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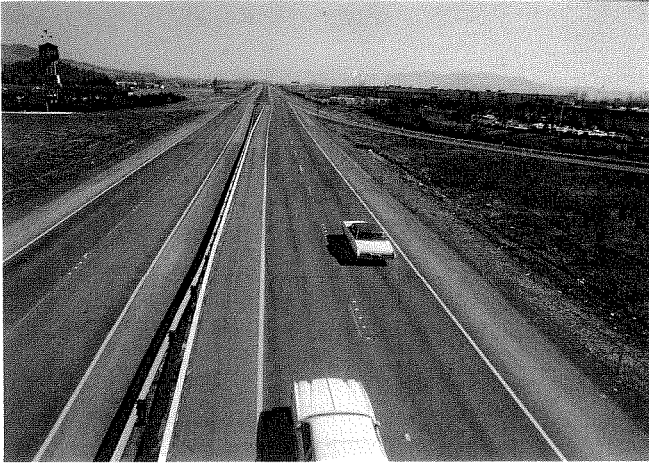
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McUrbia: The 1950s and the Birth of the Contemporary American Landscape

Kenneth I. Helphand



In the film *Back to the Future* (1985), Marty McFly takes an automotive time-machine trip back 30 years to 1955. His journey began in the parking lot of Twin Pines Shopping Center. He arrives in the barn of Twin Pines farm. He discovers his suburban neighborhood, Lyons Estates, just under construction, in an open field. Downtown has first-run movie theaters and is thriving. The film recounts his struggles to return home to the future. Richard Corliss of *Time* says, “The choice of year is canny, for 1955 is close to the historical moment when television, rock ’n’ roll and kids mounted their takeover of American culture.”¹ In the mid-1950s our physical as well as our social environment changed: the contemporary American landscape was born.

Landscapes are the products of the aspirations of previous generations. We live within the dreams and desires of our ancestors. In order to understand landscape change and evolution, it is instructive to look at their formative periods. For it is then that options are present, ideas are crystallized, and precedent is set. The recent past has been a time of acceleration in the rate, scale, and scope of environmental transformation. We live much of our lives in a landscape created by the generation immediately preceding our own. The legacy of those changes now

structures the character of much of the modern American landscape.

In the 1950s there was a confluence of events that were the harbingers of dramatic changes to the American scene. I have chosen to describe here seven phenomena, which date between 1954 and 1957, that symbolize our contemporary environment and affect us daily: (1) the interstate highway system, (2) McDonald’s, (3) Disneyland, (4) the architecture of Victor Gruen, (5) the Boeing 707, (6) the westward migration of the Dodgers and Giants, and (7) the growth of suburbia. (My descriptions of the last two are more personal, but they are still real cultural landmarks.)

