Reconsidering the Suburbs: 
An Exploration 
of Suburban Historiography

IN THE SPRING OF 1987, a group of museum administrators and their counterparts at historic houses and villages gathered at the Strong Museum in Rochester, New York, for a workshop on the interpretation of the history of home and family. One of them commented, more or less in jest, that soon museum interpreters would be turning their attention to the first Levittown, where they would seek a house from which they could strip away the "improvements" in order to restore it to its original 1947 condition. Guides would give tours, dressed in period costumes, and museum educators would design "living history" tableaux. The idea seemed fanciful then, but a month later Hofstra University, located on Long Island near that same Levittown, marked the suburb's fortieth anniversary with a conference. Scholars and policy-makers gathered to analyze the suburbs of post-World War II America. When a local museum official confessed a desire to restore one of the early Levittown houses, hardly anyone smiled. The idea seemed perfectly credible. Urban intellectuals may raise their eyebrows, but it is not so farfetched to think that Levittown, or a community like it, might become the Colonial Williamsburg of the twenty-second century. After all, in our own century, the suburbanite has become the American archetype, much as the farming villager was in the colonial period.

According to the 1980 census, about forty percent—a larger group than live either in cities or small towns—of all Americans reside in suburbs. Because the United States at this historical moment appears

1 At the Hofstra Conference suggestive papers included Jenni Buhr, "Levittown as Utopian Community"; Hugh Wilson, "The Family in Suburbia: From Familism to Pluralism"; and Michael Fifield, "Transitional Spaces: Design Considerations for a New Generation of Housing." Barbara Kelly of the Long Island Studies Institute directed the conference; inquiries about the papers should be directed to her. The workshop on the Interpretation of Home and Family was conducted by the American Association of State and Local History at the Strong Museum on April 26 through 30, 1987.
to be a suburban nation, Americans tend to view their suburbs from a contemporary lens. Such a view can blur the historical perspective. While the suburbs of the 1980s differ spatially, demographically, and economically from their counterparts in earlier periods, their development has been part of an important historical process that began (at the latest) in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Although suburbanization is nearly two centuries old, the interest of historians in it is much more recent, dating only to the 1970s, with the exception of isolated examples. Historians have come to recognize that the suburban experience is central to an understanding of America’s urban past as a whole. For Philadelphia, it is perhaps even more so, but Philadelphia is a city whose historians have not shown a great interest in the suburbs, preferring to concentrate on the city itself.

This essay is one historian’s exploration of suburban historiography, as it has developed and as it might become, both nationally and locally. Although social observers and policy-makers began to comment on the growth of suburbs as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, Adna Weber’s analysis of suburbanization in *The Growth of Cities* was probably the first attempt to put the phenomenon under a scholarly microscope. Weber took an all-too-brief look; in spite of the long-term popular interest in suburbs, it was not until the 1920s that social-scientific analyses of the impact of suburbanization appeared. In *The Suburban Trend*, Harlan Douglass, influenced by urban ecology, which at that time served as the principal explanatory model for urban development, discussed a variety of suburban forms in this pioneering work. Like the planners of his generation, Douglass viewed properly designed suburbs as the solution to the problems of urban congestion, although he was not unmindful of potential problems.²

A second important early suburban work, foreshadowing the case studies that later became so popular in the 1950s, was George Lund-

berg's *Leisure*, an analysis of the work and recreational patterns of Westchester County, New York. Lundberg gathered together a team of young sociologists in the late 1920s and early 1930s to produce the first detailed study of suburban life. Although its principal interest was suburban leisure, the Lundberg group produced an impressive array of data on family life, occupational patterns, community organization, and adolescent behavior. The book remains an important source for understanding both the lure and the limitations of suburban life in the twenties and early thirties. Its minute examination of the daily lives of suburbanites provides today's readers with a sense of suburban satisfactions and disappointments, while its overall analysis confirmed the then current view that suburbanites chose their way of life because of its ties to nature and its presumed ability to preserve traditional family life.  

The Lundberg group finished *Leisure* as the Great Depression began to affect America's upper middle class. (It had already devastated blue-collar workers and the lower middle class.) The book was published in 1934, when social scientists had weightier matters on their minds than how suburban families spent their time. Not until after the depression and the war would they turn their attention to the suburbs again, and by then explosive growth had made suburbia seem to be a new phenomenon. The advent of assembly-line construction, pioneered by the Levitt brothers, and the housing demands brought on by wartime shortages were abetted by the federal mortgage subsidies—the Federal Housing Administration and the Veteran's Administration had made financing suburban housing, for white Americans, easier than renting—and resulted in the late 1940s and early 1950s in massive residential construction on the outskirts of most American cities.

The sheer magnitude of new suburban construction by itself was enough to fuel interest. But suburbia also served as a symbol, and thereby provided an opportunity for social comment by all shades of the political spectrum. At one end were so-called traditionalists, who had grudgingly tolerated as a temporary necessity the idea of women taking on wartime employment and enjoying wages nearly equal to

---

those of men, but who never accepted the idea that women's place might change permanently. At war's end, when many women refused to leave their jobs, employers forced them out; and there was a flurry of films, books, and articles expressing fears of deleterious long-term effects of women's wartime employment. As the new suburbs filled with growing families, these traditionalists could breathe a collective sigh of relief.

At the other end of the spectrum were the "cosmopolitan" critics of American conservatism in the 1950s, who found in suburbia an arresting symbol of conformity. Consider, for example, the images in Malvina Reynolds's suburban song, "Little Boxes":

Little Boxes on the hillside,
Little boxes made of ticky-tacky.
Little boxes, little boxes,
Little boxes all the same.

