

## Suburbia

Suburbia is as much a state of mind as it is a particular geographic location. Popular culture—especially movies and television but also books, novels and stories, even advertising—has cemented the image of a suburban lifestyle in the public consciousness as the embodiment of the American dream. But is this dream actually a nightmare? Since the 1950s, films have frequently depicted suburbs as outwardly pleasant places to live but regimented and stultifying yet spiced with unsavory outbreaks of promiscuity, vice, and violence.

Historians and social scientists have long debated the significance of the American suburb. Kenneth T. Jackson writes that "suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness" (4). But psychiatrist Bernard Gordon, in his study of Bergen County, New Jersey, sees another side of suburban living: "Why do we needle the typical American about his shiny mass-produced house and car, his manners and more? Possibly because he represents the great sad joke of our time. Having amassed a wealth that used to be the subject of fairy tales, he often finds that he isn't happy at all" (28). These two viewpoints—suburbia as the embodiment of American culture and suburbia

as a breeding ground for malaise and discontent—have characterized the debate over suburbia in America since the early twentieth century.

For many, the word "suburbs" evokes the post-World War II American phenomenon that started with tract housing developments such as Levittown. But although suburbs have actually existed for centuries, it was not until the advent of public transportation systems in the nineteenth century that it was convenient for people to live a significant distance from the city center—where business, industry, and cultural activities were located—and yet travel there on a regular, daily basis. Railroads were followed by the horse-drawn streetcar, the cable car, and the electric streetcar or "trolley" as means of opening up the land surrounding cities for settlement by those who would travel to work in the city, "commuters." The private automobile, which became affordable with the introduction of the Ford Model T in 1908, contributed to the spread of suburban communities (and eventually, the decline of public transportation), although it would be several decades before the nation's road system caught up to the huge increase in car ownership.

The growth of American suburbs was not driven solely by advances in transportation. Just because people *could* live outside the city did not mean they would *want* to live there. The suburban experience in the United States was also a function of factors such as the abundance of relatively cheap land, high wages, advances in home building design (which reduced the cost of construction), and the desire

to own a private, family home, which meant a detached house on a plot of land. Suburbs were perceived as clean, healthy, safe, and private, the opposite of overcrowded ghettos in the city.

The Depression and World War II temporarily slowed the construction of new homes and the production of private automobiles, but as soon as the war ended, the process of suburbanization resumed at an even greater rate. It was during this period that criticism of the suburbs began to be heard. Funds for public transportation were diverted to highways; the decline of America's city centers increased. Critics suggested that suburban living weakened the extended family by leaving housewives and children isolated during the day. Furthermore, the suburban lifestyle, though available to many more Americans than before, was still largely restricted to certain socioeconomic and racial segments of society.

Although suburbia is still the "quintessential physical achievement of the United States" (Jackson, 4), over the past several decades steps have been taken in an attempt to mitigate some of its problems. Intensive efforts have been made to revitalize some cities, and public transportation has regained some support for ecological and economic reasons. As the supply of cheap and available suburban land becomes exhausted, some predict a gradual return to city living for the middle class, as has occurred in Chicago, for example. However, although suburbs may change, they are unlikely to disappear.

### Early Film Images of Suburbia

Films with recognizably "suburban" themes and settings date back to the first decade of the century, in comedy shorts such as *The Suburbanite* (1904) and *The Suburbanite's Ingenious Alarm* (1908). The mechanics of suburban living—and its companion, the commute to work—figure in the plot of *The Commuters* (1915), which concerns businessmen who use the excuse that they are working late to stay in

the city and have a wild "boys' night out." Similarly, the depiction of "suburban sin"—so popular in novels and films of the 1950s and 1960s—may be found as early as *Let's Be Fashionable* (1920), which takes place in "the suburban community of Elmhurst, where it is considered fashionable for married couples to engage in harmless affairs" (American Film Institute, *F1*, 511).

