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Seven Books about Suburbia: Home Sweet Home?

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In Omaha, the ad read: “Big Ice Box, 7 x 17, could be fixed up to live in.” In North Dakota, families kitted out grain bins. In Chicago, they moved into old trolley cars. Meanwhile, thousands tried quotidian life in Quonset huts, while millions doubled up with in-laws or friends. Two newlyweds even set up housekeeping in a Manhattan department store window: they hoped the hype would land them housing. This was all just after World War II, when a sea of new veterans, along with their wives and young children, were desperate for a place of their own. What an extreme chasm between supply and demand: housing starts had fallen a stunning 95 percent during the Depression and the war. Everyone wanted a house. There were none to be had. Suburbs, of course, predate the postwar housing crisis. They were mentioned as far back as the fourteenth century, in “The Canterbury Tales,” and there were various suburban upticks in America up to the 1920s. But suburbia didn’t come into its own until the middle of the American Century. The suburbs have many raconteurs, not to mention critics aghast at their conformity: “And they’re all made out of ticky tacky/And they all look just the same,” as Malvina Reynolds wrote in “Little Boxes.” The song was inspired by the endless tract housing in Daly City, outside San Francisco.

The foundational book here, the Q source to later gospels, is “**Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States**” (Oxford University Press, 1985). I’d always assumed that Stateside capitalists, after the war, jumped right in to build suburbia. You know, they had “seen their opportunities and took ’em,” to paraphrase that Tammany Hall pol. But author Kenneth T. Jackson says not so fast. This Columbia history professor shows how the FHA and

VA were the true galvanic force. Basically the government acted as guarantor, and rampant suburbia was impossible without the Feds—which they took pains to play down, fearing accusations of socialism. The way it worked was the FHA offered generous insurance so builders could break ground with near-full security. And this in turn allowed mortgage bankers to ask down payments of less than 10 percent, versus a pre-war rate of 30 percent-plus. The VA lowered interest rates for GIs. On top of which, lenders could now stretch the life of the mortgage to 30 years, chopping down monthly payments so that, suddenly, it was cheaper to buy than to rent.

“Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000” (Vintage, 2003) also covers the war’s influence on postwar housing. Author Dolores Hayden, a professor of architecture and American studies at Yale, mentions how new streets were often named for the fallen: Chicago’s Park Forest named its for Illinois’s Congressional Medal of Honor winners. Even the houses themselves got built along war lines. William Levitt, of Levittown fame, had been a Seabee who learned how to construct fast, with standardized parts, highly controlled suppliers — goods were “combat loaded” with the most important stuff on top — and a workforce with almost amusingly narrowed skills. One guy only painted windowsills, for instance; another just bolted washing machines to the floor.

Hayden also chases the changeability of the suburb’s reputation. For most of history, suburbs were seen as lesser than — you know, sub — urban areas. The city’s edge, after all, was the place for slaughterhouses, garbage dumps, and brothels. And in much of the world, the edge is still undesirable, from the favelas of Latin America, to the poor immigrant projects rimming European cities. Why have suburbs worked out differently in America? Abundance of land, says Hayden, plus a historical Jeffersonian antipathy to cities. And what was our great suburban catalyst? Transportation. Horse car, omnibus, streetcar, train, automobile: if you could dwell outside the city but commute inside with ease, you could live like a king. That’s why Boston’s suburban MBTA lines are purple — it’s a play on royal purple, á la Versailles outside Paris.

Although suburbs may be the “quintessential physical achievement of the United States,” according to Jackson, and a savior to the postwar housing panic as they spiked and spiked again, they siphoned the middle class from cities, harmed the environment (via the gas-gulping automobile), and perpetuated racism. Here again, the free market is not the main force. It’s government as guarantor, the dark side. As housing issues expert Charles Abrams wrote, in 1955, the FHA’s racial policy “could well have been culled from the Nuremberg laws.”

“The Suburb Reader” (Routledge, 2006), a teeming collection edited by Becky M. Nicolaidis and Andrew Wiese, features many in-your-face racist moments, like this Levittown contract clause: “No dwelling shall be used or occupied except by members of the Caucasian race...” The book also runs excerpts on everything from suburban ecology and sprawl, to ennui and architecture, as per Ralph Waldo Emerson, Betty Friedan, John Cheever, and a slew of academics. For a subject not exactly rolling in laughs, one entry stood out: “Chicago Suburb,” Mad Magazine’s satire of the famous Carl Sandburg poem, as in “Hog Barbecuer to the World/School Segregator, Mower of Lawns.”

The fight against racism, suburban-style, blossoms in **“Climbing Mount Laurel: The Struggle for Affordable Housing and Social Mobility in an American Suburb”** (Princeton University Press, 2013). Upscale Mount Laurel loomed large in the New Jersey State Supreme Court’s key fair housing decisions in 1975 and 1983. But the housing itself wasn’t built until all of 2001. For years, locals protested hard that home values would fall and crime rates would rise. Douglas S. Massey and four other authors, most with Princeton ties, meticulously document how this wasn’t the case at all. The even bigger takeaway: those who moved into the Ethel Lawrence Homes—named for a Mount Laurel citizen known as “The Rosa Parks of affordable housing”—have gained so many advantages in health, education and stability, you want to weep for untold others, knowing what happens when an American Dream is deferred.

Which brings us to our foreclosed present day, with house-happy suburbs in housing-crisis freefall. Two new books pounce hard here: Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube’s **“Confronting Suburban Poverty in America”** (Brookings Institution, 2013) reveals that “the geography of poverty” has changed and more now live below the poverty line in suburbs than in cities. That’s what happens when you put all your eggs in the mortgage basket. Raising the ante is **“The End of the Suburbs,”** (Penguin, 2013) by Leigh Gallagher, which holds that the mortgage crisis merely revealed a pentimento of cracks. With falling birth rates and driving amounts (young people get licenses less and less), plus the growing cachet of cities, suburbs will lose center stage in our nation’s narrative.

If this is the way it’ll go, then hold dear to **“Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir”** (Norton, 1996), the most resonant book about suburban life. Author D. J. Waldie composed it in 316 fragments, at turns reportorial and soulful — children playing under the oleanders, dogs setting off a roundelay of barks, conviviality on the sidewalks — to chronicle the birth and life of Lakewood, outside Long Beach, California. Here, non-veterans had to put \$695 down, veterans \$0 down for a thousand square feet of hard-won comfort, wrapped in stucco. Lakewood is the Ur-suburb, in fact, of the famous Fortune photos, wherein moving vans stretch as far as the eye can see. On Palm Sunday, 1950, it opened its sales office. There were 25,000 people waiting outside.

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