Reynolds believed that the people who chose to live in such houses were alike as well; others agreed. "Little Boxes" might have been written expressly for the fictional John and Mary Drone, the hapless suburban couple in John Keats's heavy-handed satire *The Crack in the Picture Window*. Keats blasted the suburbs and the people who lived in them for what he considered their mindless conformity. We might dismiss his work as journalistic or fictional hyperbole, but even serious analysts demonstrated a tendency to believe that the post-World War II generation consisted of dull, conventional men and their equally boring families. The Drone family surely were not representative suburbanites; nevertheless, they had their counterparts in the "organization men" of William Whyte's scholarly attempt at understanding suburbia, men who lived for the corporation and had little individual identity beyond it.

---


5 John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston, 1956). This book has its amusing moments, but its intent is deadly serious. Keats believed that "the dwelling shapes the dweller," which is architectural determinism at its most severe. William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York, 1956), made a similar point, arguing that the corporation and the men (then the corporate world was a male world) who served it had destroyed
As irresistible as such images were, they did not do justice to the complexity of the post-World War II suburban process. Other works appeared that presented the suburbs as more complex entities. William Dobriner’s 1958 volume, *The Suburban Community*, offered readers a sophisticated range of suburban analyses; indeed, this book remains a comprehensive introduction to the state of suburban scholarship during that decade. Sociologists and political scientists had now begun to develop a less antagonistic view of suburbs and the people who lived in them.

The 1960s brought two of the most sophisticated examples of the new approach—Bennett Berger’s *Working Class Suburb* and Herbert Gans’s *Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community*. (This was not the original Levittown, but the third, near Philadelphia in New Jersey. Its residents later rejected the name of Levittown and voted to rechristen the community with its original name, Willingboro.) Berger’s book was the first to examine the lives of working-class suburbanites, and contained a chapter debunking what its author called the “myth” of suburbia. *The Levittowners*, now some twenty years after its original publication, remains one of the most sophisticated commentaries on suburban life to date. Sympathetic yet keenly observant, Gans argued that Levittown and suburbs like it, while not without their problems, satisfied their residents. Critics of the suburbs, he suggested, were attempting to foist their own cosmopolitan values on others; rather than halt suburban growth, Gans wanted to open it up to those who had heretofore been excluded—the poor and racial minorities. And Scott Donaldson, in *The Suburban Myth*, defended the suburbs and portrayed the critics of suburban life, interestingly enough, as frustrated Jeffersonian agrarians.  

---


The sociologists and political scientists of the 1950s and early 1960s who explored the territory of suburban America did so because of their interest in the policy implications of the creation of hundreds of thousands of new communities beyond the reach of urban taxing power and apparently insulated from the problems that beset America's cities. Much of their work suggested that suburbanization was a new process, but although the magnitude of suburban growth surpassed anything that had gone before, suburbs had been around for a long time.

In Adna Weber's view, city and suburb were complementary, the former providing economic opportunity, and the latter offering an environment which allowed for some respite from the ceaseless demands of commerce and industry. By the twenties, however, to some extent in the work of Douglass but expressed most clearly in Leisure, there emerged a sense that the suburb, while still connected to the city, housed people with different "psychologies," to use Lundberg's term, and with attitudes about family and community life that distinguished them from urbanites. And by the 1950s, suburbs and cities had become antagonists in the eyes of many observers. Partly this was a matter of politics, for an essential ingredient of those suburbs of the immediate post-World War II period was their political separation from the city. With their own governments, suburbanites perceived themselves as increasingly separated from urban Americans. These differing perceptions of the suburbs raise important definitional questions. For the social scientists, who studied the suburbs of their own "present," the suburb seemed fixed in its existing social and spatial dimensions. In the 1950s, the high water mark of suburban studies among sociologists and political scientists, one essential ingredient of a suburb was its political separation from the city, because these particular suburbs did possess their own governments.

For historians, as they began to analyze the changing characteristics of suburbs over time, questions of definition would become more

---

difficult. Sam Bass Warner may not have been the first historian to discover the suburbs of the late nineteenth century, but his *Streetcar Suburbs*, published in 1962, was the first major historical analysis of suburbanization in the United States. Focusing on the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, *Streetcar Suburbs* analyzed three communities within Boston that were transformed from outlying villages, became middle-class residential suburbs, and were annexed by Boston. In Warner's view, transportation technology spurred suburban growth. Political independence was not a real issue; indeed, these communities were both inside Boston and distinctly suburban. Not political separation, but class segregation and community fragmentation were the chief consequences of suburbanization. Warner's work was much admired in the United States, but little imitated. Although in England H.J. Dyos and his colleagues were investigating urban and suburban processes along similar lines, *Streetcar Suburbs* stood alone in the United States throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.8

Warner's study pointed to some of the definitional issues confronting historians. For example, can there be suburbs within cities, or must they be separate political entities? Must a community be predominantly residential in order to be called a suburb? Are there essential economic and cultural dimensions? Finally, such issues must for historians be answered in a temporal context. How does our understanding of what a suburb is change over time? In what essential ways, for example, does suburbanization mean something different for the 1890s, the 1920s, or the 1950s?

Unfortunately, there are no uniformly satisfactory answers to these questions. For the political historian or sociologist, suburbs are interesting because of the political dilemmas brought on by separation. Annexation battles and metropolitan fragmentation are the staple fare of such scholars.9 But for social and cultural historians, political bound-

