

Liminality and the Triple Dream: Streetcar and Post-War Suburbs

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The built landscapes that developed across American time and place are among the most significant resources of social history. Dell Upton has referred to architecture as an art of this sort of social storytelling. With Upton in mind, suburbs become a particular landscape of interest because of their place between the city and country, the rich and the poor. As liminal vernacular landscapes, both streetcar and post-war 'sitcom' suburban developments represent the built manifestations of the desire for home-ownership and social well-being by the working and middle class of America.

The suburban communities that developed on the fringe of American cities after the advent of public transportation systems demonstrate the desire of ordinary citizens for a house, land, and a community - what Dolores Hayden refers to as the triple dream (see figure 1). In these communities, a pattern of development around a central streetcar artery to the economic hub of the city emerged, and homes radiating from this center were divided into spheres of individuality-minded architecture (see figure 2). These environments developed out of two factors. First was the desire to move outward from the cities as they became increasingly crowded due to influxes of southern and central Europeans during the nineteenth century. Dolores Hayden describes, "rough wooden wagons jostled elegant horse-drawn carriages in muddy streets strewn with filth and rubbish...One by one, American middle class families chose to reside at the edge of the city." [1] Overcrowding lead to less than desirable conditions for the middle and upper class, and thus gave rise to the picturesque enclaves of Llewellyn Park and its counterparts. However, the distance from the city and high costs of living in these enclaves deterred most of the working and middle class. Still desiring the triple dream, a gap was opened for a new two-part city that would allow suburbs to be within reach of lower social strata.

Streetcars themselves are the second factor to develop the streetcar suburb. The introduction of the streetcar in the 1880s was rapidly embraced by most cities and solved the problem of suburban enclaves

being too far from the city to be feasible for the working and middle class. According to Gwendolyn Wright, "the suburban expansion of the period depended directly and indirectly on many different forms of technological innovation. The suburbs of the 1870s had been constrained by the public transportation networks." [2] With the technological innovation of the streetcar, development could be explored outside of the boundaries of the city and provide the alternative, suburban landscape wanted by the middle class.

With the desire for affordable housing and the accessibility of public transit, the streetcar suburb landscape was shaped architecturally. Taxpayer blocks materialized as a temporary means of attracting citizens exploring on the new transportation lines, earning their owners enough income to pay their taxes. These blocks were typically single story, indistinctive, multi-shop units, which is reflexive of their temporary, economically-motivated nature. These blocks fronted the streetcar line, shaping the suburbs into linear landscapes (see figure 2), and provided a community and commodity center around which citizens settled. The housing developed set back from the trolley line and taxpayer blocks, and consisted of single, double, and triple family homes. Architecturally, the homes were indistinct, "a sentimental Victorian hodgepodge of borrowed forms." [3] This is demonstrative of the architecture being planned around affordability, rather than the superfluity of the earlier, picturesque suburban architecture. Floor plans reveal horizontal division, separating multi-family units into individual spheres of home-ownership. Despite the possibility of another family living upstairs, these architectural forms allowed for the sense of individual home-ownership on a widely accessible scale. Homes within the streetcar suburbs provided the triple dream for liminal Americans in desirous of the idealized life in a liminal zone.

The commodification and reproduction of streetcar suburbs indicates their ability to allow working and middle class Americans play out the triple dream. Businessmen such as Samuel Eberly Gross capitalized on this desire of the middle class, offering cheap housing and payment plans to allow anyone the chance at a home, land, and community. Wright evidences this, stating, "Chicago's Samuel Eberly Gross completed forty thousand lots, developed sixteen towns and 150 subdivisions, built and sold over seven thousand houses, all between 1880 and 1892." [4] Soon, communities such as Grossdale, IL, Chevy Chase, MD, and Brighton, MA were all extant within the streetcar

suburb landscape. The success of these communities was directly related to their easy access via streetcar, but also by the rise of simple, available, and affordable housing around these streetcars that allowed working and middle class Americans to fulfill a desire for the triple dream.

The suburban communities that developed after World War II represent that same attempt as streetcar suburbs to fulfill the dream of home ownership, land, and community. In these vernacular landscapes, however, the single family home came to dominate, unlike the multi family homes of the streetcar suburbs. Its architectural pattern is also similar yet unique to that of the streetcar suburbs, in that it continues on the commodification introduced by Eberly and his colleagues but on an entirely grander scale. When World War II commenced, resources were deployed for the military, leaving nearly nothing for housing development. Despite many working and middle class Americans having stable jobs in the war-time economy, housing supply was low and demand surged. By 1947, discussions were to sort out this new housing crisis. Out of the hearings came the idea of government-subsidized private development, which would provide Federal Housing Administration Loans and Veterans Housing Administration Loans. Hayden posits, American suburbs of the post-World War II era were shaped by legislative processes reflecting the power of the real estate, banking, and construction sectors, and the relative weakness of planning and design professions.” [5] It was with loans that white Americans were able to pour money into housing development and the post-war ‘sitcom’ suburb was shaped.

