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Authors

Cooper Marcus, Clare
Francis, Carolyn
Meunier, Colette

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Mixed Messages in Suburbia: Reading the Suburban Model Home

Clare Cooper Marcus,
Carolyn Francis,
and Colette Meunier



Some years ago, we discovered a common interest, not the type of thing one would speak too loudly about in a College of Environmental Design. While happily acknowledging to each other our fascination with suburban model homes, we had each felt a little out of step with our academic designer colleagues. We were drawn to look at these dwellings not as Design or Architecture but as artifacts of contemporary culture. Sometimes we found it helpful to imagine we were foreigners, newly arrived in this strange society. What could these model homes tell us about American values?

For five years, we have casually studied the media advertising, sales brochures, physical layout, furnishings, and landscaping of single-family model homes in the San Francisco Bay Area ranging from those in the lowest new-house price bracket to those in exclusive developments commanding prices up to more than a million dollars. All were in single-family “tracts”; for the purposes of this analysis, we have ignored medium-density, planned-unit developments or condominiums. Rather than “research” (such an all-encompassing, misused word), we would term this enterprise “informed speculation.”

When analyzing the various themes represented by model

The following Berkeley students took a seminar on housing with Clare Cooper Marcus in the spring of 1986, observed contemporary suburban model homes, and commented helpfully on an earlier draft of this paper: Steve Aced, Gail Baxter, Phil Erickson, Marge Gladman, Kathy Landis, Gerald Magutu, Terezia Nemeth-Venzon, Onju Roy, Scott Ryan, Fatima Shaker, and Paul Zimmerman.

I Although new house advertising extolls the virtues of “living in the country, close to nature,” the reality is that the natural landscape is either bulldozed for house construction, fenced off, or both.

All photographs by
Clare Cooper Marcus

homes, we were struck by a series of recurring, almost schizophrenic mixed messages. The advertising and the design, layout, furnishing, and decor of the houses embody a startling number of conflicting values. Sometimes one media message conflicts with another; sometimes a message implicit in the layout or decor contradicts contemporary societal norms. As norms and expectations change, we see evidence of considerable ambivalence regarding many values and aspirations, for example, a simultaneous embracing of modern technology and a parallel nostalgic yearning for what may be viewed as the more “simple” life of the past. Or is it, perhaps, a longing for that time when the United States was “on the rise” and the future looked totally rosy? These conflicting messages can be identified under many rubrics. For purposes of this discussion, we will first discuss nature and then look at security, exterior image, individuality, privacy, interior space, sex role cues, leisure, and children. Although our primary focus is the model home, we could not help but make analogous observations of typical site plans and subdivision layouts.

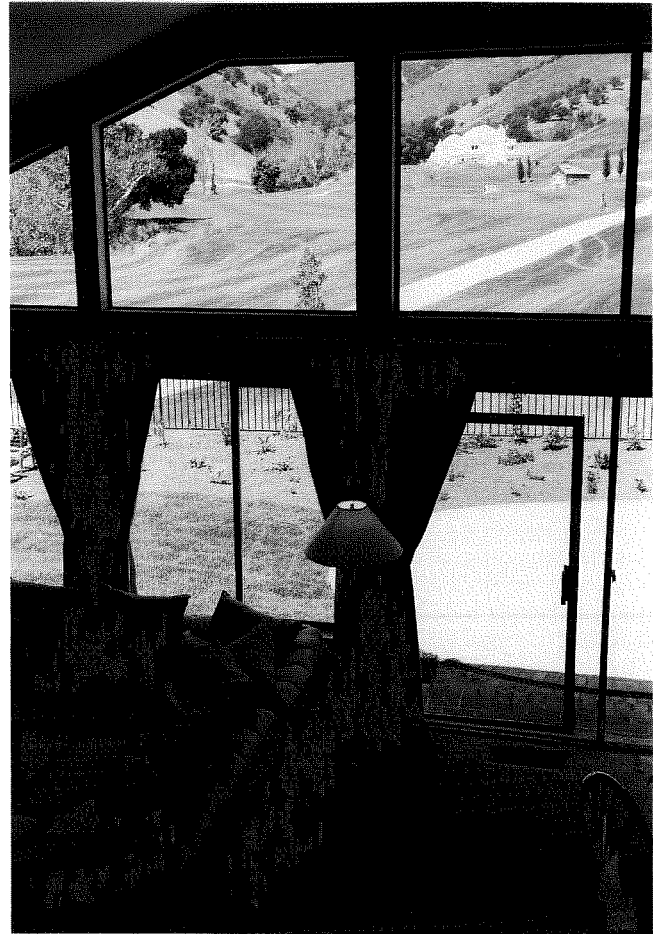
Nature: To Be Seen but not Touched

Suburban model homes and especially their advertising embrace and celebrate the image of nature. This is not

surprising, considering that the first American suburbs grew up around Eastern cities as the wealthy sought homes in more sylvan surroundings to escape from the “evils” of the industrial city.