---


9 Historical analysis of the politics of the suburbs also must include Kenneth Jackson, *The Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985), about which more later, particularly chapters 8, 11, and 12. See also Jon Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City* (Baltimore, 1986), especially chapters 3 and 6. Joel Schwartz has done interesting work on suburban politics during the Progressive era. See, for example, his "Suburban Progressivism in the 1890s: The Policy of Containment in Orange, East Orange, and Montclair," in Joel Schwartz and Daniel Prosser, eds., *Cities of the Garden State: Essays in the Urban and Suburban History of New Jersey* (Dubuque, 1977), 53-72.
aries are of less importance. Density, land-use, cultural and economic relationships to the urban core, and patterns of social interaction are all far more important. The foremost scholars of suburban America—historians Sam Bass Warner and Kenneth Jackson, and planner Herbert Gans—have all suggested elastic, but not shapeless, definitions of the suburbs. A single theme, however, runs throughout the vast majority of historical definitions of the suburb (as opposed to contemporary definitions): until the post-World War II period, and for most scholars until the 1970s, suburbs were viewed as distinctly residential in character. In this regard, perhaps the most usable is Jackson's "working definition of suburbs," which includes "function (non-farm residential), class (middle and upper status), separation (a daily journey to work), and density (low relative to older sections)."\(^\text{10}\) Such a definition leaves room for change—a suburb in 1850 may have become part of the inner city by 1950—and it encompasses social, economic, and geographic elements. Significantly, it omits the idea of political separation from the core city. This is as it should be; for most of this country's history, suburbs either began as, or became, governmentally connected to the city. Annexation was a potent factor for cities and their suburbs until the end of the nineteenth century, and in the South and Southwest remained so through the 1960s.

Perhaps the best work on the complicated history of annexation and consolidation is Jon Teaford's *City and Suburb*, which deftly chronicles the difficulties that ensued from the simultaneous—and often conflicting—desires of suburban Americans to enjoy the benefits of both organized metropolitan government and local control. In the late nineteenth century, when suburbanites wanted paved streets and city water, they often opted to join the city; by the early twentieth century, particularly in the East and Midwest, they tended to resist annexation. But as Teaford demonstrates, it would be a mistake to view this process as a "simple two-sided duel with all of suburbia allied in defense of its privileged position against the attacks of its irreconcilable enemy, the central city."\(^\text{11}\)

Published in 1979, Teaford's book was one of a number of new

---

\(^{10}\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 11.

\(^{11}\) The best analysis of annexation is Jon C. Teaford, *City and Suburb: The Political Fragmentation of Metropolitan America* (Baltimore, 1979). The quotation is from p. 3.
works on suburbs by historians. Just three years before its publication, the first "reader" in suburban history appeared: Philip Dolce's *Suburbia: The American Dream and Dilemma*. Included in that volume was an article by Kenneth Jackson, who was rapidly becoming the foremost authority on the American suburbanization process in the United States. Jackson, like most of the historians who had become interested in suburbanization, was an urban historian. For him, one of the largest themes of urban history involved the decentralization, and eventual deconcentration, of nineteenth-century cities. His intellectual territory included the demographic, political, and socio-economic dimensions of suburban development. The appearance of his summary work in 1985, *Crabgrass Frontier*, culminated more than a decade of influential articles and papers mapping out the terrain of suburban history.12

The period beginning in the mid-1970s and continuing until the present has witnessed a significant increase in the number of historical accounts of suburbanization. A major theme of such work, especially that published in the *Journal of Urban History*, has emphasized the influence of technology on the creation of suburban America. While one cannot generalize from the *Journal* to the state of urban or suburban history as a whole, it seems significant to note that the scholars whose work has appeared there have argued that the best way to understand suburbanization was through quantitative demographic analyses or through probing the connections between suburbanization and technological change.13 We should not infer from such


13 The *Journal of Urban History*, interestingly enough, between 1974 (the year it began) and 1986, published only four articles explicitly about suburbanization. Two of them focused on demographic issues, and two on technology. Besides these, there were two review essays on suburban history. The journal did not publish a special issue on suburbanization until May 1987. The relative scarcity of articles, until now, suggests that urban historians have only recently begun to think of the suburbs as a separate field of investigation. The journal’s choice of topics for special issues through 1986 confirms this view; there were special issues on "Immigrant Women and the City," on "Immigrants and Workers in European and
studies that urban historians have provided a simplistic analysis of the relationship between a technological innovation—for example, streetcar electrification, or the automobile—and suburban development. Peter W. Moore, to illustrate, insisted in a sophisticated argument that transportation technology in Toronto “did not lead to development as much as respond to it.” And Joel Tarr, in his introduction to the special issue on technology of the *Journal of Urban History* in 1979, reminded readers that “the extent to which technology is an autonomous force, and the nature of its impact, both intended and unintended, are critical questions.”

Related both to technology and politics, but in some ways a separate question, is the extent of the importance of planners in creating suburban America. Joseph Arnold’s prescient book, *The New Deal in the Suburbs*, published in 1971, demonstrated the extent to which many planners believed that the way to solve the problems of the cities was to create new communities in the suburbs on the model of Ebenezer Howard’s Garden City plan. The idea of using the federal government to subsidize suburban housing was not an entirely new one. Franklin K. Lane, Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of the Interior, had suggested it at the end of World War I, but neither the president nor Congress showed much enthusiasm. During the depression, however, it began to seem politically conceivable. Rexford Tugwell, head of the Resettlement Administration, envisioned the creation of three thousand “greenbelt” towns to house both urban dwellers who wished to escape the slums and rural Americans who were driven off the farm. The president cut the number to twenty-five, and Congress eventually to three. The ideas of the planners fell into the maw of

American Cities,” on the “Early Years of Public Housing,” and “Technology and the City.” The technology issue, in May 1979, did, however, have a great deal to say about the suburbs within the various articles; it focused on technology as a way to understand suburbanization. A kind reader of this essay wanted me to make it clear that one should not generalize about the state of urban history from one journal, since what an editor publishes is often just a reflection of what is submitted. True enough; still, “submitters” generally take their cues about what might be acceptable to a journal from the kinds of articles it publishes. So, at least to some extent the kinds of articles that appear in a particular journal reflect what the editors believe are important contributions to the field.

the political process, and the towns in the end grew to be more like typical middle-class suburbs than a new kind of community. Arnold’s analysis is at its best in showing the limits of planning in a democratic society. (Catherine Bauer, one of the frustrated planners of the thirties, would have said the fate of the greenbelt towns showed the limits of planning in a capitalist society, but Arnold makes a different argument.)