Post-war suburbs are indicative of their era, much like streetcar suburbs. Whereas streetcar suburbs centered upon and were spurred by immigration concerns and the technological innovation of the electric streetcar, post-war suburbs centered upon and were spurred by assembly-line mass production and economic growth and complexity. With federal money flowing into housing development, construction development firms such as William Levitt’s were able to standardize and mass-produce housing. Hayden explains that “The postwar suburbs were constructed at great speed, but they were deliberately planned to maximize consumption of mass-produced goods and minimize the responsibility of the developers to create public spaces and public services.” [6] These houses became cheap to produce as these developers bought out industries they worked with vertically, and made it

possible for even semi-skilled laborers to construct a house. This assembly line approach is reflected in the architectural styles of these post-war suburbs. The houses in communities such as Levittown are indistinguishable, on small plots of land with small yards. Developers would produce varying styles of home design one could choose from, but all remained dulled and standardized sketches of vernacular forms such as the Cape Cod home (see figure 3).

Post-war suburbs were built with automobiles in mind as the only mode of transportation, and were built around a taxpayer-funded infrastructure. In the mid-20th century, “Families moved into a culture of consumption and became dependent on cars.” [7] The automobile effectively defined the post-war suburban developments. Architecturally, each house had a driveway and a paved road leading to and from a major highway artery or city; malls developed as an economic and community center accessible only by automobile. Socially, automobiles excluded the poorer working class of the city, and defined the space as wholly a middle class effort to achieving the triple dream; they confined malls to a patron-ship made only of middle-class suburbanites able to afford an automobile and mortgaged home. This is a departure from the streetcar suburbs, which, due to their proximity to the city and foundation upon public infrastructure, allowed for a wider inclusion of strata seeking the dream of home-ownership in the idealized suburban environment.

Differences do persist between the streetcar suburbs and the post-war sitcom suburbs. In regards to infrastructure, streetcar suburbs relied entirely on the centralized transit line; the street shaped these landscapes physically and socially. Linearity, flanking taxpayer blocks, and variable affordability of housing are demonstrative to this end. In the post-war suburbs, the emphasis was instead on the automobile. This reliance dictated the architectural development of homes with driveways and garages, but also highway systems and shopping malls with massive parking lots. Additionally, the landscape of the post-war suburb was made possible only by the government loans that had been introduced, whereas the streetcar suburbs had not. In regards to the social aspect of these landscapes, post-war suburbs were more homogenized due to the racist predilections in loan criteria. Because these developments were made possible only by government loans and were characterized by the single family home, the triple dream was more restricted than it had been in the streetcar suburbs. Hayden agrees, stating that

"Racial segregation...was now enforced by government loan policies and local bankers' red-lining...Compared to the streetcar suburbs, sitcom suburbs offered far less flexibility about multiple units and family types." [8] The landscape of the post-war sitcom suburbs was more homogenized, socially and architecturally.

Despite their differences, these two landscapes trend more toward sharing many similarities. Both were made possible through the rise of technological innovation. For the streetcar suburbs, it was public transportation. For the post-war suburbs, it was the mass availability of automobiles. Housing architecture in both landscapes was based on a muted vernacular, but designed to maintain individual spheres. In the streetcar suburbs, this was achieved through horizontally divided spaces in multi-family homes and the attempt to make houses appear to be single family homes from the facade. In the post-war suburbs, this was achieved through 'cookie cutter' choices that allowed choices of differentiated housing. Both landscapes became dominated by large-scale private development, which indicates their popularity through this reproduction. All of these similarities, however, point towards the largest parallel of the two landscapes, which is the story they reveal socially. The individuality implicit in the architecture of the landscapes demonstrates that streetcar and post-war suburbs arose as a way for working and middle class Americans to move away from congested cities and own their own house within a like-minded community. These suburbs were designed as a more affordable alternative to the enclave suburbs of the higher class but wanting more than the tenements of the city, and arose from the desire for Hayden's triple dream.