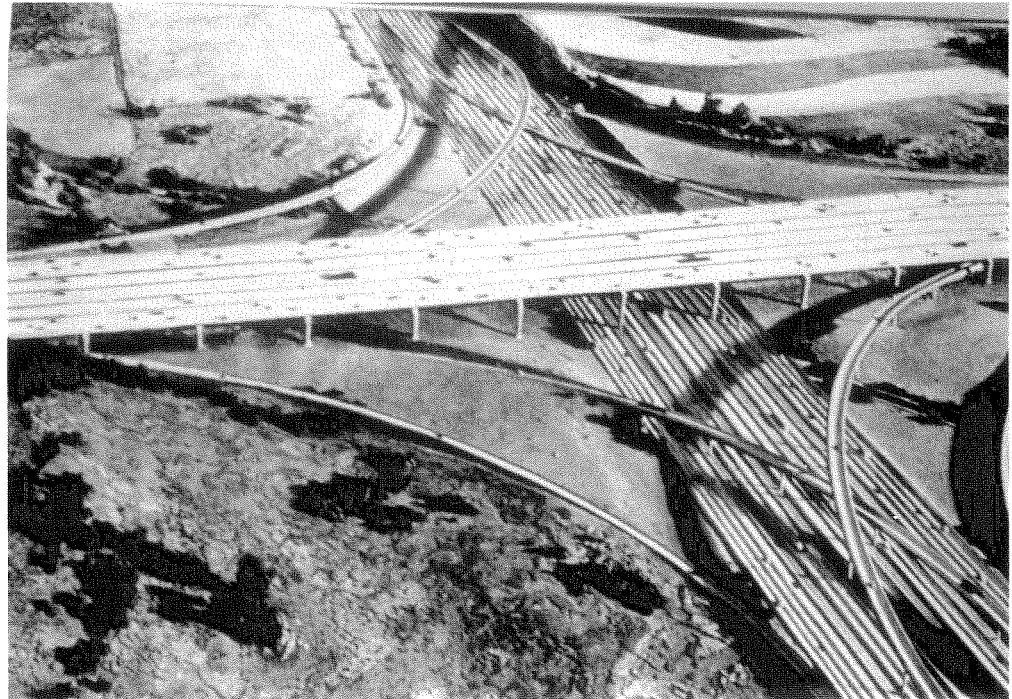
These phenomena have contributed to our comfort and convenience, but often with dramatic and unanticipated adverse effects. They are a product of our affluence, but might our riches have been better spent? They are modern, but are extensions of deep-seated cultural concerns and imperatives: individualism, mobility, and a quest for the diverse desires of the American dream. They are all immediately identifiable, yet symbolic of a modern placelessness. These are emblems of Daniel Boorstin’s “everywhere community,” those aspects of our society which unite us by their ubiquitous presence and a common bond of

shared experience.² This is the baby-boomer's landscape. These are not the elements that make a Utica, Eugene, Tucson, or Tampa distinctive, but the elements that link them in cultural bondage.

These developments are part of the postwar world. They have been much copied and have spawned their own changes. A decade after World War II and at the conclusion of the Korean War, America's affluence and productivity were redirected toward a consumer society. A generation deprived by economic depression and war was seeking a life for which it had paid its dues. It deserved the comforts which were coming. A nation which turned out tanks and even whole ships in assembly-line fashion could certainly do the same for television sets, washing machines, even houses.

1956: Interstate Highway System

The interstate system is the final stage of American highway development. As the automobile became more prevalent, faster, and ultimately essential to our way of life, the landscape was modified to accommodate this new necessity. The automotive highway was built on a foundation of paths, tracks, pikes, and roads of a horse and pedestrian era. In the early period of automobile usage there were few environmental



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changes. The automobilist was an adventurer challenging territory and terrain. But soon changes came to the road itself: surfaces were made smooth and hard, roadbeds wider, curves broader. There was a whole set of accoutrements to accommodate the needs and desires of drivers, passengers, automobiles, and the road itself. Any stretch of road came to contain information for orientation, direction, and traffic management. Its signs, lights, and stripes became second nature. There were places to service the car and to serve the mobile populace. The landscape—urban, suburban, rural—became an automotive one.

The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways was the culmination of those efforts. The system is based on visions of a highway system first proposed as early as 1915 by the National Highway Association. The NHA compared its system proposal to the Panama Canal as a more economical and equally significant engineering achievement and source of national pride.³ In 1925 a system of national highways was instituted, largely following this scheme and incorporating the system of national "trails" which had developed. The nation was made ready for the visions of Norman Bel

2 "The Crossing Point of Two Future Motorways," General Motors Futurama Exhibit, 1939 New York World's Fair, Designed by Norman Bel Geddes.

Geddes. His design for the General Motors futurama exhibit, displayed at the 1939 New York World's Fair, showed a nation in which the automobile was the dominant force.⁴ It was a landscape of high-speed travel between dense towering urban clusters surrounded by suburban communities. The model was vivid and evocative and touched a resonant chord. Years later, while traveling on the highway, my mother told of visiting the fair; and, yes, the futurama, which was to be America in 1960, had in fact come to pass.