Arnold’s work considers the role of the federal government in community planning, but suburban history needs more work on planning in general. Within the next months we can look forward to Gail Radford’s dissertation on reform housing in the twentieth century, and recently, in separate studies, Mark Foster and Daniel Shaffer have looked at suburban planning. As Foster has suggested in From Streetcar to Superhighway, in the 1920s “the overwhelming majority of urban planners gave up visions of reconstructing urban cores . . . , opting instead to exercise their creativity by shaping suburban environments.” Some of the most influential planners in this period were organized in the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA). Daniel Shaffer has studied Radburn, New Jersey, which was designed by two moving spirits of the RPAA, Clarence Stein and Henry Wright. With its superblocks, careful separation of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and houses that faced onto a large and lovely park, Radburn’s design was intended to create, in Shaffer’s words, “a physical and social landscape that would focus on the family, and especially the child.” According to housing critic Catherine Bauer, Radburn was the “first American attempt to build a complete pre-

---

15 Joseph Arnold, The New Deal in the Suburbs (Columbus, 1971). Arnold did, however, suggest that there are limitations, in a democracy, on how far planners can go. The best introduction to the work of the founder of the Garden City idea, Ebenezer Howard, is Robert Fishman, Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Le Corbusier (New York, 1977). For Catherine Bauer’s views, see Bauer, Modern Housing (Boston, 1934). Franklin K. Lane is quoted in William Smythe, City Homes on Country Lanes (New York, 1921), 66-67. There is a new book out on one of the greenbelt towns, Arnold Alanen and Joseph Eden, Main Street Ready Made, published by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin in 1987, which did not arrive in time to be included in this article.

16 Mark Foster, From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940 (Philadelphia, 1981), 65. Gail Radford is writing her dissertation at Columbia University under the direction of Kenneth Jackson.
planned community on English Garden City principles." Radburn was never completed along the lines its planners intended, because the depression intervened. Today, it sits, still with its distinctive appearance, in the center of a larger, more traditional suburban community.\footnote{Daniel Schaffer, Garden Cities for America: The Radburn Experience (Philadelphia, 1982), 161. Bauer, Modern Housing, 239.}

Radburn, a case-study of a suburb designed by planners who considered themselves “advanced,” might be juxtaposed with Scarsdale, which was neither advanced nor designed by planners but which, according to its historian Carol O’Connor, was thought of by its residents as “a sort of Utopia” nonetheless.\footnote{Carol O’Connor, A Sort of Utopia: Scarsdale (Albany, 1983). It is particularly instructive to read O’Connor’s work in conjunction with the Lundberg study previously cited.} Scarsdale residents preserved and protected an environment of expensive single-family houses through zoning and restrictive covenants that excluded both those below a certain income level and racial minorities. O’Connor’s book focuses on the public life of a well-to-do community—its school system, its politics, its social clubs. Shaffer’s and O’Connor’s studies are particularly interesting because they deal with the 1920s in considerable detail. Like Mark Foster’s more general study of planners and metropolitan growth, they take the historians beyond the streetcar and commuter rail suburbs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Of all the works covering any of the periods of suburban history before World War II, there are three recent books that transcend categorization—Kenneth Jackson’s Crabgrass Frontier, Henry Binford’s The First Suburbs, and Robert Fishman’s Bourgeois Utopias. Jackson’s book, the most important work in suburban history since Streetcar Suburbs, is a comprehensive analysis of the suburbanization process from the early nineteenth to the late twentieth century. Binford’s, a study of pre-Civil War suburban Boston, is particularly significant for its attempts to probe the intellectual and cultural roots of the suburban vision. These two books were published in the same year, one broadly inclusive, the other microcosmic. To look at their analysis of the earliest manifestations of suburbia in some detail,
therefore, seems warranted, particularly because they offer contrasting views.

Jackson begins his suburban history in Brooklyn, New York, which he argues was America's first suburb. In the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Brooklyn's population exploded as a result of overcrowding in lower Manhattan and the simultaneous advent of the steam ferry. People moved to Brooklyn not because of a pastoral ideal, in his view, but because Manhattan had become too crowded. Brooklyn offered easy access as well as "pleasant surroundings, cheap land, and low taxes." Although Brooklyn grew into a thriving industrial city in its own right by the middle of the nineteenth century, during this early period it owed its growth to Manhattan and the steam ferry. Economic, not ideological, reasons brought residents to Brooklyn, and their lives and livelihoods (in those very early years of the nineteenth century) were tied to Manhattan. While grateful for the space and the trees, Brooklynites did not reject the city; rather, they took advantage of inexpensive land and cheap and rapid transportation. For Jackson, the inexorable extension of the city itself was the driving force behind suburbanization.19

While Brooklyn was becoming a commuter suburb of New York, the villages of Cambridge and Somerville, Massachusetts, were following a different route to suburbanization, according to Henry Binford. In the early nineteenth century these communities enjoyed substantial independence from Boston, although, as part of the city's "fringe," their agricultural and manufactured products often wound up in the city's markets. Binford refers to such communities as "hybrids" from which some residents commuted to Boston but most had primarily local interests. What is important about these villages, he argues, is that the residents of these communities, and not Bostonians, instigated "the systematic development of land for commuter residence." This was a gradual process. In 1840 only about 6 percent of the household heads of Cambridge and Somerville commuted to Boston. By the 1850s, things had begun to change: "Commuting to work was still a practice open only to those with high income and flexible schedules, but there were now large blocs of such people in

19 Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 25-33 (quotation on p. 29).
the inner suburbs.” During the 1840s the promoters of the “suburban ideal” came into direct conflict with those who wished to preserve the mixed economic activities that had characterized the “fringe economy.” The former won out.\textsuperscript{20}

These two descriptions of the origins of the residential suburb differ: the first is urban-centered and economic, the other suburban-centered and ideological. Jackson’s \textit{Crabgrass Frontier}, the result of more than a decade of research, is the best and most comprehensive analysis of the demographic, spatial, economic, and structural underpinnings of American suburbanization. It may be viewed, in fact, as the “last word” on these subjects. In a sense, Henry Binford gave historians, if not the “first word,” one of the freshest attempts at analyzing the cultural and intellectual foundations of suburban life in America.

