

**Somewhere That's Green?
Visions of Sustainable Suburbia**

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Dedication

To memories of 206 Bright Street—

My Grandmother's Home,

My Mother's Home,

and My Home,

always.

Abstract

Conceived and represented throughout its history as a primarily residential landscape combining the best aspects of city and country, suburbia has traditionally been painted with the rhetorically green brushstrokes of leaves, gardens and grass. In more recent decades, coinciding largely with rapid mass suburbanization sprawling across North America, suburban development has rather come to be seen as antithetical to the preservation and appreciation of the natural world, indicative of a lifestyle spatially and experientially alienated from nature's amenities despite its many trees and lawns. Contemporary environmental movements promoting a "green" agenda often dismiss suburbia as a wholly unsustainable paradigm. However, emergent trends in planning, building, marketing, consumption, and entertainment attempt to reconcile long held desires for suburban places that bring everyday life closer *to* nature with ecological pressures to live in greater harmony *with* nature. This project examines tensions and synergies between suburbia as it has been physically and culturally constructed since the mid-twentieth century and some of the many hypothetically greener conceptions either currently in development or envisioned as on the horizon. Through analysis of popular media discourses and representational practices positioning subdivisions and single-family homes as symbolic as well as symptomatic of this iconic privatized built environment, this project explores how and why various solutions posed for suburbia's perceived ecological problems envision compromises that either only peripherally address the substance of many environmental critiques, or are fundamentally at odds with what continues to make suburbia so desirable as a residential choice.

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• INTRODUCTION •
**Redefining Green:
Suburbia and Sustainability in Contemporary Discourse**



Figure 0.1: *Ellen Greene as Audrey, looking out her dream picture window singing:*

*A matchbox of our own
A fence of real chain link
A grill out on the patio
Disposal in the sink
A washer and a dryer and an ironing machine
In a tract house that we share
Somewhere that's green.*

*He rakes and trims the grass
He loves to mow and weed
I cook like Betty Crocker
And I look like Donna Reed
There's plastic on the furniture
To keep it neat and clean
In the Pine-Sol scented air
Somewhere that's green.*

Still from *Little Shop of Horrors*, directed by Frank Oz (1986).

When Audrey imagines living “somewhere that’s green” in the 1986 film version of *Little Shop of Horrors*, her description of the place is far different from her cramped, dreary apartment on skid row.¹ “A matchbox of our own,” while extremely modest by contemporary standards, is precisely where she envisions herself and Seymour pursuing “the good life.” [Figure 0.1] Suburban homeownership would be an American dream-come-true. Her aspirations may seem simple to audiences then and now, tracking with the typical postwar “little boxes” so often derided and dismissed in popular culture, yet in context these are BIG dreams. Chain link may not indicate middle-class status as well as the fabled white picket fence, but it delineates the private property of the suburban yard to be raked, trimmed, mowed, and weeded just the same. The basic appliances she lovingly lists—a grill, garbage disposal, washer and dryer, iron—all represent the labor-saving modernization of everyday life; and while most are to be found also in urban residences, they collectively mean something different in suburbia, where they signify upward mobility via their association with outward mobility—having greater space to accommodate and ability to afford more and better appliances. Still functioning both as modern symbols of affluence and leisure, their very basic models and materials position them relatively low on the continuum of suburban class signification. To Audrey, however, they embody a vastly better life than what she presently experiences.

In this musical sequence, Audrey’s dreams are quite literally mediated, framed by shots of her opening and closing the September 1959 issue of *Better Homes and Gardens*, “The family IDEA magazine,” featuring a neighborhood of modern ranch-style houses on the cover and ads for blissful domestic products within. [Figure 0.2] Many of our own dreams for better living are similarly constructed from the conglomerate visions of suburbia we encounter in media like films, television shows, commercials, magazine ads, and, increasingly, online marketing that illustrate current dreams of “the good life.”



Figure 0.2: *In her cluttered, close quarters on skid row, Audrey pages through a copy of Better Homes and Gardens, framing the daydream sequence in which she, Seymour, their potential children and family dog, all get to live in a tract home much more modest than the ones pictured on the cover.*

Left: *Better Homes and Gardens* cover, September 1959 issue.

Right: Stills from *Little Shop of Horrors*, directed by Frank Oz (1986).

We may now have more upscale desires than Audrey's plastic-covered furniture and "Pine-Sol scented air" in entry-level suburbia, but we might also recognize—and share—her deep-seated longing for "somewhere that's green." Our shared vision of suburbia is the product of countless circulated images, sequences, and narratives, many of which include the interplay of middle-class domesticity, the latest in consumer technologies, and a connection to nature. This tripartite construction of the suburban dream is demonstrated in the continued popularity of *Better Homes and Gardens*, a magazine that cultivates preferences for residential design, appliances, and landscaping.² Audrey's version of the dream life is more private, not inclusive of the houses, cars and neighbors seen in this particular cover illustration, but it mimics one of the ads inside depicting an apron-clad happy housewife gazing out her kitchen window. Contentedly at home in her sparkling, modern kitchen, she enjoys her private view of the "natural" world just past the flower-filled window box. An animated bird accompanies Audrey as she dances through the room, reminiscent of scenes from classic Walt Disney films like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1939) and *Cinderella* (1950).³ Audrey's ideas—and ideals—of suburban life are born from and nourished by visual media.

Audrey's dream home sits within a painted cardboard set, but one that includes a great deal of green paint. The imitation grass, flowers and trees included in the scene are as vital to her vision of home as the tract house façade with its diminutive picture window. As the title of the song suggests, being "Somewhere that's Green" is the factor contextualizing the comfortable lifestyle enjoyed within. Having a washer and dryer in a low-rent apartment on skid row is not the same as having them in your own detached single-family home in suburbia. Context matters in shaping the terms of the dream, whereby one is envisioned as having the opportunity to better enjoy the leisure benefits of consumer technologies in a more expansive though private park-like setting. When

Audrey imagines looking out her window in her “dream” she sees her equally happy husband doing yard work, stopping only long enough to play with the dog and wave back to her inside, while in her “reality” all she sees outside her apartment window is a dark alley full of garbage and a vagrant drunk. These competing visions, while stereotypical, often condense the terms of discussion and imagination of how—and where—we want to live. The oversimplified choice is between city and suburb.⁴

The phrase “leafy green suburb” has long peppered discourses about residential real estate, usually signifying a positive attribute inherent in such places when compared to the “concrete jungles” of modern cities. Different perceptions of the “urban” and the “suburban” often hinge on this respective expectation for either the deficit or surplus of such amenities as grass and trees and gardens. Such distinctions have only been amplified in visual media, where we find images of “the city” in film, television, and photography that usually focus on bustling activity amidst the cold steel and glass towers of urban mazes. Meanwhile, “the ’burbs” are mostly characterized by neatly lush, green expanses that promise a more leisurely, even sleepy pace. That “greenness” can alternately be used to signal a wholesome life more closely allied with nature than in the city, or exposed as a façade, an artifice that conceals the dysfunctional, the pathological, the unnatural. This color-coded, visualized connection to nature, whether perceived as authentic or fraudulent, has informed our conceptualization of the suburban landscape for over three centuries. In recent decades we find a relatively new popular use of the term “green” to describe suburbs—and the impetus to build and rebuild them better—as environmentally friendly developments and endeavors. “Green” in this current cultural context looks beyond the aesthetic and experiential qualities of any nominally verdant physical environment, evaluating such factors as how ecologically sustainable it is to construct, furnish, maintain, and otherwise live in it. This newer understanding and

imagining of “green” is, however, just as mediated as Audrey’s vision of her own “better home.” We increasingly find interpretations of a “greener” suburbia that incorporate more eco-friendly translations of middle-class domesticity and consumer technologies, as well eco-revisions of the suburban home’s setting in both yard and community. Looking at a variety of media discourses positioning suburbia as somewhere that’s *this kind of green*, this project explores how these visions of sustainable suburbia work.

In the marketing of new subdivisions we find the familiar rhetoric of selling a home in suburbia as fulfillment of one’s own personal American dream, but this is more often framed as a relatively *green dream*. You can have it all, but you can now have it in a manner that appears consistent with a mainstreamed environmental culture, one in which green is no longer quite as fringe, increasingly acknowledged and appropriated by capitalist enterprise. Images and narratives of green suburbia are now marketing tools for selling us everything from “better” cars and washing machines to “the best” houses and neighborhoods. In feature film and television texts we repeatedly see these themes deployed in concert with industrial and consumer discourses, even when they purport to critique such efforts as inauthentic “greenwashing.”⁵ These greened dreams are all constructed, or more appropriately reconstructed, as ecologically sound and desirable, but always in the context of prior conceptualizations of suburbia. Audrey’s list comprises the basics of a well-appointed suburban life. As each is refashioned for today’s eco-conscious marketplace, “green” means having a *better dream*. Key to this operation is a doubling, making suburbia now even “better than ever” for both *you* and for *the planet*.

Approaching the notion of a more environmentally sustainable suburbia through mediated visions of green communities and green homes, my aim is to demonstrate how each concept—*green* and *suburbia*—is culturally constructed in relation to the other. The politics of representation shape our reading of these textual examples and

contextual discourses, often maintaining the oppositional characterization of these terms. For us to see “green” as something that can be “suburban,” and “suburbia” as somewhere that can be “green,” we first need to better understand how and why we have come to appreciate (or depreciate) what each has traditionally stood for within the popular imagination, and then move on to a perspective from which we can evaluate what their mediated merger potentially means for “green suburbia” today and tomorrow.

Pursuit of a suburban landscape that is both ecologically and economically sustainable is multifaceted and multidirectional. Concentrating on the rhetoric employed in the design, building and marketing of green subdivisions and single-family homes, this project traces only a few of the ways in which they are being constructed in visual media as well as in the physical environment. At issue is how their meanings as both “green” and “suburban” are either affirmed or contested in popular culture, offering additional layers of context for those constructions and positioning them as part of the process of redefining “green” more broadly in cultural discourse. This speculative, mediated venture of “greening suburbia” is consequential precisely because of the historical relationship between rapid postwar suburban expansion and the rise of environmental awareness that Adam Rome so thoroughly explored in *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*. Despite growing interest and investment in ecological sustainability within the broader culture, multi-media promotion of suburbia as an ideal, aspirational home choice has continued unabated, though not without criticism. If the eco-integrity of suburbia can be established—or salvaged—it has the potential to reshape environmental discourses going forward, as well as fortifying suburban discourses of consumer demand, securing a place for this perennially popular though much maligned contemporary landscape and lifestyle in a resource-dwindling, climate-changing future. How we see suburbia, or perhaps more significantly, whether or not we see a viably *green* suburbia matters.

Vision, however, is not neutral. What we see before us in both the physical environment and visual media has been culturally constructed and framed, packaged and reviewed with our visual consumption in mind. Discourses participating in these constructions and framings position us as viewers and consumers—of natural-looking landscapes, of dream houses, and of a greener suburbia as constituted by eco-friendly versions of both. These discourses are often disciplinary and increasingly partisan, suggesting, even at times insisting, that we look at such imagery in a certain way, from a particular perspective shaped by the rhetoric surrounding it, and in which “we” are all to various degrees invested. Within the interdisciplinary field of suburban studies, which includes architectural and planning history as well as social and cultural history, emergence of contemporary “green” attitudes and practices is poorly addressed except for relatively rare works like Adam Rome’s contribution, which makes clearer a historical trajectory for “home grown” environmental culture grounded in as well as a consequence of postwar suburbanization nationwide. Likewise, suburbia is nearly absent from most contemporary environmental discourses, including eco-criticism, green cultural studies, and more activism directed and centered forums, except as an overly simplistic and monolithic target of critique, a rhetorical straw man or conveniently generic illustration of all that is wrong with where and how and why we built what we have. Popular media discourses follow more often than challenge such socio-cultural and environmental appraisals, wherein visions of suburbia, suburbanites, and suburban dreams for a “better” life (like Audrey’s) are more cookie-cutter caricature than examples of nuanced, differentiated representation. Throughout this project my goal is to intervene in, but also to make connections between these variously encamped and entrenched discourses, highlighting, introducing, or restoring a better sense of how very complex these visions of green and suburbia and green suburbia really are.

My search for contemporary examples of how suburbia could be made “greener” led to a wealth and variety of texts that demonstrate this complexity, including feature films, television series and commercials, reporting in print and online, and numerous websites for communities being built and sold across the country. “Green,” in its most recent configuration, has emerged largely as a digital discourse in which the local and the global, the amateur and the professional, all coalesce in an almost universally accessible new media environment. This integrated study of the mediation of suburban sustainability considers fictional and reality-based texts that contribute to a wider view of suburban life from the late 20th and into the 21st centuries. At stake is not only whether or not suburbia is sustainable in environmental terms, providing a place where more and more people can pursue their independent and communal goals without endangering ecosystems small or large, but also if it is itself a sustainable idea for anyone anywhere in an increasingly unstable, unequal, global economic environment. I do not intend here to apologize for suburban growth and popularity to date, nor do I wish to simply add to the immense criticism it has already received from multiple quarters. While temporarily disentangling the discourse of possibility from defensive or offensive mainlines, my goal in this project is to trace the genealogy of the discursive construction of “green suburbia” through examination of representative examples of green homes and subdivisions, built and dreamed, and the diverse media landscape through which we encounter them.

In this process, my focus is on the visualization of “green suburbia” in a key sampling of media texts organized thematically. While in some instances these images correspond to material objects and environments, their representation of the possible is of even more interest here than the probable or the actual. These are the spaces, the narratives, the engagements where sustainable suburbia is imagined by both the producers and consumers of visual media. They exist prior to and subsequent of the

political, economic, or socially derived constraints that eventually limit or diminish the physical realization of green suburban dreams. None looked at here are purely utopian visions of a perfect world, but they each do respond on some level to a feared dystopic future of environmental decline or even collapse. The underlying context—and critique—of green suburban discourses is the possibility that suburbia will not or cannot survive as either a cultural paradigm or a physical landscape. This does not necessarily lessen our many financial, social, and psychic investments in suburbia, but it does energize efforts to both see and sell a better way forward. And even if we do not individually or collectively buy any of these re-visioned suburban solutions as advertised, each image advances an argument about what kind of environment suburbia is, why so many value it as is, and how it can possibly be both sustainable and sustained.

We live in a suburban nation, more so every year. Even as suburbs across the continent grow, they grow much more diverse compared to stereotypical views derivative of the bland, middle-class domesticity featured in postwar American sit-coms like *Leave It to Beaver*, or decades later found in photographic critiques like *The New Topographics* emphasizing the banality of monotonous sprawl.⁶ In reality there is a multiplicity of thought about the places we call home, drawing upon an expanding visual vocabulary of suburbia in which elements of “green” are transforming our older, simplistic, “black-and-white” views. With new ways of seeing we may yet hope to build a new paradigm that includes the possibility of “green suburbia,” one that recognizes the socio-economic and cultural diversity of this dynamic landscape, and is no longer constricted by outworn stereotypes.⁷ Representations of suburbia in media discourses are key to understanding why and how actual suburbs get built—and rebuilt. Material structures and physical places are fashioned as consequences of these discourses, which also recursively fashion the discourse, as seen in the production of suburbia as *somewhere that’s green*.

It's Not Easy Being Green: Rethinking Suburbia as Sustainable

The first rule of sustainability is to align with natural forces, or at least not try to defy them.

— Paul Hawken

Many observers remain skeptical of suburbia's ability to truly "be green" since this particular landscape has longstanding associations with environmental disregard or even degradation. In a 2008 *New York Times* piece, "Don't Let the Green Grass Fool You," the author muses that "Longtime suburban residents might wonder how they suddenly became environmentally incorrect. People who moved to the suburbs in the '50's and '60's thought they were being green just by doing so.... Then, green 'just meant open space and privacy.... Those Levittowns were 'green' because they had lawns.'"⁸ In attempts to rehabilitate the idea and ideal of suburbia in a new eco-conscious cultural context, this fundamental shift in understanding is often elided in marketing rhetoric for new and old suburban homes and communities. The visual focus remains on trees and leaves to connote eco-friendliness.⁹ Re-branding the 'burbs, no matter how intensive the effort, must nonetheless reconcile the dual meanings of green, but also the complex desires that still lead so many to move to suburbia, and the ways in which developers continue trying to draw us to their ever greener versions of it.

While nineteenth and early twentieth century suburbs largely drew wealthy and upper-middle-class residents who could afford to retreat from rapidly industrialized cities, in the latter half of the twentieth century we begin to see a more modest suburban home as a stepping stone to the middle-class. The basic desire for privacy, property, and prosperity were factors for many first-generation post-WWII suburbanites just as it was for their more affluent predecessors,¹⁰ but this is not the whole story. In *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism*, Adam

Rome articulates an important underlying factor that contributed to the unprecedented postwar period of mass-suburbanization. Like the fictional Audrey in *Little Shop of Horrors*, a whole generation was chasing that shared mid-century “green” dream:

Though millions of postwar migrants to the suburbs simply sought affordable shelter...suburban homebuyers often wanted a chance to be closer to nature. The developers of subdivisions acknowledged that hope by naming developments for natural features, but the names evidenced a brutal contradiction. To create tracts of houses, builders in the 1950s and 1960s routinely destroyed the meadows, woods, and hills they honored in their place names.¹¹

Environmental, aesthetic and more broadly cultural critiques are still founded on this perceived discrepancy between the reality of how a great many suburbs are built and the rhetoric employed in marketing them to consumers. At the very least, such ironic practices provide occasional laughs at the expense of those naïve homeowners who supposedly bought into the absurd logic that has historically made clear-cut suburban development economically efficient if not ecologically sustainable, such as *Kansas City Star* columnist Bill Vaughan’s well-worn aphorism: “Suburbia is where the developer bulldozes out the trees, then names the streets after them.” [Figure 0.3]

It was often these relatively “un-green” practices that made homeownership affordable to an emergent middle-class, giving them a chance to have their very own little piece of highly cultivated “nature” on a quarter-acre lot, albeit in a vast suburban sea of identical quarter-acre lots. Compared to aging, over-crowded housing conditions in postwar cities that saw little reinvestment during two decades of economic depression and wartime scarcity, these simple, brand-new “matchboxes” surrounded by scraggly patches of crabgrass and chain-link fencing were paradise found. Newly planted saplings may have appeared comically small and bare to onlookers, but to residents they would, in time, grow into the full stately trees that line established suburban streets. Yesterday’s desolate new subdivision is in many cases today’s leafy green suburb.



Figure 0.3: *A photographer captures this point of conflict between the ideal of suburban nature—as evidenced in the street name “Deep Woods Drive”—and the more common reality of clear-cut subdivision construction.*

This trend of referencing “natural” features of the landscape (whether preserved, replaced, destroyed, or entirely fictional) can be seen in the names of streets, but also of subdivisions and entire suburban towns.

Bob Thall, “Hoffman Estates, Illinois” (1993); from *The New American Village* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

Yet critical views largely focus on the initial physical production of a subdivision. Looking back nostalgically at what kind of landscape immediately preceded the big bulldozers and little boxes, less attention is paid to the much longer history of cultivation and commodification of the land before suburbia suddenly moved into the neighborhood. Likewise, our focus on the initial construction process and its attendant destruction of the existing landscape, while visually dramatic and deserving of our critical attention in terms of its environmental and cultural impacts,¹² usually overlooks the extended period afterward, as a community is settled and residents actively manage and modify their individual and communal landscapes—increasingly with an eye towards sustainability of ecological health as well as economic wealth. Lakewood, California, for example is a massive postwar suburb made infamous by the republication of William Garnett’s aerial marketing photographs as evidence of the environmental damage caused by modern, industrial scale development. In those same Lakewood neighborhoods, a movement replacing “traditional” lawns with “edible estates” re-imagines the suburban yard as a productive as well as aesthetic landscape.¹³ [Figure 0.4] Encouragement for suburban homeowners to redefine the meaning and use of their property in modern subdivisions this way, where such agricultural activities have been largely discouraged or even outlawed, is but one growing strand in the rhetoric of greening suburbia one “greener” yard at a time. Similar movements promote xeriscaping, permaculture and native habitat restoration instead of lawns.¹⁴ Much more than grass can undoubtedly grow in suburbia.

This older meaning of “green” in the postwar paradigm—the individual yard carpeted in a monoculture lawn and accented with a few shade trees, the requisite foundation plantings, and flowers in window boxes—is itself far removed from the pastoral expanses of historic British and American suburban estates. Even so, their respective visions and promises share a foundational desire for private green space.

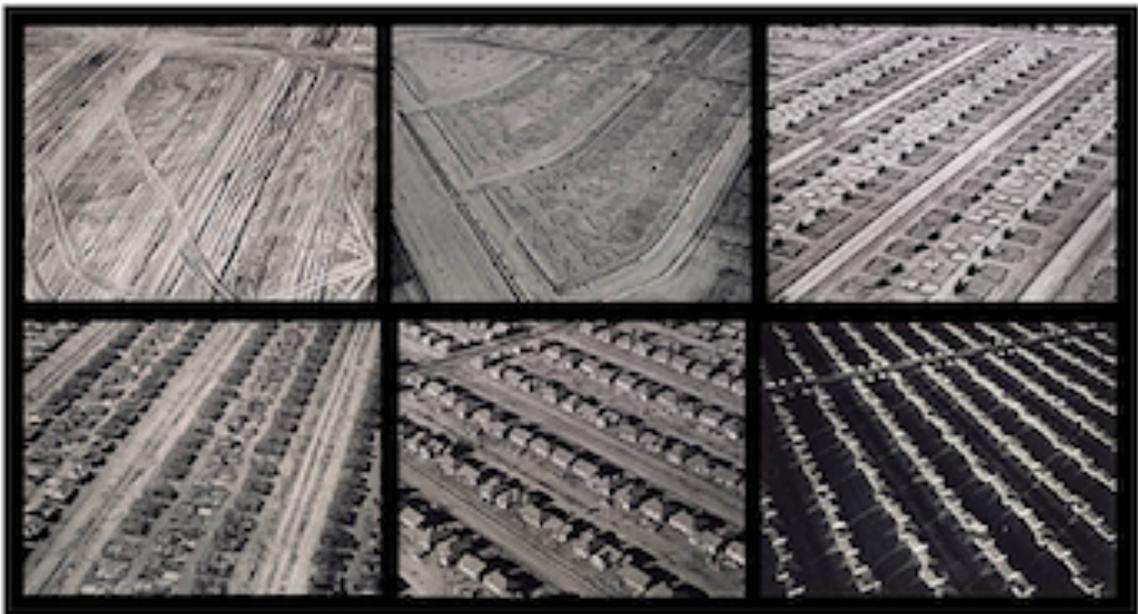


Figure 0.4: *Originally commissioned as promotional images, Garnett's aerial photographs have been widely reproduced, such as in Peter Blake's God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape (1964), where they were seen as visual evidence of the scale of suburban development and its environmental damage. (above)*

Haeg's composite "edible estates" images, made in those same Lakewood neighborhoods over half a century later, counter this view with documentation of how some families have transformed their once standard yards into sustainable gardens. (below)

Above: William Garnett, Lakewood, California series (1950)

Below: Fritz Haeg, photo collage of Edible Estate Regional Prototype garden #2- Lakewood, CA (2006) This and other images from the *Edible Estates* project can be seen here: <http://www.kcet.org/socal/webstories/sustainingla/edible-estates/edible-estates-slideshow.html>.

As the meaning of “green” is renegotiated in late 20th and early 21st century discourses, the project becomes more overtly political in its evocation of suburbia as public space, even when referencing a conglomerate of individual, private properties. The corner-to-corner carpeting of front lawns suggests visual continuity in a streetscape. If one yard converts to a vegetable garden the illusion is broken, but if every single one does it is potentially restored. Even the appearance of rows of similar houses deflects attention from each individual unit, evoking the neighborhood in its entirety, as a whole. The effect is a less individuated perspective of suburban space, life, and aspiration, including efforts to transform it in environmental terms. Solar panels on one home’s roof stand out, breaking the pattern. Solar panels on every roof reinforce the visual and ideological connection between homes, suggesting unity (but could also be read as conformity).¹⁵

But not everything green can be so easily seen, and if not seen, can it be believed? Local communities are experimenting with programs to green suburbs from the inside out, focusing homeowner attention on relatively invisible improvements like attic insulation and higher efficiency furnaces or water heaters.¹⁶ There are doubts about the efficacy of such plans and pronouncements, as evident in statements like this from a Preservation Institute blogger: “The *New York Times* reports (with a straight face) that Levittown, NY, the archetypal post-war suburb, is now aiming to become ‘the nation’s first ‘green suburb’.”¹⁷ In 2007, Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi argued that “everybody’s heard of Levittown, U.S.A,” and therefore, if it could become “an example of *easy environmentalism* and show homeowners how they can make changes to save money and improve the environment...we can do an *extreme makeover* of an entire community that can become a model for the rest of the country.”¹⁸ Promoted at the community level and to a national audience, the campaign to “green Levittown” is still conceived as a concerted effort of incentivized individual homeowners, mostly in terms

of small energy efficiency improvements and, therefore, collective carbon emissions reductions. [Figure 0.5] These are all green choices that do not offer very dramatic or even noticeable visual evidence in or on the home, seen mainly in monthly residential utility bills. Beyond questions of how different a greener suburbia might look, and whether or not we will know it when we see it, we must also ask if a few more compact fluorescent light bulbs or home energy audits really make any suburb “green”?

Suburbs are much more than the sum of their residential, commercial, and civic parts, and larger concerns are rightly raised about the possibility of really transforming this landscape into something we recognize as a “sustainable community.” Dan Chiras and Dave Wann outline three “major barriers that limit options” in many existing suburbs and prevent suburbia from becoming, in their term, *Superbia!*:

- The physical layout of the suburbs, which results in social isolation and resource consumption (...lots of driving and high fuel bills).
- The ‘mold’ of suburban culture, which reinforces extravagant, private lifestyles that often disregard public values and require expensive, time-consuming maintenance.
- Government incentives, municipal zoning laws, and bank lending policies that shaped suburbia but have become obsolete. American culture has changed, but the rules haven’t.¹⁹

Ignoring for now the contradiction inherent in their rhetoric framing of the issues this way, wherein “American culture has changed” but “suburban culture” is old and “moldy,”²⁰ all three points—positioned in the negative here—have correlative positive aspects and inspire compelling counterpoints that still speak to many people who, in fact, like living in suburbia and don’t feel the need to fundamentally change the nature of the place they call home. “Social isolation” can be moderated by technologically enabled social networks and time spent with geographically *close* friends and family who carpool or share a cul-de-sac. “Private lifestyles”—not necessarily extravagant—can be translated into freedom to grow vegetables and chickens rather than only azaleas and children.



Figure 0.5: *The public campaign to “Green Levittown” was visualized through the abstraction of leaves, and critiqued through a literal greenwashing of historical photographs of this iconic postwar development.*

Above left: “Green Levittown” logo (2007)

Above right: A “Green Levittown” tie-in ad from Tragar Oil, advertising itself as “Your Green Energy Company” (2008)

Below: Photo illustration used with Bryan Walsh’s article in *Time Magazine*, “A New Blueprint for Levittown” (January 17, 2008); photograph by Joseph Schersche, Time Life Picture Collection/Getty.

And in terms of “official” culture, regulations and policies are neither deterministic nor static—they can and will change as cultural actors assert pressure corresponding to their articulated values, which increasingly include and prioritize environmental sustainability.

As for their first point, though, addressing “the physical layout of the suburbs” is perhaps the most difficult to tackle in regard to greening long established suburban locations. Chiras and Wann reevaluate our familiar property divisions and patterns, optimistically arguing that while “suburbs have been the butt of many jokes and a lot of criticism...these millions of single-family homes represent a huge potential to create and promote sustainability.” But their proposed changes in a truly “extreme makeover”²¹ include fundamentally reordering the visual character of suburbia, as well as residents’ social, economic, and political relations to their property and their neighbors. Their 2003 article for Terrain.org includes an illustration of what this vision of *Superbia!* just might look like.²² [Figure 0.6] In addition to solar panels on every roof, suggested revisions to standard neighborhood configurations embrace the removal of pavement and fences to create community gardens, “clustered parking” lots instead of driveways and garages, and a “Common House” that is “cooperatively owned by neighbors.” This is a valid attempt at rethinking what a neighborhood looks like and how it functions, and certainly adds elements that fit both definitions of “green,” but it does represent a radical change.

There is a growing backlash against the possibility of a new, more sustainable suburban paradigm drawing from the deep, fortified well of postwar discursive trends. Defenders of the status quo are assumed unaware of the consequences—intended or otherwise—of continuing and expanding upon old models that valorize private property over community involvement, waste resources rather than conserve them, and are devoted to cars rather than pedestrian or transit-oriented movement. Even though what we have is not the most efficient in any respect, it is what we are most used to seeing.

*Transforming Suburbia...
into Superbia!*



Figure 0.6: *In this illustration contrasting traditional “suburbia” (top left) to the new and improved “Superbia!” (bottom right), we are meant to see how this reordering of the landscape might transform our living relations—how we could be more connected to our neighbors and to the environment we share. In recycling (and in some cases, like the garage, repurposing) existing structures, and maximizing the literal “green” spaces that connect them (rather than roads, driveways, and fences that otherwise divide them) Wann and Chiras advocate novel ways to foster both community and sustainability within the physical confines of pre-established suburban neighborhoods.*

Illustration by Dan Bohlen. Published in Dave Wann and Dan Chiras, “Transforming Suburbia...into Superbia!” *Terrain: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments* 13 (Summer/Fall 2003), <http://www.terrain.org/articles/13/superbia.htm>.

Relatively early in the contemporary push to “green” suburbia, a 1995 cover story in *Newsweek* began with the proclamation that “Most of us actually know what we want in a neighborhood—we just don’t know how to get it, because developers have been building the wrong thing for 50 years.”²³ Our choices in the suburban marketplace, while substantially bigger and well appointed compared to those modest postwar tract homes, do largely conform to the spatial precedents of how they were built. Even so, one blogger reassesses the legacy of the most cited example, Levittown, in terms of sustainability, acknowledging that while we’ve long been told that this was “the place where America went wrong” leading us down “a path to oil addiction and high energy usage,” the average 800 square foot “individual houses were probably fairly low energy-intensity dwellings” and “the community as a whole was smarter than we give it credit for now.”²⁴ So perhaps Levittown really has always been the nation’s “first *green* suburb”? Yet here we find ourselves in an all too common rhetorical cul-de-sac, where promotion of the individual “green house” stands in as the sustainable solution for suburbia at large.

Temporarily reversing our outlook from a macro lens that primarily considers suburbia in its collectivity to a view that focuses in on those individual houses is, however, called for. The single-family home has long been one of the most potent symbols of the American dream in suburbia, representing a scale and sphere of agency through which an individual or a family can affect change in their own lives, if not the community, country, or wider world. Within his treatise on planning and design considerations in residential development, Avi Friedman traces the “rise of suburbia,” pointing out that one “noticeable factor that affected sustainability and affordability was the transformation of the home from a modest shelter to a swollen token of social status.”²⁵ This discursive realignment has been an easy target in terms of environmental critique, questioning the validity of green McMansions as eco-solutions. [Figure 0.7]



McMansion produces 81 tonnes of CO₂ in construction. Produces 44 tonnes of CO₂ annually



Figure 0.7: Australian artist Mathieu Gallois and his project team envision the possibility of tearing down overly large suburban houses (above) and replacing them with two—or more—smaller green ones on the same lot (below). Notice the emphasis on green grass and trees in the redesign.

Image from “Reincarnated McMansion,” reproduced on Placeblog (April 3, 2011), <http://placing.wordpress.com/2011/03/04/changescaping-thought-reincarnated-mcmansion/>.

This question of the green credibility of oversized single-family houses is being raised beyond the suburban limits of the United States. In Australia a project team led by Mathieu Gallois proposes the deconstruction of that country's exceedingly large new homes. McMansions are to be dismantled and "reincarnated" as two much more petite and environmentally sustainable houses, complete with solar panels and water heaters, green roofs, reused windows, and reverse brick veneer, among many other eco-friendly designs and materials.²⁶ Visually, this "down sizing" and "up cycling" has the potential to substantially alter entire neighborhoods by reducing singularly large and overly bulky masses to more intimate, human-scaled residences that allow for more green space in between and all around. The basic plan is somewhat contrary to that put forward by Wann and Chiras, though, emphasizing more but smaller private housing stock per lot rather than encouraging greater communal living situations within existing large suburban homes. One aspect that both ideas share, at least in the respective concept drawings published online, is the greater net effect of green ground (and house) cover.

While there is rising interest in retrofitting the suburbs we've long learned to love or loathe, making them greener in the process, brand new subdivisions continue to be built with greener goals and design principles. Here we find a growing class of "green dream homes" that fit within the standard growth patterns of traditional suburbs, but with various levels of eco-claims and certifications attached. The cultural function of such supposedly "green" domestic status symbols, which often boast the latest in both stylish eco-friendly furnishings and energy-efficient technological gadgetry, is similar to their non-green predecessors and neighbors. The difference is largely one of context. These green giants increasingly incorporate the larger suburban community setting along with the individual single-family house and yard into wider discourses of "living green." Just as the "green dream home" is often held up as the more responsible antithesis of the

sprawling, wasteful, cookie-cutter McMansion (the former rhetorically conveying the cultural capital of eco-consciousness while the latter represents the same old suburbanites gone wild), an address in a brand new “green suburb” connotes a special investment in the environment and its attendant eco-cultural status far beyond residence in a traditionally designed and built subdivision. The means by which many of these new “green houses” and “eco-communities” are commercially marketed and culturally marked suggest that the old, familiar way of building and living in suburbia is inherently incompatible with sustainable philosophies and practices. Those who choose to live in such un-green places are rhetorically positioned as both lacking in their regard for the natural world, and themselves missing out on—or worse, depriving their children of—the benefits of a community’s natural amenities (as highlighted in promotional materials).

One high-profile example of this trend is found in the annual HGTV “Green Home Giveaway,” patterned after their slightly longer running “Dream Home Giveaway.” Tying into the escalating prominence of sustainability themes in the cable network’s house-hunting and design-oriented programming (as well as green product placement), the community in which the sponsored green homes are sited is as much a part of the prize as the house. Highlighting respect for and incorporation of the natural landscape into the master plan for Stapleton, CO, the location chosen for HGTV’s 2011 contest, the Senior Vice President of Development for Forest City Stapleton assured readers and viewers that “we’ve worked to create a community that is founded on sustainability,” and “We’ll be delighted to welcome the lucky winner of the Green Home Giveaway to the neighborhood.”²⁷ Residency is described as of the house and of the equally significant neighborhood. Whether won or purchased, the rhetoric of green dream homes in places like this becomes ever more dependent upon the wider context of the green suburban development in addition to the content and style of the individual suburban house.

While some may still see suburban planning and building as stultified, hopelessly tied to naïve or misguided paradigms of the past like those that produced multiple Levittowns, across the country and internationally there are diverse, serious efforts to rethink what suburbia is and could yet be, provided that market forces continue to support the nascent but growing culture of sustainability. “Green is green,” in the words of Jeffery Immelt, the CEO of General Electric, a global corporation with interests in North American suburban home and community building.²⁸ That philosophy may, in the long run, be the basis for a vibrant green suburban future, in all of its color-rich connotations, just as profit motives drove most of what came before—for good and ill.

Prolific author and engineer Jerry Yudelson describes the wider industry shift to more sustainable design and construction practices—including those in the suburbs—in terms of a “Green Building Revolution.” This was also the title of one of his most recent books laying out “the abundant evidence supporting the economic and policy case,” and the basic environmental rationale for green building.²⁹ Yudelson briefly highlights a Rocklin, California community, The Grupe Company’s Carsten Crossings, as an example of how a production builder can simultaneously comply with and profit from a commitment to higher sustainability standards on the scale of subdivisions as well as one-off single-family homes. He focuses here, though, on one “model home” and its incorporation of many energy-efficient technologies, like tankless water heaters and photovoltaic roof panels.³⁰ While making the case that builders’ products—individual suburban houses—are more effectively marketed to and increasingly sought by prospective homeowners as much for the bottom-line cost-savings in energy use as for their less tangible environmental bona fides, the discursive context of the larger suburban development in which they are sited also plays an important part in why someone would choose this eco-friendly house in this eco-friendly suburb. [Figure 0.8]



Figure 0.8: *LEED ratings, which consider contextual features like “sustainable sites” as well as the design, materials, construction practices, and efficiency of the home itself, are superimposed on the photograph of a standard-looking model home, “certifying” its greenness. Also highlighted are the resultant savings a homeowner could expect in energy costs.*

Above: Solar panels being installed throughout this Rocklin, CA subdivision; photograph by Max Whitaker for *The New York Times* (2006).

Below: Cover page of the U.S. Green Building Council’s LEED project profile, “A Green Home Among Many,” for the Oakgrove model available in Carsten Crossings at Whitney Ranch in Rocklin, CA.

This community was also covered in the *New York Times*, featuring a photo of one construction worker installing solar panels.³¹ [Figure 0.8] In that image the rooftop perspective looks down across the suburban street, encompassing a longer view of a dozen or so identical houses that, presumably, will also sport the same solar panels when completed. While not quite as dramatic as William Garnett's aerial images of Lakewood, CA a half century earlier, the suburban dream is here visualized as pieces within a now larger, greener whole. As part of the broader cultural recasting of suburbia as *somewhere that can be greener*, such visual representations documenting technical processes by which actual suburbs are "going green" makes the discursive construction of green suburbia somewhat more tangible. This means of situating of the green home within—and constitutive of—the green community runs through most of the marketing of and reporting on Carsten Crossings. The 2007 U.S. Green Building Council project profile, titled "A Green Home Among Many," proclaims that "LEED certification...assured Carsten Crossings homebuyers that they were getting some of the greenest homes on the market, with the added benefit of knowing their neighbors were too." Here you no longer have to worry much about "keeping up with the Joneses," at least in terms of being green. It is literally built into every house, and therefore into the entire community. And as further assurance, you can literally see it displayed on every roof. These discursive and material declarations of each home's parity in terms of green technology are central to understanding the recursive relationship between being green and seeing green, whereby visual rhetoric and building/buying practices inform each other.

Another aspect of the discursive construction of green suburbia is found in marketing for Carsten Crossings, where emphasis on each home's green building standards and integrated systems like solar power is followed by equally vital eco-assertions that the subdivision's "proximity to open space, walking paths and parks adds

to its appeal.”³² On the website for master-planned Whitney Ranch, the sprawling development of which Carsten Crossings is only a small part, the community as a whole boasts “Over five miles of trails and three parks surrounded by native grasses and plant life” that “offer striking views and connect neighborhoods and schools to one another.”³³ In addition to providing views of and access to “nature” within the community, a nearby Audubon Demonstration Garden further shows homeowners how to themselves engage in the representational practice of green by transforming their own backyards into mini-natural habitats for native birds and butterflies (but *not* cougars and coyotes), potentially extending a “wilder” vision of the native California landscape into every piece of domesticated property, reconstructing it through individual landscaping design choices.

Allusions to Whitney Ranch’s many parks, preserves, trails and even its ranch-style community club house are marketing a vision of “green” suburban life in which the “natural” landscape is integral to the product you are buying,³⁴ but on an ever greater public rather than private level. Relatively little emphasis is given to the individual yard in sales materials, and a cursory glance at many such developments makes the reason for this omission quite clear. To maximize profits in the context of exceptionally high land values, contemporary suburban developers, green or otherwise, increasingly build bigger houses at ever-greater densities, to the point that the cliché postwar quarter acre lot is now considered a luxury.³⁵ Yet some consolation for this lost private landscape is communal ownership of the local environment, and therefore community identity as well as cultural capital for participating in conspicuously “sustainable” consumption, or even “conspicuous conservation.” This trend represents a pseudo-public (or pseudo-private, depending on perspective) status for such lands, whether designated for preservation of or recreation in natural environments, since both access and entitlement are often dependent upon residency and/or property ownership within the development. This is

just one new vision of having a “little piece of paradise” in suburbia, wherein the pieces may have gotten quite a bit littler, and, in discourse and practice, “paradise” itself is more of a communal concept.

The presence of gates in green suburban developments, like the solar-hybrid community of Discovery at Spring Trails outside of Houston, Texas, reinforces this message, providing a physical boundary that ostensibly protects and contains residents *and* their claim to the natural landscape. In terms of the latter value, this protection could be read in many ways, including insurance that the landscape—and its cultural value *as nature*—will not be damaged, degraded, or developed by “outside” influences, safeguarding the “borrowed view” by bringing it within the confines of the suburban development and commodifying it as an amenity. Sustainability is here equated with living *near* (a nature preserve, a forest) as much as *in* (a house, a subdivision) a place designated, certified, and protected as “green.” The integration of high tech energy-efficient solutions in each home, with native, natural-looking landscapes as the setting for those homes, largely defines the discursive parameters of “green suburbs” as we encounter them today. But do they really differ fundamentally—in theory or practice, visually or functionally—from why and how mainstream suburbia was produced up to this point, when we acknowledge the shifting meaning of “green”?

As a physical landscape and as a cultural ideal, suburbia has always been a fusion of seemingly opposing concepts, such as the individual and community, private and public, but also nature and technology, which are progressively employed as twin strategies for designing and selling a greener suburbia, setting the terms of discourse in such a way that they are seen as complementary rather than contradictory. Yet one other major factor surrounding the “greening” of both old and new suburbs involves a blending of the urban and the suburban, with priority often given to those facets that

seem more decidedly urban.³⁶ Perhaps the most well known movement setting the agenda for what this kind of sustainable development looks like is the Congress for New Urbanism, self-described as “the leading organization promoting walkable, mixed-use neighborhood development, sustainable communities and healthier living conditions.”³⁷ The regionally nostalgic character of New Urbanist projects more often reference the aesthetics and organization of pre-WWII small towns rather than 21st-century urban centers. Although a leading challenge to established suburban trends in planning, many basic principles of New Urbanism are not as universally desirable in actual suburban developments across the country as many would like them to be. In her study of the relation between planning theory and practice as they pertain to “New Urbanism, Smart Growth, and Sustainability Principles,” Jill Grant notes that

Planners helping to develop and implement urban policy find themselves caught in a love/hate relationship with the suburbs. On the one hand, through their training and via professional organizations, planners learn planning principles that encourage mixed use, a vibrant urban realm, intensification, compact form, walkability, and transit oriented development. On the other hand, planners practice in local contexts within which the suburbs are highly valued as desirable landscapes full of prized real-estate commodities. The reality being constructed therefore may bear little relationship to the rhetoric of the planning discipline.³⁸

Part of the appeal of suburbia—green or not—is that it looks, feels, and functions in an appreciably different way from the city (and the country), as evident even in the marketing for many New Urbanist communities promoted as quantifiably and qualitatively “better than” more standard—yet popular—suburban environments.

This schism between planning ideals and built realities harkens back to the early, often unplanned and unregulated development of suburbia that was the foundation of many older critiques in the broader discourse, including environmental assessments, that made master-planning attractive for builders and buyers. In popular media as well as in critical literature, the *image* of suburbia as a place where people were moderately

free to do as they liked in their homes and on their property no matter what effect that had on neighborhood “values” found utility in popularizing the *practice* of establishing and enforcing standards in the built landscape. The freedom once thought inherent to suburban dwelling was increasingly tempered by the collective constraints of community, such as laws, covenants, and norms, which then resurface in the discourse as evidence of suburban cultural conformity and stagnation. Competing ideals of self-determination and fitting in are now being renegotiated in both the discourses and practices of green suburbia, wherein more and more people say they would like to “go green” and still enjoy the full comfort and status of a consumer-driven suburban lifestyle “as seen on TV.”³⁹

But as Kermit the Frog so famously put it, “it’s not easy being green,”⁴⁰ and especially not in suburbia, where almost every facet of it as a physical place and cultural paradigm have engendered environmentally critical reaction for decades. A range of disparate voices in popular and critical media claim to show us how to proactively build, buy, and even take pride and pleasure in a greener version of suburbia than what we have thus far learned to expect or desire. These discourses are slowly, ideally reforming our very notions of suburbia as a place where we can, both individually and communally, dream of and pursue “the good life,” repositioning the rhetoric of “good” to mean much more than it traditionally has in the suburban context. As we navigate the various, and at times contradictory discursive constructions of green, we are also engaged in the actual construction of everyday suburban lives, participating in that discourse. The question of who speaks for “green suburbia” shapes the visions of it we, as consumers and critics, find more desirable and credible in imagining it as “somewhere that’s green.”

We cannot understand how or why suburbia is built the way it is without understanding the discourse, and this dissertation is an effort to analyze certain threads of that discourse in order to better understand how suburbia is at present being constituted as a place that can or even should be “green.” Each section of this project engages facets of a green suburban paradigm shift in process, surveying how their rhetoric and imagery contribute to the wider discourse, shaping its parameters and helping suburbanites visualize their own access to and possibility for greener homes and communities. The project is divided into two main parts, looking at the wider suburban context of green communities and landscapes in the first half, followed by a closer look at the more individual suburban component pieces of green single-family homes. In each there are discursive congruencies, using similar rhetorical strategies to construct or critique green suburbia, yet there are also often significant differences in how the rhetoric of green is deployed to frame it in either more communal or personal terms.

Part 1 explores tensions between *development* and *environment*, focusing on the literal and discursive construction of “green suburbia” on the scale of subdivisions. It is here that the interrelationship of ecology and economy—in all of their many usages and connotations—is renegotiated at the community level, framing debates concerning the assumed opposition of development as destructive cultural process and the environment as endangered natural entity. “Sustainability,” as a general concept incorporated into building and business practices, is rationalized as those values, products and processes making development somehow more in harmony with or at least less harmful to the environment. The phenomenon of suburban “sprawl” is often measured in terms of new subdivisions spreading further and further out into the countryside, and its visualization is perhaps the most dramatically negative within the context of popular discourse. Aerial photographs highlighting the uniform spread of tract housing across the landscape

reveal the scope and scale of sprawl in a manner illustrating the environmental costs of continued growth. Marketing for new subdivisions, especially those making green claims, no longer rely on such expansive views as they did in the immediate postwar era. Whether a new green community encompasses thousands of single-family homes or merely dozens, the language and images used to promote its eco-friendliness more often than not focus on symbolic smaller details rather than on the literal bigger picture.

In chapter 1, I explore how the term “smart growth” is redeployed in green suburban marketing rhetoric to shift focus from the dominant discourse in planning debates, where it is commonly used to prescribe less car and energy dependent—and thus more environmentally friendly—forms of residential development, both in suburbia and in urban infill. This chapter explores how a select few corporations and communities have recently used the “smart” moniker in their marketing materials to reorient consumer (and critic) attention towards the ecological as well as economical benefits of their respective products. Also accepting that cars are—and will be—an integral part of suburban mobility and culture, the desires and designs to make them easier on both the environment and the pocketbook are an essential part of this particular construction of green suburbia. Likewise, the incorporation of energy efficient or alternative energy productive technologies in new homes is advertised as a means to greening entire communities. Visible additions, like solar panels on every tract house roof, communicate a neighborhood-wide effort in this regard, yet in sales materials individual savings is often the primary pitch to potential residents of these smart green suburbs. The tensions between community and individual interests, as well as mediated efforts to reconcile them in the suburban context, animate discussions about the underlying goals and resultant benefits of greening suburbia on these terms.

The second chapter looks at how our conception of green suburbia is so often expressed in terms of a preference for “natural landscapes,” subdivisions that appear as products of more organic growth patterns, and thus thought to be more environmentally assimilated than most standard suburban developments since the postwar mass building boom. Considering how “nature” has been represented in the Western tradition of landscape art largely as some thing and some place special, removed from everyday life and not polluted by human activity or habitation, great efforts are made to downplay the perceived contradiction of suburban development in nature. In this context, the figure of the developer is central to how these narratives play out, often depicted as villains in eco-conscious media, and pseudo-champions of the environment in marketing media promoting the latest, greenest subdivision. These developments, often much smaller in scale yet greater in price and status than those massive postwar tracts, borrow from the conventions of landscape art in their promotional materials, though with the addition of a few model houses set in otherwise scenic views. This strand in the mediation of green suburbia exploits the signifiers of nature, those elements of the landscape that register as pristine or pastoral, to frame new communities both aesthetically and ideologically. Whether the “natural” theme is wetland, forest or farm, the perceived greenness of such communities is tied to our impressions of them as being somehow closer to nature, often exclusively so. Where once the presence of expansive green lawns was enough to accomplish this, a symbol of the democratization of nature in suburbia, in our current cultural moment “green” rather entails a 5,000-square-foot luxury Green Built “cabin in the woods” or a LEED-certified McMansion adjacent to a bucolic, organic farmstead.

Part 2 analyzes the competing discourses of *progress* and *nostalgia* through which the detached single-family home provides another instrument for constructing “green suburbia.” Whether building new or remodeling older suburban houses, design

trends that utilize nostalgic aesthetics and natural materials often belie the state-of-the-art technology defining contemporary green dream homes. Unlike houses of the future in decades past that openly celebrated synthetic materials, industrial applications, and innovative forms, the house of today largely conceals its smart core systems beneath interior furnishings and exterior façades that offer familiar style, organic comfort, and natural settings. Popular green home exhibitions exaggerate this duality, acknowledging their similarity to luxurious non-green dream homes featured in regional tours and national media, while room-to-room disclosing the hidden electronic secrets that promise modern, high-tech green living. Whereas yesterday's houses of tomorrow included labor and time saving devices aimed primarily at the suburban housewife, the main rationale for green-tech in the home is now planet savings in the form of resource conservation, with the added benefit of monetary savings for the whole family unit. From outlandish concept houses to conservative model homes, plans for whole new structures to modest remodeling goals, what is being visually constructed and sold is an architectural container and landscaped environment for a potentially greener lifestyle.

Chapter 3 looks more closely at how this “house of the future” theme is merged with that of the “dream house” in the cultural imagination of green concept homes, drawing on a few fantastic mid-twentieth century designs in order to contextualize more current environmentally geared public and private projects. As spaces for dreaming about the future of suburban domesticity, these largely theoretical structures incorporate both desires and anxieties concerning our changing relation to the natural world. They are primarily problem solving exercises, wrapped in the comfort and familiarity of a spatial form that makes those problems seem more manageable, more solvable, on the level of individuals and households. Fear of ecological damage or disaster is translated into ecological justification for dreaming better—in terms of both the personal and

environmental benefits of green home construction and consumption. The role of technology is often central to such mediated visions, projecting the history of mechanical and computerized advancement into the automated eco-friendly living spaces we hope to one day soon enjoy. The setting in which such high-tech, ultramodern dwellings are visualized, though, is often a stark contrast to notions of the house as “a machine for living in.” Seen most often as lone sculptural specimens in remote natural landscapes, the visual rhetoric illustrating this type of future green paradise remains a solitary dream, disconnected from larger suburban contexts and environments. In terms of both setting and structure, also vital to this discussion are those places in and objects through which we are afforded the leisure to dream about a greener tomorrow in relation to the home. From major theme park attractions to interactive online games and children’s dollhouses, the time and space to “play green” is also considered in the context of concept homes, wherein the future of green suburban living is modeled and practiced.

Attention to these themes continues in chapter 4, although the focus shifts to houses currently available and marketed to predominantly middle-class consumers in suburbia. Model homes that illustrate the possibilities of green living today are products of dream home discourse, translating its long history of aspirational showcasing into an imperative to think differently about those dreams, including their environmental costs and impacts as well as their promised comfort and status. In modular or prefabricated dwellings we find green houses most aesthetically in line with modern “houses of the future,” although designed to be more affordable versions of “everyday green” for cost-conscious, style-conscious and eco-conscious suburbanites. As more contemporary models of manufactured green homes, they suggest continuity with earlier attempts at providing efficiently mass produced suburban housing while still maintaining a semi-custom experience for homeowners when ordering their green dream home to personal

and site specifications. Most green homes today marketed as appropriate for suburban locations are, however, much more traditional—even nostalgic—in design. In a walk through any number of model green home tours, or virtual tours of more nationally promoted examples with brand-name designers, most green aspects of these eco-homes are invisible, either indistinguishable from their non-green equivalents or seamlessly integrated into each home's traditional design. Prospective buyers have to be told about the many included and upgradeable green features rather than shown. A similar design rationale is operative in the mediated discourses advising suburbanites how best to green the houses and yards they already have and love (or can't afford to leave). Remodeling older homes into dream green homes is a process both materially and culturally comparable to the discourses surrounding new construction, although with the additional eco-rhetoric of "reduce-reuse-recycle." Old or new, site-built or prefab, surrounded by manicured lawn or wildlife habitat, representations of the green dream home of today nonetheless offer a limited palette within the suburban context, shaping and restraining the parameters of green house dreams as much as they facilitate them.

The conclusion to this project aims to further contextualize media texts and rhetoric discussed in each chapter, positioning them in terms of the cultural politics of green through examination of scenarios of eco-crisis, or even eco-pocalypse. Suburbia, as a much more diverse conglomeration of cultural sites than might be evident in both popular and critical discourse, is difficult to address as a singular kind of place that can be made greener in one ideally prescribed or agreed upon way. Whether or not to green suburbia is as central a question as how to green suburbia. A constituency for *not* making suburbs more environmentally sustainable through planning, taxation or regulation remains vocal, representing a position on the conservative right claiming that American-style suburbia still represents the best opportunity for individual fulfillment and

preservation of free markets. Meanwhile, some influential voices on the progressive left see no need for the suburban experiment to continue, arguing that the greenest possible future would see the majority of the population instead living in denser, more energy and resource efficient urban centers. Both “sides” reject a middling “green suburban” future. Their difference in imagination and idealization is especially visible in respective media that entertain catastrophic possibilities—either the collapse of civil society whereby the suburban survivalist employs self-sufficiency knowledge and skills to live in a way that, in other circumstances, could be considered “green,” or the economic collapse of suburbia whereby everyone abandons the impractical and indefensible periphery in order to pool resources and forge a cooperative “green” community in the heart of cities renewed by necessity. A third popular scenario in contemporary media is complete environmental collapse, which potentially renders both free suburban dreams on the right and green urban dreams on the left both untenable and irrelevant on an uninhabitable planet.

The media construction of “green suburbia” is useful because it is a discourse *in between*. Proposed remediation of suburban landscapes and lifestyles may not, in the end, be enough to mitigate planetary disaster, although it could represent the most pragmatic (though no less ideological) common ground on which necessary serious discussion of a variety of challenging environmental issues can possibly take place. The limited ranges of representation we have, though, are not unproblematic. Visions of sustainable suburbia largely conform to the banal, middle-class standards we have become accustomed to seeing in popular media over half a century—much like Audrey’s magazine and sitcom dreams in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Upholding the dominant paradigm of nuclear families living happily and comfortably in detached single-family homes on the stereotypical cul-de-sac, the green American dream is often expressed in gendered terms, reinforcing the masculinity of house-building and the femininity of

home-making. Little evolution is evident from their postwar antecedents, other than the newfound eco-consciousness of the dreamers as they navigate a world of cultural conformity and conspicuous consumption.

Eco-friendly suburbia is widely depicted as a no less insular environment than the standard, despite rhetoric enshrining consumer-citizens' concern for "the planet." The predominant "whiteness" of green common in these images and narratives renders this discourse further disconnected from related (though mostly urban-centered) discussions of environmental and social justice. Green suburbia tends to maintain its somewhat "special" and "separate" character distinct from both the city and the country, yet borrows freely from their respective discourses of and approaches to "going green." As much an imagined, idealized landscape as it is a real, built environment where a majority of Americans now live, this duality in the cultural construction of suburbia offers a point of perspective from which to assess limitations and liabilities of past discourses as well as practices, while also shaping our dreams and prospects for a better life. British environmentalist Jonathon Porritt famously pronounced that "The future will be green, or not at all." The underlying question animating this project is whether or not we can eventually come to see suburbia as a vital, desirable, and sustainable part of that green future.

Notes for the Introduction:

- ¹ This scene from *Little Shop of Horrors*, featuring the song “Somewhere that’s Green,” can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ouLiQ7KhmYU>.
- ² *Better Homes and Gardens*, first published in 1922 by Edwin Meredith, is a multi-media brand that includes a digital version for tablets, a website (<http://www.bhg.com/>), a TV show, domestically-oriented special interest publications (home decorating, home improvement, recipes, entertaining, gardening, etc.), house plans, Home Designer Suite computer software, and even a national real estate arm established in 2008. Also in 2008, *Better Homes and Gardens* partnered with Clorox Green Works to sponsor a “Living Green Tour” eco-home showcase in fifteen cities. According to a report from the Pew Research Center Project for Excellence in Journalism, the circulation of *Better Homes and Gardens* in the U.S. is 3rd, over 7.6 million in 2011, behind only two publications from AARP (with circulations north of 20 million each), and trailed by *Game Informer Magazine*, *Readers Digest*, *National Geographic*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman’s Day*, *Family Circle*, and *People*, rounding out the top ten. For more detailed comparative circulation analysis, see Katerina-Eva Matsa, Jane Sasseen, and Amy Mitchell, “Magazines: By the Numbers,” *PEJ’s The State of the News Media 2012: An Annual Report on American Journalism*, <http://stateofthemedias.org/2012/magazines-are-hopes-for-tablets-overdone/magazines-by-the-numbers/>.
- ³ In both *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, two early, iconic animated films by Walt Disney, we find a vision of domesticity in which a variety of “wild” animals—representatives of “nature”—readily understand and gladly assist the young, home-bound heroines with housekeeping chores like cooking, baking, cleaning, and even dressmaking. For a very nice read of the domestic labor and sensibilities of animals in *Snow White*, see the first chapter in David Whitley, *The Idea of Nature in Disney Animation* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), where he critiques and expands upon the following observation in Eleanor Byrne and Martin McQuillan’s 1999 book, *Deconstructing Disney: Snow White* “transforms the neglected cottage with the help of the newly domesticated animals who use their bodies to perform household tasks in ways that labour-saving machines of 1950s America would achieve.” In the “Somewhere that’s Green” dream sequence of *Little Shop of Horrors*, the animated birds merely accompany Audrey as she dances through her modern dream kitchen, equipped with 50’s-style appliances.
- ⁴ The opposition of city and country has also been employed widely to frame such discussions, although the word “country” in current usage aligns more closely with “rural,” which connotes a much different lifestyle and spatial pattern than “suburban.”
- ⁵ Greenwashing Index, a website supported by EnviroMedia Social Marketing and the University of Oregon, identify “greenwashing” as “when a company or organization spends more time and money claiming to be ‘green’ through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact. It’s whitewashing, but with a green brush.” See more at <http://www.greenwashingindex.com/about-greenwashing/>. Jim Motavalli recounts the coining of the term by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in the mid-1980s; “A History of Greenwashing: How Dirty Towels Impacted the Green Movement,” *Daily Finance* (February 12, 2011), <http://www.dailyfinance.com/2011/02/12/the-history-of-greenwashing-how-dirty-towels-impacted-the-green/>.
- ⁶ As with marketing materials, popular sitcoms and critical photography are sample media texts shaping our views of suburbia, though they frame this landscape for different audiences and with different purposes. This comparative project intends to bring them all into conversation.
- ⁷ The Brookings Institute recently published *Confronting Suburban Poverty in America* by Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube (2013), as well as a related website and toolkit (<http://confrontingsuburbanpoverty.org/>), calling attention to the socio-economic realities of suburbia usually overlooked in favor of stereotypical views of comfortable suburban affluence.

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- ⁸ Alex Williams, “Don’t Let the Green Grass Fool You,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2008, quoting Columbia professor Robert Beauregard, last accessed June 1, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/10/fashion/10suburbs.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.
- ⁹ In addition to the heavy reliance on a spectrum of green ink and pixels in literally greenwashed marketing materials, logos and illustrations for green home products and services—including third-party certification programs—often sport an added leaf to simple icons like house graphics to connote their “naturalness.” See figure 4.7 for a few examples of this trend.
- ¹⁰ These were also factors for pre-WWII working class suburbanites, although less attention is paid to this segment of suburban history despite such early, prominent works as Bennett M. Berger’s *Working-Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). In *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), Becky M. Nicolaides demonstrates the complexity—and familiarity—of working-class suburban dreams in a local political context, including their “quest for independence.”
- ¹¹ Adam Rome, *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 13.
- ¹² I discuss this point more extensively in “Intermediate Landscapes: Constructing Suburbia in Postwar American Photography,” in *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes*, ed. Andrew Blauvelt (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2008).
- ¹³ See Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* (Metropolis Books, 2010), and Arnie Cooper’s feature in *Dwell*, “The Lawn Goodbye,” January 26, 2009, <http://www.dwell.com/articles/the-lawn-goodbye.html>. While by no means a new idea, family-scaled food production on suburban lots has many precedents prior to postwar mass-suburbanization that popularized the lawn as an increasingly working-class as well as middle or upper-class landscape, such as wartime “victory gardens” or the earlier “agrarian utopia” experiment of Runnymede in Palo Alto, California.
- ¹⁴ Xeriscaping is landscaping practice designed to minimize water use, employing water conservation techniques and the use of drought tolerant plantings appropriate for local climate conditions (of which Kentucky Bluegrass, the most popular turf cover used in suburban settings, is decidedly not). Permaculture, a movement tracing its roots back to the late 1920s, is concerned with ecological design that creates self-sustainable agricultural environments that mimic natural ecosystems. One of its leading figures, Bill Mollison, outlines the three main tenets as “care of the earth,” “care of the people,” and “return of surplus.” Native or natural landscaping is a much broader concept concerned largely with the restoration of native plant communities and wildlife habitat. Most state and even some local governments have published native landscaping guides for suburban homeowners (including the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/gardens/nativeplants/index.html>).
- ¹⁵ The difference between “unity” and “conformity” is in the eye of the beholder. How we are inclined to read similar or repetitive features in the suburban landscape largely depends on our perspective on and disposition towards suburbia culturally, usually privileging either the ideals of individuality or community.
- ¹⁶ For more, see the “Green Levittown” webpage at the *Citizens Campaign for the Environment* website, http://www.citizenscampaign.org/special_features/green-levittown.asp. That the page has not been updated since April 13, 2010 speaks to how frontloaded the campaign was, a media frenzy in announcing and rolling out the various initiatives, but very little follow through in the media as the years went by. Hardly any reporting has been done on how successful (or not) the program has been to date, including how many households participated, to what extent, and how much “greener” they became as a result.
- ¹⁷ Charles Siegel, “What Is Missing In ‘Green Levittown’?” *Preservation Institute Blog*, December 19, 2007, last accessed June 1, 2012, <http://preservenet.blogspot.com/2007/12/what-is-missing-in-green-levittown.html>. Levittown’s claims to being “the first suburb” are good self-

promotion, but of course not historically accurate. The first of several, built in 1948 on Long Island, NY, did however institute a paradigm for large-scale postwar subdivision development that has dominated the popular imagination of generic “suburbia” ever since.

- ¹⁸ *Emphasis mine*. Linda Saslow, “Nation’s ‘First Suburb’ Aims to Be Most ‘Green,’” *New York Times*, December 16, 2007, last accessed June 1, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/16/nyregion/nyregionspecial2/16levittli.html>. The “extreme makeover” reference in Suozzi’s remarks is not incidental. ABC’s popular *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (2003-2012) carefully selected families that have suffered some sort of hardship, remodeling their homes with donated materials and camera’s rolling. The narratives of *deserving* homeowners down-on-their-luck are moving, and by using this well-known phrase Suozzi positions Levittown as equally in need and worthy of the transformation. Once completed, the recipients are presented as model citizens in their model homes, a configuration also inflected in how we are supposed to see—and feel for—the residents of this model suburban community that deserves to be green.
- ¹⁹ Dan Chiras and Dave Wann, *Superbia! 31 Ways to Create Sustainable Neighborhoods* (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers, 2003), 1.
- ²⁰ Since census data has for some time now backed up the notion that America is a majority-suburban nation, we might reasonably ask if “American culture” and “suburban culture” are effectively the same thing. In 1992 *The Atlantic Monthly* published that “The United States is a nation of suburbs” in a piece by William Schneider titled “The Suburban Century Begins” (<http://www.theatlantic.com/past/politics/ecbig/schsub.htm>). More recently, Joel Kotkin weighed in following the 2010 census findings, assuring us that, despite rumors of its inevitable decline, “America’s Future Is Taking Shape in the Suburbs;” *New Geography* (July 31, 2012), <http://www.newgeography.com/content/002992-america-future-is-taking-shape-in-the-suburbs>.
- ²¹ Jennifer Hattam, “Interview: Tearing Down Fences: Get to Know the Neighbors and Build a Better ‘Burb,” *Sierra Magazine* (July/August 2005), last accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/200507/interview.asp>.
- ²² Dave Wann and Dan Chiras, “Transforming Suburbia...into Superbia!” *Terrain: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environments* 13 (Summer/Fall 2003), last accessed December 20, 2012, <http://www.terrain.org/articles/13/superbia.htm>.
- ²³ “15 Ways to Fix the Suburbs,” *Newsweek*, May 15, 1995, 46. The fifteen suggestions to “get our communities back on track” include: “give up big lawns, bring back the corner store, make the streets skinny, drop the cul-de-sac, draw boundaries, hide the garage, mix housing types, plant trees curbside, put new life into old malls, plan for mass transit, link work to home, make a town center, shrink parking lots, turn down the lights,” and lastly, a much more amorphous concept, “think green.” After short summaries of the “15,” competing sentiments from prominent voices in New Urbanist debates are quoted in conclusion: Peter Calthorpe acknowledges that “Suburbs aren’t just about bedrooms anymore,” and Oscar Newman argues that “instead of saying, ‘This is what’s wrong [with suburbs],’ they should ask, ‘Why do people feel it’s worth it to live there?’” Despite the prominence of the former, the last point is most germane to this project. The cover article (without the cover image) is also available online at *The Daily Beast*, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/1995/05/14/15-ways-to-fix-the-suburbs.html>.
- ²⁴ Alexis Madrigal, “What Levittown Got Right,” *Powering the Dream blog*, November 13, 2009, last accessed July 20, 2011, <http://www.greentechhistory.com/2009/11/rethinking-levittown/>.
- ²⁵ Avi Friedman, *Sustainable Residential Development: Planning and Design for Green Neighborhoods* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007), 42.
- ²⁶ For more about the “Reincarnated McMansion” project in Australia, see their main website: <http://www.reincarnatedmcmansion.com/>, and also Josephine Tovey, “Would You Like Grass with Your Junior Mac?” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 28, 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/energy-smart/would-you-like-grass-with-your-junior-mac-20100727-10uem.html>.

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- ²⁷ “HGTV Selects Denver, Colorado for 2011 HGTV Green Home Giveaway,” *Bloomberg*, August 31, 2010, last accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aaSewJcb7eTs>.
- ²⁸ Phrase coined by General Electric’s CEO, Jeffrey Immelt, discussing GE’s ecomaginationSM campaign, a marketing and product portfolio that includes major energy infrastructure projects like the “smart grid” as well as programs targeted at North American homeowners and homebuilders, like “Blueprint for Green Homes.” The latter is in collaboration with the Masco corporation’s Environments for Living® program. The corporate context of the phrase is featured in *Time*’s 2007 “Heroes of the Environment” series. http://www.time.com/time/specials/2007/article/0,28804,1663317_1663322_1669927,00.html
- ²⁹ Jerry Yudelson, *The Green Building Revolution* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2008), xxi. Author of resource guides for the building industry, books by Yudelson for lay readers include *Choosing Green: The Homebuyer’s Guide to Good Green Homes* (2008) and *Green Building A to Z: Understanding the Language of Green Building* (2007), both by New Society Publishers.
- ³⁰ Yudelson, 122-3.
- ³¹ Felicity Barringer, “California, Taking a Big Gamble, Tries to Curb Greenhouse Gases.” *New York Times*, September 15, 2006, photograph by Max Whitaker, last accessed December 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/15/us/15energy.html?pagewanted=all>.
- ³² U.S. Green Building Council, “A Green Home Among Many: Carsten Crossings is first subdivision made up entirely of LEED homes,” 2007, last accessed September 8, 2012, <http://www.usgbc.org/ShowFile.aspx?DocumentID=3394>.
- ³³ Whitney Ranch “Trails and Parks” web page, last accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.whitneyranch.net/Whitney-Ranch-Living/Trails-and-Parks>. To accompany the natural amenities of the landscape, a 10,000 square foot “Ranch House” is the architectural and social focal point for the community at large, recalling a historical place and time in which one conceivably lived closer to the land, not to mention an iconic—and often disparaged—modern suburban tract-house style writ large. See the “Ranch House” page: <http://www.whitneyranch.net/whitney-ranch-living/lifestyle/ranch-house/>.
- ³⁴ See Barbara L. Allen, “The Ranch-Style House in America: A Cultural and Environmental Discourse,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 49:3 (February 1996): 156-165.
- ³⁵ Some of the most recent conditions under which this trend continues is discussed by Kermit Baker in “Larger Homes with More Outdoor Amenities Are Squeezing into Smaller Lots,” *AIArchitect* (June 7, 2013), <http://www.aia.org/practicing/AIAB099049>.
- ³⁶ The USGBC’s LEED program set standards for good green building practices, and, along with the Congress for New Urbanism and the Natural Resources Defense Council, recently launched the *LEED for Neighborhood Development*. But as stated in the “Characteristics” document, “Pilot Projects are primarily located in dense, urban areas,” and do not *necessarily* address suburban design. “LEED for Neighborhood Development Characteristics of Pilot Projects,” (October 2007), <http://www.usgbc.org/ShowFile.aspx?DocumentID=3773>.
- ³⁷ The Congress for New Urbanism, last accessed December 10, 2012, http://www.cnu.org/who_we_are. This neo-traditional movement promotes a return to pre-automobile age planning models for both new communities and urban infill. In addition to stated goals of socio-economic diversity and an “affirming, human-scaled public realm,” the shift away from car travel and traffic is central to the projected sustainability of New Urbanism.
- ³⁸ Jill L. Grant, “Theory and Practice in Planning the Suburbs: Challenges to Implementing New Urbanism, Smart Growth, and Sustainability Principles,” *Planning Theory & Practice* 10:1 (March 2009): 14.
- ³⁹ For more on this see *Green Builder Magazine*’s 2013 Consumer Survey: “Green Life Wanted,” [http://www.greenbuildermag.com/GBM/media/pdfs/51-57-GB-0513-Consumer-Survey-\(2\).pdf](http://www.greenbuildermag.com/GBM/media/pdfs/51-57-GB-0513-Consumer-Survey-(2).pdf).
- ⁴⁰ This famous, melancholic phrase is from the song “Being Green,” written by Joe Raposo and first performed by Kermit the Frog (Jim Hensen) in 1970 on *Sesame Street*.

