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Vulgaria

The Re-Enchantment of Suburbia

Commentary

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Abstract

This commentary interprets the development of upscale American suburbs in terms of the changing political economy associated with distinctive phases of political-economic development. The current outcome, it is suggested, is “Vulgaria,” the emblematic cultural landscapes of contemporary American suburbia. They are landscapes of bigness and spectacle, characterized by packaged developments, simulated settings, and conspicuous consumption, and they have naturalized an ideology of competitive consumption, moral minimalism, and disengagement from notions of social justice and civil society.

These landscapes are examined as an expression of modernity, focusing on the interdependence of consumption and production within the political economy of modern urbanization, on the roles of suburbia in terms of consumption and, in particular, on the “enchantment” that is necessary to sustained consumption and capital accumulation under successive phases of capital development and waves of metropolitan growth.

Keywords: Consumption, Enchantment, New Urbanism, Re-enchantment, Suburbia, Vulgaria

Introduction

Suburbia is, to borrow Umberto Eco’s term, an “open text”—an endlessly interpretable landscape (Eco 1989; Bondanella 1997). American suburbia has indeed been endlessly interpreted, but predominantly in terms of idealistic assumptions and deterministic concepts. Thus, a great deal of conventional wisdom has it that American suburbs are best understood in terms of the ideals of progressive arcadian

utopias that are rooted in the Jeffersonian Arcadian Myth or the Frontier Myth (Popper, Lang, and Popper 2001; Smith 1971; White and Limerick 1994). Equally, a great deal of conventional wisdom is framed in rather deterministic terms, focusing on the existence of abundant, cheap land in combination with cheap transportation and lax regulation. In many accounts, contemporary suburbia is thus a creature of

deep-rooted arcadian and/or pioneer values coupled with (subsidized) automobile dependency and a permissive approach to land use and real estate development.

In this commentary, I explore suburbanization as an expression of modernity, focusing on the roles of suburbia in terms of consumption and, in particular, on the enchantment that is necessary to sustained consumption and capital accumulation under successive phases of political-economic development. This is not to deny the influence of progressive arcadian ideals (the Jeffersonian agrarian vision, Thoreau's transcendentalism, Wright's Usonian utopianism, an ambivalent but generalized anti-urbanism, etc.) that have underpinned the moral geography of suburban development in the United States (Duncan and Duncan 2004; Fishman 2002). Nor is it to deny the past influence of the Road Gang and federal subsidies (Gutfreund 2004; Squires 2002) or the contemporary influence of cheap gasoline and the shortcomings of land use planning on the morphology of suburbia (Gillham 2002; Szold and Carbonell 2002). Rather, the intention is to address the "open text" of contemporary American suburbia in terms of a complementary view that emphasizes the interdependence of consumption and production within the political economy of modern urbanization.

This requires an approach that recognizes the nature of suburbia as both structured and structuring. Economic and social relations are constituted, constrained, and mediated through space. At the same time, the built environment is continuously restructured in response to processes of production and consumption and their attendant economic and social relations. Such an approach allows interpretation of the growth and development of suburbia as a consequence of modernity,¹ an

expression of modernity, and a conditioner of modernity (Silverstone 1997; Taylor 1999). The modern metropolis, initially a product of the political economy of the manufacturing era, has been remade in the image of consumer society. Meanwhile, the roles of suburbia have been recast several times. The changing political economy associated with successive phases of capital development and successive waves of metropolitan growth was reflected in significant changes in what Ball (1986) calls the "structures of building provision." Producers have had to contend with changing technologies, building systems, regulatory environments, and financial systems; consumers, meanwhile, were responding to dramatically changing physical environments, social structures, and patterns of disposable income. In the process, suburbs have been reconceived from intellectual utopias to bourgeois utopias to degenerative utopias to conservative utopias, each with a distinctive physical form and moral landscape.