Robert Fishman’s \textit{Bourgeois Utopias}, published in 1987, is different from both the Jackson and Binford books. Fishman covers both British and American suburbs, and also offers an interpretation of the choice of the middle classes on the European continent to remain urban rather than follow the path laid out by their Anglo-American counterparts. In Fishman’s view, suburbs originated in England on the eve of the nineteenth century, and not in the United States. The village of Clapham, five miles outside of London, was, he argues, “perhaps the best developed example of the late eighteenth century bourgeois suburb.” Like Binford, Fishman emphasizes the importance of ideology, and ties suburbanization to evangelical religion and the rise of “the closed domesticated nuclear family” within the English merchant class.\textsuperscript{21}

Although the discussion above has concentrated on historians’ views of the origins of the suburbs, both Fishman and Jackson cover the entire sweep of suburbanization. Indeed, Jackson’s work on the influence of the New Deal in promoting suburban life is one of the best analyses to date of the influence of federal policy on American housing. The New Deal’s Federal Housing Administration (FHA), in effect, ensured the triumph of urban deconcentration. This agency guaranteed mortgages and enshrined, although it did not invent, the

\textsuperscript{20} Henry Binford, \textit{The First Suburbs} (Chicago, 1985), 84, 99, and 139.

practice of redlining. By refusing to make loans in redlined areas to whites, and by refusing to lend to blacks in areas where whites predominated, the FHA institutionalized the racist practices already in existence in many suburbs, and helped to condemn inner-city areas to further decay. The policies of the FHA encouraged suburban ownership for whites. The income tax deductions on mortgages, which first became substantial in the 1940s as tax rates rose significantly, were an additional inducement. Racism, of course, was not a newcomer to the suburbs, having been present in both formal covenants and informal neighborhood agreements. But its institutionalization by the FHA guaranteed that racial exclusion would continue. Indeed, racial discrimination is still a fact of suburban life.\textsuperscript{22}

With the establishment of such federal agencies, the groundwork was laid for the postwar suburban explosion with which we began this essay. Jackson was among the first historians to analyze this phenomenon, which heretofore had been the province of the sociologists and political scientists, but that has begun to change. Historian Zane Miller has studied Forest Park, Ohio, which opened its first subdivision in 1956, and there are at least two dissertations in progress on the first Levittown.\textsuperscript{23}

Zane Miller's book serves as a reminder to historians in the Northeast that suburbanization may have begun with Brooklyn but it has extended far beyond its original boundaries. Miller's work, Mark Rose's on Kansas City and Denver, and several of the essays in Roger Lotchin's \textit{Martial Metropolis}—a book on the cities and the military in which several sunbelt cities, and their suburbs, figure prominently—indicate that historians have begun to extend their study of

\textsuperscript{22} It is true that since the income tax came into being mortgage interest has been tax deductible. But because the law allowed a $4,000 deduction for married persons, fewer than two percent of all Americans even had to file returns. In the 1940s tax rates went up steeply to pay for World War II; it was at that time that mortgage deductions began to be a real inducement to middle-class home ownership. See Jackson, \textit{Crabgrass Frontier}, 293-94, for a lucid explanation of home owners' tax status. Racism has been a persistent theme of suburban history. See, for example, Philip L. Clay, "The Process of Black Suburbanization," \textit{Urban Affairs Quarterly} 14 (1979), 405-24.

\textsuperscript{23} Zane Miller, \textit{Suburb: Neighborhood and Community in Forest Park, Ohio} (Knoxville, 1981). Jenni Buhr, at the Department of Geography at Rutgers University, and Barbara Kelly, of the Long Island Studies Institute at Hofstra University, both have dissertations in progress on Levittown, Long Island.
suburbanization into areas of the country in which the model developed for the Northeast may not be entirely applicable. But then again, those who developed those early suburban models may indeed have been describing a national, and not a regional, pattern. Historians have suggested that suburbs across the nation may in fact have more similarities than differences. Twenty years ago Robert Fogelson reminded us that while Los Angeles in 1930 was unique—in its residential decentralization, its dependence on automobiles, its fragmentation—it was in fact the "archetype, for better or worse, of the contemporary American metropolis." More recently Carl Abbott, who has become the leading expert on sunbelt cities and their suburbs, has reminded historians that "Citizens of Walnut Creek, Irvine, Richardson, and North Charleston are American suburbanites first and sunbelters second." Abbott recognizes some distinctions; nevertheless, he argues, "Even where we find the greatest regional differences in the mid-1980s, ... Sunbelt cities are still following the example of New York and Chicago."24

Abbott's reference to "New York and Chicago" rather than, for example, "Scarsdale and Radburn," is telling. It suggests that an urban framework continues to dominate analyses of suburban America. As a consequence, historians often portray the suburb as an urban "problem," suburban residents as people who want to remove themselves from the urgent work of making the cities livable.25 This point of view is not without merit, but it can result in an inability to discern


25 I am grateful to Randall Miller for helping me to sharpen my ideas about the ways in which urban history has shaped the historical view of the suburbs. He has helped me beyond measure to focus the themes of this essay. For a telling example of the ways in which the urban viewpoint can determine an analysis of the suburbs, see Teaford, *The Twentieth-Century American City*. Raymond Mohl reviewed this work in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (hereafter, *PMHB*) 111 (1987), 411-13.
developing patterns that might deviate from the past. For example, it becomes difficult to explain the metropolis of the 1970s and 1980s, when some suburbs have become so urbanized themselves as to make the core city seem superfluous. What historians like Kenneth Jackson have referred to as the contemporary “suburbanization of the United States” may actually be, as Robert Fishman has argued, “something quite different: the creation of a radically new kind of city that differs so fundamentally from both English and American suburbs of the past that the new city should not be called ‘suburban’ at all.”