• PART 1 •
Between Nature and Culture:
Environment and Development in Green Subdivisions

Knowledge and power in the city; peace and decency in the country.

—Mason Cooley

Suburb: a place that isn't city, isn't country, and isn't tolerable.

—Mignon McLaughlin

Suburbia is a middle ground. Despite the intention of many to design, build, and sell “the best of both worlds,” it is a contested terrain that still conjures up images of a compromised landscape rather than a landscape of compromise. Even so, suburbia remains where Americans are most likely to pursue the promise of the American dream, including their green dreams. In an essay on “the popular and cultural manifestations” of modernism in much criticized postwar suburbs like Levittown, Yoke-Sum Wong turns somewhat surprisingly to Gaston Bachelard’s conception of a house as “a repository of dreams.” Although in contrast to the intimacy of domestic “nooks and corners” and the flights of “vertical imaginings” from cellar to attic, she describes how “suburbia spreads out—it is vast—sprawling as far as the eye can see, attached with ribbons of highways to towns and cities.” She explains further how “This expanse offers endless horizons of wish fulfillment and possibility.” Our dreams and aspirations are not bound to the house alone, but wander through and emerge from its spatial and cultural contexts, including subdivisions. Contrary to popular images and narratives that disparage suburbia, painting it as a static, monotonous, and desolate landscape—both culturally and naturally—it is in many ways a dynamic, diverse, and popular location that affords its current and prospective residents a space for dreaming that looks out rather than up.

Wong finishes this thought by making a connection between Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* as applied to the horizontal development of suburbia and critical reflections by contemporary American poet Susan Stewart on suburban space as a "landscape of apprehension: close to nature and not consumed by her; close to culture, close enough to consume her."¹ Suburbia, geographically and discursively situated as a place in between "the city" and "the country," also occupies that conceptual space between "culture" and "nature," but never simply so. Stewart's articulation of its "closeness" to each describes the pleasurable tension contained and produced in such non-equivalent relations: culture is what we desire to consume, while nature is that we fear will consume us. The very idea of "green suburbia" is a reversal of this construction, reorienting and rearranging the terms of the cultural equation. It attempts to hold at bay or protect us from the threat of corrupt culture, and to bring closer the promise, make possible the consumption of untainted nature. Proposed as a new kind of place between city and country, green suburbs aim to be distinguishable in some way from most existing types of suburban development that each historically sought their own form of *ruse in urbe*.

Suburbia, as built and represented over two centuries in the United States, encompasses a variety of patterns and profiles that negotiate these terms in ways that render it more or less amorphous, not easy to define yet recognizable when we come across it visually. We tend to know it when we see it. Even so, some visions of suburbia are increasingly difficult to distinguish from the expansive urban fabric of the modern metropolis, while others appear as isolated enclaves amidst rural lands or the receding wilderness. Yet within each type of suburb we encounter an opposition between two additional concepts related to the city and the country: development and environment. The first part of this dissertation addresses a few of the means by which several different types of suburban development are discursively constructed and positioned as "green"

with respect to the environment in various media, including marketing materials like television commercials and corporate websites, reporting on suburban communities, and depictions in the visual arts of painting, photography, and film. Chapter 1 focuses on how the environmental rationale of new green subdivisions incorporates high-tech and hybrid energy solutions along with natural, native landscapes, although often in locations considered part and parcel of car-dependent sprawl. In this discursive construction, consumption of nature is supposedly curbed through conspicuous conservation—of land, of energy, of natural resources. Chapter 2 looks at new housing developments prioritizing the preservation of pristine or pastoral countryside in their plans and rhetoric, their relation to nature often limited to a highly managed aesthetic rather than a wild or working landscape. Nature is made safe for consumption in the form of scenic views and domesticated property. Different means of constructing “green suburbia,” all with distinct ties to historical legacies and ideological traditions, attempt to reconcile the oppositional values of “country” and “city,” “nature” and “culture,” in the contemporary context of environmental discourses. In doing so, the physical and conceptual space of suburban “dreaming” is itself reconfigured and recontextualized as “somewhere that’s green” within, though ideally transcendent of, the wider envelope of urban sprawl.

Notes for Part 1:

¹ Yoke-Sum Wong, “Modernism’s Love Child: The Story of Happy Architectures.” *Common Knowledge* 14:3 (Fall 2008): 446-447. Wong quotes from the prologue of Susan Stewart’s *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993 [1984]), 1. Stewart here begins with the notion of “the invisibility and blindness of the suburbs” compared to how the “countryside unfolds, maplike before us, simultaneous and immediate,” and how “to walk the city is to experience the disjuncture of partial vision/partial consciousness.” The suburbs, in her view, rather “present us with a negation of the present; a landscape consumed by its past and its future. Hence the two foci of the suburbs: the nostalgic and the technological.” (1-2) These two terms are also central to my understanding of “green suburbia,” where the combined notions of nostalgia and progress inform its physical and cultural construction at the level of both subdivision marketing and single-family-home design.

• CHAPTER 1 •
Smart Growth: Building Better Suburbs

Despite the prominence of compact, urbanized development in planning discourses, sprawling suburbia remains as popular as ever. For many critics, how and where it is developed precludes it from even being considered “green,” let alone “smart.” Over-consumption of land and natural resources don’t end with the construction of vast suburban tracts in the countryside. Once built, residents exhibit continued dependence on the automobile and other energy-intensive facts of suburban life, like home heating, air conditioning and a range of appliances. Yet these are the very aspects of suburban homes and lifestyles now being “greened.” The sustainability of individual houses is related to the sustainability of the larger communities they are a part of. Equally true in reverse, a community’s perceived stability and sustainability is based on registers of value attributable to individual properties. Commercial concerns that develop and furnish green houses in green suburbia play a principal role in how each are articulated and pursued. These mutually derived interests are increasingly being reassessed and renegotiated within ecologically oriented media discourses, with greater attention to how, when it comes to being green, what is good for one might really be good for all. In this context, though, green suburbia requires more integrated, holistic approaches than are generally available to single actors.¹ This chapter examines how visions of such novel, self-described “smart” green communities are discursively constructed in commercial terms that are employed parallel to or in concert with more communal environmental interests, packaging green suburbia for “smart” individual consumption.

Driving Forces

Now we're stuck up a cul-de-sac in a cement SUV with an empty gas tank.

—James Howard Kunstler, interview in *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (2004)

The energy crisis of the 1970s gave residents of the United States a brief moment of self-reflection and speculation on the sustainability of its energy-intensive, car-dependent suburban lifestyle, culminating in one particularly absurd vision of the near future. An original theatrical trailer for the 1979 farce *Americathon* begins with a “bulletin from 1998—the year America ran out of gas, oil, and cash.”² The scene is set immediately with the “flash” announcement that “people have stopped driving cars and started living in them.” [Figure 1.1] Immobile, oversized steel carcasses become cramped, utilitarian domiciles. The cars are arranged haphazardly around a lone tree in what was once a public square, like a makeshift subdivision requiring little to no actual construction or modification of the site. Unfit joggers and cyclists struggle past a sign for Oaktree Gardens, with its commonplace but trite acknowledgement that “If you lived here you’d be home by now.” A graffiti addendum asks “but who’d care” in a scrawl of black spray paint. This is a world of extreme locality-by-necessity, since all forms of fossil-fueled commuting have quite suddenly gone the way of the dinosaurs. While ridiculously comedic in tone, the underlying premise of this Hollywood movie was nonetheless extremely serious at the time, and it still is. The suburban future would most likely not look and function the same as in the familiar suburban past. Without unlimited access to cheap and easy oil, the physical organization of life across the American landscape would certainly, drastically, have to change. The question raised by this uneasy proposition was twofold: how, and how fast?



Figure 1.1: *Brief scenes in Americathon depict a future in which people live in cars rendered otherwise useless due to the lack of oil, turning to foot and pedal power for all transportation.*

Stills from the trailer for *Americathon*, directed by Neal Israel (1979).
The trailer can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqYoB6BLOMw>.

However pressing the oil crisis may have seemed at the time, it did fade some from public debate and popular imagination. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Americans' faith in an energy-rich future was renewed, and life in suburbia went on... and on... and on. Legacies of that panicked, not-too-distant past can be seen in the reduction of the average size of cars and their gradually increasing mileage standards. These trends cannot be viewed in isolation, though, for they developed alongside the rise of minivans and sport utility vehicles (SUVs) as default family transport, including the resurgence in popularity of the eponymous Chevy Suburban, which has been in continuous production since 1934.³ When the specter of peak oil did reemerge early in the 21st century, and the Chevy Suburban's sales dipped slightly, its decline was hailed as a primary factor in expected suburban decline. According to this vision of the near future, as in accounts of the near past, critics hoped external conditions and escalating costs would affect major changes in our collective driving practices and living choices.

Discourses surrounding the crisis of peak oil are not always directly concerned with stated fears of global warming, predicated upon past and continued burning of fossil fuels. They are, however, often openly focused on fears related to the rise and spread of suburbia as a dominant building pattern. Gregory Greene's 2004 pro-New Urbanist documentary, *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream*, is illustrative of the latter.⁴ It begins with select clips from Redbook's 1957 promotional film, "In the Suburbs,"⁵ that highlight the car-dependent postwar suburban boom. The original intent of this twenty-minute film was to explain the market research on consumer-oriented lives of "young adults" that went into Redbook's "Easy Living" campaign in conjunction with shopping centers across the country. One clip, as used by Greene to demonstrate the unbridled car-facilitated consumption of these newly forming families in newly built suburbs, adjusts our view of this historical relationship:

The shopping centers see these young adults as people whose homes are always in need of expansion, people who buy in large quantities and truck it away in their cars. These young adults, shopping with the same determination that led them to the suburbs in the first place, are the goingist part of a nation on wheels! Living by the automobile, the first young adults in the age of the push button!

From automobiles to “push-button” appliances, technology was the driving force of this generational shift in living standards and patterns. The difference between Redbook’s original intent and Greene’s appropriation of this filmed sentiment is the perceived “goodness” of this way of life. Prior to this segment, Greene inserts one of the first statements made in the promotional film: the suburbs are “in need of reflection.” Rather than a call for better targeting and accommodating this rising demographic, as intended for those in the business of marketing to these young consumers, it now suggests that the entire era of automobile suburbia should be questioned going forward. Made just one year after Dr. M. King Hubbert published his startling peak oil prediction,⁶ there is no evidence in this or any other marketing films at the time that it all would, could, or even should come to an end. As utilized in Greene’s films, these clips function as a way of “looking back” at how misguided and shortsighted we were—and are—as a society.

What was in essence a big joke in *Americathon* a quarter century earlier, the end of oil is now framed as a dire millennial prediction, arguing that suburbia is unsustainable not so much in environmental terms, because of the effect of suburban development on the environment, but rather as economically unsustainable because the fuel will one day run out, or, once past peak, will become so expensive to produce and consume that transportation and dwelling alternatives will be deemed necessary. The somewhat more hopeful sequel to *The End of Suburbia*, Greene’s 2007 *Escape from Suburbia: Beyond the American Dream* more directly addresses the problem of climate change, and even proffers eco-conscious community-based solutions for reorienting life in a post-peak oil,

post-suburban future.⁷ Yet without the immediate pressure of either environmental catastrophe or economic crisis, solutions that require entire communities or societies to change are a hard sell. And even in such conditions, like the housing market crisis of 2008, it is still easier to market change on the level of individual or family consumption.

For some time the conversation remained largely focused on solutions in the form of more fuel-efficient, hybrid, and even all-electric cars rather than on houses or the sprawling manner in which we build them. If we drive smarter, we don't have to address the systemic problems—economic as well as ecological—of how, and how far, we travel in the course of everyday life. A 2010 commercial for Nissan's entry in the eco-friendly car category, the electric Leaf, tells a visual story of suburban redemption on these grounds. [Figure 1.2] In the one-minute TV spot, a lone polar bear travels far from his endangered natural habitat to a suburban driveway, in which is parked a shiny Nissan Leaf. After a brief moment of surprise/terror when the bear rears up behind the would-be commuter, all ends well with a literal bear hug.⁸ Smart, responsible, personal choices are the key to saving the whole planet, not to mention the polar bear's icy domain. The appeal made by this innovative television commercial has shifted from earlier decades and their respective manifestations of both energy and environmental crises in popular culture. In *Americathon*, our reckless disregard for resource scarcity over a long period of time results in an abrupt, catastrophic (but hilarious) destabilization of life as we've known it. Millennial documentary films like *The End of Suburbia* and *Escape from Suburbia* play upon similarly apocalyptic notions that, despite warning, one day soon the oil tap will run dry and we will be *forced* to alter priorities and patterns. And as the titles suggest, suburbia is what will—and must—end, and if all else fails, what must be escaped from. Peak oil will foster a return to the cities we long ago left behind, while cars, and the sprawling suburban landscape they made possible, will languish.



Figure 1.2: *A polar bear makes the long trek from the Arctic's melting ice, through forest, rural countryside, and big city, all to personally thank one suburban driver who "went green" by buying a Leaf.*

Stills from Nissan Leaf "Polar Bear" commercial (2010).

The commercial can be viewed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG7ueitiW-w>.

Nissan's reassuringly cute and non-predatory polar bear offers us an out, or rather, a way to remain in an otherwise endangered suburbia, suggesting that if we just go about our usual business in smarter, more environmentally-friendly ways, we can maintain a way of life that we—and the polar bears—have become accustomed to. For these icons of global warming caused by carbon emissions, their crisis is born not from the sudden loss of oil, but rather from continued use of it. Figured here as an emissary for the natural world and planet earth, the polar bear's gesture of unsolicited gratitude represents a relatively easy compromise between suburban wants and needs. The Leaf, and other cars like it, bypass altogether the question of peak oil (but also inadvertently raise another set of questions about the electrical generation sources that will charge them). By shaping the rhetoric of sustainability so narrowly, as simple, alternative consumer choices, green marketing like this conveniently distracts the audience from critical questions, such as whether or not sprawling suburbia can survive the collapse of oil reserves? Or does a Nissan Leaf in every driveway mean that suburbia could be an ecologically as well as economically sustainable enterprise?

Car culture and suburban culture, their respective pasts and prospective futures, are fatefully intertwined. In the minds of critics, like Gregory Greene and his interviewed experts, as well as boosters, like the commercial interests that produced Redbook's "In the Suburbs," their marriage resulted in urban—or *suburban*—sprawl.⁹ The Nissan Leaf commercial upholds this environmentally suspect relationship, albeit on renegotiated terms, while in *Americathon* the nature of the rhetoric provoked us into considering the possibility that people will "choose" the crude convenience of living in their cars over the creature comforts of suburban homes in far-flung locations. Here the structures of automobiles endure, at least for a while, to serve as immobile homes at sites of re-condensed living, yet this scenario is really more akin to a Depression-era shantytown

than either walkable New Urbanism or master planned communities. While the cars no longer function according to design, nor represent the cultural capital of social and spatial mobility, neither do they read as functionally or aspirationally adequate housing.

Cars are objects of movement and transience, easily disposed of or repossessed in times of financial difficulty. The house is more an object of stability and permanence. Its occupants are the ones dislocated and dispossessed when payments are not made. Houses remain. As economist Paul Krugman explains in his Pulitzer Prize winning *New York Times* op-ed series, "Changing the geography of American metropolitan areas will be hard," in no small part because "houses last a lot longer than cars. Long after today's S.U.V.'s have become antique collector's items, millions of people will still be living in subdivisions built when gas was \$1.50 or less a gallon."¹⁰ And it appears likely that they will continue to be built new in expanding rings of development, as if following the visible pattern of tree rings whose contractions and expansions are determined not by the amount of precipitation in a given year, but rather the price and plentitude of fuel. While often presented as a dynamic suburban duo, as primary signifiers of suburbia houses outlast and outperform cars in the cultural work they perform, visually and materially. They are written into the landscape, and we can read them there.

For many critics who have long predicted that the outer suburbs and exurbs of most metropolitan areas were well on their way to becoming the slums, if not the ghost towns, of tomorrow, the most recent financial and foreclosure crises once again spelled the imminent demise of suburbia.¹¹ A mid-2008 report noted that with "energy prices at an all-time high, the national housing market flailing and mortgages hard to come by," in Houston's outer suburbs especially, "new houses are as hard to sell as used SUVs." One new development on the periphery of metropolitan Houston, a car-dependent region whose fortunes are closely tied to the petroleum industry, was however hailed as

an exception to the now hard-to-sell standard suburbia. At its start, the plan for Discovery at Spring Trails was roundly praised as “the Prius of new developments,”¹² even while denounced simultaneously by critics as yet another bad example of green-washed sprawl. This was to be a suburb that acknowledged our ongoing car romance, but included a rationale as well as a literal a place to “plug in” to a new era of eco-consumption where cars—and all of the other “push button” technologies equated with suburbia—were reasons to again be hopeful rather than fearful about the near future.

While all-electric cars like the Nissan Leaf are slowly making market inroads, hybrids are widely considered a more practical immediate eco-replacement for our internal combustion past. The Toyota Prius has the largest cultural footprint, with long-running print ads claiming it’s “the planet’s favorite hybrid,” or TV ads like the 2010 “Harmony” commercial, whose narrator promises that “You get more power, and more space. The world gets fewer smog-forming emissions,” followed by assertions that the third generation Prius is “harmony between man, nature, and machine.”¹³ While the Toyota Prius is by far the most popular brand and model of electric hybrid vehicles, it is also the target of both green and anti-green criticism. The former argues that such cars are not really green because they are, well, still cars, and therefore perpetuate both solitary-driver commuting lifestyles and the sprawling road infrastructure that support it. The latter takes issue with the air of eco-superiority they claim that hybrid drivers exhibit over the rest of us un-green gas-guzzling fools. In a self-promotional viral fake ad campaign by David Krulik, three images—including one of a Prius in the driveway of a nice suburban home—depict people engaging in morally ambiguous activities (disposing of a body? soliciting sex? committing adultery?), all with the tagline: “Well, at least s/he drives a Prius.”¹⁴ [Figure 1.3] Each scenario undercuts the moral superiority of the “characters,” so that their perceived “greenness” remains their sole redeeming feature.



Figure 1.3: *The Toyota Prius, the most popular gas/electric hybrid automobile, is a much-satirized icon of green living. Yet the message in many critiques differentiates between the technology and a culture of smug superiority derived from its still marginal saturation in a mixed-market environment.*

Above David Krulik, viral spec campaign: "Well, at least she drives a Prius," (2008).
 Below: Stills from *South Park*, "Smug Alert" (March 29, 2006)

We are left asking if this is enough. Does doing, or more specifically, buying something good for the environment (that is simultaneously good for you and your individual status) at the expense of social bonds and civil society make you a good enough person? Here is where marketing media and critical media (and in many cases even entertainment media) diverge. Just as Gregory Greene was able to take pro-car, pro-suburban footage from a marketing filmstrip and repackage it as a critical indictment of both, Krulik's "fake" ads also operate in both spheres of influence. They call out the role of pro-Prius rhetoric in shaping the discourse on suburbia, affirming the environmental goodness of owning hybrid vehicles while impeaching who we are in spite of, or precisely because of it.

A similar morality play is found in a 2006 episode of *South Park*, "Smug Alert," which pokes not-so-gentle fun at the "smug" emissions of new hybrid Prius owners.¹⁵ [Figure 1.3] Here the cumulative effect of every driver in this Colorado suburb owning a Prius is a massive cloud of "smug" polluting the air, more dangerous than Los Angeles' infamous car-produced smog. San Francisco, with the most hybrids per capita, is the first city affected, followed by South Park. After the entire town is physically devastated, the community regroups to consider lessons learned and how to go forward together:

Richard: So I guess there's nothing left to do now but...rebuild.
Randy: Yeah. First off, we're all gonna need new cars.
Gerald: And let's make sure nobody gets a stupid hybrid, right?
Kyle: NO! Hybrid cars are a *good* thing!
Mr. Mackey: But hybrid cars are the leading cause of smug, m'kay?
Kyle: Hybrid cars don't cause smugness, people do. Look, hybrid cars are important. They may even save our planet one day. What you all need to do is just learn to drive hybrids and not be smug about it.
Randy: You mean... drive in hybrids... but not act like we're better than everyone else because of it.
Kyle: Yeah!
Randy: I'm... I'm not ready.
Gerald: I don't think I can do it either.
Mr. Mackey: It's simply asking too much.
Randy: Perhaps... one day... we can learn to drive hybrids without being smug about it, but for now... technology is just too much for us.
Gerald: Come on, everybody! Let's go buy wasteful gas guzzlers!

Technology is “too much,” shaping the context in which we live and dream, just as to live in the suburbs of the 1950s meant needing to own a car (or two),¹⁶ at least according to marketing messages from Redbook, et al. For the fictional residents of *South Park* in the 2000s, technology still dictates consumer choice and community identity, although in a quite different cultural context. Assuming that nearly everyone in suburbia already has a car, a hybrid announces your “extra” investment in eco-friendliness. In this playfully vulgar commentary penned by series co-creator Trey Parker, it reinforces the notion that to own a hybrid car in this cultural moment is to still be special, smugly so, at least until everyone drives a hybrid. That is the tipping point in the discourse at which “going green” no longer needs to be advertised, defined, or defended.

The Prius, available worldwide since 2000 and held up as the gold standard of hybrid automobiles, is perhaps a fitting comparison for green communities in terms of consumer choices in the suburban marketplace. Houses and cars are generally the two largest purchases an individual or family will make, and in that context alternatives to conventional choices are marketed equally for their social and economic advantages as their perceived environmental benefits. Like the Toyota Prius and the Nissan Leaf, Discovery at Spring Trails was discursively promoted as a green option for making suburbia more eco-friendly as well as more economically palatable in a down market. Framed as a “smart community” for its high tech, integrated solar power systems, and a “smart choice” for eco-conscious families who also value the energy-efficient bottom line, Discovery at Spring Trails may seem the antithesis of “smart growth,” at least in the usual sense of the term as used in urban planning discourses.¹⁷ This is a community that, by necessity, includes the car—gas, electric, or hybrid—in its eco-plan, but with a market-friendly claim to doing so *smartly*, changing the suburban standard.

Market Choices

While I am a great believer in the free enterprise system and all that it entails, I am an even stronger believer in the right of our people to live in a clean and pollution-free environment.

—Barry Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Majority* (1970)

Whether we are discussing the greenness of cars or houses, our individual choices are made within larger contexts that affect how ecological or economical our options really are. An all-electric or hybrid automobile may be relatively more efficient and cleaner than the average gas-guzzler, but it must still be driven on a system of roads that facilitates both green and not-green cars. A solar-powered suburban house may produce more energy than it consumes, able to function independently “off-grid,” but that house is most likely built within a subdivision where its neighbors have recurring energy bills. Seeing “suburbia” as “green” requires harnessing the individual impetus for going greener, but also reconciling this with wider community goals, norms, rules, and systems. Rather than framing these as mutually exclusive, the mediated rhetoric of suburban sustainability often addresses the individual in terms of the communal, and the communal in terms of the individual, although rarely as equal concerns.

Suburbia—green or otherwise—remains a landscape of conflicted interests. Lewis Mumford’s 1938 reflection that it is “a collective effort to lead a private life”¹⁸ is much cited, often in connection with other critiques of the rise of individualism and tandem loss of community over the suburban century.¹⁹ Marketing materials for new houses often address potential consumers with dual tactics: the collective appeal of belonging in and to a community of like-minded individuals, and the promise for every individualized advantage of private property. Defenders of a free market system that seemingly reconciles these contradictions cite Adam Smith’s proposal that “By pursuing

his own interest he frequently promotes that of society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”²⁰ It is in this statement that we also find the dual rationale for a new, greener suburbia. “The environment” is of individual and communal interest.

While most suburban marketing pitches propose that you are “buying into” a particular community, what you are ultimately purchasing is a discrete piece of property. Attached to ownership of that property may be communally defined benefits and responsibilities, yet these do not necessarily invalidate or compete against the more decidedly individualistic interests derived from it. “Keeping up with the Joneses,” at least in regard to the aesthetic (approved house color, not-too-tacky yard ornaments) and upkeep (house in good repair, lawn neatly manicured) imperatives of the neighborhood, ostensibly upholds property values for each homeowner as well as the community at large. Self-interest is tied to community-interest. Although, as a regular contributor to Treehugger.com recently argued, the problem with looking at both economic and ecological issues through narrow ideological lenses “is that ‘self interest’ is...mistaken as simply ‘looking out for number one’,” and also “expressed primarily in monetary terms.” He points to what he sees as an emergent environmentally-focused paradigm that is neither capitalism nor communism, and “most definitely is not consumerism,” in which both individuals and corporations are “finding innovative ways to move beyond outdated ideologies and deliver real-world services and products in a resource constrained world with an end goal of not just making money, but pursuing well-being, happiness and a sense of purpose too.”²¹ That does not, however, prevent corporations from playing to, co-opting, mediating, and controlling those interests that only superficially rise above possessive individualism and crass consumerism, especially in the arena of green marketing. It also renders the role and efficacy of civic or governmental players questionable, and quite possibly irrelevant.

Ecological as well as economic power lies, at least in part, in the hands—the choices—of “consumer citizens.”²² Yet the rhetoric of sustainability often turns on the reprimand of consumers for choosing suburbia. As noted by historian Lizabeth Cohen,

Although a low-growth suburban policy is often applauded as environmentally smart, the democratic promises of the Consumers’ Republic were premised on the social benefits of unbounded mass consumption. Respecting both people’s needs for housing and the future health of the environment requires honest and open balancing of one against the other, not the strategic use of one to hinder the other.²³

It is in this light that we might look more closely at the example of Discovery at Spring Trails, where the purchase of a house is framed as purposeful in both providing you and your family the home and amenities expected in a subdivision targeted at your perceived demographic needs and desires, although in a much more environmentally *responsible* manner compared to other market choices. [Figure 1.4] In marketing media discourses selling sustainable suburbia, personal agency is recast as affecting much more than just your own family’s wealth or welfare. Choosing the right house, in the right community, is advertised as an act of environmental stewardship. Environmental activism is here presented within the context of consumer activity. In this example the underlying mediated message subtly shifts from conspicuous consumption to conspicuous conservation.²⁴ The family depicted on Discovery at Spring Trails’ home page is not shown standing in front of their newly built and purchased home, as was done in marketing images for postwar Levittown.²⁵ You are, of course, still buying that same (though much larger) detached, single-family house, but that is not how the main web pages—your point of entry for imagining yourself living here—are inviting you to view that purchase or that place. The open fields, the waters’ edge, the freedom for you and your children to roam, to enjoy, to discover these natural places—conserving that for future generations is what’s for sale. But your kids can enjoy it now.



Figure 1.4: *The primary amenity suggested in these online marketing images is access to “the environment,” to open, natural space that is “included” both with the purchase of a single family home and physically within the bounds of the gated community.*

Screen captures of Discovery at Spring Trails' webpage header and the original community home page (above left), location map in relation to downtown Houston, TX (above right), and community site plan (below) as of March 8, 2012.

Also critical to this change in focus from consumption to conservation is the way new subdivisions are laid out, especially those marketed in any way as “green.” To better understand how this green shift might be rationalized today, we can turn to Lynn Spigel’s explanation of how mass postwar suburbia worked—physically and culturally:

...the central preoccupation in the new suburban culture was the construction of a particular *discursive space* through which the family could mediate the contradictory impulses for a private haven on the one hand, and community participation on the other. By lining up individual housing units on connecting plots of land, the suburban tract was itself the ideal articulation of this discursive space; the dual goals of separation from and integration into the larger community was the basis of tract design.²⁶

When we look at the spatial configuration of green subdivisions like Discovery at Spring Trails [Figure 1.5], we do see something different from most past standards of suburban land development and commodification (such as in the iconic mass-suburbs of postwar America like Levittown, NY or Lakewood, CA, both serving often as visual evidence of how environmentally irresponsible suburbia has been to date as individual *and* common pursuits). In terms of “greening” suburban tracts, this reformed discursive space does perhaps better articulate the united though limited interests of individual and community. In separating out or “preserving” land within the confines of the subdivision, plans like this insert a third term into what Spigel describes. The green suburban tract offers a new “ideal articulation of...discursive space” in which houses and the community are each separated from and integrated into “nature” in a way uncommon to most postwar predecessors. As land “set aside,” removed from the inventory of home production, these relatively natural spaces represent a shared claim of household and community to nature. Furthermore, they buffer adjacent parcels within larger tracts, defining smaller “green neighborhoods” as connected through and to nature in the form of wooded trails, accessible lakeshore, or open “green space.” Through these features Discovery families can better “mediate the contradictory impulses” of development and environment.

Through inclusion of reserved or preserved land within the confines of the property at large, homeowners are each positioned as protecting “nature” through a contract that grants them a personal share in communal ownership of that undeveloped (and many times undevelopable) property,²⁷ to which they enjoy recreational access because of their residential real estate purchase. As seen in the plan for Discovery, green corridors follow the creek and surround small lakes, helping define smaller neighborhoods within the whole. Like many new subdivisions, this “green space” around natural water features and paths through wooded copses is designed to offer communal access for all Discovery residents rather than offering more expansive “premium” lots with private access. These real estate transactions, with individual/communal claims to natural spaces through their boundedness within the gated community proper, lend property ownership here a certain economic as well as cultural cachet increasingly expected in most new subdivisions. Its dominant value, though, is dependent on the lens through which we view it, and the context in which that view is socially constructed.

If the discourse we participate in is environmentally friendly, we may be more prone to seeing residency in a subdivision like this as holding a personal stake in preserving nature for the collective (be it the family, private community, geographic region, or whole planet). If, however, we are discussing our new home in Discovery at Spring Trails in a market-friendly forum, we are more likely to see that preserved nature as an amenity ensuring solid property values for us personally and our community. The connective ideological tissue between ecologically and economically based valuations lies in the unspoken chasm between such conversations, an issue of competing “eco” contexts. However, these contexts are not weighted equally. Summarizing *The Failure of Environmental Education*, a writer for an eco-oriented website argues that if we were

...taught ecology as the overall system in which we exist and economy as a subset of that system, instead of the other way around, perhaps the blind rush to affluence perpetrated by rampant industrialization would eventually give way to a more holistic approach to living.²⁸

Implied in such critiques is also a possible cause/effect relationship between suburban economy and ecology, wherein the amenity of “nature” is another product of affluence, more readily “chosen” by those with the means to be green, or denied to those lacking green purchasing power and the mobility it affords. The potential of “green suburbia” is still positioned rather conventionally in market terms, as a landscape connecting us to nature via an economic status that enables moving farther out from the urban centers of industrial civilization, or as a landscape that has greater economic value because it is manufactured and perceived as closer to that cultural conception of nature. Serious consideration of ecology *and* economy is discouraged in both discursive constructions.

The primary value—economic or ecological—we assign to Discovery at Spring Trails is of interest due to its particularly sprawling metropolitan context. One blogger recently challenged the “urban[ism] legend” that “Houston is a fundamentally unplanned city, and that whatever is built there is the manifest destiny of the free market in action.”²⁹ While focusing on certain facets of within-the-city-limits regulations, such as minimum lot sizes and parking spaces, as well as the public enforcement of “voluntary” deed restrictions, the ongoing planning conversation he was participating in is also central to how the suburban fringes of the Houston metropolitan area have been characterized in national discourse as the poster-children for what is wrong with unregulated growth. Beyond the usual indictments concerning the ugliness, inefficiency, and environmental tragedy of car-dependent sprawl, a wild-west atmosphere of land use lawlessness and disorder are further suggested by the casual drive through the greater Houston area (and indeed many major metropolitan regions).

Patterns of sprawling development are the product of myriad market pressures, public policy, and aspirational desires, even in Houston. Yet official attempts at reigning in unsustainable growth are increasingly subject to political backlash across the country directed at local, state, federal, and even international government action, such as the recent spate of conspiracy-fed resolutions targeting the United Nations “Agenda 21.” Here environmental goals more broadly, and smart growth initiatives in particular, are seen as “commie” attacks seeking to limit individual “property rights and freedom.”³⁰ What is often lost or ignored in these conversations is that, under the auspices of our revered free-market system, many consumers seeking the American dream in suburbia willingly relinquish many aspects of their “freedom” in exchange for the perceived stable property values enabled by various “private” rules, regulations and covenants that bind property owners in “master planned” communities. Although, they do choose to buy in.

For many environmentally-oriented critics of highly suburbanized metros, though, the solution to sprawl is simple: we shouldn’t just move from brown city to green suburb, but rather more of us should move from hot, rambling brown cities like Houston to “smart” green cities like San Francisco, which has recently embraced new “low carbon” housing policies.³¹ Well-intentioned suggestions like this address the bigger-picture view of collective carbon footprints related to where we choose to live, but the socio-economic realities of how people make these choices—both pragmatic and idealistic—are complex, and usually limited by factors beyond simple geographic preferences and the patina of green that may be attached to any given urban or suburban location. If you cannot afford—or do not desire—to reside in the Bay Area, or, if you are for personal, professional, or financial reasons tied to greater Houston, what choices are available to you there, including alternatives to suburbanism-as-usual, or even urbanism-as-usual?

Attempts at creating something different from standard suburban sprawl have a longer history in Texas than might be expected. The Woodlands is a much-studied master-planned community developed in the 1970s in response to the haphazard manner in which the Houston area was being rapidly built up.³² It is billed as “one of the ‘greenest’ communities in the country” because of its plethora of protected “green spaces,” self-advertising its status as “the invisible city” because of one journalist’s observation that “the trees are the overwhelming presence along major roadways, in the neighborhoods and even in the commercial areas.”³³ The community’s online home page further entices viewers with an animated, multi-layered map of the community as a piece of land covered in trees and cut out from its greater Houston context. [Figure 1.5] The standards for claiming to be a “green” subdivision, however, have changed greatly in subsequent decades, and entail much more than the per capita tree count.

Even so, the tree-heavy character of The Woodlands is featured prominently in their marketing to prospective new homeowners as a matter of cherished communal resource and individual affection. On the main “Nature” page, the copy reads as follows:

With all of the diversity in The Woodlands—people, homes, businesses, religions, things to do—there is one central idea that holds the fabric of community tightly woven together, and that is a love of nature. When residents are asked about their favorite things in their community, the answer is inevitably “the trees” or “the forest.” What began as a vision of The Woodlands’ founder, George P. Mitchell, is now an enduring testament to designing with nature. After 36 years of growth, The Woodlands remains true to its name with over 6,000 acres preserved as green space, and a plan for 8,000 acres to be ‘green’ when the community is completed.³⁴

It becomes difficult to see the suburb for the trees. They appear to define The Woodlands without irony in name (unlike the tree-bare “Deep Woods Drive” in Bob Thall’s Schaumburg photograph [figure 0.3]), fulfilling the promise that this natural feature is dominant in our direct visual field, as well as in our mediated valuation of the place.



Figure 1.5: *The interactive map on The Woodlands’ main web page (above) obscures all individual residential and other property divisions by emphasizing extensive tree cover. Its “natural” appeal is further made with animated white bird flocks and gauzy clouds floating over the map area. One click takes you to the “terrain view” (below), which also leaves property lines out of the picture of each sub-community, highlighting main roads, water, and green spaces.*

Screen captures from The Woodlands’ home page, <http://www.thewoodlands.com/>.

Yet even this old school leafy-greenness is contextualized within the capitalistic ethos of greater Houston history and culture. On their “Environmental Heritage” page we are told that “Although the land use plan for The Woodlands was created in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it continues to guide development, thanks to its fundamental correctness and flexibility to accommodate market trends.³⁵ It’s eco-character may be greatly valued for the participation of such environmental heavyweights as Ian McHarg in conceptualizing the original plan, one that “provided a notable alternative to the urban sprawl that was rampant at the time,” but the ultimate goal of this—or any—development is to sell real estate. If no one had bought into The Woodlands over the years, its love story, a narrative about the power of nature to both inspire individual fealty and forge community spirit in suburbia, would have begun and ended unceremoniously in the seventies. The market has, though, apparently spoken, and continues to do so since property values and sales in The Woodlands are reported being as strong as ever, despite the most recent national housing bubble bust.³⁶

Discovery at Spring Trails was developed practically next door to this earlier attempt at a green suburban environment, and both were respectively planned with the underlying intent—and overarching marketing message—that they would be somehow in even better harmony with nature than the competition down the road. With their shared close proximity to major suburban employment, commercial, educational and recreation destinations, the almost forty-year-old Woodlands and the four-year-old Discovery potentially defuse one major environmental critique aimed at suburban sprawl: that residents MUST commute great distances in their cars to the city for their economic livelihoods, material needs, and socio-cultural desires.³⁷ Not every car that traverses the city streets of Houston—or any other dense urban center—begins and ends its daily run in the 'burbs. And many cars seen on the winding roads of suburbia never venture

beyond its locality. Some places on the suburban fringes like The Woodlands and Discovery do offer residents, workers, learners, and players a potential completeness in their self-containment that is rarely credited, and this “all-in-one” suburban package further includes preserved “natural” space.

As metropolitan regions further develop outward along decentralized, multi-nodal models, the cliché of the postwar “bedroom community” loses cultural relevance and critical bite. The debate is not now, if it ever truly was, just between the “urban” city and the “suburban” country.³⁸ Looking beyond the usual suspects (fear of or escape from the city, drive ’till you qualify for a mortgage, etc.) as primary reasons people move to and between suburbs, there is recognition in green discourses that closeness to nature is still a strong motivation for many choosing to live in suburbia. Perhaps nothing more than an illusion of connectivity to the natural world, as featured in the promotion of new subdivisions this “call to nature” is essential to their discursive construction as green.

This relationship to the natural is often connoted through mere proximity to those features of the landscape most romanticized—trees, pastures, water, topographic rises. Through their marketing rhetoric Discovery at Spring Trails augments this appeal with a more utilitarian rationale that utilizes the sun as an all-natural power station for those more domestic desires of suburban living, suggesting harmony between modernity and nature. Whether a community is truly “green” in any substantial, comprehensive way, or simply greenwashed with images and rhetoric promising grassy fields, forest pathways, or calm waters, these are propositions encountered every day in eco-saturated suburban marketing materials. Seen in print or online, in movies or on TV, format matters less than how these mediated messages position viewers as consumer-citizens of the whole planet rather than just of their nation, state, metropolitan region, or suburban community. With great purchasing power comes the perception of great environmental responsibility.

Bright Ideas

*I'd put my money on the sun and solar energy. What a source of power!
I hope we don't have to wait until oil and coal run out before we tackle that.*

— Thomas Edison, remark to friends Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone (1931)

A connection to nature in suburbia comes in many forms, including a rather literal one: connecting to a “natural” power source. As with our possible choice of electric or hybrid automobiles, “green technology” is another principal factor we are asked to consider when shopping for a new green suburban home or community. More and more developers are including these home energy-producing and energy-savings upgrades, often on a community-wide scale that suggest the early stages of a shift in both building and marketing standards. While it has become somewhat commonplace for even communities that make no overtly green claims to set aside at least some small amount of shared, un-built “green space” within otherwise traditional looking tracts, options like wind or geothermal, but especially solar are also popping up in the occasional ad as companies compete to make their homes and communities seem “special.” While once the province of small custom or niche “green builders,” lately we find even some of the largest national development companies getting into the green home game.

Lennar, a production homebuilder operating in eighteen states, has stepped up its own brand of better living through green technologies, including solar. In a 2007 ad for one of their “solar subdivisions” outside of Sacramento, California, the rhetoric employed in their consumer address begins with a wink and a nod toward classic 1950s advertising, with a similar look and tone as Redbook’s “In the Suburbs.” A black-and-white commercial on a vintage TV set is accompanied by a voice reminiscent of postwar pitchmen, telling us about the marvels of the coming solar revolution in suburbia:

The home of the future will be filled with every modern convenience. But where will all the energy come from? Scientists believe our homes will actually generate their own electricity. And all we will need is nature's power plant. No home will be without the modern, attractive sun collectors—enough to power two fans and a toaster. Just right for today's modern home.³⁹

Nature is here not just an aesthetic amenity like adjacent “green space,” but the entity that will power your suburban lifestyle—or at least your toaster. Meant to illustrate how little was actually expected of solar power capacity in decades past, this parody leads into a more sophisticated computer-generated full color model of a contemporary suburban home. We move through the interior, following ethereal beams of sunlight, until we emerge outside to see how the solar “tiles” blend inconspicuously into the roof shingles, a far different picture of how solar “fits in” compared to the cartoonishly large collection dish seen in the previous segment. [Figure 1.6] That, according to a pleasant female voice, is “the logic of Lennar.” Now a “real” present-day Lennar spokesman tells us how there's “virtually nothing” you need to do once you move into your new solar home. With Lennar's green home technologies, the proverbial “push button” is no longer even required. Implied is that the sun is doing it all for you, with help from Lennar along with Sunpower, manufacturer of the included technology. The rest of the 6½-minute video gives us a brief explanation of how this solar tech works and how it is integrated into the design. The female voice reassures us that “A Lennar home with Solar Plus is a smart choice because it saves you money,” because “As energy rates continue to rise, the value of the energy produced by your solar system should increase.” If hedging your bet on the future of energy markets is not enough to persuade you, “there's also a generous federal tax credit.” Included in this multi-faceted pitch are personal appeals, like that from one homeowner who feels he is “finally in control” of “energy costs.” Lennar's stated goal is to help their customers both save energy and do “something good for the environment,” but also to feel “good about the home in which they live.”



Figure 1.6: *Where Lennar has included solar panels, their marketing draws the distinction between older, bulky and unsightly technologies that were limited in their home-powering capabilities (above left) and their newest offerings, where solar supposedly powers most functions within the home while seamlessly blending in with the traditional façade.*

Part of the “everything included” in your purchase of a Lennar home in communities across the country—including their tract in The Woodlands—is a promise of “green” and an assurance that your smartly built dwelling helps you save the environment (while also saving money). (below right) Specific aspects of the “better” construction of Lennar homes are “revealed” in wall cutaways, each labeled to highlight economic as well as resultant implied ecological benefits. (below left)

Above: Stills from “New Solar Homes by Lennar” promotional video (2007)
 Below: Information placards at the Lennar model demonstration home in The Woodlands, outside of Houston, Texas. Photos by Andrew Back (October 24, 2011)

In addition to the rhetoric of “empowerment” and “smartness” in Lennar’s marketing, as in their PowerSmart program,⁴⁰ the company also promotes the idea that “everything’s included” when you buy one of their homes. An ad for houses available at their Creekside Park subdivision in The Woodlands announces that “solar power” is one such inclusion here in the “next generation” of Lennar communities, along with included “home automation” and other unnamed “luxury features” common in their developments in other states.⁴¹ Solar, though, is the feature that allows Lennar’s homes to stand out among both the old and new competition within this wider development, one that already enjoys longstanding associations with “nature.” At their demonstration home at this site, wall cutaways and “EI” branded informational signs are used to show visitors how every aspect of the home’s design, construction, materials, and appliances will save you money while also helping you “save the environment.” [Figure 1.6] Prospective homebuyers are prompted to “imagine” many things as they walk through, including the possibility of owning “a dream home that’s also a green home,” one “built smarter, brighter, greener & tighter.” These green features and slogans do more than offer residents peace of mind concerning the wisdom of their investment. They also represent the homeowner’s environmental bragging rights in respect to those neighbors who didn’t choose a Lennar home. Since “everything’s included,” solar power is a common feature within this tract, a definer of an eco-conscious community within the wider suburban community that is The Woodlands, as well as within the even wider community context that is suburban Houston.

Nearby Discovery at Spring Trails takes a similar discursive approach. In terms of green credibility and market incentive, what distinguishes Discovery from The Woodlands is largely (though not entirely) a matter of common features of the individual houses available throughout the community. In suburbia’s greener configuration there is

as much attention paid to the environmental bona fides of each house-for-sale as to wider issues of land use and tree cover. The houses at Discovery are of similar size and comparable price to many in The Woodlands, including those by Lennar, but are purportedly built “from the ground up” in conjunction with General Electric’s “homes inspired by ecomagination®” program. Each of several builders, producing a distinct tract of currently popular yet somewhat nostalgic home styles, conforms to the company-mandated technical standards of improved indoor air quality and thermal comfort, a 20% reduction in household energy and water usage, emissions and quality construction inspection processes, and additional third-party guarantees from another corporate entity, the Masco Environments for Living® program.⁴² Whereas you must buy a Lennar-built home in The Woodlands to get “solar included,” any home by any builder in Discovery will give you the same amenity, but with many more options and choices.

Green houses make the green suburb, and one way to sell the idea that both are indeed green is to enlist “nature” in marketing them. The sun may be powerful, though it is also somewhat intangible. Another approach is found in a GE ad that features a bird’s nest under the following caption: “Nature can teach us many things. We took a course in homebuilding.” [Figure 1.7] While there is no shortage of technically rich information on GE’s homebuilder program,⁴³ in their advertising they prefer animated “living” symbols to make their pitch. One example of how the eco-character of a GE community, Discovery at Spring Trails, is marketed in this context can be found in a 2008 TV commercial from GE’s national ecomagination campaign. A large, mature tree uproots itself, marching slowly to music across the hillside pasture in which it grew, disturbing a lone cow on the way. It crosses an empty, gently curving two-lane country road on its final approach toward a charming white house on an expansive green lawn. The giant tree is shown “looking in” on the house and its contents (not including the people who live there).



ecomagination.com

Figure 1.7: *This ad points out how GE's homebuilder program, designed to be implemented at the scale of communities rather than single homes, aids in "making your 'nest' closer to what nature would build."*

General Electric print ad for its ecomagination homebuilder program (2007).

A narrator explains what we are now supposed to be “seeing” from the tree’s point of view: “Introducing a new way to build a home: with advanced GE lighting and technology that not only reduces energy use, but greenhouse gas emissions as well.” Nearly every shot of the interior includes a few branches and leaves around the edges to remind us whose perspective we are sharing. The items we/the tree see first through the energy-efficient windows are shiny stainless steel appliances in a modern kitchen, focusing in on a large double-door refrigerator with oversized freezer drawer below. This is followed by a shot of the proprietary digital control panel that allows homeowners to monitor water and energy use in real time and track usage patterns—and costs—over time, complete with cute icons so that even a child can translate the combined resource and monetary savings realized by the family unit. Next we/the tree spy a matching front-loading washer and dryer in the spotless laundry room, dissolving into a topside view of solar panels on the roof. [Figure 1.8] All of these focal points are, not coincidentally, GE consumer products. They can, of course, be purchased separately, but the impact of seeing the complete, matching set is key to this sales pitch. Home technology is coordinated aesthetically with and within the home, as well as ideologically with and within the natural environment.

The main segment of the television commercial wraps by cutting to a longer view of the tree leaning in to embrace the house, all framed by two (white) men standing at a partial run of fence in the foreground. Looking on at the strange scene next door, the older gentleman somewhat dismissively declares to the younger, “house-hugger.” This brief diegetic utterance accomplishes a reversal of the usual derogatory meaning of “tree-hugger” into a signal of approval for viewers (even if not for the pseudo-farmers depicted here). We recognize the embedded tree-hugger reference, allowing us to laugh at the joke while embracing the message—and the product—being sold through it.



Figure 1.8: *As we follow the tree to see what wonders are to behold within the eco-appointed house, the rooms we are given visual access to are, appropriately, the ones which typically house the higher-ticket items manufactured and marketed by GE. What's new in this ad is knowledge that GE also makes and sells bigger-picture home technology, like the "Eco-Dashboard" and residential solar panels.*

Stills from General Electric's "House Hugger" commercial, Discovery at Spring Trails edition (2008). The full commercial can be viewed at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMgdFVdtL8w>.

Like the polar bear featured in the Nissan Leaf commercial, “Nature” in tree-form is here given agency to make valuations on its own behalf and in its own interests, and because these products and their inferred suburban lifestyle are granted “Natural” approval, we are given license to choose them and take eco-pride in those choices. The sales pitch is framed as a *direct* one, from “Nature” to each of us, while the roles of manufacturer and developer are minimized and obscured, standing behind eco-spokes-figures and letting their actions do all or most of the talking. We are, in effect, being asked to trust “Nature” as to which car and house products are best for it, and therefore for us. In terms of our own agency as eco-conscious consumer-citizens, those choices are then reaffirmed as “eco-friendly”—in these two examples both literally and figuratively.

While made to promote the multi-national corporation’s homebuilder program in North America, this 30-second “house-hugger” ad was provided to all participating communities to use in their site-specific marketing. We see this in an ad-on Discovery at Spring Trails ending, a disjunctive few seconds following the main commercial text encouraging us to “Visit Discovery, Houston’s first solar-powered community.” Linking commercial enterprises and lending another “brand name” to your home choice, this commercial again positions suburbia as green conservation through green consumption. What really makes this a feel-good eco-purchase is the bigger “box” in which all those green gadgets are literally housed, the home itself, and that this combined package is presumably powered by the same sunshine that grows house-hugging trees.

While our focus in the ad is centered on this house and its integrated consumer product choices, it is supposed to be selling ecomagination-inspired communities as well as the individual houses within them. In order to do so, GE constructs its particular brand of “green suburbia” as a more natural, pastoral, and less densely developed or inhabited landscape than might otherwise be expected. We are given the “green house”

to look at, to consider, and to imagine with, but absent in this media construction is the main product, the subdivision. Selling “suburbia” through the sale of your potential home within it, at the level of individual choices, is not new in suburban advertising discourses, but the larger ideological frame of that individual choice as “good” for the environment now positions the prospective buyer in semi-heroic terms. While the substantiality of eco-benefits realized from a development like this depends upon everyone doing their part, the commercial bypasses the communal aspects and interests of green suburbia by focusing our attention on the micro—the “good” (though invisible) individual homeowner, and on the macro—the “grateful” (though individualized symbol of the) totality of nature. Lost in translation is the middle ground on which they meet, discursively and physically, in which suburbia is a collectivity of similar homes, residents, and interests.

Starkly visible in the TV commercial is how little this pastoral setting, with its singularly large, semi-rural home and towering, affectionate tree, resembles the actual environment in which homes in this or any company-approved subdivisions can be found. The double-branded house you would be buying is much more closely sited to its neighbors. As discussed earlier, the “natural landscape” that comes with the new suburban home in Discovery at Spring Trails is a common green space; park-like, but not the same sort of expansive personal property we see in this ad. You may not have to share these communal green spaces with the general public outside of the community as you would civic parkland or even commercial campuses, but neither do you have them completely at your disposal in the same way as traditional private suburban yards or bucolic farmsteads. That the ad discursively uses this type of hybrid yard-farm landscape as the context for a green home (and community) rather than one closer to the actual product setting being marketed obscures the reality of the new green subdivision. That reality is replaced and subsumed by a much longer history of visual

rhetoric that imagines suburbia as simple but comfortable life in the country, a landscape of yeoman farmers who live out the republican virtues advocated so long ago by Thomas Jefferson. Self-sufficient and self-determining, this is an appealing vision that continues to sell suburban tracts to consumers who want a home and property of their own, but one securitized by the awareness that every other landowner in the vicinity shares those same virtues. By visually referencing these pre-modern agrarian and republican ideals, the commercial fabricates another layer of meaning and expectation as to what suburbia is, and what it offers. “Community” is inferred but not seen in this visual discourse, with “like-minded” neighbors in the distance instead of lined up all in rows, all looking the same. The marketing of green subdivisions like Discovery showcase the house with all it contains, all it represents, but further implied is assurance that your choice and the values that drive it are common to every other individual member of the community.

And everybody gets a hug. This is a recurring trope in green marketing. Buy a Nissan Leaf and a polar bear traverses a hemisphere to personally thank you with a hug. Buy a GE-inspired house and a nearby tree overcomes its root-bound existence to hug said house—although, not the homeowners who bought it! While the distances “Nature” is moved to travel are inversely proportional to the size of consumer investment, the common cause in both commercial texts is their featured products’ energy use. The Leaf makes commuting to and from the suburbs sustainable compared to other cars because it runs on electricity rather than gasoline, out-greening even the hybrid Prius. The GE ecomagined house is built tighter and runs more efficiently than standard homes in competing neighborhoods, even if those other homeowners also bought GE’s Energy Star-rated appliances to fill them. Discovery is the comprehensively greener choice.

The crowning feature of these “hybrid” homes garnering the most press coverage is the 6-panel solar array included with each house irrespective of builder. [Figure 1.9]



Figure 1.9: *As seen in this satellite view of a portion of the development (above), many of the solar panels that are included with purchase of a house in Discovery are not to be found on the roof, as would be expected, but rather atop small arbors in the semi-private backyards.*

The section of the subdivision chosen for a local TV news report was, however, of homes featuring the small solar arrays on the roof, prominently visible in the more public street orientation.

Above: Screen capture from a Google satellite image of one completed section of Discovery at Spring Trails, as of March 8, 2012. (green arrows my addition)

Below: Still from news coverage of residential solar panels at Discovery at Spring Trails, "Neighborhood Turns to Solar Power," KTRK-TV Houston, TX (June 8, 2011), <http://abclocal.go.com/ktrk/story?section=news/local&id=8178806>.

Local television news reports broadcast live on location with video footage lingering on the installed panels, and interviews showcasing homeowners' realized savings of energy, water and financial resources. "Solar" was most often the key word and concept driving the stories, in part due to its novelty still as home tech, but also for its community-wide application. In one story a resident's \$251 credit meant that his 36-panel solar system "generated more energy than he used" that month, and, "With that kind of savings, it's hard...not to gloat to his friends."⁴⁴ Conspicuous conservation equals "green" bragging rights both ecologically and economically. This latter green connotation, conservation of money, is up front on the website, as on one page asking those *Windows* shoppers contemplating a new suburban home to "Do the Math," contrasting Discovery's offerings with look-alike non-solar comparables. [Figure 1.10]

This line of argument recalls 1970s discourses surrounding savings experienced by those who bought smaller, more fuel-efficient foreign cars. Saving gas saved money then, saving electricity saves money now. Environmental benefits are a bonus. These homes—and this development—are similarly framed as "smart" for their integrated high technology and higher performance, something that Land Tejas, developer of Discovery and other Canyon Gate Communities, is known for even in their non-green projects. A community "solar farm" powering a portion of the development-wide infrastructure (like gates, recreation center, street lights, irrigation systems, etc.) was also prominently featured in company marketing and news coverage, highlighting a systemic plan to supplement other alternatives like wind, but also more conventionally generated electricity to power both home and community, hence the "hybrid" moniker. Solar as a sales strategy interweaves community and individual interests through combined environmental and financial interests. While one discourse may dominate at any given time, framing the meaning of both ends and means, they do reinforce each other.

Do the math.

The best part about living in Discovery at Spring Trails is that the savings generated by your home's efficiencies translate into lower monthly payments than if you lived in a lower-standard home.

At the same time, you are living in a better-built home that is more sustainable and healthier for you and your family.

Just look at this comparison chart and see for yourselves.



| | Discovery at Spring Trails | EnergyStar | Average Home |
|--|---|----------------|----------------|
| Sales Price | \$227,500 | \$213,300 | \$210,000 |
| Home Description | 2500 sq. ft., 4 Bedrooms 2.5 Bathrooms, 2-Car Garage | | |
| Standard Features Included | Carpet, Wood Cabinets, HVAC | | |
| Advanced Home Features | | | |
| 2-year heating & cooling guarantee | ✓ | | |
| 2-year temperature comfort guarantee | ✓ | | |
| Third Party Inspected & Certified | ✓ | Partial | |
| Solar Electric System-15%+ of home power | ✓ | | |
| Power-saving refrigerator | ✓ | Upgrade Option | Upgrade Option |
| High-performance washer/dryer pair | ✓ | Upgrade Option | Upgrade Option |
| Programmable Thermostat | ✓ | ✓ | |
| LCD Dashboard for energy management | ✓ | | |
| GE Recognition Approved | ✓ | | |
| 1-time \$2,000 Federal Income Tax Credit** | ✓ | | |
| Cost of Ownership (monthly) | | | |
| Mortgage (based on estimation of 30-yr @ 6.5%) | \$1,438 | \$1,350 | \$1,327 |
| Property Tax (based on estimation of \$10) | \$569 | \$534 | \$525 |
| Utility Bills (based on above home features) | \$238 | \$397 | \$438 |
| <small>**based on New solar system.</small> | | | |
| Monthly Total | | | |
| | \$2,245 | \$2,281 | \$2,290 |

Note: This chart is an estimation based on average residential usage, and is for comparison purposes only. Actual prices and savings may vary.

Figure 1.10: Prospective homeowners are given a chart indicating their house's "Advanced Home Features," including the "power-saving" GE refrigerator, the "LCD dashboard for energy management," and a solar electric system that provides 15% of the home's power.

How this chart is visually presented—over a field of wildflowers rather than in or near the home, shapes our imagination of green suburbia as a pastoral landscape, one that includes extensive "natural" expanses rather than just rows of houses. Again the open, natural space motif is relied upon to sell the "eco-smart house" in the "eco-smart community". At least the homeowner gets a hug this time, presumably from her "eco-smart" child for making the overall "smart choice" for their family and the planet.

Screen capture of Discovery's "Do the Math" page, as of March 8, 2012.

While the distinction of Discovery at Spring Trails is that technologies like solar are community-wide, the solar suburb is not a brand new idea. As Alexis Madigral notes, “whole subdivisions in the Chicago and New York suburbs were being built with solar home design principles,” even as early as 1947.⁴⁵ In contemporary marketing of solar homes, like those in Discovery, the incentives of saving energy—and money—are justified in the discourse by current volatile energy markets. A few years before Discovery held its first open house news broke on the collapse of Texas energy giant Enron,⁴⁶ exposing the fragility of an outdated grid system, as well as the incompetence of regulatory agencies that were at best overwhelmed, at worst corrupt. Technologies like solar are marketed in cultural environments like this as offering more than significant money savings or conservation of non-renewable natural resources. They imply some degree of security and independence. Narratives like this play equally well at both ends of the ideological pool, encouraging greener suburban home choices as part of a wider communal goal of being environmentally responsible, while simultaneously promoting a vision of pioneering self-sufficiency that allows suburbanites to at least consider literally disconnecting from the physical and metaphorical grids of wider interdependency. This “freedom” is framed as an initial consumer choice to be made in the marketplace that, perhaps, offers liberation from the market after the point of purchase and throughout the lifetime of home ownership. While the visual prevalence of so many solar panels signifies communal effort toward this goal, houses at Discovery at Spring Trails are by no means independent of the grid or the market, even with additional panels or systems.

Acknowledging the likely continuance of suburban market dependency despite the rhetoric of self-reliance, there is growing commercial incentive for corporations to promote their own green credibility with eco-conscious consumers, encouraging stronger brand loyalty. As we have seen in GE’s “House Hugger” commercial, eco-branded

communities like Discovery are advanced as platforms for selling “whole” green living settings and solutions rather than one-off products or even coordinated product lines. Solar energy technologies are often central to the conceptualization and marketing of such projects, providing green power as well as powerful green symbolism. General Electric is not the only global corporation entering the solar subdivision market, nor are such communities only found in the United States.⁴⁷ In 2011 Panasonic unveiled a media campaign that referenced their own green “eco-smart” community, Fujisawa Sustainable Smart Town (FSST). In one commercial the narrator explains that...

What drives us to redefine the way we watch TV is what drives us to broadcast the world’s biggest events in 3D, or live to your seat high above the Atlantic Ocean. It’s what drives us to create eco-friendly racetracks, batteries that power tomorrow’s cars, nearly indestructible laptops, hyper-vigilant security cameras, communications systems that keep you in touch wherever you go, digital cameras setting new performance standards, and the sustainable smart towns of the future. At Panasonic, we’re driven to make what matters most better. Just another way we’re engineering a better world for you.⁴⁸

This campaign, consisting of online, television, and print advertising, is the latest move in a plan to raise the company’s green profile, including upward mobility in its top ten ranking by the Interbrand Best Global Green Brands survey.⁴⁹ The master-planned community of approximately 1000 households is sited on “recycled” land that previously hosted a Panasonic factory outside of Tokyo. According to a company press release, “Panasonic will apply its ‘comprehensive solutions for the entire house, entire building and entire town’ to Fujisawa SST,” with the intention of creating “an advanced model of a town demonstrating efficient use of energy by promoting widespread use of energy-saving devices and proposing new solutions that integrate measures for energy creation, storage and management.”⁵⁰ And the main focus of this energy-centered plan based on “Panasonic’s Eco Ideas for green lifestyles” is solar power. [Figure 1.11] Like the FSST, Discovery relies on solar panels as observable evidence of its inherent greenness.



Figure 1.11: *The Fujisawa Sustainable Smart Town (FSST) is being built by Panasonic (one of nine Japanese companies participating in the project) on a former industrial site outside of Tokyo. A commercial broadcast in U.S. markets features the design and building of FSST as just one of many green initiatives by Panasonic (above). Despite the circular center of the town, its plan largely follows a suburban single-family housing pattern that will look familiar to American audiences. Upon closer inspection the prominent “black” roofs are revealed to be solar panels (below), the most visible feature denoting its technological systems and connoting its environmental sustainability.*

Above: Still from Panasonic’s “Innovations” commercial (2012).

Below: Promotional image of the FSST included in a company press release, “Panasonic Announces Sustainable Smart Town Project” (May 26, 2011), http://news.panasonic.net/archives/2011/0526_5407.html.

Solar suburban communities appear to be on an upward trend at home and abroad, in locations that seem culturally open to the idea, like California, and in more than a few surprising places like Texas. As “green” becomes more mainstreamed, and marketing rhetoric continues to promote the dual benefit of planetary and monetary savings to homeowners, the future of solar suburbs does indeed look bright. Despite early promotional fanfare, industry excitement, and promising consumer interest, the Discovery at Spring Trails development was not as successful a venture as was hoped. The initial plan was for the solar-hybrid community to encompass up to 3,000 new single-family homes. By mid-2011, with just under 300 lots sold and over 800 acres yet to be developed, it was forced into bankruptcy. *GREEN*—an ecologically positive goal, did not in this case mean *green*—an economically positive result. As a discursive apparatus key to shaping Discovery at Spring Trails, its greenness, at the time unique in the Houston metro, was ultimately no match for other forces in the economy and culture. Following a standard “culture industry” critique, we might conclude that this development was not really so different from its equally mass-produced competition, offering suburban consumers the home and community choice akin to a “green” Cadillac as opposed to a “brown” Chevy. It may be no surprise that, in the midst of the most severe economic and housing market crash since the Great Depression, no one was buying either brand or model. But does Discovery’s financial failure in this context translate into a more broadly cultural failure in attempting to reshape our conception and production of suburbia as environmentally sustainable? Discourses shape practices, yet this occurs within and as part of a larger process of economic competition, wherein these wider contexts also reciprocally shape discourses. All parties in both economic and cultural transactions have the ability to *adjust*—reorienting messages, repurposing plans, and realigning expectations. Following how the construction of “green suburbia” fares in

these shifts and turns gives us insight into how these processes and mechanisms work, much like inserting a “green” dye in order to trace the circulation system of a cultural economy. While some routes get pinched off or dead-end, others continue in the cycle.

After sale of the project to an investment group and the hiring of a new developer in mid-2012, Discovery at Spring Trails was renamed “Harmony” to better dissociate future marketability from its tepid sales start. Online searches for the original community redirect e-visitors to a similar master plan, but complete with the new name and tagline: “Sounds like home.”⁵¹ Perhaps, but for the residents of the 150 completed, occupied homes at the close of 2012, a mere 5% of the projected total, it may not yet look or feel like home. The respective names chosen are central to how these two discursive constructions of the same subdivision are positioned within a marketplace currently in flux. “Discovery” connotes newness, adventure, and curiosity, all qualities that accentuate the intentional combination of natural landscape and high tech infrastructure that allowed it to stand out initially compared to other suburban communities nearby, to be seen as a suburb of and for the future. The switch to “Harmony” suggests somewhat dissimilar characteristics, less of a differentiation from the status quo than an accord with suburban development paradigms past and present, promoted as having a commercially safer, more generic connection with the natural world that affords agreeable, pleasant living with natural as well as cultural amenities. The very ideals and assets that first defined Discovery are sublimated to a rhetoric that distances the newly conventionalized development from its ambitious original green project.

Some real estate experts still hold great hope for the future of the community, noting that the project was in fact begun after the financial crisis and is still positioned “to be the next new best thing up there” when things pick up, at least partially because of its somewhat unique green building commitment which supporters still claim was not the

cause of its money problems.⁵² One aspect of how this chapter 11 reorganization is currently playing out points to the potential friction between personal and community interests under economic market pressure. As the “premier” solar-hybrid community in Houston, what was initially a mandated minimum of six solar panels per house has regressed to a voluntary program in which individual home buyers can now either participate, with an additional up-front investment, or not. For early residents, among the first to buy into Discovery’s solar promise, this change in community business operation and marketing strategy represents a fundamental tension in how both the community and the individual property within it are discursively presented and economically valued. This change quite possibly renders their homes’ resale value uncompetitive. While the solar-hybrid homeowner can boast greater energy efficiency that translates into financial savings over the long term, it is now in effect “priced up” compared to a brand-new non-solar home in Discovery, even one of comparable size by the same builder. The prominent display of solar panels on a roof or on a backyard arbor mark these early homes not only as green, but much more expensively so.

The “level playing field” of the free market is dismantled, altered in a way that disincentivizes one of the main green features in and across the community. The visual discourse of solar panels, once the pride and promise of a new smart subdivision, now reads as an expensive green ornamentation. Homeowners that desire and proudly display solar technologies no longer have the assurance that their neighbors will too. This example lies in contrast to other suburban communities where there has been tangible homeowner resistance to solar panels due to upfront costs, and homeowner association opposition and even restriction due to aesthetic objections or concerns over property values (even though the latter have increasingly been struck down at many levels, including the Texas state legislature). While a capital investment of even a few

solar panels may make financial sense to the individual homeowner who incurs the ongoing, long-term costs of operating the home, the larger community context in which that house resides determines its relative exchange value.⁵³ In Discovery at Spring Trails/Harmony, what was once a subdivision-wide project of living green—and a visible step toward being “grid-neutral”—is reduced to a matter of individual interest, even while rationalized by some in the more broadly conceived—and concerned—context of “the environment.” Environmental bragging rights are no longer communally grounded.

When everyone in a neighborhood is “visibly green,” in effect no one within the community can be seen as outwardly different or “special” in these terms. As icons of individualized environmental interest, prominently green features like solar panels or wind turbines on or near a single house in suburbia both functionally and aesthetically differentiate that home—and homeowner—from the community as a whole. We see this dramatized in one rather strangely lighthearted murder mystery episode of *Bones*, where we find that the result may be deadly. In “The Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood,”⁵⁴ a man’s body is found cooking in the communal barbeque pit, and while by episode’s end our investigative team knows who committed the crime, they struggle to explain why. Standing in front of the deceased’s house, they ponder what might have caused three neighbors to suddenly “snap.” *Bones* suggests that the homeowner “must have violated some ethos of the suburbs.” Booth adds, “like cheating on his wife or ripping off his neighbors,” both of which were true and known. Sweets agrees these are “all accepted derivations of the suburban ethos,” but it is the grating metallic noise of the giant windmill behind them that eventually inspires their conclusion. Sweets: “It was the last stroke. It’s ugly, it makes a horrible sound, its destroys home values.” Green technology disrupted the peace, quiet, normalcy, and community spirit of Verbena Court. [Figure 1.12]



Figure 1.12: *A murdered neighbor supposedly “ruined the neighborhood” by installing a solar panel on his roof and windmill in his front yard. Much more is made, however, of the visual disruption of the noisy windmill than the silent solar panels. One is tolerable, the other a bridge too far.*

Stills from *Bones*, “The Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” (October 8, 2009)

Stereotypes abound in the contrived narrative of this episode, which makes sweeping generalizations about how people who live in the suburbs think and behave much like a single organism, lashing out in defense of their community interests (inherently tied to individual property values). Yet this brings into relief the fissure between two understandings of the appeal of a house in suburbia: the freedom to do as you like with and on your property (including individual interest and identity of being green), and the bonds of community (including communal interest and identity of being green). When privileging the individual, there is a cultural premium on standing out, while when privileging the communal, it is more important to fit in. The appeal of green communities, like solar or hybrid suburbs, is premised on the latter being built in. Removal of factors that both enforce and ensure participation in such efforts threaten to create a reversal of the general (but not necessarily murderous) scenario we have in *Bones*, where the odd man out will be the one without solar panels on his roof.