Both the streetcar and post-war sitcom suburbs reflect the desires of their inhabitants, when investigated under a critical scope. Through their architectural forms, their infrastructures, and the people who resided in them, these landscapes speak to the social underpinnings that created the need for their formation. In this manner, both suburban forms represent the desire for a home, land, and community by the working and middle class of America.



Figure 1. This advertisement from General Electric promotes the trolley as "transforming the conditions of city life". It speaks to the possibility of attaining the triple dream, made available by suburbanization. ("Enter Suburbs, Exit Slums", General Electric Company, 1932)



Figure 2. This advertisement for the streetcar suburb of Gross Park demonstrates the centrality of the streetcar line to the development of the landscape. Taxpayer blocks fronted the trolley line, and single and multi-family houses were set back from the noise of the street. ("Outside Fire Limits, You Can Build Wooden Houses", State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1885)



Figure 3. These two renderings of Levittown house designs demonstrate the minor variations homeowners could buy. The designs are rooted in Cape Cod style, but designed on an impersonal scale that loses the style's context. (Sketches of Cape Cod houses at Levittown, Nassau County Museum Collection, unknown date)

References

- [1] Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (Knopf: 2003), 21.
- [2] Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing America* (MIT Press: 1983), 103.
- [3] Hayden, 78.
- [4] Wright, 100.
- [5] Hayden, 151.
- [6] Hayden, 128.
- [7] Hayden, 147.
- [8] Hayden, 147.

"It is here the romance of my life began": The Construction of Frontier Masculinity in Late-Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century America

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"It is here the romance of my life began," wrote Theodore Roosevelt in reference to the American West (qtd. in Jenkinson 5)[1]. The West certainly has held a special place in American history, especially for men. As the nineteenth century transitioned into the twentieth century, a variety of historical developments, including industrialization, immigration, and the close of the frontier, all contributed to a sense of anxiety felt by many white, American men about their manhood. As such, this period, specifically 1880 to 1910, serves as a useful place to investigate frontier masculinity. I argue that a series of lionized cultural products—including a promotional poster for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, a bronze sculpture by Frederic Remington, and a political speech given by Theodore Roosevelt—all conveyed a popular portrayal of the ideal, white American frontiersman [2]. This ideal representation was defined by a man's horsemanship, his shooting ability, and his toilsome, yet fulfilling labor. However, other expressions of masculinity existed on the frontier. From Theodore Roosevelt's journal recordings, Henry Flipper's accomplishments as a black frontiersman, and Owen Wister's homoerotic references in *The Virginian*, I construct a counter-archive that challenges the dominant portrayal of the ideal frontiersman [3].

The archive and counter-archive I have constructed for the purposes of this paper are not

intended as fixed categories of frontier masculinity. Instead, they demonstrate that masculinity was constantly negotiable at the turn of the nineteenth century. At times, the examples in each archive appear paradoxical, which further demonstrates that western masculinity defied rigid classifications. Furthermore, the archive and counter-archive created here are not intended to be an exhaustive portrayal of western masculinity. Instead, they seek to highlight various representations of late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century masculinity, in order to promote dialogue on the subject, not only for scholars, but also for the general public.

In order to enhance the legibility and navigability of this analysis, I have divided the paper into five main sections: Part I explains the methodology and theory used throughout this paper along with the selection criteria used to determine the cultural products present in this study. Part II illuminates the historical context surrounding American men's understanding of their masculinity at the turn of the century. Part III introduces the three cultural products in my archive, while Part IV presents the three examples in the counter-archive. Part V articulates the conclusions of this analysis.

PART I: Methodology

My thesis relies on an interdisciplinary approach to interpret cultural and historical artifacts. Three disciplines, in particular, influenced my research: "new western history," gender studies, and performance theory. First, new western history emerged in the late 1990s and challenged the dominant narrative of white men conquering native savages. It investigated the experiences of other westerners, especially women and people of color (Butler and Lansing 7). Similarly, I investigate the excluded representations of frontier masculinity and compare them to dominant portrayals of the ideal westerner.

Second, I draw on gender studies to examine how men constructed their masculine identities. For the context of this work, gender is not an inherent feature of the body (Rico 11). Instead, gender is always constructed (Rico 11). As Judith Butler states, "gender is always a doing" (qtd. in Rico 11). Judith Kegan Gardiner believes that the construction of a masculine identity is a "nostalgic formation, always missing, lost, or about to be lost, its ideal form located in a past that advances with each generation in order to recede just beyond its grasp" (qtd. in Rico 12). Michael Kimmel elaborates on Gardiner's claim, writing, "we tend to search for the