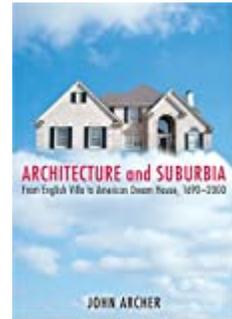


John Archer. *Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690-2000.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005. 470 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-4303-5.



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The Suburban Dream Is Alive and Well, and Continuing to Defy Its Critics

John Archer's *Architecture and Suburbia* is an original addition to the growing range of histories of suburbia. In a large and attractively illustrated history of both the interiors and exteriors of suburban housing, Archer eschews the parochialism that often limits American histories of suburbia by exploring in some detail the transatlantic English influences that have shaped the suburban dream in modern North America. In common with Robert A. M. Stern before him, and Robert Bruegmann currently, Archer understands that the Anglo-American suburb is a hugely popular context for residential living, and that many of the clichés and stereotypes that bedevil the image of suburbia are ill-founded.[1]

Archer is an architectural historian with interests in the social and cultural history of British and American suburban housing. With its time frame of over three hundred years, the range of the book is impressive. Situating the origins of modern suburban housing and lifestyles within an emerging culture of individualism promulgated by the Enlightenment, early chapters explore the gentrification of outer London as beautiful houses for the wealthy middle classes spread over Middlesex and other

home counties during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Privatism, "oppositonality to the city" (p. 70), a growing desire for property ownership, and the demand for the spatial separation of business from the pleasures of the home, all found expression in the size and layout of Georgian and Victorian villas around West London. These "smaller counterparts of country houses" were the bourgeois "apparatus of selfhood," the title of an early chapter. Although Archer touches upon Manchester in northwest England, the suburban aspirations of middle-class northerners and of provincial-industrial England more generally, receive scant attention.

Moving the focus across the Atlantic to the United States, Archer shows how the "Republican pastoral" of late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century America owed much to English influences in domestic architecture. Leading politicians, business people, and professionals shared in a developing preference for the spacious but compact suburban home. Housing became "a critical dimension of American privatist and individualist political ideologies of the nineteenth century" (p. 174). This political culture, interwoven as it was with the social

realities of the domestic sphere, served the self-interest of the middle-class male most satisfactorily during the nineteenth century. As with gender relations, rooms had specific roles and tasks allotted to them, and reflected wider inequalities between men and women. Archer makes a telling criticism, however, of Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall.[2] Their “flawed picture of the role of separate spheres in the rise of the middle classes” (p. 201) gave inadequate attention to the informal linkages between men and women at home and in the suburban community; moreover, the emphasis upon gendered difference failed to understand the common interest of all members of the household to secure their comforts and economic interests.

The rise of the much-maligned gated community is dated to Tuxedo Park, New York, and similar garden suburbs built during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. In addition to a fear and loathing of a dangerous and depraved downtown and its inhabitants, Archer also emphasizes the continuation of Jeffersonian pastoral tradition enshrined, for example, in the Homestead Act of 1862. Social Darwinism was also harnessed to the cause of upper-class garden suburbs. Safe and beautiful housing developments were seen to provide segregated enclaves for those of Anglo-Saxon stock. They also appeared to represent the highest degree of civilization to many contemporary American writers.

Archer does not fully explore the often-significant differences between the garden city and garden suburb movements in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Nonetheless he is well aware of the influence of the English Garden City movement instigated by Ebenezer Howard in England, on both the planned garden suburbs of the early twentieth-century United States, and later twentieth-century experiments. The pioneering Radburn in 1920s New Jersey, the first residential development in the United States to accommodate the car to modern housing conditions, is among the best known.

But Radburn and the later New Deal new towns were the exceptions to the massive rule of mostly sporadic and relatively unplanned suburbs that spread through North America between the wars and especially during the post-war period. Housing policies had encouraged home ownership during the 1920s, but the Housing Act of 1949 provided for millions of subsidized mortgages in comparison to the greater provision of public housing in Britain. The suburban house was by the early postwar period inextricably a part of the American Dream, affording ever-spiraling levels of material comfort, labor-

saving devices, generous space, status and approval, and a balance between privatism and collective obligations.