Despite setbacks at Discovery/Harmony like the loss of mandatory solar panels on each home, this still solar-hybrid community is credited for piloting high-profile public-private partnerships that illustrate yet another level of conceptualizing communal environmental interests and goals beyond the limits of home owner associations. They were the recipient of a DOE grant to test the reliability of wind power as part of a Smart Grid demonstration project, and facilitated numerous residential investments in “smart meters, appliances, lighting and controls furnished through the GE ecomagination initiative,” as well as “plug-in stations for hybrid electric vehicles in every garage.”⁵⁵ Not bad for an ultra-conservative state that likes to tout free enterprise and individual responsibility above all else on the national stage. As one local observer commented, “You expect solar power and ecoconsciousness to appeal in California, a state full of upscale, tree-hugging locavores. But in Texas?” Indeed, solar-hybrid homes and

communities, while still rare, are seen as less novel in states like California that have a history and culture of embracing environmentalism on personal and civic levels. Possibilities for structural change still rest in no small part on the continued availability and salability of detached, single-family green homes in any region, whose potential for converting consumer citizens is only amplified when those homes are seen as part of a green community, a greener whole. Green success breeds green success. With every green community breaking ground and making a splash in news and marketing media, their novelty is reduced and the very idea of them becomes part of the mainstream mediated culture of suburbia more generally. When high-profile examples flourish in places once thought wholly opposed to their underlying environmental ethos, temporarily “standing out” by virtue of what they are now “fitting into,” they perform even more of the cultural work necessary to make this particular discursive formulation of “green suburbia” the new standard for suburbia in general. As a green builder and consultant attached to the Texas project at Discovery early on reasoned, “We’re an oil-and-gas state...If this kind of development can succeed here, it can make it anywhere in the nation.”⁵⁶

It hasn’t succeeded yet, but the story is not finished. Canyon Gate Communities, the original developer of Discovery, positioned this subdivision as the next generation of their own brand of smart suburban community. With the help of a multi-national like General Electric, itself launching its new green rebranding program, ecomaginationsm, Canyon Gate added “green” rhetoric and amenities to their portfolio of ultra-high-tech suburbs with the hope of merging “green” and “technology” to define a premium suburban product and cultural expectation. Like all seven of their communities ringing the outer Houston metro, the semi-unique enterprise of Discovery at Spring Trails was envisioned as a guard-gated community “offering entry-level and move-up homes” with a mandated “high-level of technology” within each home and throughout respective

developments, with the added benefit of a green foundation.⁵⁷ Marketed as a community “Building a Smart Grid, One Smart Home at a Time,”⁵⁸ their initial failure at this location and with this plan does not invalidate the basic premise that this kind of suburban subdivision can be deemed “smart growth,” even though it may seem anathema to proponents of much higher-density, more diverse, and less car-dependent development. What it did accomplish in terms of the discourse was to provide a novel template for thinking about how green technologies—alternatives like wind and solar, but also energy-efficient conventionals—can be incorporated as part of the broader project of greening the suburbs we already have and plan to build, lessening their environmental impacts even if not altogether offsetting or eliminating them.

This is as much a rhetorical strategy as it is a plan for shaping the material development of green suburbia, and, as always, they are recursively constitutive. Green gains in the built environment may seem small and shallow, but the discourse grows and deepens with every attempt to envision our individual choices (of cars, houses, and subdivisions) in terms of mutual interests, of relation to others and to the environment, and of a more broadly conceived sense of community—in other words, *ecology*. This kind of rhetoric employed in marketing green as part of a newer, better, suburban dream does more than just “sell” us the latest smart technologies for the home or a more natural-looking community setting. It is consequential in setting the terms for future debates about what green means in the context of that suburban dream. Building better suburbs will require us to first be able to see them that way, possibly looking past the cars, beyond the sprawl and beneath the solar panels that currently define the limits of green suburbia in contemporary discourse.

Notes for Chapter 1:

- ¹ An example of government organization and facilitation of green goals in public policy is HUD's Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, whose stated mission is "connecting housing to jobs, fostering local innovation, and helping to build a clean energy economy." While part of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, recent Sustainable Housing and Communities grants focus on managing metropolitan and regional growth. Partners include the DOT and the DOE as well as the EPA, indicating the extent and comprehensiveness of strategies necessary for making homes, communities, and regions more sustainable—economically as well as ecologically. Public environmental concerns are here intertwined with housing, transportation and energy in fostering sustainability. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities "Overview," last accessed February 27, 2013, http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/sustainable_housing_communities.
- ² Narrated by George Carlin, *Americathon* stars John Ritter as a young, dislocated President residing in a California condo, who attempts to save the country from bankruptcy—and repossession by Native Americans—by holding a telethon hosted by Harvey Korman. The film received terrible reviews at the time and is difficult to find, but it is worth watching the opening credit sequence, with music by the Beach Boys, for its survey shots of the cars-turned-houses in "Oaktree Gardens," with its tiny white-plastic-fenced patios around their passenger doors, and scenes of the pedal and pedestrian traffic; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaFYcai1vK0>.
- ³ "Suburban" was originally a class of vehicles that combined a station-wagon body with a commercial-grade truck frame, of which the Chevrolet "Suburban Carryall" was only one company's model. By the 1980s Chevy's "Suburban" was the only one left on the market, and in 1988 finally obtained exclusive trademark rights to the name. On May 3, 2010, *The Houston Chronicle* published a photo retrospective showing the design evolution of this iconic SUV, featuring a showcase held at a GM plant in Arlington, TX to celebrate the Chevy Suburban's 75th anniversary; <http://www.chron.com/cars/gallery/Chevy-Suburban-turns-75-18678.php>.
- ⁴ See more about Canadian Gregory Greene's *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (2004) at <http://www.endofsuburbia.com/>.
- ⁵ "In the Suburbs" was produced by On Film, Inc., and sponsored by *Redbook Magazine* in 1957. It can be seen in its entirety at: <http://archive.org/details/IntheSub1957>.
- ⁶ In 1956, geologist and Chief Consultant of Shell's Exploration and Production Research Division M. King Hubbert predicted the peak of U.S. oil production would occur by 1970. His findings were presented at a meeting of the American Petroleum Institute in March of 1956, and have been the subject of countless additional studies, predictions, and debates ever since. Dr. Hubbert's later studies predicted world peak oil production by the turn of the century.
- ⁷ Intended as the second film in a trilogy though receiving much less press coverage than its fear-inducing predecessor, *Escape from Suburbia* premiered on cable television, the Sundance Channel, rather than in theaters. Notably, its release was at the height of the real estate bubble.
- ⁸ Nissan premiered the "Polar Bear" commercial in September 2010, prior to the December 2010 introduction of the actual vehicle in American and Japanese markets. The TV ad created immediate buzz for the soon-to-be-available Leaf (*Leading, Environmentally friendly, Affordable, Family car*), but received its own fair amount of praise and criticism for its fuzzy, emotional appeal. It was reviewed in the *Green* blog by John Collins Rudolf, "A Bear Hug? Nissan Ad Raises Eyebrows" (September 10, 2010), <http://green.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/10/hugged-by-a-polar-bear-nissan-ad-raises-eyebrows/>. See also the "making-of" video posted on Fred Meier's *USA Today* blog (September 14, 2010), <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/driveon/post/2010/09/how-they-made-that-nissan-leaf-polar-bear-ad/1#.UL9xLI5AsUU>.
- ⁹ The literature on sprawl is a field unto itself in suburban studies. Environmental factors are often, but not always, primary concerns in academic studies and cultural critique. For a

thorough, thoughtful reconsideration of the phenomenon, see Robert Bruegmann's *Sprawl: A Compact History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). For a prescriptive collection of pro-urbanism essays, see *Sprawl and Suburbia: A Harvard Design Magazine Reader*, William S. Saunders, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). William T. Bogart also offers insightful economic analysis in *Don't Call It Sprawl: Metropolitan Structure in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ Paul Krugman, "Stranded in Suburbia," *New York Times*, May 19, 2008, last accessed March 8, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/19/opinion/19krugman.html>. Krugman begins this widely read op-ed with the statement: "I have seen the future, and it works," speaking of the less car-dependent European metropolitan areas he visited. He compares greater Berlin, which he describes as "a city of trains, buses and bikes," with Greater Atlanta's "cars, cars and cars."

¹¹ Joel Kotkin pushed back against the notion that oil or gas prices alone will mean "the demise of suburbia." He argued that "Perhaps the best way to test the thesis of higher energy prices constricting suburbia is to look at the experience of the 1970s," when "Americans faced an even steeper price rise than anticipated by almost anyone today," and made worse by the fact that "we were hopelessly unprepared for it" since the bulk of jobs were still "located in the urban core." Even so, "Suburbanization proceeded apace." Kotkin's take-away is that the resiliency of a suburban model that has been adapted rather than abandoned "should inspire planners, architects, policymakers and those concerned about the environment to think about suburbs in positive and creative ways. Given our need to cut energy consumption, we need to think less about dragooning Americans back into the cities and more about finding ways to make all communities more self-reliant and less energy consuming." This optimistic assessment, though, was published just before the worst economic crash since the Great Depression, when we lost of millions of jobs and the housing market nearly collapsed. "Suburbia Will Survive a Gas Crunch / It Thrived in the 1970s, and Will Adapt to the Latest Spike." *SFGate*, May 14, 2006, last accessed November 14, 2012, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/Suburbia-will-survive-a-gas-crunch-It-thrived-2518902.php>.

¹² Lisa Gray, "Green Houses in New Development," *Houston Chronicle*, July 17, 2008, last accessed August 8, 2009, <http://www.chron.com/entertainment/article/Green-houses-in-new-development-1785339.php>.

¹³ The Prius 2010 "Harmony" commercial can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9LqWd3kkkM>. See also their 2012 "Kingdom" commercial, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBgbduIHdL0>, which features a new "breed" of Prius, a larger model with more cargo space, as if it were a wild animal stopping at its equivalent of a watering hole, a charging station in the middle of a verdant valley. The narrator explains that "In nature every species must evolve to survive. But once in a while a species comes along that does much more than survive. It creates a legacy." Our family-on-safari is encouraged to hurry up to see it, since we don't know how many weeks until it needs to "drink" again.

¹⁴ David Krulik, viral spec campaign for the Toyota Prius: "Well, at least s/he drives a Prius," (2008). See all three images at: <http://www.krulik.net/1/portfolio/post-3-print>.

¹⁵ The full "Smug Alert" episode of *South Park* (March 29, 2006) can be viewed here: <http://www.southparkstudios.com/full-episodes/s10e02-smug-alert>. The phrase "Smug Alert" was also used as the title for a September 10, 2010 blog post by Andrew Sullivan, critiquing the Nissan Leaf "Polar Bear" commercial on similar terms, <http://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2010/09/smug-alert/182590/>.

¹⁶ See, for example, the 1956 Ford commercial, "Two Ford Freedom," which can be viewed here: <http://archive.org/details/TwoFordFreed>.

¹⁷ It is perhaps now difficult to imagine a suburban landscape decoupled from, or independent of the car. The concept of "smart growth," which, not coincidentally, also emerged in the 1970s, does just that. Smart growth initiatives in the U.S., the U.K. and Europe prioritize compact, walkable and bikable neighborhoods with mixed-used, transit-oriented development. The car,

omnipresent in the average suburban landscape, is here minimized and, ideally, made irrelevant. The literature on smart growth theory and practice is vast, and of great relevance to urban and suburban environmental discourse. It is not, however, the focus of this chapter despite my use of the phrase in its title. While I will engage and identify sample communities throughout the rest of this project that can be more properly considered examples of smart growth planning principles, I want to take the opportunity here to temporarily re-center the meaning of this phrase, positioning its usage parallel to that of the “smart houses” discussed in part two. It is the integration of alternative energy and high technology systems in both house and subdivision that I am interested in here, and the mediated discourses that attempt to position such suburban homes and developments as “smart” technologies and choices in terms of related economic costs and ecological savings.

¹⁸ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), 412.

¹⁹ See, for example, Robert Putnam’s 1995 essay, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” in *Journal of Democracy* 6:1 (Jan 1995): 65-78, and the book-length study that followed, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000). Putnam argues that, in many ways due to changes in suburban life in the postwar decades (including television), we have gradually divested ourselves of our “social capital,” reducing the social, civic, and even familial ties through which we nurture trust and meaningful, mutual connection. Putnam’s thesis, while highly influential, has been reevaluated since first published, as in a considerate but critical paper presented at the 2001 meeting of the American Sociological Association by Berkeley professor Claude S. Fischer, “Bowling Alone: What’s the Score?” <http://ucdata.berkeley.edu/rsfcensus/papers/BowlingAlone.pdf>.

²⁰ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 1937 [1776]), Book IV, Chapter II, Part 9, 423.

²¹ Sami Grover, “Environmentalism Isn’t Socialism Or Capitalism. So What Is It?” *Treehugger* (March 7, 2012), last accessed September 12, 2012, http://www.treehugger.com/economics/environmentalism-isnt-socialism-or-capitalism-so-what-it.html?campaign=daily_nl.

²² In *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage, 2003), Dolores Hayden has thoroughly demonstrated how both historical and contemporary patterns of transportation and development have been determined by the “activities of automobile manufactures, commercial real estate developers, and the federal government” far more than “consumer choice.” While I agree, my intent here is to examine how those choices are framed for and envisioned by consumers as consequential in green marketing media.

²³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers’ Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 253-4. More recently, Halina Ward briefly explored the history and future potential of the “consumer-citizen” concept, which is defined by the European-based Consumer Citizenship Network as “an individual who makes choices based on ethical, social, economic and ecological considerations,” and “actively contributes to the maintenance of just and sustainable development by caring and acting responsibly on family, national and global levels.” “The Consumer-Citizen: Potential to Strengthen Democracy for Sustainable Development?” *Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development* (October 6, 2009), last accessed December 7, 2012, <http://www.fdsd.org/2009/10/the-consumer-citizen-and-democracy-for-sustainable-development/>.

²⁴ For example, an April 21, 2010 *Freakonomics* blog post draws attention to the fact that while many other car companies manufacture their own hybrids, the Toyota Prius is a best-selling model because it “is unmistakable” compared to its competition, whose electric-hybrids look nearly identical to their all-gasoline powered models. They note that the Prius “marks whoever is driving it as someone who cares about the environment; it’s an act of ‘conspicuous conservation,’ an update of Thorstein Veblen’s ‘conspicuous consumption’.” They cite a draft paper by economists Steve and Alison Sexton, “Conspicuous Conservation: The Prius Effect and WTP [Willingness to Pay] for Environmental Bona Fides,” which further argues that this

socio-cultural phenomenon is “A sort of ‘keeping up with the Joneses’-type concept but applied to efforts to make society better. I will be competing with my neighbors,” but in terms of reducing energy consumption and other “environmental impacts.” A home in a “green” subdivision, like Discovery, similarly marks its residents as making a “better” choice for themselves and society. It is very much a matter of eco-display within the visual field of everyday life in suburbia. See also Kai Ryssdal’s interview with Stephen Dubner, “Freakonomics: Saving the Environment, or Just Showing Off?” on American Public Media’s *Marketplace* (April 19, 2011), <http://www.marketplace.org/topics/sustainability/freakonomics-radio/freakonomics-saving-environment-or-just-showing>, and “Going Green to Be Seen: Status, Reputation, and Conspicuous Conservation” by Vlada Griskevicius, Joshua M. Tybur and Bram Van den Bergh, in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98:3 (2010): 392-404.

²⁵ One of the most reproduced images of Levittown, with its connotations of homeownership pride and opportunity, is the 1950 Bernard Hoffman photograph of the Levey family in front of their new Levittown Cape Cod. See, for example, how it is used in framing the online version of Marilyn Geewax’s “Living in the Middle: Series Overview,” *National Public Radio* (October 6, 2010), <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130324657>. A brief survey of the collective early Levittown images made and published calls this caption into question, since the very same family—in the very same clothes and of the very same age—is also posed in front of “their” *Ranch* model house, as seen in Peter Bacon Hales’ “Building Levittown: A Rudimentary Primer,” *Levittown Documentary Project*, <http://tigger.uic.edu/~pbhales/Levittown/building.html>. While this may render the authenticity of actual ownership somewhat suspect, it does nonetheless demonstrate the desire of builders in this period to humanize the otherwise sparse new mass building sites and structures, articulating the purchase of not just a “house”—one of thousands—but rather a “home” for this particular family (which could be you, if you were white).

²⁶ Lynn Spigel, “Suburban Home Companion: Television and the Neighborhood Ideal in Postwar America,” in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001): 32.

²⁷ While many early developments did leave space for parks, schools, shopping and churches in their plan, housing lots were maximized. Compared to the original Levittown built with ease on a cleared, flat, potato field, what is often left out of the discussion of new subdivision plans—green or not—is that the space dedicated to conservation owes as much to the difficulty of building expansively in marginal areas as to the environmental consciousness of the developer. The result is that unbuildable wetlands, hills or ravines become desirable “natural” amenities.

²⁸ Christopher Mims, “Teaching Kids to Love Nature and Buy Less Stuff,” *Grist* (August 30, 2011), last accessed September 12, 2011, <http://grist.org/list/2011-08-30-teaching-kids-to-love-nature-and-buy-less-stuff/>.

²⁹ Stephen Smith, “Urban[ism] Legend: Is Houston Really Unplanned? *Market Urbanism* (December 10, 2008), last accessed March 9, 2012, <http://marketurbanism.com/2008/12/10/is-houston-really-unplanned/>. Greater Houston, though lacking traditional zoning, is not necessarily without “regulation.” One author takes issue with two basic assumptions: that “Houston = the free market at work” and “Houston = an example of sprawl,” and the “logical” conclusions that commonly arise from their combination: that “sprawl is...a product of the free market, rather than of government interference with consumer preferences.” Michael Lewyn, “How Overregulation Creates Sprawl (Even in a City without Zoning),” *Wayne Law Review* 50:1171 (Winter 2005). Lewyn further critiques the underlying “assumption that Houston is a free-market role model,” pointing out that “a wide variety of municipal regulatory and spending policies have made Houston more sprawling and automobile-dependent than would a more free-market-oriented set of policies,” and further “proposes free-market, anti-sprawl alternatives to those government policies.” (from abstract) Others have argued that, compared to regions that embrace smart-growth policies to limit sprawl even as their populations grow, the free-market system in the Houston metro sustains one of the lowest median housing prices.

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- ³⁰ Chas Sisk, "TN House passes resolution condemning U.N.'s Agenda 21." *The Tennessean*, March 16, 2012, last accessed March 20, 2012, <http://www.tennessean.com/article/20120316/NEWS0201/303160044/TN-House-passes-resolution-condemning-U-N-s-Agenda-21>. See also: Ethan Goffman, "The Agenda 21 Conspiracy." *E: The Environmental Magazine* (July/August 2012), <http://www.emagazine.com/magazine/the-agenda-21-conspiracy/>.
- ³¹ Matthew E. Kahn, "Houston, we have a problem. Could you move to San Francisco?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 4, 2010, last accessed March 9, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/Green-Economics/2010/0604/Houston-we-have-a-problem.-Could-you-move-to-San-Francisco>. Here Kahn wonders if developers in the Bay Area will "fight back against this regulation," and "if they think that there are customers who are willing to pay for these homes." The full working paper is at: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w14238.pdf>.
- ³² The Woodlands, last accessed December 9, 2012, <http://www.thewoodlands.com/>. Also see Ann Forsyth's *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). She notes that George Mitchell started this novel suburban project out of concern about the sprawling, fragmented development he saw all around, but also because the volatility of energy markets threatened his continued success in the oil and gas industry. He turned to real estate, and in the process of building The Woodlands developed the environmental philosophy he was later known and honored for. (163)
- ³³ This is promoted on the community's website, on the "Greenspace" map page, last accessed December 9, 2012, <http://www.thewoodlands.com/nature/greenspace.html>.
- ³⁴ See more at: <http://www.thewoodlands.com/nature/nature.html>. A variety of "nature" photographs cycle through while you visit this page, including long shots of some green spaces, close-ups of flora and fauna you might expect to see there, and quasi-religious imagery of sunlight through the tree canopy. Human beings are not featured in any of these images, only in the occasional bench or light pole indicating it's an environment for—and by—people.
- ³⁵ *Emphasis mine*, last accessed December 9, 2012, <http://www.thewoodlands.com/nature/environment.html>.
- ³⁶ One local realtor pointed to reports that home values in The Woodlands actually went up while other markets saw steep declines. Other factors considered in claiming "The Woodlands Real Estate Market Is Vibrant" were the unemployment rate, price-to-rent ratios, and foreclosure statistics. Michele Flory & Company, *Experience the Woodlands* (June 23, 2011), <http://experiencethewoodlands.com/2011/06/23/the-woodlands-real-estate-market-is-vibrant/>.
- ³⁷ Labs and offices for Exxon, GE and other major employers are located at or near The Woodlands, as well as a shopping mall, other commercial centers, and the main concert venue for the metro area—all inviting the question of who in this suburban hub really *needs* daily access to the city of Houston, and why. This de-centering of the economic landscape to suburbia is by no means a new phenomenon. See Louise A. Mazingo, *Pastoral Capitalism: A History of Suburban Corporate Landscapes* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).
- ³⁸ William Sharpe and Leonard Wallock explored this in much more detail in their essay "Bold New City or Built-Up 'Burb? Redefining Contemporary Suburbia," in *American Quarterly*, 46:1 (March 1994): 1-30. They note how, compared to commuter suburbs of the 1950s, by the time of their writing in the early 1990s, suburbs have assumed many of the functions of traditional cities," even if they are not yet "fully comparable" in terms of "diversity, cosmopolitanism, political culture, and public life." (3) See also *Edge City* by Joel Garreau (New York: Doubleday, 1991), and Joseph Goddard's *Being American on the Edge: Penurbia and the Metropolitan Mind, 1945-2010* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
- ³⁹ See the entire video, "New Solar Homes by Lennar—Powered by Sunpower" (2009), at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpKPXrTW-f4>.
- ⁴⁰ See more about the PowerSmart program by Lennar at <http://lennarpowersmart.com/>. In one commercial for the home builder, the text reads "Until now... a home gave you shelter, gave you

warmth, gave you comfort. Starting today, it gives you power: power to save money, power to save the environment.” See the ad here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1TqsPJDgnHE>.

⁴¹ See the ad for “Everything’s Included by Lennar in The Woodlands” here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQxIkv8UAEQ>.

⁴² Discovery at Spring Trails is listed on GE’s company website as one of five communities currently participating in the program (others in FL, LA, PA and Canada). See “homes inspired by ecomagination checklist”: <http://www.ge.com/yourhome/homedetails.html>, and Masco Environments for Living®: <http://www.environmentsforliving.com/EFLPublicSite/index.jsp>.

⁴³ Information meant for builders who would like to participate in building in GE communities is at http://www.geappliances.com/energy_efficient_home/homebuilder.htm; and for potential homeowners wanting to know more about the program at <http://www.ge.com/yourhome/>.

⁴⁴ Cynthia Cisneros, “Neighborhood Turns to Solar Power,” ABC Channel 13 (June 8, 2011), last accessed March 8, 2012, <http://abclocal.go.com/ktrk/story?section=news/local&id=8178806>.

⁴⁵ Alexis Madrigal, *Powering the Dream: The History and Promise of Green Technology*. (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2011), 92. In addition to examples of passive solar communities from the fifties as discussed by Madrigal, see also early reporting on solar heated homes in the seventies, like the Blue Skies development in California: “Solar Energy Comes to Suburbia,” *Mother Earth News* (May/June 1977), <http://www.motherearthnews.com/print.aspx?id=%7B4D4E07F1-3355-4AF9-A1EF-0BE2876715F7%7D#axzz2ZEs7b0ly>.

⁴⁶ See *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, directed by Alex Gibney (2005).

⁴⁷ Canada is home to one particularly interesting solar community outside of Alberta. Promoted as the “first of its kind in North America,” Drake Landing boasts a “district system designed to store abundant solar energy underground during the summer months and distribute energy to each home for space heating needs during winter months.” See more at <http://www.dlsc.ca/>.

⁴⁸ Panasonic, “Innovations” commercial (2012), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlqfdfXZM98>.

⁴⁹ Anna Sanina, “Panasonic Unveils a Better World in North America.” *PopSop: Brand Magazine Online* (July 27, 2012), last accessed December 4, 2012, <http://popsop.com/57232>.

⁵⁰ Panasonic Corporation press release, “Nine Leading Companies and Fujisawa City to Collaborate on Sustainable Smart Town Project” (May 26, 2011), last accessed December 4, 2012, <http://panasonic.co.jp/corp/news/official.data/data.dir/en110526-3/en110526-3.html>.

⁵¹ The new website for “Harmony” (formerly Discovery at Spring Trails) avoids extensive “green” promises, unlike its predecessor, save a few images of families enjoying the open green spaces and one generic graphic of a CFL bulb with a couple of leaves labeled “Energy Efficient Homes.” The former “Discovery Center” demonstration building, showcasing all of the green GE features found in the homes and throughout the community, is now closed. Direct access to the new Harmony website here: <http://www.harmony-tx.com/>.

⁵² Jennifer Dawson, “Discovery at Spring Trails Owner Enters Chapter 11,” *Houston Business Journal*, July 1, 2011, last accessed November 29, 2012, <http://www.bizjournals.com/houston/print-edition/2011/07/01/discovery-at-spring-trails-owner.html?page=all>.

⁵³ Purva Patel, “Solar Panels Become a Cash Cow for Some Texans,” *Fuelfix.com* (August 2, 2011), last accessed March 8, 2012, <http://fuelfix.com/blog/2011/08/02/your-electricity-bill-could-be-a-cash-cow/>.

⁵⁴ *Bones*, season 5, episode 4, “The Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” (October 8, 2009). The title references lyrics from a song in the popular PBS children’s show, *Mr. Rogers*, “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?” The episode includes several nods to suburban television tropes, like affairs between *Desperate Housewives* and the hot gardener, and a *Modern Family*-type gay couple who perfectly fit into the stereotypical suburban culture, unlike the universally disliked crazy environmentalist who is murdered.

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- ⁵⁵ “DOE Grants \$13.5m For Texas Smart Grid Community,” *Energy Business Review*, March 22, 2010, last accessed March 9, 2012, http://utilitiesnetwork.energy-business-review.com/news/doe_grants_135m_for_texas_smart_grid_community_100322. See also the U.S. Department of Energy publication outlining the project, funded by the *American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009*. Illustrated by a series of suburban houses backing onto a common green space, this central image is surrounded by smaller photos of solar panels on a roof and, all in a large field array: an electric meter, a battery, a refrigerator, the interior of a family room displaying its wall-mounted GE Dashboard, and an electric car charging in a garage. What this conglomerate image is supposed to represent is the multi-faceted way that each smaller means of energy generation and conservation within the home all *work together* to produce a “smart grid community.” Neither sun nor wind power alone is enough to do the job without such concerted efforts. Also emphasized is that a combination of individual and communal systems are optimal. “CCET: Technology Solutions for Wind Integration.” (December 2010), <http://www.smartgrid.gov/sites/default/files/ccet-oe0000194-final.pdf>.
- ⁵⁶ Gray, “Green Houses in New Development.”
- ⁵⁷ See the developer profile: <http://www.canyongate.com/aboutus/developer.php>.
- ⁵⁸ Enablence, “Building a Smart Grid, One Smart Home at a Time: En-Touch of Texas sidesteps larger rivals by offering broadband telecom and green energy services” (2010), last accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.enablence.com/media/mediamanager/pdf/112-enablence-casestudy-entouch.pdf>.

• CHAPTER 2 •

Organic Growth: Preserving Suburban Landscapes

As cities before them, suburbs are never built on empty land. Rather, they move into existing, functioning ecosystems, into spaces already inhabited by wildlife or in use for other human endeavors like agriculture. Increasingly this view of suburban growth frames efforts at building subdivisions in a “greener,” more environmentally friendly way, envisioning suburbanites ecologically as both good residents and good neighbors, pursuing our own individual interests while contributing to the health and vitality of our wider “community.” This rationale diverges from older ways of conceptualizing a more “natural” suburbia, wherein its desirability was based largely on a *setting* either in heavily wooded areas, near bodies or flows of water, or even adjacent to pastoral parkland or bucolic farmland. While providing visual amenities such as trees, lakes, streams, and fields, this way of seeing suburbia did not usually incorporate ways of living in symbiotic connection or harmony with the natural world. Nature was backdrop, a visual balm to soothe the rougher edges of life in the modern industrial world. This chapter explores a few of the ways that new subdivisions are discursively built and marketed as “green” by virtue of their attempts to integrate environment and development with ecology in mind, and media critiques of the reliance on the *appearance* of nature in and around new suburban homes in such real and imagined eco-efforts. Sustainable suburbia in this context includes visually and ecologically preserving the land as it was before suburban development, perceiving and pursuing “organic” growth, whereby a subdivision can ideally be seen as more integral to the whole of the environment in which it resides.

Borrowed Views

It is only in appearance that time is a river. It is rather a vast landscape and it is the eye of the beholder that moves.

—Thornton Wilder

In the opening paragraphs of his 1960 political analysis for *The Nation*, Robert C. Wood describes the “tip-toe-back-to-nature movement,” a “yearning for grass-roots living” that “pulls city-dwellers to the countryside.” This characterization of suburban migration has been at the core of a dominant narrative in American culture for the better part of a century,¹ drawing attention to what is understood to be a major attraction of the suburbs while nonetheless insinuating that the urban neighborhoods left behind were lacking in those “natural” amenities so plentiful on the periphery. Yet in this process Wood further describes how suburbia may be “the fulfillment of one man’s dream,” but it is just as “often the realization of another’s nightmare,” citing the windfalls of those in the business of building, selling and furnishing suburban homes versus the demands upon those who must deal with overcrowded schools and streets, as well as the plight of “conservationists watching land being chewed up in hundred-acre bites.”² Critiques of sprawl, while based on a number of aesthetic and socio-economic factors, often include environmentally charged judgments along these lines, framing suburbia in terms of tensions between the personal desire to live closer to nature in a suburban home of one’s own and the larger trend of mass suburbanization which is seen as a threat to that very conception of nature sought by so many in the move. We want what everyone else wants, and in our drive to have nature in our own backyard we push it further away. This theme resonates widely in visual and narrative media as well as in critical discourses.

Whether we view ourselves as advancing or nature as retreating into the distance, the geographical footprint of suburbia grows, and from our present perspective

this growth is often assumed to have followed a rather familiar historical trajectory. First there were forests. Then there were farms. Now—and always after—there is suburbia. From a conservationist standpoint, this is an environmental tragedy unfolding in (not so) slow motion rather than the outcome of organic growth. The critical vantage point for this evaluation, however, is often from within the city looking outward at the progression of urban sprawl. As suburbia marches on, pushing civilization ever further into the receding countryside, this expanding middle-ground is seen by many urbanites as what must be traversed in order to get to more “natural” destinations like farms and forests, parks and preserves. Neil Gaiman describes a reversal of this more commonplace directionality in his 2001 novel, *American Gods*, wherein a few of his characters move inward from the open space of the road, observing how “Chicago happened slowly, like a migraine. First they were driving through countryside, then, imperceptibly, the occasional town became a low suburban sprawl, and then came the city.”³ By car or by rail, this progression—or regression—of the built environment is experienced primarily in visual terms. We see changes built into and gradually dominating the landscape while we move through it, in space and over time. When suburbia is not the starting or ending point of travel, it is merely a vast middle ground standing between idealized urban and rural or pristine places, presumably offering little of interest itself in terms of aesthetic appreciation of it *as landscape*. We have been trained to (not) see suburbia this way.

One study of “landscapes of the mind” by geographer J. Douglas Porteous begins with a statement emphasizing how “when we consider landscape, we are almost always concerned with a visual construct.” It is “something we look at or imagine as a visual metaphor.” He further posits that as such it “does not exist without an observer,” and, whether in our imagination or pictorial representation, “we frame the view, and our appreciation depends on our frame of mind.”⁴ Discourses thus framing the “natural”

environment as *landscape* are often ideologically positioned from a home place in relatively urban, cultural centers where suburbia is usually overlooked, disregarded as an impediment to both visual and ecological connection between civilization and nature. The rise of environmental awareness and activism in the twentieth century was at least partially facilitated through landscape art, like that of conservationist Ansel Adams, whose monumental black and white photographs of the American West illustrated the concept of “wilderness” for generations, but also highlighted its extraordinary fragility in the face of rapid development long before any discussion of climate change.⁵ Like the influential romantic views of nature popularized in mid-nineteenth century Hudson River School paintings,⁶ Adams’ prints continue to affect our conception of nature as sublime, and our relation to it as somewhere distant and distinct from those places we regularly inhabit. In much of the classic art associated with past popular environmental movements and philosophies, such as transcendentalism, we repeatedly find this preference for views of the natural world *sans humans* (except, of course, for the unseen artist whose perspective we are privileged to share in their images).⁷

Nature is over *there*, where we want to be, and never right *here*, where we are. Yet beyond this “wish you were here” postcard view of nature as a landscape far from the city and untrammelled by human footprints, we do find a few images of a more local, less pristine nature as a canvas for architectural blueprints and the domestic desires that underlie them. Recent work by Jennifer McAuley explores the “refuge” and “return to nature” to be found in the suburban “parks and wild areas that are either pocketed by the expanding city or that border the sprawl.” Her 2008 “Dream Home” paintings follow a traditional stylistic formula, yet frame conceptions of nature in terms quite different from other common views of “natural landscapes” prevalent in the visual arts. [Figure 2.1]



Figure 2.1: *From forest glens to tranquil waters, McAuley plays with our desire to appropriate these views of the natural as part of our desire for the constructing the domestic, all made possible at the edges of suburbia.*

Jennifer McAuley, "Dream Home 1" (above) and "Dream Home 2" (below), (2008), <http://www.jennifermcauley.com/Archives.html>.

Superimposed on these serene views are the geometrically ordered plans for detached single-family homes. The combination as presented challenges how we would normally imagine these two entities—landscape and home space, but here in context with each other. Rather than inserting the façade of each house as it would look built into the semi-wild scene, or offering an aerial view that would display the floor plan as it would fit into the lay of the land, we are confronted with a disharmony of vision, a mixing of two incongruent methods of representing space. This technique asks us to consider our inherently conflicted impulses for desiring these landscapes *and* these homes: we want the view, we want the house, we want it all in and as one. McAuley prefaces her *Landscapes of Suburbia* series with the online statement that her paintings “ponder the beauty, fragility and tenacity of these areas and contemplate the human desire to own, to structure, to interact with and to control nature.”⁸ We do not really want to “borrow” this view of nature, we would rather own it outright and position ourselves within it, as naturalized residents, both masters and beneficiaries of nature.

This proprietary positioning is much less tenable in representations of wild places far from the urbanized centers of work and play, where we are subtly encouraged to feel personal ownership of the view, but collective ownership of the land as part of a “natural” national heritage. We want the landscape as we see it to remain, therefore we must simply pass through—taking “nothing but pictures,” leaving “nothing but footprints,” and killing “nothing but time,” as the motto goes. Building a dream house in the middle of a national park may indeed be pure fantasy, but we might find real opportunities for transforming landscape into real estate closer in, at the edges and in the pockets of suburbia’s unused and undeveloped lands, places far less appreciated *as landscape* because of their proximity to (and contamination from) ever-expanding sprawl. In other works McAuley includes chain link fencing in the foreground of her studies and distant

cityscapes in the background to “place” the natural environment more concretely in reference to the built environment, arguing while “Traditional landscape artists focus on the pristine and unmarred beauty of the natural world,” for her “that type of nature does not exist outside the imagination.” In response, she looks to “find beauty in the areas that many artists might erase or ignore.”⁹ Still of interest as “landscape,” the presence of buildings, roads, parking lots, fences and signs—in other words, *development*—renders a site somehow less natural. Our imagination and expectation of “nature” is still derivative of almost two centuries of landscape art that rarely pictured *us* in it.

Emma Marris, author of *Rambunctious Garden*, discusses the need for a *gestalt switch* from a “protected areas-only, pristine-wilderness-only view of conservation” that “sees a globe with a few shrinking islands of nature on it” to a “new view” which allows us to see “impervious surfaces—pavement, houses, malls, where nothing can grow—as the foreground and *everything else* as the background nature.”¹⁰ As she further contends, “If conservation is to take place everywhere, we must all learn to see nature as the background to our own lives and not just as islands far away.”¹¹ This way of seeing configures suburbia in the context of nature rather than nature in the context of suburbia. The switch also holds the possibility of putting *us* back into the picture as suburban residents of nature. Can we accomplish this turn of vision within established traditions of landscape art, or do we require new kinds of imagery to help us see the world in this newly “naturalized” way? Suburbia provides a suitably ambiguous and even ambivalent canvas for negotiating this question of suburbia as a natural landscape.

The other side of this inquiry is whether or not natural landscapes can be seen as *suburban*. While the legacy of landscape imagery plays such a large part in shaping our conception of nature, we also owe a great debt to the words of Henry David Thoreau for influencing how we imagine living in—and in harmony with—nature. *Walden*, his 1854

account of “life in the woods,” exerts outsized influence on contemporary readers, wherein a simple, contemplative life close to nature is understood to be the remedy for (and in opposition to) the strains and ills of “over-civilization,” then and now. Yet the location of Thoreau’s two-year experiment on Walden Pond was not in some vast, open wilderness, but in fact seems more than a bit *suburban*. He was, after all, in earshot of the commuter train and walking distance of “town,” including relatives providing regular meals. As one critic humorously noted, “The more one reads in Thoreau’s unpolished journal of his stay in the woods, the more his sojourn resembles suburban boys going to their treehouse in the backyard and pretending they’re camping in the heart of a jungle.”¹² Thoreau enjoyed what might be characterized as the “best of both worlds,” a solitary peace communing with the surrounding natural world with easy access to the necessities and comforts of modern social life. Neither was his sojourn entirely about self-sufficiency; success or failure at small-scale agriculture on the site did not affect his ability to sustain himself during his “retreat,” hot meals being just a mile down the road.

The famous pond and the woods surrounding it now lie in the heart of Boston’s suburbs, conserved largely because of their notoriety through Thoreau’s writing.¹³ At the same time the very name “Walden” is regularly seen on suburban street signs and subdivision placards across the country, leading one freelance writer to call Thoreau “the father of the American suburb.”¹⁴ But are suburbia and Thoreau’s vision of nature really incompatible? As a cultural as well as geographical reference point, the idea of *Walden* still resonates with those seeking to find their own sense of connection with nature while nonetheless living the suburban dream. In 2012 Mark E. Martinsen’s book, *A Suburban Thoreau: Bringing the Spirit of Walden Home*, offered readers advice on how to do so, or they could follow the example set by Tom Montgomery Fate in *Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father’s Search for the Wild*. [Figure 2.2] We keep on dreaming of a suburban Walden.

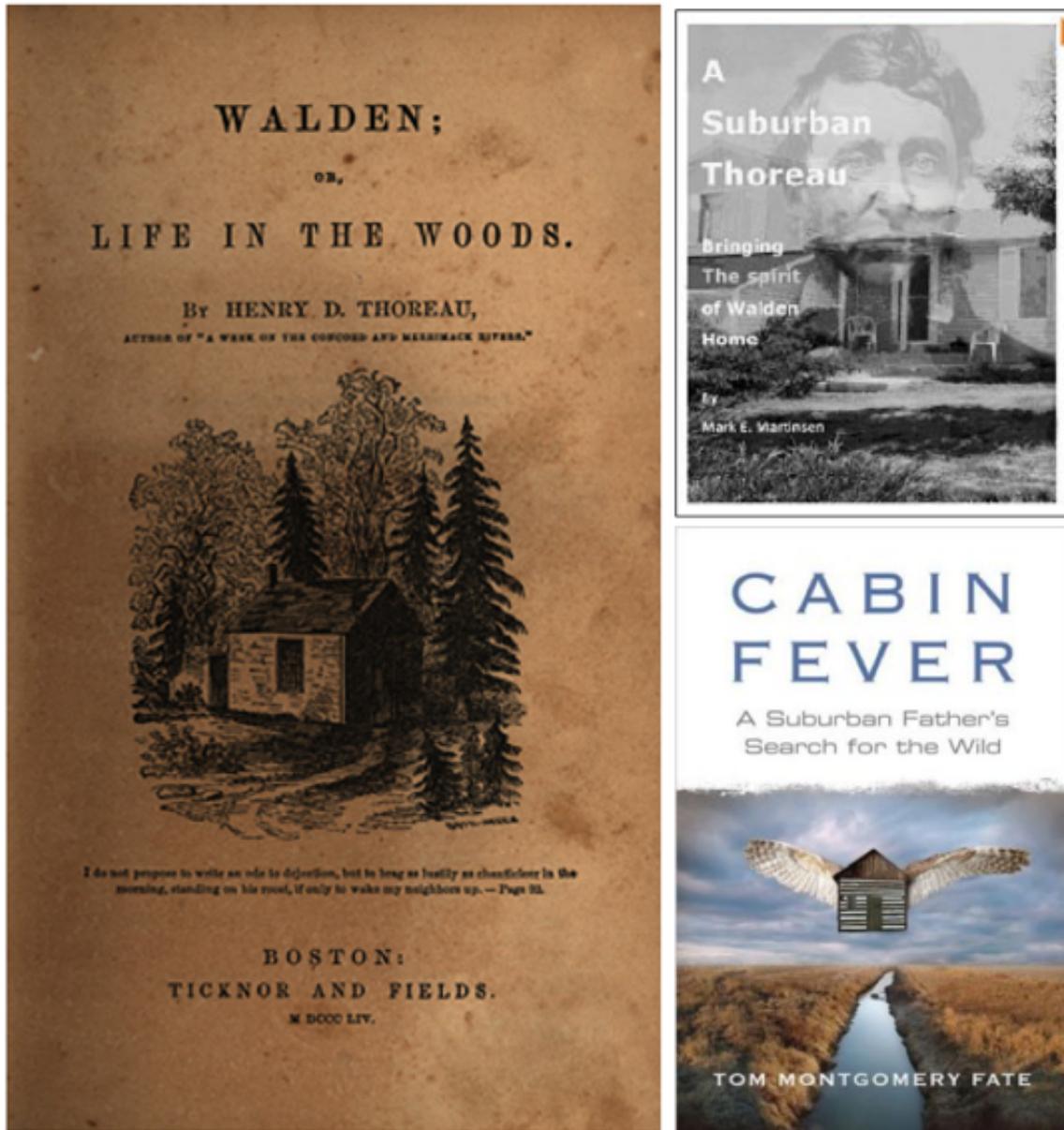


Figure 2.2: *The image of a “cabin in the woods” is nostalgic shorthand for a certain kind of habitation not just in nature, but with nature. Contemporary authors—mostly men—look back to Thoreau for their inspiration as to how this can be achieved while still living in suburbia. This particular strand in the discourse of greening suburbia is unsurprisingly gendered.*

Left: Cover of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* (1854).

Right above: Cover of Mark E. Martinsen’s *A Suburban Thoreau: Bringing the Spirit of Walden Home* (M. E. Martinsen, 2012).

Right below: Cover of Tom Montgomery Fate’s *Cabin Fever: A Suburban Father’s Search for the Wild* (Beacon Press, 2012).

Other writers have offered verbal snapshots of their own negotiations between the ideals of life in the woods and the realities of life in suburbia based on a reading of *Walden*, including Wen Stephenson, who recounted his personal journey in a five-part series for *Slate*. Deciding to forgo the usual drive to the nature trails he enjoyed walking through, Stephenson describes how he “discovered” nature while walking the six miles to this environmental shrine from his suburban home, a walk

...through the leafy suburban streets at dawn, past the organic farm fields, the crops and livestock, protected woods and wetlands, historic conservation land—rolling wooded landscape, broad bright clearings, hayfields, ponds and swamps, windblown wildflower meadows. A suburban idyll, pastoral paradise.¹⁵

The destination, Walden Pond, had notably less impact on the author than the walk there and back, at least in terms of “awakening” him to environmental issues and the difficulty of tackling them individually. It was just another suburban park, a touristy one at that, not living up to the imagination of it built up in 150 years of good press. “Nature” for Stephenson was rather to be found in the varied landscapes encountered along the way, in suburbia. By the end of his physical and introspective travels, he questions himself as to “why only walk to Walden and back? Why not walk in every direction from my house, ‘hear the cock crow in every barnyard within my horizon,’ as Thoreau would have it?”¹⁶ His goal of privately connecting with nature grows to encompass connection with community, with the “fellow human beings who inhabit my surrounding landscape.”

This conceptual shift is in line with how Emma Marris suggests we rethink our view of nature, one that allows a break from its constricting mythologies and lets us see our own everyday landscape—and ecological community—in a new light and with new hope. There is still a difference between valuing an extant suburbia-in-nature and reconciling new development with its perceived encroachment-on or destruction-of nature. Time offers a movable viewpoint: before, during, and after. Yet most textual

engagements with the suburbia/nature nexus are positioned at one point in this timeline. We are used to thinking about nature in terms of fixed, stable views—as landscape. Yet “nature” is not contained in a static image or even a vivid description of one’s momentary encounter with a place. Nature is process. It has this in common with a *building* (rather than *built*) environment; it is always changing despite our efforts to hold it (and us) still. The prospect of this change is uncomfortable, but presents an opportunity of vision. We do not look at *development* and *environment* in the same way nor with the same regard, yet if we are positioned as belonging in these *developing environments*, we can view them as a merger of constructs rather than as conflicting constructs, a continuation and evolution of one of the primary paradigmatic aspirations of suburbia—*rus in urbe*.

This compound view, though, when presented in popular media and the visual arts, often resorts to default constructions of either suburbia as an artificial simulation of nature, or as an overdeveloped semi-urban space devoid of nature all together. In those much rarer mediated views of the active transition from nature to suburbia, depicting the literal construction of houses, roads, and strip malls, the narrative arc of both still and moving images most usually follows a line of critique which shows preference for the “before” rather than the “after,” aligning with the views of traditional landscape art as well as social and environmental critics. Eco-themed films and artworks in which suburban development is a central concern emphasize either the aesthetic beauty of pristine areas or the cultural value of agricultural land, but are not always positioned against the urban, rather only the suburban. Compared to marketing media, whose purpose is to “sell” the idea that a merger of environment and development is both possible and desirable, most other visual texts counter this suburban dream with assertions that it is deleterious to otherwise natural landscapes. Even recent visions of “green suburbia” in popular, non-marketing media tend to assume a critical stance against suburbia, and against growth.

Pristine Beauty

The greenest home is the one you don't build. If you really want to save the Earth, move in with a family and share a house that's already built. Better yet, live in the forest and eat whatever the squirrels don't want.

—Scott Adams

In both media and critical discourses of suburban development, nature and the natural landscape are depicted as casualties of growth, especially in the contemporary era of wide scale clearing and building practices. The desire of so many to have a home of one's own in a relatively pristine or bucolic setting is most commonly framed as an individual pursuit whose mass achievement comes at the expense of those very same visual, spatial and material natural resources that continue to draw us ever outward from urban centers. If we acknowledge that "growth" may be necessary in economic as well as demographic terms, though, we come to the problem of where and what kind.

Addition of the adjective "green" in front of the term "development" isn't always enough to soothe critics' concerns, and their skeptical perspective is given voice in most media constructions of suburban sites. Economist Edward L. Glaeser, author of *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (2011), likes to pull H. D. Thoreau into the ongoing debate over the quandary of "green development," setting him up as a straw man who "was no fan of cities," and whose "like-minded heirs, including the urbanist, Lewis Mumford, praised the 'parklike setting' of suburbs and denigrated the urban 'deterioration of the environment'." He proceeds to argue that those Thoreau-influenced "suburban environmentalists had it backwards," and Manhattan, that "most man-made" of cities, "is the real friend of the environment" due to its density, and therefore its reduced per-capita consumption of space and production of greenhouse emissions. Suggesting that cities should literally

“grow up” and embrace more vertical high-rises instead of fostering outward growth beyond the city limits, he frames the issue in terms of wider public policy, wherein “Good environmentalism requires a national perspective, not the narrow outlook of a single neighborhood trying to keep out builders.” Instead,

...we need to think clearly about where new housing causes the least environmental damage, and we need to make sure that our land-use policies help that happen. A local approach can do more harm than good because dense areas are rich in protesters who push new housing out to where there are few people to oppose it.¹⁷

The more rural or sub-urban the proposed location of development, there are also fewer people who are likely to see it happening, and therefore who feel invested in that environment’s preservation. In Glaeser’s argument no-growth advocates and historic preservationists inadvertently push growth out to the suburban fringes, working against the efforts of many environmental conservationists to keep growth out of the less-developed exurban farms, forests, and wetlands. A more conflicted position is, though, that of the “suburban environmentalist,” whose intentions are widely caricatured in popular discourse as reactionary NIMBY-ism. While the phrase Not-In-My-Back-Yard might imply an overly individualistic, even selfish concern, it might also be reconfigured and reconsidered in terms of Not-in-*Our*-Backyard, which connotes the possibility of collective interest and action to maintain a balance between development and the environment, especially as they are both conceived and experienced in any given suburban location. Environmental issues thus framed could be central to building community awareness and identity in ways that merge the social, political, economical, and ecological interests. This approach does, however, still have limitations related to our common “still life” views of nature. What we want to preserve in terms of landscape and environment are often their condition as we see and know them now, and this view often finds purchase in visual media discourses as well as in critical literature.

When we buy into suburbia our position as property owners is fixed, and we in turn desire to fix the aesthetics and ecologies of that position. In *Milk Money*, a 1994 Hollywood movie, we see one of the main characters who attempts to do just that. Roger Ebert's review of the film takes the form of a fictional conversation between two Hollywood studio executives, one pitching the project to the other.¹⁸ After describing the rather tedious boy-meets-prostitute, boy-takes-prostitute-home, boy-wants-prostitute-to-marry-widower-dad aspects of the plot to Executive A, Executive B explains "a nice angle" in the movie in which the dad, Tom (Ed Harris), is "a science teacher"

B: ...who is fighting to save the wetlands near the school from an evil developer who wants to pave it and turn it into a shopping center...

A: (Nods approvingly) Ecology. Very good.

This "science teacher," Tom, lives with his son in a more established neighborhood of Middleton, a fictional suburb of an unnamed city, and his love interest is the last 5 acres of wetlands surrounded by the menacing facades of large, new suburban houses.

Apparently the only resident in town who actually cares about the preservation of this tiny patch of nature, his passion and rationale are presumably due to his status as the local representative of the wider scientific community. At stake is both the beauty of this suburban refuge and its existence as habitat for a variety of native flora and fauna. Tom's unlikely partner in appreciating the charm and necessity of the wetland is V, a hooker from "the city" (Melanie Griffith). After hiding out a while in his son's backyard treehouse to escape a mobster who thinks she stole his money, V eventually wins Tom's heart when she recognizes a rare ibis (which she "knows" only by watching a lot of TV documentaries). One movie reviewer even notes that, rather than conforming to the *Pretty Woman* mold, V's dreams "bear a striking resemblance to those of Audrey—give up streetwalking for a life with a caring husband 'Somewhere that's Green'."¹⁹ Only this version of "green" includes a merger of the domestic and the natural landscape. But of

course two threats prevent Tom and V from living the suburban sitcom dream together: his inability to protect the wetlands and her inability to elude the urban gangster. Roger Ebert imagines how this all played out in the faux-executive pitch meeting:

B: Then we get the big climax.

A: What happens?

B: I don't want to spoil it for you, but let's just say the gangster doesn't get what he wants, and true love saves the day.

A: What about the wetlands?

B: The wetlands? Let me just say, from the point of view of the ultimate significance of this picture, the message-for-the-family-audience sort of thing, the wetlands are what this picture is all about.

A: Saving the wetlands. A good cause.

B: Of course, you don't mention the wetlands in the ads.

A: No, you mention the hooker in the ads...

What Ebert taps into in this tongue-in-cheek review is how when Hollywood inserts environmental themes into its mainstream "family" pictures they are often nothing more than a plot device. However beautiful aesthetically or useful ecologically, we can be sure that the endangered wetlands are NOT "what this picture is all about."

How Tom is constructed in relation to the wetlands is however of great interest for understanding the situational appeal of "local nature" in contemporary suburban culture and discourse. In her 1999 study, *Constructing Suburbs*, Ann Forsyth identifies the role of "local environmentalists," an informal group sharing "common perspectives," including the notion that being close "to 'nature'" was "extremely important" to them. From their point of view, new suburban development was not only "a threat to their homes and daily activities," but also to the "aesthetic value" of their landscape—the "unique visual qualities" that help define "nature" as they desire to protect it.²⁰ The wetlands are an extension of (although non-adjacent to) Tom's house, a home that V would like to share, and infinitely more valuable to him/them than another shopping center since wetlands also provide a home for that picturesque ibis. What is missing in this shallow Hollywood version of an ecological fairy tale is the rest of the community.

“Local environmentalist” Tom is figured as alone in his futile stand against the bulldozer. He chains himself to a truck to keep it from tearing up the fragile ecosystem in the movie’s post-climax (V has already escaped from the mobster). The day is saved by the hooker with a heart of gold—and a big bag of cash! Tom is presented with a deed for the wetlands-turned-property in his name, purchased by V with corrupt city money. Despite its happy ending, the means of this eco-fable resolution undermines any actual eco-message. Eco-protest lost. Nobody from the community came to save the day, and while they exhibited happiness that Tom’s dream of preserving the wetlands came true, they did not seem to share that dream to the point of helping him—or the wetlands—in any substantial way. He was the lone nut who put himself in harm’s way, even though they too can now presumably enjoy the natural beauty of the wetlands and the wildlife it attracts. Yet its continuation as a privately owned preserve further ratifies it as a now-legally-sanctioned extension of Tom’s (and V’s) home in the suburbs. It may function as a natural community park or preserve, but belongs only to Tom.

Privatization of the natural landscape may provide an adequate temporary solution to keep bulldozers out of an eco-sensitive area, but in its reduction to private property it remains vulnerable to market pressures. It is the rare patch of undeveloped land on the edges of suburban growth that is “protected” from development, “preserved” for natural habitat. If the demand for housing (or commerce, or transportation, etc.) is great enough it will be sold, converted, and subsumed into the sprawling suburban fabric of development and, therefore, perceived as an environmental loss. *Milk Money’s* Tom sees his fight for the little “island” of nature as a last stand against this unnatural tide. What he fails to recognize is that the land on which his own house sits was also likely part of that original wetland, drained, bulldozed and subdivided long before he and his son took up residence there. His position as witness to those ongoing processes, as a

critic of and protester against *further* development, is simultaneously justified and undercut by his status as a suburban homeowner. Old growth is forgotten as *growth*.

In such popular media discourses as film we find anti-suburban critiques like those offered by Glaeser, but also this type of narrative validating and defending existing suburban landscapes under threat from new construction. In addition to the desire to preserve a landscape as it is, there is a tendency to want it to be as it was, as we remember it. Since a large percentage of the population does not spend their entire life in one house or neighborhood, the possibility of “coming home” to a place that has changed is likely. When that place was once on the edges of suburban development, the changes may indeed seem drastic. This is the situation described in a 2001 documentary film, *Green with a Vengeance*, featuring statements by Earth Liberation Front (ELF) spokesperson Craig Rosebraugh, who recalls a Portland suburb’s past:

All these houses were here like this when I grew up, but this was basically the end of the cul de sac...beyond all these houses, that’s where all the hundreds of acres of forest and natural land area including creeks really started and then just went back. And so that’s the area I played in. Homes like these have now become targets for the ELF.

Rosebraugh had a temporarily privileged position on this transient suburban edge that only seemed stable for a time. He describes how the suburb has developed since then, admitting that he agrees “this is what people think of when they think of the ‘American Dream’,” but that he has “emotional trouble coming back here because the area has changed so much.” It was when he first revisited the site and “realized that was all gone” that “all those memories slowly but surely ceased to exist” for him.²¹ He sees this landscape over time from the point of personal experience and therefore with a sense of cultural ownership and loss. His childhood view and access were borrowed since he did not own any piece of this land (including “his” childhood home), yet it was effectively perceived as his own in the absence of other claims to it, claims that are often

substantiated by the presence of development on or “improvements” made to it. We feel differently about—and in relation to—the landscape we see out our picture window when it contains open fields or dense forests rather than other houses or chain stores. Our view is even more dramatically disrupted when we see the bulldozers arrive to begin the transformation from one to the other, from environment to development.

In those spaces and moments when we are witness to the disruptive processes of suburban development, the threat to environmental preservation is just as often personified in the figure of the “evil developer” as it is represented by the presence of the bulldozer. This is especially true in filmic texts that incorporate themes of sprawl and other negative consequences of suburbanization, wherein developers are handy stock antagonists eager to convert natural landscapes into profitable real estate. For example, *The Californians*, a 2005 independent film directed by Jonathan Parker, reimagines Henry James’ classic novel, *The Bostonians*, as a modern environmental drama. Gavin Ransom (Noah Wyle), a developer of high-end gated communities, competes with his activist sister for the affections of the talented daughter of local hippies who are joined in protest against his latest project. Set in the scenic undeveloped hills of Marin County, the tagline for this film is “Here Comes the Neighborhood,” a reversal of the cliché pronouncement “there goes the neighborhood.” The local suburban environmentalists, who live near and love the site as is, eventually (and inadvertently) win out when the development fails financially, leaving a broken, humbled Ransom with his ostentatious, unsellable model McMansions. The film’s latent message, though, is not so much that the environment wins, but rather that development temporarily loses. Without the stimulus of economic growth, “preservation” of the environment can be seen as a default position, simply “reserved” until conditions change. The well-meaning activists here come off as naïve and ineffective, a sideshow to a story that gets much less media

attention than protests—the project of capitalist progress advancing at times slowly but surely in the background. In contrast, *The Unforeseen* is a more nuanced narrative treatment of the ongoing battle between developer and environmentalists. As described by one reviewer, this 2007 documentary from Laura Dunn “weighs the economics of the American Dream against the destruction of the natural world in an effort to explore just what price we, and future generations, are willing to pay for the luxuries of modern living.”²² It is easy to blame the developers of land for destroying the natural landscape, unless we want to buy what they are building there—physically and discursively.

Yet even the “green” real estate developer is not immune to eco-protest, whether in the real world or in a popular entertainment landscape that superficially promotes eco-consciousness to general audiences. When Participant Media decided to add an “eco-comedy” to their catalog of socially conscious films,²³ their curious choice was a family-friendly movie about an employee of a “green” development company who relocates his family to a brand new house in the woods, tasked with overseeing construction of an expansive “green” subdivision of similarly large houses. *Furry Vengeance* was a critical as well as box office failure in 2010, much like the eco-comedy *Milk Money* fifteen years earlier. However, this film attempted to integrate ecology as a central theme of its plot and rationale for its characters, and not simply insert it as a “feel good” sideline story. That “green” label attached to both developer and development does not, though, initially position the main character as a hero, environmental or otherwise. Occupying the dual positions of primary builder and resident, Dan Sanders (Brendan Fraser) comes under personal attack from the very nature his company’s rhetoric exploits in their marketing of the new community of “Rocky Springs.” A combination of live and CGI forest animals revolt against the destruction of their home, targeting the one man they see as most directly responsible, the initially unsympathetic “Developer Dan.” [Figure 2.3]



Figure 2.3: *The prospect of animals conscious of their environment and collective in their resolve to protect it makes for an interesting child-friendly fable that oversimplifies the opposition between “development” and “environment.”*

Above: Movie poster and stills from Roger Kumble’s *Furry Vengeance* (2010)
 Below: Poster and still from Studio Ghibli’s *Pom Poko* (1994)

Conceptually this film seems to borrow heavily from *Pom Poko*, a 1994 Japanese anime feature from Studio Ghibli about a group of shape-shifting “raccoon dogs,” or *tanuki*, that engage in terror tactics and industrial sabotage in their futile attempt to stop a suburban development from destroying their forest home outside of Tokyo.²⁴ In a similar vein, the forest critters led by a raccoon in *Furry Vengeance* employ a variety of complex machinations to undermine Sanders’ life both personally and professionally, though, unlike in *Pom Poko*, they (at first) do not make direct moves against the homes being built, the construction crew at work on this next phase of development, or the corporate leadership team that flies in to observe the project. The rest of the Sanders’ family, wife Tammy (Brooke Shields) and teenage son Tyler (Matt Prokop), are also spared the critters’ vengeance. Suburbia’s threat to the environment is personified wholly in “Developer Dan,” despite his naïve belief in his company’s green credibility.

The Sanders’ house is featured prominently throughout *Furry Vengeance*, the one finished structure in and around which much of the action and eco-terror occurs. Cast as “a soaring McMansion that anchors the new development of Rocky Springs” according to production notes,²⁵ the design and construction of this celebrity home in an actual new subdivision is not green in any appreciable way. Yet to moviegoers and house hunters alike it appears to offer a certain kind of aspirational home in the midst of nature. *Nature as location* is its main selling point, both within the diegetic universe of the film and in the real estate market. In the first scene after the film’s opening credits, Dan Sanders walks out the front door of his new home in a bathrobe, and says “Nature” to himself with an air of satisfaction. This is immediately followed by the sounds of construction vehicles as the camera pans to reveal them from his point of view. After a brief tour of the job site by his Hispanic foreman, Dan returns to his house and casually turns on a sprinkler to repel a squirrel eating blueberries from “his” bush in the carefully

landscaped front yard. As he walks back into the house Dan turns on an indoor waterfall and exclaims again, "Nature." In these moments we get a sense of how this view of nature is discursively constructed for and by suburban homeowners, as an aesthetically crafted landscape outside with neutered natural references inside, *nature as decoration*. In this idealized, domesticated view the "native" squirrel is no longer welcome.

A battle of wills and wiles ensues over whether this tract of land will remain habitat or become property. Our conception of property does not usually take into account the claim of "wildlife" on the land. Over a century ago Ambrose Bierce provided us with a provocative satirical definition of "land" in his *Devil's Dictionary*, extrapolating the ongoing problem for human beings, but in this context also shedding light on how those non-human inhabitants are "removed" from it both physically and ideologically:

Land, n. A part of the earth's surface, considered as property. The theory that land is property subject to private ownership and control is the foundation of modern society, and is eminently worthy of the superstructure. Carried to its logical conclusion, it means that some have the right to prevent others from living; for the right to own implies the right exclusively to occupy; and in fact laws of trespass are enacted wherever property in land is recognized. It follows that if the whole area of terra firma is owned by A, B and C, there will be no place for D, E, F and G to be born, or, born as trespassers, to exist.²⁶

Bierce articulates a fundamental way in which suburbia operates socially, culturally and politically, affording a right to access, to control, and to speak for the built suburban landscape. Physical and discursive production of new homes transforms what appears prior as nature into land, into suburban property in which only certain (visual) aspects of nature now belong. It is in this context of existential crisis that we view the fictionalized, anthropomorphized reaction of nature's clever furry representatives to the oncoming threat of development. "Nature" strikes back in response to this suburban invasion and acquisition of the forest, whether in the sometimes violent and lethal example of *Pom Poko* or the merely scatologically humiliating methods favored in *Furry Vengeance*.²⁷

Such mediated “nature’s revenge” fantasies play with the possibility of reversing our understanding of land-as-property critiqued in Bierce’s somewhat cynical definition. They also construct a population of residents able to bear witness to and protest the development of environmentally sensitive places, a cultural function made necessary to such media narratives where, as consistent with Glaeser’s arguments, fewer people already live there, see, and therefore prevent that development from happening. Even if only in the realm of children’s narrative media, if we allow “nature” agency to protect against development, than we might also begin to recognize and respect land preserved from development as “natural property.” This land can then be seen as the rightful “home” of its non-human natives, and ourselves as the trespassers against whom they have the right to “stand their ground.” This discursive repositioning is often pivotal to conservationist rhetoric defending wildlife through preservation of natural habitat, but also has real consequences in the material formations of suburbia.

Under modern capitalism all land is already either public or private property, none of it free from the system that renders us all—human or non-human—potentially trespassers, even as we wander through those places that seem wildest. We must each “buy” our way in and negotiate the rights of property both legally and economically, even if our end goal is to preserve native habitat ecologically. Or we may make use of tactical trespassing to momentarily subvert a system dependent on property rights over human or natural rights, though delays and damages resulting from these actions, while drawing critical media attention for such issues, are overwhelmingly absorbed by the system as temporary setbacks—just the cost of doing business.²⁸ Development, more times than not, proceeds apace. That we see this as environmental loss is an indicator of how political, economic and ecological systems are framed as diametrically opposed, with suburbia often presented as the front line in a battle between them.

Even when individual eco-themed films are seen by relatively small audiences (whether box office flops, limited release independent films or documentaries, niche genre or foreign movies), they collectively advance environmentally grounded anti-suburban, and many times anti-capitalist positions advocated by certain social critics. In “The Ecology of Work” Curtis White addresses this tension between environmentalism and capitalism, describing it as “a hard division between land set aside for nature and land devoted to production.” He illustrates the point with the critical observation that “Environmentalists consider the preservation of a forest a victory, but part of the point of that victory is (usually) that humans can’t live in this forest,” it is “set aside.” In this common construction, nature becomes “a place to go for a weekend hike before returning to the unrelenting ugliness, hostility, sterility, and spiritual bankruptcy that is the suburb, the strip mall, the office building, and the freeway.”²⁹ Forest and suburb are contradictory sites, for once a house is built in the forest the forest ceases to be; it is now slowly *becoming* suburbia. Even as we plan periodic escapes to the forest from our suburban homes, our brief chances for reconnecting with nature and recharging our spiritual batteries, when we get back home we occasionally indulge in fantasies of a different, more “natural” way of living in the forest *sans houses*, as in such magical or alien eco-themed films as *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (1992), or James Cameron’s eco-blockbuster *Avatar* (2009).³⁰ And when we cannot successfully cohabitate with nature on its terms, we import impressions of it however and wherever we can, as evidenced by the uninterrupted popularity of forest-themed concepts employed in the marketing of subdivisions, including new “green” ones in the current sense of the term.³¹

In an early scene from *Furry Vengeance*, Dan meets with his boss, Mr. Lyman, and his assistant who shows him what “Phase 2” of Rocky Springs will look like from the air. When he/we see the plans, “Phase 1” shows small clearings scattered throughout

more or less continuous dense tree canopy, while the second appears similar to those of postwar Lakewood or Levittown, only with a few more trees spotting the otherwise low-density houses in the middle of standard suburban lots. Dan questions the vision:

Dan: So you're just gonna take out the whole forest?

Lyman: Yeah!

Felder: But we're replacing it with a shopping mall with a forest theme.

This is reminiscent of naming the streets after long gone trees. We seek references to and simulations of "nature" in our everyday lives, yet we remain somewhat wary of and inconvenienced by "the real thing" at home or at play. A 2007 *New York Times* editorial comments on the increasing presence of wildlife in our otherwise sanitized field of view: "It's odd, isn't it, that just as people are turning more and more of the region into indoor space, within the cavernous square footage of suburban McMansions and megamalls, the outdoors seems to be drawing ever nearer—uncomfortably near sometimes."³² We may enjoy seeing wildlife in our everyday lives, but not necessarily cohabiting with it. In most media discourses depicting culture/nature clashes, the directionality of migration is a human move into nature. When animal life is shown encroaching on suburbia, it is suburbia that was the first transgressor. [Figure 2.4] Films like *Furry Vengeance* and *Over the Hedge* may be fictional narratives, yet they illustrate and express concern over actual practices in the physical development of suburbia, where wildlife that once enjoyed the vast expanses of open land or standing forests are suddenly displaced when large tracts or even entire towns are constructed, seemingly overnight.³³

One real world example is the "Disney New Town" of Celebration, built at some distance from its Florida theme park. While making no claims to be a "green suburb" it has become a celebrity case study of development versus environment. Adding to the discourse, a local planning department staffer notes that he doesn't "hate Disney," but critiques their apparent lack of environmental regard in the development of Celebration:



Figure 2.4: *Films like Over the Hedge imagine the complete replacement of a forest with suburban sprawl, seemingly overnight from the perspective of displaced wildlife who have no natural structure for survival left in its wake.*

Poster and stills from *Over the Hedge*, directed by Karey Kirkpatrick (2006)

“They are designing with the mindset of the fifties and sixties. Clear, mow down, level, start all over again, replant. Instead of trying to design by using the natural amenities.”³⁴

Yet ancient trees were not the only “nature” cleared to make way for housing. Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins muse about the fate of Celebration’s many large alligators:

Before the development started, the workers at Disney World would transplant ‘gators from the swamps and ponds of the theme parks and golf courses to the wilds of what would become Celebration. As the land was cleared for the town, most of the big alligators left of their own accord or were trapped and removed. Today, most of the alligators are small, and when they reach four or five feet, they, too, are captured by animal control officers and relocated in unpopulated areas, perhaps only to wait for the next wave of development.³⁵

These “waves of development” are also waves of domestication, making nature safe for suburban consumption. In the practice, as in the discourse, “nature” is what is always most likely to be displaced. Disney’s media brand is built on a certain kind of sanitized and familiarized view of nature, and this extends to their suburban real estate ventures.

Though as children’s media more broadly cultivates empathetic relations to the natural world and its animal citizenry, this way of seeing nature occasionally constructs suburbia as a home place compatible with both human and non-human interests. When Bob the Builder “goes green” in the 2005 animated children’s film *Bob’s Big Plan*, it is to save the titular sunflowers in Sunflower Valley, “a place he used to visit as a kid.”³⁶ Bob sees a local architect’s model for a design competition, and is shocked “to see Sunflower Valley looking like a city,” all paved over and full of tall buildings. His “friends,” neighbors, construction vehicles and critters, ask Bob if he can design something different, so that the “sunflowers can keep their home.” Inspired by a suggestion from an affable bird, they together come up with a “big plan” in which houses will “blend into” the sides of the hills—a brand new green town. [Figure 2.5] The project judges choose Bob’s inventive entry, praising it as a “vision that will build a community for the future, blending in with its surroundings, using the natural resources around it for energy and power.” It was *better*.