The occasional use of suburbia as a setting or a plot device persisted into the 1930s, although few films seriously addressed the topic of suburbia and its impact on society. The plot of *The Night of June 13* (1932) involves a man whose wife committed suicide because she was jealous that he was riding to the commuter rail station with an attractive neighbor! In *Mama Runs Wild* (1938), a married couple moves to the "Paradise Park" development. The housewives try to shut down the local tavern, the men rebel, and eventually there is a *Lysistrata*-style war between the sexes. Although the protagonist of *Three Men on a Horse* (1936) lives in a "cookie-cutter sub-development" (American Film Institute, *F3*, 2199), his commute by bus does have one positive benefit: only on this daily trip to work can he unfailingly pick the winners of horse races.

Suburban life—despite its foibles—was by no means considered undesirable. Home ownership was still part of the American dream, although the Depression made buying a home of one's own more difficult to achieve. In 1939, the American Institute of Planners sponsored the production of a documentary film for the upcoming New York World's Fair. Documentary filmmaker Pare Lorentz wrote the script, based the ideas of urban planner and historian Lewis Mumford. The result was *The City* (1939), directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke. This film begins by lauding New England small towns: the sense of community, the convenience, the pleasant and healthy lifestyle. *The City* then illustrates the pitfalls of life in modern, overcrowded, dirty, and hectic industrialized cities. Acknowledging America's

inability to return to the bucolic pleasures of small-town life, the final section of the picture suggests the development of "green communities," where the advantages of small towns could be combined with the new industrial economy. The film calls for the construction of planned communities, utilizing modern technology and mass transit, as an alternative to decaying cities. In 1964, Lewis Mumford supervised the production of six new short films—made under the auspices of the Canadian Film Board—further examining the relationships between the city and society.

#### Suburbs in 1940s Hollywood

Although, as Robert Fishman notes "the two great symbols of postwar Los Angeles—the tract of endlessly repeated suburban houses and the freeway—were developed in the 1930s" (172), suburbia as a nationwide phenomenon, with its own media identity, is rooted in the years after World War II. "The boys came marching home in 1945 and 1946, produced babies, and looked for homes to house their families. Instant suburbs, thrown up by developers, without professional planning or architectural assistance, supplied the homes and the GIs moved in" (Donaldson, 39). Levittown, a name synonymous with tract housing developments, consisted of seventeen thousand homes on Long Island. At first, films and other forms of popular culture portrayed suburbanization as a positive move toward fulfillment of the American dream—to own a "piece of land." *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) illustrates this point: George Bailey's (James Stewart) goal as manager of a building and loan society is to help his fellow citizens buy homes in the "Bailey Park" subdivision. The happy homeowners can raise their children in clean, healthful surroundings, instead of renting sordid tenements from the sinister Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore).

Some films dealing with flight from the city to the suburbs eschew the stereotyped image of tract housing, choosing to depict their pro-

tagonists—usually for comic effect—trying to rehabilitate decrepit older homes. These films, even those set beyond the suburbs in truly rural areas, carry a double message. They reiterate the American desire for a private home outside the city; they also exaggerate some of the more mundane aspects of home ownership, such as repair and maintenance. As opposed to apartment dwellers whose maintenance needs are handled by various and sundry employees of the building's owner, suburban homeowners must emulate their pioneer ancestors and become members of the "do it yourself" fraternity, or rely on eccentric and unreliable outside contractors. An early example of this type of film is *George Washington Slept Here* (1942), in which Jack Benny and Ann Sheridan move from a New York City high-rise apartment to a rundown Pennsylvania farmhouse. *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948) has a similar premise, this time with Cary Grant and Myrna Loy as the urban refugees who move to the clean air of the suburbs, only to discover that their dream house is a wreck. As the influx of "home improvement" programs on television attest, the theme continues to be a topical one, and has served as the basis for such films as *The Money Pit* (1986) and *Life as a House* (2001).

#### The 1950s and 1960s: Suburbia for All

The names of housing developments, real and filmic, hint at the appeal of suburban living: Bailey Park, Paradise Park, Sunrise Hills, Elmhurst, Cuesta Verde. "The suburbanite tries to escape from the noisy dirty city to the lap of nature" (Donaldson, 55), or at least to some approximation of nature. The American belief in the nobility of the farmer had to be tempered with the realistic needs of everyday life, and, for most, the suburbs were a satisfactory compromise. Films critical of suburbia point out exactly how much "nature" most suburbanites encountered: in *Poltergeist* (1981), for example, the only tree visible in the entire de-

velopment is a huge, gnarled, dead specimen (which eventually comes to life and tries to swallow the family's son). Both *Poltergeist* and the much earlier *No Down Payment* (1957) show that the "piece of land" homeowners purchased was often so narrow that the next house was literally an arm's length away.