The highway system is now virtually complete. It is over 45,000 miles long, links every major city in the country, and with its appendages of beltways and beltlines is as dominant in the modern landscape as the railroad was in the nineteenth century. Stilgoe's metropolitan corridor was bypassed by what Peirce Lewis has called the "Galactic Metropolis."⁵

In 90 years the automotive landscape has become an increasingly autonomous environment, with its own character and culture. The interstate is the apogee of this trend. It is a self-contained system. When you are on it you are *on the road*. It has limited access, with its own visual character and infrastructure, and is developing its own culture of high-speed long-distance travel. There is now a national system of super-

highways-freeways. This system is bigger, better, and faster, and it is free—without tolls, open, and unrestrained.

The interstate changed national and local transportation patterns. It made or broke towns as they were passed through, bypassed, or passed by. It radically transformed urban areas in building access on and off the system. Much of the urban trauma of the past decades has been with trying to come to terms with this dilemma. The interstate—the "I"—is now the "eye" through which we see much of the nation.

1955: McDonald's

In 1955 Ray Kroc's fast-food empire was inaugurated. It now has over 9,000 units in the United States and dozens of countries. One-third of all American meals are eaten out of the home, almost 20 percent of these at McDonald's. McDonald's is the single largest consumer of virtually all the products it purchases: beef, rolls, potatoes, mustard, ketchup, pickles, straws, even fish.

In its brief history McDonald's has gone through a series of stages representative of a transition from a roadside restaurant to a community institution and cultural symbol. McDonald's has been the industry leader, but its history also stands for that of other national fast-food franchises: Burger King, Wendy's, A&W,

Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, and Pizza Hut.

In its formative period McDonald's was exclusively a drive-in restaurant where food was bought to take out and consume in the parking lot. Seating was soon added. These early units have now become historic landmarks. The dual arches and tiled exteriors gave way in styling to the mansard roof prototype of a suburban community design. These places had ample seating, the benefit of television advertising, and a product rapidly becoming as American as apple pie. Ray Kroc has been called the Henry Ford of fast food, the entrepreneurial innovator who created an industry.⁶

By the late 1960s McDonald's had become a suburban community institution. In an interview in *Nation's Business*⁷ in 1968, Kroc said, "We aim at the local family trade. When we look for a site, we count church steeples, rather than autos, signs of substantial family neighborhoods. That's where we get 90 percent of our business." Children's birthday parties began to be celebrated at McDonald's, and soldiers in Vietnam told of yearning for Big Macs.

The company diversified. The location of restaurants expanded. McDonald's International was organized to export the food and concept, its restaurants becoming embassies of the American way of life. Townhouse units, urban,

often inner-city restaurants were built, and other new locations were added: shopping centers, hospitals, even toll roads. The American populace now expects to see arches on the horizon wherever it travels. They are a sign of predictability and even the comforts of home. As Boorstin has noted, America has created a novel environmental democracy, an "equalizing of times and places." McDonald's represents an extension of a standardized product into a standardized landscape, one which is mechanized, interchangeable, comfortable, convenient, and predictable.⁸

McDonald's has become an icon and international symbol of American culture as dramatic as Coke or blue jeans. The prefix "Mc" has entered our language as a symbol of the instant and inexpensive, the packaged and the pervasive.

1955: Disneyland

W. E. Disney's Magic Kingdom has been called America's "Main Street," "Mecca," "National Capital," "Versailles," a "Technological Cathedral," "The Town Square of Los Angeles," a "Potemkin Village," and "Utopia."⁹ It is our key symbolic landmark, perhaps *the* site which represents modern America.

Disney was a media pioneer, first in film and later in television. Most of us under 40 watched Disneyland, the theme park in Anaheim, California, being built on

Disneyland, the television show. Each week the construction was featured: the steady rise of Sleeping Beauty's castle, the robot animals of Adventureland, the buildings of Main Street. Disney called his designers "imagineers." The designers of Disneyland were those who had worked on his films. Architects only came in later to make it all stand up.

