

**UCLA**  
**CSW Update Newsletter**

**Title**

Suburbia and Community: Untangling a Historial Conundrum

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5b47h6m3>

**Author**

Nicolaides, Becky

**Publication Date**

2008

# Suburbia and Community

## UNTANGLING A HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM

*In our manner of building since the end of World War II, we have managed to fill our land with things that are unworthy of our affection, and these add up to thousands of places that are not worth caring about. In the process of filling our landscape with these loveless and unlovable structures, we have thrown our civic life into the garbage can. And as a final consequence of all this, we are putting ourselves out of business as a civilization.*

— JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER,  
“A Crisis in Landscape and Townscape”

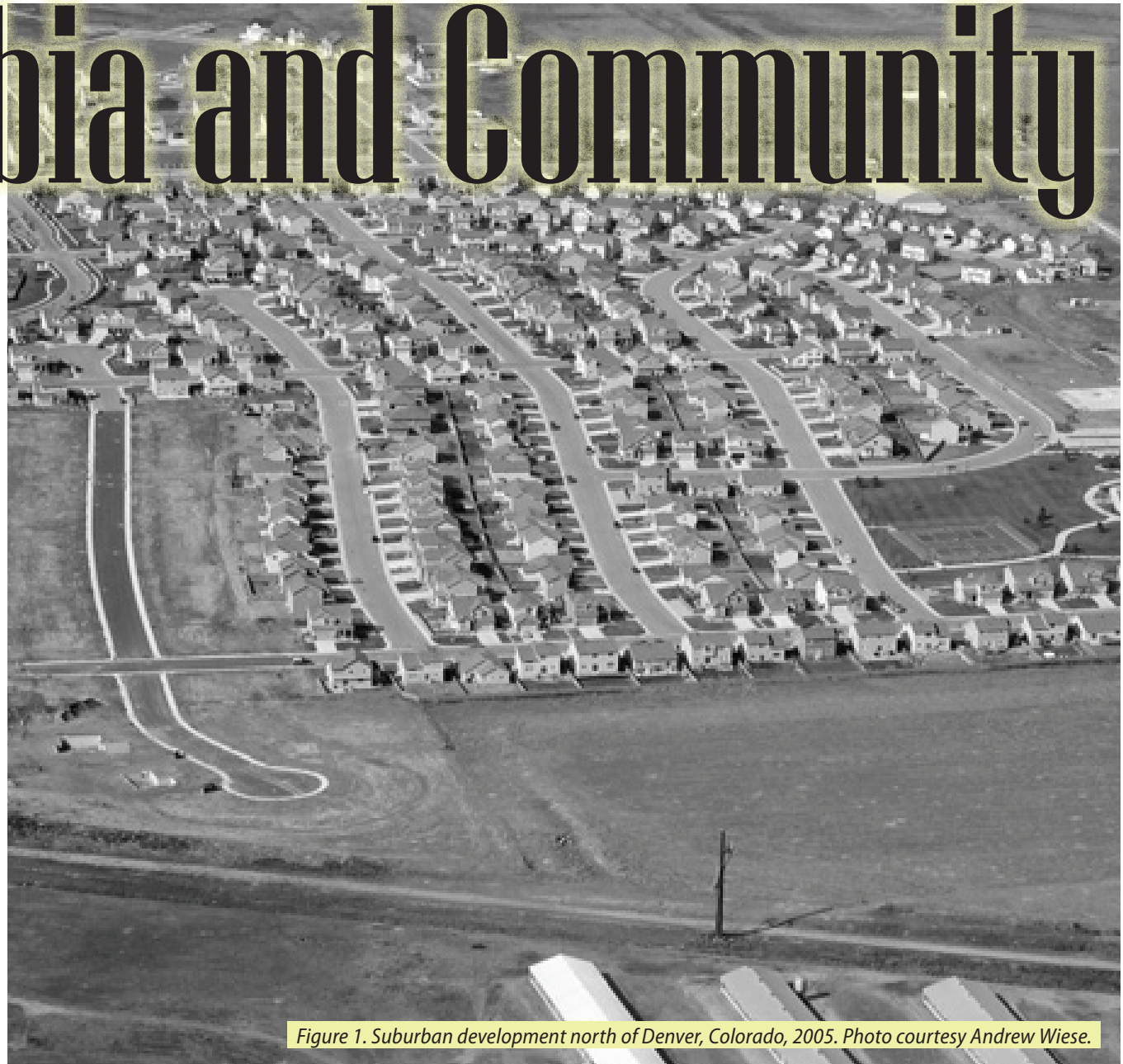


Figure 1. Suburban development north of Denver, Colorado, 2005. Photo courtesy Andrew Wiese.

**W**ithout him naming it, most of us can easily identify what Kunstler is referring to in this passage. The suburbs. For years now, social critics and urban planners have maligned this built landscape in critiques that have become familiar to many of us. The suburbs are chastised for destroying the environment, diminishing the quality of life as commuting times increase, sully the air, promoting political and economic inequality, destroying aesthetic vistas, and worst of all, killing community and civic life.

As destructive as the suburban trend seems to many, it is a phenomenon we need to better understand. The suburbs, for better or worse, are here to stay, at least for our lifetimes and those of the next few generations. The fact is, we have become a suburban nation. In 2000, the

U.S. Census reported that 50 percent of Americans live in suburban areas, outnumbering urban and rural dwellers. Suburbia not only dominates our demographics, but it has become an influential force in political, social, and economic relations. This suburban takeover began after World War II, when the federal government encouraged powerful developer-builders to build fast and furious. The result was decade after decade of development, with subdivisions spreading like wild mushrooms in every metropolitan area.