Enchantment and disenchantment

The appeal of suburbia under these changing conditions has been dependent, in large measure, on the *enchantment* of suburbia as an object of (and setting for) consumption. This may seem at odds with the idea of suburbia as an expression of modernity. Max Weber famously depicted modernity as a process of rationalization of what had hitherto been an enchanted, mystical, and magical world (a parallel to Emile Durkheim's influential interpretation, couched in terms of a transition from the "sacred" to the "profane"). According to Weberian analysis, modernization is inevitably a process of disenchantment. But neo-Weberian scholars have developed the idea of a recursive cycle of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment that

1 Understood here in broad terms as the dominant social order of Western societies, characterized by individualism, rationality, large-scale social integration, and the idea of progress (Giddens 1990).

is closely tied to the dreams, aspirations, imagined worlds, and moral geographies that shape and reshape consumer preferences in response to changing technologies and product cycles (Campbell 1989; Ritzer 1999). These dreams and preferences, in turn, are of course the focus of the mythmakers and advertisers that are essential to the circulation of capital (Twitchell 1999).

The argument, in brief, is this: Successive phases of capitalist development have required material products to become enchanted—freighted with positive symbolic meaning—to enhance their appeal to consumers. But in the process of meeting large-scale demand, the products themselves become routinized and commonplace, ownership diffuses, and the products lose their enchantment. New iterations of products subsequently have to become re-enchanted for consumer demand to be sustained at the maximum level.

The enchantment of the earliest suburbs can be traced to the intellectual utopias devised by Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes, and others, all of whom drew heavily on an intense imaginary of an alternative world, both physical and social: a sanitized arcadia of collective privacy and respectability. Realized in built form as “borderlands” and “bourgeois utopias,” the first manifestations of suburbia capitalized on this imaginary in responding to changing ideologies of the family and the impulse toward what Evangelical writers at the time called the “reformation of manners,” contrasting the new “sacred” spaces of suburbia to the “profane” industrial city (Fishman 1987; Stilgoe 1990). Meanwhile, the development of early suburbs provided an outlet for the investment of newly won capital that the new middle classes had at their disposal. “Hence, right from the beginning, the suburban landscape was commodified . . . Once the ideal had been established, and once the family had been

remade to fit the landscape, even as the landscape was remade to fit the family, suburbia exploded, becoming, as it were, the only option for respectable middle-class life” (Mitchell 2000, p. 129). Inevitably, perhaps, this also led to a great deal of vulgar ostentation on the part of some—as, for example, in the homes of Victoria Park, outside Manchester, described by Fishman (1987).

Disenchanted suburbs and degenerate utopias

The advent of the automobile intruded on this ideal and prompted revised imaginaries from a new generation of mythmakers and enchanters, including Frank Lloyd Wright, whose visions of “Broadacre City” and “Usonian” architecture were overtly populist and democratic. The Good Roads lobby, together with federal tax, banking, and housing laws and regulations, quickly facilitated greater access to suburbia—though it was mostly in the form of a rapidly spreading “Crabgrass Frontier” (Jackson 1985) rather than through any realization of visionary schemes. At any rate, the moral landscape of the suburbs now became one of democracy and material well-being: the classic American Dream. A Fordist political economy brought mass production and mass consumption, with Levittown the precursor of hundreds of thousands of acres of standardized subdivisions of “sitcom suburbs” (Hayden 2003). Suburban homes became idealized settings for family life, and suburbia became the locus of a “Paradise Spell” (Brooks 2004) of relentless aspiration and restless consumption.

It was at this point, though, that disenchantment began to set in. Although Fordism had schooled Americans to think of consumption in terms of quantity and value rather than excellence or distinction, the realities of “post-Utopian suburbia” (Rybczynski 1995) led to a conventional wisdom of suburbia as some kind of placeless “subtopia.” Lewis Mumford

gave early voice to this disenchantment, deploring the way that suburbanization was producing “more and more of worse and worse.” Meanwhile, the utopian idealism that had lent enchantment to suburbia had all but disappeared. Bourgeois utopias had become developers’ utopias. As a result, the moral landscapes of suburbia increasingly reflected material culture and consumerism rather than democracy or social reform. The suburbs had become, to borrow David Harvey’s term, “degenerate utopias” (Harvey 2000).