Disneyland (and now Florida's Disney World) has become a place we are expected to take ourselves and especially our children. It has joined Washington, D.C., and the National Parks as a pilgrimage destination. Disney's "lands" are succinct representations of American ideals. At Disney World you arrive via a hi-tech futuristic monorail. You exit at a Victorian train station to walk down Main Street, USA. It is a small town in America's heartland in 1905, modeled on Marceline, Missouri, Disney's hometown.¹⁰ This is an idealized Main Street, pristine, innocent, problem free. We are in a commercial version of an American pastoral. This is literally "the stage set for the American Dream," as Harold Rosenberg has described Main Street.¹¹ The time is just before we leaped into an era of technological development, when an automobile was still for joyrides, like traveling with toad in *Wind and the Willows*.

At the end of Main Street the choice of "lands" is open.



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3 McDonald's—Classic Golden Arches.

4 McDonald's—Mansard Roof Design.



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Looming over all is Sleeping Beauty's Castle, the crown of fantasyland and the emblem of the Magic Kingdom. Fantasyland is a nostalgic childhood world, cast largely with Disney characters or ones that he had made his own. Frontierland pays homage to America's Western ideal. History is still played out in mythic and idealized terms. Adventureland is a safe and manufactured excursion through an ersatz jungle. It is a journey where you can travel the world without leaving home. Tomorrowland is the land of the future, which will be bigger, better, more spectacular, where technology will solve any and all of our problems.

An advertisement for the opening of the Magic Kingdom in Florida said, "You get the feeling that nothing bad could ever happen here"—that was Disney's innocent utopian dream. His final concept was EPCOT, which opened after his death in much truncated form. It was originally conceived as an Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow—a place for people to live now, in Tomorrowland.

Disneyland spawned Disney World. Their appeal is universal. They are America's most popular tourist sites. Even Khrushchev wanted to visit, and this prototype of theme parks was duplicated in Central Florida and has now been replicated in Japan. The dedication plaque

in the town square reads, “Disneyland is dedicated to the ideals, dreams and hard facts that have created America . . . we hope that it will be a source of inspiration to all the world.”

1956: Gruen

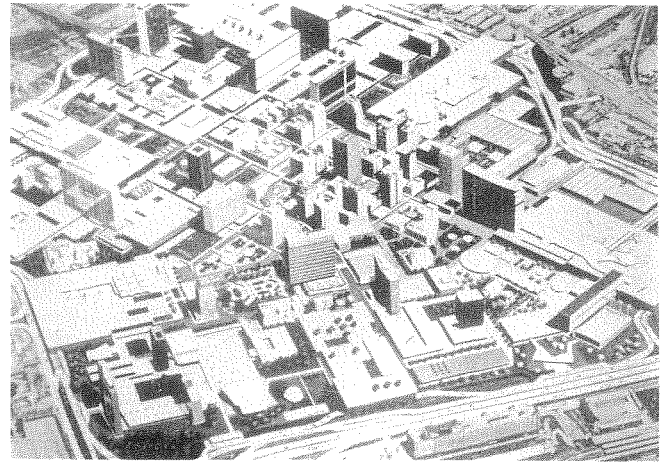
In the mid-1950s the Detroit architect Victor Gruen designed two landmark projects which became national models.¹² The first was Northland Shopping Mall, which when it opened in 1954 was the world’s largest shopping center. The second was the 1956 plan for the central business district of Fort Worth, Texas, a plan characterized by an auto-free pedestrian core. Both projects were harbingers of things to come. They represented a growing suburbanization of the city and a corresponding urbanization of burgeoning suburbs.

The suburban shopping center and the downtown mall are logically paired, although too often they are looked at in simplistic, criminal terms, one “stealing” business from the other. They respond to two forces. On the one hand are forces of decentralization, elements which scatter people and events in the landscape: television, telephone, computers, automobiles, single-family housing. On the other hand are forces of concentration, which intensify development in a single place, the economies of clustering and shared space. We end up