To suburbia's critics, one particularly alarming concern has been suburbia's impact on community and civic life. Kunstler himself refers to the "loss of community" that people sense about suburbia. Robert Putnam, in his landmark book *Bowling Alone*, implicates suburbanization in the decline of community

and social capital since the 1970s. Because people spend more time commuting alone in their cars, they have less time "for friends and neighbors, for meetings, for community projects, and so on."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, social homogeneity – common in suburbia – dampens the tendency toward civic participation, while suburban sprawl blurs a sense of community boundedness – that is, a sense that people belong to a clearly recognizable neighborhood. Without this feeling, Putnam argues, civic and social engagement diminishes.

Proponents of the New Urbanism, a movement of urban planners that has blossomed since the 1980s, share similar assumptions. Their core philosophy is, at heart, a reaction against suburbanization. In planning communities that are compact, mixed use, walkable, and mixed economically, New Urban-

**...as a historian, I remain deeply puzzled by one simple question: How did a built environment that purportedly kills community once support some of the most vibrant socializing in American history?**

ists seek to reverse what they perceive as suburbia's worst tendencies. In their credo, *Suburban Nation*, they convey their sense of suburbia's social damage in their list of "the victims of sprawl" – cul-de-sac kids suffering from a lack of autonomy because they lack mobility, soccer moms burdened by the incessant chauffeuring of kids, teenagers bored senseless by the sterility of suburban life, and the elderly isolated by an inability to drive. Suburbia disconnects people. Through a design solution, they believe, community and connectedness can be revived and rejuvenated.<sup>3</sup>

Although I agree with many of these criticisms, partly based on my own lived experiences as well as my scholarly read of these debates, as a historian, I remain deeply puzzled by one simple question: How did a built environment that purportedly kills community once sup-

port some of the most vibrant socializing in American history? If we line up the social scientific evidence chronologically, it appears that from 1950 to 1980 a sea change in suburban community experience took place. Something radical shifted. Yet the built environment stayed the same. A brief glimpse at this evidence is both suggestive and provocative.