One hundred years later, the city-country split hasn’t changed much. Contemporary subdivisions—for example, Shadow Oaks, Twin Pines, or Pebble Creek—are frequently named to evoke nature. The actual models (most subdivisions offer four to eight possible styles) are often given “nature names,” such as Aspen, Poplar, and Linden. At the highest-priced development in the Bay Area, most streets are named after trees (Oak Ridge Court, Silver Maple Drive, Conifer Terrace), a particularly disturbing feature in that—with few exceptions—the only native trees left are in the stream beds, where bulldozers could not intrude. Nature is clearly a selling point, as brochures and advertisements make much of community greenbelts and possible views of hills or bay; and the model homes themselves often feature densely lush atrium spaces and an astonishing number of houseplants.

But there is another, conflicting, message. Nature is a nice idea, but the average house buyer is clearly not an avid gardener, bird watcher, or hiker. Yard space is almost always minimal, allowing for only very limited ornamental



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2 Although clearly a major selling point, “Nature” is presented as a picture framed by house or auto windows rather than as an environment to be fully experienced.

gardening, and in fact a major selling point is often the “low maintenance” landscaping or even lack of buyer responsibility for front yards. Houses are dominated by their garages, often accommodating three vehicles, and the subdivisions themselves are usually dominated by a network of overly wide streets. The emphasis on automobile rather than foot traffic is further underscored by a common lack of sidewalks. Some new and expensive suburban developments have main streets completely out of scale with the amount of traffic they carry, and although a sidewalk or bike lane could easily have been provided, it is not. Nature, it seems, is to be viewed through the kitchen or car window, not walked through, seen up close, touched, or smelled.

The attempt to create a natural setting seems to vary quite considerably from low- to high-priced developments. In lower-priced schemes, the site is often flat and treeless, dominated by a grid of streets and standard house lots, with the house in the middle of the lot and fences on three sides. The impression is of human dominance over the landscape, with the same theme repeated in microcosm in individual garden designs (exotic plant materials, rocks, gravel, and tightly pruned shrubs and trees). In some high-priced schemes, an attempt is made to preserve something of the natural vegetation, with

houses clustered or individually sited to preserve views or hillsides. We do not think this necessarily implies that the wealthier classes are more “environmentally concerned” but that “Nature” is one of a number of selling points appealing to higher-income buyers; low-income buyers are probably happy to find *any* decent standard house that they can afford. There may also be a distinction between traditional working class values of neatness and order (manicured gardens) and a more upscale “Sea Ranch” ethic of unblemished nature. Nevertheless, advertising for even a low-priced subdivision surrounded by other tracts and close to freeways and shopping centers will have a blurb about “living in the country.” Perhaps having your own yard is “country” enough for those who have just moved out of an apartment building or sharing with in-laws.

For all income groups, there is clearly some ambivalence about urban versus rural values. Advertising and sales materials frequently make nostalgic references to the country setting, the serenity of “getting away from it all,” and imagery of country kitchens, cozy evenings by rustic fireplaces, and such. But it is the *idea* (or status image) of living in the country that is being marketed rather than any deep attachment to nature. In the midst of the media’s bucolic

reveries, one is frequently reminded of the convenience of freeway connections, ease or speed of commute, and quick access to the more sophisticated pleasures of the city. The highest-priced development in the Bay Area, surrounded by stone walls and entry gates, sports two country clubs, extensive sports facilities, and a three-million-dollar man-made waterfall and advertises that it “combines the sophistication and elegance of the city with the ease and serenity of the country. . . .” If you are wealthy enough, city values are brought out for you in the form (ironically) of the “country” club.

The Search for Security

When new-house advertising extolls the virtues of “country living” and “getting away from it all,” the “all” implies the bustle of urban life, noise, activity, and—presumably—crime (although they are never mentioned specifically). The latest California “new homes” offer deadbolts and door peepholes as standard features; large high-priced developments offer an entry gate and twenty-four hour guard to keep out everyone but legitimate callers. Let’s hope this is effective, because the cheap aluminum windows and sliding patio doors (let alone the *ten* exterior doors in one recently visited \$900,000 model) wouldn’t keep out an ambitious teenager, let alone a serious intruder.

But security has deeper connotations than protection from crime. The cascading pitched roofs and prominent chimneys of high-priced houses may be conveying a message of basic psychological security and warmth in a world that is increasingly full of unpredictable dangers. The small range of prices in any one subdivision ensures that your neighbors will at least be in the same income bracket and—hopefully—have the same child rearing values. The “planned development” ensures that no unexpected commercial or lower-priced dwellings will pop up at a later date.

Similarly, the range of individualizing options is limited. The first large mass-produced developer of postwar suburban houses—Levitt—was severely criticized by the architectural fraternity of the time for offering little choice in house design or layout. In response to this, he started offering three or four models to choose from, a practice that is now a standard procedure in new house marketing. In the 1960s, the choices emphasized number of rooms and colors of kitchen formica and floor tiles. In the 1980s, the advertising emphasizes more, such as “an assortment of floor plans to match every lifestyle,” although exactly what “life-style” implies and how the house design meshes with it is not made explicit. Extra rooms (den, library, exercise room) are offered in the higher-priced models or

are offered as “bonus rooms” you can add later over the garage. The choices are minimal, however, in terms of what people *might* want if given the option: a one-car garage plus extra living space instead of a three-car garage; an attic for storage; a large children’s bedroom—play-room instead of a family room; and so on. But developers know full well that while they are selling a house, they are also selling “an investment”; too much individuality of style or layout may mean higher initial costs plus poor resale possibilities.