Figure 2.5: *Bob's design incorporates the hills and plentiful sunflowers of the site, and his friendly yellow bulldozer is presented as preserving the natural countryside even as it is employed in building a whole new town where people will be able to "live, work, shop, go to school, and play sports."*

Stills from *Bob the Builder*, "Bob's Big Plan" (2005) and screen capture of the related online storybook.

When children follow along with the theme song between every episode of the series, they learn to ask “can we build it?” and answer “yes we can!” The message here is distinct from the usual anti-suburban context, even in children’s media. Can-do spirit and teamwork are supplemented by encouragement to build on a much larger scale than the individual home. Bob the builder in this storyline becomes a “good” developer. The architect who designed the theme park-style urban development is not demonized, though. He loses gracefully to Bob, who came up with a better plan that considered a wider “community” including non-human life already residing in Sunflower Valley. This particular green suburban lesson—reinforced in an online storybook version, a play set, and a traveling stage play—is one of ecological community and ecological citizenship.

These mediated models of living (and building) green draw upon and advance wider discourses, like the environmental critiques of modern nature writer Aldo Leopold. In his postwar tract, *A Sand County Almanac*, Leopold traces an evolution of “ethics” from, first, “the relation between individuals,” followed by “the relation between the individual and society,” both of which incorporate land, animals, and plants as “property” treated primarily in economic terms within the confines of those relations. He goes on to outline the next stage, “The Community Concept”:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate (perhaps in order that there may be a place to compete for). The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.³⁷

This shift is one of relation, but also of position. As Leopold further suggests, “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it,” just like Bob the Builder. When Bob builds the new green *community* in Sunflower Valley, these principles are illustrated as the “winning” option.

In “The Once and Future Land Ethic” Curt Meine addresses the broader legacy of Leopold’s ideas, arguing that the “land ethic cannot meaningfully endure if the fragmentation of interests prevails.” Here he is referring to the divides between urban, suburban, and rural dwellers, all of which ostensibly have different relations to the land in both ecological and economic terms. He affirms that the land ethic will, however, “flourish if it makes connections.”³⁸ This has not been an easy proposition. Concerned with the economic logic that continues to dominate human-land relations half a century after *A Sand County Almanac* was first published, environmental scholar and former commercial fisherman Raymond A. Rogers eloquently suggests a way in which we might alter the terms of our uneven modern relationship with both nature and capitalism:

The kind of humans we are, and the kinds of nature we want to conserve, are reflections of each other. If we think of ourselves as human resources available to serve capital, we will only want to conserve natural resources. If we think of ourselves as members of human communities, we can then begin to think about conserving natural communities and habitats. By its very definition, capital is aggressively homeless.³⁹

The last point in this argument is especially relevant when we consider discourses of suburbia in the context of the environment, and vice versa. Each configuration is concerned with the concept of “home,” either broadly conceived or specifically practiced within a capitalist framework, one that shapes not only the choices we make in everyday life, like where and how to live, but also how we discursively order and value them.

Including non-human life in our view, do we recognize the land we now “share” as their home or as our home? This is the question faced by Dan in *Furry Vengeance*. He learns humility and respect, but not as a result of enlightenment through peaceful contact like Bob the Builder. A difference remains between regularly seeing untamed nature up close and living with it in close quarters. And while the desire to be closer to nature is still a common rationale for moving to suburbia, we nonetheless crave safe,

ordered, manageable park-like landscapes, characteristics that don't usually come to mind when we think of native wildlife habitat, especially forests. Another 2006 *New York Times* editorial on suburban wildlife observes that the "sneaky thing about the suburban landscape is how natural it looks." The problem is described as partly one of vision:

The trees turn green, then brown and then green again, there are always leaves to blow and grass to mow, and something is keeping all those greedy deer and evil geese alive. It all looks good, but something is not right. All those highways, sidewalks and housing developments, the products of planning decisions that revolve mainly around people and their cars, keep nature off-balance. They pay little heed to the needs of all the other residents of suburbia—the wild things that live, move, work and play entirely off the grid.⁴⁰

Acknowledging that suburbia is also "where the wild things are" is a rather distinctive enterprise from actively accommodating their—and our—presence there. The latter scenario is more common in fictional (and marketing) media discourses than in reality.

When we encounter such themes of "nature/culture clash" in popular media it is often in the context of family-friendly or children's films, where the anthropomorphism of field and forest creatures renders their plight in search of or in defense of "home" both familiar and empathetic. In *Over the Hedge*, the 2006 animated feature based on a comic strip begun in 1995 [Figure 2.4], we encounter a diverse group of animals who awaken from their winter slumber only to find their forest home suddenly gone. Behind a mysterious hedge wall at the meadow's edge they find the old tree growth replaced by endless rows of identical beige McMansions, each surrounded by manicured lawns and paved suburban streets. Rather than "attack" the suburban trespassers, the raccoon in this tale leads the ragtag group and makeshift family made up of turtle, squirrel, possum, porcupine, and skunk on a replacement scavenger hunt for all the hidden processed treats a bountiful suburbia holds. The critters who reluctantly go *Over the Hedge* in search of food are left with little choice but to invade suburbia, their normal means of sustenance gone. Nothing "natural" is left after the forest's conversion to subdivision.

Over the Hedge offers young viewers a humorous glimpse of what's really at stake in the later narrative of *Furry Vengeance*, as well as in ecocriticism, the loss of ecosystem and displacement of "natural inhabitants." Yet here we neither see the forest environment before development nor the process of developing suburbia. Nor do we meet the "evil" developer who did this—the antagonists here are the homeowners and exterminators employing similar strategies for keeping wildlife out as "homeowner Dan." In this film text development just happened. We are positioned to accept this even as we are prodded to feel for the plight of those loveable, harmless, homeless animals. In contrast to *Over the Hedge*, the eco-messaging of both *Furry Vengeance* and *Bob's Big Plan* engage development as process rather than as only product, offering a narrative that makes room for the eco-education—and eco-redemption—of developers and homeowners, although in *Furry Vengeance* not until our composite character is made to suffer unspeakable indignities for his complicity in a project that is not truly green. Dan the developer comes to realize that these "critters" were only defending their home, just as he was. Having eventually learned this lesson, he risks his own livelihood by taking their side, protesting destruction of the forest, aiding and abetting their fight as they take on the real powers that be, company CEO Lyman, who is finally thwarted and expelled. The final scene reveals a changed man with a new occupation: "Forest Ranger Dan."

Equally relevant in social terms to the growing diegetic environmental awareness of such a stock villainous character as "the developer" is how films like this are deployed as foundational educational texts for young audiences. As Roger Ebert joked about *Milk Money's* thin veneer of environmentalism, in the case of *Furry Vengeance's* "message-for-the-family-audience sort of thing," the forest IS "what this picture is all about." Here the family-values-pitch is remade to assimilate wild animals rather than see them as "other," opening the possibility for imagining some form of a suburbia/forest configuration

in terms of cohabitation in a place that enables mutually respectful dwelling, but only if it can be carefully planned, built and occupied with as light a footprint as possible (just as “Bob the Builder” does from the start). While perhaps no Thoreau, “Forest Ranger Dan” might very well reside within the woods he now protects, though we never see if he and his family remain in the 6,000 square foot “green” McMansion in the woods. What we can surmise is that none of the other houses were completed, and no one else is moving in. Dan goes from developer to protester to protector, all of which allow him to remain, but also necessarily keep the site “safe” from further suburbanization.

The “message” for kids watching the film was ideally that they, too, would come to the same realization as Dan, and want to protect and promote wildlife in their own suburban neighborhoods. His example much more overtly becomes a call to practice rather than a simple entertainment. With theatrical release of *Furry Vengeance*, Participant Media provided an online social action plan for parents and teachers to help guide children’s understanding of the film’s environmental issues and learn to do their part. Activities prepare young readers to be local activists for the environment, but not necessarily protesters against development. The goals for this program, stated on the cover page, are to “educate your students about the effects of their everyday decisions on our environment and encourage them to think critically before making choices that could potentially threaten and endanger wildlife and habitats.” As framed here, children have agency to “protect our planet” through decision-making, but still largely in terms of consumer choices. Since the young children most likely to see and enjoy this film have limited purchasing power, the real targets of the eco-messaging are parents who make most of the “family” decisions as to where and how they live—and what to watch. Children are deployed to change the eco-consciousness of adults equally if not more than parents are encouraged to teach their children environmental values. [Figure 2.6]

LIVIN' THE GREEN LIFE

Dan Sanders thinks he is moving his family to Oregon to live the green life, but his job to develop a forest preserve is threatening their greatest chance to experience it. Fill in the letters of each word that are missing to show what the Sanders family's new green "To Do" List might look like once the animals who fight back in *Furry Vengeance* have taught Dan a lesson.

DAILY ECO-ACTION

Visit Internet resources to find out more ways you and your family can go green. Record the ideas you want to try on your family list below. Choose a weekend to perform as many of these eco-actions as you can. It's not as hard as you might think!

SANDERS FAMILY'S GREEN "TO DO" LIST

1. Wash clothes in _o_d water.
2. Turn off _l_ _t_ when leaving a room.
3. _o_ _os_ leftover veggies.
4. Unplug e_e_to _cs when not in use.
5. Buy in b_ _k_ **Remember, we want to cut down on packaging trash!**
6. Shop the _a_m_ _y_ _a_ _et for veggies and fruits.
7. Set up a _sin_ _are_ **We'll store it and use it on the garden during dry times.**
8. Look online for a b_ _ _e_ _y recycling center.
9. Stay away from _e_ _s_ _ides and _o_ _ic cleaners.
10. _a_ _k more and dr_ _ _ less.
11. Eat less _e_ _t.

FAMILY'S GREEN "TO DO" LIST

| Morning | Afternoon | Evening |
|---------|-----------|---------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

OPENS IN THEATERS ON APRIL 30, 2010.

FURRY VENGEANCE

www.furryvengeance.com

FURRY VENGEANCE

He came. He saw. They conquered.

Dear Parent, Teacher, or Caregiver:

Your child has been learning about the importance of protecting wildlife habitats with the help of the animal characters who star in the hilarious movie *Furry Vengeance*. How much do you know about the wildlife in your neighborhood, state, or on planet Earth? Help your child with the activities in this booklet for a fun learning experience the whole family can enjoy—and be sure to see *Furry Vengeance* when it opens in theaters on April 30, 2010.

ECO-ACTION BOOKLET

REPRODUCIBLE MASTER

ACTIVITY 1 THE WAY I SEE IT

PART A. In the comedy *Furry Vengeance*, Dan Sanders heads up a development project for Lyman Industries that would build housing, golf courses, and a mall by clearing a beautiful temperate forest preserve in Oregon. But the animals living there decide to strike back, and they conspire to turn Dan's life upside down in a hilarious series of misadventures that shows just who has the upper paw.

The character speech bubbles on this sheet show how both the animal and human characters have their own interests at stake. What do you think of these points of view?



This forest is going to be developed one day and it might as well be my company that gets the profit.



Where am I supposed to find nuts and berries if they clear the vegetation? Those humans ruin everything for us animals.



Tons of people can live in the middle of this great forest and enjoy being close to nature. When I'm done, it's back to Chicago.



This is my home, and I'm tired of these humans trying to destroy it. My family needs the rivers, trees, and vegetation to survive.



When we first got here, I'd rather have been using my laptop. Now I know better. Dad's company says it's green, but all I see is g-r-e-e-d.

Figure 2.6: "Eco-Action" materials, designed for home or school use in conjunction with the film's release in theaters, emphasize its green message for families.

Above: Cover pages of the *Furry Vengeance* "Social Action" printable packet (2010), <http://www.takepart.com/furryvengeance>.

Below: Part A of Activity 1: "The Way I See It"

In these movie-related materials, fun quizzes and games have children follow “The Sanders’ Family Green ‘To Do’ List” and plan their own “Daily Eco-Action” for “Livin’ the Green Life,” presumably in suburbia. Activity 1 asks kids to consider respective human and animal “interests” and “points of view.”⁴¹ Motivations for each position are given in thought bubbles next to the characters’ pictures, with critters now able to express in words very relatable human desires. Part B of the exercise asks kids what they think “might happen to the animals in your region if a company were to build a mall or housing in or near their habitat?” Ignored in this prompt is that in many respects they already have. This activity, like many environmental media texts, takes as its starting point the built landscape as we have it, consolidating our position as we are already in it, focusing our eco-intentions and eco-actions on preventing suburbia from proceeding further in its encroachment on nature. The difference is the incorporation of the places where we do already live into the conception of nature—it is no longer strictly “out there,” but rather to be found in and among our otherwise domesticated suburban landscapes.

Following the theme of another *Furry Vengeance* activity, “There’s No Biome Like Home,” the ecosystems and habitats that children are encouraged to explore increasingly turn toward exploration of their own backyards, schoolyards, parks, and neighborhoods, as well as widening their eco-horizons to learn more about regional habitats across the globe. Through the social action materials (if not necessarily through the film itself) children learn to see nature in their everyday lives and spaces, not just in distant forests, but they also learn to see their own precarious place within nature. But places like suburbia were supposed to “reconnect” children to nature, as conveyed even in postwar political analyses with otherwise little focus on children, pressing the point to demonstrate more broadly changing demographics and expectations. As Wood wrote, “A vision of a pastoral scene turns potato fields into mass developments, transforms

sleepy half-rural towns into commuter bedrooms, *gives a whole generation of children a first-hand knowledge of green grass and fresh air*, and changes the family habits of the nation.”⁴² The “closer to nature” rationale for the move to suburbia has been widely justified as what’s best “for the children.”

Even so, critics have questioned what kind of nature is most beneficial to and appropriate for children, a vision of nature that is both stimulating and safe. Suburban development is rarely seen as exhibiting both qualities, even when we consciously plan suburban spaces with nature in mind. Nature is stimulating but dangerous; suburbia is safe but dull. When we bring nature into suburbia we tend toward the latter. As J. Douglas Porteous argues, we currently do not even “plan in a truly child-friendly, ecological way,” since we rarely consider how children tend to use and value space:

Above all, children want to make their own places, to give order and meaning to an environment by modifying it. The important features to children—ponds, brooks, patches of dirt, scrubby wastelands of bushes and trees, tall unmanicured grass—are just those features conspicuously absent in suburbia. Yet suburbia, by all accounts, is chiefly chosen by its adult residents as a good place to bring up children!⁴³

Manicured lawns in parks and yards do not facilitate children’s engagement with outdoor space, only their occupation of it. Dominant trends in mass suburban development and rhetoric is to erase, minimize, or strictly manage those elements that suggest “nature” in untamed forms, cultivating landscapes that we believe are best for the cultivation of children. Yet in failing to make suburbia “natural enough” in itself, or physically close enough to accessible “nature,” problems like “nature deficit disorder” emerge in the discourse. Over time societal fears have shifted from the “lost child in the woods” to sustained worry over the possibility of the “last child in the woods,”⁴⁴ animating efforts to more broadly reconnect daily life for us all with a greener suburban landscape. This reconnection is discursively constructed in images of field and farm as well as forest.

Pastoral Virtue

*The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops,
but the cultivation and perfection of human beings.*

—Masanobu Fukuokka, *The One-Straw Revolution* (1975)

Another way that we are presently trying to find greener suburban solutions for raising healthy, happy families is by looking to a different kind of semi-natural landscape, one that, like forests and wetlands, is also seen as under threat from the encroachment of development—farmland. In 1998, Vice President Al Gore announced an ambitious plan for “smart, green growth” that was particularly concerned with suburban sprawl’s menace to disappearing farmland across the country, though he included descriptors evoking less obviously cultivated regional environments. His critique rested on the argument that “Bad planning has too often distorted our towns and landscapes out of all recognition... From the desert Southwest to the forested Northeast ... thickets of strip development distort the landscape.”⁴⁵ Fragmented suburbia—with its chaotic array of strip malls, cookie-cutter houses, paved streets and parking lots—is a landscape that elicits environmental reaction, while relatively more unspoiled places, like the Western wilds of Ansel Adam’s photographs or Bob the Builder’s beloved Sunflower Valley, provoke much more proactive responses, the desire to protect rather than to condemn.

Pristine views of natural landscapes are often referred to as “paradise,” but of late qualified as either a “paradise lost” or a “paradise threatened” with loss. In such discourses, development is indicted as a causal factor. As Joni Mitchell so memorably expressed in her 1970 hit song, “Big Yellow Taxi,”⁴⁶ we don’t always see it coming—or going. This sentiment resonated with counter-cultural environmental sensibilities of the time, furnishing an anti-suburban anthem for a generation largely raised in suburbia:

*Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone
They paved paradise
And put up a parking lot*

Inspired by overdevelopment Mitchell witnessed on a trip to Hawaii, her lyrics beyond the popular refrain include rural farmland as well as forested hills in her conception of a real “paradise” needing protection from more than just pavement. She wrote “*Hey farmer, farmer, put away that DDT now,*” imploring him to “*Give me spots on my apples but leave me the birds and the bees (please!)*” Farms are not the environmental threat here, but rather the way that land is farmed, the chemical means of producing all those perfect apples for urban and suburban consumption. Channeling Rachel Carson’s bestselling critique of such devastating yet unquestioned agricultural practices in *Silent Spring* (1962), Joni Mitchell’s song is both a lament for what is already gone and a call to action to preserve what little still remains—including native wildlife. Mitchell’s social critique of heavy pesticide use in modern industrial farming suggests that suburbia is not the only kind of “development” at fault, and we need to look more closely at *practices* in rural land use as well as wilderness aesthetics. The “native” inhabitants of the land, “the birds and the bees,” are part of the natural landscape and reason for preservation. This double emphasis is lessened somewhat in a 1973 cover, where Bob Dylan went as far as to replace the “big yellow taxi” with a “big yellow bulldozer” that “took away the house and land.” That substitution asserts the validity of the farm *as is* as part of paradise to be preserved against the tide of development swallowing up and paving over the land.

Edenic references in the framing of both pristine and bucolic landscapes this way call into question the place of human beings in an oxymoronic “wild garden.” A garden is something and someplace that must be tended, managed, and cultivated. As Michael Pollan argues, “nature abhors a garden.”⁴⁷ Yet popular imagination of the biblical story

of Eden conjures a more primal, natural looking space, though one that is nonetheless ordered and productive, self-sustaining even before the creation and after the expulsion of its two most famous residents. No DDT was needed to grow that most infamous apple. We've been searching for this mythical vision of paradise in every undeveloped place we discover, but once found, the cultural pressure to transform our own private Eden into a place more comfortably and familiarly inhabitable to us usually wins over the desire to leave it untouched.⁴⁸ We want to live in the Garden of Eden, to garden in it, not just appreciate it from afar as a pleasant, distant view. Paradise, as THE landscape, it seems cannot exist without a resident observer. That impossibility is acknowledged in our endless, futile attempts to (re)create it, often in suburbia. The Talking Heads offered a response to such visions of a "return" of earth to a natural paradise in their 1988 song "(Nothing But) Flowers," which could very well be read as a response to Mitchell's view of what we've lost and our naïve desire to restore it, giving up "what we've got" now:

*Here we stand
Like an Adam and an Eve
Waterfalls
The Garden of Eden
Two fools in love
So beautiful and strong
The birds in the trees
Are smiling upon them
From the age of the dinosaurs
Cars have run on gasoline
Where have they gone?
Now, it's nothing but flowers
...
If this is paradise
I wish I had a lawnmower*

These lyrics feature a different kind of nostalgia, one for factories, shopping malls, billboards, real estate, highways, parking lots, Pizza Huts and 7-Elevens—the suburban landscape as we best love to deplore it, those places that don't fit into green suburbia.⁴⁹

Contrary opinions notwithstanding, not everyone wants to live in a primitive, pristine landscape, even one as pastorally bountiful as we imagine Eden to have been. Yet within the emerging discourses of green suburbia there is a strand of sustainable thinking and dreaming that both includes and prioritizes farmland, especially organic farmland, as a more appropriate and realizable interpretation of Eden than standard suburbia. This trend in part stems from reaction to seeing firsthand the conversion of expansive farms and ranches into sprawling patches of suburban style tract housing. Observers of new subdivisions being built often joke about “the last harvest,” a “crop” of houses instead of corn or wheat.⁵⁰ One 2005 independent film provides a brief but rare dramatization of the heavy, often uneasy decision preceding such seemingly rapid transformations. The opening scenes of *Sweet Land* depict the grandson of immigrant farmers in rural Minnesota as he faces a dilemma concerning the future of the land his grandfather cleared with “the resolution of a pioneer” back in 1911. During a flashback to his eulogy he is referred to as “a true settler, in the best sense of the word, creating civilization out of the wilderness.” After his grandmother’s death in the present day, the grandson walks outside the solitary farmhouse to meet a professional-looking woman who follows him in the rain across a muddy field, telling him she’s sorry for his loss. This is immediately followed by an offer to pay him \$2.2 million to “put up 1200 homes on this land.” She closes the offer (and this brief scene) with the calm assurance that this is “what his grandparents would want.”⁵¹ The rest of the film shows us otherwise.

In their introduction to *Representing the Rural: Space, Place, and Identity in Films about the Land*, Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield set up a distinction between urban cinema, including its affiliation with modernity and “the bright lights and hectic shifts of the big city,” and a rural cinema that focuses on what they describe as “a less illuminated, slower, more natural scene.” Central to such films is “a relationship between

land and inhabitant,” wherein “the land both sustains and is sustained by the people” in terms of the “physical terrain” as well as “social terrain,” or “its emotive, nostalgic power as an idealized space and community—the land imagined or remembered as a dream.”⁵² Suburban film exhibits its own complicated relationship between land and inhabitant, but one that is most usually disconnected or artificial. When we find the moment of transition from a pastoral or agrarian landscape to a suburban landscape depicted in film, signifiers of “the rural”—both natural and cultural—are in the process of being displaced or erased, rendering the transformed land as “placeless” in its generic, cookie-cutter semi-urbanization. This is now a landscape accommodating individual American dreams, but no longer symbolizing a unified national dream in the same way.⁵³

The conversion of rural land into suburbs is of both local and national concern. Rapid suburbanization of California’s rich Central Valley farmland led to the formation of the first Farmland Conservation Caucus in the U. S. congress, as reported in a 1996 *New York Times* article. Whereas a large percentage of this valley’s produce supplied national markets, fears were expressed about its ability to continue to supply even local food needs if growth trends are not significantly curtailed. A strawberry farmer is quoted in the piece, describing the houses in one development displacing his small operation as “sprouting as fast as mushrooms after rain.” The choice of metaphor is significant, contrasting the intentional land productivity of farming operations with the uncultivated produce of fungi, which, even when edible and non-poisonous, grow out of the rotting remains of prior growth, like decaying tree roots. While an estimated million or more acres of “productive farmland” is developed as suburban housing nationwide, this article noted that the “change is most dramatic in places like Fresno, where signs promising inexpensive houses...draw escapees from the nearly New York-level prices around San Francisco and Los Angeles.”⁵⁴ The economics of land use is an important factor when

contemplating where and how suburbia spreads outward from the city or through a region. While a rural tract may seem inexpensive relative to urban properties, from the perspective of the owners of active farmland, a high one-time sale price may make development seem more economically fruitful than continuing operations in a volatile commodities market. Housing is the last, and in many situations, most lucrative crop.

Even as this type and aspect of suburban sprawl has been making news over the last few decades, this is nowhere near a new phenomenon. Any American town's historical museum will reveal the transition over time through archived photographs of now built up, bustling intersections that once were nothing more than dirt roads running through dirt farms. These often grainy, black and white images telling the story of land use changes over the last century and a half are, for many viewers, just remnants of the past, dislocated from most contemporary experience except as curious visual records or relics of what once was. Viewers of such photographs may not have any personal or genealogical relation to that site's unrecognizable past use or land value, only to the present form and function of these places. The main difference between historical and contemporary contexts of development is that the *process* is being witnessed first hand. The transition, as observed in real time, is more likely to be felt as a loss by those who see it happening near where they live, work, or commute, like local environmentalist Tom in *Milk Money*. Wetland, forest, or farm, their replacement with housing registers as loss in just about every sense of the term—damage, deficit, and defeat—in environmental discourses, but perhaps more so as we see them happening now.

Visual texts like photographs expose and document an unaesthetic transitional border between the rural landscape of the past and the suburban landscape of tomorrow, a conditional state that is usually subsumed as development proceeds apace. [Figure 2.7] It is a scar on the land that is healed as the site is built, landscaped, lived in.



Figure 2.7: *The transition between landscape types is more dramatically visible from the air, where one can see the larger context of suburban development. (below) On occasion, however, we are provided images that clearly show the harshness of these borders between development and environment from a more pedestrian, human-scaled perspective. (above)*

Above: Chris Faust, "The Edge, Eden Prairie, MN" (1990) and "The Edge, Prior Lake, MN" (1994). See more from the *Suburban Documentation Project* at <http://www.chrisfaustphoto.com/collections/suburban.html>.

Below: Alex Maclean, "New Housing Sub-Division and Agricultural Fields, Chandler, AZ," from *Designs on the Land: Exploring America from the Air* (2003), and "Buckeye, AZ," from *Visualizing Density*, with Julie Campoli (2007). See more at <http://www.alexmaclean.com/>.

Even if observers have little or no direct relationship with these local farms, or farms in general, their conversion to tract houses changes the landscape visually, and whether little boxes or bloated McMansions, their presence suggests a much less romantically rural—or natural—local environment. The illusion is broken. One way we are urged to see, imagine and evaluate landscapes is as a whole entity—a forest, a farm, a community. Borders define but also disrupt this tendency, forcing consideration of more than one kind of place in proximity with each other. The difference between how we view the transitional line between forest and farm versus either forest and suburbia, or farm and suburbia, is that suburbia is itself categorized as a “borderland.”⁵⁵ In this respect, it is *the line*. As it extends into either the wilderness or the rural, suburbia’s ever-increasing thickness presents a problem for maintaining this one-dimensional conceptual status as border, becoming a substantial entity unto itself, *a landscape*. Displacing and replacing what was there before, each subdivision’s construction signals a landscape in flux, but in which the outcome is predictable. The process is one-way, forest or farm to suburbia, but each term is not visually appreciated or culturally valued the same. Each prior state is symbolic of a shared, communal view—or dream, while tract houses in the after state represent that view as privatized, divided, dismantled.

However we may like to think of such expansive views of the countryside as “ours,” as part of our imagined cultural identity as attested to by the popularity of Currier and Ives prints, farmland is nevertheless usually privately owned property. Yet the work of one Arizona artist, Matthew Moore, both reasserts and complicates our collective history and culture of farming—our relation to the land—by referencing the transition of his own family’s farm to suburbia. Self-described as the “last of four generations to farm my family’s land” outside of Phoenix, which “will transform into suburbia” in less than five years, the “questionable ecological practices” of contemporary agriculture are also

among his stated concerns in his works, which “display the realities of this transition in order to rationalize and document” his eventual “displacement” from his land and home.⁵⁶ In a profile for *Dwell*, Moore admits that “You can’t really point fingers at the subdivision, unless you look at yourself... Farmers brought water here with canals, and it’s beautiful growing ground—but in terms of sustainability its questionable, especially when you start plopping down 3,000-square-foot homes, within 12 feet of each other.”⁵⁷ “Rotations: Single Family Residence” was the first of Moore’s works in this theme, using “a twenty-acre field of barley as a canvas through which an enlarged floorplan of a common single-family residence home was eliminated by hand.” He documented the four-month project in a 45-minute video to further “examine the futile role of a farmer performing the act of clearing the land for future development.” In 2005-2006, Moore used the officially submitted plan for a 253-unit subdivision as the template for another earthwork in his hometown of Surprise, AZ. “Rotations: Moore Estates,” the pseudo-suburban community planted in sorghum and wheat, lies kitty-corner to the real one, on the first tract of the family farm that his grandfather sold for development. [Figure 2.8]

Farther from home Moore created a variation on the theme with “Rotations: The Craftsman Bungalow.”⁵⁸ Here he planted 70 navel orange trees “in the model of the first Craftsman bungalow floorplan in Pasadena,” which he describes as “the ‘tract’ home of its time,” when a 1920s building boom displaced mass citrus groves in the area. A “faux historical landmark plaque” at the site of this 2004 project includes the following text:

By the late 19th century, Manifest Destiny had transformed the Southwest, and cities like Pasadena stood as models for an urban future. Native lands transitioned to agrarian landscapes, then agricultural productivity became urban efficiency. Citrus density translated into lot density, and tree rows turned into bungalow walls. Today, housing development gives way to retail development. The American Dream is still a dream of yields and profits, where success is measured in terms of production. Like the citrus fields they once replaced, bungalows have become an endangered species worthy of commemoration.



Figure 2.8: *Moore prefigures the development of suburbia, though the houses and neighborhoods eventually displacing the farm are represented by literal crops, either cut away from a field of barley (above) or grown in sorghum and wheat (below).*

Above: Matthew Moore, "Rotations: Single Family Residence" (2004)

Below: Matthew Moore, "Rotations: Moore Estates" (2005-2006)

See more at <http://www.urbanplough.com/work.php>.

This tale of “progress” gives those who stop to read it a series of conceptual “snapshots” of landscapes past and the conditions of change from one to the other. However, the “floorplan” effect may be lost on those just casually walking or driving by this linear arrangement of tiny sticks of trees planted on a sod median. Like many critical views of suburbia, it is ideally viewed—and registered—by air or other elevation. As the trees grow, lushly filling in the space along this boulevard, will passersby even notice the plaque, or take in its message? Will the new mini-citrus grove read as a small-scale re-greening of an overly urbanized suburbia? Planting trees in commemoration of houses that once replaced similar trees, which themselves replaced a more “natural” landscape, reorients the theme of linear progress into a more indirect, circuitous story that calls into question issues of preservation and conservation. Moore’s combined artistic and agricultural practices advance the discourse, catalyzing such questions relating to our own histories and futures of engagement and occupation of any given landscape that may now arise when confronting his work, either in person or through media.

Within our current timeframe of suburban expansion into the rural countryside, we find subdivisions that attempt to limit conversion from farmland to suburbia by both practically and discursively reorienting growth in terms of conservation of agricultural land and activity as well as of more natural landscapes like wetlands. Prairie Crossing, an exurban development in Grayslake, IL connected to Chicago by commuter train and highway, is a “nationally recognized Conservation Community.”⁵⁹ It is one of the most publicized and praised examples of this new green suburban paradigm, a portion of which has even achieved LEED-ND certification. Photographs used in promotional and reporting materials highlight the visual drama of this community as landscape—colorful historic-looking houses set in small clusters amidst the calm waters and waving grasses, further framed by the pastoral view of organic farmland and horse pastures. [Figure 2.9]



Figure 2.9: *The site plan for this community shows the scale of “development” versus “conservation.” (above left) At Prairie Crossing many views of the houses are framed by tall grasses and wetlands, giving the illusion that they are “naturally” emerging from the landscape rather than planned and built in typical suburban fashion. (below) Promotional materials and rhetoric also highlight organic farming as integrated into the community. (above right)*

Above left: Site plan for the LEED: ND Prairie Crossing Conservation Community

Above right: PDF cover of “Building Communities with Farms”

Below: Images of Prairie Crossing published on the web (left: CivilEats.com, right: Prairie Crossing home page)

The farm, however prominent, is not the primary sales point in the discursive construction of Prairie Crossing as green. Described in an “Unsprawl Case Study” as “a community where nature is the backyard and fresh vegetables are grown just down the lane,” this “former farm” site was once going to be developed into a “typical subdivision” of over 1500 single-family homes.⁶⁰ It was “saved” in the 1980s by Gaylord Donnelley, wealthy businessman, conservationist, and owner of the farm next door. As economic investment in development and philanthropic effort to conserve natural and agricultural land, Prairie Crossing is also an intervention in the discourse of green suburbia. Part of the novelty of building, selling and living there is seen in its carefully crafted merger of landscapes, where just enough familiar suburban patterns are present to contextualize its pleasant, scenic views as part of a residential community in the traditional as well as the ecological sense of the term. Even in street bound views of most homes, traditional grass lawns are intermixed with prairie plantings, marking the difference between this and “less natural” subdivisions nearby or nationally. The border between suburbia, farm and nature is effectively erased by their containment within the community, but also by evocation of another landscape type: parkland. The overall effect is of a park-like setting incorporating natural motifs in a highly aestheticized landscape. The artfully arranged houses in Prairie Crossing are situated as if in a sculpture park, a view placing suburban landscapes within a conceptual history and framework outlined by Robert Smithson:

When a finished work of 20th century sculpture is placed in an 18th-century garden, it is absorbed by the ideal representation of the past, thus reinforcing political and social values that are no longer with us. Many parks and gardens are recreations of the lost paradise or Eden, and not the dialectical sites of the present. Parks and gardens are pictorial in their origin—landscapes created with natural materials rather than paint. The scenic ideals that surround even our national parks are carriers of a nostalgia for heavenly bliss and eternal calmness.⁶¹

How we see Prairie Crossing is informed by similar “scenic ideals,” looking for “Eden.”

The kind of park suggested in discursive views of Prairie Crossing is part of its appeal. In *The Future of Life*, Edward O. Wilson discusses habitat, drawing on research in environmental psychology to support the “savanna hypothesis,” that at a critical point and duration in our evolutionary development as a species in Africa our ancestral “home” was mostly open savanna and transitional forest. He argues that, as a result, human beings exhibit a remarkable cross-cultural preference for “savanna or parklike habitats”:

They like a long depth of view across a relatively smooth, grassy ground surface dotted with trees and copses. They want to be near a body of water, whether ocean, lake, river, or stream. They try to place their habitations on a prominence, from which they can safely scan the savanna and watery environment.⁶²

Wilson further acknowledges how this “ideal natural habitat is intuitively understood by landscape architects and real-estate entrepreneurs,” who work within a culture that supports higher property values for landscapes that satisfy the above desires. Jeremy Lundholm confirms that “the open lawns and scattered trees of suburbia” common since the fifties in North America appear to conform to the suburban savanna hypothesis.⁶³ The more “natural” design and visual effect of recent conservation communities like Prairie Crossing make those expanses of mowed Kentucky blue grass seem like poor imitations of “the real thing.” In every image of golden grasslands meeting blue-green waters, easily surveyed and accessed from the security of your own comfortable home, the pitch is to sell houses in this development, but also the very idea of this kind of development as more connected to nature, a landscape that supposedly speaks to our pre-historical connection to nature as a species—a vision of Eden *made real*.

Certain kinds of farms as incorporated into suburban plans and rhetoric also offer this kind of pleasing facsimile of a natural park or wetland, with “amber waves of grain” evoking expanses of tall prairie grasses or shoreline reeds in their marketing imagery. Commitment to organic farming practices make these landscapes even more family-

friendly for suburban locations since they avoid the worst of petrochemical fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Yet the farm-as-suburb, or *agriburbia*,⁶⁴ is still a relative newcomer to the market of hybrid suburban landscapes. While in no way replacing the appeal to some consumers of living “on the green” in popular golf course-centered suburbs, places like Prairie Crossing and more dedicated agriburbs offer a means of just “living green” through incorporation of onsite organic agriculture and conservation of wetlands that covered most of the land before it was “developed” for agriculture.⁶⁵ This model could be described as the new suburban “triple play,” merging—and further domesticating—three distinct landscape ideals: subdivision, farm, and native pre-development condition of any given area (or biome), be it prairie, forest, wetland, desert.

The bright blue of “Lake Aldo Leopold” lies at the heart of the “community” of Prairie Crossing, literally and figuratively, with views from the few wide avenues and communal spaces designed to draw your gaze toward the water, center of sociological and ecological life. The dominant color on the community’s site map is literally green, meant to convey just how much of the property as a whole remains “natural” and “open.” One common feature of this (and other) types of recursive green development and discourse is this focus on usable “open space,” most commonly referred to as “green spaces” for the assumption that they will not be paved parking lots, flooded lakebeds, or plowed farm fields.⁶⁶ [Figure 2.9] James Howard Kunstler addresses the assumption that “nature is the antidote for problems of bad urbanism,” and, we might extend the argument to include “bad suburbanism,” which Prairie Crossing makes the claim to have remediated in its plan and rhetoric. He takes issue at one point with overuse of the terms “open space” and “green space” because they are “too abstract to be meaningful.” To illustrate, Kunstler compares “a farm and a neighborhood square” as examples of both open and green spaces, but nonetheless green spaces that “differ hugely in

function, character, and ownership relations with society.” His advice is for more specific word usages, such as “farms” or “wetlands” when the desire is to preserve rural or agricultural land, or employing the “vocabulary of urban design” regarding “the human habitat” of parks, plazas, ball fields, bike trails, etc. “If you ask for an abstraction (green space),” he claims, “it will be delivered as an abstraction (grassy berm).”⁶⁷ We indeed find this kind of meaningless—and useless—amenity in many newer suburban tracts, including those claiming to be “green” in more than just the “grassy” sense. “Green” needs to be seen as “good” for something.

Green developers and marketers regularly tap into this cultural desire for both landscapes and lifestyles to be “good,” a quality often illustrated by how natural it looks, but also by how historical it feels. The particular appeal of a “farm” as “green space” in the human/ecological suburban context is also one that services traditional family ideologies rooted in nostalgia for an idealized agrarian past, and the “family values” of land stewardship they connote. As the centerpiece for this kind of family-friendly and eco-friendly suburban justification, the “choice” of agriculture is more complicated in terms of landscape practice and property relations than its mythology may immediately indicate. In Solano County, California, architects Brendan Kelly and Amie MacPhee “created a plan for a clustered rural community that marries innovation with deeply rooted farming patterns,” but they claim the real innovation comes from retrofitting “not buildings” on their own, “but the typical pattern of development.” Undertaking the project independent of the usual bank-bound corporate developers, the 400-home “village” sits at the center of a combination of land use dedicated to our trifecta of agriculture, open parkland, and preserved natural habitat. As concerns the aspect of the community receiving the most notoriety, Kelly says that agriculture “is an amenity,” but “You can’t just wish for it, you have to support it.”⁶⁸ The question is supported how, and by whom?

A perceived benefit to people wanting to live on or near a farm is often framed in terms of the virtue of agricultural landscapes for their children. Better than school field trips to petting zoos or county fair displays, agriburbia promises a daily connection to more “natural” ways of life, defined as such by “closeness” to the rhythms and routines of the farm, of the land, of life. This is a theme further popularized through children’s farm-related toys, stories, and visual media. Yet despite their proximity to farmland, most agriburban developments cultivate a subtle but significant separation between residential and agricultural activity. They are designed to go on indefinitely side-by-side (unlike the Moore family farm, and countless others in danger of being replaced by subdivisions), but their connection could be characterized more as one of association than cooperation. As described on the website for Bundoran Farm, an agriburb outside of Charlottesville, Virginia, their brand of “preservation development” uses “limited residential development to preserve the character and use of rural landscapes in perpetuity.” Citing an equal emphasis on farming, environmental, and development concerns in their rhetoric, the goal is for a small number of lucky families to be “attracted to living in harmony with productive land,” creating “a community committed to the active application of environmentally responsible principles.” The stated promise is that “these families will not see themselves only as homeowners, but as stewards of the land.”⁶⁹

The level of active agricultural practice varies from green suburban resident (minimally at Prairie Crossing) to green suburban resident (more so at Bundoran Farm), yet the idea of “agricultural suburbs” as presented in marketing media remains appealing to families who want something different, something *green*.

Agriburban communities are promoted as affording a life more connected to a wholesome or natural environment—the farm—without having to actually labor on it. Why “farm” if one can conveniently “purchase” local, organic produce at the farmer’s

market down the street? The notion of suburban self-sufficiency is often presented as at odds with ideals of community participation and interdependence. Yet the location and “nature” of suburbia as a landscape *in between* becomes a point of contention for those who desire one, the other, or both. Where one engages with nature and agriculture (suburban or rural locales) is as important a consideration as how (organic or not), or to what extent (all or only some of us). Suburbia, as a land of compromise between rural sensibilities and urban practicalities, is rarely viewed as such in the popular imagination. It is at times (though less frequently today) seen through the lens of antiquated country life, although sanitized in ways that delimit or ignore the intensive labor and sensory experiences (like smells and sounds) of traditional agricultural activities and landscapes.

In popular depictions, suburban life is rather usually tainted by its associations—geographically, culturally, etc.—with city life, seen predominantly as private retreats, the “bedroom communities” in a domestic metaphor that connotes “the city” as the more public space “of the home.” The purely aesthetic, leisurely gardens of this conception of suburbia, whether lawns, ornamental flowerbeds or a few vegetables grown to supplement the family’s food stores, are not farms. It is this postwar vision of mass middle-class suburbanization—where relation to “the land” is seen only in terms of cutting grass, pruning roses, harvesting tomatoes—that inspired its rejection by many of suburbia’s grown children as they searched for something they felt to be more authentic, more natural. There is a transitional phase of thinking between early back-to-the-landers and their more contemporary revivalists, the first largely having “hopes” that “revolved around the ‘halfway back to the land’ option of the suburbs,” while by the seventies

...the suburbs seemed to offer nothing that was good: they were associated not only with traffic jams and strip malls but with mindless consumerism and a soul-destroying culture of conformity—everything new back-to-the-landers longed to escape. Now, they hoped to reconnect with the natural world far beyond the boundaries of suburbia.⁷⁰

This new generation, despite their rejection of suburban roots and influences, did nonetheless fuel decades of suburban leapfrogging to exurbia, moves made possible by economic and public policy factors, but also culturally desired for their expected “rural” settings and sensibilities. Old-fashioned farms may have been retreating, but their visual icons and motifs in a new, green suburban landscape were nonetheless gaining ground.

One of the more recently ascendant examples of this discursive trend in the Twin Cities’ market is the appropriately named “Spirit of Brandtjen Farm.” Once an actual working farm, much like that depicted in the out-state fictional example of *Sweet Land*, this site has been redeveloped as a “unique suburb” featuring the architectural ghost of the land’s former utility, before its residential redesign. [Figure 2.10] The official website “welcomes” visitors to a “groundbreaking new master-planned community of homes, neighborhoods and *nature*,” an interesting choice of words, since “groundbreaking” is usually used in connection with development and, therefore, connoting something quite different than preservation of the romantic rural past.⁷¹ Bob Shaw, reporter for St. Paul’s *Pioneer Press*, published a series of articles chronicling the long stages of planning, construction, and marketing of this subdivision, including its “green” ambitions in a real estate environment boasting few eco-sensitive community-wide projects. Starting with the “Last Harvest to Herald Unique Suburb,”⁷² then to “A Developer vs. Red Tape,”⁷³ and “Revising a Vision,”⁷⁴ to, finally, “The Hard Sell: Brandtjen Farms Tests Marketers,”⁷⁵ the process of a new green development is made visible to readers who might otherwise just see the refurbished historic barn and think they “know” what this place is all about. Later articles in local press outlets humanize that process by telling more personal stories about the people who choose to move here, and why they do so. Green goals are not always central to those stated rationales and dreams of a “country home” in suburbia.⁷⁶

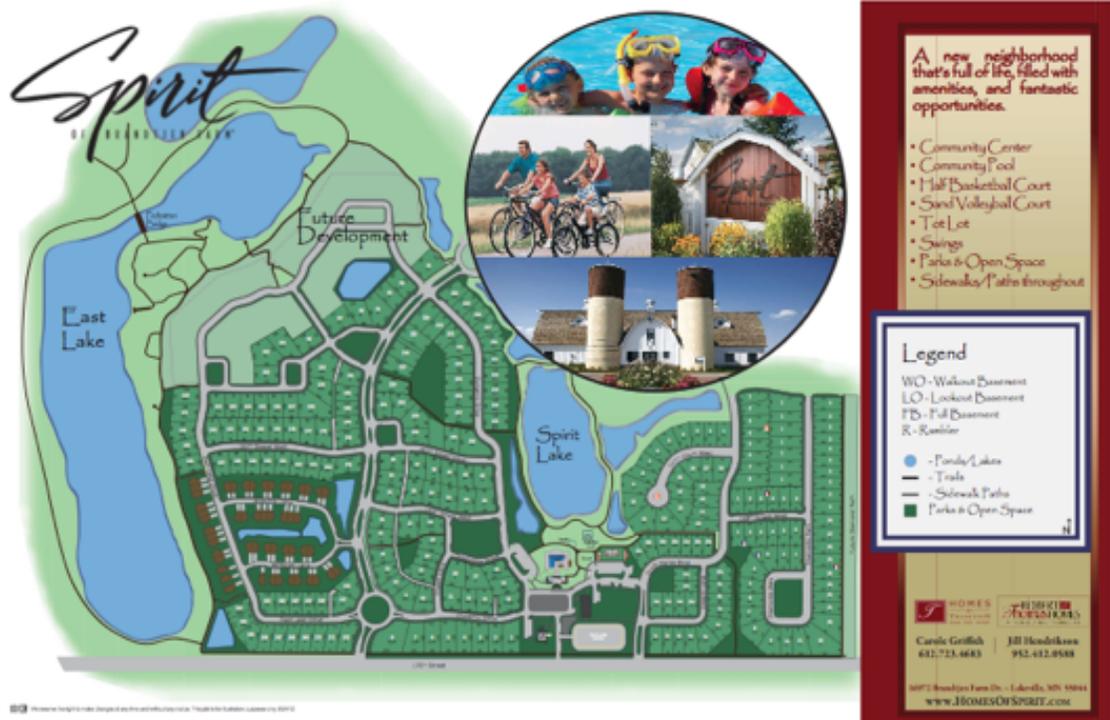


Figure 2.10: Compared to *Prairie Crossing*, little “land” is left “undeveloped,” either as farm or as natural habitat/wetland. The names of the waters, “Last Lake” and “Spirit Lake,” speak as much to the conversion of this receding natural landscape into residential suburbia as does the site plan. The barn is used as a central focal point for this Minnesota community—a historical symbol of a working landscape (below left) vs. a marketing feature referencing an aesthetically pleasing landscape but no longer functional in the “agricultural” ways advertised by that barn. (below right)

Above: Spirit of Brandtjen Farms site map, <http://www.homesofspirit.com/SiteMap.pdf>.
Below: Photographs of the original and rebuilt “barns,” on the Tradition Development “Mission Statement” webpage, <http://traditiondevelopment.com/mission.asp>.

Other suburban developments, like Stonemill Farms in Woodbury, Minnesota built by Newland Communities, are “farms” in name only, but boast barn-like buildings. Claiming to offer a place “Where the environment and your family can grow together,” its support of this is limited to brief statements under the webpage heading “Green Living,” asserting that the community “. . .was built with families in mind. This not only includes your immediate family, but our global family as well. Notwithstanding, Stonemill Farms was designed to minimize impact on the environment.”⁷⁷ More short blurbs under the subheadings of “Walk,” “Plant,” “Conserve,” “Reduce,” and “Research” frame this residential family choice in terms of ecological activity. Yet the visual and rhetorical façade of “green” fronting communities like this remains insubstantial, as casual perusal of their marketing materials suggests, and the occasional online rant makes explicit.⁷⁸

While such developments are rhetorically positioned as responding to and belonging in particular regional environments, they largely conform to generic plans implemented nationwide, just as postwar cookie-cutter suburbia once did. As they begin to modestly proliferate in local markets, their uniform marketing pitches always present them as being something brand new. The Preserve, a Spanos Co. project outside of Stockton, California, offers potential residents “A new community. A new way to live.”⁷⁹ Reporting on this greenfield development, whose familiar stated goals are to preserve agricultural lands and native habitat (but also include the endangered amenity of high-paying jobs⁸⁰), one blogger describes the conundrum of such community developments: “It’s sprawl, but its green. It’s green sprawl.”⁸¹ Speaking of the agriburban Platte River Village project in Milliken, Colorado,⁸² another blogger suggests that “What’s curious about this development is that it’s a prime example of an increasing sensibility that treats sustainability as merely a salve for our environmental guilt, as opposed to a practical way to solve a big problem.” He adds: “sustainability is not attained through a feeling.”⁸³

Though “feelings” about the environment, as about suburbia, are the basis of how we make many “rational” decisions about where and how to live. The combination of pleasing landscapes and reassuring rhetoric make us “feel good” about those choices, perhaps even “better” than we would about other, more conventional and less green suburban options. Marketing for developments designed using the principles of New Urbanism demonstrate this as much through their appeal to an older, simpler way of life as their more practical considerations, like ease of transportation and stable property values. These places “feel” like they should be able to deliver on their brand of pre-modern nostalgia, thanks in part to the successful circulation of such ideals in the wider discourse. Allan C. Carlson notes “The new agrarianism is also in harmony with the new urbanism,” which he describes as “a sort of populist rebellion against the drabness and sterile designs of suburbia.” As seen in journalistic coverage and real estate success of Prairie Crossing, “New urbanists...wax enthusiastic over the preservation of family farms in close proximity to nonfarming households.” These communities nurture the ideal of simpler, more natural country life without the insecurity or inconvenience of farming as a primary livelihood.⁸⁴ This way of thinking about and imagining a newer, greener type of suburban landscape is consistent with certain strains of representing suburbia in visual media, especially in the postwar period where we saw families like the Ricardos grow tulips and raise chickens after their move to “the country” on *I Love Lucy* in 1957.

The idea of limited agriculture as a means for reconnecting individuals and families to nature is not new, even to suburbia, where new communities cohabitate for some time with the farms they are displacing, but its formal incorporation into green-themed master-planned agriburban subdivisions is. This trend is not synonymous with the “new agrarianism,” though they share many points of interest and appeal as places for and ways of living closer to “the land.” While they each may benefit from feelings of

sustainability and sustenance that they provoke, they also at times suffer because of them in terms of assumptions of superficiality or inauthenticity prevalent in the discourse. In his introduction to a volume on the late twentieth century revival of agrarianism, Eric Freyfogle argues that it is “very much a living as well as lived tradition,” contrary to reporting that too narrowly tends “toward the fragmentary and the narrative, covering bits and pieces, less often analyzing or proceeding by dialectic than illustrating and evoking.” He notes one popular though “patronizing” representation of agrarianism in contemporary culture as “nothing more than a Currier and Ives-style retreat from the stringencies of modernity.”⁸⁵ Such views ignore what Freyfogle describes as a more richly nuanced commitment to the land as “an organic whole” by modern proponents. And “in the agrarian mind,” he further asserts, “the health of humans is dependent in the long run on the well-being of the larger land community.”⁸⁶ Though he later counters the “stock pastoral tale” in which the fictional hero escapes from a corrupted city, “fleeing “to a pristine, wholesome wild, there to begin life in a new Eden,” with the reality of anything but paradise. Rather it is a “battle-weary land” that commonly greets the agrarian pilgrim today, a land marred by eroded hills, polluted rivers, and biologically impoverished forests.”⁸⁷ In this discursive move, the authors of such accounts—as well as Freyfogle who introduces them here—present a reversal of intention, a turn of primary direction in this traditionally conceived reciprocity that marks the movement’s revival. It becomes as much about what humans can offer the land, i.e. nature, in terms of sustenance, connection, and healing, as it is about what it can offer us in those very same terms.

Yet how we see—and choose—a landscape to live in is usually a matter of thinking about what it offers us, and therefore what it makes of us. We are where we live. Such cultural assumptions, and their respective qualities and inferiorities, are detailed in “Living in America,” a poster series by Rachel Yoo Digerness. [Figure 2.11]

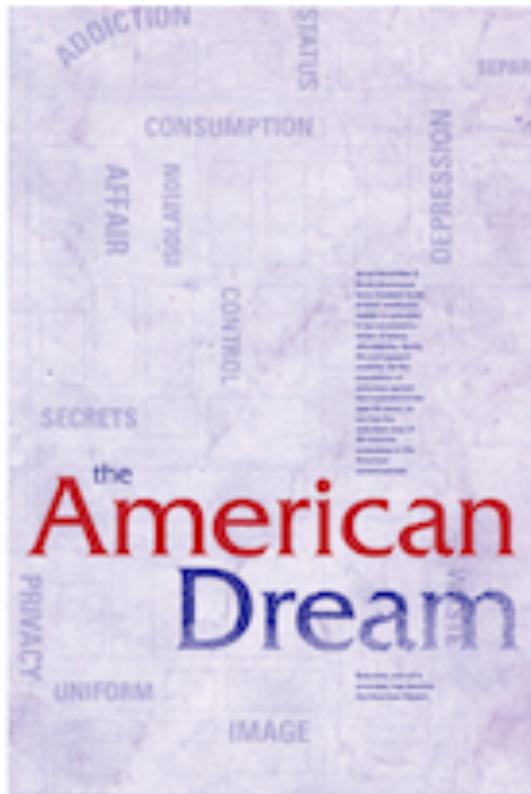


Figure 2.11: *Our choices for living are threefold, two framed in positive qualities and values (one is "green"), while the suburban option is understood as all negative.*

Rachel Yoo Digerness, "Living in America" poster series, <http://www.yoandme.us/portfolio/living-in-america/>.

Described as a project “highlighting stereotypes of American living environments: urban, suburban, and rural,”⁸⁸ text in each panel relates to what are understood to be separate, unique choices of landscape type and their socio-cultural relations. Within the sparse agricultural grid of the rural “green” poster, “the SMPL LIFE” includes the key words of “sustainability, organic, environment, family, and cooperative,” terms relatable to values expressed in the new agrarianism movement. Meanwhile, “the BIG CITY” is defined by “convenience, opportunity, diversity, influence, arts, mobility, and culture,” all finely printed in white lettering on a black urban grid and signifying a much different though nonetheless desirable choice. On the patriotic but faded red, white and blue suburban grid, “the American Dream” is evoked through pathological words like “addiction, status, consumption, affair, isolation, depression, control, secrets, privacy, uniform, image.” Seen together, the individual arguments of each poster are brought into more direct conversation, setting up and defining terms of comparative analysis that might not otherwise be apparent when considering each landscape—and culturescape— independent of the others.

The series omits pristine wilderness as a choice, a place we are not generally allowed to build and live in, only visit and dream of. Like many common, limited visions of suburbia, the series also precludes imagining landscapes that are hybrids of all three typologies. Yet it is precisely in these complex recombinations, in modern, inventive reconfigurations of *rus in urbe*, that the possibility of “green suburbia” is currently being experimented with and proposed to families across the country (and globe) as viable, desirable, sustainable solutions to our collective environmental woes. Conveniently imagined and designed as places not demanding total commitment to an older, agrarian kind of “green” lifestyle, green suburbs are also increasingly conceived as places friendly to diverse cultural interests and identities, as well as supportive of a variety of economic

opportunities, qualities traditionally considered the domain of cities. Paul H. Mattingly notes how “landscape” is a term that “fits the suburban experience particularly well,” since it is a “sufficiently elastic notion” that “can contain both country and city features as well as city and suburban values.”⁸⁹ “Green suburbia” is discursively constructed as a new version of this kind of landscape, blending—but also reworking—the “best of both worlds,” responding to our search for a home, a community, a relationship to the land that matches contemporary values and satisfies both current and future needs.

The challenge is moving beyond pretty pictures and good feelings toward a greener *lived landscape*, from discourse to practice. Yet much of the prevailing green suburban discourse, especially critical discourse, emerges from a history of building practice, wherein little or no attention was paid to environmental costs and effects. Popular media often responds in concert with the critics, attempting to visualize the issue from these same perspectives, and sometimes even trying to show ways of repairing or remediating both social and ecological damage. Just as often, though, popular media aligns with and reinforces consumer dreams that fuel further development, constructing visions of green suburbia that are virtually indistinguishable from marketing materials selling us a better life, a greener future. In most cases, suburbia is nevertheless formulated and represented *as landscape*, and as such, whether the discourse is critical or aspirational, the possibility of green suburbia is constructed through the employment and revision of visual rhetorical by which we make connections with a history of art, narrative, and critique in the process of ourselves fashioning an image of home and community that is as “good” for us as it is for the environment.

Notes for Chapter 2:

- ¹ This move was popularized on the most watched TV show of the time, *I Love Lucy*, where we learn that “Lucy Wants to Move to the Country,” (January 28, 1957).
- ² Robert C. Wood, “The Impotent Suburban Vote,” *Nation* 190:13 (March 26, 1960), 271.
- ³ Neil Gaiman, *American Gods* (New York: Harpertorch, 2001), 72.
- ⁴ J. Douglas Porteous, *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 4. Porteous goes on to argue that vision, while both the “common” and the “intellectual” sense through which we primarily know the world around us, also “distances us from the landscape” wherein it is relatively “easy to be disengaged” compared to other “sensory modes” like touch or smell.
- ⁵ See, for example, Robert Turnage’s essay, “Ansel Adams: The Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement,” tracing Adams’ conservationist interests and efforts throughout his life. Originally published in *The Living Wilderness* (March 1980), republished on *The Ansel Adams Gallery* website, last accessed January 14, 2013, <http://www.anseladams.com/ansel-adams-the-role-of-the-artist-in-the-environmental-movement/>.
- ⁶ In an introduction to the Hudson River School for PBS, Thomas Hampson covers many of the most prominent figures associated with the genre. He ends with a brief examination of “Kindred Spirits” by Asher B. Durand, which includes the figures of himself and Hudson River School founder Thomas Cole “on a rocky promontory in serene contemplation of the scene before them.” Hampson notes that “Tiny as the human beings are in this composition, they are nevertheless elevated by the grandeur of the landscape in which they are in harmony. As Cole and Durand firmly believed, if the American landscape was a new Garden of Eden, then it was they, as artists, who kept the keys of entry.” *Profiles: Artists, Movements, Ideas*, last accessed January 14, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/icon/hudson.html>. The environmental and philosophical legacies of this art movement are explicitly outlined in a “ready-made” essay provided for teachers about “the shifts in perception that transformed nature from wilderness to ecosystem,” Max Oelschlaeger’s “The Roots of Preservation: Emerson, Thoreau, and the Hudson River School,” *Nature Transformed: The Environment in American History*, TeacherServe©, National Humanities Center, last accessed January 14, 2013, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nattrans/ntwilderness/essays/preserva.htm>.
- ⁷ There are many notable exceptions, including within the canon of work most associated with pristine wilderness scenes, like the Durand painting above and the famous 1941 Ansel Adams “Moonrise” photograph that includes a small settlement in Hernandez, NM. Chris Cook provides an interesting contrast to the original in his daytime photograph of the same site, from a similar prospective in 2005, seen at <http://www.abmedia.com/astro/newmexico/adams-moonrise-site.html>. In some of Adams’ lesser-known work, he actually did engage urban and suburban landscape forms, as in his 1967 Los Angeles image, “Freeway Interchange,” which was featured on the cover of the 2010 edition of *Unseen Ansel Adams* (Thunder Bay Press). A much more contemporary and loosely defined “Environmental Art” movement that seeks to “improve our relationship with the natural world” depends upon people being present to witness the art on location, asking us to view the art and the environment contextually, in site-specific, at times ephemeral earth works and installations. What can be seen by those not physically present at such sites at prescribed, limited times are photographs and videos that frame the visual art experience for us, and provide publishable and exhibitable art texts for critical and general consumption. For more on Environmental Art, see the *Green Museum* online: <http://greenmuseum.org/>.
- ⁸ Jennifer McAuley, “Landscapes of Suburbia” (2007-2010), last accessed February 20, 2011, <http://www.jennifermcauley.com/LoSuburbia.html>.
- ⁹ Jennifer McAuley, “Distant City,” last accessed January 12, 2013, <http://www.jennifermcauley.com/DistantCity.html>. See also John Gossage’s images from *The Pond*. Taken in the early 1980s “around and away from a pond situated in an unkempt wooded

area at the edge of a city,” they do not focus on the traditionally conceived “beauty” of landscape art, but rather “reveal a subtle vision of reality on the border between man and nature.” Gerry Badger, Toby Jurovics, and John Gossage, *John Gossage: The Pond*, 2nd ed. (New York: Aperture, 2010).

¹⁰ Emma Marris, *Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature in a Post-Wild World*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 135. Throughout this chapter, “Conservation Everywhere,” she highlights many strategies relevant to suburban landscapes for “adding lands to our portfolio and deepening value of the lands in play,” including those that are actionable on an individual rather than municipal, regional or national scale. One example is *reconciliation ecology*, which is described as “the science of inventing, establishing and maintaining new habitats to conserve species diversity in places where people live, work or play.” (145) For more on this concept, see Michael Rosenzweig, *Win-win Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Marris, *Rambunctious Garden*, 151.

¹² Robert Zacks, *An Underground Education* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1999), 20.

¹³ On the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation page on the history of “Thoreau at Walden Pond” (<http://www.mass.gov/dcr/parks/walden/thoreau2.htm>), they include the following contextualization of what this landscape was like at the time: “Much of Concord had long since been cleared for agriculture by the time Thoreau was growing up there, but because the area around Walden Pond was too sandy for good farming, it had remained forested into the 1830s. A year before Thoreau moved to the woods, the Fitchburg Railroad reached Concord, running along the south side of Walden Pond. In the next decade, the wood-fired trains would create a demand for fuel that would leave even this part of Concord nearly stripped of trees. When Thoreau took up residence at the pond in 1845, much of the pond’s shoreline was bare. Yet he could still boast: ‘I have my horizon bounded by woods all to myself.’” Despite suburban development all around, satellite views of Walden Pond today show how heavily wooded the “park” area is due to reforestation efforts that, it could be argued, follow the vision *created by* Thoreau’s popular account rather than preserving or replicating the pondscape *as it was* in Thoreau’s time. Even the fish in said pond, whose meager and declining population was acknowledged by Thoreau himself, are now plentiful thanks to restocking. When one sees Walden today its physical landscape is more the product of our imagination of “nature”—fueled by Thoreau’s equally imaginative writing—than of a straight-forward preservation of “natural” land over time.

¹⁴ Steve Palay, “Thoreau’s View Tame for Today,” October 19, 1989, last accessed February 11, 2013, <http://www.simplysharing.com/thoreau.htm>.

¹⁵ Wen Stephenson, “Walking Home From Walden,” *Slate*, June 21, 2011, last accessed February 11, 2013, <http://www.slate.com/id/2296390/>.

¹⁶ Stephenson, “What’s a Suburban American To Do?,” last accessed February 11, 2013, <http://www.slate.com/id/2296390/entry/2296383/>.

¹⁷ Edward Glaeser, “The Greenness of Cities,” *The New York Sun*, January 30, 2007. In a similar opinion piece, Professor Glaeser recounts that 1844 spring day when Thoreau, “the patron saint of American environmentalism,” took a walk in the woods and accidentally set fire to 300 acres of forest near the Concord River. He uses the incident to advance his pro-urbanism/anti-suburbanism argument: “if you want to be good to the environment, stay away from it.” “Green Cities, Brown Suburbs,” *City Journal* 19:1 (Winter 2009). While a well-established critic of suburbia *and* suburbanites’ desire to live closer to nature, Glaeser admits that he and his family “did what millions of Americans do throughout the country,” they “chose a suburb” for their own home. As for his “choice,” he blames public policy factors like the “home interest deduction, highway infrastructure and local school systems” that “drive” or *push* him and others out of the cities and to the suburbs, rather than what factors—like nature—*pull* them in these directions. “Downtown: The Lights Are Much Brighter There,” *Radio Boston*, February 21, 2011, last accessed February 15, 2013, <http://radioboston.wbur.org/2011/02/21/triump-of-the-city>.

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- ¹⁸ Roger Ebert, "Milk Money," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 31, 1994.
- ¹⁹ James Berardinelli, "Milk Money," *Reel Views* (1994), http://www.reelviews.net/movies/m/milk_money.html.
- ²⁰ Ann Forsyth, *Constructing Suburbs: Competing Voices in a Debate Over Urban Growth* (Amsterdam: Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1999), 54. This study is focused on the development of Rouse Hill in suburban Sydney, Australia. In addition to "local environmentalists," she defines four other groups as each have interests in relation to that development: "scientific environmentalists," "expansionists," "developers," and "consolidationalists." "Scientific environmentalists" consist largely of environmental professionals and bureaucrats whose wider view was arguably more distanced from the particular locale in question, while the "local" focus is grounded in their personal experiences and identities as landowners in a suburban setting, but one described here as "semi-rural."
- ²¹ *Green with a Vengeance*, (2001; Journeyman Pictures), <http://www.journeyman.tv/10226/documentaries/green-with-a-vengeance.html>.
- ²² Jason Buchanan, *Rovi*, 2008, <http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/unforeseen/>. Earlier in the review Gary Bradley, the "aspiring real-estate tycoon," is introduced as someone "recognizing the remarkable potential for both growth and financial profit in such a rapidly expanding boomtown," and setting "his own American dream into motion by turning a 4,000-acre ranch into the biggest and fastest-selling subdivision in the entire state of Texas." In another review the location is described as "pristine hill country" rather than a "ranch." Whether characterized as wilderness or rural, the land itself is not the main aspect of the natural landscape endangered by this project. At stake is Barton Springs, a swimming hole and natural habitat cherished by locals-turned-environmentalists, newly engaged in these issues on the levels of both local and state politics. While outmatched by such celebrity activists as Robert Redford and Willy Nelson who are extensively interviewed for the film, Bradley is also given a fair amount of screen time to retrospectively explain his position and his ambition, rather than presented as a caricature. He may not be entirely sympathetic to the target audience for this environmental message film, but he and his version of the dream are at the very least rendered understandable.
- ²³ Other high-profile films with environmental themes by Participant Media include the fictional feature *Promised Land* (2012) and Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). For more titles, see <http://www.participantmedia.com/pm-films/>. The company also states that *Furry Vengeance* was more than a "green-themed" movie, but also a "carbon-neutral" production thanks to the services of the non-profit Film and Entertainment Recycling Initiative (FaERI).
- ²⁴ In *Pom Poko*, an animated feature based on Japanese folklore directed by Isao Takahata for Studio Ghibli (1994), both farm and forest are under assault. The first is depicted as a landscape where humans and nature live in a state of relatively peaceful compromise, but the latter is where nature truly reigns absent of human habitation. One scene in the film offers a particularly critical though distanced view of a forested mountain being scraped away by oversized bulldozers, transformed before our eyes into one dense suburban tract development.
- ²⁵ Participant Media, "Designing Rocky Springs," last accessed January 11, 2013, http://www.participantmedia.com/press/press_kit/furry_vengeance.php. The house used as the set was an actual model home for a new development in Topsfield, Massachusetts called Hickory Beech. Planned as a small, exclusive, wooded subdivision of 24 custom Arts & Crafts style single-family homes between 3,500 and 6,000 square feet, houses are set on 1 acre lots and listed at \$1.3-\$2 million. The "real" builder, Gillis Homes, does not specifically call out their homes or even their company as "green," nor do we see anything in or of the house on film that denotes "greenness." Gillis Homes does, however, feature an environmentally relevant quote by John Ruskin on its website to anchor its business philosophy: "When we build let us think that we 'build forever.' Let it not be for present delight nor present use alone. Let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for." See: <http://www.gillishomes.com/index.swf>. Director of Ruskin's home museum, Howard Hull, argued that for Ruskin, "man working in nature isn't just a Romantic idea of pleasantness and prettiness: it is deeply, profoundly about the possibility

that you can make a better world.” James Wouldhuysen, “Nothing Romantic about Environmentalists: The great nineteenth-century poets waxed lyrical about nature, but they still believed in humanity—unlike today’s eco-pessimists,” *Spike*, July 16, 2008, last accessed November 2, 2011, <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/5471/>. While it may not be clear that anyone’s “descendents” will be grateful for this 6,000 square foot home, it had yet to sell almost a year after filming wrapped, even after significant drops in price and a local media spotlight. Taryn Plumb, “Furry Sale: Topsfield house seen in film all yours for \$1.5m,” *Boston Globe*, May 16, 2010, last accessed December 5, 2010, http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2010/05/16/topsfield_house_used_in_furry_vengeance_on_sale_for_15m/?page=1.

²⁶ Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary* (1911), originally published as *The Cynic’s Word Book* in 1906. The entire book is available online through Project Gutenberg: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/972/972-h/972-h.htm>.

²⁷ Themes of vengeance appear in a variety of eco-messaged media texts, but not all of them rely on the usual furry suspects to act on Nature’s behalf. In “Bugs,” a 2005 episode of the CW’s *Supernatural*, insects attack construction workers and homeowners in addition to the developer and real estate agent in a new development being built on ground sacred to Native Americans, stereotypically depicted as one of the few human representatives “of nature” in the popular imagination. Suburbia is positioned as both non-natural and non-native in this reframing of the concept of trespassing from Nature’s point of view. An even more pseudo-spiritual scenario is found in M. Night Shyamalan’s 2008 feature film, *The Happening*, where trees mysteriously attack humanity on the biochemical level, inducing both murderous and suicidal tendencies. The message is brought home for viewers as characters flee past a billboard nestled among the trees along a highway, announcing a new housing development with the tagline “You deserve this!”²⁷ This environmentally charged double entendre speaks to our desires for as well as our fears of continued development of the natural world—we proceed at our own risk.

²⁸ The example of ELF’s action in the eco-arson of the Seattle Street of Dreams site is discussed in this context in the conclusion.

²⁹ Curtis White, “The Ecology of Work.” *Orion* (May/June 2007), last accessed June 7, 2010, <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/267/>.

³⁰ In both *Fern Gully: The Last Rainforest* (1992) and *Avatar* (2009), the forest/trees are figured as magical and/or alien, bigger, brighter, and stranger than the terrestrially “common” kinds of forest that we might actually contemplate living in or near.