Suburbs as proscenia for consumption

Historian Lizabeth Cohen (2003) has traced the development of a “consumers’ republic” in the United States in the post–World War II era: a society based on mass consumption of automobiles, houses, and manufactured household goods. Conspicuous consumption, identified as an outcome of modernity by 19th-century sociologists such as Simmel and Veblen, diffused from the bourgeoisie to the mass middle classes, and meanwhile expanded from the arenas of fine food, fashion, and leisure to encompass every sphere of life. Material consumption also *intensified* with increasing affluence and as the symbolic value of people’s consumption became increasingly important to their image and status (Clarke 2003; Shields 1992). Houses themselves became “totem objects,” symbols of self-identity and fundamental components of the new identity kit for middle-class status (Low 2003; Madigan and Munro 1996). They also became the proscenia for the enactment of middle-class lifestyles that centered increasingly on material consumption.

In the process, traditional identity markers having to do with class, ethnicity, and community were eclipsed by consumption-related identities. Thus emerged consumer “tribes” (Maffesoli 1996) for whom image, status, and identity is tightly bound to driving a certain type of car, living in a certain type

of home, wearing particular designer labels, and so on. Consumer knowledgeability and the intensified symbolic value of material consumption led to a “reflexive” form of modernization in which consumption is disembedded from communal values, so that people are better able to monitor and evaluate their individual place in society (Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). As Juliet Schor put it in straightforward terms in her book, *The Overspent American*, “many of us are continually comparing our own lifestyle and possessions to those of a select group of people we respect and want to be like, people whose sense of what’s important in life seems close to our own” (1998, p. 3). Consumption, in other words, has come to equate with the enactment of certain lifestyles. The fact that many of these lifestyles are played out in suburban settings implies a certain re-enchantment of suburbia.

Conservative utopias and re-encharnted suburbs

Rethinking contemporary American suburbia as re-encharnted means that we must address the fundamental questions of re-encharntment *by* whom, and re-encharntment *for* whom. But to do so requires, first, some attention to the political economy associated with contemporary social and metropolitan change. A great deal has been written about the causes, consequences, and characteristics of the changes that have occurred in the post-Fordist era dating from the mid-1970s. The reorganization of production and consumption on a global scale and the consequent reshaping within America of social and occupational structures and income distribution has been accompanied by profound shifts in social, cultural, and political sensibilities. A hedonistic, postmodern culture has contributed to a “society of the spectacle” with a new emphasis on visual consumption, simulation, nostalgia, and themed environments (Baudrillard 1998; Debord

1995). A new, informational economy has reframed markets around “reflexive accumulation” (Lash and Urry 1992). And a distinctive new neoliberal politics has emerged, predicated on a minimalist role for the state and asserting the desirability of free markets as the ideal condition not only for economic organization, but also for political and social life (Brenner and Theodore 2002).

In the United States, neoliberalism has been accompanied by the emergence of “national-greatness” conservatism, the abandonment of Keynesian policies of full employment, the privatization and deregulation of the economy, and the attenuation of notions of social justice and civil society. At the metropolitan level, the overarching goal of neoliberal politics and policies has been to mobilize metropolitan space “as an arena for both market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices” (Brenner and Theodore 2002, p. 21). Neoliberalism also has encouraged an extremist property rights movement in its aim of abolishing all attempts to regulate land use (the “monster,” as Kunstler puts it, behind the American Dream—Kunstler 1996, p. 29).

This socio-cultural climate has propagated a distinctive new iteration of suburbia. Heavily packaged and themed, often walled and gated, it is a conservative utopia of premium spaces. Packaging, theming, and gating, together with simulation, have re-enchanted suburbia for the affluent upper-middle classes (and, therefore, for the less affluent but aspiring middle classes). Ritzer (2003) describes these re-enchanted spaces in terms of “islands” in the social geography resulting from the rationalization of the post-Fordist economy. Physically designed and tightly regulated through homeowners’ associations to provide privacy, autonomy, stability, security, and partition, these re-enchanted suburbs have in turn propagated a kind of moral minimalism in their indifference

to metropolitanwide issues (Baumgartner 1988). Bound only by their contracted commitment to lead a private life, people in these settings have little social contact with neighbors, virtually no social interaction beyond their workplace and, as a result, few bonds of mutual responsibility. It is this asocial quality and its attendant moral minimalism that prompts Ritzer (2003) to describe upscale gated communities not just as “islands” but as “islands of the living dead.”