Where and When Is This Place?

Current new house styles often evoke images from the past. This seems especially true in higher-priced schemes, which present a bewildering array of possibilities, ranging from highly ornate neo-Victorian to mysteriously transplanted Tudor to grandiose Colonial.

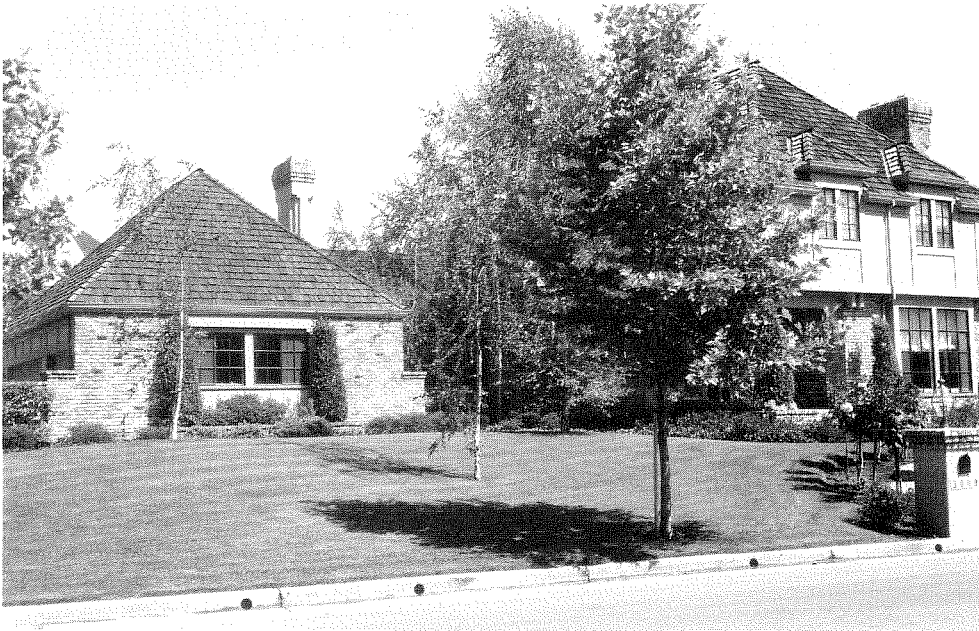
The names of models are very frequently drawn from the Old World, especially British royalty, castles, and stately homes. Perhaps this is a contemporary example of “keeping up with the Joneses”: displaying one’s wealth through a house style reminiscent of homes built by the landed aristocracy in other eras and settings (Southern plantation, French chateau, Scottish castle, English manor house). This symbolism makes some sense



3, 4 Developers are aware that massive chimneys and cascading rooflines convey the image of the warmth of home.



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5 In one high-priced development, buyers are presented with a bewildering array of styles, from Southern plantation to Nantucket “cottage” to Victorian gothic to French chateau.

6 To complete the traditional “historic” image of many new houses, the three-car garage is “rotated” to be approached from the side. From the street, the garage is disguised as a wing of the house, often complete with windows and drapes.

in a state such as California, where there is considerable “new wealth” but few architectural models of “old wealth” to draw on.

Since the three-car garage may produce an anachronistic element in a Victorian or French chateau facade, the latest very high-priced models feature designs where cars enter the lot through a “porte cochère” and loop around the side of the house to a large garage, which from the street side appears to be a wing of the house complete with curtained windows. Thus, the status of the garage has gone full circle, from being secreted at the back of the lot to being incorporated in the house to dominating the street facade to “disappearing” again behind a false front.

Construction of contemporary high-priced houses often employs “traditional” materials, such as stone, wood, and brick. Even less expensive stucco models frequently feature columns, entries, or chimneys showcasing these materials. Mullioned windows are simulated by thin plastic strips applied over large glass windows, and nonstructural exposed beams are often part of family room ceilings. Massive, simulated carved double front doors are often featured, but the tiled entry surface inside extends behind only one door, clearly indicating the other is for show only.

In a world of consumer goods of dubious quality, developers of houses at the highest price ranges woo their customers with messages of “Old World details” and “quality craftsmanship.” A recent conversation with the salesperson for a \$675,000 custom house revealed that the builder had “rejected 70 percent of the marble shipped over from Italy for the fireplaces, and flown in a European wood-carver for two weeks to detail the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century furniture reproductions. . . .” A Sunday newspaper advertisement for a high-priced scheme stated, “In a world of steadily diminishing quality, it is reassuring to know that there is still a place where the custom estate home is cultivated in the time honored tradition. . . .”

In fact, close inspection of many high-priced models revealed brass-plated faucets next to delaminating hollow-core doors and plush carpeting below standard aluminum framed windows. Observing potential buyers inspecting such houses, it is clear that they are mesmerized (deliberately distracted?) by the grandeur of the layout and expensive model home furnishings. Details of doors and windows are far from their minds.