³¹ As in the Village of Forest Park, Illinois, whose motto is “Big City Access, Small Town Charm” (incorporated 1907), or iconic postwar Park Forest, Illinois, sold today as a place where one can “Live Grow Discover” (1946), as well as Houston’s premiere home sites in “The Woodlands” (1974), and promotions for master-plan developer of Stapleton, Colorado, “Forest City,” (1998).

³² “When Nature Intrudes,” *New York Times* (September 23, 2007), 017. Yet who is really “drawing nearer” to whom? After a brief listing of some of nature’s representatives—geese, deer, coyotes, bears, etc.—seen as encroaching into “human habitations” and perceived at best as annoyances or at worst as dangers, the author ends with a hopeful proposition. These close encounters, through picture windows in the yard or car windows on the drive home, might in fact be “a gift” that “brings the opportunity to question your own place in that world, and to ponder the realization that while untamed nature is not nearly as natural as it used to be, it is still—blessedly—untamed, and thus to be treated with humility and respect.”

³³ Cartoonists have similarly explored the displacement of wildlife as suburbia reaches further into the countryside, as in a 2001 *Off the Mark* cartoon by Mark Parisi, which shows the critters from Walt Disney’s animated version of A. A. Milne’s *Winnie the Pooh* stuck in a “Hundredth of an Acre Wood” between suburban houses and cars in “Suburban Sprawl: Worst Case Scenario.” Another cartoonist, the *Cincinnati Enquirer’s* Jim Borgman, also imagined wildlife’s return after financial collapse hollows out exurbia, depicting broken gates and windows where the

“Abandoned McMansions in Wetherington have become the domain of winos and wildlife” after the housing crisis of the Great Recession.

- ³⁴ Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins, *Celebration, U.S.A.: Living in Disney's Brave New Town* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 1999), 230. The authors note the uneven environmental record of Disney in the planning and development of Celebration, which the company tried to ameliorate through the creation of the Disney Wilderness Preserve, 8,500-acres of ranchland and swamp set aside to be protected in perpetuity. This deal cleared the way for Disney to literally clear away the proposed site of the new town without having to work around such nuisances like two-century-old oak trees. In order to maximize salable building lots within the plan, trees were cut down and wetlands were filled up, but in exchange a large tract of equally ecologically sensitive land would be preserved outside of the town limits. Preservation or recreation of the “natural,” however, had little purchase within the Disney-fied design of the community. In its final stages Disney’s “improvements” on the natural Florida landscape within Celebration included more “traditional” suburban landscaping like well-manicured lawns and non-native shrubs across the property, unlike the famed nearby New Urbanist resort town of Seaside, whose plan required more native plantings throughout (which, incidentally, were temporarily replaced by more traditional lawn grass on the few properties featured in the filming of 1998 feature *The Truman Show* in order to evoke a more idealized TV suburban setting). In a brief narrative resembling the plight of Ed Harris’ character in *Milk Money*, a film released two years before Celebration’s first phase of residential development began, Frantz and Collins relate their own mini-battle to preserve a patch of wetland behind their newly purchased home (and for their view of which they paid a premium). Despite its status as a protected pocket amenity with its own lot number, this little island of nature within the subdivision gave way to a neighbor’s dream lawn and gazebo. (239-242)
- ³⁵ Frantz and Collins, *Celebration, U.S.A.*, 239.
- ³⁶ *Bob the Builder*, “Bob’s Big Plan” online story book, http://www.bobthebuilder.com/usa/activities_stories.asp.
- ³⁷ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989 [1949]), 202-204.
- ³⁸ Curt Meine, *Correction Lines: Essays on Land, Leopold, and Conservation* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2004), 214. In his recent book, *Coyote at the Kitchen Door: Living with Wildlife in Suburbia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), Stephen DeStefano finishes with a chapter titled “A Suburban Land Ethic” (150-161). For another example in practice, allow me to briefly revisit Schaumburg, IL, which was depicted in a photograph of a subdivision under construction named “Deep Woods Drive.” [Figure 0.3] According to a student website dedicated to “Schaumburg’s Sustainable Future,” suburbia can and needs to be part of the equation as proposed by Leopold: “There is a real opportunity here to redeem Schaumburg’s reputation of the epitome of sprawl to a place where biodiversity is embraced and nurtured. Schaumburg, through the adoption of Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, could become an example of how a suburb can become a model of sustainable growth. By realizing the value of the whole community, this focus will help to ensure the continuation, health and growth of natural systems for Schaumburg and for biodiversity everywhere.” Jessie Crow Mermel, “Recovering Biodiversity Locally and Preserving Open Spaces,” (April 2011), <http://futureofschaumburg.wordpress.com/about/>. This essay and the site on which it appears were a project completed by the SUST 210 class at Roosevelt University, taught by Professor Mike Bryson.
- ³⁹ Raymond A. Rogers, *Nature and the Crisis of Modernity: A Critique of Contemporary Discourse on Managing the Earth* (New York: Black Rose Books, 1994), 3.
- ⁴⁰ “The Wild Zones.” *The New York Times*, February 12, 2006, last accessed April 29, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/12/opinion/nyregionopinions/WE_Corridor.html?sq=frontier&st=nyt&scp=3081&pagewanted=print. The editorial begins with a discussion of “biotic corridors.”

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- ⁴¹ In Activity 1, these “points of view” include CEO Lyman stating the inevitability of development: “This forest is going to be developed one day and it might as well be my company that gets the profit,” while Dan rationalizes that the forest can still be forest after suburbanization: “Tons of people can live in the middle of this great forest and enjoy being close to nature. When I’m done, it’s back to Chicago.” The raccoon defends his claim to natural property: “This is my home, and I’m tired of these humans trying to destroy it. My family needs the rivers, trees, and vegetation to survive.” And son Tyler admits his own conversion from techno-urban apathy to environmental activist: “When we first got here, I’d rather have been using my laptop. Now I know better. Dad’s company says it’s green, but all I see is g-r-e-e-d.” See the “social action” packet at: <http://www.takepart.com/sites/default/files/Furry-Vengeance-Hi-res-Final-Files.pdf>.
- ⁴² Wood, “The Impotent Suburban Vote,” 271. *Emphasis mine*.
- ⁴³ Porteous, *Landscapes of the Mind*, 171. As Edmund P. Fowler similarly argued in 1992: “Children see the environment in general, and their neighborhood in particular, as places to explore and use. If the area has no soft spaces, with dirt or mud or foliage of any kind, the child experiences it as an unmanipulable environment... To some extent, the suburbs were envisaged as a response to these needs of children, and yet it appears that the response was too adult, too neat, too programmed.” Edmund P. Fowler, *Building Cities that Work* (Quebec: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 101.
- ⁴⁴ For more on this perceived contemporary ill, see Richard Louv’s *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008 [2005]), as well as *The Green Hour: A Daily Dose of Nature for Happier, Healthier, Smarter Kids*, by Todd Christopher (Boston: Trumpeter Books, 2010).
- ⁴⁵ Judith Havemann, “Gore Calls for ‘Smart’ Growth; Sprawl’s Threat to Farmland Cited,” *The Washington Post*, September 3, 1998, A17.
- ⁴⁶ John Wilson of Fine Arts Films made an animated version of Mitchell’s “Big Yellow Taxi” that was featured on the *Sonny and Cher* show in the 1970s. The story depicted in the video has been described as “two hippies fleeing from their rustic pleasures under the pressure of the bulldozer and urban sprawl,” who can be read as a modern day Adam and Eve on the run from civilization. Ian Lumsden, for *Animation Blog* (September 22, 2007), last accessed January 3, 2013, <http://www.animationblog.org/2007/09/joni-mitchell-john-wilson-big-yellow.html>.
- ⁴⁷ “Nature Abhors a Garden” is the second chapter in Michael Pollan’s *Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education* (New York: Grove Press, 1991).
- ⁴⁸ Samuel Clemens poked fun at this tendency in “Extracts from Adam’s Diary,” where on “FRIDAY.—The naming goes recklessly on, in spite of anything I can do. I had a very good name for the estate, and it was musical and pretty—GARDEN OF EDEN. Privately, I continue to call it that, but not any longer publicly. The new creature says it is all woods and rocks and scenery, and therefore has no resemblance to a garden. Says it *looks* like a park, and does not look like anything *but* a park. Consequently, without consulting me, it has been new-named—NIAGARA FALLS PARK. This is sufficiently high-handed, it seems to me. And already there is a sign up: KEEP OFF THE GRASS. My life is not as happy as it was.” In *The Writings of Mark Twain, Volume 23* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1903): 261.
- ⁴⁹ The music video for Talking Heads’ “(Nothing But) Flowers” is interesting for what it does not show. We get no pretty pictures of the return-to-nature landscape being described, nor of the symbols of sprawling modernity the lead singer is so nostalgic for. Rather, all of the terms used to connote both states of landscape and living are presented in their most abstract form—as words. Phrases from the lyrics appear projected on the faces and running past the members of the band as they play in a blank studio space. We must supply our own imagery for both what is and what was. The video can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOEIRI5HSuQ>. For a view of this sprawling landscape longed for in the lyrics for “(Nothing) But) Flowers,” see the opening sequence of Richard Linklater’s 1996 film version of Eric Bogosian’s play *SubUrbia*.

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- ⁵⁰ For an extensive study and critique of one such rural development amidst the cornfields outside of Philadelphia, see Witold Rybczynski's *Last Harvest: How a Cornfield Became New Daleville*. (New York: Scribner, 2007).
- ⁵¹ *Sweet Land*, directed by Ali Selim (2005) was filmed in Minnesota. Following these opening scenes, we then are treated to the unfolding story, set in 1920, of how this homesteader from Norway and his German mail-order bride make this farm their family home. By the end of the film we return to the present day, and the grandson's decision not to sell. We see him, his wife, and his daughter digging a grave for his grandmother on the land, as was done for his grandfather decades ago. This suggests that they now inhabit the farm, preserving it for future generations. It remains one home rather than many, but a home that maintains a connection to its family as well as its agricultural history.
- ⁵² Catherine Fowler and Gillian Helfield, *Representing the Rural: Space, Place, and Identity in Films about the Land* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2006), 1-6. In cinema they do note that rural landscapes are also "frequently cast as a site of cultural tradition and heritage" (2), but are not always nostalgic in the treatment of those who inhabit these spaces. "Far from a harmonious relationship with nature," they "may be subjugated to its whims, may be oppressed by it, and may be enslaved and exploited by the land they so carefully tend."
- ⁵³ Fowler and Helfield identify rural cinema as "an ideological hub" that "allows for the intersection of complex sociopolitical and ideological issues and conflicts, such as those surrounding 'identity' and 'the national'." (11)
- ⁵⁴ Carey Goldberg, "Alarm Bells Sounding as Suburbs Gobble Up California's Richest Farmland." *New York Times*, June 20, 1996, A10. At the start of the article, it is noted that "As if mocking the vanished bounty, the clusters of ranch houses, lawns, and new blacktop here in Fresno County bear faux-farm names like Vineyard Glen and Harvest Park," in a similar fashion to the trend noted in Bill Vaughan's aphorism cited in the introduction concerning the irony of streets named after trees that have been taken out to accommodate housing construction.
- ⁵⁵ See, for example, John R. Stilgoe's *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820-1939* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988).
- ⁵⁶ Matthew Moore's "Artist Statement," <http://www.urbanplough.com/info/artist-statement/>. His brief online statement concludes as follows: "Documenting the reality of land and appetite from agriculture to suburbia, the decisions of our society reveal consumer models that make us disobedient to our relationship with land and time. By exhibiting this theater of evolution and loss, I have entered a historical dialogue of displacement that reveals my part (in agriculture) in the transformation of my family's land and identity. Through my artwork, I look at these dilemmas which reveal the impact of the American dream on our society and the land as we transition towards a post agrarian nation."
- ⁵⁷ Matthew Moore, quoted in Amber Bravo, "Raising Arizona," *Dwell* (April 2007), <http://www.dwell.com/profiles/article/raising-arizona>.
- ⁵⁸ All of Moore's work can be seen at his website, <http://www.urbanplough.com/work/>, including images from "Rotations: The Craftsman Bungalow."
- ⁵⁹ See more about Prairie Crossing at their website, which includes links to many of the high profile reviews and reporting about this "conservation community": <http://www.prairiecrossing.com/pc/site/about-us.html>. For more on Prairie Crossing in the context of LEED-ND, see Matt Baker, "Neighborhood: LEED-ND and the Future of Community," at *Sustainable Chicago* (June 10, 2010), <http://www.sustainable-chicago.com/2010/06/10/building-a-better-neighborhood-leed-nd-and-the-future-community/>. Prairie Crossing has, despite this, been highly criticized as *sprawl*. Another aspect of the community seen as an additional green amenity for residents of the green subdivision and its nearby conventional neighbors is a working organic farm (and farmer's market). A road sign welcomes drivers to the Prairie Crossing Farm, including onsite: The Learning Farm, Farm Business Development Center, Community Gardens, Community Stable, and eight affiliated

organic farming operations. For more on how this vision of blending subdivisions with farmland, see “Building Communities with Farms: Insights from Developers, Architects and Farmers in Integrating Agriculture and Development” by Vicky Ranney, Keith Kirley and Michael Sands, published online in 2010 by a group closely associated with the Prairie Crossing venture, The Liberty Prairie Foundation.

- ⁶⁰ Simmons B. Buntin, “Unsprawl Case Study: Prairie Crossing, Grayslake, Illinois,” *Terrain: A Journal of the Built & Natural Environment*, 9 (Spring/Summer 2001), <http://www.terrain.org/unsprawl/9/>.
- ⁶¹ Robert Smithson, “Cultural Confinement,” in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996 [1972]), 155. In addition to his prolific writing, Robert Smithson was a contemporary artist most famous for monumental “land art” pieces like “Spiral Jetty” in 1970 (which can be seen on the artist’s official website: <http://www.robertsmithson.com/>). This statement is in the context of Smithson’s critique of the “cultural confinement” of art, and in this section specifically the placement of sculpture in “parks” which he saw as “finished landscapes for finished art.” He also wrote here that “Parks are idealizations of nature, but nature in fact is not a condition of the ideal. Nature does not proceed in a straight line, it is rather a sprawling development. Nature is never finished.”
- ⁶² Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 134-35. In addition to his focus on biodiversity throughout this book, the context in which Wilson introduces the savanna hypothesis is a discussion on *biophilia*, the subject of an earlier publication by Wilson and attributed to Erich Fromm. Biophilia is defined as “the theory that humans have a genetic predisposition toward natural environments” in Nevin Cohen’s *Green Cities: An A-to-Z Guide* (Sage Publications, 2010), 34-36.
- ⁶³ Jeremy Lundholm, “Urban Cliffs,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Ecology*, eds. Ian Douglas, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2011), 258. He further argues, however, that we need to take into account the “actual built structures in urban environments,” which are potentially better explained by the “urban cliff” hypothesis as a compliment to the savanna hypothesis, adding “value in its explicit recognition of the habitat qualities of the built environment.” This hypothesis offers a view of cities as a “natural environment” rather than a strictly artificial construct in a nature/culture binary. The explanatory power of the combined theories lies in the prospect for thinking about suburban landscapes and architectures in relation to each other—both in terms of the individual house/yard configuration, but also in the wider view afforded by dwelling and neighborhood designs that back up to parks, preserves, or undeveloped land, guaranteeing homeowners a perpetually borrowed view that, as in Prairie Crossing, is more substantial and savanna-like than can be achieved on the limited scale of the traditional suburban lot alone.
- ⁶⁴ See more about this trend—and its catchy name—at “Agriburbia: Sustainable Communities by the Bushel,” last accessed January 31, 2011, <http://www.agriburbia.com/index.html>.
- ⁶⁵ Stephanie Simon, “An Apple Tree Grows in Suburbia: The Hot Trend in the Suburbs Is to Mix Homes and Agriculture.” *Wall Street Journal*, September 12, 2011, last accessed October 30, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111903392904576510492421141056.html>.
- ⁶⁶ On the site plan for Prairie Crossing posted on their website, though, the “farm” area is colored in the same “green” as the “prairie,” the “pastures,” and even the park-like sodded communal lawns and play spaces surrounding houses (the proper “wetlands” and school “park” are a lighter shade of green).
- ⁶⁷ James Howard Kunstler, “Man in Nature: The Fiasco of Suburbia.” *Orion* (Spring 2001, web exclusive), last accessed December 2, 2011, <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/221/>.
- ⁶⁸ Allison Arieff, “Agriculture Is the New Golf: Rethinking Suburban Communities.” *GOOD Cities* (April 18, 2010), last accessed August 1, 2012, <http://www.good.is/post/agriculture-is-the-new-golf-rethinking-suburban-communities/>.

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- ⁶⁹ See more at: <http://www.bundoranfarm.com/>. *Emphasis mine*.
- ⁷⁰ Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 210.
- ⁷¹ Spirit of Brandtjen Farm website: <http://www.homesofspirit.com/>. *Emphasis mine*.
- ⁷² Bob Shaw, "Last Harvest to Herald Unique Suburb." *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* (updated June 29, 2007), http://www.twincities.com/dakota/ci_6264157?nclick_check=1. The extended series was published in the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* by their suburban life reporter beginning in 2004, intended to run until the first residents move into the community.
- ⁷³ Bob Shaw, "A Developer vs. Red Tape." *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* (updated June 29, 2007), last accessed January 31, 2011, http://www.twincities.com/dakota/ci_6263346.
- ⁷⁴ Bob Shaw, "Revising a Vision." *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* (updated June 29, 2007), last accessed January 31, 2011, http://www.twincities.com/dakota/ci_6263345.
- ⁷⁵ Bob Shaw, "The Hard Sell: Brandtjen Farm Tests Marketers." *Saint Paul Pioneer Press* (updated June 29, 2007), last accessed January 31, 2011, http://www.twincities.com/dakota/ci_6263340.
- ⁷⁶ For example, new residents Matt Shimon and Mike Cuthbert left their South Minneapolis home for a brand new old looking, energy and water-efficient 4,500-square-foot custom farmhouse in the Spirit of Brandtjen Farm. They express appreciation for the "country" setting in suburbia, which "takes you back to a less hectic, simpler time." They add that they "feel calmer here than in the city." See more, including images of the couple's house and property, in Lynn Underwood, "It's the New-Fashioned Farmhouse," *Minneapolis StarTribune* (October 24, 2011), <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/homegarden/132347158.html>.
- ⁷⁷ See the Stonemill Farms website: <http://www.stonemillfarms.com/Living/GreenLiving.aspx>. According to their website, three of the builders operating within Stonemill Farms have been certified by Minnesota's Green Path program.
- ⁷⁸ For example, one posting to City-Data.com responded to a forum on St. Paul, MN suburbs titled "Stonemill Farms??? WTF..." with the following comment: "I will say, though, that I hate it when places play up their 'green' credentials when they don't have much to brag about: the website makes a big deal about recycling (just plain old recycling, it looks like, nothing fancy like an organics/compost program) and, of all things, walking. It's great that they're encouraging people to walk to their parks and the skating rink, but anyone who would seriously consider moving to such a place to have a 'smaller carbon footprint' (straight from the website) would be exhibiting a massive amount of denial on that front (although I assume that's just there for marketing purposes, as 'green' is trendy these days). There may be many valid reasons to move to the development, and it's nice to see new construction incorporating walking paths (although I see there aren't sidewalks in the photos) or considering things like energy requirements, but there's very little 'green' about this place. (I don't even think they're going for any LEED certification, but maybe I'm wrong about that? Still, if they're playing up 'encouraging homeowners to plant trees' as an example of how green they are, I assume they're grasping for straws here.)" Posted by uptown_urbanist on September 5, 2010, <http://www.city-data.com/forum/minneapolis-st-paul/1076855-stonemill-farms-wtf.html>.
- ⁷⁹ See the homepage for The Preserve here: <http://stocktonpreserve.com/>. The background image is curiously a dandelion going to seed on grassy green background.
- ⁸⁰ See The Preserve's website, especially its page on "Sustainable Technologies" under the heading of "Jobs of the Future." http://stocktonpreserve.com/Jobs_of_the_Future/Sustainable_Technologies.
- ⁸¹ Michael Fitzgerald, "Spanos Rides Green Wave with Preserve Proposal." *Recordnet.com* (July 29, 2009), last accessed September 16, 2011, http://www.recordnet.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20090729/A_NEWS0803/907290323/-1/A_NEWS13. The writer also makes note of the larger context of this large and very successful developer, which has had a long history of anything but green building or environmental

priorities. Contributing to suburban sprawl, they are involved in the development of commercial big boxes. Even the site for The Preserve was originally slated to be a “bourgeoisie ‘Lifestyle Center’.” The new plan is mixed-use, and promises a variety of housing options with greater density, a permanent green belt, and the ambition to be certified as a One Planet Community.

⁸² On their Platte River Project webpage, the pitch for an agriburban future is made by the TSR Group, a Development Management and Planning and Design firm “who founded Agriburbia®,” and see it “as a sustainable development model for the future.” See more at <http://www.agriburbia.com/markets.html>.

⁸³ Brian Watkins, “‘Agriburbia’: Friend or Foe?” *Curator* (November 27, 2009), last accessed December 10, 2011, <http://www.curatormagazine.com/brianwatkins/agriburbia-friend-or-foe/>. Watkins further posits that “The idea that sustainability is a penance paid simply through intelligent purchasing is innocently nearsighted, but more problematic is the idea to return to the autonomous indulgences of a sprawl design that’s wrapped in recycled newspaper, claiming that the sum of your repentant emotions is good enough.”

⁸⁴ Allan C. Carlson, “Agrarianism Reborn: On the Curious Return of the Small Family Farm.” *The Intercollegiate Review* (Spring 2008), 13-23. In his study Carlson also includes the exurban “countrysiders,” as outlined by Gene Logsdon, who have “one foot in the country, one foot in the city,” with the goal of joining “the best of urban life with the best in rural life in a new and admirable agrarianism.”

⁸⁵ A similar “retreat from the stringencies of modernity” can be attributed to the feelings of attachment many modern environmentalists have with Thoreau, seeking subdivisions modeled on his description of life at Walden Pond. One example is an exurban hill town in MA modeled after Thoreau’s Walden, offering a green alternative away from the city (and the traditional suburb), yet has experienced clashes with local farming nearby, especially concerning manure. See James Barilla, “The Road to Exurbia.” *Places* (September 6, 2011), <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/the-road-to-exurbia/29478/>.

⁸⁶ Eric T. Freyfogle, “Introduction: A Durable Scale,” in *The New Agrarianism: Land, Culture, and the Community of Life*, ed. Eric T. Freyfogle (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001), xviii-xix.

⁸⁷ Freyfogle, “A Durable Scale,” xxiii.

⁸⁸ Rachel Yoo Digerness, “Living in America” poster series, <http://www.yooandme.us/portfolio/living-in-america/>. Published online under the name yooandme.us, Digerness also produced a “GE Citizenship Report” video in 2012 promoting the company’s commitment to sustainable growth: <http://vimeo.com/34278913>.

⁸⁹ Paul H. Mattingly, *Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 2. In his history of Leonia, NJ, a suburb of New York City, he argues that landscapes “contain many detailed features of history, of politics, of geography, of cultural conventions, without being reduced to them.” Mattingly draws on John Brinkerhoff Jackson’s *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

• PART 2 •

**This Old House of the Future:
Progress and Nostalgia in Green Dream Homes**

We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us.

—Sir Winston Churchill

*Standards of living
They're rising daily
But home oh sweet home
It's only a saying*

—Bryan Ferry, "In Every Dream Home a Heartache" (1973)

When we imagine our “dream house,” we are engaged in visions of *a better tomorrow*, one shaped by the conditions of today, but also quite often influenced by the dreams of yesterday. Lynn Spigel begins her final chapter of *Welcome to the Dream House* with the observation that “current corporate wisdom on technological progress” at the turn of the millennium was “steeped in a sense of nostalgia, not for yesterday per se but...for yesterday’s future.”¹ The resultant marketing for middle-class consumers was constructed in such a way that “the home of the future is a wish fulfillment of some idealized past,”² where new technologies are developed and implemented in service of old fashioned tastes and values. Today’s vision for how we might—and should—live in “tomorrow’s home” is still formulated as a compromise between the competing ideals of nostalgia and progress. Computer-controlled “smart houses” are triumphs of modern technology capable of monitoring and managing their contents as well as their residents’ daily lives. Yet whereas the “house of the future” was once imagined as a “machine for living in,” a plastic paradise of technologically enabled conveniences and innovative forms, today’s high-tech domestic infrastructure is increasingly camouflaged, hidden behind a veneer of traditional design or natural materials, looking back to simpler times.

As we move firmly into the twenty-first century, technology-centered visions of houses of the future remain encapsulated in the rhetoric and imagery of the past, but also in that of nature. Conceptualization of “the natural” in this context largely concerns an idyllic setting where homes are imagined, depicted, and built, but also the materials they are made of and furnished with. Nature is a mediating factor between our dual desires for progress and nostalgia, whether aesthetically, materially, or in terms of environmental sustainability. No matter how state-of-the-art a house may be, often the sellable eco-friendly future in suburbia appears both comfortable—in terms of familiarity, conformity and traditional aesthetics, and stable—not overtly challenging norms and expectations of what a home is, only how it is made and could be used. In the “green” house of tomorrow, past emphasis on efficiency of time spent is fused with efficiency of resources consumed. How recent discourses shift the focus of technology’s role in domestic life and space, merging this older thrust toward greater labor savings with the more contemporary goals of energy and related “planet savings,” coincides with trends in design (of houses, yards, and even communities) that express presumed consumer desire for a more natural, symbolic past without sacrificing the promise of the future.

With acknowledgment of the novelty of earlier “houses of the future,” part 2 of this dissertation explores some of the contours and incongruities of how “green dream homes” today are relatively constructed in visual media discourses. Employing a carefully measured blend of nostalgia and progress to sell consumers an eco-friendly vision of tomorrow, they further promote and even exaggerate the part suburbanites can play in making the future greener through their individual environmentally conscious purchases of and for the home. Analysis of the discourses through which this is accomplished requires attention to a wide variety of images and experiences, including design competitions, green real estate tours and architectural exhibits, advertising,

documentary films, and reality television, as well as a range of critical and journalistic reviews of such efforts. In chapter 3, fantastic *concept houses* are proposed as spaces for dreaming in terms of technological advancement and novel design parameters, but also as places of imaginative, interactive play, for exploring alternative ways they might one day be inhabited compared to more conventional structures found now in suburbia. “Green,” as deployed in these conceptual presentations and exercises, is as much about proclaiming difference from the suburban status quo as it is about transforming the home into a more environmentally responsible and responsive dwelling. Chapter 4 examines the equally dramatic yet relatively pragmatic real estate market for green homes, where several *model homes* are discursively designed and marketed as dream homes to middle-class aspirants. In this context, “green” is more commonly deployed as a means of eco-friendly living that fits into the existing suburban fabric rather than standing out, mainstreaming sustainability in the process. How green a home—and its owners—are perceived to be is partly a function of media that illustrate and advertise the possibility of green suburban domesticity as a means to living better, both aspirationally and environmentally, while also preserving a sense of what made the traditional single-family home in suburbia so desirable historically. Visual cues and rhetoric of nature at home are critical to integration of past and future in selling a better, greener suburbia today.

Notes for Part 2:

¹ Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dream House: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 382. She further notes that despite the prominence of exotic designs from the 1920s or 1930s, “the home of tomorrow has historically looked backward,” and was from the 1940s quite often “traditional in design—recalling Tudor, Spanish, and Colonial architecture rather than the futuristic structures built by the likes of [Richard] Neutra or [Buckminster] Fuller.” (385) This trend continues in contemporary designs, both in concept-driven exhibits and mainstream suburban housing stock, suggesting a consumer interest in progress as far as the home functions, but nostalgia for how homes look and feel.

² Spigel, *Welcome to the Dream House*, 391.

• CHAPTER 3 •

Concept Houses: Imagining How We Might Live

Before they are built into the landscape, houses encompass our dreams and goals for living well. In reality, we do not often have the chance to translate those dreams into concrete structures that bear much resemblance to our dream home, yet we continue to plan, and draw, and wish, and play as if we will. We find inspiration for dream houses in a variety of mediated texts and experiences, many of which purport to show us the coming “house of the future” as if it were a certainty just over the horizon. While some remain fantastic visions decades or more after they are first unveiled, elements of others slowly become integrated into the spaces of everyday life, indicative of an ever-changing standard of living. Technological function and modern form are often combined to showcase and distinguish future from present, all with the promise of liberating residents from practical and aesthetic lifestyle restrictions of the past. In recent years the rhetoric and rationale for houses of the future has shifted, emphasizing both desired and required environmental sustainability in their designs. This chapter considers a few examples of how such *concepts of home* incorporate high tech, eco-friendly systems and modernist design parameters to explore ways in which “the good life” is re-visioned as “the good green life” in the (not-too) distant future. The bright green dreams they inspire reposition the home as both good for us and for the environment, yet less certain is whether green concept homes aid in imagining a more sustainable suburban future we can believe or expect, or if their novel, mediated fantasies of a domestic green tomorrow will remain in the realm of dreams unfulfilled.

Dream Spaces

A house is a machine for living in.

—Le Corbusier

Despite popular nostalgia envisioning a simpler, more traditional postwar America, the period was populated with countless images and narratives that promised progress in every sphere of life. The home was an especially charged cultural site for imagining just how drastically our everyday spaces and practices would change as the economy shifted gears from wartime production to support a nascent consumer society. Instead of tanks and planes and machine guns, factories were now mass-producing cars and refrigerators and washing machines, many of which were destined for new suburban tract homes popping up across the country. Dream houses—large and small—had one thing in common: they could be filled with the latest in these modern home technologies. Marketed directly to a generation of housewives pushed out of those same factories when their war production work was no longer deemed necessary or convenient, they were now tasked by the nation to drive consumption of modified factory output for the private sphere of the home. In addition to the more mundane examples of this type of marketing, like advertisements for GE appliances included in brand new Levittown kitchens,¹ or even rhetoric on the geopolitical stage, such as the infamous “Kitchen Debate” when Vice President Nixon showed off the modern conveniences enjoyed by American women in front of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev,² there were also much more fantastical mediated visions of the home, like the 1956 promotional short “Design for Dreaming.”³ [Figure 3.1] Yet even in such delightfully bizarre visions of the future, their sponsors and producers were also always highly invested in selling a better today.

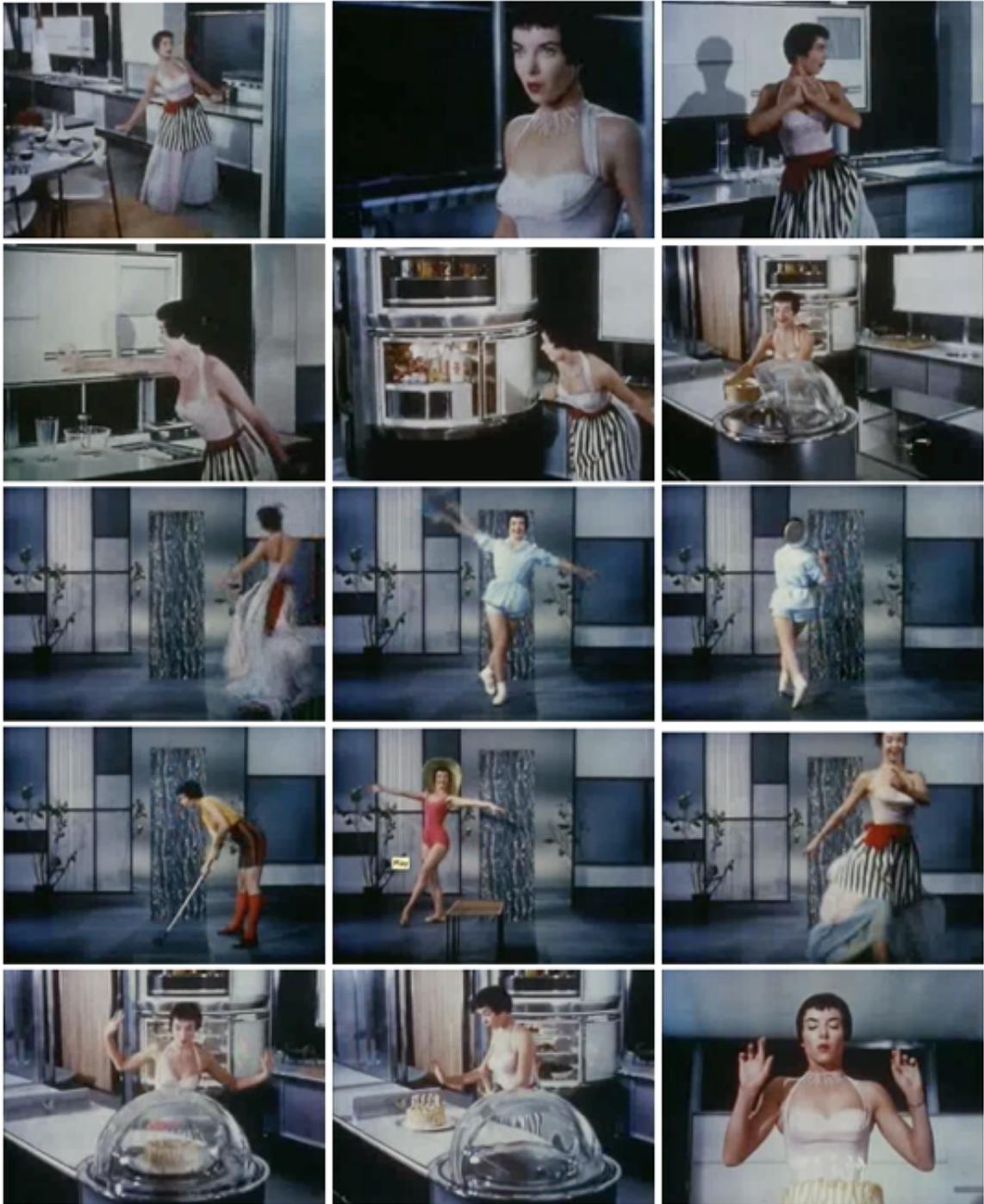


Figure 3.1: *A young woman dances her way through domestic chores and leisure pursuits in a dream kitchen that promises to free her from home labor.*

Stills from the Frigidaire “Kitchen of the Future” segment of “Design for Dreaming,” a promotional short for General Motors, directed by William Beaudine (1956). It can be seen in full at <http://archive.org/details/Designfo1956>.

In this imaginative short, a tall, dark and handsome man magically transports a young woman, played by dancer Thelma Tadlock, from her bedroom to General Motors' Motorama at the Waldorf-Astoria. As they float above the crowds surrounding GM's newest model cars, he asks "Since it's just a dream and involves no money, which one would you like me to buy you, honey?" She makes her choice—all of them, following which the man responds "Better get her to the kitchen, quick!" Deposited in the related showcase for Frigidaire's "Kitchen of the Future," an aproned Tadlock bemoans her fate: "Just like a man, you give him a break, and you wind up in a kitchen, baking a cake." Her outlook changes abruptly, however, when she sees the kind of kitchen that awaits her. In this completely automated domestic space, cooking is push-button magic. And pushing buttons is almost all that is required of her to create a beautiful self-frosted cake, complete with self-lighting candles! In the meantime, freed from the labor of cooking and baking (and presumably cleaning), she now has time to indulge in leisure activities like tennis, golf, and swimming, and thus is less confined to—and defined by—the home.

While this particular high-tech, high-concept kitchen was not yet available for purchase, the narrative employed in fashioning it for consumers was already standard in marketing for countless home appliances that promised to do *most* the work for the modern housewife. Unrealistic as such claims may have been (and still are), they spoke to dreams of a better tomorrow in which women would be liberated not from housework per se, but from the drudgery and time commitment it represented. The rhetoric of the day was largely concerned with technology driven advancements for both the home and the homemaker in marketing materials and popular entertainment alike.⁴ This blending of media form and message continues in updated visions of the house of the future, although in many instances they focus as much on images of the postwar past. In the opening credit sequence of Frank Oz's 2004 remake of *The Stepford Wives*, myriad clips

from “Design for Dreaming” and similar mid-century marketing films are edited into a waltzing musical montage that resets these forward-looking vignettes as nothing more than quaint nostalgia for a time when this was all women could hope for from modern technological marvels—help with chores around the house.⁵ The gendered rhetoric and address common in such media discourses still relies on a nuclear family model, one that extrapolates an idealized family form into a future where the houses themselves may bear little resemblance to either postwar tract houses with all-electric “wonder kitchens” or millennial McMansions with sentient cores. Yet in magazine ads or film and television entertainments,⁶ as in architectural designs for concept houses or exhibitions demonstrating the coming thing in digitalized dwelling, the heterosexual couple and patriarchal family are central to most cultural constructions of where and how we might one day live. The future is most often conceived as in a detached single-family house.

Beyond technological wizardry, postwar dreamers and professional dream-makers were also concerned with the form and setting of an idyllic domestic future. Charles Schridde, an artist better known for his impressionistic rodeo paintings, also worked as an illustrator, completing a series of images for Motorola that featured the company’s state-of-the-art black and white television sets incorporated into high-concept futuristic homes.⁷ [Figure 3.2] The architecture, while inventive in 1961, was analogous to many modernist designs, including Philip Johnson’s 1949 Glass House. Some even looked suspiciously like the prime-time space-age home of *The Jetsons*. What makes these designs intriguing are the “natural” settings that Schridde carefully placed them in. On a sea cliff, at a lakeshore, straddling a forest stream, on a grassy plain—the open glass structures dramatically minimize any division between inside and outside, merging inner domestic space with the wider natural world. Even those that imagine glass pods high over the city or beneath the ocean meld “home” and “nature.”



Figure 3.2: *These playful images were intended to show how such leisure appliances as the television set and hi-fi stereo can be integrated in the home of tomorrow, with the purpose of selling them to consumers today.*

Charles Schridde illustrations for Motorola, 1961-63, republished online by *Business Insider*, <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-exquisitely-detailed-pictures-are-how-motorola-envisioned-the-future-in-1961-2012-6#-1>.

One might wonder how the imagined families depicted here manage to keep their eyes glued to relatively small television screens when such panoramic views beckon. Yet this, too, is vital to understanding the appeal of many concept homes—accommodating desires to be both technologically mediated and stylistically forward thinking, while also connected to nature within and beyond the house. Even in the lighthearted fantasy of “Design for Dreaming,” one benefit Tadlock derives from the automated kitchen is the ability to leave it in order to spend time outside in the fresh air and sunshine. Schridde’s designs go a bit further, incorporating views of the natural landscape (or seascape) into ultramodern homes while allowing residents to sit comfortably inside watching TV.⁸

When we begin to encounter intentionally “greener” versions of concept houses in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, these three key elements—high-tech appliances or integrated systems, sparsely modern aesthetics, and isolated natural settings—form the tripartite model in which a more environmentally sustainable future is also imagined. While widely circulated in and integral to postwar discourses of “the good life” expected in the future, these terms are part of a vocabulary that is borrowed in later generation to define more contemporary dreams for a more sustainable future. As a compound whole, they are here posited as *machines for living in the garden*. I am here drawing on two widely cited concepts, Le Corbusier’s “the house is a machine for living in” and Leo Marx’s “machine in the garden.” The latter is the title of his influential 1964 book, a work of literary criticism in which Marx probes the conflict between technological progress and the pastoral ideal in American culture.⁹ In combining the two, my intent is to open a space for considering the hopeful along with the critical in assessing a joint framework for dreaming—how green dream houses are designed and where they are set. This first requires distinguishing *concept houses*, which, in their flights of fantasy, are not usually conceived as plans to be built and inhabited, from *model homes*, which

are limited by real world factors like cost, salability, topography, practicality, and the average densities in which suburban houses are built. There is a freedom in playing in the world of conceptual dwelling design that extends the direction, scale, and style of dreaming beyond constriction of practical realities. To what extent, though, are green dreams translatable as, or inspirational to, real world structures and lifestyles?

Whether on paper, in the ether, or as physical models we can manipulate or walk through, concept houses are spaces for imagination and experimentation. Through them we gauge how far we've come in terms of home technology, materials and design, and push to extremes the limits of our expectations for how far we might yet go. They are "the stuff of dreams," exercises that facilitate creative thinking about the future of domestic life and the progressive, even sentient architecture that might one day house it. These spaces that we draw, build or playfully engage with, no matter how revolutionary, are also always grounded in specific spatial and cultural contexts. Despite a long history of imagining "castles in the air," floating in the clouds high above any real world needs or concerns, part of the pleasure of dream home design is fantasizing where they—and by extension, we—could be situated in either our individual or collective futures. We may set our ideal house of tomorrow in a tropical paradise, rendering it in such a way that its glazed façade looks out over the ocean, taking in the warm glow of the setting sun. Or perhaps we imagine our dream house of the future to be tucked into a forested hillside, so integrated into its environment that it does not even obstruct the natural flow of water down a pebbled streambed. Charles Schridde was neither the first nor the last to create such seductive images of how we might want to live, placing futuristic designs in equally invented settings that reciprocally define the character and function of each house.

Contemporary purveyors of green futures work from the same palette of architectural ideas and conceptual landscapes, but in this eco-context the "nature"

outside provides more than merely a scenic site for or view from the concept house. Rather, most eco-ideational housing designs are purposely set in conditional settings that either suggest or enhance the green meaning of the house. This is as relevant to designs that imagine homes in urban and suburban settings as it is to those envisioned as “out in the wild,” although we find a slight preference in many recent high-concept green projects for the latter. Borrowing a strategy from residential real estate marketing 101, concept houses are often presented as standing alone in their pristine location so that you are better able to imagine yourself and your family in relation only to the house in question and its natural setting (and not the bright pink house or auto repair shop that may sit next door, blighting the view). The lone “neighbors” usually visible are nearby trees, cacti, hills, or waters, whichever is most appropriate to the claims being made about the proposed residence as an environmentally conscious and connected structure.

We see this clearly in Phantom House, from the combined talents of Diller Scofidio + Renfro and environmental-design firm Atelier Ten, who together “imagine a guilt-free, sustainable luxury house that thrives on excess.” [Figure 3.3] A desert dwelling that would take advantage of its hot, dry climate, it provides its hypothetical dwellers more comforts and conveniences than might otherwise be expected in this locale. As described in a *New York Times Magazine* profile, the primary rendering shows an elevated glass box sitting snugly against generic rocky foothills “overlooking a rapidly growing city in the American Southwest.” The imaginary residents, “M. and J.,” are Sun Belt suburban professionals, living in a region most likely short on water, hard on energy, and growing exponentially for decades despite these problems. Innovative in both form and function, the article notes that this design draws both “on existing technologies and those that may come to be,” as well as transforming “redundancy into efficiency” by boasting duplicate indoor and outdoor spaces for living and working here.¹⁰

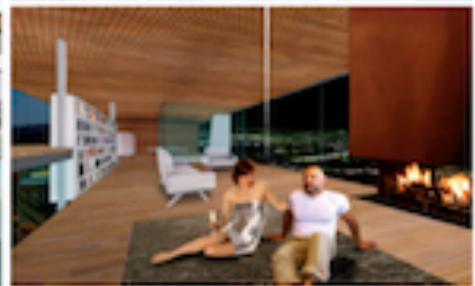


Figure 3.3: *The modern open concept space of this technologically advanced eco-house is envisioned as both sitting in and in harmony with its desert environment, suggesting consumption and conservation of “nature.”*

Top: Concept for Phantom House by Diller Scofidio + Renfro (2007)

Bottom left: Concept couple in “Early Morning: 5 a.m. to 8 a.m.”

Bottom right above: Concept couple in “Early Afternoon: 1 p.m. to 4 p.m.”

Bottom right below: Concept couple at “Night: 9 p.m. to Midnight”

All images were published in “An Eco-House for the Future,” *New York Times Magazine* (May 20, 2007), http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/magazine/20scofidio1.html?_r=0.

In a fiction best compared to the “Design for Dreaming” film fantasy, and persistence of the paradigm, a day-in-the-life of this eco-house of the future is imagined in a series of additional illustrations that cover the couple’s interactions with the house from morning through night, charting their activities and attitudes, as well as the energy produced and consumed. Although this home is equipped with futuristic products and systems, others seem strangely familiar. In this potential future, an energy-efficient “RotoFridge” uses a vertical conveyer system to make food available to both the upper (interior) and lower (exterior) kitchens, whereas the round dream refrigerator in Thelma Tadlock’s “kitchen of the future” simply revolved. “J.” is not depicted in a nostalgic postwar mold. Though she and “M.” are figured as a twenty-first century eco-version of bourgeois domesticity, one where the house has long fulfilled its earlier promises of both a “good life” for them and an “easy life” for her, a modern-day woman who now works at home as well as in the home. Rather than leave the house for an afternoon swim, she simply moves to the wired outdoor poolroom below, where she—and her smart, wireless devices—can multitask work, play and rest without much if any worry over the housework. Historical context and technological details may have changed, but the underlying marketing message remains the same, as do the fundamental paradigms of effortless leisure, isolation in nature, and high-tech enabled ease of living.

The couple here enjoys the added benefit of an “eco-friendly” lifestyle without sacrificing either sensual luxuries or modern conveniences. A wide array of novel smart technologies throughout optimize energy and water usage, as well as maximizing the creature comforts of daily life.¹¹ The house is also furnished with high-tech updates to more traditional suburban features that would not normally be thought appropriate to an eco-house in a desert clime, such as the “LawnDrawer,” a “mobile turf surface” that can slide between front and back yards, following the sun or the shade as preferred. Yet

nothing is wasted in the automated management of this house or its occupants, whether wastewater channeled to irrigate the mobile lawn or filtered through the native EcoFlow garden, or the “excess human energy” captured by a smart mattress that recharges the house’s batteries while the residents recharge theirs. Despite all of the high-end eco-innovations packed into this concept house, the story these designers chose to tell about the couple living here is actually rather banal. This smarter, sleeker, greener vision of a dream home enables a lifestyle ostensibly already familiar to the readership of the *New York Times Magazine*, even if aspirational.

We find that the three primary aspects of how this concept house is visually presented compete with each other for viewers’ attention—its dramatic setting, its technological sophistication, and its futuristic form. All three also contribute to its substantial environmental claims—it treads lightly in its desert ecosystem, it produces more energy than it consumes, and its combination of recycled and natural materials lend themselves well to the modernist aesthetics favored in most architectural discourses promoting an ecologically stylish future. Form, however, tends to dominate both function and setting when we look at both strictly conceptual projects like this and architectural designs for expensive client-commissioned eco-houses.

Modernism is somewhat over-represented in sustainable residential architecture, domestically and internationally. The overwhelming presence of large, open spaces and clean, straight lines becomes apparent when flipping through any of the numerous coffee table books on the subject. In one 2009 title, *Sustainable Homes USA*, the trend is not so much broken as it is punctuated by a few examples that stand out mostly for their unconventional forms when compared to the page-by-page parade of glass boxes. In the occasional departure from this trend, we see references made to what in some respects feel like older, pre-modern vernacular architectures, but also at times glimpses

of a different kind of futuristic green vision set free from the rationalism of straight lines and right angles. For example, a “wildly creative wave-shaped” structure by Robert Oshatz, the Wilkinson Residence, is a one-of-a-kind home conforming to its site’s topography. It incorporates the hill, trees, and creek as much as possible, following the “Utopian modernist tradition of blending ambiguity between interior and exterior space.”¹² Rather than impose rectilinear forms on an irregular landscape, as was done in the “Phantom House” concept drawings, site-specific green dream homes like this can incorporate more organic forms to better connote their harmony with the natural world, both structurally and ideologically.

Another home featured in this book also snubs the box as basic spatial form, but rather than rejecting geometrical structures altogether it adopts a different one. Built from a kit and then assembled on an idyllic ocean-view California site, this geodesic dome home claims Buckminster Fuller lineage. In the spirit of his “visionary and pioneer” status in “the field of affordable housing and prefabricated construction,” this structure differs from most houses celebrated in this and other books like it in two main respects: it is “relatively inexpensive” and, even more distinctively, it is “ephemeral,” since it “could be easily disassembled, transported and reassembled in a different location” with minimal site disturbance.¹³ Its rubberized skin, though, has more in common with a tent or a yurt¹⁴ than with more traditional houses—site-built or modular. The blending of organic form and high-tech materials or methods outlines another way of imagining the future of green housing, expanding the architectural discourse beyond the heritage of housing design as focused on elite, individual projects that only occasionally expressed an environmental ethos, but in service to the goal of democratizing the house in forms other than the little boxes so disdained in popular culture and critical discourse.

Desiring to be modern in function while refusing to be limited by modernist

preferences for the rectangle, there were visionaries besides Fuller's followers who saw this more architecturally democratic future as round. While not always covered in high concept architectural publications, some examples of this trend were periodically found scattered across the country, constructed as novel vernacular green experiments and intended as challenges to dominant home building and design paradigms. In the late seventies, a series of Xanadu Homes of the Future appeared both organic and alien in the landscapes where they were built, most notably the Wisconsin Dells and Kissimmee, Florida.¹⁵ Balloon forms and polyurethane foam construction methods were utilized in the search for more inexpensive, durable, and efficient homes, but these were not the only experimental aspects of these grouped dome pods. Designed as sites for re-imagining "the house as a total organic system," according to architect and Futurist Roy Mason, their unique rounded interior spaces were fully computerized. An article from the early eighties begins with a question—"Remember the Jetsons?"—to introduce Xanadu houses to readers. While products of their time, these structures shared many characteristics requisite in contemporary green home design: built-in greenhouses for family food production, technology permitting a commuter-free, work-from-home lifestyle, automated controls for maximum energy efficiency, and "a true house computer" that serves as an "electronic hearth." Referring to this last item, Mason is quoted as saying "The home of the future will be more like the home of the past than the home of the present," with families gathering around the computer much like yesterday's fire, and less like today's more passive television set.¹⁶ A number of tourists to Disney's brand new Epcot Center traveled just a little farther down the road to see how computers were integrated into one of these strangely natural-looking Xanadu houses.¹⁷

Even though technically part of the built environment, such artistically ambitious houses as those featured in contemporary design photo spreads, or set up as roadside

attractions for vacationers, all have much more in common with concept-only images of a possible architectural future than with the majority of housing stock we have today or had back then, green or otherwise. The sites on which they are generally constructed rarely resemble typical suburban neighborhoods. Set off by themselves in either pastoral or pristine landscapes, they often enjoy the seclusion that their extensive glass walls demand. Even the geodesic tent dome, while potentially mobile, is photographed all alone on a private beach. The modern green dream house is a relatively solitary, single-family aspiration. In such visually segregated situations, lacking any other residential context, the architectural style of these green houses—ultramodern boxes, geodesic domes, or even more organic, freestyle forms—does not thus appear “odd.” In print or in person, we are given the opportunity to consider them individually, to value them as either images or objects of regard, especially in the triple terms of their environmental assertions. But as built, lived-in green houses, they also potentially work as models for conceptualizing what a green home could be for the rest of us. While we look or visit, we may wonder if such green architectural dreams could ever fit into existing neighborhoods. The other option is to accept the pleasant fiction that we can all someday live in our own eco-friendly dream house all by itself in the woods, on the beach, or even above the clouds.

A growing strand of architectural discourse is, however, increasingly focused on how to reconceptualize an ecologically responsible future in suburbia. Beginning with the premise that “the word ‘house’ conjures images of rectangular dwellings with front porches and chimneys” as well as “front lawns and garages too,” a slideshow published online by *Forbes* in 2012 purports to offer alternatives to this traditional housing paradigm specifically in light of how “climate change, population growth and geo-political shifts are already redefining the way we look at residential spaces of the future.”¹⁸ [Figure 3.4]



Figure 3.4: *While not always called out as explicitly “green,” the “homes of the future” featured in an online slideshow for Forbes are designed to fit in and respond to specific environments, some fantastic and some mundane, all challenging. “Reboot” by Vetterlein is the exception, for despite its robot-modern aesthetic, this green home of the future could “work” anywhere.*

“10 Stunning Homes of the Future.” *Forbes* (July 12, 2012), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeslifestyle/2012/07/12/10-stunning-homes-of-the-future/>. Above: “Tornado-Proof Home” by Ted Givens and “Urban Tree House” by Jason David Designs; Middle: “The Wolke 7” by Timon Sager, and “Fallingwater Cottages” (interior) by Patkau Architects; Below: “Roll House” by Christopher Daniel, “Moon Villa” by Royal Haskoning Architecten, and “Reboot Home” by Victor Vetterlein

The designs included cover the spectrum of extremes in both condition and setting, like shelters that avoid tornado damage by folding into the ground during storms, or fold into themselves to control levels of transparency, and thus, exposure to the sun. Zeppelin-supported flying house-ships float above congested urban areas below, and, for a future in which sprawl reaches escape velocity, a transparent, multi-level moon bubble dwelling is designed to take advantage of this extraterrestrial body's much lower gravity. Others exhibit little or no structure above ground, carving out comfortably stylish contemporary caves beneath a landscape that retains its "natural" appearance, while cantilevered prefab structures create livable space once put in place above traffic on busy urban or suburban streets. These examples demonstrate the immense variety of possibilities for conceptualizing homes of the future that run counter to what we are used to today, but focus on design in the context of open landscapes rather than built suburban sites.

One 2008 high concept home featured in this *Forbes* presentation, the Reboot, extends the smart-house ideal to nearly every aspect of its integrated design. From some angles resembling a robot head akin to a *Battlestar Galactica* Cylon, its "futuristic aesthetic" is also reminiscent of Monsanto's forty-year old high-tech House of the Future at Disneyland [Figure 3.5], as well as of a more organic form—a giant mushroom, albeit one whose sleek, white skin collects solar energy to power its computer-controlled systems. According to the designer, Victor Vetterlein, this "self-sufficient, eco-friendly dwelling" is meant to "provoke discussion," and, when "discourse emerges," even out of the rejection of wild ideas and proposals like this, he argues that it is nonetheless "the predecessor to real change." How this change materializes is a gradual process, one that plays out in those spaces that let us not only see, but also touch future possibilities. In the construction and exhibition of concept homes, other avenues of opportunity for such discourses to "emerge" in the wider eye of public entertainment and engagement.

Show Places

If you can dream it, you can do it.

—Walt Disney

It may be easy to overlook a photograph, an illustration, or a diagram casually encountered in a coffee table book, a magazine, an online article or blog post. Even when incorporated into clever print ads, the static image (or collection of images) does not necessarily command our attention as fully as more dynamic media like film and television, or even the experience of walking past a physical display or through an interactive exhibit. When there is a story we can follow, a character we can identify with, a threshold we can cross, a gadget we can play with, the future can seem more tangible or believable than it otherwise might in even the most realistic, detailed concept drawing. “Real change,” as Vetterlain articulates it, can be imperceptibly slow in materializing. Much of what was considered science fiction in the fifties has already been integrated into homes today, from the most expensive custom mansion to the cheapest tract home, yet each ingenious invention was once dismissed by critics of the day as impractical for how we then lived. Whether based in extant technologies or those still in development, theatrical built concept houses, however, generate an air of credible magic, potentially overriding rational skepticism. Seeing and touching possible tomorrows elicits a sense of play, an optimism that things can and will change for the better. In experiencing these houses of the future we are positioned as witnesses to and participants in progress. This has been an essential component to the success of Walt Disney, a company with an extensive history of conceiving, drawing, building and popularizing fantasy futures for children of all ages, long before issues of environmental sustainability emerged as widely shared cultural concerns. [Figure 3.5]

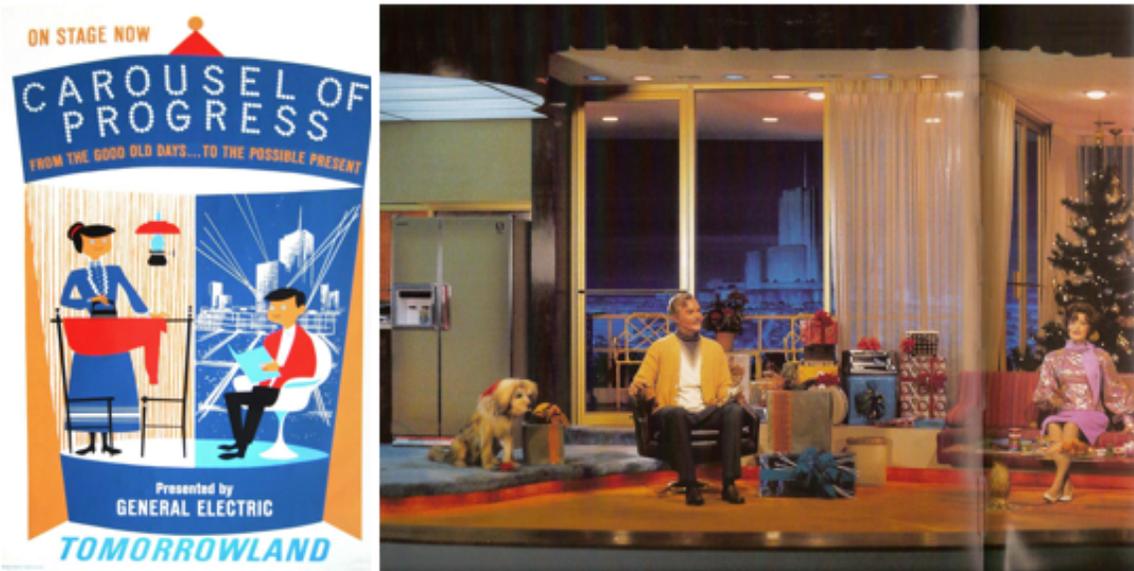
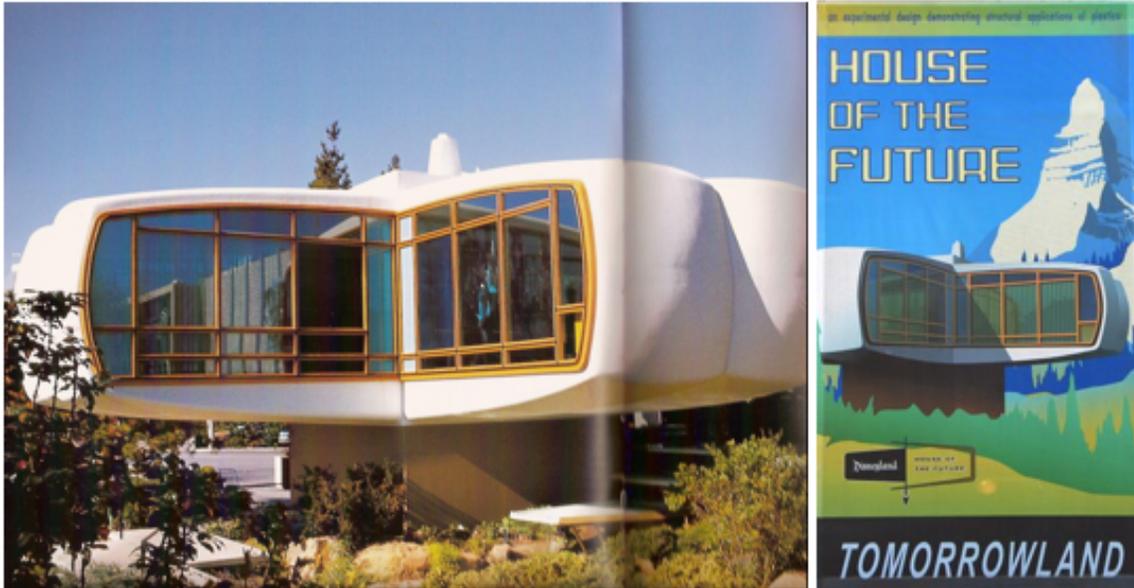


Figure 3.5: *Two of Disney's early popular Tomorrowland exhibits focused exclusively on changing materials in, technologies of, and expectations for the home, with corporate sponsorship of Monsanto and General Electric. Here the future was respectively envisioned as all plastic and all electric.*

- Top left: The Monsanto House of the Future at Disneyland, Anaheim, CA (1966)
 - Top right: Poster for the original House of the Future exhibit in Disneyland
 - Bottom left: Poster for the Carousel of Progress exhibit in Disneyland
 - Bottom right: Walt Disney's Carousel of Progress, at Disneyland, Anaheim, CA (1973)
- The two photographs, from vacation slides collected by Charles Phoenix, were published in *Southern Californialand: Mid-Century Culture in Kodachrome* (2004)

Most likely seen in subsequent visual media by more people than ever visited the actual exhibit during its ten-year run, the 1957 Monsanto House of the Future remains one of the most iconic examples of how we once thought the future would look, feel, and function.¹⁹ Like Buckminster Fuller's prototype aluminum Dymaxion Dwelling Machine (conceived in the 1920s and built in the 1940s), this postwar structure boasted little that was either traditional in design or natural in material. Its smooth, synthetic materiality and push-button gadgetry were described as an integrated "demonstration of style and technology."²⁰ "Plastics" may have been the "one word" driving the future in 1967's *The Graduate*, but Monsanto was publicly promoting it a full decade earlier in this popular Tomorrowland attraction. As with its contemporary, the geodesic dome, later Xanadu houses, or even more recent eco-interpretations like Vetterlein's Reboot, Disney's dreams of the future were also round. Incorporating only a few token rectangles in its window framing and interior furnishings, its shape bespoke not only the technological advances found within the home, but also those employed in the making of the house itself. The use of molded plastic inside and out was expected to revolutionize the housing industry, "a trend that will grow...as houses emerge from the conventional cube shape and begin to take advantage of the freer forms made possible by modern structural plastics materials." While this did not catch on as originally hoped, at least "as far as the housewife is concerned" we did finally get that microwave oven!²¹

Included at the end of a 1960 trade article showcasing the house, titled "The Future Won't Wait," is an impressive list of Monsanto's trademarked materials used in the exhibit, as well as other corporations and interior design services that contributed to its construction and décor. Again, wrapped in futuristic forms and rhetoric, this House of the Future was still mainly a marketing device for products and materials that, while relatively new, were almost or mostly available at the time. The difference was that

these innovations were largely being marketed to manufacturers and builders rather than directly to consumers. In another Tomorrowland attraction that opened in 1967, just as the Monsanto house closed, the emphasis of the Carousel of Progress was more on how consumer products and home utilities have gradually—but radically—changed the way we live. Before its installation at Disneyland, and subsequent move to Disney World,²² this family stage show first debuted at General Electric’s pavilion at the 1964 New York World’s Fair.²³ The novelty of this attraction was that the period tableaux were staged in such a way that they became sequentially visible to a revolving seated audience. While an Audio-Animatronic family sang “There’s a Great Big Beautiful Tomorrow,”²⁴ viewers were transported through the past, visiting that same family—and home—first in spring at the turn of the twentieth century, followed by summer in the 1920s, autumn in the 1940s, and finally winter/Christmas in the present. This last scene has been updated from the imagined family home circa 1973, complete with brand new avocado fridge, to a future in which Grandma plays virtual video games with the kids.

The only connection these Carousel scenarios have with nature are the changing of the seasons, visible through increasingly large glass windows. Progress here is told as a linear story, an evolution, but the seasons also subtly suggest a cyclical revolution, as if progress is a “natural process” that keeps us connected to the environment outside rather than something that increasingly alienates us from it. A similar argument can be made for the less-dramatized Monsanto House of the Future, which, while eschewing all things natural, was nevertheless set in a small but lushly landscaped spot within the theme park. Its wide plexiglass windows let visitors—who could imagine themselves as residents—look unrestrictedly out upon carefully staged trees, shrubs, rocks, and flowers. Natural props softened the view of this elevated *plastic machine in the garden*, but also bled through the window walls to suggest a more natural context for the house.

The combined ideas of “progress” and the “house of the future” outlasted some of these original attractions, at least as they were originally conceived or executed mid-century. In the Disneyland theater building that once housed the Carousel of Progress, a new exhibit draws visitors who are curious to see just what Tomorrowland holds in store for us—and our homes—in the next century. This glimpse of our domestic future is sponsored by a consortium of high-tech companies led by Microsoft.²⁵ When it opened in 2008, the Innoventions Dream Home was not compared favorably to its “plastic marvel” predecessor fifty years earlier. In this higher-tech update it seemed “The future now looked like the past.” But, it is important to note, it did not resemble the postwar past that produced such futuristic curiosities as the Monsanto house. With the exception of an only slightly more modern—and round—kitchen, interior spaces and furnishings stylistically borrow from the pre-WWII nostalgia permeating new suburban homes being built across the country, including a partiality for Craftsman-like details inside and out. An AP article described how, to visitors, the “5,000-square foot home...will look like a suburban tract home outside,” although “inside it will feature hardware, software and touch-screen systems that could simplify everyday living.”²⁶ The things this new smart house claimed it could do for us, though, would be accomplished through a more subtle integration of technology than simply putting a computer screen in every room (which it also does). Well beyond the limited abilities of the push-button “Design for Dreaming” kitchen, this one may not bake a self-frosting cake for you, but it does know what’s in the fridge and what groceries are on the counter, suggesting recipes for what you could make with them for dinner. A “magic mirror” in the girl’s bedroom shows her what the clothes in her closet will look like without having to try them on. Such RFID chip-based wonders of tomorrow are merged with digital applications available today, all in flashy interactive displays demonstrated by fictional residents—the nuclear Elias family.

In a witty critique of what he refers to as “HoF II,” journalist P. J. O’Rourke waxes nostalgic for his childhood visit to the wonderfully modern plastic original. He notes that the circular form of the new Innoventions version “seems to have more to do with the preexisting shape of the building and with crowd control than with futurism.” Rather, he adds that “According to Disney, the shape of things to come can be found at Pottery Barn, with a quick stop at Restoration Hardware for ‘classic future’ touches.”²⁷ Yet the backward-looking aesthetics of this supposedly groundbreaking exhibit was not the main problem, nor was it necessarily indicative of a conservative turn in Disney operations late in the twentieth century. O’Rourke turns instead to the idea that we, as a culture, “seem to have entered a deeply unimaginative era,” cautioning us “not to confuse imagination with innovation or even progress.”²⁸ In many ways our imagination *of innovation* and *of progress* has been articulated almost exclusively in terms of corporate branding of the future, *brought to you by...(insert company name here)*. What we get is often nothing more than imaginative marketing of innovation and progress rather than real change.

Most remarkable about the Disney/Microsoft Innoventions Dream Home is how *not green* it is for 2008. Despite an ongoing fascination for all things technological, our collective rationale for revolutionizing the future of the home in form, materiality, and smart-tech capability, has changed over the last half century, and especially in the last ten years. The imaginative, science-fiction aura of futuristic “green” concept homes adds an element of entertainment to otherwise quite serious discussions of how suburban housing can—and must—be made more sustainable in a world facing unmanageable demographic pressures, dwindling resources, and even environmental catastrophe. When “being green” is culturally constructed as comfortable, easy, and fun, the future seems much less scary, much more hopeful. Disney, with its history of great ingenuity, storytelling, and showmanship, could have led the way in illustrating this goal

for millions of visitors yearly. The 2008 exhibit missed an opportunity, as noted by many eco-conscious observers who expected more from a company that claims environmental bona fides stretching back to its nature-film days. Eco-architecture critic Lloyd Alter declared “Disney’s New Dream Home: Worse Than We Dreamed” in his review for Treehugger.com.²⁹ One blogger was especially disappointed, having thought “the folks at Disney...would incorporate a modicum of sustainability into the mix but instead we are left with an eco house of horrors filled with energy-guzzling gadgets.”³⁰ The result was also surprising to many in consideration of the other brand name attached to the project. Bill Gates, synonymous with Microsoft, built his own outrageously expensive, state-of-the-art dream home, but even way back in the 1990s it was “a model of environmental sensitivity when few knew what that meant and LEED hadn’t yet been created.”³¹ A decade later, when the business community at large was increasingly embracing “green” to demonstrate good corporate citizenship, the verdict in popular opinion was that both Microsoft and Disney should have known—and could have dreamed—*better*.

Four years later Disney tried again, this time with a more overtly eco-friendly exhibit in one of its most high-traffic parks, EPCOT. Opening on Earth Day in 2012, VISION House is Disney’s first “green” house of the future, but far from the first domestic exhibit that attempted to show and sell us a magical future waiting on our doorstep, one that we both want and want to believe in, according to Disney. Packed with just as many techno-gadgets as its predecessors, this time they were all carefully chosen for their environmentally conscious materials, function, style, and efficiency. [Figure 3.6] Emphasis on “vision” in the name sets a double expectation for guests to the house—that it will be both interesting *to see*, like any good Disney World attraction, but also offer a view of the future that is visionary, not stuck in the trap or trappings of the past. In the context of its nearly mainstreamed green cultural moment, eco-expectations were high.

A collaboration of Walt Disney Imagineering and Green Builder® Media, VISION House's corporate sponsorship model, display strategies, and product tie-ins actively promote the difference between this and all other houses of the future.³² Besides its "greenness," another aspect of this exhibit that separates it from competition, past and present, is that everything seen here is supposedly available now to consumers, although much of it is still prohibitively expensive for the average household.

As you approach VISION House, just one exhibit among many competing for attention in the loud, busy Innoventions building, its two-story pale brick façade is rather unassuming compared to the flashing lights and bright colors all around. To draw in passersby for a closer look, they are invited to play with touchscreen displays installed into pedestals that look like solar panels. External non-house exhibit walls are covered with color-coded graphic key words and eco-factoids conveying what's "green" about this semi-modern/semi-traditional structure. [Figure 3.6] Tours begin every ten minutes, and you may not enter "uninvited." When you and your small group are led through it, from front door to back yard, each eco-appliance, eco-material, and eco-function are enthusiastically pointed out by your guide in a manner reminiscent of postwar television commercials interrupting popular sitcoms like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, demonstrating how amazing new automatic dishwashers will save busy housewives invaluable time, transforming the conditions of everyday life for the family.³³ In its latest iteration the stated goal is to save the environment, as well as oft-mentioned monetary savings—ecological appeal through economic appeal. This particularly slick stainless steel dishwasher conserves both water and electricity, but we do not literally see those savings except in stickers that tell us it is so. While highlighting features like a novel flat utensil tray, the appliance represented small changes, merely aesthetic and operational modifications rather than a revolutionary rethinking of what a dishwasher is or could be.