And yet, by the 1950s, suburban living had become a middle-class ideal: between 1934 and 1954, the population of the suburbs grew by 75 percent, while the total population of the United States increased by just 25 percent. It should be noted that both in real life and in popular culture, "suburbia" had a dichotomous meaning. There were upper-middle-class suburbs (Connecticut was the archetype), where well-paid executives and other white-collar workers lived, commuting each day to the metropolis by train. On the other hand were the massive Levittown-like subdivisions, populated by young families of more modest means, whose breadwinner often commuted by car to his job. Befitting their economic and social differences, the lives and problems of the residents of these two types of suburbs were depicted as quite dissimilar. The protagonist (Gregory Peck) of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), for example, is a war veteran living in a mortgaged home in Connecticut; however, his home and white-collar city job are distinctly superior to those of the veteran (Cameron Mitchell) living in tract housing in *No Down Payment* who manages a gas station and whose neighbors are salesmen, small businessmen, and the like.

Nonetheless, both types of suburbia were tarred with the same brush in popular culture, when the phenomenon was considered as the central theme of a novel or film. More often than not, suburban life was either ignored or used—generally without comment—as just one more setting in a film. Hollywood, particularly, found more excitement in exotic and urban locales than in the suburbs. In 1955, for example, at least 60 percent of Hollywood's



FIGURE 60. *No Down Payment* (1957). Glowing in the charms of suburban life in a new housing development in California, Jerry Flagg (Tony Randall, right) enjoys a drink with a neighbor as his wife (Sheree North) and the children play Monopoly. When the Flaggs face a monetary crisis that threatens their home, tragedy ripples throughout the community, taking the form of alcoholism, murder, and divorce. Courtesy Twentieth Century-Fox.

output absolutely excluded suburbia because most of the movies were period films (including westerns), took place in foreign locales, or were clearly restricted to specific urban or truly rural settings.

Television, on the other hand—and particularly the situation comedy—has long been a fertile source for images of suburbia. But it was not always so. The Kramdens and the Nortons in *The Honeymooners* lived in New York City apartments, as befitting the economic status of Ralph and Ed (bus driver and sewer worker, respectively). In *I Love Lucy*, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo also lived in a New York apartment, albeit a nicer one than the Kramdens'. However, in the last season of the series the Ricardos moved to the suburbs—not a Levittown tract house, of course, but an upscale Connecticut town. This new location provided new material for jokes, including gags about two quintessential suburban pastimes, lawn mowing and backyard barbecues.

*The Dick Van Dyke Show* featured an archetypal suburban situation: Rob Petrie lives in a detached house in New Rochelle, and commutes every day to his office in New York City.

Laura Petrie is a housewife and mother. Ironically, perhaps as part of an antisuburban backlash in popular culture, *That Girl's* protagonist moves from New Rochelle to New York City as the series opens (in 1966). Although situation comedy will never desert the suburbs entirely (TV's *The Simpsons* is proof of this), many popular shows of the past several decades—particularly those that do not center on a nuclear family in its home—have returned to city locations, including such productions as *Seinfeld*, *Friends*, and *Frasier*.

Films, TV shows, and books of the late 1950s dealing with the suburban phenomenon were almost universally critical of the "multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly at uniform distances . . . inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances . . . conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold" (Mumford, 486). *No Down Payment* focuses on four couples in the Sunrise Hills housing development. During the course of the film, rape, murder, alcoholism, racism, and divorce are all highlighted. *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) shows that young couples are not the only ones suffering from suburban angst: teenage children of the middle class, despite the nice homes they live in and the material goods bestowed upon them by their parents, are still rootless and prone to random acts of senseless violence and vandalism. Their parents discover that living in a detached house in a "nice neighborhood" is no substitute for the personal attention they are now too busy to give their children. James Dean became a symbol for a generation of Americans stifled by the materialism of this world.