In low-priced subdivisions, the level of quality of materials and detailing is proportional to their price—

what you see is what you get. In many cases, materials and finishes represent a better buy for the dollar than in more expensive houses; ironically, the higher-priced developer can “get away with” lower-quality construction. If we are to believe the advertising, the wealthy are buying community, amenity, exclusiveness, and high-status life-style, and the less wealthy are buying just a house.

In some lower-priced schemes, there is greater emphasis on looking “up to date.” Houses have “contemporary” entries, prominent garage doors, wood-framed chimneys (as opposed to ornate brick chimneys in high-priced models). There are few arched windows, shutters, or antique-style porch lanterns. Is the message from housing developers that the wealthy, who have “made it,” want to relax into styles reminiscent of the Old World aristocracy and the first-house buyers, who are “just making it,” desire a thoroughly modern look? Or is it simply that “Old World” detailing *costs* more and only upper-income house buyers can afford it?

In most price ranges, the interior decor of model homes is heavily biased toward the traditional: chintz, gingham and brocade, “antiques,” prints of old maps, and other historic features are prominently featured. Sales literature

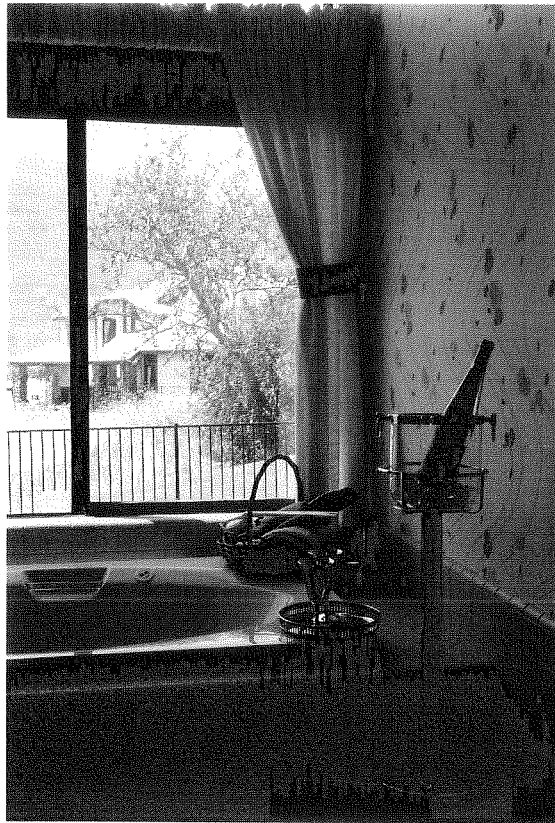


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7 The open-plan layout of all new houses guarantees that a casual visitor will see virtually the whole dwelling from the threshold.



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often creates an “instant past” for home buyers by presenting information on the historic significance of the subdivision locale, specific features incorporated into the new setting, or romantic versions of local “character” stories.

Conspicuous amid all these references to days gone by, a virtual showroom of energy-consuming modern appliances adorns each of the model homes. From double oven with microwave to trash-compactor, instant boiling water device to room-to-room intercom, whirlpool spa-bath to electronic burglar alarm, model homes display a considerable wealth of modern technology. These appliances are usually highlighted in the sales brochures and the advertising, often in the same breath as the traditional family room with beamed ceiling is being lauded. Significantly, when comparing high- and low-priced models, although space standards and quality of materials may be lower in the cheaper houses, the number and quality of standard technical appliances remains essentially the same.

Privacy within the House and between Houses

The issue of privacy as displayed in model house designs also seems to embody a number of mixed messages. Most models create considerable privacy

- 8 **Privacy and distance** from neighbors is clearly a value that is *not* being marketed in contemporary suburbia.
- 9 **A remarkable proportion of master baths** are clearly visible from neighboring houses or the adjacent golf course. Is this deliberate?

barriers to the outside world: houses are buffered by semi-private front yards, views into street-facing windows are controlled by curtains or blinds, and entry is regulated by a peephole or even an intercom. However, once a visitor steps over the threshold, a vast amount of the home's interior is thrown open to view. From the entry one can invariably see fully into both formal living and dining rooms; there is often a partial view into the kitchen and sometimes to the family room; and surprisingly often the visitor can see the bedroom and bathroom entries on the upper floor in a two-story dwelling.

Apart from the exposure of virtually the whole house to casual or relatively unknown visitors, this type of layout affords virtually no privacy *between* areas of the house. Ironically, one of the latest built-in luxuries in higher-priced houses is the intercom to all rooms, perhaps another trick to make the buyers think they have more space or privacy than they do, since the open-plan layout virtually ensures that a call from one room will be heard throughout the house. Family members can achieve complete privacy only in a bedroom or bathroom, and there is little chance of two groups of people in the house—teenagers, for example, plus socializing adults—being engaged in separate activities without having a distinct awareness of each other. This seems to

suggest a desire for the sort of family interaction reminiscent of a peasant family in a one-room cottage. However, the existence of the encapsulated home-within-a-home of the master suite suggests otherwise. This cluster of rooms, often entered through double doors, provides a seemingly luxurious setting for eating, sleeping, relaxing, and bathing quite separate from the rest of the house. Subtle details in the decor—two wine glasses beside the fireplace, a breakfast tray on the king-size bed—suggest that here, at last, you will experience the love life you so richly deserve. Often labeled “The Retreat,” the master suite offers the possibility of leading much of one's life secluded from the ruckus without.