In that most green technical innovations, whether process or product, are tweaks, adjustments, or slight variations in design or efficiency of things we already have or expect to have in the modern suburban home, they rarely look or function in ways that announce them as radical or transformative. And in the particular case of this eco-house of the future, filled with items that sponsors hope you will be inspired to buy after visiting, the aesthetics have been carefully muted to appear a warmer, friendlier kind of modern, not too futuristic nor too radically different from what is seen in other mediated visions of the (green or not green) dream home currently in circulation. New LED lights resemble old-fashioned incandescent light bulbs, not colder replacement CFL's. Recycled glass countertops are of a color and pattern that look a lot like granite—if you squint. Only a few items stand out for their ultramodern forms, the novelty of their tech, or both, while most others blend in with a larger interior design scheme that rather seems positioned to push back against modernity, against the future. The bathroom especially reveals the progress/nostalgia dichotomy of this type of green dream house. The claw foot tub, made from recycled materials, would look equally at home in any late nineteenth-century bath. Meanwhile, the high-tech cube toilet remains most memorable (judging from its prominence in some blog posts about the exhibit) because it looks so out of place, but also because it introduces tech in the most unexpected places—automatically raising and lowering its heated seat, as well as “drying” the user to music from their iPod.

VISION House, like many of its high-tech predecessors, also has the equivalent of an “electronic hearth” or control panel where the homeowner can monitor and manage everything from the window blinds to the air conditioning and exchange systems. The distinction in this version is that it can all be done remotely, whether you are at work a few miles from home or on vacation half a world away. The “syncing” of these home technologies with now ubiquitous personal mobile technologies, like smart phones and

tablets, is presented as a means of keeping you connected and in control of your home environment no matter where you are; you are promised greater knowledge of what your green house *is doing*, since it is no longer a “dumb,” passive structure. The new green rhetoric of the “house of the future” is one that endorses interactive automation of technologies throughout for greatest efficiency in operating the home, but further justifies the use of so many technologies for their own inherent energy efficiency, making this “smart house” palatable as a “green home,” unlike its earlier Disneyland Innoventions counterpart. Even so, as observed when walking through the guided tour with other guests, the “wow factor” seemed much more related to the novelty of the tech and the stylishness of the decor. The accompanying “eco-factors” just made it “feel OK” to be wowed by them, and thus defensible to want to buy and install them in your own home.

Besides the salesman-like EPCOT guides who reinforced this impression at every turn, the pitch was made in absentia by fictional residents. Pictures of the young Monteverde family were displayed throughout, putting real faces to the invented names. The bedroom configurations and decor further indicated the home of a middle-class nuclear family, much as if this were a typical open house in any suburban neighborhood. The backyard boasts the ability to grow plants in a traditional green house and on a novel vertical green wall. If you were unclear about this pseudo-family’s eco-dedication from the tour inside and out back, a Chevy Volt is parked as you exit at the garage. The Monteverde’s (“green mountain”) are a model green family with a model green home. Though unlike the many attractions at Disney World aimed at entertaining the whole family, VISION House is an exhibit primarily geared for adults. Bored children were reluctantly dragged through, constantly reminded NOT to touch, even as their parents were encouraged to ever so briefly “play” with select gadgets. Cheerful prompts notwithstanding, no one—child or adult—was willing to touch the magical eco-toilet.

Despite generational divides in the experience, VISION House is billed as having a “something for everyone” general appeal. Those in the business of building suburban houses and well as those interested in or already owning a home, two groups that are not usually addressed by the same media messages, make up the combined target audience. As one reviewer put it, “A dichotomy exists between green builders who focus on a practical engineering approach and to those, often DIYers, who embrace natural materials,” yet “VISION House embraces both with a hands-on, touch-me and play exhibit” where “families learn green to do now and about which to dream.”³⁴ Those didactic dreams, however, still mostly involve acquisition of “better for you” and “better for the planet” green consumer products. The future as imagined here is brought to you by a whole host of home-related industries and corporate interests rather than one or two primary companies, like Monsanto, GE, or Microsoft. The one literal take-away from a visit to VISION House is a card identifying the many products seen and demonstrated, including manufacturers’ web addresses for more information (and pricing). [Figure 3.6]

VISION House may be mostly about a collection of eco-innovative technologies as seen under one hypothetical roof, each and all with the potential to at least marginally transform how domestic space looks and functions, but it curiously avoids the structural integrity of such spaces—it is a house of the future without being an actual house. Although the exhibit does have a series of facades that “contain” it, as well as a garage and a backyard full of plastic greenery, its interior spaces are not discrete rooms but sequentially visible IKEA-like furnished tableaus conforming to the essential zoned uses we associate with the single-family home—living room, kitchen, dining room, laundry room, bedrooms, and bathroom. Despite cutaway walls revealing innovative framing and insulation systems, the flow and organization of the exhibit reinforces the conception and meaning of a house as a container for keeping and displaying all of our “stuff.”

Whereas past examples, like the Monsanto House of the Future, were as much about the technologically enabled plastic structural form of tomorrow's house, the role of technology *in the home* was of equal concern. It was not alone in this duality. In 1956 Alison and Peter Smithson designed a House of the Future for the *Daily Mail* in the UK. Like other physically constructed concept houses exhibits of its time, it was meant to provide "an accessible setting for architectural experiments" that wrestled with the "contradictory sentiments" of an era in which there were "fundamental shifts in attitudes around technology, precipitating on the one hand a skepticism towards the effects of the machine, and on the other, a renewed vigour in utopian technology-led architectural visions."³⁵ Their interpretation involved what they called "appliance houses," a way of incorporating "reconfigurable and replaceable components" as a central rationale for the machine house, while also rejecting the overall machine aesthetic so popular in earlier decades. Diana Periton's review of a 2004 retrospective exhibition of their domestic design work describes their House of the Future in a way that invites comparison with the more recent Disney examples discussed here. In addition to their general focus on technology as "appliance," they used a similar venue as VISION House and many of its contemporaries—a big box building—to stage their domestic magic show, with actors playing "inhabitants" who demonstrate to visitors how the "wide range of built-in gadgets" would change life as we knew it. While they offered an alternative to Le Corbusier's mechanistic paradigm, for the Smithsons "a house was a particular place, which should be suited to its location and able to...accommodate its inhabitants' individual patterns of use."³⁶ It is in this spirit that exhibits like VISION House engage visitors with a similar rhetoric of flexibility and customization in imagining how green their homes could yet be. The greening of one's home through gradual purchase and replacement of appliances, today *and* tomorrow, is much more conceivable than building a whole new green home.

For all of the possibilities inherent in these models for greening the home through incremental technological gadgets, additions or improvements, the big picture fantasy is still of the overall “smart house.” This theme is not new in popular culture, although when addressed in media like feature films the scenario rarely ends happily.³⁷ Techno-horror narrative trends in the movies and on television are mostly at odds with how more directly consumer product oriented exhibits, like by Disney, are positively represented as both family and future friendly, and increasingly eco-friendly. Critical or hopeful in tone, stories about completely computer dependent lifestyles in suburbia may seem like science fiction, yet the idea prevails in the design of concept houses that imagine near-future possibilities based on the tech we already have and perceivable developmental trajectories. This is, however, also a point of contention in debates about how smart we actually want our houses to be. A recent study from the Pew Research Center suggests that, while possible in the near term, the cost and complexity of various “smart” systems, including those designed for use in and around the home, will not be in as high demand as once thought. Their expert respondents concluded that “people find comfort in the familiar, simple, ‘dumb’ systems to which they are accustomed,” especially at home.³⁸

One question yielded “nearly evenly divided” results as to the successful acceptance and implementation of “smart systems” by 2020, with 51% agreeing that “the Home of the Future that has often been foretold is coming closer and closer to becoming reality” while 46% expect that “the Home of the Future does not come to resemble the future projected in the recent past.” The statement that won the slight majority framed this house as a “connected household” that would be “a model of efficiency, as people are able to manage consumption of resources...in ways that place less of a burden on the environment while saving households money.” This dual justification is also becoming more common in marketing rhetoric to populations that are not considered

necessarily part of or sympathetic to environmental movements. Eco-interest is couched in terms that highlight economic self-interest. The competing option in this “tension pair” meanwhile suggests that smart houses, and the embedded systems that make them so, will not become mainstream largely “due to difficulties in gaining consumer trust and because of the complexities in using new services.” This resistance is precisely what projects like VISION House are positioned to counter, mainstreaming the aesthetics and motivations for green homes while also familiarizing would-be consumers with the more technical aspects of green, all through fun, easy, low stakes interactions in a space that looks like a home (rather than a research lab, or even a retail electronics store).

Polls like this offer insight into the rationale behind consumer practices. The reasoning behind choices in the Pew questionnaire was diverse, as further expressed in written arguments by most participants in the online survey. Environmental sustainability was cited as one concern among other wide-ranging factors as demographics, economic conditions, mobility, privacy, efficiency, standardization, mandates, and incentives in affecting future success or failure of smart technologies in the home. This illustrates the complicated, and at times conflicted terrain in which such eco-calculations are made. Several answers focused on two related expectations for what a house—of today *or* tomorrow—should be: both “simple” and “dumb.”³⁹ As further included in the statement rejecting a future dominated by high-tech homes, “the home of 2020 looks about the same as the home of 2011.” While the sentence qualifies this point as it continues with the phrase “in terms of resource consumption and management,” it also “looks like” the homes we have today in the more conventional sense of style and appearance. This is further related to how we engage culturally with the technology that could make our residential architecture “smarter,” whether incrementally or at a more revolutionary pace. The future we want is familiar. In this context, green must be packaged this way as well.

Not primarily designed as a tourist eco-attraction like Disney's VISION House, a recent government-sponsored project was developed concurrently, also attempting to bridge the divide between a high tech green future and the familiar suburban present. The National Institute of Standards and Technology is now invested in net-zero-energy homes, constructing a test house in 2012 that will serve as a flexible laboratory for an array of green home technologies. [Figure 3.7] The choices made about its size, style, and setting garnered both praise and criticism for how it presents the foreseeable future. In addition to being fully furnished, the house—its systems and appliances—will also be completely automated and monitored in order to conduct a year-long simulation of “real world” conditions based on the expected usage of a family of four. That such an experiment is framed in terms of the stereotypical nuclear family unit reaffirms the popular assumption that this is the norm, the base unit of both social organization and resource consumption in daily life. The choice of house is in line with the standard inventory of suburbia today, a traditional 2,700 square feet, 2-story plan designed for the “average” family. As NIST chief engineer Hunter Fanney explains, they “wanted to show that a [green] house like that could be designed to fit into a typical suburban neighborhood and look like any other house.”⁴⁰ Compared to concept houses, green or otherwise, the NIST test home strategically packages novel technologies within popular middle-class design standards, similar to Disney's VISION House. Consciously contrary to “most attempts at building such places” that “have taken the form of futuristic or minimalist creations, of tiny pod homes or avant-garde construction,” this pragmatic yet experimental dwelling acknowledges that if “American tastes for the 2,700 square-foot, two-car garage homestead don't change, we could at least change these homes themselves.”⁴¹ Here the imagination of green progress is limited to the function of the house, embracing the status quo of design, and accepting suburbia as a suitable setting.



Figure 3.7: *The NIST test house was designed to look like any new suburban house. Solar panels on the roof are the only exterior clue to its “greenness.”*

Above: Photo of NIST’s Net-Zero test house in Gaithersburg, MD, from *The Atlantic Cities*, <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/housing/2012/09/house-consumes-less-net-energy-your-little-urban-studio/3398/>

Below: Illustration of the NIST Net-Zero house, highlighting its construction and the technologies installed and to be tested for future consumption.

Even so, this particular suburban-friendly green test house was built at a location devoid of other houses. Its visual context is remarkably similar to many concept houses and high-end architect-designed homes, set alone against greenery—this time including both a wooded backdrop and an expansive lawn. Whether we are able to visit the NIST house of the future or only view it through media coverage of its opening and operations, it offers an alternative site for dreaming of a greener future that fits in with and confirms the locales and lifestyles we now enjoy. It further emphasizes technological innovation and efficiency as solutions for broader environmental problems in our suburban future.

Our dreams of and for a future green home of our own are not always nurtured in the physical spaces we currently inhabit or even occasionally visit. As new technologies are incorporated into our everyday spaces and routines, and at ever-greater rates and scales, they also represent a powerful tool for facilitating imagination about how that green dream home might look, how we might expect to occupy it, and even where it may be set. Even if you never had the chance to walk through the VISION House exhibit at Disney World or the NIST Net-Zero test house outside of Washington, DC, all you need is an Internet connection to virtually visit them.⁴² Through its related interactive website, including a version for kids and another for teachers,⁴³ the green ideas and lessons of VISION House are not limited by geographic location or the ability to travel. [Figure 3.8] Here the mediated experience of this digital concept house is designed to be accessible and attractive to its age and use specific audiences. In addition to “The Vision House Story,” adults see menu choices like “Find a Green Expert,” “Find a Green Product” and “Own a Green Home,” with each click connecting them to more ways they can buy green to be green, as well as a “Do It Yourself” page with ideas for how the handy and the thrifty can build green. This colorful “homepage,” much like the physical Disney exhibit, functions as simultaneous idea generator, information source, and shopping network.

The more colorful complementary children's page is filled with green games, stories and trivia, as well as an extended cast of eco-characters beyond the Monteverde family, each with slightly different eco-tales and adventures to edu-tain younger suburbanites. Kids who visit the site are addressed as "Visioneers," a green counterpart to standard postwar Disney "Mouseketeers," and encouraged to participate in environmentally oriented imagination and action through online play. As they are enlisted to "help Samantha [Monteverde] GREEN the scene" online, they learn to model rhetoric that can be employed in advocating for green changes in their own homes and families.

While the physical exhibit at Disney World was much more oriented to adults, the split VISION House website acknowledges that guests of different ages not only have different interests in greening the future, but also varying levels of engagement with the house as an instrument for green selfhood. Adults make the majority of decisions in and about the home; their tastes and choices reflect what they think is most appropriate for themselves and their family's wellbeing and social standing. Children are rather seen as products of that house, those tastes, and those choices. In addition to ensuring the most modern conveniences and efficiencies of living in a green dream house, parents are encouraged by media like VISION House—in person and online—to choose green options for and in their home spaces to better cultivate eco-aware children. Technology is both tool and toy in this context, allowing increased interactivity of all family members with the house in ways consistent with mediated lessons on living greener. As children reach technological parity with or even superiority over adults, they are better able to share household responsibilities, maintain green sensibilities, and shape green suburbia.

Design may seem less relevant to generations that are years or decades away from making their own housing decisions, but it is worth noting how the VISION House of the future is rendered online in strikingly dissimilar ways for its age-specific visitors.

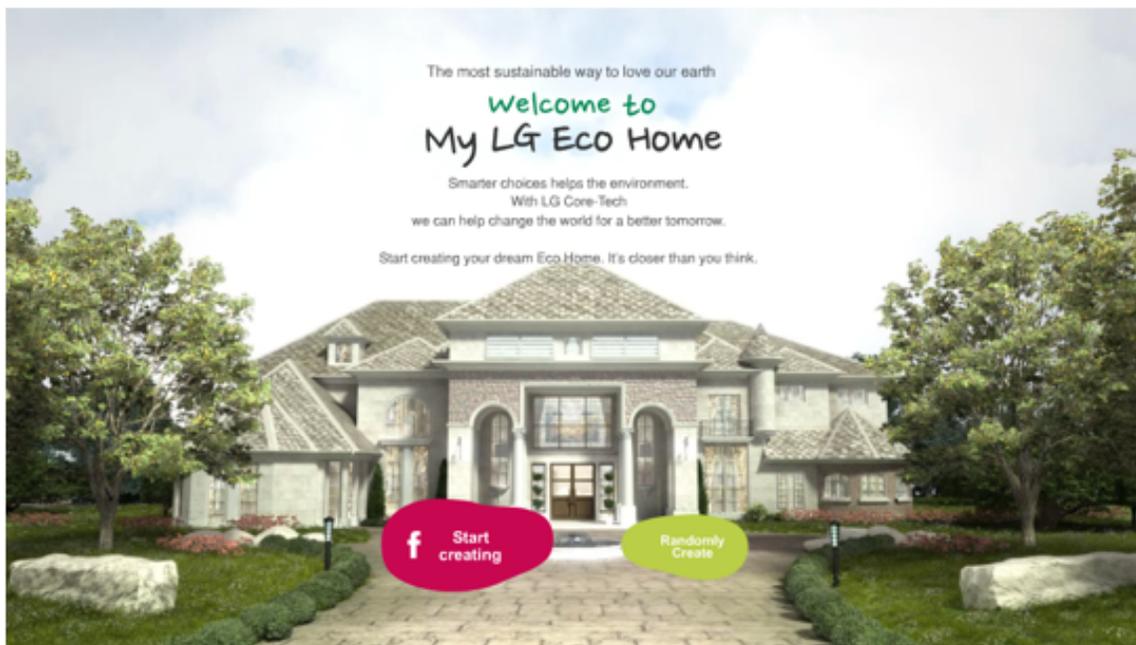


Figure 3.8: *The online presence of “houses of the future” include a virtual version of the Disney World Innoventions attraction, which renders the green dream house quite differently for adults and children (above), where the “visioneers” patently omit any consideration of what any might well consider a central aspect of “visioneering,: such as style, design, and landscape. Other examples, like My LG Eco Home, which is “played” through Facebook, has an even more traditional façade similar to a suburban McMansion. (below) Both sites help users envision what their green dream house might look like through the choice of green products, although the latter does so in a much more game-like interface.*

Above left: Screen capture of Disney’s VISION House interactive website (2012)

Above right: Screen capture of the game-filled “Kids” page” on the VISION House website (2012)

Below: Screen capture of My LG Eco Home interactive design web page (2012), <http://www.lgcoretech.com/global/index.php>

The adult digital version tracks the physical exhibit, although as a whole appears more uniformly modern than the recycled brick façade in EPCOT. The green color scheme brightens up around the edges of the kids' version, and the house itself is more cartoon-like, stylistically connoting rather than denoting "house." The level of detail and realism found in online interpretations of green dream homes is proportional to the age-based ability to conceive of building, purchasing, or furnishing one in real life. Depending more on the literal interpretation of built space, adult dreams have more visual investment in material synchronicity than the more playful distortions found in child-centered media.

Online play may be directed at one age group or another, but it also affords those without the financial means to ever own a green dream home a place where they can virtually experience the process of building, buying, or filling one up. On the My LG Eco Home website, the aesthetics have more in common with average real estate ads than most houses of the future.⁴⁴ This site functions as a DIY concept house in game form. [Figure 3.8] Sponsored by LG, a Korean company that makes everything from washing machines to televisions, social media is the platform for dreaming about high tech, energy-efficient appliances we might one day buy for our actual houses, an escalation of the "design for dreaming" rhetorical paradigm. We are able to share those dreams with Facebook friends, inviting them to a virtual housewarming party to show off our virtual green tech and cred. While "dressed up" in eco-furnishings and surfaces that contribute to the green style of the house, this is again contextualized in an architectural model that speaks more to nostalgic typologies common in suburbia over the last few decades, the aspirational neo-traditional McMansion.⁴⁵ The "welcome" encountered on the entry page tries to position it as "The most sustainable way to love our earth," yet another instance of mitigating environmental impact through green consumption for the home. Whether virtual or material, these remain common parameters for imagining a greener future.

Play Time

*The house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer,
the house allows one to dream in peace.*

—Gaston Bachelard

Few structures of imagination facilitate dreaming of, as well as in, the form of a house. Despite the proliferation of commercial green-themed dream house websites for the young and the not so young, there is still a certain pleasure to be found in more tactile versus virtual forms of play. Exhibits like those at Disney theme parks are not the only means by which concept houses are translated into material form, creating built spaces within which dreams of the future are sheltered, nourished, and also constructed. In the children's playhouse we find a structure that offers a simplified, smaller scale, lower tech version of the home in which free play is encouraged and children get to both create and enact their own stories. These narratives are, however, often imitations or interpretations of adult socio-spatial scripts children observe in visual media as well as in their own homes and families. The reduced scale of most playhouses facilitates a more individualistic engagement with such structures, regarding it as "my" space rather than "our" pseudo-domestic space since the "families" associated with it are imagined around the desires and constructions of the child to whom it belongs. Rather than comparing themselves to a fictional family conjured up by a marketing team trying to sell you the latest in home design or appliances (like the Monteverde family in VISION House), children playing in these simpler, miniature reproductions are producing their own ideal family structures and activities as much as they are reproducing those dominant in the culture. The playhouse makes room for imagining and containing both ideas of family and of the individual in a way that models and rehearses future adult/home relations.

The extent to which children recognize and value the eco-character of their playhouses, individually or shared, holds the possibility of shaping the kind of “green” play, imagination, and dreaming that takes place within or around them. When in or part of a public space, like Disney World’s Innoventions building, environmental messages and lessons are central to their inclusion in what might otherwise be construed as base consumption-centered entertainment venues. One example, the basic play structure, made out of what appear to be scrap pieces of wood and set up as if in the front yard of VISION House, and adorned only by simulated crayon signs warning “kids only,” offers the most simple of tactile play opportunities framed as “green” play. Unlike its product-filled adult-oriented counterpart, nothing is sold in or through the children’s “green” playhouse except an extension of eco-home values broadly construed. Examples of this kind of playhouse as a consequence are visually distinguishable from those meant to draw adult dreamers, marking their “greenness” in more apparently primitive designs and materials compared to adult high tech houses of the future meant to “wow” them.

Commercially available green playhouses produced for home consumption may be smaller and less durable than that included near the VISION House exhibit, but they share a cultural logic of simplicity, that runs counter to trends in both concept homes and toys, wherein everyday life and play increasingly incorporate new complex technologies in their design and function. These uncomplicated playhouses are further stripped of many of the aesthetic pretensions related to the adult dream home. They are often simple shells containing few if any furnishings or appliances. In this respect many green playhouses are technologically primitive, read as more “natural,” and the play that they promote is imagined this way as well, encouraging engagement with the space it creates rather than the things it contains. Looking at a selection of recently available models claiming various eco-values like recycled materials or non-toxic finishes, most available

green playhouses for children advertise themselves as such through their basic designs and rather unadorned, naked appearance.⁴⁶ This may certainly be an effect of cheap manufacturing rationalized as something “better” through green marketing, yet this trend is dominant enough in the marketplace that this particular kind of bareness, simplicity, and even non-durability now registers as “green” to parents when shopping for such eco-friendly products. [Figure 3.9] Some are made of unpainted, sustainably harvested or recycled wood [3.9a], while others utilize bright fabric on lightweight tent structures [3.9e]. Currently the most popular material for green playhouses is recycled cardboard, whether the original unprinted brown [3.9c,f,h], brightly colored [3.9d.g,i], or with simple black and white designs that can be colored in—and thus personalized—by the child. Forms follow the traditional uncomplicated patterns of Cape Cod-like boxes, or even more modern and fantastical shapes, each designed to shape the dreaming within. Regardless of form, color, or even the material, the “greenness” of these playhouses is realized in their simplicity, versatility, and the ease with which they can each be moved, dismantled, and eventually recycled. They are also relatively inexpensive, especially when compared to tech-intensive toys and computer-based games. While a growing segment of the still small environmentally oriented toy market, the eco-playhouse, though, does not necessarily promote eco-play. Despite their eco-conscious materials and production, their design offers little in the way of imaginative play that diverges from standard non-green playhouses, whether equally simple or more extravagantly detailed.

The tech-centered toy industry is, perhaps not surprisingly, investing in a version of green houses of the future, offering options for a completely different kind of eco-play. More of an experimental concept house, comparable in theme to the full-scaled NIST Net Zero test house, Thames & Kosmos sells the “Power House,” through which older children (10 and up) can explore “Sustainable Living in the 21st Century.”⁴⁷ [Figure 3.9]



Figure 3.9: *Green playhouses come in a variety of shapes, but are usually quite simple. Toy model green houses, though, tend to be more technologically complex.*

Above: Eco play houses; multiple companies (2012)
 Below: Thames & Kosmos, the original “Power House” experimental model house, and the “Power House: Green Essentials Edition” (2010)

While the architectural form the Power House assumes is not much more innovative than larger playhouses, its green claims emerge from the knowledge children actively gain about alternative technologies like wind and solar, as well as other areas of green tech and life related to the home, including water conservation and organic gardening. Their website introduces the product in terms of the future, not of the single-family house alone, but of the whole planet. It proclaims that “To live sustainably, we must use Earth’s resources at a rate at which they can be replenished, and thus provide for future generations to live as we have.” It is reasonable to assume that implied in this statement is also “as we have lived” in suburbia. While full scale eco-houses of the future—from the most outrageous concept drawings like Phantom House to relatable promotional product displays like VISION House—included many of these same technologies and ideas, only in this children’s toy are lessons about the fundamental science behind them.

In both the original and the scaled down “Essentials” versions of the Power House, progress is not about the sustainable techno-gadgets we can expect to see and buy in the future, but rather educating a future generation who understands and develops such technologies, one better aware of the whole-house and wider ecosystems in which they will eventually be deployed. While the rationale of this toy house is environmentally focused scientific experimentation, it relies on visuals that position it as yet another idealized eco-house in a romanticized environment. Power House, like so many of the disparate examples discussed here, is pictured on its box as a lone residential structure amidst tall trees, green grass, and calm waters, just as we have come to expect in our eco-imagination of sustainable living. Even so, Power House and other green toys like it do reorient eco-play in a way that merges the conceptual and the material, all housed in a most familiar structural form in whose future we are at least interested if not invested.

Like the playhouse, playing somewhere between the conceptual and the material is the children's dollhouse. Such objects are much more than oversimplified domestic sets in which little girls (and in some instances little boys) act out the mundane fantasies of everyday life with Barbie and Ken. They too are sites and objects of experimentation, although their general "greenness" has to date lagged behind both bigger blander playhouses and similarly scaled science-oriented test houses. Unlike the meticulously handcrafted reproductions of adult hobbyists, the dollhouse-as-toy is readymade for instruction of children's "practice" of grown-up space, though one often much better "equipped" to engage the functionality of rooms and furniture and appliances (even if they are only "dumb" cardboard, wood or plastic copies). Role-playing the heterosexual couple or the nuclear family through molded, malleable plastic figures is structured *by* as well as *within* the design of dollhouses. Often appearing generically cartoonish in form, most common examples feature either an open-sided or openable box that offers a clear view of the interior, and easy access for small hands to manipulate the dolls and toy objects within. These little boxes are usually divided into basic rooms that serve the function-specific uses we associate with a basic mid- to late-twentieth-century, middle-class, suburban house. Providing a loose script of sorts, they further teach "normal" occupation and use of this miniature pretend space, but also of the adult spaces that those rooms in particular, and that house in general, correlate with in real life.

In many respects, the adult Disney VISION House exhibit resembles a full human-scale dollhouse configuration more than an actual built and furnished home, suggesting a common play script for both children and adults as concerns our continued imaginative engagement with domestic space. As an organizing structure for "playing house," kids are encouraged to learn which activities are appropriate to different areas within the home through experimentation with the semi-open-concept dollhouse. The

“lessons” manifest in recognition of which items—furniture, appliances, fixtures, accessories, and even bodies—belong in each room, which becomes part of the set up and backdrop for play domestic narratives. The dollhouse is in this context an instrument of normalization. In VISION House we encounter a similar process as visitors are exposed to a social as well as material normalization of “green” in the oversized but nonetheless dollhouse-like spaces they are led through. The “green lessons” learned include which technologies belong where, but also how they might affect the social scripts we have absorbed from over half a century of media illustrating and marketing an ideal suburban lifestyle. There is an inconspicuous gendering of the discourses related to examples like this, even though they may seem a world away from “Design for Dreaming” in their joint address to both men and women.

The pervasiveness of gendered “zoning” of interests in and around the house in media more broadly is related to a history of gendered play, often “centering” play for girls within the space of dollhouses, while for boys play is more generally involved with constructing space and interacting outward with the environment.⁴⁸ This paradigm extends to larger scale play as well: little girls are more often given a “playhouse,” and little boys are expected to build a “fort” in and around which they will play. Although it is dollhouse scale, the “experimental” Thames & Kosmos Power House is never referred to as a *dollhouse*, which has gendered connotations framing it as “for girls.” Barbie’s Dream Houses perhaps have an outsized place in the cultural history of dollhouses as sites for gendered domestic play, as highly idealized as well as normalized play space that resonates with girls of all ages. In recent discourses concerned with “greening” Barbie’s Dream House and her imagined lifestyle within it, the gendering of green finds material expression in these conceptual play homes. As brand-name, modern artifacts of American girlhood spanning over half a century, Barbie’s Dream Houses provide a

“home” for one of the most popular dolls ever produced. At 1/6 scale, they have always been somewhat more intricately designed and semi-functional compared to other toy houses manufactured at smaller scales, such as those by Playskool or Fisher Price, which are aimed at younger children (and not always “just for girls”). Barbie, and the various incarnations of her Dream House marketed over the decades, had the potential to at least moderately challenge the hegemonic family ideal articulated in the dollhouse-as-play-form. While there was always room for Ken (as well as some other female figures that are presented as Barbie’s sisters or friends, but, intriguingly, not usually as her daughters), this was nonetheless always *Barbie’s dream* and *Barbie’s house*. As such, though, greening Barbie’s Dream House requires also greening Barbie.

Her first bachelorette pad, a simple cardboard box more reminiscent of the inside of an efficiency apartment or dorm room than a fully equipped and spatially differentiated house, was introduced by Mattel in 1962, three years after the first doll premiered. The exterior of this fold-up house-in-a-box though, was printed with details that suggested it was a typical postwar ranch home that would fit into any new suburban neighborhood of that era.⁴⁹ Despite its humble, tract-house-like beginnings, it wasn’t long before Barbie’s Dream House was just as plastic—and complicated—an object as she was herself. By the 1980s and 1990s Barbie traded in her modest starter homes for virtual McMansions. The early cardboard versions had included all of “the basics” a girl on her own (or with a boy on the side) would need, like a closet, TV, stereo, record albums, etc., and in one version sold in the early 1960s she even had a complete pink and turquoise efficiency kitchen. The newer, professional incarnations of Barbie required spaces of well-appointed multi-room, multi-floor luxury, each model “pinker” than the last and more traditional in terms of architectural style. Not only is Barbie-the-doll a symbol of conspicuous consumption in the name of American childhood, her various dream

houses can be read as indicators of her (and our?) own increasingly aspirational (even if pretend) adult consumption, corresponding to home purchasing power made possible by upscale dream careers. While always glamorous, Barbie was sold (dressed as) as incarnations of a nurse in 1961 and a stewardess in 1966, but later as a doctor in 1988 and a pilot in 1990, and her move-up residences displayed the distinction in both size and style. In this context, we can read Barbie and her Dream House as more culturally progressive than usually thought, a role model for domestic and professional independence more in line with Mary Richards than June Cleaver.

Barbie's Dream House is not limited to just the physical dollhouse, but also extends into mediated spaces, including movies and numerous web videos, and even an actual Malibu home that was "redesigned" in honor of Barbie's 50th birthday. The range of address of the Barbie brand and the branded space of her Dream Houses extends to both young girls and women, in the latter maintaining a discursive appeal to memory of when one was a child and what playing with Barbie and her dream house meant at that time. A series of commercials in 2008 revolve around this narrative of fond memories, and the value of passing on the experience to a new generation of Barbie girls. But in addition to looking backward, Barbie's Dream House in particular afforded a space for dreaming about the future, all centered on the house as something more than the place in which you are, upon marriage, dutifully deposited and expected to perform certain domestic roles, as was the pre-Barbie Thelma Tadlock. While that was—and is—certainly a possible narrative that children might play out in their dollhouses, the toy itself is not necessarily prescriptive of this. The dollhouse—Barbie's Dream House or any other—is as much a space for dreaming as any sophisticated concept drawing or high tech house of the future. The question here is whether or not a gender specific toy like this offers anything of relevance to questions of a sustainable future, for Barbie, for us,

or for the next generation. Can we dream green within the confines of pink plastic?

It is in 2011 that we finally get a game-changing Barbie doll that could aid in answering this question. Mattel finally released a much-anticipated official “Architect Barbie.”⁵⁰ [Figure 3.10] Now, rather than simply positioned as someone who potentially buys and lives in a dream house, little girls are given a specific scenario (or at least a wardrobe) in which Barbie can be imagined as able to design dream houses for clients as well as for herself. This particular professional Barbie was part of the “I Can Be...” series, in which the public could weigh in online as to which career Barbie should pursue in order to inspire girls everywhere to follow her fictitious, fashionable lead.⁵¹ Most critical discussion filled the blogosphere over what this new Barbie looked like—she wore pink, but as one writer noted, she also sported black-rimmed glasses so we’d know she’s smart!⁵² Following the announcement and unveiling, some interested voices were beginning to ask what “Architect Barbie” would be inclined to design and build? Worried observers pointed to the miniature pink “architectural model” of her most current Dream House that came with the doll. Integral to this secondary discussion was how green the pink plastic monster-Barbie-mansions could possibly be? These were designed for old, non-architect Barbie, so what would a now eco-self-conscious Architect Barbie Green Dream House look like, and would little girls want to play with, as well as design it?

In the spirit of these questions and further tying the doll-architect to the dollhouse in practice as well as concept, the American Institute of Architects sponsored the “Architect Barbie Dream House” design competition in partnership with Mattel. AIA criteria for the fun-inspired contest included reflecting “the best sustainable design principles” while also being “a stylish space” that Barbie, with her closets full of clothes, and multitude of animals, including a giraffe, “can live in comfortably.” This list also articulated the “need” for a gourmet kitchen and large entertaining space, a master

“dream” bathroom, and a big backyard, overlooking the ocean, of course. These HGTV-like requirements are far beyond those found in most suburban neighborhoods. All of the designs submitted addressed each criteria in modernist designs that also ran counter to the fifty-year history of actual Barbie Dream Houses manufactured by Mattel and designed for childhood play. The winning design looks unsurprisingly similar to Phantom House, as well as a large number of green concept houses submitted to non-doll related design competitions. Described in one announcement as “the quintessential Malibu home, complete with modern aesthetics, super functional spaces, lots of eco-friendly décor and plenty of sustainable features,” it includes such contemporary green must-haves as a “green roof, drought tolerant landscaping, rainwater harvesting, solar panels and energy efficient appliances.”⁵³ [Figure 3.10] It is also congruent with the aesthetics of a modern modular architecture that is intervening in the visual and ideological discourses of green design, as evident in its simple stacked glass boxes, sparse furnishings, and clean lines. The ultramodernness of the design illustrates the visual disjunction between professional architectural discourse and that of the prolific and profitable dollhouse market which follows a much more traditional, even nostalgic aesthetic guideline, one more closely emulating house styles common in the broader built suburban environment. Design for children’s play does not match playful AIA endorsed concepts of Barbie’s “green” dream.

Since announcement of the design competition, critics have inevitably weighed in on how green this design really is—or isn’t. Barbie’s cars and clothes, indicative of a high-consumption lifestyle, make her an unlikely, and less than ideal, role model for sustainability. Writing for *The Atlantic*, Kaid Benfield concludes his description of the winning concept with the following complaint:



Figure 3.10: *In conjunction with the release of Architect Barbie (above), Mattel and the AIA cosponsored a design competition for a more suitably sustainable Architect Barbie Dream House. A stackable series of boxes with green interior features and green roofs, this modern concept home is very different from the Dream Houses available for purchase, including the model pink McMansion that comes with Architect Barbie herself.*

Above: Mattel's "Architect Barbie," 2011's "Career of the Year" doll
 Below: Winning sustainable design for the AIA "Architect Barbie Dream House Competition," submitted by architects Ting Li and Maja Paklar (2011), <http://info.aia.org/aia/architect-barbie.cfm>.

Of course, this being an AIA competition, the house has nearly 5,000 square feet of living space and is sited on a three-acre lot in Malibu with a three-car garage. The Institute isn't known for giving much weight to green locations with walkability and transportation choices... So I think "the best sustainable design principles" should come with a disclaimer in this case. Even Barbie can't have everything, apparently.⁵⁴

Context is as important as concept in green design—even for dolls. One aspect of how children play with dollhouses (including those designed for or by Barbie) that gets relatively little consideration is how dislocated such structures inevitably are. Compared to other kinds of play-building toys that require children to construct or move figures through larger town-like or neighborhood spaces that incorporate more than one building or building type, the dollhouse is a *self-contained* and *self-concerned* environment. Barbie may have a fancy pink sports car (a hybrid?) parked in her dream garage, but where and how far does she go in it? The play is meant to remain centered inside the single-family/single-doll dream house and in the immediate vicinity of the private yard narrowly attached to it. The house of our dreams holds our dreams within its structure, whether physical or conceptual, adult living space or childhood play space. This is a potential impediment to conceiving those dreams in more eco-sensitive terms. While by no means the only discursive practice that treats the concept of home in ways that are isolated from broader ecological contexts, traditional dollhouse-play—even green dollhouse play—nonetheless reinforces such models of thinking and dreaming.

But one factor that prevents this discussion of conceptual green domestic play space turning into material green domestic play space is the fact that Barbie's highly publicized Green Dream Home does not actually exist. Mattel does not and will not be manufacturing or selling this product for Architect Barbie or any other Barbie doll currently available for young girls to play—and dream—with. The competition was concept-only, and while the rhetoric surrounding it often addressed the figure of the child

immersed in a stylishly green update of hot pink Barbie space and culture, it never directly addressed actual children or invited them to play with it—as object or idea—in any fashion. The target audience for these designs was adult female architects and those who follow the mostly male profession. The women who participated were in essence asked to channel their memories of playing with the dolls and dream dollhouses of their youth, and enact the fictional product of Architect Barbie as played by their adult, professional, working selves. Young girls still within the playing-with-dolls age range are given Architect Barbie as a role model, complete with the rhetoric of LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) and other green building practices, yet their actual company-sanctioned, tie-in product play is relegated to the same old pink oversized plastic McMansion.⁵⁵ This discrepancy has cultural consequences for the nature of “dreaming,” whereby limitations on the commercial, material form of imaginative play appear to sanction or promote certain kinds of dreams and delimit others, the effects of which may extend to broader fields of play as well as everyday life, including the construction of gender and family, the design of homes and neighborhoods, and even the means and meanings of sustainability.

This situation has not escaped the notice of some in the pro-green play-architecture community.⁵⁶ Miniio Modern Dollhouses offers “a more sustainable place for the plastic dolls to play.”⁵⁷ [Figure 3.11] Reminiscent of the spare, open space of the original 1960s Barbie Dream House in size and simple modern furnishings, Miniio’s green alternative to the overgrown and overly pink cluttered versions of recent decades does not incorporate any of the stylistic flares or details one would associate with the Barbie franchise. Handmade using all natural and nontoxic materials like wood, metal, stone, and beeswax finishes, the basic module boasts a blandly neutral palette, which extends to the attire of the hipster-ish Barbie doll featured in the promotional photos.



Figure 3.11: *For eco-conscious consumers who disapprove of Barbie's pink plastic Dream House, they can buy their children this modern green Barbie house.*

Images from slideshow with Julie Seguss' March 1, 2013 *Inhabitots* blog post, "Miniio Modern Dollhouses Are Green Dream Homes for Barbie and Other Dolls," <http://www.inhabitots.com/miniio-modern-dollhouses-are-green-dream-homes-for-barbie-and-other-dolls/>.

Only a touch of pink can be found in a decorative band around the legs of one chair. Even the girl shown playing with this doll-in-house, who otherwise conforms to the enthusiastic poses and smiles required in official Mattel product ads,⁵⁸ is streamlined to match the style of the toned-down doll she manipulates through the open walls of the modular open-concept boxes. This design suggests the presence of large panes of glass and natural light common to both modern homes and concept houses, as if the eco-dollhouse is situated to look out upon a pretend lakeshore or nature preserve. Hints of this natural setting are seen in the promotional photographs, in the simple landscape graphics on the girl's bedroom wall and in cartoon figures of birds and flowers overlaying the images. Even though the style of doll and space seen here refer to a more urban contemporary cultural context, this modern dollhouse form, made from all natural materials, are given a familiar though make believe natural setting to further emphasize its—and Barbie's—potential greenness.

The aesthetic choices made for Miniio's upscale but down-sized dream house deliberately reject the increasing sentimentalism and grandiosity of Mattel's offerings in this product category, including those with pink gadget-filled dream kitchens, and even the pink-tinged modernism of the Malibu green concept houses submitted in the AIA design competition. However, if we look at these competing visions collectively, as illustrative of the range in which we imagine something as inconsequential as a dream house for a doll, we have an opportunity to better understand the divided context for our broader discourses of the future of green dream homes. If we expand our definition of "concept houses" to include not only those architectural designs that propose artistic, fantastic domestic futures, but also the vast assortment of ways that dreams of and for the future are made material, interactive, and consumable, the speculative conversation they engender potentially makes room for a wider variety of voices and interests than

might otherwise participate. Yet as self-contained products structuring green home play and green home dreaming, they potentially limit the opportunity for conducting a broader, engaged discourse among all parties and from multiple perspectives.

Whether we imagine someday living in a glass box on a seashore or a smart house in the suburbs, those dreams are influenced by the cultural and environmental contexts in which we now live, travel, and also play. The “openness” of exhibit house, playhouse and dollhouse designs may seem counter to the notion of the house that shelters daydreams, but they do promote certain other kinds of dreaming that shape our conceptual construction of houses and the plausible narratives we imagine can take place within them. A greener tomorrow may be technologically driven, maximizing the efficiency with which those narratives get played out in real life, but they might also help fundamentally redesign the spaces, settings, and meanings of the green dream house of the future. The “concept houses” explored in this chapter do the cultural work of engaging tradition with challenges and exigencies of the present, but they also further demonstrate the degree to which certain kinds and shapes of dreaming register as more or less part of a “fantasy” future. The role of consumer practice and desire cannot be underestimated here—the future we can touch and play with is a future we can plausibly believe or expect to someday enjoy. Barbie’s architect-designed sustainable “Green Dream House” is image, not materially reproducible or purchasable. More girls are now playing with Mattel’s pink plastic non-green toy versions than have to date even seen the AIA design. A few environmentally conscious parents have given their children Miniios’ expensive but all natural modern interpretation. While these are all facets of Barbie’s Dream House discourse, and revealing of the ways in which it is being re-mediated as something that can be greener, they also highlight the divide between participants of that discourse and the prioritization of green within it.

Notes for Chapter 3:

- ¹ For examples of some of the ads for all-electric, time and labor saving kitchens, see “Push-Button Convenience” at The State Museum of Pennsylvania’s *Levittown, PA: Building the Suburban Dream* (2003), <http://www.statemuseumpa.org/levittown/three/kitchen.html>. In addition to an ad for GE’s “wonder kitchen” appliances included in Levittown houses, the site includes an illustration from a 1957 issue of *Electrical Merchandising* that pictures an apron-clad housewife lounging on a chaise in the middle of her automated kitchen, accompanied by a quote from “Architect” Alfred Levitt: “Thanks to the number of appliances in our house, the girls will have three hours to kill every day.” A year before “Design for Dreaming,” the combined interests of the American Gas Association, the National Association of Home Builders, and The Woman’s Home Companion all sponsored a less fantastical promotional film, “Word to the Wives” (1955), in which women learn how to trick their husbands into buying them a new, modern dream kitchen for their suburban homes: <http://archive.org/details/Wordtoth1955>.
- ² During this exchange, Nixon showed off the modern American kitchen available in new houses back home, adding “a word about the interest of Americans in making the life of their women easier.” Khrushchev “rejoined that in the Soviet Union they did not have what he called ‘the capitalist attitude toward women’.” Harrison E. Salisbury, “Nixon and Khrushchev Argue in Public as U.S. Exhibit Opens; Accuse Each other of Threats,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1959.
- ³ Starring dancer and choreographer Thelma Tadlock, the portion of “Design for Dreaming” focusing on the Frigidaire “kitchen of the future” is only 2 minutes out of its 9 minute run time, sandwiched between views of the Motorama floor show and a romantic drive on the “roads of the future.” Despite its tone of a fantasy future, it illustrates the industrial refocusing of American manufacturing from wartime production to products associated with rapid suburbanization—cars and appliances. For more see: <http://archive.org/details/Designfo1956>.
- ⁴ This theme also permeated the more far-fetched television shows of the period. In the equally future-oriented animated series, *The Jetsons* (1962-63), wife Jane enjoys similar automated wonders, including a robotic maid. In its prehistoric compliment, *The Flintstones* (1960-66), Betty and Wilma are assisted by equivalent “pre-modern” conveniences, only instead of electronic machines automation was accomplished through “built-in” animals of varying sorts.
- ⁵ Contrary to the original quasi-feminist 1975 thriller based on Ira Levin’s novel, in which robotic wives replaced the women in this traditional, upscale suburb, the contemporary 2004 film imagines a post-feminist male fantasyland where the over inflated houses are more sentient, efficient, and connected than any of the humans that inhabit them. Replacement spouses are just another form of high-tech appliance in these “smart-McMansions.” Despite the rhetoric of automated efficiencies throughout the remake, no mention of “green” or the “environment” is made as a rationale for or effect of the high tech home systems.
- ⁶ See, for example, Tex Avery’s “House of Tomorrow” cartoon (1949), which organizes its jokes around assumed gender relations in and to the house, and the first solo film featuring *Ma and Pa Kettle* (1949), where they win a “model home of the future” that no member of the family feels comfortable in, preferring their Hillbilly shack to modern technological conveniences that other families could only dream about at the time. See also Ray Bradbury’s 1950 short story published in *The Saturday Evening Post* and later produced as a radio script, television episode, and film, “The Veldt.” Alternatively titled “The World the Children Made,” it follows a family who lives in “The HappyLife Home,” a fully automated house of the future in which the virtual reality nursery simulates the open environment of Southern Africa, including the wildlife.
- ⁷ Originally published in *Life* and *The Saturday Evening Post* in the early 1960s, many of Schridde’s images for Motorola have been reproduced online. See Laura Stampler, “These Exquisitely Detailed Paintings Show How Motorola Envisioned the Future in 1961,” *Business Insider*, June 16, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/these-exquisitely-detailed-pictures-are-how-motorola-envisioned-the-future-in-1961-2012-6?op=1>.

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- ⁸ Yet notice that the lady of the house, as in many advertisements of this period and since, is rarely depicted as seated with her husband and children, enjoying the leisure spaces and activities afforded by the modern home. Progress is largely defined by how products of all sorts—from high-tech appliances, cleaning supplies, processed foods, and even the design or materials of the house itself—are imagined as making her work in the house easier than it was not too long ago. A few of Schridde’s images do, however, recall Tadlock’s flowing, whimsical dance in and out of the spaces of her dream sequence, just as Audrey, too, danced through her own dream home in *Little Shop of Horrors*. One consistency in how women were imagined as ideally occupying the home is to be cooking, cleaning, or dancing—sometimes all at once!
- ⁹ Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000 [1964]).
- ¹⁰ “An Eco-House for the Future,” *New York Times Magazine* (May 20, 2007), last accessed July 5, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/20/magazine/20scofidio1.html>. This “proposal” appeared in an issue titled “Eco-ecture: Designing and Building with the Environment in Mind.”
- ¹¹ Just a few of the “green” features of Phantom House include opaque blinds that open and close on timers, water-wise showerheads that feel decadently water-intensive, and automatic temperature controls that keep occupied areas of the house 12 degrees cooler than outside.
- ¹² Pilar Chueca, *Sustainable Homes USA* (Barcelona: Links, 2009), 128.
- ¹³ Chueca, *Sustainable Homes USA*, 92. This dome house was chosen by a family of three who “wanted to explore alternative options to traditional housing typologies,” but the potential for siting this type of structure in suburbia is extremely limited for a variety of reasons, all of which rest on its lack of conformity with other homes. I have yet to find a neighborhood—or even a significant cluster—of geodesic dome homes that “fit” within a suburban setting. They are either the “oddball” on a street of either traditional or modern houses, or stand relatively alone in a more undeveloped area, as was the example included in this book. In regard to this home’s conceptual association with Buckminster Fuller, it may actually be more appropriate to compare it not to his famous geodesic dome designs, but rather his “Dymaxion House.” This lightweight, high-efficiency, mechanical dream house in the round was developed to be the next big thing in affordable housing for returning WWII vets. However, it never really got the chance to compete in the marketplace due to financial troubles and creative differences between Fuller and Beech Aircraft, the proposed manufacturer of the all-aluminum house. One of the only remaining prototypes is on display at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, as well as viewable online: <http://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/dymaxion/index.html>. An illustrated overview of the experience of visiting this attraction—and the gendered discourses used to contextualize it as a postwar artifact—is also found in “a side trip” from *Yesterland*, “The Dymaxion House: A Vintage ‘House of the Future’ that You Can Visit Today”: <http://www.yesterland.com/dymaxion.html>.
- ¹⁴ Despite continued interest in mid-century futurism, like Buckminster Fuller’s provocative geodesic designs, a different kind of nostalgia is fueling a micro-trend for sustainable, pre-modern yurt living. A Montana company, Shelter Designs, offers a 30’ diameter “Eco-Yurt,” touted as “The Green, Natural Home” for “a nontoxic, sustainable lifestyle.” See their website for pictures and an alternative environmental rationale: <http://www.shelterdesigns.net/ecoyurt.html>.
- ¹⁵ See “Xanadu: Home of the Future” for photos by William A. Ackel made of the Kissimmee, FL “Xanadu” home in 1994, a decade before it was demolished to make way for new (presumably more traditional suburban) development: <http://www.abandonedfl.com/?p=1909>.
- ¹⁶ Tom R. Halfhill, “Computers in the Home of 1990,” *Compute!* (December 1982), last accessed March 20, 2013, http://www.commodore.ca/history/other/1982_Future.htm.
- ¹⁷ This focus on state-of-the-art technology turned out to be one of the features that doomed Xanadu structures to obsolescence, since early 80’s computers seem practically ephemeral from more recent vantage points. This also calls attention to how we look back rather dismissively at the wonder people had for technological innovations of yesterday, both those that have become a routine part of our everyday lives (self-cleaning ovens, television, air

conditioning, computers, wireless phones, etc.) and those that never materialized as promised (flying cars, anyone?).

- ¹⁸ Bethany Lyttle, "10 Stunning Homes of the Future." *Forbes* (July 12, 2012), <http://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeslifestyle/2012/07/12/10-stunning-homes-of-the-future/>. Vetterlein also points out that while it looks and sounds like something out of science fiction (and especially Japanese Anime), "most of the technology that would make it possible already exists." For more details of the 2008 "Reboot" house, see Victor Vetterlein's website: <http://victorvetterlein.com/project09.html>.
- ¹⁹ In the caption for a Kodachrome slide image of Monsanto's "House of the Future" [Figure 3.5] collector Charles Phoenix contextualizes the exhibit, noting its prime location in the park, but also its novelty compared to the suburban houses most of its visitors lived in at the time: "Between 1957 and 1967, this three-bedroom, two-bath, model dream house stands at the end of Main Street USA between Sleeping Beauty's Castle and the entrance to Tomorrowland. Monsanto sponsors the popular walk-through exhibit. The brochure boasts 'not a natural material in the house;' the dynamic structure is made entirely of plastic. Microwave cooking, electric toothbrushes, big-screen television, molded furniture and push-button telephones are seen here for the first time by most visitors. The House of the Future is a startling contrast to the countless ranch-style homes that are being built in the rest of Southern California." *Southern Californialand: Mid-Century Culture in Kodachrome* (Santa Monica, CA: Angel City Press, 2004)
- ²⁰ The "Monsanto House of the Future" page at *Yesterland* offers a brief but thorough history of the exhibit, including period photographs of the structure and its park setting. It also connects more recent Disney "House of the Future" exhibits, at both Disneyland in California and Disney World in Florida, to their cultural progenitor: <http://www.yesterland.com/futurehouse.html>.
- ²¹ "The Future Won't Wait," *Monsanto Magazine* (1960), <http://www.yesterland.com/futurewontwait.html>. For images of the floor plan and interior spaces, see "Monsanto's House of the Future Brochure (1961)," reproduced in Matt Novak's *Paleofuture* blog for *Smithsonian* (January 25, 2008): <http://www.paleofuture.com/blog/2008/1/25/monsanto-house-of-the-future-brochure-1961.html>.
- ²² The "Carousel of Progress" was moved from Disneyland to the newer, more expansive Disney World in Orlando at the behest of General Electric in 1973, but the "Progress City" portion once located above the exhibit, based on the concept drawings for EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow), did not accompany it. Now instead of leaving the theater by ascending to view how electricity and technological innovation would transform the city at large, the story of progress begins and ends within the single-family home.
- ²³ This attraction had been around the block, seen in New York, then California, and finally Florida, where it is still running. Charles Phoenix also included a slide of the closing scene in the "Carousel of Progress" as it was in the early 70s in Disneyland [Figure 3.5], with the following description: "A charming computer-operated mannequin family speak and sing the pleasures and wonders of household progress and electricity. The four acts take place in the 1890s, 1920s, 1940s and the future.... This image is the final act--Christmas sometime beyond 1973. Sheer curtains over floor-to-ceiling glass are drawn just enough to reveal the focal point, the perfect city in the perfect distance. Gifts are everywhere--among them, electric curlers, a toaster oven and hair dryer, all thanks to the sponsor, General Electric."
- ²⁴ The song, written by Richard and Robert Sherman, was temporarily replaced with another commissioned composition: "The Best Time of Your Life," because GE was more interested in encouraging visitors to purchase new appliances today rather than wait for a distant tomorrow, no matter how bright it might be. In 1996, well after GE's sponsorship of the exhibit lapsed, the original theme song was once again used. This retro move is characterized as being "in the true spirit of progress," which I assume to be meant ironically. See Disney's web page for the attraction, <https://disneyworld.disney.go.com/attractions/magic-kingdom/walt-disney-carousel->

of-progress/, and also the Sherman brothers' autobiography, *Walt's Time: From Before to Beyond...* (Camphor Tree Pub, 1998).

²⁵ In a Microsoft press release, this Disneyland collaboration with HP, Life|ware, and a local home builder is compared to the "Home of the Future" exhibit at Microsoft's headquarters. One research executive describes the Disney version as a way to "show people how technology can enrich our lives today, and offer a glimpse of the technologies that will revolutionize homes in the future." For more, see "Making Dreams a Reality: The Innoventions Dream Home" (June 16, 2008), <http://www.microsoft.com/en-us/news/features/2008/jun08/06-16Innoventions.aspx>. Take a virtual tour at Disney's web page for the "Innoventions Dream Home" at <http://dreamhome.disney.go.com/media/ap/dreamhome/>.

²⁶ Quoted in the "Monsanto House of the Future" page at *Yesterland*.

²⁷ P. J. O'Rourke, "Future Schlock," *The Atlantic* (December 2008), 82. He also notes that the "future family...still has one mom and one dad, amazingly enough."

²⁸ O'Rourke, "Future Schlock," 83. He expresses this turn in an interesting way, especially when we consider the confluence of thinking about technology and the environment at the present moment: "Global imagination, like global climate, seems to have cycles—natural, man-made, or whatever."

²⁹ Lloyd Alter, "Disney's New Dream Home: Worse Than We Dreamed," *Treehugger.com* (June 27, 2008), last accessed July 17, 2012, <http://www.treehugger.com/sustainable-product-design/disneys-new-dream-home-worse-than-we-dreamed.html>. Alter, who also states his love for the 1957 Monsanto vision of the future, bemoans the "off the shelf Microsoft and HP stuff" filling this later effort, especially the overabundance of digital picture frames. Both he and O'Rourke quote the builder of the "Innoventions Dream Home" expressing his belief that "The 1950s home didn't look like anything, anywhere. It was space-age and kind of cold," an aesthetic which he and his partners at Disney, Microsoft, H.P, etc. felt would now "intimidate the visitors." The assumption is we have lost our taste for plastics unless it's in faux-wood flooring.

³⁰ Matt Hickman, "Where's the Green?" *Mother Nature Network* (December 15, 2008), last accessed July 17, 2012, <http://www.mnn.com/your-home/remodeling-design/blogs/wheres-the-green>.

³¹ Lance Hosey, "Gizmo Green," *Archit* 99:1 (January 2010), 29. The author argues that the "popular image of green building" is mostly "dumb design with smart gadgets." He specifically calls out Diller Scofidio + Renfro's "Eco-House of the Future" concept for the "Phantom House," despite generally admiring much of their other work.

³² See the Green Builder® website for press releases, photographs, and a video tour of the exhibit: <http://www.greenbuildermag.com/VISION-HOUSE/VISION-House-in-Innoventions>. The media company advertises itself as "Building a Better World," and a source of "News, Views, and Ground Breakers on the Sustainability Home Front." The installation at Disney World's EPCOT is not the only VISION House produced by Green Builder®. Others have been or currently are on display in Tucson, Los Angeles, Aspen, and Las Vegas, as well as the 2011 "deep energy retrofit" ReVISION House, also in Orlando.

³³ See, for example, "Separate Rooms," an episode of *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* sponsored by Hotpoint appliances, first aired February 6, 1953.

³⁴ Christina B. Farnsworth, "Disney Green." *Metropolis Magazine* blog (August 2, 2012), <http://www.metropolismag.com/pov/20120802/disney-green>.

³⁵ Wally Smith and Hannah Lewi, "The Magic of Machines in the House," *The Journal of Architecture* 13:5 (2008), 647.

³⁶ Diana Periton, "Alison and Peter Smithson: From the House of the Future to a House for Today." *Home Cultures* 1:3 (November 2004): 308. Periton points out that "It was not in fact the 'machine for living in' that they rejected, but the aspiration to the universal through visual meditation." (310-11)

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- ³⁷ Disney even produced a made-for-TV movie titled *Smart House* in 1999, directed by LaVar Burton and starring Katey Sagal, where things go horribly wrong in what was supposed to be a dream life in a completely computerized dream house. In a similar theme as *Ma and Pa Kettle* fifty years earlier, this smart house was also won in a contest.
- ³⁸ Janna Quitney Anderson and Lee Rainie, “Smart Systems’: The Future of the Internet,” *Pew Internet & American Life Project* (June 29, 2012). The lead in for this report reads as follows: “Experts think tech-enhanced homes, appliances, and utilities will spread. But those systems are complex and so far there is low public demand, so they advise: Don’t expect to see the ‘Home of the Future’ by 2020.” The online questionnaire was conducted between August 28th and October 31st, 2011, and included several “tension pairs” that offered oppositional scenarios for the year 2020, followed by an invitation for “respondents to react with their expectations based on current knowledge and attitudes.” See more at http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2012/PIP_Future_of_Smart_Systems.pdf.
- ³⁹ Anderson and Rainie. These answers were respectively offered by Mike Leibold of the Institute for the Future, and Tracy Rolling, a “product user-experience evangelist for Nokia,” on pages 4-5 of the “Overview.”
- ⁴⁰ Nigel F. Maynard, “Data-Driven Home Aims to Test Which Green Features Work.” *Builder* (June 11, 2012), <http://www.builderonline.com/green-building/data-driven-home-aims-to-test-which-green-features-work.aspx?cid=BP:061412:FULL>.
- ⁴¹ Emily Badger, “This House Consumes Less Energy Than Your Little Urban Studio,” *The Atlantic Cities* (September 26, 2012), last accessed March 17, 2013, <http://www.theatlanticcities.com/housing/2012/09/house-consumes-less-net-energy-your-little-urban-studio/3398/>.
- ⁴² See more at the VISION House website: <http://www.visionhousegreen.com/>, and the NIST site for more information, photographs, and video of their Net-Zero Energy Residential Test Facility (NZERTF): <http://www.nist.gov/el/nzertf/>.
- ⁴³ The “For Teachers” page at the VISION House website makes for an interesting comparison to the social action materials available before release of the 2010 family film *Furry Vengeance*. While that film’s related materials focus on habitat preservation and include some tips for a more eco-friendly lifestyle, the online educational VISION House materials are offered as even more STEM-friendly “turnkey sophisticated content to help teach about green design, environmental science, engineering and eco-friendly buildings.”
- ⁴⁴ The interactive site, My LG Eco Home, automatically connects to your Facebook page to design and share your green dream home plan: <http://www.lgcoretech.com/global/index.php>.
- ⁴⁵ Tafline Laylin, “My Eco Home by LG Allows Green Facebook Users to Design a Virtual Dream Home,” *Inhabitat* (November 18, 2012), a “sponsored post,” last accessed March 17, 2012, <http://inhabitat.com/my-eco-home-by-lg-allows-green-facebook-users-to-design-a-virtual-dream-home/>.
- ⁴⁶ See for example, qb play houses, a company based in the Netherlands, <http://www.quubi.nl/original/?lng=en>, and a selection of green playhouses recently featured in a Houzz blog: “Guest Picks: 20 Eco-Friendly Playhouses,” with links to the respective companies: <http://www.houzz.com/ideabooks/880217/list/Guest-Picks--20-Eco-Friendly-Playhouses>.
- ⁴⁷ Thames & Kosmos sells two different versions of the “Power House,” the original and a more basic “Green Essentials” edition. See more at their commercial website: <http://www.thamesandkosmos.com/products/ph/ph.html>.
- ⁴⁸ I am not suggesting a direct or absolute cause and effect relationship here, but rather pointing towards a cultural disposition for cultivating gendered relations to domestic space, observable in both (how we design and encourage) children’s play and (how we represent and affirm) adult dwelling.

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- ⁴⁹ One of the original 1960's commercials for Barbie's cardboard Dream House can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GygWkwk2E3Q>.
- ⁵⁰ It is also of note that "Environmental Barbie" was one of the "careers" in the running for the "I Can Be..." contest in 2010, coming in behind both "Computer Engineer Barbie" which won the adult vote and "Anchorwoman Barbie" that was most popular with little girls who participated. Both were then manufactured and marketed, but we're still waiting for Eco-Barbie.
- ⁵¹ The notion of an "Architect Barbie" was in circulation at least as early as 2002, and gained traction after Professor Despina Stratigakos mounted the 2007 University of Michigan exhibition that imagined what an "Architect Barbie" would look and be like. Mattel finally followed through with the "official" doll in 2011.
- ⁵² See for example, Allissa Walker, "Architecture Is Tough! Will Architect Barbie Help More Women Become Designers?" *Good Design* (February 25, 2011), <http://www.good.is/posts/architecture-is-tough-will-architect-barbie-help-more-women-become-designers/>.
- ⁵³ Bridgette Meinhold, "Architect Barbie's Winning Dream House Design Unveiled—And It Has a Green Roof!" *Inhabitat* (August 3, 2011), <http://inhabitat.com/architect-barbie-dream-house-winning-design-unveiled-and-it-has-a-green-roof/>.
- ⁵⁴ Kaid Benfield, "Architect Barbie and Her Dream House: Green Design for Kids," *The Atlantic* (August 11, 2011). Benfield's credentials include director of the NRDC's Sustainable Communities and Smart Growth program and co-founder of LEED for Neighborhood Development. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/08/architect-barbie-and-her-dream-house-green-design-for-kids/243457/>.
- ⁵⁵ Even if her dream home is not yet officially available in a greener shade of pink, Mattel is actively engaged in a campaign to redeem Barbie's eco-friendly image since Ken publicly broke up with her over the Indonesian deforestation resulting from her packaging practices. While both Barbie and Barbie's Dream House will be made of plastic for the foreseeable future, the box she comes in will use somewhat less of it. Identified by many critics as yet another blatant case of corporate greenwashing, at least one commentator argued that "Barbie is now an environmentalist. Or at least her marketing team is." Stacey Irwin, "Eco Friendly Barbie: Dream House Goes Green." *Green Earth News* (August 29, 2011), <http://blog.greenearthbamboo.com/20110829/green-is-grand/eco-friendly-barbie-dream-house-goes-green/>.
- ⁵⁶ There are efforts to design and sell green dollhouses beyond the dominant Barbie franchise, as well as a culture of green miniature houses not intended as toys. See, for example, the Green Dollhouse Project (2007), <http://www.greendollhouse.org/>, and the book related to a competition sponsored by Sustainable San Mateo County, *Green Dollhouse: Creating a Doll's Eye View of a Healthier World* (Ecotone Publishing, 2005).
- ⁵⁷ Julie Seguss, "Miniio Modern Dollhouses Are Green Dream Homes for Barbie and Other Dolls." *Inhabitots* (October 4, 2011), last accessed November 26, 2012, <http://www.inhabitots.com/miniio-modern-dollhouses-are-green-dream-homes-for-barbie-and-other-dolls/>.
- ⁵⁸ The fact that this girl also sports braces, however, adds another layer of representation to the construction of girlhood in these photographs. Rather than already exhibiting a perfected standard of feminine beauty, like Barbie, she is shown as in the process of becoming beautiful, conforming to cultural standards that value certain kinds of smiles over others. The braces further contextualize the Barbie-playing girl with her expensive but alternative dream house as belonging to a social class that can afford orthodontic "fixes" to natural imperfection, while the choice of green doll house further positions her as part of a cultural class that desires (and can afford to pay more for) unadorned dollhouses made of natural materials rather than the official pink plastic versions.

• CHAPTER 4 •

Model Homes: Marketing How We Should Live

While some of our greenest dreams of the future are encapsulated in fantastic visions of the way we might one day live, discourses of green suburbia in the tangible, realizable world of today more often center on models of home that closely fit rather than challenge the generic suburban context in which they—and we—reside, both in terms of lifestyle and the fabric of the built environment. They are actual houses available in the near green future rather than marvelous designs for much more distant, hypothetical prospects. As purchasable or reproducible residential structures, model homes provide templates from which we can gather new and old ideas about everything from recycled materials to efficient technologies to architectural styles, fashioning personalized American dreams with added assurance that the end result will be in harmony with our aspirations as well as with nature. Seen on TV or at a museum, in a magazine or at an open house in your own neighborhood, the meticulously crafted public display of private living environments includes brand new eco-luxury houses with extensive eco-sensitive landscaping, as well as modest, cost-conscious eco-makeovers of home, room or yard. Yet within the suburban marketplace, where green is still the exception and not the rule, aesthetic and social conventions pose a challenge to realizing green dreams large or small, as do economic constrictions and accessibility of eco-friendly products, materials, services, and even knowledge. This chapter explores this discursive construction of model green homes, touring a few houses featured in mass media designed to recursively shape green dreams to be built—and rebuilt—in the suburban landscape.

Museum Settings

*You never change things by fighting the existing reality.
To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*

—Buckminster Fuller

Kitchen, dining room, living room, bedrooms, bathroom, den, garage, and yard—these are the basic component spaces expected when touring a “dream house for sale.” Corresponding to contemporary department store show rooms, the experience of going through an “open house” can be further compared to walking through a museum exhibit, or a house functioning as a museum of sorts. They may not boast any connection to famous figures or historic events, yet such private residences, while on the market and opened to the public, draw upon discursive formations common to museum display. Museums are repositories of cultural knowledge, informative models of conventions over time, as well as instruments of instruction, modeling cultural relations. Like those “special” places designed to preserve artifacts or commemorate a shared cultural heritage, model homes showcase carefully selected and coordinated objects in ways that connote a sense of continuity between past and present, curating the familiar, the everyday. Whether an older, existing home with a history of inhabitation or brand new construction without the residual marks or memories of daily life, “open houses” are usually staged to look both lived in and livable, presented as readymade spaces of opportunity for creating a new history for your own family, though one validated by visual and rhetorical connectivity to “the good life” of an imagined American past as well as future. Model homes thus employ strategies and discourses found in history museums, but also in contemporary art and science museums, places that offer perspectives from which visitors can critique cultural complacency with past and present, and provoke a

sense of wonder at what the future holds in store. Model homes, as *models of home*, serve as mediated spaces of cultural retrospection of the past, reflection of the present, and imagination of the future. They are significant as models of social relations and practices, family structures and expectations, and personal ideals and expressions.

Yet comfort of the familiar—the stability of built, habitable space and what it represents ideologically in terms of domestic life—is of primary concern in both new model homes and remodeled open houses. In their physical and discursive construction they necessarily navigate between the novelty of “the new,” that aspirational difference which cues a desire to exchange or upgrade from current living situations, and the familiarity of “the old,” that comfortable connection which feels like a progression of rather than a break from an already established lifestyle. Designed to convey idealized ways of living, every detail of a model home’s structure, décor, function and setting is meant to appear memorable and inviting to “house tourists,” though there is no adjacent gift shop where visitors may buy a postcard, picture book, or miniature replica of the house to “keepsake” memories of their tour since the house itself is both “gift” and “shop.” The home is what you are being prompted to purchase, a place where memories could yet be made. One aspect of the model home that often diverges from comparative experiences of visiting museums is geographic context—its location in suburbia, and specifically in a residential suburban neighborhood. You will not be “taking home” a souvenir from your visit. The possibility framed by your tour through the property is that you will be “going home” if you like what you see enough to buy. This vision of the “dream home for sale” orients our thinking to consider such houses as realizable dreams, comprehensible as now, or perhaps someday, within our reach. In mediating model homes for our consumption, they are therefore equally made available as material objects as well as cultural images of desire.