What is enchanting about contemporary suburbia, then, is not its social life but its appeal to people’s exclusionary impulses and, above all, to their self-identity as consumers. This appeal resonates with the predilection for spectacle and simulacra that characterizes the contemporary culture. In the built environment, these traits are most striking as manifest in Disneyland and its competitors, in waterfront “festival” redevelopments, and in Las Vegas casino hotels such as the Bellagio, the Luxor, the Paris, and the Venetian. But suburbia has its full share of spectacle and simulation that includes thousands of private master-planned communities in neo-traditional style and tens of thousands of megastructures, including spectacularly large churches as well as gigantic and spectacular retail malls—“cathedrals of consumption” that provide “magical, fantastic, and enchanted settings” (Ritzer 1999, p. 8) that facilitate the material consumption that is translated into “lifestyles” in suburbia (Knox 1993a).

The enchanted

Whereas the degenerative utopias of the postwar era were marketed principally to middle-middle and lower-middle class markets, the re-enchanted suburbs of the contemporary era are being marketed principally to the affluent professional classes generated by the reshaped social and occupational structures of the “new economy.” Scott Lash and others refer to these classes as the “advanced

services middle classes”—the innovative class fraction associated with “reflexive modernization” and the principal patrons of symbolic consumption (Lash and Urry 1992; Beck, Giddens, and Lash 1994). Soja refers to them simply as “Upper Professionals,” noting that this group “demands much more and has the public and private power to make its demands fit into the crowded, edgy, and fragmented built environment, increasingly shaping the citybuilding process to their own image” (2000, p. 276).

What do we know about the preferences of this group (i.e., their possible predispositions to “enchantment”) and their relative importance within the contemporary metropolis? A preliminary sketch can

be derived from the consumer groups identified by SRI Consulting Business Intelligence (SRIC-BI) in terms of people’s primary consumer motivation. The SRIC-BI taxonomy of consumers is based on market research showing that people select houses and purchase products, services, and experiences that give shape, substance, and character to their identities and lifestyles.

Two of SRIC-BI’s most interesting consumer groups in the context of this commentary are “Innovators” and “Achievers.” According to SRIC-BI’s GeoVALS™ Psychology of Markets, consumers can be differentiated according to three kinds of primary motivations: ideals, achievement, and self-expression. They can also, of course, be

Figure 1: MSAs with Highest Percentages of Innovators and Achievers



Metropolitan Statistical Areas in the coterminous United States with the highest percentages of Innovators (13 percent or more of the adult population) and Achievers (17 percent or more of the adult population).