While privacy for the couple within the family is clearly a value that consumers are willing to pay for, privacy *between* houses is apparently not so important. It is ironic that many people seemingly move to the suburbs to escape congested urban life only to find themselves in closer *visual* proximity to neighbors than is the case with many high-density apartment buildings in the city or in single-family neighborhoods dating from the early 1900s. There is not a great deal of difference between new high- and low-priced houses in terms of lot width and front and side yard setbacks. If you have more to spend, you clearly

buy a larger house, more and larger rooms, but not necessarily a larger lot. This wreaks considerable havoc with the historic “landholding” image often being evoked in the facade design, since such homes were in historic times almost invariably surrounded by extensive grounds. While salespeople of high-priced models are anxious to tell you about the square footage of the house and luxury extras, we found many reluctant to divulge (or ignorant of) the actual size of the lot.

Compounding the problems of relatively small lots, private areas of houses are amazingly frequently violated by insensitive window location. In some very grand models, balconies off master suites were entirely visible for blocks around or massive entries topped by glass windows afforded a direct view of the stairway to the upper floor to any passerby. Perhaps the very wealthy are willing to relinquish a degree of privacy in return for an opportunity to display their opulent life-style—a return, perhaps, to the picture window of the 1950s.

Another breach of privacy, which we would have believed to be an unfortunate oversight, were it not for its fairly consistent repetition was the placement of windows in bathrooms. In many homes, the master bath, the retreat within the retreat, a luxurious inner sanctum

dedicated to the personal concerns of body maintenance and sensuality, was quite open to views from certain locations *beyond* the house. Surprisingly, master baths had windows of regular, transparent glass placed either within a shower enclosure, so that any normal curtaining effort would be exposed to water and steam, or placed within the room in such a way as to be almost inaccessible for lowering a blind. If the view into the bath was not desired, the window would essentially have to be permanently covered, which raises questions about its provision in the first place. After our initial astonishment wore off, we began to wonder if the windows afforded a deliberate form of “social flashing” of opulent bathrooms and their luxuriating owners to next-door neighbors, passersby, or, in some cases, golfers on adjacent fairways. When we asked salespeople about this issue, they always looked surprised and remarked, “No one has ever complained.”

Perceived versus Usable Space

One of the greatest conflicts displayed in suburban model houses centers around space. Developers and designers of today's new houses seem to place less value on efficient or ingenious floor plans and more on fostering an *impression* of greater space. This is nothing new; pattern books as long ago as the turn of the



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10 Perceived interior space is enhanced by open-plan layouts and “cathedral” ceilings. How do you water the plants?

century encouraged open layouts to enhance a sense of space. The pervasive use of what has become known as the “cathedral” ceiling (a double height area that may include both formal living and dining rooms and that, in turn, is open to the corridor or landing leading to upper bedrooms and bathrooms of a two-story house) creates the effect of “borrowed space,” where any given room appears larger because the space flows into the area beyond. That open quality is further enhanced by open staircases, with risers omitted to permit visual transparency. It is important to note, however, that virtually all of these mechanisms for creating an *impression* of greater space in fact subtract from the potential for actual *usable* space. A closed stair can enclose a stair-closet, useful for many types of storage that even in higher-priced houses is still minimally provided. In models with cathedral ceilings, extension of the second floor would have created considerable extra space on the upper floor, allowing for more rooms or for dramatically larger secondary bedrooms (maybe even big enough for serious Lego building, say). Considering its effect on privacy and energy consumption, it appears that consumers pay dearly for the impression of greater space.

Interestingly enough, the double height ceilings have created a whole new array

of essentially useless spaces: ledges that help to define the spaces below and bridge-type elements that differentiate space and serve structural functions. These are used by the model home decorators to house an astonishing array of artifacts and plants—many quite bizarre, such as a giant dead cactus—that are supposed to enhance the spaces they decorate. Apart from their questionable decorative potential, these spaces are virtually unreachable—except by a tall ladder from below—for watering plants (no wonder the cactus was dead) or dusting and removing cobwebs. For that matter, many collections of large earthenware pots seen adorning these places in some models could prove dangerous or fatal in case of an earthquake.

The emphasis on the illusion of greater space is further enhanced by styles of model home decoration. Although the scaled down furniture trick does not seem to be so prevalent now, decorators make plentiful use of glass, see-through tables, and large reflecting mirrors on almost every imaginable surface to extend the apparent size of rooms and perhaps to allow buyers to “picture themselves” in this luxurious setting.