According to Fishman, “the most important feature of post-war American development has been the simultaneous decentralization of housing, industry, specialized services, and office jobs . . . This phenomenon, as remarkable as it is unique, is not suburbanization but a new city.” Using the term “technoburb” to describe this new city, Fishman is the first historian (but not the first scholar) to envision contemporary suburbs not as the culmination of a long-term process but as the beginning of a new era. Geographer Peter O. Muller has made a similar assessment of contemporary suburbanization, although he specifically pinpoints the 1970s as the decade in which the older suburban pattern became engulfed by a new one. It was that decade, he argues, “during which the traditional metropolis—composed of a dominant central city and a subservient ring of suburbs—was both turned inside-out and split asunder.”

The work of geographers like Muller has much to offer historians as they grapple with the spatial questions that arise in any attempt at the historical analysis of suburban America. Scholars in other fields as well, especially architectural history and material culture, also can extend our understanding of the use of space, particularly in reference to the nature of suburban housing and the ways in which people have adapted to the suburban environment. Taken together, they may well suggest that a new phase of suburban scholarship is beginning to emerge.

---


Among the architectural historians, the most important are Gwen- 
dolyn Wright and Delores Hayden. Wright did not begin with a 
specific interest in suburbanization. In *Moralism and the Model Home*, 
for instance, her principal concern was the conflict between architects 
and builders over who would dominate American residential con-
struction. Her book not only illuminates that conflict but also dem-
onstrates how suburban Chicago was built. In the end, Wright argued, 
the suburb by the early twentieth century had become the repository 
of morality, serving much the same function as had the individual 
house a half century earlier.28

Delores Hayden’s brilliant feminist analysis, *The Grand Domestic 
Revolution*, suggests that suburbanization fatally hampered feminist 
attitudes to create a physical environment of equality in the late 
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Her more recent *Redesigning 
the American Dream* insists that Americans must move toward an 
arhcitecture of community that is fundamentally different from our 
present preference for single-family suburban houses. Hayden argues 
that Americans are still, in the late twentieth century, holding on to 
a mid-nineteenth-century domestic ideal. That point is highly con-
troversial; nevertheless, her analysis of alternative urban and suburban 
visions, along with her sophisticated rendering of those communities 
that did exist, offer historians a new view of how families functioned 
in suburban communities.29

Wright and Hayden have focused on the roles of women in sub-
urban America in a way that most urban historians have not. In 
Kenneth Jackson’s “working definition” of the suburbs noted earlier, 
one of the things that traditionally marked suburbs out as different 
from inner-city areas was the “journey to work.” But at least in the

28 Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home* (Chicago, 1980), and *Building the 
contains the suggestion of the beginnings of an interpretation of “suburbs qua suburbs” (to 
borrow Randall Miller’s phrase), but it is only incipient in Binford’s work.

29 Delores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, 1981), and *Redesigning 
the American Dream* (New York, 1984). It is crucial to note here that if the role of women 
in general in suburban America has been neglected by urban historians, the role of women 
and religion in the suburbs has been even more neglected. Colleen McDannell’s *The Christian 
Home in Victorian America* (Bloomington, 1986), is unique in the way it interconnects space, 
gender, and religion.
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, among middle- and upper-middle class suburbanites, only Father journeyed to work. Those who study suburban America must take gender into account in any attempt to understand how families actually lived there. One wishes, for example, that Henry Binford had realized the significance of the fact that his suburban boosters were nearly all men. This is not so much a criticism of Binford as it is of the general tendency of urban historians, when they turn their attention to the suburbs, to concentrate for the most part on either the links between city and suburb or the rejection of urban life. Such emphases tend either to highlight the male journey-to-work, or to stress the home as a refuge from the tensions of work, which also accentuates the male experience. (The home could indeed be seen as a refuge for men, but for a woman it was a place of work, although, as was likely even in the middle ranges of the middle class, she employed one or more domestics.) Historians of women have understood this. So too did the suburban advocates of the late nineteenth century, who feared that women would prefer the convenience of urban living to the isolation of the suburbs. In the 1870s the prominent landscape designer Frank Scott, for example, reminded men to choose a suburban location with their wives and children in mind, and not to isolate them in some distant community without access to urban amenities.  

Suburban history will have to come to terms with the work of architectural historians like Wright, Hayden, and David Handlin, all of whom have focused on the connections between architecture and culture. To this group we must add cultural historians such as Clifford Clark, whose recent *American Family Home* is a study of “the ideal of the independent middle-class family home.” Clark, instead of connecting suburbs with urban life, links the suburb and the small town, thereby stressing the disjunction of urban and suburban life in a way that urban historians would find surprising. *The American Family Home* is perhaps most important for its attempts to discover the links “between the popular ideals of home and family . . . and the actual

---

relationship between individual houses and the families who lived in them.\[31\]

The contributions of these historians, who would not call themselves urban specialists, when added to the insights offered by Binford's emphasis on suburban community ideals, can help suburban historians to strike into new paths. As the field stands now, there have been major studies on the politics of the suburbs and on the political problems facing America's downtowns as a result of suburbanization. From the perspective of the central cities, we also know a great deal about the ways in which technological advances helped to develop suburbs. What we now need to know is what kind of communities they were. This is particularly important because there is genuine controversy over the question of whether the patterns we now call suburban in contemporary America are the culmination of a long-term process of suburbanization or a radical break with traditional suburban forms. Kenneth Jackson and most urban historians have argued the former, while Robert Fishman has suggested the latter.\[32\]

The next wave of suburban studies, in my view, should ask the following questions of each generation of suburban dwellers. What did it mean—socially, culturally, politically, and spatially—to live in the suburbs? What kinds of people lived in the suburbs, and what did they do there? What did their houses look like and how did they furnish them? What were the family dynamics—for example, what did husbands and wives do together (and separately), what did they do with their children, how did they rear their children? What kinds of roles did men play in the suburban community, and in the house itself? What were women's connections with the larger urban community, as well as the smaller suburban one? How did these families perceive their own places in the urban economy? What did the idea of community mean to these families, and why had homogeneity by class and race become so intensely important to a sense of community? Finally, when we get the answers to these questions, we need to know how those answers are interconnected.