In recent years elements of “green” have been introduced in nearly every type of home showing aimed at both the touring and buying public, culminating in a variety of “green home” museum exhibits, trade and consumer show models, photographic and video tours published in mass media, and inclusion of “green dream homes” in regional market showcases like Parade of Homes. While not quite yet culturally dominant, these green visual and spatial discourses are no longer relegated only to niche markets or specialty interests. Their mainstreaming is well underway in the second decade of the twenty-first century, yet the articulated desire to have a green home of one’s own retains many aspects of novelty in contemporary suburbia. This “specialness” is cultivated by the very same mediated constructions that aim to further “mainstream green.” With each style, material, technology or practice called out as “green” in various green home tours, a comparison—and distinction—is emphasized in ways that either implicitly or explicitly critique past ways of living, purportedly showing visitors and viewers a better home, and with it, a better way forward. Looking at a variety of green “open houses” as mediated textual examples within particular suburban contexts, we here find opportunities to critically tour the discursive construction of “green” with respect to everyday suburban space and life—from the beautiful to the banal, the high-tech to the old-fashioned, luxury options to mundane necessities, the brand new to the recycled and remodeled.

Though as much as “green dream homes” exhibit difference in the marketplaces of commerce and ideas, they closely track an established cultural rhetoric of suburban domesticity that, like the mythical Janus, simultaneously faces both toward the future and the past. One prominent example of this trend is “Smart Home: Green + Wired.” [Figure 4.1] Described in the brochure as the “Greenest Home in Chicago,” it is both an actual, functional house purchasable for a (suburban) site of your choosing, and a high-profile green design and living exhibit at the (urban) Museum of Science and Industry.¹



Figure 4.1: *Modern style is as vital to the presentation of this Green + Wired prefab as its high-tech function, marking it as distinct from the suburban house norm.*

Left and below right: From the brochure for Smart Home: Green + Wired at the Chicago Museum of Science + Industry (April 22, 2011-January 8, 2012)

Above right: Michelle Kaufmann's original design modeled in Legos (2009), <http://blog.michellekaufmann.com/?p=2118>.

Green prefab maven Michelle Kaufmann designed the 3-story, 2500-square-foot modern modular mkSolaire home, which first went on display in the museum's courtyard in 2008 as the "Smart Home." Commissioned by the museum with the "Homes of Tomorrow" exhibit at the 1933 Century of Progress Worlds Fair in Chicago as inspiration,² it is further introduced with the online subheading "Past Meets Future in a Very Now House." Print materials accompanying the tour further employ temporal rhetoric in support of this claim. Values and characteristics attributable to both past and future are interwoven in descriptions of everything "green," from its recycled materials to the efficiency of its innovative technologies, all of which are currently available for purchase and use in residential architecture though still uncommon in everyday suburbia.

Demonstrating "sustainability and environmental consciousness in action," the house is an expression of Kaufmann's "Five Eco-Principles": *smart design, material efficiency, energy efficiency, water efficiency, and healthy environment*.³ Each is incorporated into the various room displays as well as the structure as a whole and the grounds on which the house is situated. Smart Design is meant to "let the green in" using a "full-home, automated smart technology system" in an "open and airy" yet "human scale" modern house. Material Efficiency refers to both the home's factory controlled prefabricated modules and a variety of "low impact," "renewable or recycled" materials used throughout the house, including bamboo flooring, vintage-looking chairs upholstered in bright blue fabric "made in the USA from recycled car tires" [Figure 4.1b], a dining room chandelier with a shade made from used CFL tubes [Figure 4.1c], and antique toys and knick knacks providing a long-time "lived in" ambiance [Figure 4.1.d]. Energy Efficiency in this high-tech house is realized in major systems like the combination "green" and "solar" roofs, large window openings with automated shades, and a vast array of energy-saving appliances and gadgetry. Water Efficiency is

achieved with low-flow faucets and dual-flush toilets, and also outdoor water collection and reuse systems for irrigation. Healthy Environment largely means the use of non-toxic materials and air filtration systems minimizing indoor pollutants like volatile organic compounds (VOC's), but also landscaping with "native plants that adapt to climate conditions" rather than the standard suburban water and chemical intensive lawn.

While "efficiency" might well be the takeaway keyword from the list above, "technology" is the dominant feature of the Smart Home as highlighted in published materials and the 20-minute in-person tour. Much as the integration of past and future are deployed in tandem to convey the value of a green dream home for realizing a better today, technology and nature are further entwined concepts, as evident in the exhibit's unsubtle subtitle, "Green + Wired," and illustrated in the exhibit logo as a set of leaves at the end of a green wire attached to a green house-shaped electrical plug. [Figure 4.1] This verbal and visual rhetoric represents a new "green" version of a much older idea, one that has noteworthy antecedents other than the 1933 Chicago World's Fair "Homes of Tomorrow," and some of them decades older, like "Thomas Edison's Latest Marvel—The Electric Country House." As promoted in a full page article in *The New York Times* on September 15, 1912, the glowing coverage proposed that "Any One May Now Have an Electric Plant in His Own Cellar at a Comparatively Small Cost Which Will Light and Heat It and Make Housework Easy." Although Edison's pre-green-era estate in the posh suburb of Llewellyn Park was by no means within reach of "Any One," its combination of traditional architecture, picturesque setting, and the latest technological conveniences prefigure more contemporary efforts like Smart Home: Green + Wired in showing a new suburban model in the making. Thomas Edison's electrified home was meant to be inspirational to the *Times'* mass readership, though not fantastical, showcasing science in the service of modernizing everyday life rather than an indulgence of science fiction.⁴

The technological sophistication and innovations of Smart Home: Green + Wired are primary rationales for its presence at the Museum of Science + Industry rather than at a history museum, yet the history of technology is present within its domestic display space. In the 2011-2012 brochure an “Innovations...Then and Now” page outlines a new addition to the exhibit, one that juxtaposes “THEN” technologies, like a 1925 “Full Furniture Television Set” with the very “NOW” Boxee Box by D-Link, a device that makes television content available over the internet.⁵ TV is a touchstone technology often used to position the state-of-the-art of suburban living in any period since its post WWII popularization as a common “appliance” or piece of “furniture” in even the most modest tract house.⁶ The Smart Home itself is equipped with multiple high-end, high definition televisions and peripheral devices like Blu-ray players, 3D game stations, and a built-in touch-screen console for centrally managing all of the green home’s many automated technologies. No matter how “efficient,” the ultra-electrification and automation of this novel model home is also a central point of critique as to how “green” it really is.⁷

To better understand this aspect of the modernization of suburban homes and their perceived environmental fitness, we can look to another predecessor to Smart Home: Green + Wired, the 1950s All-Electric House, where integrated consumer home technologies were—and still are—celebrated as key to “the good life.” As part of the “suburban experience” documented and on display at the Johnson County Museum outside of Kansas City, visitors can tour an authentic model home originally built in Prairie Village by Kansas City Power & Light to promote the wonders and conveniences of modern technology newly available in suburbia circa 1954. It quietly served as a family home for decades afterward, until it was moved to its current site on the grounds of the local history museum. Removed from its residential context, but restored to its original condition (and 1950s décor), technology is a big part of the draw.⁸ [Figure 4.2]



Figure 4.2: *Visitors to the All-Electric House at a local history museum in Kansas encounter a “house of the future” available in 1950s suburbia. (above) Once a model home visited by over 62,000 people in 1954 (below), it was “lived in” for four decades before being moved to museum property and restored to its original condition, including the garage workshop and backyard patio.*

Images of the 1950s All-Electric House at the Johnson County Museum on Flickr.
View more photographs at <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jocomuseum/>.

The everyday wonders to be seen here include electronic gadgets from the kitchen to the garage and everywhere in between, both increasingly typical items like electric mixers, toasters, and refrigerators, and other features relatively uncommon at the time, like automatic curtain openers and a hard-wired remote controlled television set (built into the wall above the fireplace mantle and discretely hidden behind a sliding painting). Despite a difference of over sixty years, there is an affinity between some of these novel high-tech applications in the mid-twentieth-century All-Electric House and those on display in the twenty-first century Smart Home: Green + Wired, like automated window shades and (now computerized) remote control of the TV (as well as of other integrated “smart” technologies). The history museum viewing context of the earlier home’s technology, both of its time and looking toward the near future of what will or might later become standard in suburban housing, is conceptually held “in place” due to its preserved period style and architectural setting, speaking as much or more to what once was as framing what is yet to be for today’s visitors. In terms of consistency, we’ve already seen (and used) most of this postwar tech before, although updated in both style and function within our own contemporary home spaces. What we don’t recognize remains intriguingly obscure either because the technology didn’t pan out as expected, never attaining widespread adoption or retaining mainstream popularity, or the type of luxury or convenience it represented remains an option for the wealthy who can splurge on such non-essential niceties. Not everything in the suburban home that *can be* automated necessarily must or should be, as an entire genre of “house of the future” cartoons and comedic spoofs have repeatedly demonstrated over the last century.

The hook for visitors to the 1950s All-Electric House registers as a combination of kitsch boomer nostalgia, a quaint history of home technologies, and a tribute to the local area’s great postwar thrust of suburbanization, which continues apace.⁹ Each of

these three factors collectively add up to a picture of suburbia and the suburban lifestyle that is subject to environmental criticism. In the built environment as well as in the cultural imagination, the 1950s All-Electric House stands for conspicuous consumption of mass-produced goods, non-renewable energy resources, and dwindling open land. By most contemporary measures, it is not green. While this is not necessarily the point of the exhibit, nor even a peripheral consideration in staging it at a local history museum, increasingly mainstreamed environmental consciousness nonetheless informs how such spaces and displays might be read in the current cultural moment. It is emblematic of everything we have come to regard as “wrong” with how we build and live in suburbia.

Contemporary models of home presented in the repository and instructional contexts of museums function in a similar way to those more historical examples like the 1950s All-Electric House, although adding—or reviving—its original textual and contextual marketing purposes, showcasing and demonstrating advances in new home technologies that are now or soon to be both available and desirable. The Smart Home, just one of the newest models of “wired” American houses to engage in this type of high-tech domestic presentation, establishes its green credibility in part by comparison to what now seem like frivolous or superfluous postwar excesses in technological home applications. Here technology is still employed with the purpose of making life at home more comfortable and convenient, yet this “smart” iteration of the “house of the future” paradigm claims to be both “green” and “wired,” its emphasis on “efficiency” lowering the perceived overall impact of the house—in its construction and operation—on the environment. While many critics today are still skeptical about the inherent greenness of a house that is so “plugged in,”¹⁰ one solution proposed to remedy such concerns is independence from the fossil-fueled electrical grid and increased reliance on renewable, site-generated energy sources like solar and wind. In addition to a small wind turbine

conspicuously turning in the “Windy City” sky behind the Museum of Science + Industry Smart Home exhibit, multiple solar technologies convert cloud-filtered sunshine into energy for use by the efficient though numerous electrical appliances and systems. Even the most “natural” of amenities in this “always on” home, like daylight, fresh air, and clean water, are electronically managed for eco-smart consumption.

Like the 1950s All-Electric House in Kansas, the example of Smart Home: Green + Wired in Chicago is presented as a combined package of modern technology and modern design, though the latter is dominant visually. Despite its high profile in media promoting the house-as-museum-exhibit, technology is rather seamlessly incorporated into each room’s nostalgically modern design. High-tech production processes are also inconspicuously represented in furnishings and materials that look “normal,” or even “retro,” often quoting mid-century modern pieces. Even one of its inventive solar power generation systems—a photovoltaic fabric roof covering—doesn’t detract from the clean lines of its boxy modern form. Green technologies are here made to appear “at home” in today’s modern model home, streamlined aesthetically and harmonized ideologically with future and past, since “modern” style itself here seems a bit rather old fashioned. While modern design was once “new” and connoted a change or break with traditional forms and styles, it has been absorbed into a conventional canon, suggesting continuity rather than disruption. In the presentation of contemporary green homes, use of modern design standards referencing what was once novel and non-traditional potentially reads as an indicator that that home’s “greenness” is also not as “new” as might be otherwise thought. Green here represents a change, but not too big or fast of one that it renders the model home unfamiliar, and therefore unsellable.

The historical context of modern home design frames current understanding of where and how such houses, or newly greened versions of them, fit into the suburban

landscape. From the experimental *Arts & Architecture* magazine-sponsored Case Study Houses built mostly in the Los Angeles area from 1948 through the mid 1960s, to the more prosaic *Atomic Ranch*-style tract homes built across the country during the same timeframe, modernism proliferated throughout postwar suburbia. Although, the more average, “popular” examples tempered the many extremes of this architectural typology, making them comfortable for consumption both spatially and culturally. A 2010 Johnson County Museum newsletter included a feature asking “Why Modern?” This question was posed in the context of its postwar popularization nationally, in the Midwest, and locally in suburban Kansas City. The author’s explanation of modern homes’ appeal was that

An abundance of built-in storage reflected the new exuberance of consumer culture. The one-story design and the easy care finishes of countertops and floors indicated a new expectation for convenience in upkeep. The open floor plan and the merger of indoor and outdoor spaces spoke to a desire for a more informal way of living. The growing popularity of attached two car garages reflected the vital role of the automobile in America’s suburban communities. This type of architecture dovetailed perfectly with the Baby Boom era’s emphasis on family and a laid-back attitude towards childrearing.¹¹

Smart Home: Green + Wired accords with this model of the postwar suburban lifestyle, but with some notable millennial differences that arguably impact evaluation of its inherent “greenness” in contrast to mainstream examples like the 1950s All-Electric House. It straddles the position and function of concept houses, like the Case Study Houses, that illustrate potential for new, groundbreaking suburban paradigms, and of model homes, advertising updates to otherwise familiar patterns of living in suburbia. Its modern form presents a discursive middle ground between remembrance of the past and expectations for the future, reinterpreted for an optimally greener present.

Conforming to the above description of why “modern” was once such a popular design choice in postwar suburbia, consumer culture is still central in how the Smart

Home accommodates more diverse and complicated accumulations of consumer technologies, both discreet devices and “built-in” systems, that, no matter how energy-efficient they are to operate, have an even greater rate of obsolescence as rapid technological development provides a stream of ever newer and better replacements.¹² Compared to the simple, single-story rectangular box of the 1950s model home, the modular multi-story Smart Home is comprised of multiple stacked boxes, with an additional one serving as the garage¹³ and another box-shaped outdoor living space formed by their arrangement. [Figure 4.3] Planned and furnished as if for a nuclear family with one (male) child, the Smart Home offers a great deal more square footage per resident than most modest postwar examples of modern homes for modern families. While following the pattern of informal openness in main floor living spaces, there is greater opportunity to retreat to bedrooms and other special-purpose rooms floating above on the disjunctive pod-like second and third floors. The Smart Home model goes even further than the 1950s All-Electric House in its “merger of indoor and outdoor spaces,” where NanaWall® pocket doors, its version of the modern wall of glass, open completely to a plush furnished outdoor patio. Live green foliage covers select exterior wall and roof surfaces, accenting other natural materials like wood and industrial concrete and metal. [Figure 4.3] Inside and out, contemporary options for “easy-care finishes” now emphasize recycled materials, reforming the very notion of “synthetic” as appropriately “green” due to reuse of all things found in nature as well as manmade. The greenness of product production and acquisition is just as important, practically and rhetorically, as the greenness of their everyday use and maintenance.

As with its modern form, Smart Home presents an oddly subtle spectacle of its “wiredness,” and even its “wirelessness,” yet, like other similar exhibits and model green homes it depends heavily on additional narrative exposition to articulate its “greenness.”

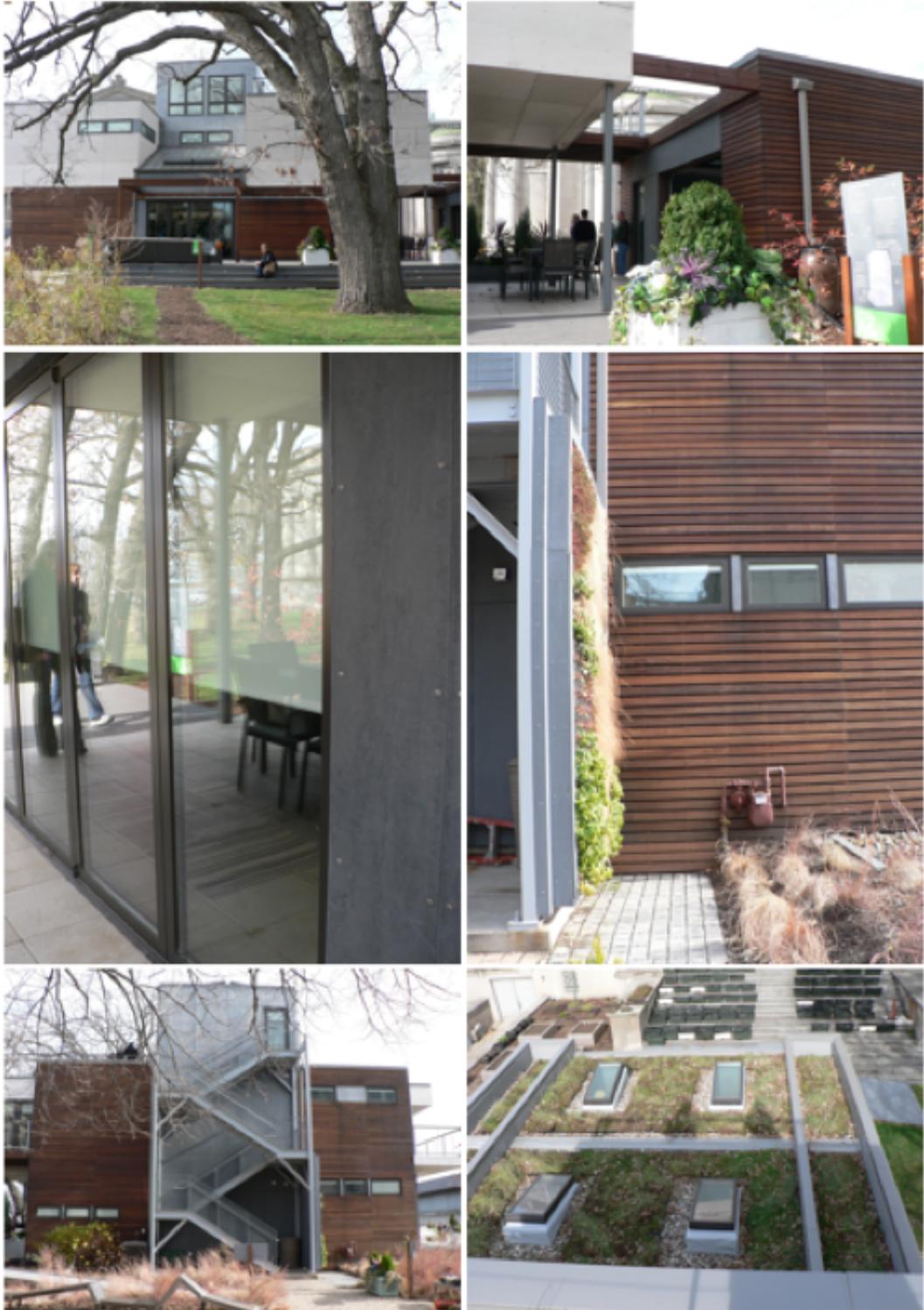


Figure 4.3: *Tours highlight the natural and technological “green” elements of this prefab house/exhibit in the context of its modern modular structure and aesthetics.*
Photographs of Smart House: Green + Wired by Holley Wlodarczyk (November 2011)

Rather than relying only on what virtual or actual visitors may casually glean from surface impressions, the eco-consciousness of such houses unfolds in a collection of “stories” that relate aspects of both its histories of production and futures of use.¹⁴ In many model or demonstration green homes colorful signs on walls explain what about each various feature is “green,” sometimes going as far as to compare them to typical non-green versions the public is more likely aware or in possession of. The Green + Wired house relies on a guided tour where these are pointed out and visitors’ spontaneous questions can be answered. A more detailed brochure than that available online, with specific information about each high-tech feature, is provided with the tour ticket purchase, giving those who make the trip to the museum “insider” knowledge of how the house works and why it is green.

For those visitors who want more information than the tour or the brochure offer, they are left with the option to buy a copy of *Prefab Green*, an illustrated coffee table book for sale in one of the museum’s gift shops. In the introduction, titled “Dreaming of Green,” author Michelle Kaufmann tells the personal story of how her first signature green design, the Glidehouse, was born from a fruitless search for a home that satisfied her and her husband’s wants and needs, which included low maintenance materials, low environmental impacts, and good, open design—all on a budget. They condensed their search to parameters expressed by the phrase “clean and green,” which have remained key principles in her work as an architect. That first site-built Glidehouse, so nicknamed for sliding features like cedar sunshades, glass doors, and moveable “storage bars,” was planned as “an efficient green dwelling with a thoughtful connection to the outdoors” on a “narrow lot in semirural Marin County, California.” Reproduction of the home using prefabricated modules came afterward, when friends became interested in having “a modern green house, too.”¹⁵ Her private residence served as a semi-public model.

In this narrative we encounter a common perspective on the difficulties of finding an *affordable green modern home*, especially in suburbia. Kaufmann, a practicing architect, with her custom-cabinet-making spouse, were able to build the green home of their dreams in a bucolic yet convenient setting; but, she admits, not everyone can. Real “choice” in the real estate market may seem like an illusion, where variation between available models is limited and superficial, and “green” is only an add-on flavor rather than a substantive foundation for how most new homes are designed, sited, and built. Since industrial practices were applied to site-built homes in iconic postwar subdivisions like Levittown, NY and Lakewood, CA, discursive constructions of contemporary homes as equivalent to any other readily available mass-produced consumer product masks a reality of scarcity when “shopping” for a house that satisfies all of Kaufmann’s basic stated criteria: budget-friendly, open concept, easy maintenance homes, but with “low environmental impacts.” This last factor continues to be the most elusive, and has not to date been a primary factor in the production, marketing, or general concerns of most mass suburban housing. Following the half-century-old model of tract home production, connection to “nature” is still largely limited to views of manicured green lawns through expansive picture windows, with minimal visible commitment to environmental values. As product and process, aesthetic and ethos, domestic modernism of the kind on display in “model homes”—from the 1950s All-Electric House to the 2000s Smart Home: Green + Wired—is further equated with the mechanical, the technological, and the efficient as a way to enhance modern living.¹⁶ Translating modern dreams into green dreams for all—open and easy-care, stylish yet environmentally conscious production homes—requires new models by which “green” can be both culturally and economically mainstreamed. Just as museums crystallize and transmit our understanding of how the past informs the present, model homes do likewise in showing how the present can shape a green future.

Marketing Rhetoric

Houses are built to live in, not to look on: therefore let use be preferred before uniformity, except where both may be had.

—Sir Francis Bacon

The challenge of designing, building and selling green homes more broadly in suburbia lies in how to both harness and nurture dreams for this particular conception of “better living” within the conditions and constrictions of local suburban contexts. As an environmentally oriented remodel of the American dream, green homes today must be fairly responsive to the existing popular paradigm of suburbia as a physical and cultural landscape, including those aspects that make it an attractive choice for folks in “Middle America.” In marketing discourses of green homes, as well as in houses themselves as visual texts available for our viewing pleasure and critique, the meaning of green is often articulated as a bridging factor between anticipatory responsibility for an environmentally sound future and evocative longing for a more natural past. The duality of this outlook is not an entirely new trend or impulse. Reflecting on what he saw on his travels through suburban environs of the desert Southwest, Londoner Jason Griffiths made note of how

Contemporary American houses evince the same ‘pull to the new’ and ‘push from the old’ that characterized the first suburbs. Although rephrased in contemporary marketing terminology, the suburban ideal still retains the sense of an escape from complexity, age, fear, insecurity, imperfection—precisely the motives that have periodically drawn people to search for a new beginning.”¹⁷

While Griffiths was not specifically referring here to new green homes, his observation is applicable to this latest shift in suburban home building and marketing, wherein green features speak simultaneously to a sense of “escape from complexity” and a “search for a new beginning,” all within relative easy-access of a standardized homescape that does not overly challenge middle-class technological, aesthetic, or economic comfort levels.

Not all “houses of the future,” like the more fantastic concept homes, fit these parameters, although many recent model homes with green certifications or ambitions borrow heavily from this imaginative discursive tradition. Smart Home: Green + Wired is just one example, representing through its design, style and construction methods an alternative to more “ordinary” houses readily found in standard suburban neighborhoods. The rhetoric attached to Kaufmann’s Smart Home model suggests that modern green prefab is the best solution to the profound lack of quality, affordable, desirable green housing, an extrapolation of and improvement on past efforts, like low-end subdivisions utilizing production-line methods on site or factory-built modular and mobile homes. Prefabrication is presented as a more economically efficient and thus feasible option for mass-producing better housing using extant processes and technologies. The green product as proposed is a somewhat customizable dwelling manufactured in a more controlled factory environment with minimized material waste, then delivered mostly finished to a prepared site of the customer’s choosing and “hooked up,” ready to furnish and occupy. Photographs of the Smart Home’s stages of placement and assembly on museum grounds document this speedy process, giving viewers—and potential modular homebuyers—an idea of what they too can expect if they choose “prefabulous” green.¹⁸

Michelle Kaufmann, whose company no longer directly sells the Green + Wired model featured at the Museum of Science + Industry, is not the only commercial party endorsing modern prefab as the solution for a greener tomorrow, in or out of suburbia. While many prefabricated home companies operate only regionally, where their product is more conveniently and affordably deliverable, (inter)national exposure through ads, websites and other digital publications promotes modern green prefab as a viable option for creating cost-effective, environmentally-conscious housing stock in “Anywhere, USA.” Blu Homes now manufactures and sells some of Kaufmann’s most well known designs,

like her own prototype home, the “Glidehouse,” and other variations with names like “Breezehouse,” “Element,” “Balance,” “Origin,” and “Evolution.” Their website boasts a “Bring Your Dream Home to Life” feature where visitors can use an interactive 3-D program to “customize” one of their available models, choosing between optional floor plans and green finishes. Accompanying color photos of the various homes set in lush, occasionally pristine landscapes are the words “simple,” “beautiful,” “healthy,” and “quality built.”¹⁹ *Green* is not directly referenced, but rather implied by vocabulary and imagery that respectively define the parameters of good eco-housing in terms of uncomplicated lifestyles, pleasing aesthetics, general well-being, and solid construction.

Another industry leader, LivingHomes, produces modern prefab LEED-certified houses with the promotional tagline “Nature Made. Factory Built,” which argues for a way of seeing and valuing the merger of *the natural* with *the machine* as environmentally ethical, economically reasonable, and, most of all, culturally desirable. Their first model was designed by American architect Ray Kappe,²⁰ and the company distinguishes itself further by association with other “world-class architects” who design relatively “low-cost” green prefab homes. According to a statement by developer and CEO Steve Glenn, the firm’s “mission is to create homes and communities that inspire people, foster family and community interaction, and make modern life easier, healthier and more comfortable—all in ways that compliment and enhance the municipalities and environments in which we work.”²¹ Despite such rhetoric of compatibility with global concerns, local contexts, and personal desires, architect-designed modern aesthetics are not typical of most new suburban residences, even when downscaled for mass-production (and presumably mass-consumption). But if the modern style so prominent in the green prefab movement is not to the average suburban customer’s liking, a few companies offer more traditional models conforming to nostalgic design trends in today’s most fashionable subdivisions.²²

Regardless of such efforts, the purchasing public has not yet been widely persuaded to see or accept “manufactured houses” as aspirational homes—modern or traditional, green or otherwise.²³ While modular prefab production is efficient and flexible, focus on this means of green inhibits thoughts of either the future or the past, dwelling instead in the “now.” Emphasis on the “process” of building modular prefab homes suggests that the house that is suddenly here today could just as easily be gone tomorrow, either moved to another site or dismantled altogether. This aspect resonates well within green discourses of “reduce, reuse and recycle,” bringing the house within the conceptual realm of other consumer products for which this would be an eco-value-added benefit in line with the “Cradle-to-Cradle” vision of sustainably “remaking the way we make things.”²⁴ However, within the discursive context of dream homes, such ease of structural mobility and disassembly might seem like an inherent drawback, a sign that reads as if the house is only meant to be temporary. One possible reason for the resurgent popularity of nostalgic design in brand new suburban housing, like the current trend of American Craftsman-inspired homes, is the temporal duality of the narrative their styling ideally communicates: looking to the future—sturdily built as if to last, while also looking to the past—as if these homes have always been there. The verbal and visual rhetoric employed in marketing brand-new old-looking homes this way reinforces such impressions, no matter how cheaply or insubstantially any given production house may be built. Green prefab must work against impressions that this housing type is both cheap and insubstantial, soliciting comparison more with architectural modernism than tract-home traditionalism. Yet even cross-promotional media exposure meant to draw interest to high-profile green prefab projects often incidentally reinforces assumptions of ephemerality, as in Kaufmann’s LEGO model of the mkSolaire design included in past exhibitions of its full-scale version, *Smart Home: Green + Wired*.²⁵ [Figure 4.1a]

Like most modular prefab houses, the Smart Home: Green + Wired is made to be “dropped in” to any setting with ease, but that does not guarantee that it will “fit in” to the neighborhood. Almost anywhere it could be placed, it would most likely stand out in terms of its style, massing, and orientation when juxtaposed with old or new suburban houses, even those with similar square footage. In the comparative context of postwar mass-produced site-built houses in subdivisions like Levittown or Lakewood, it was ensured that every house on every street looked (mostly) the same (at least until home owners modified them over time and according to taste or need). Whether on site or in factory, regardless of the means of production, architectural style remains a concern in the discursive construction of green homes, and how well they potentially communicate belonging—of house and inhabitants—within their wider suburban environment. From futuristic techno-experimental to Hobbit house shabby-chic, green dream homes come in all shapes and styles, but as the editor of a special 2005 *Mother Earth News* issue noted, “the appeal of a simple and beautiful cabin is hard to resist.”²⁶ We here find the inspiration of Thoreau’s *Walden* alive and well in the discourse of green, but not so much in the built landscape of suburbia. And in spite of rhetorical positioning of prefab green homes as suburbia-compatible via their deliverability to any location, most models would be as conspicuous in suburban contexts as Thoreau’s tiny wooden retreat. Many green prefab models do, however, attempt to straddle the proverbial fence between the modern accessibility of production homes and the rustic charm of quaint custom cabins, as evident in the language and imagery used on the websites of both Blu Homes and LivingHomes. Simplicity becomes as much a key principle as efficiency in contemporary green home marketing discourses, wherein a simpler life is interpreted from a palette of stylistic home choices connoting the not-too-recent past and harmony with nature, all with the added amenity of modern technological conveniences.

Not all green technologies for and of the home are “high-tech,” however. Along with examples from the likes of “Cradle to Cradle” proponent William McDonough, a rather “old-tech” design by architects Steve and Wanda Mouzon was featured in a 2009 *Wall Street Journal* article showcasing “The Green House of the Future.” While the other designs resemble futuristic fantasies more than realizable dreams, the Mouzon “SmartDwelling I” was included as a counterpoint to demonstrate that “Looking to the future isn’t the only way to be innovative,” predominantly through thoughtful utilization of “tomorrow’s technologies while mining ancient techniques to reduce energy use.” [Figure 4.4] Calling attention to specific “ancient” technologies like the “breeze chimney” in the Mouzon house, the author concludes by noting that all of the otherwise distinct designs in this article have one thing in common—their relatively small size. This observation supports key arguments in green home discourses that, in response to the ballooning size of the average suburban house or “McMansion,” recommend “Americans need to learn to live in smaller spaces if we are going to make an impact on the environment.”²⁷

Following the logic of similar critiques of urban sprawl, consumption of both material and energy resources is directly related to consumption of space. Size matters. Sarah Susanka, architect and author of *The Not So Big House* series of popular books, is one of the most prominent voices advocating for a downsizing of suburban homes and the way we live within them.²⁸ She employs the rhetoric of simplicity, but this quality is articulated through rather complicated house designs with plenty of built-in storage and architectural details recalling early twentieth-century home styles. Compared to the kind of “clean and green” modernist version we see in the work of Michelle Kaufmann and other green prefab architects, *The Not So Big* oeuvre offers a “better not bigger,” “less is more” philosophy packaged within the intricacy and comfort of nostalgic pre-mid-century design, but, respectively, these are still pretty big houses at well over 2,000 square feet.

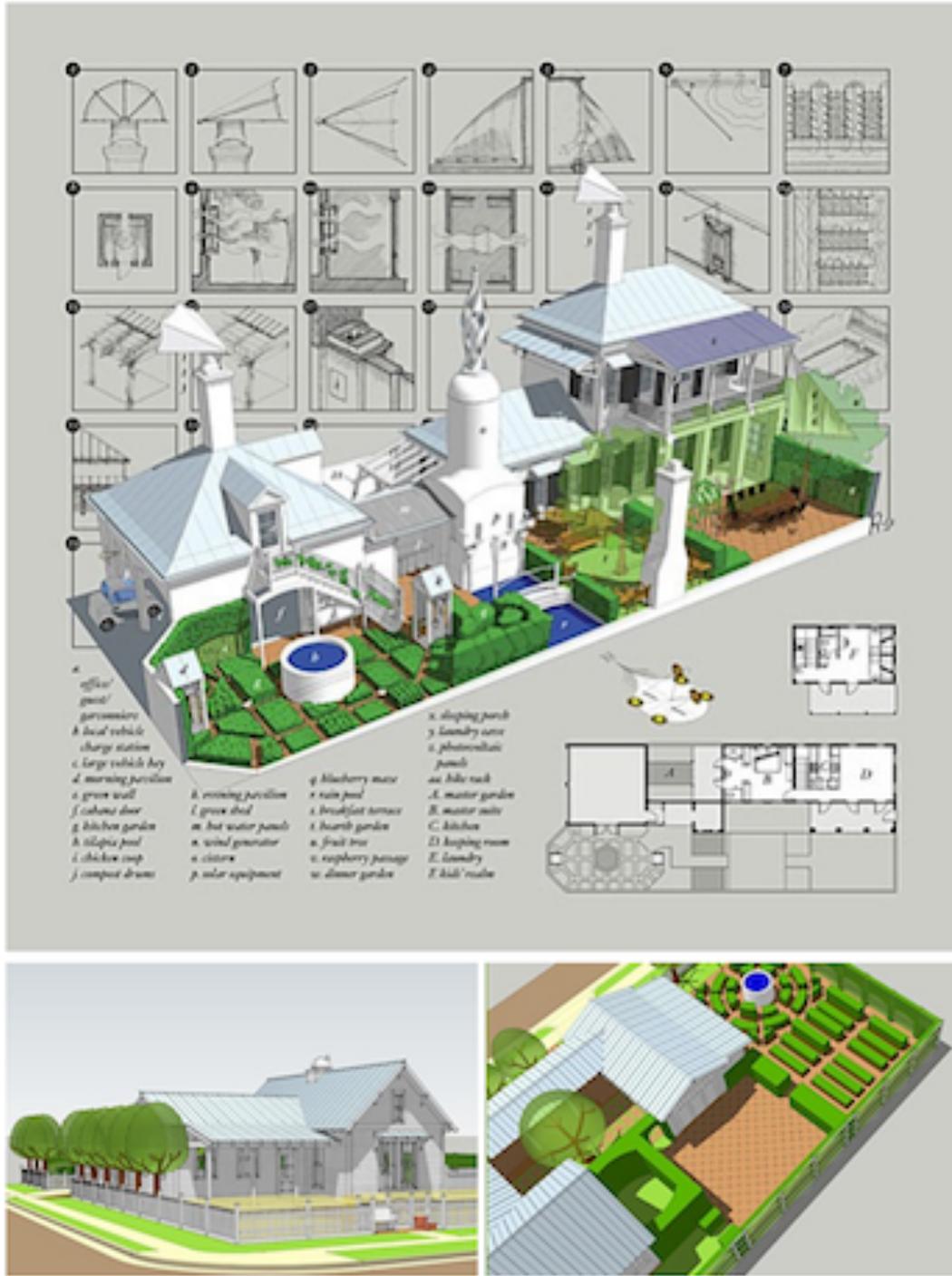


Figure 4.4: *Mouzon's neo-traditional designs for retrofitting suburbia include "green" houses that use "old fashioned" technologies and have extensive gardens.*
 Above: Steve and Wanda Mouzon, SmartDwelling I (2009), <http://www.originalgreen.org/blog/the-wall-street-journal-on.html>.
 Below: Steve and Wanda Mouzon, SmartDwelling II (2012), <http://www.mouzon.com/blog/smartdwelling-ii.html>.

Sarah Susanka's vision of sustainability through small size and efficiency of design is green relative to the contemporary norm, although the homes she designs and the house plans she sells are generally double the size of the average postwar tract home built concurrent with the 1950s All-Electric House. Always-increasing average size trends of new home construction (especially since the postwar suburban building boom) suggest that those who can today afford to build their dream home—even their green dream home—want or need more space than was previously thought sufficient. To compensate for the desire or perceived necessity of this extended living space despite smaller family sizes,²⁹ we increasingly turn to technology to balance the ledger in our cultural eco-conscience. These technologies in part fulfill wishes for a simplified life, where the latest in digital communication and automation “do” much of the work of everyday life for us. Compared to the array of electronic wonders featured in the 1950s All-Electric House, their newer, greener, smarter versions also promise a level of energy efficiency unrealized in previous iterations, while even more novel green tech, like solar systems, supplements or replaces more eco-unfriendly energy sources with renewables, powering a different vision of “clean and green.” Designs like those put forward by Mouzon do not completely turn their back on green technologies as green solutions, but rather expand the definition to include—and re-prioritize—older ways of thinking about the technology of building as a major part of the marketable energy-efficiency equation.

Admitted Mouzon fan, Lloyd Alter of *Treehugger.com* has “become disillusioned with the idea that we can throw a lot of expensive heat pumps and photovoltaics on top of what we have always done and call it sustainable.”³⁰ Although, Alter's phrasing of the problem in terms of “what we have always done” apparently dates back only to the postwar era, the age of air conditioning that encouraged, even enabled a uniformity in comfortable, economical mass-suburbanization nation-wide, irrespective of regional

climate conditions. In contrast to the postwar model, another Mouzon design represents qualities espoused by Original Green, a movement loosely related to New Urbanism whose rationale is to shift attention beyond the “Gizmo Green” solutions of add-on technologies, reviving “the sustainability all our great-grandparents knew by heart.”³¹

The Mouzons designed “SmartDwelling II” in response to a Texas competition that called for entries that were “both highly affordable and sustainable.” [Figure 4.4] Yet, unlike most participants, they were not trying to win, but rather to expose what they believed to be the mistaken priorities of the program as well as missed opportunities for rethinking common approaches to new green home design in suburbia. According to their blog, on which they proudly share their intentionally losing design with the general public (or at least the segment of which that shares their neotraditional green design sensibilities enough to follow online), they were “disturbed” by such criteria as a front-facing garage (which they ignored) and the narrow focus on simply using “better equipment and materials” as the working definition of sustainability. In their design-as-critique concept house, they instead focused on regionally specific traditional design solutions, stressing “Smaller and Smarter” and “Conditioning People First.”³² Much as the small traditional design work of Sarah Susanka appropriates history, or Michelle Kaufmann’s open prefab espouses modernism, Mouzon’s stated rationales are meant to reorient our fundamental desires and aspirations toward a new(ish) model of suburban dream home realigned with what is of late discursively constructed as old-fashioned green, or *green before we had a name for it*, a vision of green that is compatible with literal “white picket fences.”

While the ideals of “small, simple green homes” and “old time green values” are gaining some traction in contemporary discourse and, to a still very limited extent, in the built suburban environment, specific technologies like solar power generation still get the most publicity in completed projects. Yet even technologies like solar that seem like the

best, newest thing in green home discourses, some applications, like passive solar design, have a longer suburban history than generally remembered. Alexis Madigral devotes a chapter in his recent book, *Powering the Dream*, to “The Solar Home of the 1950s,” in which he notes that despite differences in regional, vernacular design traditions, some architects working in the period felt the need to make solar designs “fit in.” A 1947 book he cites, *Your Solar House*, offered variations on a design that looked “remarkably like any old subdivision home you might find, a nod to the architect’s belief that ‘although startling scientific discoveries will have terrific impact on our way of living, it will take more energy than the split atom generates to change people’s tastes and desires’.” The cultural meaning of home endures, as does the visual vocabulary with which we construct our technologically evolving vision of “the good life” in our “dream house.” For solar to work, it needs to fit within a suburban cultural context already long established. Madigral cites the relative simplicity of these and other early solar homes, both built and merely proposed, compared to the high-tech and occasionally energy-intensive houses of the future circulating in other discourses at the time and currently. Drawing on a combination of proper orientation on a site with mid-century technological innovations in efficient window glazing, “the solar home seemed the perfect match between the traditions of old and the science of the new age.”³³

The passive “solar home” of the fifties never found mainstream acceptance in suburbia due in part to the difficulty of achieving optimum solar functionality in suburban tract settings, where standardized development practices could pay little heed to proper house orientation. Efficiency was the goal in platting and building homes for the masses rather than in operating and living in them for years afterward, at least while heating and cooling were of less concern in an era of cheap energy. As this reality is slowly, at times painfully altered in present times, we increasingly look to find ways of retrofitting not only

the homes we already have, but the ideas or models of home we already know, making them more sustainable as much out of economic necessity as eco-cultural desire. The appeal of “add-on” technologies, like those dismissed by Mouzon and company, lies in their ease of after-market application for builders and homeowners alike. While very few developments in the United States and abroad embrace the seemingly lost paradigm of passive solar home design,³⁴ which demands attention long before construction ever begins, the addition of photovoltaic panels on otherwise “traditional” tract homes now widely represents the easiest way to go green by adopting “the science of the new age.” Even those rare production houses designed from the ground up for energy efficiency and marketed as “Zero-Energy or “Net Zero,”³⁵ the latest buzzword in sustainable home construction, flaunt shiny black solar panels on rooftop display as visible signs of green.

One extra-ordinary example of this last trend is a recent collaboration between domestic trendsetter Martha Stewart and production homebuilder KB Home.³⁶ [Figure 4.5] After working with the company for years, Stewart, media mogul and perhaps the most influential of middle-class taste-makers, refashioned a standard KB Home model as a testament to how suburban “green” can be both “a joy for the eyes and the wallet.” The KB Home GreenHouse served as the 2011 International Builders Show concept home, and was opened to attendees of their annual trade show that year in Orlando. As described in *The Washington Post*, despite the garage door being the “most dominant feature” upon approach as it is in typical tract houses, “once inside, your impression immediately changes” when you see how it “is an unusually successful melding of green construction” and “tasteful design,” along with “moderate size and expense.” Also noted is how, other than the “unusually large” solar array situated on the roof, “features that make the house zero-energy are hidden from view,” encouraging “most visitors,” including this architecturally-trained journalist, to “concentrate on the visuals” instead.³⁷



Figure 4.5: *From the street, the GreenHouse by KB Homes looks like any other tract home, if a bit more stylish thanks to Martha Stewart's design input, but solar panels are only a small visible part of what make it "green" and net-zero.*

Views of KB Home's "Greenhouse, an Idea Home Created with Martha Stewart," and related company logos, <http://www.builderconcepthome2011.com/concept-home.php>.

Since most homeowners in suburbia do not have the opportunity, energy or desire to build their dream home, in the act of buying on trust is often placed in a “brand name” to thoughtfully design and conscientiously construct that dream-fulfilling home for them. Martha Stewart’s credibility with consumers, who faithfully buy anything from her themed magazines and cookbooks to coordinated linens and dinnerware, are being asked to trust her further in their purchase of an entire house to hold these artful though useful everyday items. From the smallest details to the largest living spaces, photographic and video tours of the completely furnished rooms and grounds exhibit her signature style. Not only does it receive her seal of approval, the GreenHouse “idea home” was “created with Martha Stewart.” Unpretentious and well proportioned, Stewart insisted that this honestly good house would exhibit “no fakery,” unlike the puffed-up McMansions offered by most builders, including KB Home.³⁸ It is also distinguishable in its generic suburban façade from non-green KB models in the Martha Stewart Collection based on her own historic homes, like the pillared Colonial-style Katonah, the cedar shake beach cottage-style Lily Pond, or the “rustic yet modern” stone-façade Skylands.³⁹

Beauty, proportion, and organization are Martha Stewart’s trademark qualities, and her primary role in this project was to apply them to a green home, making it just as desirable as any of her other home products. As one of the largest national production homebuilders, KB receives much more from their association with Stewart than a sense of style. She may not be the most relevant name or obvious choice circulating in green discourses,⁴⁰ but Stewart’s particular brand of media properties and consumer products does promote a vision of “the good life” that draws from a wholesome, homemade and homegrown nostalgia that appeals to certain environmental sensibilities looking back to simpler times, as well as from an architectural historicism that animates a good deal of New Urbanist rhetoric and design, including that of Steve Mouzon. Green is more than

just a color in this otherwise very beige model's public presentation, called out in the usual suspects of energy efficient appliances and technologies, recycled and natural materials, native and drought resistant landscaping, and the added benefit of a large open living space in a relatively compact four-bedroom house. In addition to achieving the highest LEED for Homes Platinum rating, Environments for Living green certification, and EPA Energy Star and WaterSense labels, this house carries the Net Zero promise that it will produce more energy than it consumes. In an interview for the video blog GalTimeTV, Martha asks why everyone wouldn't "want a home like this," insisting that she and her partners at KB Home "want to make this technology and this kind of living available to as many people as possible."⁴¹

Even so, the broader market impact of the Martha Stewart/KB Home GreenHouse is questionable in an industry where "big, publicly-traded builders lag far behind their private peers in terms of commitment to green building."⁴² Media promotion of the design, construction of this one-off Stewart-branded demonstration house overshadows KB Home's project of greening production housing more generally. While Martha Stewart fans in select locations can buy a tract house with her name on it, they cannot yet buy their own modest version of her green dream home. It is presented as a suburban "option" that really isn't one, costing \$70,000 more to build than similar greenish homes planned for a nearby subdivision, which will only meet the much lower Energy Star standards because the cost of achieving Net-Zero is still far too prohibitive. The experimental though ordinary-looking GreenHouse would surely fit into any new suburban neighborhood, but is unlikely to be built or sold in one any time soon.

While green features—from energy-efficient refrigerators and photovoltaic panels to zero-energy whole-house design—are widely seen as over-expensive eco-amenities, the realizable goal of site-built green homes designed for and available to the broader

populace remains underemphasized in the discourse. Cost continues to be a factor in upholding the rhetoric of “specialness” in suburban home markets where green is still largely an aspirational dream that remains difficult to attain in most working-class and lower-middle-class everyday environments. To pitch green to economically as well as ecologically conscious consumers, some production builders and those in related home industries are turning to the strategy of promoting green as thrifty, or even as greedy. A Meritage Homes’ executive recently delivered a webinar presentation for the Greenbuild Expo titled “Be Selfish, Be Green” aimed at those interested in green construction and business practices, especially the sales of green homes and home technologies. His marketing message is that being “green, sustainable, responsible, or whatever you want to call it doesn’t have to be a sacrifice. In fact...it should be presented as an upgrade,” a way for customers to save energy and therefore have more money left over for home comforts or even “bling,” like granite countertops.⁴³ Home builders seem to need as much prompting as home buyers when it comes to justifying the added expense of green homes over those produced according to the business-as-usual model. As a means of distinguishing their company from the competition, however, builders like KB Home and Meritage appear to be in the lead, at least in advertising.⁴⁴

Within the broad discursive arena in which “green” is defined and deployed, a variety of media texts and venues, including commercial media, illustrate the rather narrow lines between which suburbia is culturally constructed, where green homes are packaged as familiar dreams. Though while synonymous with “luxury” in the popular imagination, average Americans might well believe they have a better chance of winning a green dream home in a sweepstakes than of being able to some day purchase one. HGTV has annually provided just such a chance for avid viewers of this popular house-and-garden themed basic cable network, the HGTV Green Home Giveaway. [Figure 4.6]



Figure 4.6: *Each HGTV Green Home conforms to regionally historic architectural style while sharing many of the same mainstreamed strategies for going green.*

Photos of HGTV's 2013 Smart Home giveaway (in Jacksonville, FL) and prior years' HGTV Green Homes (2012 in Serenbe, GA; 2011 in Denver, CO; 2010 in Plymouth, MA; 2009 in Port St. Lucie, FL; and the original 2008 giveaway in Hilton Head, SC), <http://www.hgtv.com/hgtv-green-homes-past/package/index.html>.

Following the success of its Dream Home Giveaway beginning in 1997, a green dream home built in the planned community of Tradition at Hilton Head, South Carolina was the major prize of this newest contest a decade later. This first 2008 HGTV Green Home was unveiled at the height of the housing market bubble, just before the crash,⁴⁵ and had a few features common to many McMansions of the era, like a spacious 2-story great room, but it was furnished with new “sustainable” pieces made with natural, organic materials as well as with several older, refurbished ones. From Energy Star appliances in the “state-of-the-art” kitchen, to organic linens in the master bedroom and low-flow fixtures in the master bath, the house is filled with “green items that make a bold statement,” at least according to Carter Oosterhouse, our guide in the televised home tour.⁴⁶ Every space is “green” in some way, including those designed for outdoor living like a screened-in porch and an outdoor patio, but also such questionable eco-amenities as a fire pit and private putting green alongside beachfront sustainable native gardens.

In the video tour Oosterhouse, who at the time hosted HGTV’s only eco-themed program, *Red Hot and Green* (2008), then sits down with two people instrumental in the first HGTV Green Home project. Asked for ideas about how viewers might be able to green their own homes, one advises that “any step is a good step,” even just buying a few organic products for the home like towels or cleaning products. The other expert immediately suggests working with—which means hiring—“professionals who are also interested in being green,” like LEED-certified architects, “people who have themselves taken the steps to learn” about how “to make a house more environmentally friendly.” These comments invoking the “steps” of greening a home represent two competing visions of what green means, highlighting the differential means of green: consumption, which can range from simple non-durable goods to major home appliances, versus construction, which usually entails more substantial structural and design concerns.

Hiring “green professionals” is not always possible, or even desirable for many homeowners. Following in the suburban DIY tradition, a thriftier vision and scale of green focuses on making homes more eco-friendly through smaller projects resurfacing or redesigning the spaces we live in, and decisions about what we buy, make, or keep to put in them. The “Eco-Friendly Features” of the 2008 HGTV Green Home were outlined repeatedly across multiple media platforms, and much like Kauffman’s Smart Home: Green + Wired and KB Home’s GreenHouse with Martha Stewart, its public display attempts to do more than just “sell” us a new green home. Their discursive construction encompasses a wide range of materials, products, design principles, building processes, and landscaping ideas that can be “taken home” and applied to projects large or small. In the context of this whole-house project, they are categorized in terms of “Innovation and Design,” “Location and Linkages,” “Sustainable Site,” “Water Efficiency,” “Energy and Atmosphere,” “Materials and Resources,” “Indoor Environmental Quality,” and finally “Awareness and Education.”⁴⁷ This last quality reaffirms the notion that consumers need to be made aware of and educated about what makes a house green, and, in course, how to make a green home. Under its heading readers are encouraged to think about their lack of “owner training” since, “as with any complex machine, a home requires proper maintenance and management.” Like cars, HGTV and Tradition suggest that houses should also come with an “instruction manual.” This rhetoric addresses the fact that, despite promises of how “smart” the new breed of green houses are, they are distinctively and increasingly more complicated to live in, let alone to build.

When we look at such model green homes through the lens of simplicity, nostalgic architectural style has the capacity to soothe anxiety over how technologically advanced and complex new homes generally are. This may not ever operate on a conscious, intentional level for either builders or buyers, and although this relation is not

unique to green homes, it does potentially inform how cutting edge technology and backward looking style are employed together to market a particular vision of green suburban living for this cultural moment. Each of the subsequent HGTV Green Homes illustrate this principle against the backdrop of new, trendy, green subdivisions filled with similar looking (and priced) homes recalling much older regional vernacular traditions, like the (not so) little house on the (long gone) prairie built in Stapleton, Colorado (2011), or the “modern farmhouse” in Serenbe, Georgia (2012). These, and all other traditionally styled HGTV Green Homes, are topped with large solar panels alerting viewers that these homes are just as ready for the future as they are compatible with the past, all while promising a comfortable, eco-friendly life in them today. If you are lucky enough to win one of these celebrity TV homes, or well-off enough to purchase one just like it, you may find that you need that extensive online manual to optimally manage all of its modern technological wonders, but at least you can rest assured that they are being powered by the “clean and green” solar array perched on top of your style-appropriate roof. Even in the newest iteration of the contest formerly known as the “HGTV Green Home,” which now goes by the name “HGTV Smart Home,” traditional style contains the modern technology, facilitating easier consumption of the idea of green by mainstream audiences. Though rather than suggesting that “green” is finally mainstreamed to the point that it need not be called out by name, the switch to the “Smart Home” moniker may indicate a flagging interest in overtly identifying green aspects of a traditional “dream house” in popular discourse.

Despite such flagship programming as the annual HGTV Green Home Giveaway, where an entire promotional house is designed and built to be green from the ground up, environmentally conscious home programming on TV over the past few years, even on the House and Garden cable network, is largely limited to the occasional episode of

shows that otherwise do not focus on green building, remodeling, or decorating. Green is the primary value articulated by unhappy homeowners who imagine either remodeling or purchasing their dream home in only a few episodes of *Love It or List It*, like season 2's "Vegan House" (2009) and season 5's "Eco-Friendly Abode" (2012). A primetime show that otherwise centers each episode around increased functionality of the homes and more conventionally aspirational dreams, this Toronto-based home makeover series premiered in the same year as the first HGTV Green Home Giveaway, but compared to concurrent shows committed to promoting eco-friendly design and décor, like the short-lived *Red, Hot and Green*, its seldom and random green incursions into otherwise standard televised aspirational dream home discourse reinforces green as a matter of taste, something that sets its aspirants apart from typical dream house fantasies for the masses, and out of the mainstream. This difference can be framed in a diversity of ways, but most common are the oppositional choices of *green as luxury* and *green as austerity*. In the latter, green means giving up on the sensuousness of fine—and refined—living, wherein most of the modern comforts of a well-appointed home are either sacrificed for the old-fashioned asceticism of the eco-luddite or replaced by recycled eco-versions that are cheap, rough and colorless. In the former, greenness is virtually indistinguishable from luxury counterparts unless a point is made to highlight how and why a material or object or technology is eco-friendly. The materiality of green is the field in which these two visions battle for dominance in the cultural imagination of suburbia as somewhere that can be environmentally conscious and economically affordable, as well as a place satisfying to our senses and our desires.

Like Martha Stewart, HGTV as a brand is built on the visual appeal of the rooms and homes it displays, equally or perhaps more than on the argued functionality of these domestic spaces after various home design experts either fix what was there before or

create something entirely new. The materials used in green-themed houses as seen on TV, often natural high-end finishes, recycled faux substitutes, or a combination of both, often become the focus of a show visually and in its narrative of green. Those aspects that make an existing or newly built home “greenest” are often the “unsexy” parts not easily seen, especially by the time low-VOC paint colors are being chosen. Sprayfoam insulation may make your house more energy efficient, but it does not elicit the same pleasurable visceral reaction as the fine grain on sustainably harvested custom wood cabinetry or the surprisingly soft plushness of upholstery fabric made from recycled tires. Unlike demonstration homes that allow us a closer look and potential touch, on TV or in images and video online we rely on the camera as our surrogate eye, and on series’ hosts to guide us through the full colored green dreams realized, as well as on featured lucky homeowners to relay their satisfaction with the spatial and textural experience.

Those promoting the greening of the average home in other mass media similarly use the sensual hook of natural and recycled materials to inspire homeowners to “go green,” framing the beauty and pleasure of their use in the home as a reward for making more costly eco-smart decisions even when only redecorating or remodeling. On the “Sustainability” page of her *Not So Big House* website, Sarah Susanka excerpts her book by the same name in introducing a list of resources for reading and thinking about green homes as well as building them. She here focuses on the “products” and “materials” aspects of sustainable homes, citing her own argument that

...with the new emphasis on sustainability and renewable materials, there is an enormous amount of recycled materials entering the marketplace—from waterproof countertops made from recycled cardboard to interior trim made from wood scraps. All of these products are quite beautiful, taking on the colors of what they were originally and exhibiting natural textures all their own. Unlike plastic, they have some personality. Like a beautiful piece of wood, they tell us something about their origins.⁴⁸

That “personality” Susanka references is framed as an essential quality inherent in a material whose greenness does not need to be narrated for us—it speaks directly to whoever looks at it and recognizes its “origin story.” For contrast she invokes that most manmade material, *plastic*, which is notable (or notorious) for its malleability, its potential to be made into any form, to take on any appearance, texture, or color—even to look natural. This, though, is the seduction of the imposter, for also inferred is a cheapness and dishonesty in the material basis of modernity that inhibits its inclusion in the menu of green options for the home, unless that plastic is virtuously recycled or made from something more obviously “natural” than a clever combination of chemicals, like plants.

The use of natural materials like wood in the built domestic environment for more than its structural qualities or ease of construction has a deep ideological connection with modern architecture. Sarah Menin and Flora Samuel closely examine two modernist heroes, tracing Le Corbusier’s and Alvar Aalto’s respective understanding of “nature and space” as it shaped their work, as well as their lives and philosophies, in the early to mid-twentieth century. They pick up on one predilection of the latter that currently resonates in the materiality of contemporary green dream homes, and especially in the surfaces that frame or conceal their more high-tech cores and functions:

While wary of technology, believing that what had ‘originally’ been ‘a physical guarantee of freedom’ had come to restrict human kind, Aalto believed nature to be a lasting symbol of freedom. As such, it should form a basis for architecture. It was for this reason that he turned to wood, which had long ‘protected’ folk from the powerful forces of nature, be it wolf or biting snow, using it this time to protect humankind from the progress of rational Modernism and technology.⁴⁹

Parallel to how nostalgic, traditional pre-modern design is meant to compensate in some way for the escalating reliance on technology in the design and function of contemporary suburban homes, natural materials like wood, and even recycled products “made from real wood,” now aim to “protect” us from not only the emotional coldness and discomfort

of modernity, but also the superficial pastiche of postmodernity. Discourses of green homes traffic in this familiar symbol of nature as freedom, but also as connection.

Natural, elemental materials are often seen as a way to reconnect with nature more generally in the suburban spaces of domesticity. As David Macauley posited:

We are, in effect, increasingly sheltered from rather than brought into closer contact with the elements, which, in turn, have retreated from the forefront of daily thought and experience. If the current ecological crisis is partly a predicament involving our changing relations to earth, air, fire, and water, it more specifically concerns what we may term the domestication of the elements and environment, a transformation and social taming of other-than-human entities, animals, and locations. This domestication has fostered forms of forgetting, kinds of cultural and philosophical amnesia. The elements often appear dimmed down or diminished as they enter the human *domus*. Although physically near, they nevertheless remain existentially remote, covered over, or concealed.⁵⁰

We feel our disconnection from nature as a loss, and as part of the process of green homemaking, we strive to reverse this condition if even in only the smallest or least substantial of ways. In spite of all the genuine wood or recycled wood products we fill our green dreams of green homes with, there remains a strong tendency to turn to easier, less expensive, and less “authentic” everyday materials, or to often un-green products and fixtures that symbolize or even simulate nature. Marketing practices, from product naming and design to store displays and media commercials, discursively try to persuade us to comfortably connect to nature within our homes by plugging in air “fresheners” with scents like “ocean breeze” or “meadow rain,” or installing purely decorative remote controlled gas fireplaces instead of “dirty” wood-burning ones, or exchanging more utilitarian showerheads for those that simulate rain showers and waterfalls. Likewise, promotion of expensive “natural” granite countertops installed in high-tech kitchens is yet another way of framing the cultural consumer process of bringing nature home, harnessing its elemental properties and natural beauty through use of the perceived “best” natural materials for specific home applications. Efforts at

paying homage to nature within the bounds of the suburban homeplace keep it at a safe distance, but as moves toward greening our houses they too require a fair bit of eco-storytelling to close that distance, to re-manifest as “real nature” in the everyday.

Visual and verbal rhetoric alluding to this cultural function is also employed often as a measure of certification, as green seals of approval of the type used for over a century, like the *Good Housekeeping Seal*, in backing and authenticating product claims in the wider media marketplace. These less physically tangible symbols of nature reassure us when the legitimacy of a home’s “natural greenness” is not obvious in either material or design. Green home logos and clip art invoke a variety of nature’s signs, like the sun, stars, trees, and grass, but especially leaves. [Figure 4.7] As a figurative seal of nature’s approval, certification that the home you are buying or the remodeling you are doing is “green,” what signals this eco-friendly quality of material, design or construction better than the literal greenest of leaves? The most prominent national system, LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) developed by the U.S. Green Building Council, uses the mighty oak leaf to connote the environmental credentials of any building project that earns its seal, but further implied in use of this long-lived national tree symbol are the qualities of historic durability and American pride. Regional green home certification programs use similar motifs with biome-appropriate trees or leaves, or in some cases native grasses. More generic clip art logos for green houses present equally generic, non-specific, even cartoonish leaves to communicate a natural connection with whatever house or home product they are employed to sell, including the ubiquitous simple green-colored house shape with leaves emanating from its roof. In one California construction company’s web banner, the house disappears completely while one lone tree on a grassy hillside sells green as “the new black,” connecting the rhetoric of green with that of fashion and style, the affirmation of green consumer trends.

Stylish and versatile as green may be when made from engineered wood products, filled with energy-efficient stainless steel appliances and a variety normal-looking reused, recycled or plant-based plastic materials, even nostalgic architectural design recalling a pre-modern past doesn't always go far enough to assure consumers that their homes are truly green. Like green "brand names" in the business of marketing more environmentally conscious homes, home products, and home services, all of the above third party certifications aim to do just that, with the added emphasis of leaf or tree laden graphic logos as reminders why it is worth putting forth the extra effort, and in most cases, extra expense. When attached to new model homes, from the prefab Smart Home: Green + Wired to any of HGTV's Green Home Giveaways, a simple leaf speaks as much to eco-aspirations as to desires for economic mobility and comfort in dwelling.

Media Messages

*We, who have so much, must do more to help those in need.
And most of all, we must live simply, so that others may simply live.*

—Ed Begley, Jr., referencing Gandhi on *Living with Ed*

Part of the project of seeing suburban houses as “green” involves a vision of them as being in harmony with the natural world, but also as natural homes. Grand dreams of a brand new green home planned from the start to include every possible eco-friendly material, energy-efficient technology, or environmentally conscious design are, for many, just that—green dreams. Such dramatic, large-scale, holistic though costly projects are disproportionately featured in green media discourses compared to more modest dreams of greenish starter homes, or renovation and repurposing of older houses built before “green” had any associations other than trees and leaves and grass. Media exposure and eco-architectural promotion of green dream homes are additional benefits that designers, builders, and homeowners alike derive from the substantial added expense of “certifying” their brand of green design and construction with national programs like the USGBC’s LEED for Homes, or with region-specific versions like MN Green Path, Greater Atlanta’s EarthCraft, or any number of state or metropolitan Green Built or Built Green organizations. These credentialed projects gain precious visibility for individual projects as well as for green building more broadly, though they run the risk of skewing perception of what “qualifies” as green in real estate markets and the popular imagination. As with the disparity between media attention to non-green dream homes and tract housing or DIY remodeling, hype over new high-profile green luxury homes in the visual media landscape overshadows lower cost and less publicized efforts at establishing an “everyday green” accessible to the average suburbanite.

This inequality of representation manifests on TV and in advertising, but also in the book-publishing sector of visual media, where any number of full-color, finely printed coffee table books display artistic, professionally photographed green dream homes as objects of regard—and of desire. Through their pages we get the rare opportunity to look both at and into spectacular private green architectural dreams. Alana Stang's *The Green House: New Directions in Sustainable Architecture* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2010) is typical of this higher-end book featuring higher-end green homes with an international scope, as are other luxury titles like *Dreaming Green: Eco-Fabulous Homes Designed to Inspire* by Lisa Sharkey (Clarkson Potter, 2008), and even more novel treatments like Michelle Kaufmann's *Prefab Green* (2009). Often alongside such pricey volumes on bookstore shelves (or in “you may also like” online shopping suggestions), are expanding numbers of less sophisticated and less expensive books addressing the variety of ways we now try to define and achieve “green” in even the most average home and lifestyle. [Figure 4.8] In this category we find paperback titles targeted at more generally interested though still “dreaming” audiences, such as Jennifer Roberts' *Good Green Homes: Creating Better Homes for a Healthier Planet* (Gibbs Smith, 2003), and *New Green Homes: The Latest in Sustainable Living* by Sergi Costa Duran and Bollina Liliana (Harper Design, 2010). David R. Johnston and Kim Master's *Green Remodeling: Changing the World One Room at a Time* (New Society Publishers, 2004) is just one such title on the subject, while other “practical” guides for average homeowners, those eco-dreamers on a budget, include Sunset's Design Guide for *The Green Home* (2010), and *The Sustainable Home: The Essential Guide to Eco Building, Renovation and Decoration* by Cathy Strongman (Merrell Publishers, 2008). And as part of a *True Green* series by National Geographic we have *True Green Home: 100 Inspirational Ideas for Creating a Green Environment at Home* by Kim McKay and Jenny Bonnin (2009).

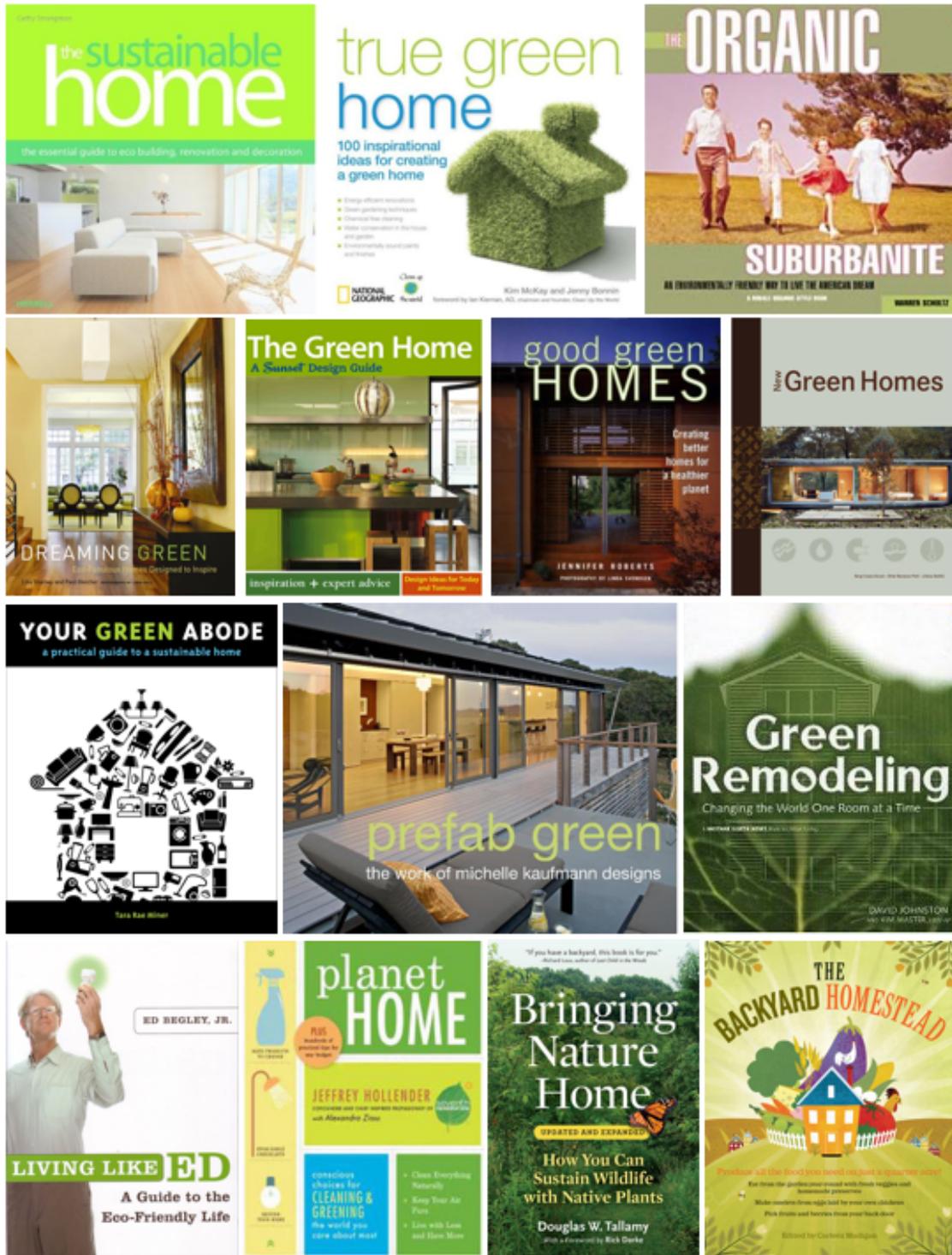


Figure 4.8: *The diverse meanings of a green home, and the means of making a home green, are shaped by popular discourse, including books on the subject.*

See main text and bibliography for more on the titles shown here.