There is a pervasive concern at all price ranges about providing an impressive entry. Even the lower-priced models sport massive double entry doors with gleaming

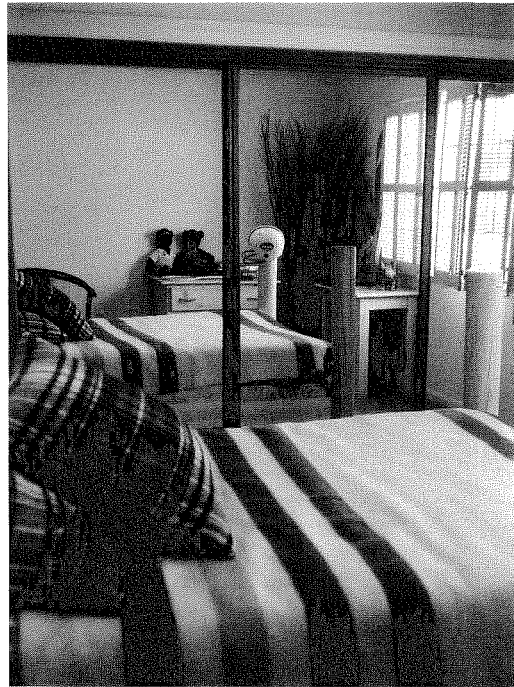
“brass” hardware. The most “exclusive” houses provide some rather astonishing interpretations, from a twenty-six foot entrance “tower” to covered, drive-through porticos reminiscent of hotels or mansions of an earlier era. This ostentatious show of the owners’ wealth seems peculiarly out of step both with the subsequent informal arrangement of the house interior and overall casual California life-styles. To make quite an issue of the arrival of guests at one’s door when the next instant they’ll be exposed to everything from the kids and dog watching television in the family room to someone rushing in their bathrobe from an upstairs bedroom to the bathroom is yet another mixed message. Likewise, when the family probably spends 95 percent of their time entering the house via the garage, bringing in groceries or returning sweaty from tennis, one questions the relevance of the little used and even less often lived-up-to elaborate entry.

Sex Role Cues

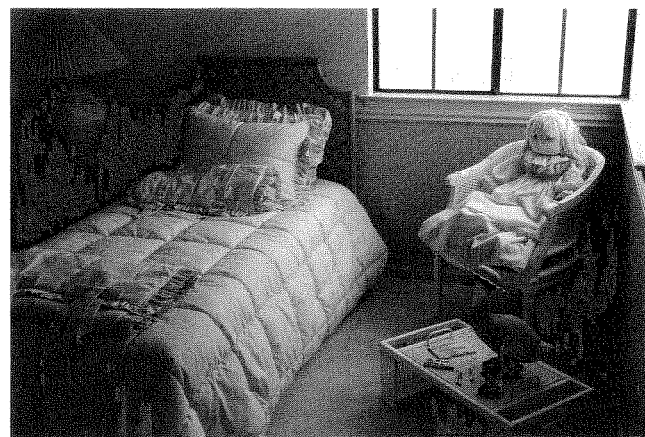
The decoration of model homes offers an interesting array of sex role cues, which by their presence or absence serve to reinforce some conflicting views of who the family is and what family members do in the 1980s. In a departure from the past, kitchens are no longer made explicitly the woman’s territory. They are in fact most often presented in a carefully

neuter mode or as distinctly “gourmet” kitchens, with overtones of cheffy extravagance more appealing to a male cook or “super mom” than a “homemaker.” While this seems to imply that the work of preparing meals is now a shared responsibility, a conflicting message is generated by the areas of the house geared to casual relaxation. The family rooms, dens, and bonus rooms are almost uniformly furnished and advertised with a distinctly masculine motif—incorporating pipe racks, fishing paraphernalia, hunting prints on the walls, model cars and trains, pool tables, and heavy leather furniture—which seems to imply that the men spend more time in leisure pursuits at home than do the women. This then contradicts the earlier impression that the work of maintaining the family is shared. Indeed, a recent Sunday paper ad for the highest-priced development in the Bay Area depicts a man relaxing in an easy chair with newspaper, pipe, and slippers while his wife hovers nearby and small daughter and sheep dog relax on the hearth rug. Apparently, “traditional” sex roles are alive and well; recent research into households in Chicago and New York indicates that in the majority of professional, two-working-parent families, men do less than 15 percent of the housework or other household chores.

When an office or work setup in a den is presented in some



11



12

11, 12 Traditional sex role cues in model house bedrooms. A boy's room has chunky pillows, rough wood bedposts, and a football helmet. A girl's room has pink wallpaper, ruffles, and a doll.



higher-priced model homes, it is invariably decorated to imply male usage. This suggests that if not simply relaxing while the woman handles the bulk of the household duties, the man must then be engaged in serious career-oriented work. The only desk-type work areas provided for women tend to be located within the master (!) suite and include fashionably colored stationery, engraved invitations, and perhaps a diary—certainly no computer terminals.