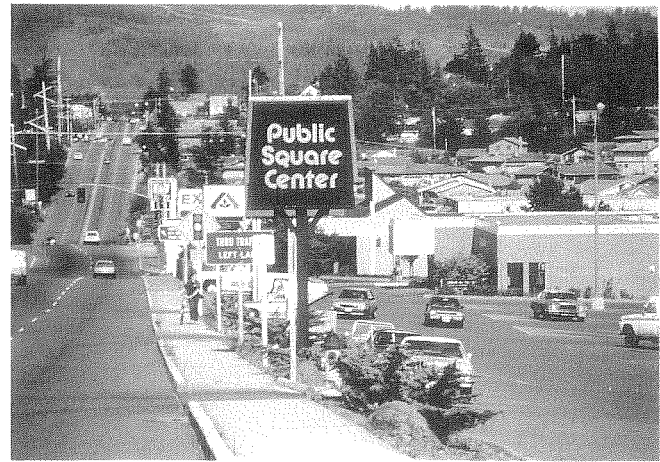
with new concentrated complexes dispersed across the landscape. Of course neither is completely new, but they became commonplace in the mid-1950s and subsequently they have come to dominate our communities.

The suburban shopping mall sits within a pyramidal hierarchy. At the bottom are neighborhood shopping centers containing supermarkets, drugstores, and video rental outlets, while at the apex are mega-malls with hundreds of stores, places that are striving to be new suburban town centers. In these environments most of the shopping that takes place is recreational, a leisure-time activity. In addition to shops these places have food bazaars, commercial recreation, multiplex movie theaters, programmed events, and the *image* of urban diversity, but now in a safe, sanitized, climate controlled, and socially regulated environment.

What of course made these places possible was the automobile and the development of suburban communities. They also have a connection to the Fort Worth plan. In that plan Gruen proposed a center-city revitalization based on urban renewal—tearing down the old and obsolete city core and transforming it into a modern pedestrian environment. Cars were to be stored in giant garages at the periphery of the pedestrian zone with direct access from a freeway ring road. This did



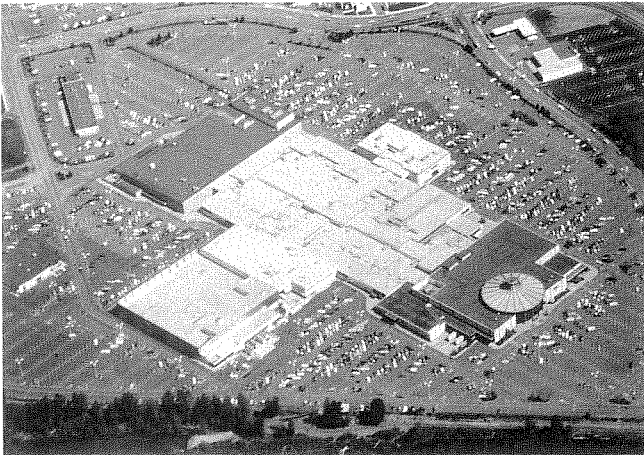
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6 “Revitalization Project Plan for Core of Fort Worth, Texas,” Fort Worth Plan, Victor Gruen, 1956.

7 Public Square Center, Shopping Center, Coos Bay, Oregon, 1985.



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8 Valley River Center, Regional Shopping Center, Eugene, Oregon.

9 Waikiki, Honolulu, Hawaii.

not actually happen in Fort Worth, but it did become the reality for hundreds of cities. There were several models for this change including the postwar reconstruction of European cities *and* the suburban shopping center. It has been often asked what happened to Main Street, and as Francaviglia has noted, Main Street is alive and well—inside suburban shopping centers, where we can still stroll past a rich diversity of stores and shops, see people we know, and feel a sense of community.

1957: The Boeing 707

In 1957 transatlantic jet service was introduced by Pan Am to the United States. The following year domestic jet travel began. (In 1952 the British had begun jet service between London and Johannesburg.) What is the significance of this development? Think of what it made possible. It brought most of the world into “home range.” It became possible to travel almost anywhere within a day.

The exotic and remote had the opportunity of becoming familiar and accessible. Look at Hawaii, which had been an elite resort for those with sufficient time and money to cruise to the islands. No longer. An elite haven became a mass resort. The tropical isles were added to the mountains and the seashore as vacation possibilities for the masses. This has happened to hundreds

of places. Combined with expanded automobile, bus, and truck traffic, this was the final nail in the coffin of the American railroad—particularly its passenger business.

