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New Visions of Suburban Life

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When did suburbia begin? It's a deceptively simple question. Is Levittown really a "first suburb"? What about Llewellyn Park and Riverside? Brooklyn and Brookline? The answer, it seems, depends on who is asking, and which paradigm they employ.

Such complexity hints at the need for policy-makers and academics to take suburban environments more seriously. Indeed, according to Richard Guardino and Daniel Rubey, organizers of the "New Visions of Suburban Life" conference, it is time to move suburbia to the forefront, "rather than treating it as merely an 'other' for the city."

The interdisciplinary conference, held March 18 and 19, was the inaugural effort of the Center of Suburban Studies, a think-tank founded in 2003 at Long Island's Hofstra University to study suburbia's problems and potentials. As if to accentuate the nature of this shift from more city-centric visions, several commentators noted how panelists at the conference were as likely to come from suburban community colleges as from "brand-name universities."¹

Subhead

In keynote addresses, Robert Puentes, a fellow at the Brookings Institute, proclaimed a "policy blind spot" toward those municipalities he termed America's "first suburbs." Although diverse, these aging postwar developments, predominantly in the Midwest and Northeast share many characteristics: slow growth, aging populations, and ethnic diversity (the latest census indicated that one third of their residents are minorities—many foreign-born). The most troubling finding, however, is that they now increasingly include pockets of concentrated poverty.

Noted historian Robert Fishman (University of Michigan) then cast



this picture in more optimistic terms, proclaiming the coming of "The Fifth Migration." In homage to Lewis Mumford's prescient 1925 article "The Fourth Migration," Fishman, author of *Bourgeois Utopias*, suggested that the trend of people moving back to the city or staying there to raise families would soon extend to these aging first-ring suburbs.² This constitutes a tremendous opportunity to reverse the dominant twentieth-century trend toward decentralization, he said.

Among other highlights of the conference was a paper by Becky Nicolaides (UC San Diego), entitled "Beyond White flight." In defiance of stereotypical views, it offered preliminary research into the history of stable, ethnically diverse suburbs of Los Angeles.³ In paired papers, Leslie Wilson and Joel Schwartz (Montclair State University) also focused on suburbs with a long history of ethnic and racial diversity, this time in New Jersey. But they described how even these model communities enacted

de facto segregation, particularly in schools through the use of IQ tests and districting.

Also of interest was an exploration by Robert Beuka (Bronx Community College) of the changing face of suburban fiction, as it moves from "Cheever Country" to the recent work of novelist Chang-Rae Lee.⁴ And in a panel on transportation, Claude Willey (Cal State University, Northridge) recounted the sights and sensations of his unusual bicycle commute from Pasadena to Northridge, about 30 miles, in language reminiscent of magical realism.

On a more serious note, the conference included a special screening of the 2004 documentary *Farmingville*, by Carlos Sandoval and Catherine Tambini. The film depicts the local effects of economic globalization as played out in a small Long Island town. Here, bitter, sometimes violent, conflict has broken out between blue-collar homeowners and Mexican day laborers living in overcrowded rooming houses. However, both sides



are being exploited to meet the needs of wealthier residents in neighboring towns and respond to the demands of the global marketplace.

(As I write, the deep wounds in Farmingville have been reopened. In June 2005, a 900-sq.-ft. illegal rooming house there was raided, and its 64 Mexican occupants tossed out. The owner, who was arrested, was estimated to have been receiving an astonishing gross monthly rent of \$9000.⁵ More raids are forthcoming.)

Subhead

Hofstra was a fitting setting for such a conference. Located in Hempstead, just down the Turnpike from Levittown, it is situated at the heart of one of the nation's oldest and most dynamic suburban agglomerations. It is also the home of the Long Island Studies Institute, which cosponsored the event—and which attracted such prominent local political figures as Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi to it.

Suozzi, young and charismatic, has risen to prominence recently by touting his vision of “New Suburbia.” This is based on a hybrid smart-growth strategy of “preserving those things that we love about the suburban life,” while attempting to increase the tax base through growth, curtail the exodus of young people, and combat traffic congestion.⁶

The centerpiece of Suozzi's vision is the integrated development of a concentration of new commercial properties and mass transit facilities in a three-square-mile area recently renamed “Nassau Center.” This tangle of highway interchanges and large, but disjointed, institutions is home to the Nassau Coliseum, Roosevelt Field Mall, and Hofstra University, itself. Fox & Fowle Architects is currently preparing an ambitious master plan for the area.

To sell his vision, however, Suozzi uses new terms for old ideas—such as “workforce housing” and “next-generation housing,” instead of the more

politically charged “affordable housing.” In some ways, the new terms seem more accurate and straightforward. Ironically, “affordable housing” itself once appeared this way, as a more palatable substitute for “low-income housing.”

The problems of suburbia are complex, indeed.

Notes

1. Peter Applebome, “Suburbia, At Long Last, In Academia,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2005. See also Katie Thomas, “Troubles with being ‘first’,” *Newsday*, March 20, 2005.
2. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).
3. Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).
4. Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).
5. Bruce Lambert, “L.I. Home Held Up to 64 Men, Authorities Say,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2005.
6. For more on the current state of Long Island, see the 2005 report of the Long Island Index, <http://www.longislandindex.org/>.

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