Bedrooms intended for young children present subtle reinforcements of traditional sex role stereotypes. Rooms for young boys are almost always oriented to competitive sports, with baseball bats and mitts, basketball trophies, or pictures of school sports teams. The colors are more subdued and the lines cleaner and simpler than in the girls' rooms, which use a lot of white painted or wicker furniture, frilled and ruffled accessories with floral patterns, and collections of dolls. Artwork in girls' rooms features ballet or cute puppies and kittens; boys' rooms flaunt flashy high-tech renderings of motorcycles and sports cars. The most "active" orientation seen in a model home girl's room was a horse-show theme, with riding boots and crop artfully scattered about and a display of cups and ribbons from hypothesized horse show triumphs. This was still all played out against a ruffly, floral background. In

virtually none of the models looked at was a desk provided in the "girl's room"; presumably if female children do homework at all, it is adjacent to the television or wet bar in the family room. It seems that while sex role stereotyping has become uncomfortable for many adults, such roles are still part of the collective consciousness in defining children's positions.

Though some may dismiss these decor stereotypes as amusing and harmless, we disagree. Reinforcing the stereotype that boys are/need to be "tough" and competitive and girls are "frilly" does a disservice to the full development of both sexes. Sex-stereotyped model home furnishings will one day seem as embarrassingly prejudiced as the billboards and magazine ads of the 1950s, which depicted all people as white.

Leisure

Leisure-related issues are prominently discussed in the sales brochures and advertising of model homes. Great emphasis is placed on the abundance of labor-saving devices and on the provision of "low maintenance" landscaping, allowing the homeowner freedom from regular duties to enjoy increased leisure time. However, it becomes clear that a very limited concept of leisure is addressed and that the majority of such activities are presumed to take place away from the home. Within

the home, the only clear messages regarding any type of recreational activity center around alcohol. Some of the more expensive houses feature rather extravagantly decorated home bars. One bar we observed featured mirrors on the ceiling and all walls and gave a completely disorienting impression of a countless number of identical people floating into a spacy limbo of hanging plants and stemware. Another was mysteriously revealed, at the flick of a switch, hidden behind a French seventeenth-century reproduction carved bookcase. The lower-priced models often feature a wet bar off the family room or in the den cum guest room; when such an amenity isn't present, its possibility is indicated in the sales brochure floor plan. In contrast, there is no provision for other likely hobbies or leisure pursuits such as serious sewing; nowhere but the garage for any type of furniture refinishing, model-making, pottery, or other messy endeavors; inadequate kitchen storage space for home canning or preserving; lack of yard space for vegetable gardening; and so forth.

The greatest emphasis outside the home is on competitive sports. Sales literature—even for the lower-priced schemes—waxes poetic about tennis courts and swimming pools, and in the more exclusive developments, they play up golf courses and soccer fields. The irony is, however,

that what health educators consider now to be the most overall beneficial form of exercise, simple walking, is neither mentioned nor encouraged. Sidewalks are rarely provided. The luxuriously designed golf courses of many higher-priced developments are laced with concrete pathways to accommodate motorized golf carts; tennis courts and swimming pools are provided with ample car parks. Heaven forbid that one should walk to the setting of one's chosen form of exercise.

Another mixed message—but certainly one not confined to suburbia—is the juxtaposition of a 1980s health-and-fitness orientation together with an almost obsessive focus on food. Magazines of gourmet eating decorate the coffee table; the latest in cookware is displayed in the kitchen. All the model houses we observed had a variety of locations indicated as possible eating places, with formal dining rooms and kitchen nooks being so basic as to be almost unworthy of mention. We also saw stools at bars between kitchen and family room; small tables set up for eating in the corners of family rooms; cozy tête-à-tête seatings in master retreats; and various dining setups on balconies, patios, decks, and courtyards. What was arresting was that each home exhibited *most* of these possibilities rather than a representative few. A recent decorating trend seems to be

in providing more faux edibles for these settings—plastic renditions of martinis (with olives), iced tea (with ice cubes), and ceramic cantaloupe slices—perhaps to ensure that we get the message.

For the Sake of the Children

Surely one of the most perplexing (and disturbing) contradictions in new subdivisions centers around the value placed on children. While moving to the suburbs “for the sake of the children” has long been an accepted rationale, the environment created there for them—as exemplified by the model homes—leaves much to be desired. While the adults of the family are now almost always afforded an owner's suite of major proportions, the children are relegated to bedrooms scarcely large enough to hold a bed, dresser, and desk and certainly too small for a train set or other such toys or for a child-turned-teenager to socialize with friends.

The master suite, while possibly enriching the relationship of the couple, may imply an ambivalent attitude toward children and family life. Children are no longer welcome in the parents' bedroom (“The Retreat”), since there are frequently no doors between sleeping and bathing areas, and privacy required for bathing now extends into the bedroom. In one higher-priced model, not

13, 14 This pleasant pathway is reserved for golf-cart vehicles in a development where children are forced to ride their bicycles in the street and low densities seemingly encourage the use of motor scooters by children well below the legal age.



15

15 Spec-built house priced at more than a million dollars, designed to support a movie image of the romanticized “good life” in times of uncertainty and rapid social change.

only were children relegated to a children’s “zone” but the master suite was literally connected to the rest of the house by a bridge. Children, it seems, must be stored away to ensure their parents’ privacy.