An overriding issue that touches each of these questions has to do with the nature of change in the suburbs. Although Americans have moved to the suburbs since the early nineteenth century, moving to the suburbs meant something different in each period of suburban growth. I do not mean here simply that the middle class followed the upper class and the working class followed the middle class, although the class dimension is important. The very nature of both suburban form and the suburban ideal has changed over time. From the fringe communities of that early period to the “technoburbs” of the late twentieth century, the relationship of the city and suburb has been changing, not constant. The economic and political dimensions of suburban transformations have received a great deal of attention, but it is equally important to an understanding of both the changes and the continuities of suburban life for historians to analyze the ways in which families functioned in their communities—structurally, spatially, and culturally.

To focus this discussion, and to try to make more explicit what I think are the accomplishments of suburban history and some hopes for its future directions, we might examine the suburban experience of Philadelphia. With a few exceptions, historians of Philadelphia have for the most part not concentrated on suburbanization, primarily because the richness and diversity of the city’s urban experience have claimed their attention. Philadelphia historians have, quite simply, taken a while to get to the suburbs; one could argue that it would not have been possible to do an adequate job without first understanding the city itself. A good example of the way that such an urban focus works out in practice is Peter Muller, Kenneth Meyer, and Roman Cybriwsky’s *Metropolitan Philadelphia*, published under the aegis of the Association of American Geographers. There is an interesting chapter on the suburbs, but the analysis is both contemporary and written from an urban point of view.\(^{33}\)

In a city like Philadelphia, with its intense neighborhood and ethnic loyalties, much within the city has to be understood before its outer reaches can be studied fully. The most ambitious effort to explain the city of the nineteenth century was Theodore Hershberg’s Phila-

delphia Social History Project, a summary of the work of which was recently published as Philadelphia: Work, Space, Family, and Group Experience in the Nineteenth Century. Covering some of the same kinds of issues was Howard Gillette, Jr., and William Cutler's Divided Metropolis. Although published before the Hershberg volume, it is in some ways more comprehensive, because it places the city in its regional context. If the former succeeded as a series of microcosmic analyses of particular urban spaces, the latter's strength was in its exploration of the tension between fragmentation and the city's desire for centralized control. Hershberg and his collaborators did not address the issue of suburbanization explicitly, while Gillette, Cutler, and their authors did so when they focused on the impact of deconcentration on the city itself. Together with Sam Bass Warner's Private City, these volumes provide some of the best material on urban Philadelphia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.  

With such a background, some scholars have begun to turn their attention to the suburbs. Thus far, Chestnut Hill seems to have received the most attention. David Contosta is working on a biography of the Houston and Woodward families, major forces in suburban development in Chestnut Hill. His recent article in this journal suggests the impact of George Woodward on the creation of middle-class reform housing in the early twentieth century. Robert Fishman included a section on Chestnut Hill in Bourgeois Utopias. And Mary Corbin Sies, in her 1987 dissertation, "American Country House Architecture in Context," chose Chestnut Hill as one of four late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century suburban case studies; her work concentrates on the interconnections between the suburban ideal and the architecture and design of particular upper-middle-class suburban communities. Such detailed explorations of individual suburban visions and particular communities are necessary for other areas in suburban Philadelphia before we can truly understand its metropolitan

dimensions. An excellent model for the regional study of suburban-ization here and elsewhere is Michael Ebner’s new book on Chicago’s North Shore. A Philadelphia counterpart might be a book on the creation of the Main Line.\(^3\)

If we were to begin now to construct a history of suburban Philadelphia, we ought to start with the beginnings of middle-class suburbanization, which occurred after the mid-nineteenth century, not so early as either New York or Boston. It is true that, as in other eastern cities, Philadelphians had begun to decentralize earlier, but those living in most of Philadelphia’s “suburbs” were working class, both skilled and unskilled. As late as 1860, in the district of Penn, located to the northwest of the central city and in the path of the city’s most important axis of residential growth, the residents were overwhelmingly artisans and unskilled laborers. Only 27 percent were what we might call middle class. Yet this was up from 13 percent in 1850.\(^3\) Even later, in 1880, West Philadelphia, despite incipient middle-class suburbanization, was predominantly working class. However, by the end of the century, while some members of the city’s elite continued to live on Rittenhouse Square, and others of the upper middle and middle class stayed on in the urban core, the move to the suburban reaches within the city, and to the separate communities beyond, was clearly evident.\(^3\)

In understanding the suburbs, it is important to remember that not all of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century residential suburbs were “streetcar suburbs.” For at least the upper middle class, and for many members of its middle reaches as well, commuter rail lines served as the link between the city and the suburban home.


John Stilgoe, in his evocative portrayal of what he calls the "Metropolitan Corridor," described the "typical commuter" as one who "strode through the great urban terminals convinced that his way of life represented the apogee of civilization."

Bankers, brokers, lawyers, and managers, even well-paid agents and clerks, relied on the rails. In Philadelphia, as in Chicago, Los Angeles, and smaller cities, railroad executives (like their counterparts in the trolley business) speculated in land for residential development.