The melodramatic, even lurid, topics of pictures like *No Down Payment* and *Rebel Without a Cause* are not that different from those portrayed in Hollywood's small towns (for example, *Peyton Place*, 1957). The setting makes the difference: implicit is the criticism that the suburban dream has a sinister lining. It is easy

to suggest that, in order to make an interesting film, Hollywood would naturally choose to "accentuate the negative," but the negative image of suburbia was not just a creation of popular culture: *The Split-Level Trap*, a 1960 sociological study, begins almost like a Stephen King novel: "What has been happening to these people? What is so terribly wrong, in this pretty green community?" (Gordon, 19).

In 1960s and 1970s cinema, suburbia seemed a little less like hell, but there were still many critical and satirical images in films such as *Bachelor in Paradise* (1961), in which travel writer Bob Hope is assigned to live in and study a suburb, another "exotic" location. As the only bachelor in the development of Paradise Valley, Hope's character is home all day and surrounded by curious housewives, leading to the expected comic romantic entanglements. Suburbia as a setting for illicit sex, a subtext of Frank Perry's excellent film *The Swimmer* (1968), gave rise to exploitation films such as *Sin in the Suburbs* (1962), *Suburban Roulette* (1968), and *Suburban Girls Club* (1968). All three of these films feature organized "sex clubs" that attempt to spice up the lives of bored suburbanites, especially housewives—a phenomenon of the 1960s and 1970s subtly critiqued, with fine use of period detail, in Ang Lee's *The Ice Storm* (1997).

However, the suburban state of mind was by now so ingrained that many films were set in suburbia without comment. As with television, the norm was now a detached house in suburbia, often larger and somewhat more luxurious than those in which the audience lived, but certainly, as Leslie Felperin writes, "instantly recognizable, with well-manicured lawns stretching a few tens of feet in front of tract houses, white convenience stores and lurid malls . . . anonymous locations with little presence in the films themselves. . . . Suburbia, constantly on our screens, is seldom allowed to convey the character, specificity and local identity that cinema allows cities and countryside alike" (15).

### The 1980s and 1990s: Suburban Hell

Criticism of the conformity of suburbia in the 1950s and 1960s did not come primarily from the counterculture of the day but rather from the intelligentsia. Starting in the late 1960s, the middle-class connotation of suburban living did draw the fire of rebellious youth, who (in theory, if not reality) rejected suburbia to live in rural communes and urban neighborhoods such as San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury and New York's Greenwich Village. As time went by, the pendulum swung back once more, and in the past several decades the liberal establishment—represented by Hollywood—has once again chosen suburbia as a target.

*Poltergeist* is one of the more barbed attacks, lightly camouflaged as a horror film. The California housing development of Cuesta Verde is depicted as a place where families can raise their children in nice homes (even though one prospective buyer complains "I can't tell one house from another"), but it is also sun-baked and mosquito-infested, and the homes are so close to one another that one man's TV remote control wreaks havoc on his neighbor's set. The real horror underlying Cuesta Verde is not revealed until the conclusion: the development was built over a cemetery, and the undead "residents" resent their new, living neighbors. Clearly, the film strives for a metaphor about the spiritual corruption underlying suburbia.

*Neighbors* (1981), based on a Thomas Berger novel, relates how the arrival of two unconventional neighbors disrupts the boring suburban life of Earl Keese (John Belushi). At film's end, Earl abandons his home and family—even setting his home on fire—and drives off to an undetermined destination with the bizarre Vic and Ramona (Dan Aykroyd and Cathy Moriarty), freed from the shackles of bourgeois conventionality.

Other idiosyncratic assaults on the suburban mythos include *Parents* (1989), which is set in the 1950s and opens with aerial shots of a housing development. The father in this film insists "We have to fit in" with the other res-

idents, which basically means not revealing his cannibalistic tendencies! *The 'Burbs* (1989) commences with an extended zoom-in on the Universal Studios globe corporate logo, down to mid-America, then down to an aerial shot of a specific area, winding closer and closer until it singles out Mayfield Place, a suburban neighborhood (albeit not tract housing: these are rather large Victorians) which is replete with eccentric neighbors surrounding the home of Ray Peterson (Tom Hanks). *Meet the Applegates* (1990) relates the adventures of a group of giant, intelligent insects who assume human form and try to "fit in" as a typical, middle-class suburban family. In the TV spin-off *The Coneheads* (1993), the pinheaded alien visitors do not even try to camouflage themselves as they go through the stereotypical actions of suburbanites. These films mock the conventional image of suburbia, showing that even aliens, cannibals, and giant insects can be assimilated into a *Father Knows Best*-style society. *Next Friday* (2000) contains an interesting variation on the Hollywood image of suburbia: Watts resident Craig (Ice Cube) is sent to live in Rancho Cucamonga with his uncle and cousin in order to avoid a vengeance-seeking gangster. The lily-white suburbs have become integrated, as the residents include whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, a phenomenon the comedy *Blast from the Past* (1999) has fun with as well.