Source: SRI Consulting Business Intelligence’s GeoVALS™

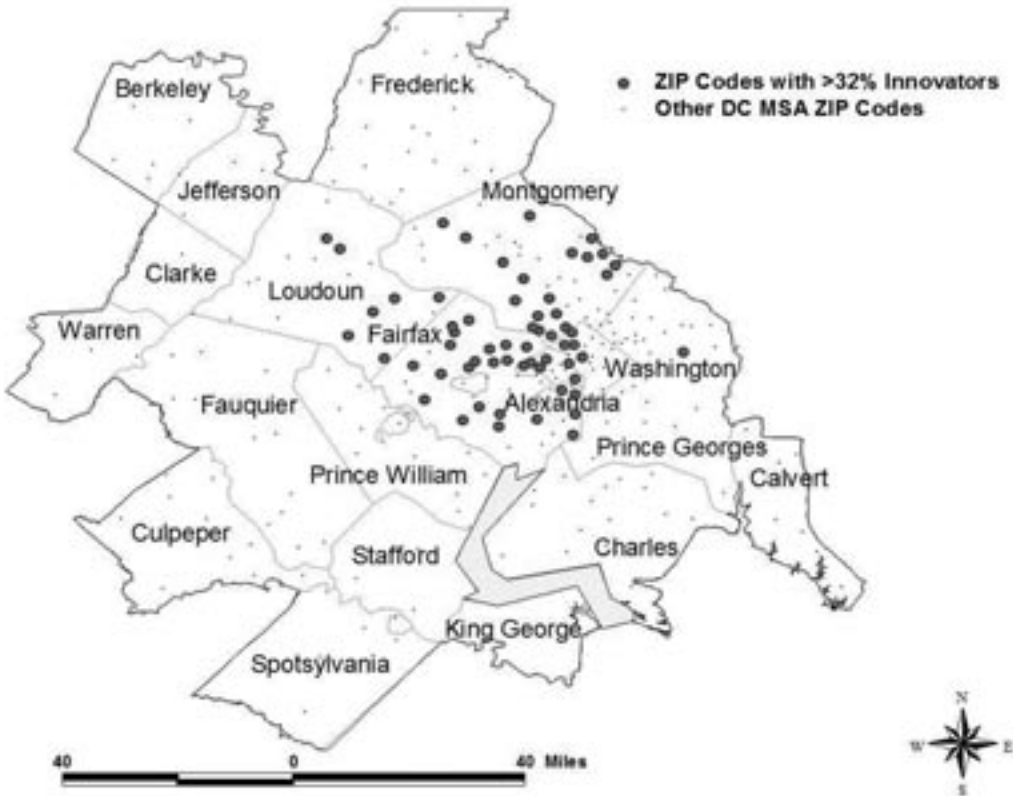
differentiated in terms of their resources: income and wealth, but also health, self-confidence, energy, and awareness of current ideas, products, and styles. Innovators have the most resources, as defined in this broad way. They tend to be well-educated, self-confident, open to innovation, and energetic. They tend to experience more “positive life experiences” (promotions, raises, etc.) than other groups and, when they do, they often reward themselves with some form of consumption. Their consumption patterns are closely geared to their personalities. Achievers also have relatively high levels of resources but are characterized primarily by their conservatism and the emphasis that they place on status, structure, stability, and predictability. As consumers, they favor homes, neighborhoods, products, and services that demonstrate their success to their peers. Achievers are highly imitative, making purchases similar to those of others whose opinions they value or of those they wish to emulate (SRIC-BI 2003).

Together, Innovators and Achievers make up almost 25 percent of the adult population in the United States. Innovators account for 1 in 10 of the adult population. They are, however, distributed unevenly across metropolitan areas. The pattern reflects, very broadly, the economic and cultural geography of the country (Figure 1). In the San Francisco–Oakland Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) and the Washington, DC–Baltimore MSA, around 20 percent of the adult population are Innovators. Other MSAs where Innovators represent at least 15 percent of the adult population include Austin–San Marcos (TX), Boston–Worcester–Lawrence (MA–NH–ME–CT), Charlottesville (VA), Corvallis (OR), Denver–Boulder–Greeley (CO), Iowa City (IA), Madison (WI), New London–Norwich (CT), New York–Northern New Jersey–Long Island (NY–NJ), Raleigh–Durham–Chapel Hill (NC), Santa Fe (NM), and Rochester (MN).

All of these MSAs except New York–Northern New Jersey–Long Island also contain above-average percentages of Achievers—i.e., more than 14 percent of the adult population. In some MSAs, Achievers constitute between 18 and 21 percent of the adult population: Anchorage (AK), Atlanta (GA), Austin–San Marcos (TX), Cedar Rapids (IA), Colorado Springs (CO), Denver–Boulder–Greeley (CO), Fort Collins–Loveland (CO), Madison (WI), Minneapolis–St. Paul (MN), Portland–Salem (OR–WA), Provo–Orem (UT), Rochester (MN), Salt Lake City (UT), San Francisco–Oakland (CA), and Seattle–Tacoma–Bremerton (WA).