1957: Dodgers and Giants Move West

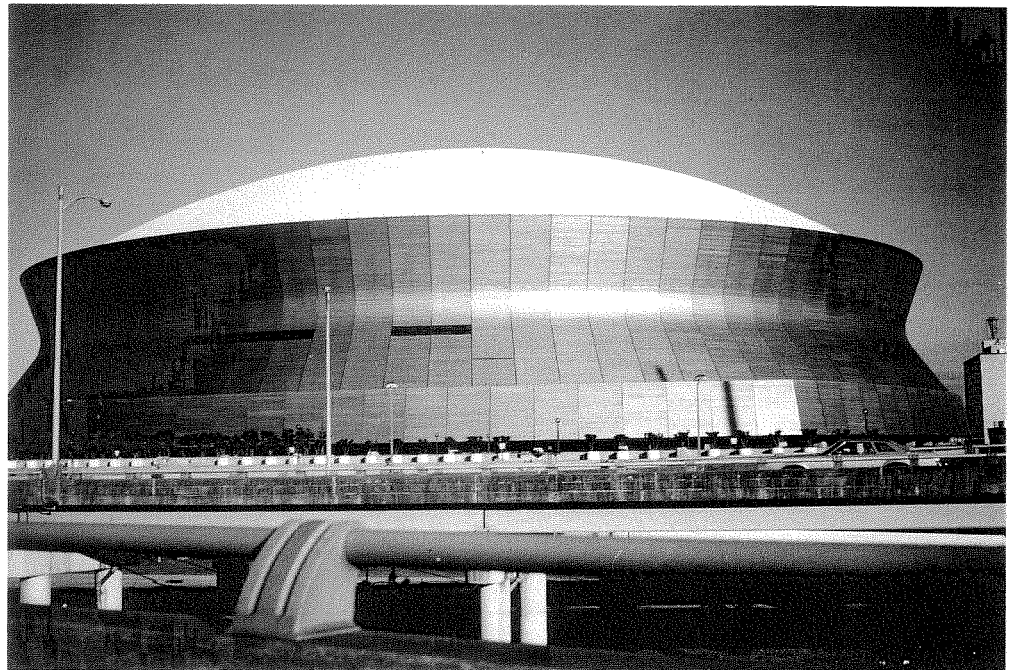
In 1957 Walter O’Malley moved what was then the most profitable team in professional sports from its ancestral home at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, New York, to Los Angeles, California. The New York Giants soon followed suit, emigrating to San Francisco. New York baseball fans were devastated by this betrayal. They were the first professional sports teams to be located outside of the Northeast and Midwest. It was a dramatic symbol of a shifting cultural dominance from the industrial east to the west and to the as yet uncoined sunbelt. The new metropolises of the west and south were on the rise: Phoenix, Dallas, Atlanta, Denver, Los Angeles, Seattle, Houston, Miami, and more would soon sport teams and domed stadia to house them.

I was a child in Brooklyn at the time, living in a neighborhood that counted its fame by the number of Dodger homes.

1956: The Growth of Suburbia

One cannot affix an exact date to the postwar suburban explosion (although

one should consider the mortgage and housing loans of the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration). But the 1950s was a decade of suburbanization. In 1956, after a year of “house-hunting,” my family also abandoned Brooklyn. It was the end of a quest. On Friday and especially Saturday nights my father would go out for the paper, bring it home, and begin the perusal of the book-size real estate section. We had a nice apartment in a nice, safe neighborhood, and I was in a good school. But like most of the neighborhood we were seeking something else: the ideal location, the proper home, the best schools, the easiest commute.



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On the weekend we ventured forth. As a nine year old I learned the nuances of model homes, and my eyes were seeking the signs which announced “Open for inspection.” There were numerous walks through raw landscapes with bulldozer tracks still visible, careful treks across planks over lawns just seeded. We learned to look for indicators. Were there any trees left? Were all the houses the same? Was the house made of brick? At an early age I knew the difference between Sheetrock and plaster, oil, gas, and electric heat. I learned an entire building taxonomy of recreation rooms, family rooms, dens, baths, half-

10 Superdome, New Orleans, Louisiana.



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11 The author, age 9, Yonkers, New York, 1956.