In the 1950s and 1960s, sociologists and social scientists conducted a number of studies documenting social life in what was then perceived as the new American residential frontier—the suburbs. Their findings pointed overwhelmingly to neighborhoods with solid social ties, even excessive by the standards of some. One of the most famous of these studies is *The Organization Man*, by William H. Whyte, Jr. In this widely read book, Whyte documented a striking profile of com-

munity life in his case study town of Park Forest, Illinois, a mass-produced suburb south of Chicago built in the late 1940s. He found neighbors who not only knew one another, but were connected intimately in the rhythms of daily life.

He illustrated the feel of this social web in a profile of newcomers, "a couple we shall call Dot and Charlie Adams," as he wrote. "Charlie, a corporate trainee, is uprooted from the Newark office, arrives at Apartment 8, Court M-12. It's a hell of a day – the kids are crying, Dot is half sick with exhaustion, and the movers won't be finished till late."

But soon... the neighbors will come over to introduce themselves. In an almost inordinate display of decency, some will help them unpack, and around suppertime two of the girls will come over with a hot casserole and another with a percolator full of hot coffee.

Within a few days the children will have found playmates, Dot will be *Kaffeeklatsching* and sunbathing with the girls like an old-timer, and Charlie, who finds that Ed Robey in Apartment 5 went through officers' training school with him, will be enrolled in the Court Poker Club. The Adamses are, in a word, *in*—someday soon, when another new couple, dazed and hungry, moves in, the Adamses will make their thanks by helping them to be likewise.<sup>4</sup>

Whyte goes on to describe a neighborhood culture of borrowing and lending, of eager participation in local clubs and civic groups, and of social intimacy. Kids and housewives were often at the heart of these connections:

The neighborliness... fills a void in the life of the young wife that is not always filled elsewhere... 'You don't find as many frustrated women in a place like this,' says one young wife. 'We gals have each other. A young girl who would get to brooding if she was in an apartment all by herself on the outside can talk things over with us. She's just too busy to

get neurotic. Kitty, for example. She's married to a real creep—pardon me, but that's what he is—but when she's disturbed she comes over here for coffee and a little chat, and we have a fine old time yakking away.

As Whyte concluded, the consensus that these neighbors created in overcoming differences of religion, background, and expectations “bespeaks a pretty high quotient of kindness and fundamental decency.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Whyte went on to critique this way of life, symptomatic in his eyes of the troubling post-WWII social trend of “group think,” what he described despite himself was vibrant community existing in suburbia. Neighbors were not merely acquainted. They were intimately connected on multiple levels—in the minutiae of the everyday demands of child raising and running homes, in mutual concerns about local civic issues, and even in intel-

lectual and spiritual life. As Whyte described the bustle in a community building on a typical night:

I saw: on the top floor, the church choir rehearsing; the Explorer Scouts (waiting for a quorum to plan next week's hike); world politics discussion group (to discuss what causes war; a second discussion group was to meet on a different evening to take up American foreign policy).<sup>6</sup>

This was a neighborhood where residents lived an ethic of mutuality and sociability. And it was in the heart of suburbia.

Flash forward to the late 1970s. By this time, just one generation removed, suburbia had become a place of deep social disconnection. Ethnographer M.P. Baumgartner documented this phenomenon in a case study of a suburb outside of New York City. The town was populated mostly by white European Americans, both middle and working class.

Baumgartner, who conducted her field work in 1978-79, was interested in exploring how people handled conflict in their suburb. What she found was that they contained it with tolerance, avoidance, and restraint in pursuing justice through the courts. A kind of “moral minimalism” prevailed, where people preferred the least extreme reaction to offenses, which in turn created a sense of social tranquility. The most common strategy for handling problems was avoidance. As she writes, “It is even possible to speak of the suburb as a culture of avoidance.”<sup>7</sup>

When Baumgartner turned to explaining this, she pointed squarely to the lack of community connection. This suburb lacked “social integration,” but instead was defined by a sense of indifference between neighbors. Avoidance as a strategy was thus logical: “It is easy to

end a relationship that hardly exists.”<sup>8</sup> What contributed to this lack of community? The very attributes that she believed characterized suburban living: the privatism that kept families to themselves; the high mobility of homeowners, making it hard for them to form lasting bonds; and the compartmentalizing of social life (at work, at church, at school, etc.).

