibid, 132.
[15] Ibid, 134.
[16] Jackson, 239.
[17] Andres Duany, Jeff Speck, and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, *Suburban Nation: the Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), 5.

suburban growth emerges: sprawl. Single-use zoning inherently encourages sprawl. With the legal restrictions on commercial and residential building use being located in the same vicinity, commuter settlements must expand outward as more inhabitants and businesses arrive. The sprawling nature of suburbia erodes pedestrian friendliness; thus, the automobile became "a prerequisite to social" and economic "viability."[18] This pivotal trait of American fringe areas represents a critical departure from traditional town life. The town center, due to sprawl, the automobile, and single-use zoning, no longer exists in many suburban neighborhoods. Focusing on planning, suburban street patterns take on a curved and labyrinthine shape. Subsequently, walking immediately becomes an outmoded form of personal transportation.

To examine government planning laws more closely, single-use zoning has secondary homogenizing impacts. Zoning was a "device to keep poor people and obnoxious industries out of affluent areas."[19] Similar prohibitive statutes and restrictive covenants were put in place to purposefully exclude people of color from relocating to proliferating communities like Levittown, Long Island. Additionally, home sale practices like blockbusting, which depreciated real estate values, contributed to minorities' incapability to spread outward. Resulting from these discriminatory measures was drastic racial and economic homogeneity in suburbia. It is feasible to conclude that the highway system, in combination with penurious individuals' inability to afford cars, helped keep the suburbs isolated from diverse urban environments, too. At the time, de jure segregation policies were uncontroversial. In contemporary America, the diversification of the suburbs is a phenomenon that has yet to come to pass. The peripheral environments were damaging to women as well.[20] The far-flung location of suburban settlements limited access to employment opportunities for females.

Architecturally, the suburbs lacked much in respect to artistic expressionism. Because of the mass-production techniques that built postwar suburbia and a desire to reduce "design fees," most dwellings were exceedingly dull and lacked architectural variation.[21] The ranch home became the popularized style of residential construction in suburbia. Structurally, the one level ranch suggested "spacious living" and a bucolic lifestyle.[22] Practically, a single story house was convenient for mothers with many children. A street garage was an indispensable feature of the suburban house; without it, a home would be unsalable. The garage normally "projected farthest toward the street."[23] The garage also reflects the Levitts' and other developers' disregard for traditional town notions of pedestrian-oriented planning, in which walking is the optimal and encouraged mode of transportation. This building immediately planted the seed for the now dominant "drive-in" culture and rising sense of placelessness in the United States.[24] Edge settlements' livelihoods have been maintained from their conception through the presence of viable economic activity and sources of employment. Aided through the freeway system, suburban denizens were burdened with extensive commutes from the Levittown to the central city. Office parks became a distinct feature of suburbia, for the well-educated labor force was no longer close to the central business district. The office park was, indeed, another creation of single-use zoning laws. Similarly, suburban retail sales began to conglomerate as shopping centers due to the decline of the main streets. The widespread use of cars exacerbated this

[18] Ibid, 14.
[19] Jackson, 242.
[20] Ibid, 243.
[21] Ibid, 239.
[22] Ibid, 240.
[23] Ibid, 240.
[24] Ibid, 251.

process. Many planned suburban communities reserved lots for "the multiple-store shopping center" during their construction.[25] The distinguishing features of suburbia certainly separate it from all previous forms of human habitation.

The dull nature of suburbia has thundering consequences that have seriously altered the economic and cultural landscape of the United States. Sociologically, many contend that suburbia's distortion of public space, whereby the common green and pedestrian-encouraging planning are unincorporated into the Levittown, has led to "Nimbyism."[26] The diminished public realm can be described as fostering xenophobia and worsening homogeneity. On a related note, the suburban lifestyle was accompanied by the "isolation of nuclear families."[27] With a plethora of married couples moving towards the suburbs for the functioning school systems, safe environment, and wholesome milieu, many branching families suffered from estrangement. Restricting access to suburban communities deeply affected minorities and their opportunities for economic progress. Many suffered from immobility, for public transit declined; the highway system became the preferred transportation option. Impoverished racial minorities of the inner city were unable to purchase individual automobiles. As a result, poor urban dwellers remained within the declining central city. Following the outward migrations, business withdrew from the inner city. This exodus of employment opportunities left those unable to relocate from urban areas impecunious.

One can reasonably argue that the decay of the inner city in the United States is partly due to the growth of suburbia. The de-industrialization of regions with manufacturing industries and the flight from the central city decimated many areas, which have yet to rebound from their fall. The product of this exodus is a phenomenon many describe as the "centerless city."[28] Ironically, the bustling activity that was once in the city is still close. For example, prosperous Orange County, California is quite a flowering locality, just south and east of the rusting Los Angeles. To examine further, many businesses have been forced to move office sites to peripheral locations; certainly, the car and the highway system are much at fault. This action has simultaneously led to a balkanization of business departments. For a single firm, the "accounting" office might be in one area, while the "data-processing" office is in another.[29] This trend was particularly strong in Connecticut. Corporate office parks, a recent emergence due to single-use zoning, dot the landscape in West Hartford, Stamford, and Rocky Hill. The Fairfield County area subsequently has one of the highest per capita incomes along with the second highest wealth disparity statewide.

Suburbia is an artificial fabrication of mass-production, profit-drive, and uniformity. This style of peripheral living has ensnared the United States to the degree that its existence is seen as commonplace. Found both on the coasts and in the inland areas, its conception has potent repercussions that have undermined some and benefitted others. Notwithstanding personal opinion on the matter of suburban sprawl, these communities provide an opportunity for uncloaking suburbanization's hidden side that leads to the discussed effects. In the study of the origins, features, and consequences of suburbia, new avenues of discovering the powers that shaped architecture and planning in the post-war nation are taken.

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[25] Ibid, 258.
[26] Duany, 42.
[27] Jackson, 245.
[28] Ibid, 265.
[29] Ibid, 267.

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