This broad geography also is apparent at the more detailed spatial scale of ZIP Code areas. Concentrations of Innovators reflect a bicoastal pattern, the highest percentages occurring within metropolitan areas of the northeastern seaboard and coastal California. The highest concentrations of Achievers, in contrast, are distributed throughout America’s heartland, almost all of them located in the suburbs of metropolitan areas. At the scale of five-digit ZIP Codes, we can also begin to see the degree of residential segregation of different consumer groups within metropolitan areas. In the Washington, DC, metropolitan area, for example, high concentrations of Innovators reflect a distinctive social geography, dominating Fairfax County (VA), along with much of Montgomery County (MD) and Loudoun County (VA) (Figure 2). Achievers are localized in a broadly similar but rather more decentralized pattern (Figure 3). Concentrations of Innovators constitute more than 50 percent of the adult population in some ZIP Code areas, reaching around 58 percent in Kenilworth (Cook County, IL), Glen Echo (Montgomery County, MD), and Waban (Middlesex County, MA). Achievers are somewhat less concentrated, with the highest levels at the scale of ZIP Codes ranging between 30 and 35 percent.

Figure 2: Location of Innovators in the Washington, DC Metro Area



Distribution of ZIP Code areas with a high incidence of Innovators (top quintile), Washington, DC, Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Source: SRI Consulting Business Intelligence’s GeoVALS™

The enchanters

In response to disenchantment among consumers with placeless Fordist subtopias, developers were quick to see the commercial advantages of switching their activities away from standardized subdivisions to focus instead on packaged subdivisions. Such packaging typically involves a variety of lifestyle features—golf courses, bicycle paths, jogging tracks, horse trails, community centers with neighborhood spas and tennis courts, and so on—along with touches of luxury and distinction—gazebos, carp ponds, allées of specimen trees, protected-view corridors, expensive fencing and landscaping—all knit together among historic illusions and allusions such as bandstands, clock towers, simulated village greens, town squares, Main Streets, and faux antique street furniture (Knox 1993b). Developers also

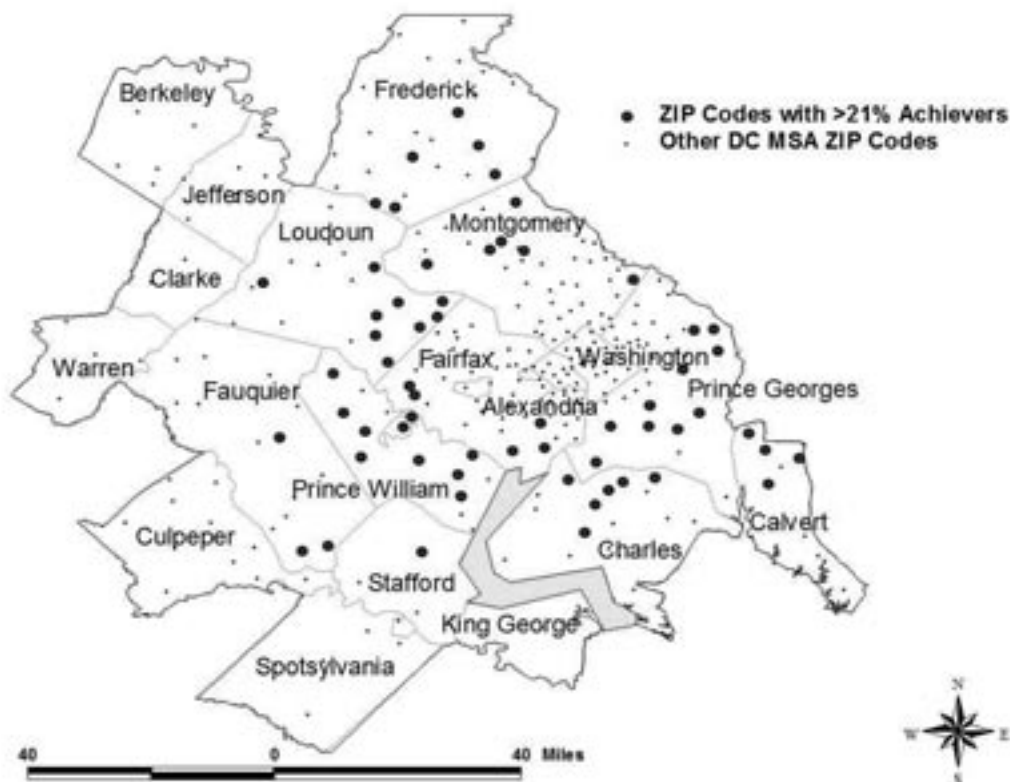
were quick to exploit increasing consumer concerns about security and exclusivity by developing gated communities of various kinds—“lifestyle communities,” “prestige communities,” and “security zone communities” (Blakely and Snyder 1999). The targeted consumers’ exclusionary and neoliberal impulses were met through the legal mechanics of the servitude regimes (i.e., covenants, controls, and restrictions) of common-interest communities set up by developers and managed by homeowners’ associations. This mechanism is especially attractive to developers, since they are able to leave homeowners’ associations to police and enforce their servitude regime, thereby ensuring a stable, predictable (and enchanting) sales environment (everything in compliance with the overall image; no untidy, unsightly, individualistic, or eccentric elements) until build-out.