Commuter railroads were important in Philadelphia by the turn of the twentieth century, not least because the area was so hospitable to suburbanization. Not only was Philadelphia (in area) the largest American city in the second half of the nineteenth century, but it also had few physical obstacles to inhibit development. If the inner city was crowded, the outer city provided possibilities for small- and large-scale developers alike. The land surrounding the city—much of it farms, country estates, and small villages—was not separated from it by inaccessible swamps or large-scale nuisance industries. By this time in Philadelphia's history, industries were no longer scattered haphazardly throughout the city and beyond but were located in more or less well-defined communities. Even the Delaware River, which separated Philadelphia from New Jersey, became less of a barrier to commuters in the 1890s, after improvements in ferry service and the completion of a railroad bridge.

Walter Bassett Smith, a successful local contractor/builder and a very plain-spoken man, found himself moved almost to eloquence when he considered the opportunities for suburban construction around Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century. "New York," mused Smith, "is cut off from its 'suburbs' by rivers and swamps, vast spaces that render quick access impossible; and when you get to its outlying country, it is, except for a few places, flat or worse; but we have, within a half-hour's ride on more than one of our railroads, a rich and beautiful country—to one who has not seen it, an inconceivable paradise." (Smith was usually more blunt of speech. He once briskly informed potential customers about Ardmore,

38 John Stilgoe, Metropolitan Corridor (New Haven, 1983), 269.
which he was then in the midst of constructing: “Some parts are handsome, and some are not.”) 39

Walter Smith’s optimism was not misplaced. He and his partner Herman Wendell had begun building suburban houses in West Philadelphia in the 1880s, after which they went on to construct successful developments in Germantown, Wayne, St. Davids, and in perhaps their best-known project, Overbrook Farms. Their success was replicated throughout the area. Philadelphians dispersed from the inner city to the outlying wards. In the late nineteenth century, suburban communities within the city limits became very important. To the northwest lay Germantown (which had been a suburb in some respects since mid-century), Mt. Airy, and Chestnut Hill. This last became known as the most elite community within the city, since many old-line Philadelphia families chose to live there. In addition, an “elite” of a different sort also called Chestnut Hill home—members of a group that historian Mary Corbin Sies calls “the professional managerial stratum.” Out toward the west of the city, managers and professionals moved to the planned community of Overbrook Farms, beyond which lay the famed railroad suburbs of the Main Line. And the construction of the city’s first subway-elevated line west along Market Street turned West Philadelphia into the city’s first mass dormitory community, peopled mostly by the families of skilled workers and the less affluent middle classes. 40

Beyond the city limits, the railroad brought commuters from Wayne and St. Davids and all along the Main Line, and places like Sharon Hill and Ridley Park. In New Jersey, Collingswood and Merchantville were quite intentionally developed as suburban communities (Collingswood by sugar baron E.C. Knight), while Haddonfield (which had been a village, then a market town of some importance even before the advent of the railroad) also found itself transformed into a suburban community. These suburbs are important, and they have been little studied, perhaps because until the recent historical

39 Walter Bassett Smith of Wendell and Smith at Ardmore (Philadelphia, 1899), 6, 8.
40 My current work in progress is on suburbanization and the middle-class family, and includes a chapter on Philadelphia suburbs. My recent article on male roles in the home also includes some material on Philadelphia: Margaret Marsh, “Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity, 1870-1915,” American Quarterly 40 (1988), 165-86.
interest in the suburbs, it was difficult to contextualize them.\textsuperscript{41} When suburbs are seen, as urban historians traditionally have done, as a problem for the city, it is difficult to analyze them from any other vantage point.

But this has begun to change—from two directions. In Philadelphia, particular interest in the late nineteenth-century suburbs that lie within the city boundaries has arisen on the part of the Philadelphians who live in those houses or houses like them. Overbrook Farms, for example, has recently been named an historic district. It and Pelham, another Wendell and Smith development, now have historic house tours. The architecture of the Woodward houses of Chestnut Hill has made them objects of interest. In the 1970s West Philadelphia and Mt. Airy began to attract scholarly attention.\textsuperscript{42} Much more needs to be done, but there are some good beginnings that suggest the diversity, variety, and complexity of Philadelphia's suburban development while also adumbrating the contours of a common regional suburban experience.

My purpose in this essay has been to examine the principal directions of suburban history over the past decade and to connect the developments in the field as a whole to the Philadelphia experience. It is a good time to make an assessment; in important ways, as American suburbs become increasingly disconnected to the cities that gave them birth, we are witnessing the end of an age. The residential suburbs of the 1950s—which sheltered nuclear families with young children in racially homogeneous enclaves—were the culmination of more than a century of the creation of a set of political and cultural beliefs. That era is over. Suburbanization as a process has not ended, but the nature of the urban-suburban connection has altered dramatically. The technoburb or outer city of today is very different

\textsuperscript{41} Margaret Marsh, "From Separation to Togetherness: The Social Construction of Domestic Space in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, 1986), contains some information on New Jersey suburbs.

\textsuperscript{42} Meredith Savery, "Instability and Uniformity: Residential Patterns in Two Philadelphia Neighborhoods," in Gillette and Cutler, eds., \textit{Divided Metropolis}, 193-226; and Margaret Marsh, "The Transformation of Community: Urbanization and Suburbanization in West Philadelphia" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers University, 1974).
from the middle-class residential communities that characterized sub-
urban America for much of its history. Vast economic and cultural
changes, which have transformed the suburbs into distinct entities
having in some cases almost no connections to what we still tend to
call the central city, have taken place since the 1970s. As the suburbs
changed, so too have the demographic, racial, ethnic, and class patterns
that characterized suburban communities at least since the mid-nineteenth century. One could easily write another essay on the scholarship
dealing with the rise of these new kinds of suburbs. As we mark the
fortieth anniversary of Levittown, it seems like an excellent time for
historians to reconsider, even to discover, the suburbs.

Stockton State College

MARGARET MARSH