That suburban dream, which had been mostly but never completely the preserve of the white middle classes, now began to spread more widely to blue-collar America. Some of the most insightful studies of suburbia in postwar America, for example Bennett M Berger’s *Working-Class Suburb* (1960) or Herbert J. Gans’s *The Levittowners* (1967), provided more nuanced and reflective accounts of mainstream suburban life than the more influential but often one-dimensional critiques of David Reisman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950) and William H. Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956). Archer gives these studies their due recognition and, drawing upon very recent work by the sociologist Mary Pattillo-McCoy and the historian Andrew Wiese, he also focuses upon the growing presence of African Americans in the suburbs.[3] This, in addition to the pursuit of the suburban dream by other minority groups (both men and women), and by gays, adds up to a growing picture of suburban diversity. Again, Archer is alive to the fact that such diversity is a very long way from the still-influential stereotypes of the nuclear-family-dominated hellhole of bland parents and bored or dysfunctional offspring. Hence he provides a particularly readable and well-informed account of suburban stereotypes in film, and an even more extreme anti-suburban hatred in American rock music, rap and hip hop. As Archer argues, many artists working within these genres manifest an inability to move beyond crabbled and unoriginal views of suburbia that were dominant in the sociologies of the 1950s.

In rightly emphasizing the diversity of American suburbanites and also the complexity of cultural production as well as consumption in relation to American suburbia, Archer raises a significant issue that deserves critical attention. In his discussion of suburban diversity he uses the fashionable but ungainly terminology of “hybridization” in the context of “suburban counterpublics” (pp. 359-372). Archer argues that a more hybridized domestic architecture may be required to encompass increasingly diverse groups in suburbia.

When gays move into the suburbs, furthermore, they apparently install a counter-public in “heteronormative” suburbia (pp. 368-372). However, it may be countered that they also pursue a suburban dream that bears remarkable similarities to the suburban aspirations of heterosexual singles and couples. What evidence is there, moreover, that gays in suburbia are more of a counter-public than in inner city or rural areas? And it is ob-

vious that sexual preference does not preclude affection for a gadget-rich home with four bedrooms, more than one bathroom, and a couple of garages. As Archer himself acknowledges, there is little popular maneuvering for radical new directions in housing policy in contemporary North America. Despite that, American suburbs are already contexts of great diversity. They are a kaleidoscope of cultures and lifestyles in pursuit of fine housing.

Archer also appears to be a little defensive about gated communities in wealthy American suburbs. Few would deny that they are expressions of residential segregation, but this is not a problem unique to suburbia. Apartment blocks in the wealthiest parts of downtown America require a key-code, a concierge, and a front door key to keep out those who are seen as dangerous. And anyone walking around Central London can see that people living in social housing (public housing) are barricaded from passers-by. For example, the late Victorian artisans' dwelling blocks near Kings Cross Station are explicitly gated communities for those who rent from a housing association or from the local council. Why not? No one wants to be easy prey for crime, and that goes for wealthy and poor people, inner-city and suburban dweller, gay and hetero, black and white. The sheer normality as well as the diversity of suburbia is simply humanity writ large in the most populous and often the most successful of the residential environments to be found across both America and England. On so many counts, the city centers and the countryside were, and in some areas still are, often plagued with social, environmental, and economic problems. The comfortable dream homes of suburban North America that make up much of the focus of this book may be only a short drive away from the overcrowded, polluted, slum-ridden central city

or the marginal and often reactionary cultures of the rural fringes, but they are a million miles better in terms of the perceived advantages and comforts that they offer to their residents.

Finally, however, it would be ungenerous to emphasize any lag in confidence in suburban studies to the detriment of the wider achievement of *Architecture and Suburbia*. In privileging the home as the heart of suburbia from the eighteenth century to the present, and in systematically connecting the development of the suburban dream to the American Dream, Archer has made a strong and unique contribution to suburban history that will be of interest to a wide range of scholars working in urban and suburban history, planning history, social history, architectural studies, cultural studies and housing policy. *Architecture and Suburbia* certainly deserves a wide readership.

Notes

[1]. Robert A. M. Stern with John Montague Massengale, *The Anglo-American Suburb* (London: Architectural Design Profile, 1981); and Robert Bruegmann, *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[2]. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

[3]. Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000); and Andrew Wiese, "Places of Our Own: Suburban Black Towns before 1960," *Journal of Urban History* 19, no. 3 (1993), pp. 30-54.

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