Since the family room is usually completely open to the rest of the main living areas, it is clear that loud or boisterous play may not be welcome there. Outdoors, the dimensions of the backyard inhibit most active play, and in fact the models often feature decks or patios clearly intended for adult use, some even dominated by hot tubs. Beyond the home, lack of sidewalks or bike paths limits children’s mobility; the “scraping bare” of the landscape leaves few places to explore; and low densities and lack of public transportation render children almost entirely reliant on adults for transportation.

If the insistence on adult auto use in this car-oriented culture is understandable, what of children and teenagers who want some mobility on their own—a potentially “explosive” situation with newly independent adolescents? The golf-cart pathways in many schemes would be ideal for cycling, but this is not allowed: “It might be dangerous” say the developers (a.k.a. “We might be sued.”). On several occasions we asked sales-representatives of the Bay Area’s highest-priced

scheme what there was for children, and we were always assured, “We have an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a soccer field, and 16 tennis courts.” Not much consolation for the parents of children younger than seven or eight. No wonder a recent Sunday newspaper advertisement for this development showed two preschoolers having a “fun” encounter with the kindly guard at the security gate, a situation not unlike bored children of the English gentry seeking solace in the servants’ wing. In no tract that we have observed recently was there either a park or play equipment; “something for the children” is evidently not a major selling point.

The lower the price of the house, the more it seems there is passing acknowledgment of the needs of children. A low-priced subdivision in Hercules, for example, located schools, parks, and “a mall for family shopping” on a map of the vicinity; a development in Redwood City provided a sandbox in the common space. These, however, are exceptions rather than the rule.

Perhaps the tide is about to turn. In one 1986 Bay Area scheme in the \$200,000–\$300,000 range, a unique offering is now included: a baby’s room. This developer may be cleverly playing to the yearnings of mid-thirties, childless, two-career couples who have put off having

a family and are now “up against the clock.”

Although babies are occasionally acknowledged and children recognized in sex-stereotyped bedrooms, no models encountered in the Bay Area admitted to the existence of teenagers; it is as if this awkward (and feared?) age group does not exist. No wonder that in one very high-priced development, rich teenagers are reportedly burglarizing each other's homes out of boredom and engaging in a new suburban “sport” known as “turfin’”—driving cars deliberately over neighbor's lawns to create ruts in the pristine sod.

Stage Set, Or Family Abode

The very latest sales ploy in high-priced homes is to sell the customer *all* the model home furnishings, down to sheets and silverware, along with the house. This meets the needs of busy executives who “haven't time” to shop around for domestic appliances and furniture and who need an “instant home.” The house has become a personal hotel to be moved into, lived in, and sold again as a total package.

Finally, one can't help asking what these model homes are a setting *for*, exactly what scenarios the designers and decorators envision taking place within them. The traditional family of father going to work, mother staying at home, and two

children now represents only 5 percent of all households, yet typical model “homes” nearly always imply this kind of grouping. Clearly developers are trying to sell a “home” and not just a house. The continued presence of the “family room,” with table arranged for a cozy family meal, implies that “traditional” values are available *here*, whatever the sociologists tell us. A recent study in Chicago asked high school students to describe a family meal in their home. Most responded, “What *is* a family meal?” A summer 1986 television documentary on “The American Family” interviewed a teenage girl from an upscale suburb of Dallas; along with talk of frequent corporate moves and teen suicides, she mentioned, almost casually, “It must be five years since my mother, my father, and I all sat down and ate a meal together at the same time.”

Despite (or perhaps because of) the rising divorce rate, model home furnishings and decor tends to evoke romantic or dramatic vignettes: the host couple in formal attire throwing open their impressively carved wooden front door with brass hardware to welcome their stylish and charming guests; the romantic evening in the master suite, silk bathrobes on the loveseat before the fireplace and champagne on the glass table; a creative afternoon in the kitchen concocting gourmet masterpieces for tomorrow's buffet using

copper utensils, French cookbooks, and microwave. Although most model home viewers are probably sophisticated enough to realize that every day does not pass in a whirlwind of social affairs and romantic interludes, as humans we are more persuaded by the notion of how things might be than how daily life truly is. Model house designers play on this theme: if the decor “tells” the customer that in *this* house their marriage will blossom or business will succeed, some will be persuaded. Is that so bad? After all, these houses do sell. Indeed, but we feel it is important to point out that many of the qualities people *think* they are getting with this purchase—privacy, a life in the country, a good environment for the children, lots of space, a good quality house—may prove to be empty promises. The average nondesigner house buyer is not highly sophisticated in making judgments about house layouts and subdivision planning, and you can't “test drive” a new house.

Perhaps, *au fond*, the many mixed messages of contemporary suburban models are disturbing reflections of the all-too-human tendency to fill emotional and spiritual gaps with material goods. Developers cannot sell happiness, success, family togetherness, or nuptial bliss, but they are adept at selling the *symbols* of these evanescent values. As long as the

symbol is still intact, we can deny that problems are rife and that alternative forms of dwelling and neighborhood may be better for some of us and for our children. While the American family is under threat in these changing times, its material symbol—the new, detached house—is very much alive and well.