12 Advertisement in Real Estate Office, Ashland, Oregon, 1985.

baths, studies, master bedrooms, and bedrooms. Most importantly—would I get *my own*? I didn't. I climbed around basements and up into attics and played in the streets. I learned about school systems and about what "kind" of neighborhood it was and what "kind" of people lived there (or would live there). When it became serious, my grandfather and uncle, both carpenters, would join us for final inspections and comments.

Years later these sites would bring instant recall when I passed by them: Briarcliff Manor, Edgewood, Ardsley, Eisenhower Drive. Eventually we settled in Colonial Heights, on Longvue Terrace, and sought the golden mean. We had a house built for us, but it was without benefit of architect. It was a tract house without a tract, located in an older neighborhood. It was complete with a two-car garage, family room, basement, patio, three bedrooms (my father used one as a study), a brick bay window, and lots of trees on its quarter-acre. We regularly drove to the site, as house-hunting gave way to a weekend ritual visit to watch the house grow. It began as our "hole" and the name stuck. We counted trees that would be saved and watched the progress from foundation through framing. We came, brought family, imagined our lives, and documented the progress in photographs. Slowly the rooms and our places

materialized. It was a joy. On my first day at the new school I was awed by immense desks that weren't bolted to the floor, an auditorium that converted into the gym and cafeteria, and the expanse of lawn that fringed the low-slung school.

We had joined the mass suburban exodus, leaving apartment house for private home, forsaking the subway for the car, the street for the yard, the old neighborhood for the future. We were just one family of millions. Eventually my brother and I would forsake the east as well and follow the Dodgers west.

All of these seven events and phenomena are still with us, the interstate, McDonald's, Disneylands and six flags over everywhere, the malls of city and suburb, jet travel, the boomtowns and cities of the west, and suburbia. The events, the places, and the people I have described in these seven phenomena were the vanguard. It is now all commonplace. Do we now dwell in "McUrbia"?

Notes

- 1 Richard Corliss, "This Way to the Children's Crusade," *Time* (July 1, 1985), p. 62.
- 2 Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973).
- 3 "Panama Canal vs. the National Highways," National Highways Association (June 1912).

- 4 Norman Bel Geddes, *Magic Motorways* (New York: Random House, 1940).
- 5 John R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale, 1983) and Peirce Lewis, "The Galactic Metropolis," in *Beyond the Urban Fringe, Land-Use Issues of Non-Metropolitan America*, ed. by Rutherford H. Platt and George Macinko (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 23–49.
- 6 George Will, "The Art of the Hamburger," *Newsweek* (February 20, 1978), p. 96.
- 7 Ray Kroc, "Appealing to a Mass Market" (Lessons of Leadership, Part 38), *Nation's Business* (July 1968), pp. 71–74.
- 8 Kenneth I. Helphand, "The Landscape of McDonald's," in *The World of Ronald McDonald*, ed. by Marshall Fishwick (Bowling Green, OH: Popular Culture Press), pp. 357–362.
- 9 William Irwin Thompson, *At the Edge of History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); Paul Goldberger, "Mickey Mouse Teaches the Architects," *New York Times Magazine* (October 22, 1972), pp. 40ff; Margaret King, "Disneyland and Walt Disney World: Traditional Values in Futuristic Form" (unpublished paper, 1975); Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney from Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingdom* (New York: Harry Abrams, 1973); Millicent Hall, "Theme Parks: Around the World in 80 Minutes," *Landscape* (Autumn 1976), pp. 3–8; Michael Harrington, "To the Disney Station," *Harpers* (January 1979), pp. 35ff.
- 10 Richard Francaviglia, "Main Street USA: The Creation of a Popular Image," *Landscape* (Spring-Summer 1977), pp. 18–22.
- 11 Harold Rosenberg, *Discovering the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 29; originally published in *Partisan Review* 25(4), Fall 1958.
- 12 Victor Gruen, *The Heart of Our Cities* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964).