The contrasts revealed by the two books are striking, even as the built environment and its culture were purportedly the same. In Whyte's Park Forest, there was also high mobility. Social life was compartmentalized somewhat for men, less for women. Family privatism existed to a degree. Yet families overcame these factors to connect with one another. The question arises, then, if the built environment remained constant, how do we explain the change? And why do we



continue to blame suburbs for causing this change?<sup>9</sup>

Both Whyte's and Baumgartner's studies are representative of others that recorded similar findings and waged similar arguments for their respective time periods. Indeed, if we look at the broad trajectory of suburban studies, those conducted in the 1950s and 1960s found moderate to excessive community connections in suburbia, while those after 1970 portray community disengagement. A powerful theme in urban and social science writings has emphasized an emergent culture of fear in suburbia since the 1970s and 1980s, characterized by the rise of privatized, gated neighborhoods, built environments of fear and security, and the "secession of the successful" into independently governed and financed communities.<sup>10</sup>

This comparison suggests that we cannot blame

*Figure 2. Gated community of Vezelay, north San Diego County, 2005. Photo courtesy Andrew Wiese.*



the built environment itself for these changes in lived experience—and for the same reason, we cannot necessarily rely on a “spatial fix” to solve the perceived problem of community decline. As much as I agree with many of the concepts and ideas of the New Urbanism (heck, I’d even like to live in one of those developments one day), I’m skeptical that a nicely designed, compact, mixed-use neighborhood will promote social cohesion.

A historical perspective on the relationship between suburbia and community poses many exciting and fruitful possibilities for better understanding these phenomena. By asking these questions and sustaining their analysis over a broad span of time, we can better untangle the forces that are changing the ways we relate to one another—or don’t. Much of what we know about social life in postwar

suburbia is based on research conducted by sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists and urban scholars, who have taken “snapshots” of particular places at a given point in time. Historians are just beginning to weigh in on these issues, to bring the valuable long view onto these changing lifeways and patterns of social existence. As a historian, my sense is that the story is more nuanced and complex than these broad outlines would suggest. By following multiple trajectories of suburban social history to explore these complexities, it is my belief that we can clarify two key issues. First, whether we can really speak accurately about a broad social shift from active community involvement to social isolation in suburbia over the years 1945 to 2000. My sense is that social connectedness has survived in different types of suburbs over time—

the challenge is identifying where, how, and why. Second, the growing ethnic, racial, and social diversity of suburbia points to a multiplicity of social experiences that must be considered in their particularities.

At this very early stage of my research, some preliminary ideas have emerged. First, I believe gender, race, ethnicity, and class all figure largely in these transformations. Race is a field that has been well interrogated by historians to date. While most of the documentation on suburban social life in the 1950s and 1960s comes from sociologists, when historians have looked at this period, they have tended to emphasize racial politics. Indeed, in a number of case studies, historians have documented suburban community engagement and activism in the service of segregation. They too have seen an ac-

tive, engaged citizenry, but one directing its energies toward the goal of neighborhood defense. My own study of South Gate found this to be true, as have others.<sup>21</sup> In thinking more broadly about this issue, I’ve come to realize that these efforts were often done in the name of community integrity—in a sense, the ways that postwar suburbanites deployed community precipitated a kind of destructive redefinition of the concept. In producing racial and economic inequality and doing so in a context of *community vitality*, suburbanites worked to transform the community ideal from a positive source of human fulfillment and acceptance into a destructive tool of exclusivity and inequality.