Stylistically, developers have sought the answer to the placelessness of sitcom suburbs in neotraditional designs and pattern books that play to the nostalgia of postmodern sensibilities. Developers' own marketing departments have proven quite capable of selling the idea of simulated Victorian mansions, neo-Georgian townhouses, and so on, simply on the basis of nostalgia and differentiation from the ranch and split-level styles of sitcom suburbs. They also have been quite capable of selling the idea of Disney-esque ensembles of stylistic retreats as "place" and "community." But they have been presented with a gift by architects and planners who have propagated New Urbanism as an innovative alternative to the disenchanting suburbia of sprawling subdivisions. New Urbanist principles embody many attractive ideals and appealing solutions, most of them borrowed straight from the notebooks of earlier

generations of utopian reformers, including Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes, Raymond Unwin, and Lewis Mumford (see, for example, Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Alminana 2003).

New Urbanism is both brilliant and original; but unfortunately the brilliant elements are not original and the original elements are not brilliant. This "new civic art" is overwhelmingly concerned with the form, shape, and pattern of the built environment, with little to say about the social construction of place, the reflexive and recursive relationships between people and places, or the broader framework of networks and flows that constitute contemporary metropolitan dynamics (Marshall 2003). In spite of mandated mixed uses, diverse housing types, and careful detailing, New Urbanist developments tend to be rather prim, somehow lacking the character that is essential to a sense of place (Jivén and

Figure 3: Location of Achievers in the Washington, DC Metro Area



Distribution of ZIP Code areas with a high incidence of Achievers (top quintile), Washington, DC, Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Source: SRI Consulting Business Intelligence's GeoVALS™

Larkham 2003), and with little evidence of social cohesion, identity, or vitality (Krieger 1998; Nasar 2003).

Nevertheless, evangelical New Urbanist consultants (not least Andres Duany, one of the leading figures of the movement) have been wildly successful as mythographers and enchanters on behalf of developers (see, for example, Veninga 2004). Embarrassing displays of intellectual obedience from many design professionals, along with the efforts of enthusiastic journalists such as James Kunstler (1996), have contributed a good deal of solemn nonsense to a Panglossian, slavishly hagiographic, and shamelessly self-referential literature that is characterized by naïve architectural determinism and a marvelous elasticity of thinking. The cumulative effect is a consensual hallucination that has done more for marketing copywriters than for genuinely progressive urban design. Form, after all, follows finance. In a classic case of cooptation, New Urbanism has been transmuted from a critical and oppositional force into an instrument of the prevailing order. Now, developers everywhere are using the tag “New Urbanist” as a kind of designer label for privatized dioramas and picturesque enclaves of, well, sprawl. The main point here, though, is that these artful fragments of suburbia have become wildly popular with consumers, and especially with many Innovator-types, with whom the “cutting edge” and progressive-sounding rhetoric of New Urbanism resonates exceptionally well.

Another response on the part of developers seeking to steer away from stereotypes of tract developments has been to offer ever larger and more spectacular homes—a tactic that resonates, of course, with many Achievers. In part, this stems from the economic reasoning of the home builders and their banks, since larger homes generally mean greater profits per unit. In part, it is commensurate with the idea of packaging as enchantment, but at the scale

of the individual dwelling. Equally, it is in keeping with the roles of suburban housing as proscenia for the enactment of lifestyles centered on material consumption: New homes must now be offered with more features, more kinds of spaces, and larger spaces. The average size of new suburban homes in 1950 was 800 square feet; in 1970 it was 1,500 square feet; and in 2000 it was 2,266 square feet—despite shrinking household sizes. By 2003, 21 percent of all single-family dwellings completed in U.S. metropolitan areas had 3,000 square feet or more (U.S. Census Bureau 2003).

