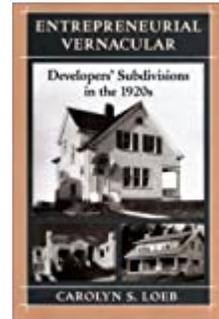




Carolyn S. Loeb. *Entrepreneurial Vernacular: Developers' Subdivisions in the 1920s.* Creating the North American Landscape Series. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xvi + 273 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6618-0.



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George Babbitt as History

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Underlying this book is the idea that housing can be considered either a privatized commodity or a social good. Carolyn S. Loeb, associate professor of art history at Central Michigan University, notes that the ideas of housing reformers such as Henry Wright, Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer, and others active in the early twentieth century revolved around the notion that housing was a social good. This contrasted dramatically with the work of real estate developers during this same period who treated housing as a privatized commodity. Loeb argues that residential subdivisions of the 1920s “intensified the process by which, in the United States, housing was treated as a privatized commodity, rather than as a social good” (p. 209).

Loeb explores suburban subdivisions in the 1920s as a physical manifestation of the commodification of housing. She successfully argues that suburban subdivisions are a vernacular landscape that rest on “connections between architectural forms and a broader web of social, historical, and cultural developments” (p. 207). According to Loeb, suburban residential subdivisions are a ver-

nacular form because they are “pervasive and dominant as a housing solution in the United States” (p. 3). Characteristic of these subdivisions are single-family houses set in the middle of green lawns.

Loeb further refines her conception of this vernacular landscape by linking it to the treatment of housing as a privatized commodity. She notes that vernacular architecture is often assumed to be the work of anonymous agents. She finds, however, that real-estate developers were the “primary shapers” of this vernacular landscape (p. 4). Her title, *Entrepreneurial Vernacular*, then, “describes the residential pattern that realtors negotiated by means of their patronage of building-craftsmen and architects, their association with a network of other housing professionals, their knowledge of the housing field, and the new organizational skills they brought to the process of urban development” (pp. 5-6).

In a very real sense, Loeb is interested in exploring the ways in which George Babbitt’s fictional experiences as a realtor reflect those of actual realtors in the 1920s. The first part of the book comprises a close exploration of three subdivisions and their builders: the

Ford Homes in Dearborn, Michigan; Brightmoor in Detroit; and Westwood Highlands in San Francisco. These are “relatively large-scale residential projects in which developers undertook the entire process of subdivision, design, and construction” (p. 10). Loeb argues that these, and other similar developments, were important models for the construction boom following World War II.

Chapter 1 explores the Ford Homes project, developed by associates of Henry Ford to build houses near Ford factories in suburban Detroit. The Dearborn Realty and Construction Company built 250 homes between 1919 and 1921, intending to sell the homes to workers and managers at the nearby Henry Ford and Son tractor plant. The homes, with modern kitchens, bathrooms, and central heating were too expensive for unskilled workers. Loeb focuses on the role of the architect Albert Wood, who was much influenced by housing reformers of the era and advocated experimental community designs. However, she finds that Wood’s interests were secondary to the time and attention paid to streamlining the production process. The Ford Homes project used assembly line techniques, especially with standardized millwork. Much of the chapter is devoted to a general discussion of industrialized building and the growing obsolescence of the building-craftsman by 1900.

In chapter 2, Loeb describes the development of Brightmoor. No architects were involved in the process at Brightmoor, located north of the Ford Homes in suburban Detroit. B. F. Taylor, a successful local developer, subdivided the property and built almost 4000 houses between 1921 and 1925. None had indoor bathrooms when they were constructed. Loeb found that many of the early purchasers of homes in Brightmoor were young families from rural, undeveloped areas (p. 60). No architectural firm was employed by the developer; as Loeb explains, “[w]hen projects were developed at very low cost, as Brightmoor was, the realtor assumed the architect’s role as well” (p. 79). Loeb counterpoints the specific discussion on Brightmoor here with a more general historical discussion on the role of architects in residential design.

Loeb turns to a district south of San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park and Twin Peaks in her third chapter. There the realty and development company of Baldwin and Howell subdivided Westwood Highlands in an area that had been farms and dairy ranches until the extension of streetcars into the area after 1918. In contrast to the Detroit subdivisions examined, Westwood Highlands was conceived as a commuter suburb aimed at a middle-class audience. Here Loeb focuses on the general

development of the real estate profession, with particular focus on Baldwin and Howell. Here we see how realtors became the de facto planners of most suburban subdivisions. George Babbitt’s real counterparts ruled!

The final two chapters move to a more general discussion on the role of homeownership campaigns in the development of the residential suburban subdivision and the role of architectural style in entrepreneurial vernacular schemes. Real estate developers supported homeownership campaigns for obvious reasons. Because housing was increasingly accepted as a commodity, standard architectural styles (with a nod to regional variation) reduced the risk of problems with resale. While each of the subdivisions explored in detail in *Entrepreneurial Vernacular* had different housing styles (colonial revival in Ford Homes, traditional working class cottages in Brightmoor, and Mediterranean revival in Westwood Highlands), all were traditional in their referencing. Much of the strength of this work rests at its intersection between vernacular architecture and urban history. Loeb acknowledges the collegiality of the Vernacular Architecture Forum and the Society for American City and Regional Planning History. *Entrepreneurial Vernacular* is part of the Creating the North American Landscape Series edited by Gregory Conniff, Edward K. Muller, and David Schuyler and was published in cooperation with the Center for American Places, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Harrisonburg, Virginia. The competition between architects, building-craftsmen, and real estate developers is central to understanding this vernacular landscape. However, this is not a story that can easily be told within the confines of the 1920s. Loeb handles this by inserting sections of historical background within the first three chapters on building-craftsmen, architects and developers. Perhaps it is because I am primarily a nineteenth century historian, but I wonder if this competition might have been more clearly highlighted by bringing these three historical sections together in one introductory chapter.

Loeb should be applauded for telling a complicated story. She successfully makes the realtors, architects, and building-craftsmen agents of physical growth. Loeb also uses careful case studies, but moves beyond them to try to tell a wider story. Local and national trends, developers and planners, working and middle class, commuters vs. those employed locally, architects and building-craftsmen, competed in the development of these three subdivisions. There was no single path to the vernacular suburban subdivision. Instead, different paths converged on this general form. As Loeb notes in the closing pages

of herbook, “[t]he planlessness that appears to characterize the geography of suburban subdivision development was, in this sense, the plan” (p. 206).

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