*Pleasantville* (1998) goes a step further: although the television-show "universe" to which the film's two protagonists are transported is "perfect," its drab sterility enforces conformity and represses emotion among its inhabitants. As the two interlopers begin to affect the stultified world, the film changes from black and white to color. In *American Beauty* (1999), the ideal suburban lifestyle is revealed to be an empty shell. Although the film dwells on the sexual aspects rather excessively (infidelity, voyeurism, exhibitionism, repressed and open homosexuality, and the sexual attraction between a middle-aged man—played



by Kevin Spacey—and his teenage daughter's friend are just some of the plot devices), *American Beauty* is not merely an updated version of *Suburban Roulette*, but rather an examination of the empty lives led by some who outwardly seem to have obtained their piece of the "American dream."

#### Suburbia in the Magnifying Glass

In the words of Kenneth T. Jackson, "for those on the right, [suburbia] affirms that there is an 'American way of life' to which all citizens can aspire. To the left, the myth of suburbia has been a convenient way of attacking a wide variety of national problems, from excessive conformity to ecological destruction" (4). The image of suburbia in post-World War II popular films and television is just as contradictory. For five decades, Hollywood has been almost subliminally presenting the suburban lifestyle as the norm for middle-class America: the city is the domain of the rich, the poor, and young single professionals. Families live in detached houses in housing developments: children ride their bikes or skateboards, neighbors drop over for coffee and conversation, fathers leave

for work every morning and do yard work and have cookouts on the weekend. For the most part, this is the good life to which ordinary Americans aspire.

But Hollywood periodically chooses to hold up a magnifying glass to suburban life: neighbors are at best wacky and eccentric, and at worst psychotic, violent, and vengeful; home ownership condemns one to lifelong indebtedness and is fraught with the need for constant, back-breaking maintenance and expensive repairs; bored suburban housewives turn to extramarital affairs, alcohol, drugs, and even devil worship to shatter the monotony of their days. Children run wild, "hang out," drink alcohol and take drugs, participate in mindless sex and violence. Or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, residents of suburbia are stereotyped, identical plastic robots, creatures of a consumer-oriented middle-class society, incapable of independent thought or creativity.

None of these images is, of course, completely accurate. However, such a widely divergent group of images suggests that the concept of suburbia is still capable of provoking controversy even after so many years.

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*Bachelor in Paradise* (1961, F)  
*Blast from the Past* (1999, F)  
*Boys' Night Out* (1962, F)  
*The 'Burbs* (1989, F)  
*The City* (1939, D)  
*The Commuters* (1915, F)  
*The Coneheads* (1993, TV)  
*Edward Scissorhands* (1990, F)  
*George Washington Slept Here* (1942, F)  
*Good Neighbor Sam* (1964, F)  
*The Ice Storm* (1997, F)  
*It's a Wonderful Life* (1946, F)  
*Let's Be Fashionable* (1920, F)  
*Life as a House* (2001, F)  
*Mama Runs Wild* (1938, F)  
*The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956, F)  
*Meet the Applegates* (1990, F)  
*The Money Pit* (1986, F)

*Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948, F)  
*Neighbors* (1981, F)  
*Next Friday* (2000, F)  
*The Night of June 13* (1932, F)  
*No Down Payment* (1957, F)  
*Parents* (1989, F)  
*Peyton Place* (1957, F)  
*Pleasantville* (1998, F)  
*Poltergeist* (1981, F)  
*Rebel Without a Cause* (1955, F)  
*Sin in the Suburbs* (1962, F)  
*Suburban Girls Club* (1968, F)  
*The Suburbanite* (1904, F)  
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