Conclusion: Vulgaria

Together, the enchanters and the enchanted have conspired to produce the dominant cultural landscapes of contemporary suburbia. The sumptuary codes of Innovators and Achievers are geared to a conservative utopia of sequestered settings that are provided by the packaged, themed, and fortified subdivisions of private master-planned developments. Re-enchanted suburbia is consequently a landscape rich in the symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. These symbolic languages are not subtle: Nothing succeeds like excess in the winner-takes-all arena of neoliberal America. The outcome is a landscape of casual vulgarity, dominated by a presumed reciprocity between size and social supremacy. This is Vulgaria, where ostentation and simulation pass for style and taste, and where affluence is confused with cosmopolitanism and urbanity.

Vulgaria has become the emblematic cultural landscape of contemporary suburbia. It is now a pathological condition of the American metropolis, characterized by inert and pretentious neighborhoods that are irradiated by bigness and spectacle. Vulgaria’s homes are tract mansions and starter castles of 3,000 or 4,000 square feet and upwards, featuring two-story entrance halls, great rooms, three- or four-

car garages, huge kitchens, spa-sized bathrooms, his-and-hers room-sized master closets, media rooms, fitness centers, home offices, high-tech security systems, and perhaps even an au pair suite. SUVs, of course, are popular driveway accessories in *Vulgaria*—preferably large-category SUVs like the Cadillac Escalade ESV (over 18 feet long, 3.6 tons gross weight), the Hummer H2 (nearly 16 feet long, 4.3 tons), and the Lincoln Navigator (17 feet long, 3.7 tons).

Vulgaria's preferred exterior residential styling deploys any kind of neotraditional motif as long as the street frontage is impressive, with high gabled roofs, unusual-shaped windows, and architectural features such as turrets, bays, and portes-cochère. The sides of houses, on the other hand, may have no windows at all, and are clad in cheaper materials. The massing of the buildings themselves is out of proportion, while doors and windows are set irregularly and off center, with the result that there is a jarring lack of the geometric harmony that characterizes (real) traditional residential design. Landscaping is always antiseptic and manicured. Place names are coy, rustic, unnaturally antiquated, and privileged-sounding, often with gruesome affectations of spelling.

The overall effect, at best, is an insidious pleasantness of neotraditional and New Urbanist conception; at worst, an outlandish brashness of contrived spectacle, serial repetition, and over-the-top pretension. *Vulgaria* is framed within barren feeder boulevards, ugly commercial strips, and crowded expressways. The commercial components of *Vulgaria* provide some of its biggest and most spectacular elements: big-box retail stores of 250,000 square feet and more on a single level, luxurious mall complexes with themed restaurants and vast parking lots. Even the churches in *Vulgaria* are big and spectacular: enormous steel and glass complexes that accommodate facilities calculated to

colonize every aspect of life, from aerobics classes, bowling alleys, and aquatic centers with Christian themes, to multimedia Bible classes and JumboTron screens that project the lyrics to happy-clappy pop-style religious songs. Congregations run into the thousands, and some megachurches have parking lots so big that shuttle buses circulate to collect visitors parked in their far corners.

The point is this: Landscape, as writers such as W. J. T. Mitchell (1994), James and Nancy Duncan (2004), and Sharon Zukin (1991) have established, is an instrument of social and cultural power that naturalizes political-economic structures as if they were simply given and inevitable. As powerful discursive formations of signs, they perform vital functions of social regulation (Mitchell 2000). *Vulgaria* has naturalized an ideology of competitive consumption, moral minimalism, and disengagement from notions of social justice and civil society—the peculiar mix of political conservatism and social libertarianism that is the hallmark of contemporary America. It is about as far away from progressive arcadian utopias as you can get.

Author

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