Race emerges again after the 1970s, when the eradication of state-sanctioned barriers of segregation (that is, the outlawing of race restrictive

covenants and the rise of fair housing laws) played a role in the dual-pronged development of suburbs after this point. Some moved toward the gated, segregated type. Others moved consciously toward integration and diversity. The racial and ethnic diversification of suburbia after the 1970s certainly complicates the picture. From 1970 to 2000, the proportion of all suburbanites who were African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans rose from just under 10 percent to 28 percent. Suburbia also became home to young singles, one-parent families, gay and lesbians, empty-nesters, and retirees. This demography suggests a multiplicity of community experiences that belie the image of fear and loathing in suburbia.

Gender is vitally important as well. The image of the suburban housewife is one deeply ingrained in our

collective psyche. A slew of writings (not to mention films and novels) portray suburban women as alternately the victims and rulers of the suburban domain, Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* foremost among them. While many share Friedan's bleak assessment of the emptiness of suburban housewifery, Whyte and others portray suburban women—and their children—as the social glue of community. Stay-at-home mothers had the opportunity to build social ties and mutual aid for one another, sometimes by virtue of their car-less isolation. The ways in which women's increasing turn to wage work impacted local community life is a topic awaiting exploration,

Figure 3. This depiction of a suburban mother's social claustrophobia appeared in *Readers Digest* in 1961, two years before *The Feminine Mystique* was published. Source: *Readers Digest* 78 (January 1961), 99.



## Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped

*Today's housewife, trying to serve children, husband, home and community, has taken on an impossible number of tasks. To get out of the squirrel cage calls for resolute decision*

Condensed from *Redbook*  
JHAN AND JUNE ROBBINS

"PROBLEMS? What problems?" The young husband we were talking with suddenly lost his temper. "My wife is well educated and in perfect health. We have three fine children and a home of our own. My wife has 16 push-button machines to do her housework. She has a car. I take her out to dinner. We give parties and go on vacations. What's more, all her friends and neighbors have the same advantages. No women in the world's history have ever had it so good! I'm getting sick and tired of hearing about the problems of today's married woman!"

Many young American husbands feel this same sense of resentment and impatience. More important,

Redbook (September '60), © 1960 by McCall '69 Corp., 230 Park Ave., New York 17, N. Y.



as are the effects of changing school conditions after initial desegregation.

Are we right to blame the suburbs for all the ills they usually get blasted for these days? For some of these problems, absolutely yes. Have the suburbs killed community, and should urban planners follow upon this logic accordingly? My answer is no. The jury is still out on this question. Until we look systematically at the social history of suburbia, in its many and diverse incarnations over the past several decades, we will continue to fall into the trap of spatial determinism, of blaming spatial form for the successes or failures of our society that emanate from forces that reach well beyond the built environment.

**Becky Nicolaides** is a CSW Research Scholar for 2007–08. She received her Ph.D. in American history from Columbia University in 1993. Formerly Associate Professor of History and Urban Studies and Planning at UC San Diego, she departed in 2006 after commuting between LA and San Diego for 9 years. She lives in Los Angeles with her actor husband and two high-energy kids.

## NOTES

1. James Howard Kunstler, “A Crisis in Landscape and Townscape,” in *Moving to Corn Fields: A Reader on Urban Sprawl and the Regional Future of Northeast Ohio*, ed. David Beach (Cleveland: EcoCity Cleveland, 1996).
2. Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 214.
3. Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff

- Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (New York: North Point Press, 2000), especially chapter 7.
4. William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), 286.
5. Whyte, *Organization Man*, 356–57.
6. Whyte, *Organization Man*, 287.
7. M.P. Baumgartner, *The Moral Order of a Suburb* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 11.
8. Baumgartner, *Moral Order*, 13.
9. While I don’t consider the latter question here, I do explore it in another article. See Becky Nicolaides, “How Hell Moved from the City to the Suburbs: Urban Scholars and Changing Perceptions of Authentic Community,” *The New Suburban History*, eds. Kevin Kruse and Tom Sugrue (University of Chicago Press, 2006).
10. The literature on this is enormous. A few examples include Setha Low, *Behind*

- the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Evan McKenzie, *Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).
11. Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920–1965* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, 2003); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, 2005); Matt Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, 2005); Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis* (Princeton, 1998).