In *Your Green Abode*, Tara Miner offers eco-makeover advice for busy people who “have an interest in the welfare of our planet—our home in a bigger sense,” but do not have the time, money, or ambition to build a new green house or even undertake a whole-house green remodel. Based on her own experience, she begins with two basic premises: first, that “any home can be green,” and second, that “any shade of green is better than brown,” rejecting limited visions that only see green as “alternate crunchy” or “the latest hip thing.”⁵¹ This book, and many more like it, go beyond the strictly “house” or architectural concerns of greening one’s “home,” though. As illustrated in the cover illustration for *Your Green Abode*, a home is as much “made up” of the “stuff” we fill it with as it is the timber, concrete, insulation or shingles that constitute its structural form. The house is a consumer product, but one filled with other consumer products. George Carlin put it in much more humorous terms on his famous 1981 album, *A Place for My Stuff*, where he describes an everyday reality we often prefer not to see this way:

That’s all you need in life, a little place for your stuff. That’s all your house is—a place to keep your stuff. If you didn’t have so much stuff, you wouldn’t need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it. You can see that when you’re taking off in an airplane. You look down, you see everybody’s got a little pile of stuff. All the little piles of stuff.⁵²

Carlin’s description recalls a familiar critical view of tract-home suburbia we’ve seen in countless aerial photographs, but he perceptively takes us inside, or “under the roof,” to envision and evaluate our modern way of living in which we constantly accumulate *more*.

Greening “our stuff” is increasingly incorporated into discourses around greening the primary place we keep it, “our home.” This includes what kind and how much “stuff” we buy for our homes, but also what we do with it and even how we maintain or protect it all. *Planet Home* by the co-founder of Seventh Generation, a green cleaning products company, guides readers through every room of the house with pointers on how to keep it clean in the most natural, nontoxic ways possible.⁵³ The title reinforces the conceptual

link between our houses and our planet, suggesting that how we live in and maintain the one impacts the other. Similar guides for “easy green living” or how best to be a “lazy environmentalist” outline the “whys” and “hows” of an adapted lifestyle that maintains the comforts and conveniences of suburban living while nonetheless *being green*, as does *The Organic Suburbanite: An Environmentally Friendly Way to Live the American Dream*, which uses postwar suburban nostalgia to “poke gentle fun at the traditions of suburbia, while helping us discover a host of earth-friendly alternatives.” Here we face the dilemma of our conflicting desires to have it all and to keep it all green, as explained on the back cover of this novelty self-help book filled with 1950s-era illustrations:

SUBURBAN LIVING can get complicated: You want your yard to look good. *You want your kids to be safe.* You want your bathtub to sparkle. *You want to keep the air and water clean.* You want to live the American dream. *And you want to do the right thing.*⁵⁴

Setting off the roman text suburban goals from the italicized green goals emphasizes implied contradictions between the dream and the reality, where the means by which we get a good-looking yard or a sparkling-clean bathroom are harmful to what we consider most valuable—our children, evoking the personal human costs, and the air and water, evoking the broader environmental costs. Doing “the right thing” doesn’t have to be in opposition to living “the American dream,” but processes and products that might help us do both are not always obvious, hence the proliferation of guidebooks, manuals, and other forms of eco-inspirational literature, many of which focusing on the “green home.”

Judging by the sheer number of published “green” titles, pronouncements of the imminent demise of the printed “book” as a popular medium of education and entertainment may be premature. Yet for those “readers” or “viewers” who are more completely embedded in the digital age, we find a newer form of communicating what a green home is and how to make your home greener, the online infographic. [Figure 4.9]

With the simplicity of a single panel of brightly colored poster-like type and illustrations, green home infographics cover a range of relevant topics including such “hard to see” processes as how your house uses—and wastes—energy, or the cycles and drainage paths of water in, out of, and all around your house. Easy to understand visuals and limited, focused messaging are meant to encourage efficiency and conservation related changes to how we live, if not where. Whether via dollhouse-like cross-section views of a home (with everything and everyone in it), or more cartoonish street-view depictions of average-looking green home façades, most infographics addressing these themes offer unique views that encompass “inside” and “outside” in a way that minimizes the barrier of the house’s structure, rendering walls as simple graphic lines. Relevant information for greening the home is targeted *across* standard discrete rooms of the house, like the kitchen, living room, bathroom, and bedrooms, as well as below-grade basements and outdoor spaces like the yard or driveway, and even the interstitial space of the garage.

The green home knowledge presented in infographics is usually a condensed form or nugget of what can be gleaned from books, documentaries, TV shows, or even in-person tours of model homes. One potential advantage of this format and style of communicating green to a busy, budget-conscious and diverse suburban populace is the generic form of “the house” in most infographics. Walking through a new or remodeled green dream house, actually or virtually, requires a level of dissociation between what we see “done” there and what we might have to work with at home in order to achieve similar goals. Specific architectural forms and styles, high-tech integrated systems, high-end material and appliance choices—these may be inspirational to the green house tourist, but may not translate well when thinking about the possibility of greening one’s own humble abode. When the most basic form of generic suburban “house” is used, it is a more open, relatable symbol rather than a precise, enviable example of “green home.”

This difference between the general and the specific influences how green home discourses are understood and made use of culturally. Being able to see yourself in a green home is not the same as being able to see your home as green. Compared to the popular HGTV Green Home Giveaway, where a lucky viewer wins a brand new green dream home in whatever location the network happened to choose that year, when *Better Homes & Gardens* first teamed with the USGBC to offer their readers a chance to win a green home in 2011, the prize was a green transformation, a makeover of a home already owned and presumably cherished, and already part of a social and physical neighborhood.⁵⁵ The cultural function of renovating an existing home, one we may have lived in for years or even generations, is distinct from the activity of finding, buying, designing, building, or even winning a new green home to live in. In ecological terms, this distinction is even more germane to discourses of how we value a house as an established part of a community, as a place that is already made, and a home place to which we already belong. Green remodeling is a cultural practice that keeps and ideally honors the old, preserving memories of and relations to a familiar, everyday space, yet embracing the new, incorporating available modern efficiencies, conveniences and even stylish trends. Spatially, eco-renovation goes beyond simple, utilitarian notions of “reuse” and “recycle,” maintaining a more personal, emotional, and historical connection to the house as representative of your past while also finding inspiration and cultivating aspirations for a better life, for a greener life, in your future.

Discourses of green suburbia encompass older, established suburbs as much as newly built subdivisions, and the green value of the former is increasingly accorded still limited though much welcomed media attention. The various means of and motivations for greening existing housing stock often entails less visual, less glamorous upgrades to a home—mostly concerning energy and water conservation, changes that affect the

household's functionality and bottom line, but also those remodeling goals that address a home's aesthetics—beauty, charm, and even its history. As Sarah Susanka argues, home structures need to be “right sized,” but also “beautiful,” because then “it tends to be looked after for generations to come.” Citing the retained “value and character” of hundred-year-old bungalows, she further states that this is “a big step in sustainability, even though we don't normally think of it that way.”⁵⁶ Green is change and continuity.

Aesthetics and history are interdependent green design considerations in old as well as in new homes, where various period styles are not of equal value nostalgically or economically. A particular decade's visual character and cultural meaning may be in or out of vogue, affecting the perceived worth of investing in home energy improvements, green aesthetic resurfacing, or both. Local and national green remodeling showcases play a role in not just demonstrating the possibilities, but also of setting the fashionable standards of which homes are desirable to spend the time, energy, and money on to make them greener, which ones already have enough “character” to build a green future upon. All pasts are not conducive to greening. For example, when a St. Louis Park, MN mid-century home was remodeled and certified through Minnesota GreenStar in 2009, the project's interior designer “integrated materials, finishes and details that were ‘a nod to the 1940s’ and echoed the original home's traditional interiors.” Further asserting that this aspect of the remodel was “green,” the builder argues that “while most people don't consider design a green element, it's classic look makes this home more sustainable,” since the home “won't have to be redone in 15 years because it's outdated.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the “datedness” of its re-design is already old enough that it carries a certain cultural cachet (and therefore market value) that a 1970s or even 1990s style cannot command (and which in all likelihood would be cause for market depreciation). What is “classic” and what is “outdated” are not fixed cultural values, shifting as mediated trends change.

Green aesthetics affect remodeled homes' perceived value, depending on how well they correspond with the particular discourses of the past in operation in any given suburban context. Sun-tracking solar panels on the roof of a 1920s Tudor revival disrupt the visual and historical continuity of a streetscape full of similar period homes, just as a brand new Kaufmann-designed modern green prefab unit would sit rather conspicuously in a subdivision full of postwar Cape Cod tract houses. When remodeling an existing home built as part of a unified design or master plan, where changes to those all around it are generally extensions of rather than alterations to a characteristic neighborhood style, the introduction of "green" can either be visually dramatic or unremarkable. In a 2003 article about a raffled Nebraska house, Angela Spivey begins by boasting that this "Green Dream House doesn't seem out of place among its surrounding Victorian-style homes." In support of this, a sustainable design manager from a local architectural firm acknowledged that "When you drive by, you don't think, 'That looks recycled'," even though much of it materially is.⁵⁸ Focusing on increasing availability and affordability of environmentally friendly building materials for the "middle-American" consumer, Spivey emphasizes their versatility in design applications—their inconspicuousness compared to more traditional manufactured retail options for building or remodeling the average home. Whereas home building industries have long been engaged in producing materials that look "authentic," both in terms of their mimicry of natural materials like wood or stone, or conformity to historically appropriate styles, within the emerging market context of consumer desire to be green while not necessarily looking green, there is a relatively new business imperative to fulfill demand for home products that fit the cultural and visual norms of suburbia. Along with dominant green discourses of efficiency and simplicity, we encounter a familiar suburban discourse of conformity, an unassuming eco-ordinary aesthetic in both newly built and existing remodeled homes.

This trend toward the inconspicuously green home accommodates a cultural desire to outwardly fit in even when inwardly embracing difference, including no-longer-subculture but not-yet-mainstream environmental identity or lifestyle. It also partially explains why so many of the green model homes on public display and for public consumption do not overtly “announce” their green virtues in their architectural style or visual presentation, relying instead on narrative exposition to reveal a home’s “hidden” green treasures. Occasionally a green home on display has a project-related celebrity to explain and endorse its eco-bona fides, like Michelle Kaufmann, Martha Stewart or Carter Oosterhouse, but once the cameras or visitors are gone, most green homes settle back into their everyday function as average-looking houses that happen to be green.

In another Minnesota example of inconspicuous green, the home of retired TV newsman Don Shelby, the greenness of this “new old house” discursively comes into being through a combination of local press and inclusion on the Remodelers Showcase tour in the Spring 2012 Twin Cities’ Parade of Homes.⁵⁹ This LEED Platinum, Minnesota GreenStar Gold, and Green Path certified teardown/rebuild reflects Shelby’s personal commitments to energy and environmental conservation, yet also conforms to the historic norm of its Lake Minnetonka neighborhood. Larger than the original house, the replacement maintains appropriate period style and even reuses many of its materials, such as old kitchen floorboards finding new life as an upstairs hallway ceiling. Shelby is a master storyteller who happily relates the green details of his dream home along with a fair amount of environmental philosophy dating back to the old-time frugal “sustainability” practiced by his parents and grandparents. The homeowner’s rich narrative of how and why this home is green effectively connects not just the material transition from old to renewed, but also the conceptual understanding and cultural aspiration of green as a way of living that must bridge past and future, ordering where and how we should live today.

In many mediated discourses of green homes—building them, remodeling them, and living in them—narrative threads of personal experience allow the example of specific houses (with particular technologies, amenities, styles and histories) to function again more like common, relatable symbols. When the eco-story being told is framed as more than just a marketing pitch, a way to “sell” us anything from a better refrigerator to a better house, our viewing and listening position is no longer strictly that of the consumer. The cult of celebrity is deployed for myriad marketing purposes, including but not exclusive to the sale of green products. In the self-presentation of environmental identity through one’s own home we register something more compelling, something approaching that elusive quality of “eco-authenticity.” Investment of thought and energy as well as of money in making a home green over time is more substantial than simply buying organic towels, Energy Star appliances or even a hybrid car. While celebrities likely have more economic as well as cultural capital with which to realize their green dreams than the average fan living in the average subdivision, their example potentially registers more as an exemplary green lifestyle than as a piece of green real estate.

Like the local figure of Don Shelby, whose green home embodies his green values, Academy Award-winning actor Ed Begley, Jr. is positioned as much more than as a celebrity spokesman with a national profile whose house communicates as much about his dedication to the environment as his words. His discursive function is as an “outsider” green role model. In *Living with Ed*, his modest, conspicuously green 1936 Studio City house gets as much screen time and narrative focus as the unconventional man living there. [Figure 4.10] Later airing on the niche network Planet Green, in 2007 the first season focused more exclusively on the Begley family abode, and was seen on the more generally popular (and available) HGTV.⁶⁰ Subsequent seasons followed the Begleys touring more spectacular green homes of Hollywood stars in exquisite settings.



Figure 4.10: *On Living with Ed, the film and TV star comes into conflict with his wife over the sometimes drastic eco-friendly changes and additions he's been making to their home, while she dreams of a more "normal," aspirational residence.*

Above left: Season 1 DVD cover for the reality cable TV series *Living with Ed* (2008)

Above right: Photos published in *Dwell's* "Preview" for *Living with Ed* (June 11, 2010)

Below: Promotional image of Ed Begley, Jr. and Rachelle Carson for *Living with Ed* (2008), after Grant Wood's classic painting, *American Gothic* (1930)

Yet part of the appeal of Ed and his green house as seen in these early episodes are how ordinary he—and it—really are. Over decades, Ed has tried to make the house “as energy efficient” and “as environmentally friendly” as he could, installing multiple solar panels on the roof, planting an extensive edible garden instead of lawn, surrounding the yard with a white picket fence made from recycled milk jugs, switching to compact fluorescent light bulbs, making furniture, reusing old materials, and, perhaps most significantly, not remodeling the more purely aesthetic features of the house, inside or out. A house-proud longtime environmentalist, Ed Begley’s brand of green ignores fashionable trends of home style and décor, much to his wife’s chagrin.

The behind-the-scenes tour we get of an older, less-than-luxury, lived-in home is two-sided. Describing the small, basic house as a “palace” by even contemporary world standards, Ed’s appreciation and enthusiasm are tempered by Rachelle’s frustration at everything from how tiny and dysfunctional it is to the home’s “unattractiveness.” Most of what she finds “ugly” are those features that have the most obvious green purpose and presence, like red-orange rain barrels in the yard or the monumental rooftop solar array. The one hard-won element of eco-style she herself finally introduces into the home, a sparkling, elegant recycled glass kitchen countertop, was initially a painful decision for Ed because it meant throwing out the existing well-worn counter. The eco-obviousness of the Begley home is always at the center of a clash over tastes and values—his and hers. Rachelle complains that “he’s never concerned about how it looks. It’s all about the environment with him.” While she wants a “clean house” and he wants a “clean environment,” attempts at finding a balance fuel much of the drama and humor of the show, and at one point Rachelle even “cheats” on Ed by “seeing other houses”—bigger, nicer, newer dream houses—though we get the sense that Ed’s vision of a green dream home will always win out, since, as she acknowledges, she “married into a lifestyle.”

That “lifestyle” is situated in a suburban home and neighborhood, but in many respects it diverges, at least in Ed’s rhetoric, from what we have come to see—and expect—as the standard suburban lifestyle. While Rachelle’s tastes and desires tend toward more fashion-conscious, consumer-driven, materially aspirational ways of living, Ed’s greener way is exhibited through a combination of eco-gadget nerdiness and old-fashioned frugality, even “cheapness.” Most of the times that Rachelle objects to Ed’s environmentalism as the dominant rule of order for their family are when it impacts the aesthetics or convenience of the home, both of which she is willing to spend more on. Yet compared to her outwardly unsupportive role on *Living with Ed*, in the companion book, *Living Like Ed*, Rachelle expresses a much different, more acquiescent tone and perspective. As popular media, the reality TV series and the lifestyle guide book each primarily serve different purposes, entertainment and education respectively. The eco-friendly message is carried in each, but through different vehicles of personality and their relation to the home, as made clear in the titles—learning what it’s like to live *with* Ed versus learning how to live *like* Ed.⁶¹

The eco-battle of the sexes on *Living with Ed* is not contained by the physical boundaries of the house, spilling out into the yard and street. For getting around town, a range of green transportation options include “her” hybrid vehicle, but Ed’s preferred modes, in ascending order, are “his” all-electric car, public transit, bicycles, and walking. We never see a lawnmower, or a standard lawn for that matter, but in a tour of the yard Ed proudly recounts the variety of vegetables grown within the recycled plastic picket fence enclosure (compared to painted wood), and then cooked in his prize solar oven (compared to a gas grill). Meanwhile Rachelle directs us toward crispy brown fruit trees and dead plants. The suburban-scale organic agricultural dream Ed relates is brought abruptly back to the unattractive reality of “anything but Eden” as Rachelle sees it, and

we laugh with her. Ambition to live in a more self-sustaining way, producing all of your own food as well as electricity, is a growing thread in green home discourses around “suburban homesteading,” connecting it ideologically with much older traditions and more recent “back to the land” revivals.⁶² Yet Ed’s rhetoric is bigger than his “edible estate,” and those show segments are at times more reminiscent of the zany exploits of *Green Acres* or even the British sitcom *The Good Life*⁶³ than with the everyday practices of an alternative green lifestyle like those outlined in popular “how to live” books such as *The Backyard Homestead: Produce All the Food You Need on Just a Quarter Acre!*⁶⁴

Ed Begley’s vision of a green suburban home is inclusive of a yard that is more productive and more natural than the average manicured patch of turf grass we are accustomed to seeing on televised or in photographic tours of dream homes. Though this “natural” aesthetic is often at odds with local codes that prohibit vegetable gardens in front yards, or weed ordinances that make no exception for native, drought tolerant plantings of tall grasses and wildflowers. Non-conforming homeowners who receive citations, are charged fines, or are even sued by their municipalities or neighborhood associations increasingly make the news, becoming local, sometimes national eco-heroes for bucking what seem like outdated, un-green suburban norms. Whether this is the homeowner’s intention or not, these kinds of land use and landscaping choices are commonly read as “green” by the casual observer, an assumption validated by media images and narratives like *Living with Ed*, or even in more rarefied environments like the Smart Home: Green + Wired exhibit at the Museum of Science + Industry, surrounded by native plantings and gardens efficiently irrigated by the home’s grey water recycling system. Each HGTV Green Home is likewise framed by a carefully selected collection of native trees, shrubs, and grasses to compliment their region-specific architectural style, fortifying claims of ecological belonging despite being new construction. Even Martha

Stewart's stylish yet ordinary looking GreenHouse for KB Homes boasts native grasses and organic vegetable gardens interspersed with otherwise large expanses of lawn.

Ed's ill-tended garden may look a little brown to us, but it reads as green. Emma Marris notes the trend in national and state conservation efforts that encourage residents to "let nature into their garden by planting threatened species, tearing out lawns, greening roofs, making rain gardens, and most of all, changing their aesthetic to embrace the slightly messy, the brown in the summer, and inevitable, the buggy." Marris emphasizes how the "new look and feel is rambunctious, diverse, and more like wild spaces."⁶⁵ This description—and prescription—is at odds with how suburban landscapes are usually understood. The staid, uniform, and domesticated appearance of stereotypical suburbs is often derided for its lack of both natural life and cultural liveliness, yet it is also the very substance of what is desirable to many who reside there, a well-maintained and self-contained vision of nature. Representations of more "natural" yards, especially front yards, starkly contrast with the more prevalent, cliché images of lawns, lawn care, and lawn obsession in popular and critical media. Through even the slow and sporadic accumulation of mainstream media images and messages countering the suburban norm, though, illustrations of green homes with greener yards may lead to a mainstreaming of natural landscaping practices as part of the suburban paradigm.

Persistence of the monoculture green lawn as a dominant feature expected in the suburban landscape is due to more than just simple aesthetic preferences or traditions. Much like picture windows, Timothy Morton argues that "The lawn creates ambience, a fantasy space that fuses inside and outside—all lawns are carpets."⁶⁶ Returning repeatedly to the suburban lawn in his theorization of environmental aesthetics, he at one point describes it as "just a horizontal, mass-produced version of the wilderness people visit to find peace and quiet and a sense of abstract nature. Lawns are a type of

'instant distance'—just lay down the sod and sit back contemplatively."⁶⁷ Bill Owens' captured the cultural and material practice of this idea in his 1973 photographs of *Suburbia*. The homeowner's caption to one image explains the process of quick transformation thanks to the literal green carpet-like grass: "I bought the lawn in six-foot rolls. It's easy to handle. I prepare the ground and my wife and son helped roll out the grass. In one day you have a front yard."⁶⁸ With another photo of a woman holding a baby in one arm and a hose nozzle in the other, the caption reads "My husband, Pat, has a theory about watering our newly seeded lawn. The water has to trickle from heaven and fall like tender little rain drops...otherwise the lawn won't grow properly."⁶⁹ Traditionally the installation or cultivation of grass did more than just give a superficial green makeover to newly built properties. It made a house a home, extending its living space to the outside. It also served an ideological function that connected suburbia and the single-family home to a dimmer, receding view of the natural world, keeping it close but also safe for consumption. Richard S. Weinstein summarizes the meaning and quandary of that standard patch of green grass around most suburban homes:

The lawn...represents a subjugation of nature to the rule of civilization. It is an abstraction of the presence of nature...known and therefore tamed. The democracy of the suburban lawn is simultaneously benign, excessive, and obsessive in the sense that it imposes sameness irrespective of geographic difference and the particularity of ecological place. At the same time the lawn is pleasing, ordinary, and democratic and allows each citizen a symbolic share in a domesticated ritual of subjugation and aggrandizement. The lawn is a middle-class embodiment of the American conflict between the value of nature as a principle and its management as a means toward material progress.⁷⁰

Contemporary discourses of green homes may appear to be at war with our continued desire for the common green suburban lawn for precisely these reasons, which are further illustrated in the short 2007 documentary, *Gimme Green*, a humorous but rather pointed critique of the lawn as an aesthetic obsession, an unsustainable industry, and an enduringly powerful if environmentally problematic symbol. [Figure 4.12]

That lasting love of the lawn is, however, a motivating factor in one of the less visually noticeable green home makeovers gaining popularity both in today's media marketplaces and consumer practices, as more people want to have their lawn and be green, too. This eco-trend is comparable to the manufacture of home products from recycled materials, where the end result looks nearly the same as old un-green versions. Natural ingredients and non-toxic processes are here sold as a "good," greener, more desirable option promising to deliver a fantastic looking lawn that looks as if "bad" chemicals have been dumped on it all along. Only the customer and their lawn care specialist may know the truth, unless a yard sign advertises the service change. Using the slogan "TruGreen. Go Greener," one of the largest home lawn service companies in the U.S. undertook re-branding itself in terms of this newer, eco-friendly understanding of green. Following initial success with a nationwide ad campaign in 2010 featuring "Bobby Sinclair: Neighborhood Lawn Kid," TruGreen enlisted the business-savvy adolescent to launch a new range of products and services, TruNatural.⁷¹ [Figure 4.11]

Bobby: TruGreen did it again. Yo, Kev. Tell them about TruNatural.
Kevin: Well, it's a hundred percent organic fertilizer. It grows healthy, green grass, naturally.
Bobby: TruNatural's going gangbusters. Green families love it.
Hippies: Hey man.
Bobby: Families with dogs love it. And you know who else loves it? Bobby. Second quarter's gonna be a monster.
Announcer: Call TruGreen and get a customized plan for a healthy green lawn.
Bobby: They grow it. I mow it.
Announcer: TruGreen. Grow greener.

"Wannabe future millionaire " Bobby Sinclair is presented as an entrepreneurial middleman of sorts. His profits depend on homeowners in his neighborhood "market" having decent-enough lawns that they will require—and desire—his regular services, and, in this case, also to be willing to pay a premium for a more environmentally safe, all natural lawn care regimen. His best customers are "green families...with dogs."

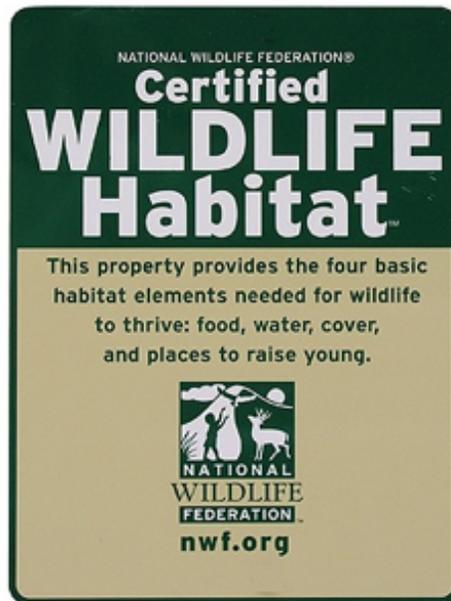


Figure 4.11: *With multiple strategies for “greening” the yard, the question is “for whom?”*
 Above: TruGreen “TruNatural” commercial stills featuring “Bobby Sinclair” (2010)
 Below Left: National Wildlife Foundation’s “Wildlife Habitat” certification yard sign
 Below Right: NWF sponsored home “Wildlife Habitat” exhibits at Disney World’s Animal Kingdom, Orlando, Florida; photographs by Holley Wlodarczyk (2012)

This intertextual discursive construction of which suburbanites “love” TruNatural in this particular TruGreen commercial admittedly draws upon the inspiration of *Family Ties* for Bobby’s character, the right-wing, future business executive of America Alex P. Keaton,⁷² whose sitcom parents were lefty suburban ex-hippies. The “green families” Bobby is seen servicing “naturally” with a wink and a smile live in a nice, older suburban home with a big front lawn, but their physical appearance and gestures while standing in front of that home best characterized them as “hippies,” complete with peace signs. Associating “green” consumer preferences with 1960s and 1970s counterculture (here all grown up and living in the ‘burbs) is one of the ad’s punch lines, but it also performs more serious cultural work in confirming a link between a respect for nature and a certain kind of alternative lifestyle. This conceptual framework is at play in *Living with Ed* as well, where Rachelle is the “normal” person with more openly materialistic goals and desires while Ed is the “eco-alternative” stock character—funny, loveable, admirable one though he may be. Of course they are a “natural” customer-base for green products that satisfy suburban wants and needs without compromising commitment to environmental stewardship. Green-as-alternative lifestyle is here further naturalized culturally, even as the inconspicuousness and normality of green is simultaneously affirmed in the lawn.

The second type of “family” we follow Bobby’s business to is one that loves their dogs, and therefore, has derivative environmental concerns based on the desire keep the yard looking good but also safe. This sentiment is similar to what we find in most of the “why” and “how to green your home” books, like the *Organic Suburbanite*, that usually include whole chapters on “greening” the lawn. An often heard common sense refrain concerning the poisons lawns are conventionally treated with is that if it kills the bugs it can’t be all that safe for people or animals, or the planet. Self interest beyond economic returns or savings, the desire to protect “our own”—people, pets, property—

may be a practical, rational reason many might be persuaded by ads like these to “go green” even if they do not wish to “be green,” self-identified environmentalists (like Ed.)

Other media representations manage to shift, even expand our perception to better see our “homes” as inclusive of much more than the house we live in, the stuff we keep there, or the yards we maintain, perhaps indirectly arguing through their dramatic imagery that “green” is—or should be—a more normalized way of being, thinking, living. A micro view is found in films like *Honey I Shrunk the Kids* (1989), where accidentally miniaturized kids go on a suburban safari in their own backyard, a familiar place made strange, exciting, even wildly dangerous. Compared to more “normal” views we have of the lawn as sterile, empty of life except for the monoculture leaves of grass freshly mowed, this fantasy film transforms our view to see the richness of even “garden variety” diversity. The title of a 1975 article in *Environmental Conservation* asked: “Suburban Gardens: England’s Most Important Nature Reserve?” The main argument of this scientific study tracking the diverse and prolific insect species found in the suburban gardens of England and Wales includes the proposition that, in addition to providing such desirable, natural-enough habitats, these spaces are “in no danger of disappearing; on the contrary they are spreading, yet their potential for conservation has been neglected.”⁷³ “Greener” here means achieving that suburban dream lawn while safeguarding the life hidden beneath our feet, another kind of green home makeover entails converting the yard to natural wildlife habitat, creating a place within the domain of home that literally draws nature back in, nature that’s easier to see like birds, reptiles, and small animals. In the U.S. the National Wildlife Foundation program encourages children and adults to extend the notion of your green home to include “habitat,” which can still be compatible with a comfortable suburban aesthetic, as represented again by a white picket fence in educational public displays. [Figure 4.11]

In his guide to green home building, *The New Ecological Home*, Daniel D. Chiras articulates the difficulty in reconciling our desire for a home of one's own with concern for the environment: "When we think of our homes, we don't tend to think about resource depletion, environmental pollution, habitat destruction, species extinction, or crippling exposure to indoor pollutants. We imagine our homes as comfortable refuges, not as sources of personal and environmental harm."⁷⁴ That is never our aspiration, yet it is more often today considered the net effect, and motivation for greater efforts at making all of our homes "greener," including visual media that attempt to reach, engage and inform as wide an audience as possible. As another dimension of the discursive construction of green homes and green suburbia, growing fear of these consequences surface in marketing media, popular entertainment, and critical analysis, marking non-green as more broadly "harmful." In some instances related hopes and fears are used to sell us something greener than we already have, while in others what is being sold is framed as a green idea, a mediated environmental consciousness that if internalized will ideally shape future consumer behavior and desire, including that concerning where and how we live in a hopefully greener suburbia.

Fear and loss are commonly intertwined themes of suburbia gone ecologically wrong, yet within visual discourses especially there is a focus on how innocent this landscape usually appears, designed as if it precluded and protected residents from all conceivable dangers. Whether in an environmental study, a demonstration home, a feature film, a television commercial, or an infographic, the "truth" as revealed through narrative is that we can't—or don't want to—always see the underlying reality of danger in the structures and landscapes most meant to connote safety. Pleasant, comfortable fictions of home are a necessary component to media messages attempting to persuade the public otherwise, calling for a widespread change of consciousness, practice or both.



Figure 4.12: A few eco-critical documentaries help viewers envision the “homes” we live in—and want to live in, making unseen processes and connections visible.

Film posters for *Blue Vinyl* (Judith Helfand and Daniel B. Gold, 2002), *Gimme Green* (Isaac Brown and Eric Flagg, 2007), and *Home* (Yann Arthus-Bertrand, 2009)

Fictional narratives like Todd Haynes' *Safe* (1995) dramatize unseen dangers in picture perfect everyday environments, in this case through the mysterious plight of an average upper-middle-class housewife suffering extreme chemical sensitivities in and around her very clean, modern, model suburban home. We learn as our protagonist does how the very things making her sick are common materials and products found, used, or built into her cinematic dream home, most of which are still regularly used in the construction, furnishing and maintenance of real suburban homes almost twenty years later in 2013. In a similar media message developed through a different type of narrative arc, a 2002 documentary chronicles an adult daughter's determination to change her parents mind about their budget-friendly, durable exterior siding choice of *Blue Vinyl*. We approach some of these same real life issues explored in *SAFE*, also from a perspective of partial knowledge. Along with our guide, we have absorbed the cultural knowledge that vinyl is "bad," but through an investigative tour of the long, toxic chain of vinyl's production, distribution, application, and afterlife, we learn more specifically why, and to what extent this banal, popular home material might be poisoning more than just our individual suburban home environments, but our wider planetary habitat—our *HOME*. [Figure 4.12]

The discursive construction of green suburbia through green homes and yards is a cultural process that has many links to and antecedents in the past, often expressed in nostalgic longing for a perceived simpler time when we didn't have to worry about things like how unhealthy our homes were for us or for "the environment." As the complexity of dwellings grows over time, so do the discourses with which we attempt to come to terms with it, developing new models for building, living, dreaming, and thinking about what a green home is now and what we might yet want it to be. Two professionals in the green home building and remodeling field describe the evolution of thinking about what

constitutes a green home, and how, just a few decades ago, “homes that saved energy were called energy efficient, while homes designed with attention to air quality were called healthy,” and homes “that used efficient framing techniques or materials were called resource efficient.”⁷⁵ The term “green home” has come to encompass all of these aspects of design and building processes, as well as landscape and lifestyle choices, and, through model green homes yet unbuilt, unmediated, and undreamed, will undoubtedly include more. In *The Poetics of Space* Gaston Bachelard wrote that

Sometimes the house of the future is better built, lighter and larger than all the houses of the past, so that the image of the dream house is opposed to that of the childhood home. Late in life, with indomitable courage, we continue to say that we are going to do what we have not yet done: we are going to build a house. This dream house may be merely a dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people. It must therefore satisfy both pride and reason, two irreconcilable terms.⁷⁶

The notion of the childhood home is that which we know, the comfortable paradigm in which we are free to dream, to construct and consume and reimagine models of better living that indeed attempt to reconcile this desire for a green dream home that satisfies “both pride and reason.” As the possible future of suburbia is culturally constructed in the context of always shifting discourses of green, the challenges, and opportunities of fashioning and refashioning such meanings is made ever more complex. Yet in the variety of media texts, forms and venues through which we engage this complexity, we are able to see how these discursive shifts in green home design, marketing, and even critique are anchored in history, precedent and tradition. As they are further enacted in media images, the built environment, and everyday practices, we are better able to make sense of their meanings and implications over time, building new conceptions of what a green dream home could be in green suburban future, one in which we can reasonably take pride in.

Notes for Chapter 4:

- ¹ Museum of Science + Industry, Chicago, “Smart Home: Green + Wired” Exhibit Resource Guide 2011-2012. The most recent iteration of the Smart Home ran from April 19, 2012 through January 6, 2013. My observations are based on a visit during the previous run, from April 22, 2011 until January 8, 2012. With each reopening there are changes in furnishings, décor, some of the integrated technologies, and materials showcasing “innovative ways to live green,” while the structure and grounds remains largely the same. For more see the exhibit’s currently updated webpage: <http://www.msichicago.org/whats-here/exhibits/smart-home/>.
- ² “Smart Home: Green + Wired” Exhibit Resource Guide 2011-2012, p.1. As acknowledged in the 2011-2012 brochure “Welcome” message from Museum President and CEO David R. Moseno, that World’s Fair exhibit in Chicago 80 years ago “unveiled visionary building methods and technologies like prefabricated homes and solar-powered heating.” Michelle Kaufmann, an “industry leader in superior modular home construction,” was their choice to design a twenty-first century inheritor to that tradition, where “green” is now seen as the current appropriate paradigm for showcasing the “scientific and industrial innovations, new materials and technologies shaping the homes of *our* future.” *Emphasis mine*. In a profile for the July/August 2007 issue of *Sierra*, Dashka Slater named Michelle Kaufmann “The Henry Ford of Green Homes.” See more at <http://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/200707/innovators.asp>.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p.2. Although as of Kaufmann’s blog entries on February 22, 2010, her revised “Eco Principles” are now six in number, phrasing of the first five slightly modified from what was published in the Smart Home brochure: “Thoughtful Design,” “Efficient Materials,” “Energy Conservation,” “Water Efficiency,” “Healthy Spaces,” and the brand new “Systems Built.”
- ⁴ A decade later, Buster Keaton made a short film titled “The Electric House” that began in the spirit of the former, with a comedy of errors in mis-hiring Keaton as a newly graduated electrical engineer to “wire” a rich man’s house, but regressed into the latter with technologically-enabled slapstick humor derived from the extravagances of over-automated *inconveniences*. Directed by Joseph M. Schenck, Buster Keaton’s 1922 silent short film (or what is reported to be a remake of a lost version) can be seen in full at: <http://archive.org/details/TheElectricHouse>.
- ⁵ Other “Then and Now” pairings in the 2011-2012 Smart Home: Green + Wired exhibit include a Corona typewriter circa 1900 with an Apple wireless keyboard, and an early 1980s Atari Gaming Station with the Nintendo 3DS.
- ⁶ For example, a built-in TV was included in certain postwar Levittown models, as documented in many histories of the iconic developments in New York and Pennsylvania. See, for example, “Six Models: Living the American Dream,” on Levittown, PA’s 60th anniversary website, <http://www.levittowners.com/houses.htm>, which features a photo of one such television built into the space under the stairs. A caption notes that to the Levitt’s “a TV was an appliance” and not yet furniture, and a profitable one at that for the builder/developer since its “retail price was added to the sale price and amortized into the buyer’s 30yr mortgage.”
- ⁷ For more on this line of critique, see Steve Hallett’s *The Efficiency Trap: Finding a Better Way to Achieve a Sustainable Energy Future* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2013). In a recent review for *E: The Environmental Magazine*, Brita Belli quotes the Purdue professor’s historically sweeping argument that “efficiency” is “the worst nightmare of the environmental movement.” One of the provocative questions Hallett poses is “What if the virtuous Prius driver consumes more energy than the jerk in the Hummer?” “The Efficiency Nightmare” (March 1, 2013), <http://www.emagazine.com/magazine/the-efficiency-nightmare/>.
- ⁸ For more about the 1950s All-Electric House at the Johnson County Museum, see the museum’s website: <http://www.jocomuseum.org/visit.shtml>. This power company-sponsored model home for sale can be compared to other postwar corporate campaigns, like General Electric’s cross-promotional models of the Blandings’ home from *Mr. Blandings Builds His*

Dream House starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy (1948), built and opened for public tours at the time of the movie's release nationwide.

- ⁹ Despite the enthusiasm of Johnson County boosters in trying to create a "National Museum of Suburbia" in a nearby vacant bowling alley, efforts to expand the attraction beyond the All-Electric House and a few related suburban-themed exhibits are not universally supported, as reported in a recent *Wall Street Journal* piece. A local publisher expressed that he doesn't "think it's a big turn-on to see something you can see everyday," while the author notes that "Indeed, there is plenty of real suburb in these parts already." A former Kansas politician's doubts about the project are cited near the end of the article, raising the issue of whether such a museum is even necessary, let alone viable, as a *physical site* for local or national tourists to visit, when "You can just put it all online." Jim Carlton, "Suburban Kansas Dream: Museum of Suburbia," *Wall Street Journal*, October 10, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB1000872396390443493304578038920747409686.html>.
- ¹⁰ The idea of a *green* all-electric house is widely dismissed by many eco-critics and even discouraged in certain markets. For a California builder's analysis—and defense—of all-electric *green* houses, see Herb Gardner's blog: *The Green Builder's Journal: Homebuyers Guide to Green Building and Sustainable Living*, where he lays out his company's arguments and strategies as President of City Ventures Home Building Group. The main thread dealing with these issues begins with a May 21, 2012 posting, "Why Sell Electric Homes?" (<http://greenbuildersjournal.com/?p=111>), and ends with a 3-part series on "The Insanity Of Building All Electric Homes" under Title 24 of the California Code of Regulations.
- ¹¹ Johnson County Museum, "At Home with Modern Architecture," *Album*, XXIII: 2 & 3 (Spring/Summer 2010), http://www.jocomuseum.org/AlbumNews/Spring_Summer%202010.pdf. The article notes the decline of modern home styles after the 1960s, with a pronounced market transition to interpretations of more nostalgic or historic house styles by the 1980s. Mid-century modern is regaining limited attention in current markets now that those built in the postwar era are old enough to be considered for historic preservation, but in new construction it is still more pronounced in high-end architect-designed homes and green prefab than in tract house design.
- ¹² One of the biggest environmental problems related to the rapid rate of replacement of consumer technologies is the proliferation of electronic waste (e-waste), since "in the fervor to develop better, faster, sexier technology, the U.S. has failed to plan for the resulting pile of unwanted devices." For more on this issue, see the November 2007 Issue Brief from The Council of State Governments, "State Responses to Technological Obsolescence," in *Trends in America*, http://www.csg.org/knowledgecenter/docs/TIA_TechnologicalObsolescence.pdf. This publication is aimed at state leaders to aid in proactively implementing "forward looking policies and strategic investments," rather than always only reacting to the latest crisis or need, acknowledging that the "most dominant characteristic of the 21st century is not just change, but the rate of change." For a more environmentally centered take on how consumer goods are always "barely improved & a bit more expensive," see "Planned Obsolescence: 8 Products Designed to Fail" by Brian Clark Howard for *The Daily Green: A Consumer's Guide to Green from GoodHousekeeping.com*, <http://www.thedailygreen.com/environmental-news/latest/planned-obsolence-460210#slide-1>. And for a more historical overview of the trend, see Giles Slade's *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- ¹³ Though semi-attached, the garage is still presented as an essential part of *the house*, and filled with just as many "green" gadgets as in other domestic spaces, like a solar-powered automatic lawnmower and a few different styles of eco-bicycles to perhaps replace the need for *one* of the cars to be parked in this otherwise standard 2-car garage. For more on the issues involved in evaluating the eco-consciousness of this vital part of the suburban home, see, "Green Garages: Oxymoron or Objective?," a discussion between Sarah Leavitt, curator of the National Building Museum's 2010 exhibit "House of Cars," and Susan Piedmont-Palladino, who curated a recent

exhibition called “Green Community;” <http://www.nbm.org/about-us/national-building-museum-online/green-garages.html>.

¹⁴ Like the fictional Monteverde family who “lived” in the VISION House on display at Disney World’s EPCOT theme park, Smart Home: Green + Wired projects a family of three into its furnished spaces, to whom all of the carefully arranged “green” objects and technologies belong. They are each thus contextualized in an imagined—and imaginable—daily life that we *now* know how to emulate at home with our own versions of these products, but also seeded through this exposure to them is the notion that *our versions* can indeed be *made greener*.

¹⁵ Michelle Kaufmann and Catherine Remick, *Prefab Green* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 2009), 16-17. The semirural Marin County, CA location of Kaufmann’s own house makes for an interesting point of comparison with the narrative of *The Californians* discussed in chapter 2. Kaufmann repeatedly states how she wants her work as well as her personal living choices to “make a difference,” giving her “new” dream home in this semi-suburban, environmentally progressive area eco-credibility, a sense of *fitting in* compared to the fictional developer’s perceived degradation of that same location because the houses were McMansions and his dream was profit-driven only.

¹⁶ As historian Yoke-Sum Wong argues, “Bill Levitt and his family, whatever their lack of artistic pretension, succeeded where others had failed in making a machine for living in,” further noting that they “created it in the suburbs.” Yoke-Sum Wong, “Modernism’s Love Child: The Story of Happy Architectures,” *Common Knowledge* 14:3 (Fall 2008): 461. Le Corbusier’s 1923 statement that “A House is a machine for living in” also serves as an epigraph to the Johnson County Museum’s 2010 newsletter article as a retrospective introduction for today’s readers on how to be as “At Home with Modern Architecture” as their predecessors apparently were, embracing (at least some aspects of) “the machine” as a metaphor for modern living in the new suburbia.

¹⁷ Jason Griffiths, “Manifest Destiny: A Guide to the Essential Indifference of American Suburban Housing.” *Places* (October 20, 2011), <http://places.designobserver.com/feature/manifest-destiny-american-suburban-housing/30438/>.

¹⁸ See the Smart Home: Green + Wired’s “How the Home Was Built” page, <http://www.msichicago.org/whats-here/exhibits/smart-home/the-exhibit/pre-fabulous/how-the-home-was-built/>, as well as a “video” that condenses the four-month-long production on-site to demonstrate assembly of the “Home in 90 Seconds,” <http://www.msichicago.org/whats-here/exhibits/smart-home/the-exhibit/pre-fabulous/home-in-90-seconds/>. This time-lapse photographic treatment of modern home production processes was also used well over half a century earlier to promote new, rapidly built homes in Levittown, PA circa 1953: see “Building of a House in 40 Seconds,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDfKk3tejFE>.

¹⁹ For more on Blu Homes, see their website: <http://www.bluhomes.com/>.

²⁰ One famous Ray Kappe-designed conventionally built home, the Benton residence, was prominently featured in the Showtime cable television series *Californication*, in episode 7 of season 1, “Girls Interrupted” (September 24, 2007). In this narrative representation, the homeowner is looking to hire an architect to design a guesthouse on the property that is “all eco-friendly and shit,” according with the main home’s environmentally sensitive design.

²¹ See more at <http://www.livinghomes.net/about.html>. Also of note is that on the LivingHomes’ “Architects” page they use a photograph of LEGO blocks arranged in a loose pile, suggesting the basic interchangeable building blocks—and rectangular shapes—common to modern modular design. For comparison see Kaufmann’s LEGO model of Smart Home in figure 4.1.

²² Method Homes has several stylistically modern models, like the M, Paradigm and Elemental Series, but also offers a more traditional, suburbia-friendly new Cottage Series, and even a modern/nostalgic crossover Cabin Series. For more, see Method Homes: Builder of Modern, Green, Sustainable, Prefab Homes, <http://methodhomes.net/>.

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- ²³ In popular discourse, the terms “modular” and “prefab” in the context of housing often get confused with “mobile” homes, despite important distinctions denoted by the precise meaning of each term as a descriptor. While all are in some way “manufactured,” the latter, not usually set permanently on a foundation and thus meant to be most easily “moveable”—and therefore *transient*—usually represents the lowest order of cultural capital within the classification of home ownership, and, perhaps not coincidentally, as a housing industry sector in steep decline due to multiple economic and cultural forces it has the least association with ascendant, aspirational “green” housing trends. See for example, Derek Thompson’s April 2, 2011 piece for *The Atlantic*, “America’s Fastest-Dying Business? It’s Mobile Homes,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2011/04/americas-fastest-dying-business-its-mobile-homes/73336/>.
- ²⁴ For more see the Cradle to Cradle Products Innovation Institute at <http://www.c2ccertified.org/>, and the book by William McDonough and Michael Braungart: *Cradle to Cradle: Remaking the Way We Make Things* (New York: North Point Press, 2002).
- ²⁵ The use of LEGO blocks to recreate this model home in miniature playfully draws attention to its “modularness,” much like earlier self-promotional models made of gingerbread were meant to suggest. See Michelle Kaufmann, “Lego Kaufmann Home on Display at Smart Home,” Michelle Kaufmann blog (May 4, 2009), <http://blog.michellekaufmann.com/?p=2118>.
- ²⁶ “Cozy Cabins and Other Green Dream Homes,” *Mother Earth News*, Guide to Affordable and Sustainable Homes 209A (Summer 2005): 1.
- ²⁷ Alex Frangos, “The Green House of the Future,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 27, 2009, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124050414436548553.html>. In a *Washington Post* piece, “How a ‘Green House of the Future’ Can Impede Environmental Progress” (May 2, 2009), architect and professor emeritus Roger K. Lewis responded with the argument that “To make America greener, we must shift focus. We need less attention on how to shape the individual house and more attention on how to shape—and reshape—communities. And we must focus attention on changing rules and public attitudes that make green design harder to achieve.” While I concur, it is more often at the level of the individual house that citizen-homeowners directly engage—and gain exposure to—the wider “community” system of planning and regulation. The argument I am trying to make throughout this dissertation is that we need a both/and rather than an either/or approach for realizing substantial change in the built as well as the imagined suburban environment. For the full article by Roger K. Lewis, see <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/30/AR2009043004501.html>.
- ²⁸ Sarah Susanka coined the phrase “*Not So Big*®” in the original 1998 book with Kira Obolensky, *The Not So Big House: A Blueprint for the Way We Really Live*, which Taunton Press released an expanded Anniversary edition of in 2008. Sequels include *Creating the Not So Big House* (2000), *Inside the Not So Big House: Discovering the Details that Bring a Home to Life* (2005), the more philosophical than architectural *The Not So Big Life: Making Room for What Really Matters* (2007), and the long-awaited *Not So Big Remodeling* (2009) for those NSBH fans who appreciate her sensibilities but cannot or do not want to leave the home they already have. Recently her projects include the building of a *Not So Big*® “showhome” in 2011, briefly open to the public for tours as part of an infill development in the historic but economically hard-hit “redfield” site of Libertyville, IL. See Susanka’s *The Not So Big House* website for a more complete overview of her work in this area over the years: <http://www.entsobighouse.com/>.
- ²⁹ As one writer points out, “For more than 60 years, at least, American consumers have dreamed of one day having enough room to stretch out. It may take more than the shock of hard times to downsize that particular fantasy.” For more, including a thoughtful outline of the concerns over growing home size and attempts at building—and selling—smaller homes in “the New Economy,” see Andrew Rice, “The Elusive Small-House Utopia,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 15, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/17/magazine/17KeySmallHouse-t.html?scp=10&sq=James+Casebere&st=cse&pagewanted=all>

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- ³⁰ Lloyd Alter, "The Green House of the Future in the Wall Street Journal," *Treehugger* (April 28, 2009), <http://www.treehugger.com/sustainable-product-design/the-green-house-of-the-future-in-the-wall-street-journal.html>.
- ³¹ Mouzon, "Original Green," <http://www.originalgreen.org/>. The term "Original Green" was coined by Steve Mouzon, founder of the New Urban Guild in Miami and, along with his wife Wanda Mouzon, is one of the principals of Mouzan Design. They are active in the New Urbanism movement and designed several "Katrina Cottages" and other alternatives for FEMA, who otherwise relied largely on trailers as temporary housing post-natural disaster. As put forward on their website, the concept of "Original Green" is intended "to describe the sustainability that existed before the Thermostat Age," when we "had no choice but to be green." From their perspective, sustainable *places* are "nourishable, accessible, serviceable, and securable," while sustainable *buildings* are "livable, durable, flexible, and frugal."
- ³² Steve and Wanda Mouzon, "Smart Dwelling II," *Mouzon Design* blog (January 28, 2012), <http://www.mouzon.com/blog/smartdwelling-ii.html>.
- ³³ Alexis Madrigal, *Powering the Dream: The History and Promise of Green Technology*, (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2011), 92.
- ³⁴ For more on the American version of Passive House, an ultra-low energy building paradigm related to the German Passivhaus movement originating in the late 1980s, see, <http://www.passivehouse.us/passiveHouse/PHIUSHome.html>.
- ³⁵ For more on Net Zero energy building certification programs, see, <http://living-future.org/netzero>, or for Zero Net Energy home resources, see <http://www.zerohomes.org/>.
- ³⁶ *Builder* "Concept Home 2011." The KB Home Green House, an Idea Home Created with Martha Stewart, <http://www.builderconcepthome2011.com/>.
- ³⁷ Katherine Salant, "With Martha Stewart's Help, 'Green' Home Is a Joy for the Eyes and the Wallet," *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/21/AR2011012100244_pf.html.
- ³⁸ Salant, "With Martha Stewart's Help, 'Green' Home Is a Joy for the Eyes and the Wallet."
- ³⁹ For more on Martha Stewart's non-green collection by KB Homes, see their website: <http://www.kbhome.com/martha-stewart>.
- ⁴⁰ For instance, a Google search of "Martha Stewart" and "green" results in multiple pages devoted to her use of the color in room décor, product-matching, and weddings, as well as a green bean casserole recipe, before any "hits" related to eco-friendly products or design. Stewart herself is quoted in the Robbie Whelan article below admitting that she is "as energy-efficient as you can possibly be, up to a point."
- ⁴¹ *GalTimeTV*, "Want to Live Like Martha Stewart?" (February 1, 2011), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRZgLfBhI8>.
- ⁴² Robbie Whelan, "Martha Stewart Green Houses—Who Will Buy Them?" *Wall Street Journal Blogs* (January 12, 2011), <http://blogs.wsj.com/developments/2011/01/12/martha-stewart-green-houses-who-will-buy-them/>.
- ⁴³ Steven Castle, "Be Selfish. Be Green," *Green Tech Advocates* (December 9, 2012), <http://greentechadvocates.com/2012/12/09/be-selfish-be-green/>. C.R. Herro, head of Meritage Homes' Energy Business Innovation Program, further asserts that "Creating this subtle change in your customers' perceptions," that green is greedy rather than a compromise, "is about awareness, validation and monetization." This last aspect is here justified as applicable to the home buyer as well as the home seller.
- ⁴⁴ On their "Energy-Efficient Living" web page, Meritage Homes boasts that "Sure there are other homebuilders that call themselves green, but chances are they're green with envy more than anything." Meritage Homes, "Energy-Efficient Living," last accessed March 12, 2013, <http://www.meritagehomes.com/whybuy/energyefficient/>.

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- ⁴⁵ HGTV announced the location of their first Green Home Giveaway in December 2007, followed by months of televised and online coverage of the home's design and construction. The hour-long "special" home tour, or "reveal," was aired on the cable network during primetime on Sunday, March 23, 2008, followed by a months-long period in which viewers could enter to win the home, its furnishings, and an "eco-friendly SUV." The winner, and their tour of their brand new green dream home, was also filmed for broadcast and website viewing later that summer.
- ⁴⁶ The short 3½ minute tour of the original 2008 HGTV Green Home can be seen here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7s79l690vps>.
- ⁴⁷ See "HGTV Green Home 2008: Eco-Friendly Features," <http://www.hgtv.com/green-home/hgtv-green-home-2008-eco-friendly-features/index.html>.
- ⁴⁸ For more on Susanka's thoughts and recommended resources on "Sustainability," see: <http://www.entsobighouse.com/sustain.asp>.
- ⁴⁹ Sarah Menin and Flora Samuel, *Nature and Space: Aalto and Le Corbusier* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 79.
- ⁵⁰ David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 2. *Emphasis original*.
- ⁵¹ Tara Miner, *Your Green Abode: A Practical Guide to a Sustainable Home* (Seattle: Mountaineers Books, 2010). 9.
- ⁵² George Carlin, *A Place for My Stuff* (Atlantic Records, 1981). A little later Carlin explains a point that further resonated with the anti-consumerist, anti-McMansion rhetoric defining green as a goal of having a smaller, simpler, less cluttered life—and house: "That's what you're house is, a place to keep you stuff while you go out and get...more stuff! Sometimes you gotta move, gotta get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore."
- ⁵³ Jeffrey Hollender and Alexandra Zissu, *Planet Home: Conscious Choices for Cleaning and Greening the World You Care About Most* (Clarkson Potter, 2010).
- ⁵⁴ Warren Schultz, *The Organic Suburbanite: An Environmentally Friendly Way to Live the American Dream* (Rodale Press, 2001). *Emphasis original*.
- ⁵⁵ Ashley Katz, "USGBC and *Better Homes and Gardens* Launch Green Home Makeover Sweepstakes," press release June 7, 2011, <http://www.usgbc.org/Docs/Archive/General/Docs9485.pdf>.
- ⁵⁶ Dolphin Blue, Inc., "Heroes of Sustainability: Sarah Susanka" (September 26, 2012), <http://www.dolphinblue.com/blog/sarah-susanka/>.
- ⁵⁷ Lynn Underwood, "Cost-Conscious Green Home Design." *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, August 8, 2009, <http://www.startribune.com/lifestyle/homegarden/52791412.html?page=all&prepage=1&c=y#continue>
- ⁵⁸ Angela Spivey, "Home Green Home." *Environmental Health Perspectives* 111:16 (December 2003): A 873.
- ⁵⁹ It is a relatively new development to have remodeled homes on "dream home tours" like the Parade of Homes, and only very recently have a few "green remodels" been included. In the Twin Cities metro, the Minneapolis Builders Association (MBA) was formed in 1927, then suspended from 1931 through 1935 because of the Great Depression, then again from 1941 through 1945 during World War II. In 1948 they sponsored their first "Idea Home," followed the next year with the first official "Parade of Homes." This tracks with the general postwar development of Parade of Homes tours in other regional markets, and other similar tours like the "Street of Dreams." It was not until 1987 that the combined Minneapolis and Saint Paul Builders Associations (later to become the Builders Association of the Twin Cities®, or BATC) held its first Remodelers Showcase based on the new-construction-centered Parade of Homes.
- ⁶⁰ For more on *Living with Ed*, see Alissa Walker, "Preview: Ed Begley, Jr." *Dwell* (June 11, 2010), <http://www.dwell.com/dwell-design/article/preview-ed-begley-jr>.

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- ⁶¹ As Ed's wife and partner, her role can't come across as undermining his eco-message in the book, or his "lifestyle" which serves as an eco-example for interested readers who share his goals, while in the show her still loving but antagonistic attitude lets her serve as the straight man or foil for Ed's environmental eccentricity. A "reality show," it borrows codes and conventions from suburban family sitcoms, potentially having greater appeal for a broad viewing audience, even one not necessarily committed to sharing Ed's eco-lifestyle or having a green home just like his. Those who watch the show may come to admire Ed, but not necessarily emulate him. For more on Ed's approach to living greener in a different format from the TV show—including Rachelle's changing role in relation to him and his green "lifestyle," see *Living Like Ed: A Guide to the Eco-Friendly Life* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 2008).
- ⁶² Dona Brown approaches the theme of suburban agriculture in her history of the back-to-the-land movement (which she thoroughly distinguishes from the more romantic "back-to-nature" ideal) from the late nineteenth through early twentieth centuries in the U. S., noting the range of development types dreamt and built before the countercultural 1970s return to its principles. One example that stands out in this history is Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City plan in the 1930s, whose concept, she notes, "was deeply rooted in the turn-of-the-century ideas and values Wright shared with early back-to-the-landers." This is, however, "despite its ultra-modern look," which "featured the ubiquitous presence of new technologies" like telephones, modern appliances, and cars, as well as a nod to futuristic "spaceshiplike flying machines" that Wright thought would soon replace the automobile. Wright's plan for Broadacre City was first published in his 1932 book, *The Disappearing City*, and was further popularized through public display of a model made by his students at Taliesin in 1935. Brown notes the positive reception of the basic premise in Depression-era America, especially for the potential to achieve some modicum of self-sufficiency and food security. Like this melding of old-fashioned agrarian values with new-fangled technological conveniences, the integration of individual desire to own and work the land with a more democratically universal promise of a community of citizen-landholders animates the Broadacre City project. Yet what distinguishes schemes like this from some of the contemporary agriburban developments discussed in the last section of chapter 2 is how agricultural space and function are incorporated into the planned communities at the *individual* rather than the *communal* level. Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 132.
- ⁶³ *Green Acres* (1965-1971), starred Eddie Albert as a country-dreaming lawyer and Eva Gabor as his city-loving wife, a couple ill fit for their sudden move to a rural farm, and BBC's *The Good Life* (1975-1978), which aired later on PBS as *Good Neighbors*, followed a Tom and Barbara Good as they transformed their suburban property into a self-sufficient farm, upsetting their conventional suburban neighbors in the process.
- ⁶⁴ Carleen Madigan, ed., *The Backyard Homestead: Produce All the Food You Need on Just a Quarter Acre!* (Storey Publishing, 2009). Green living in suburbia increasingly includes such agricultural practices as growing fruits and vegetables, but also grain crops, beekeeping, and raising animals, fish and poultry. "Suburban chickens" are currently in fashion, and a lifestyle organized around keeping them in the average yard is supported by multiple books and blogs.
- ⁶⁵ Marris, *Rambunctious Garden*, 147.
- ⁶⁶ Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 89.
- ⁶⁷ Morton, *Ecology without Nature*, 114.
- ⁶⁸ Bill Owens, *Suburbia* (New York: Fotofolio, 1999 [1973]), 11.
- ⁶⁹ Owens, *Suburbia*, 23.
- ⁷⁰ Richard S. Weinstein, "The First American City," in *The City: Los Angeles and Urban Theory at the End of the Twentieth Century*, eds. Allen J. Scott and Edward W. Soja (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 26.

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- ⁷¹ The “TruNatural” ad is part of a series in TruGreen’s “Bobbie Sinclair” ad campaign, and can be seen here at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_Rewqlq8Og. In another ad this same year Bobby is engaged as a pitchman for their new tree and shrub care program, where he meets the “new guy,” a tree-care specialist. In their brief exchange Bobby learns that “Trees need love too, right?” He then sniffs the air and asks “You smell that?” The specialist responds: “No, smell what?” The answer is “Opportunity.” These ads collectively create a “friendlier” face for corporate business, locating it culturally in the super-local context of the “neighborhood lawn kid” rather than a faceless national chain. TruGreen, “TrueGreen Brings Back Popular Neighborhood Lawn Kid in New National Marketing Campaign to Launch Tree and Shrub Service” (February 28, 2011), last accessed March 9, 2013, <http://info.trugreen.com/ci/fattach/get/150995/1299518038/redirect/1/session/L2F2LzEvc2lkLzNtaUls2ts>.
- ⁷² “Tru Green Taps Tween Spokesman for Ads,” *Brandweek* (February 22, 2010), last accessed March 9, 2013, <http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/tru-green-taps-tween-spokesman-new-ads-107075>.
- ⁷³ Jennifer Owen and D. F. Owen, “Suburban Gardens: England’s Most Important Nature Reserve?” *Environmental Conservation* 2:1 (March 1975).
- ⁷⁴ Daniel D. Chiras, *The New Ecological Home: A Complete Guide to Green Building Options* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2004), 4.
- ⁷⁵ Kathleen O’Brien and Kathleen Smith, *The Northwest Green Home Primer: Hundreds of Ideas for Building, Remodeling, and Buying Green* (Portland: Timber Press, 2008).
- ⁷⁶ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994 [1958]), 61.

• CONCLUSION •

Sustaining Suburbia: How Green Is the American Dream?

In the rhetoric of the everyday, “green” is constructed as a means of going on with life in such a way that we fulfill our wants and needs without doing irreparable harm to the natural world of which we are intrinsically a part. Visions of green suburbia are largely premised on the idea that connections already exist between culture and nature, and by helping us to better see those connections in our most ordinary environments of home and community, we will presumably be better equipped and motivated to nourish and cherish them. Suburbia, as a physical and cultural landscape, was first conceived and pursued as a place where the “best of both worlds” could be realized and enjoyed, an enlightenment project that found cultural currency with a growing population over centuries. Sustainability within the contemporary context of suburban landscapes and lifestyles translates both as change, in terms of altering our practices and aspirations to accommodate increasingly pressing environmental concerns, but also as continuity, in terms of maintaining those aspects of our past and present that we find satisfying and meaningful enough to want to perpetuate into the future. In this conclusion, I would like to take a brief tour through a discursive strand that calls those goals into question, media engaged in imagining both small instances and sweeping scenarios that play with the rhetoric of eco-pocalypse—the end of both the natural and cultural worlds as we’ve known them. Through the lens of these eco-disaster discourses in the extreme, we can better see both green and suburbia as they are currently constructed, but also show the limits of those constructions in relief against an uncertain, at times frightening future.



Figure 5.1: “How Bad Can I Be?” from *The Lorax* (2012), a capitalist manifesto sung by the Once-ler as his “thneed” enterprise builds a town and destroys a forest:

How bad can I be? I'm just doing what comes naturally
How bad can I be? I'm just following my destiny...
How bad can I be? I'm just building the economy
How bad can I be? Just look at me petting this puppy
How bad can I be? A portion of proceeds go to charity
How bad can I possibly be? Let's see...
All the customers are buying
And the money is multiplying
And the PR people are lying
And the lawyers are denying
Who cares if a few trees are dying
This is all so gratifying...
How bad can this possibly be?

Posters depicting Thneedville for the 2012 animated film version of Dr. Seuss' *The Lorax* (above), a partial film still featuring the tree-cutting Once-Ler (below left), and a related “Discover the Forest” USDA Forest Council PSA featuring the title character (below right).

To begin, let us look at one of the most popular of such eco-media texts. The word “suburbia” is never mentioned in the colorful 2012 animated feature film version of Dr. Seuss’ *The Lorax*, nor does it appear in the original 1971 environmentally themed children’s book on which it is based.¹ Yet the visual and cultural presence of someplace we recognize as suburban dominates half of the greatly expanded narrative on screen. The book begins with an unnamed “any boy” who comes upon the decrepit home of the Once-ler on the outskirts of an unnamed “any town,” seen briefly from a dark distance. That boy gets a name, Ted, as does the town, Thneedville, along with stories of their own in the Universal Studios retelling of this 40-year-old eco-fable. And we learn an awful lot about both of them by the time the titular character emerges from a stump in flashback, proclaiming “My name is the Lorax. I speak for the trees.” [Figure 5.1]

Hardly anyone in Thneedville, a walled town that’s “Fantastic! Made of plastic!” misses the forest of vibrant truffula trees that once covered the valley, and even fewer remember them. Residents have become as accustomed to substitute plastic lit-up and blown-up trees as much as to the bottled air they buy to breathe. Yet one teenage girl fantasizes about these now mythical symbols of nature to the point of painting them on the side of her house, which otherwise looks just like everybody else’s house. It is to win the love of this would-be tree-hugging girl that Ted undertakes the quest to escape town and find the Once-ler, who his grandmother assured him was the only one who could tell him what happened to the trees, and hopefully help him acquire one to bring back. After Ted finds him, what was in the book almost entirely the lonesome tale of the Once-ler’s greed and regret over ecological devastation in the name of progress is now a series of flashback interruptions to an otherwise heroic narrative in which the boy gets the girl of his dreams, and happens to acquire environmental consciousness in the process. The

climax comes when her dream also comes true, and the very last truffle seedling is planted in the middle of town. In this public act the eco-consciousness of (almost) all residents of Thneedville is likewise awakened, and we are left imagining that this gated community will now embrace a more natural way of living, getting their fresh air courtesy of trees—from photosynthesis rather than from synthetic processes and plastic bottles.

“Real” trees are here just as powerful symbols of the environment—and of environmentalism—as they were in the counter-cultural moment that led to the creation of Earth Day just a year before *The Lorax* was first published. Their abundant presence is what connotes the relative “naturalness” of mass subdivisions like the Woodlands outside of Houston, and their absence is a signifier of the very “unnaturalness” of traditional suburban development across the country, as we are reminded in Bill Vaughan’s definition of suburbia as “where the developer bulldozes out the trees, then names the streets after them.” Attempts to remediate this perceived truth are seen in the number of saplings planted in suburban yards, as in the construction and décor of suburban houses, clad and furnished with real wood or its facsimile. Inside and out of the suburban landscape, trees represent nature’s architecture, and when they’re gone, so goes the rest of nature’s residents. In *The Lorax*, first it is the mammals that leave, then birds, then fish, and then, finally, people. Nothing is left except a barren landscape, devoid of all life except for the Once-ler, living in solitude at the sad site of his making. The 2012 film contrasts both the lushly treeful before and empty treeless after images of this place with the wholly artificial construct of nearby Thneedville, which we here learn was built on an industry that collapsed once the natural resources out of which trendy thneeds are made, truffle trees, were depleted. Somehow the town goes on, dependent economically on a new industry, making air, which is a necessary commodity

due to pollution from the last industry, one that ruined the ecosystem. Living inside their plastic paradise, the Thneedvillians remain oblivious to the loss of this forest, their view of the devastated landscape hidden behind massive walls past which no one ever needs to venture. An environmental crisis that cannot be seen does not exist.

Old folks like Ted's granny and the outcast Once-ler are the only keepers of memory of the forest-that-was and the history of the processes by which it was lost. His entrepreneurial story in other contexts would be an illustration of the American dream: an average guy with a good idea builds a business "out of nothing," bringing a whole town into being around it, then lives in a nice home on the periphery from which he surveys his economic empire—even as it declines. In the movie, the Once-ler's boom to bust tale is given a rock-n-roll update. Accompanied by electric guitar, *Daily Show* comedian Ed Helms voices the Once-ler's celebrational defense of capitalism in the song "How Bad Can I Be?" As Ted hears the story-through-music, we, as viewers, see the long ago transformation from forest to wasteland while the thneed industry grew, clearing the trees, polluting the air and water, until the last truffula tree was felled. Standing in for capitalist greed, the Once-ler's past actions are not the only source of eco-concern in this film version, as they were in the 1971 book. While the Once-ler made a fortune by exhausting natural resources and ruining the natural environment, fueling development of suburban-style Thneedville in the process, our contemporary villain, Mr. O'Hare, built his empire by supplying a necessity that nature once provided for free. Bringing nature back is a threat to this new economic and political enterprise, and O'Hare's imperative is to keep consumer-citizens from realizing the structure and reach of his power. Trees here represent a possible reconnection of people with the environment, and with it, freedom from the constrictions of an artificial suburban lifestyle.

In this brief look at how a classic children's story is re-mediated for contemporary audiences, we see how expansion and adjustment of its eco-emphasis reframes the terms of environmental critique. The recent version more explicitly comments on how we are living badly *now*, not just on what past generations may have done badly *then*. It also pulls suburbia back into the center of green discourse from the safe rhetorical distance it occupied in the book. Although, in the general period during which the book first gained popularity, suburbia was increasingly criticized and rejected by a baby boom generation that largely grew up reading Dr. Seuss in plastic-filled postwar suburbs. By the late sixties and early seventies a more fully developed and forcefully articulated environmentalist culture looked past the suburban American dream for personal and collective fulfillment, to a life that seemed more "natural" and "authentic." Representing this counter-cultural point of view, a Haight Ashbury "hippie" living communally made the following public statement in a 1967 interview on NBC News' *Frank McGee Report*:

What we have in the United States is a model of existence which is based upon a small family unit. Many people live in suburbia—a job from eight to five, two cars in the garage, a house, a washer and a dryer. That's kind of the model of existence. We in this kind of newly evolving community find that that model is not really relevant to the planet Earth.²

Implicit in this formulation is that, confined by the social structures, distracted by the routines, and comforted by the conveniences of modern suburban life, residents remain oblivious to the environmental costs of conforming to this way of life. Connection to nature means awareness of its value, and of its benefits to those who live more closely to and with it. This critique, as articulated by a "hippie" 45 years earlier in a television news segment, is maintained though updated in the narrative emphasis of the 2012 *Lorax* film, where by story's end the promise of reconnection to nature is repositioned as now both possible and desirable *within* the eight-to-five, two-car-garage, washer-and-

dryer “model of existence” still symbolic of today’s suburban environment, though one where the trees are ideally now real and plentiful. Nature and the American dream can survive together in a physically and conceptually greener suburbia. This is a political as well as cultural proposition, affecting how—and whether—we are able to envision a sustainable suburban future.

The greater the severity or totality of any kind of crisis situation, the greater the public and therefore political will to effect change. A strong tendency to preserve familiar ways of life however remains in the process of effecting whatever changes are deemed necessary or desirable, including green ones. In the face of environmental crisis, possible choices include abandoning places now devoid of nature in search of greener pastures, enlisting technology to produce artificial simulations of and replacements for nature lost, and preservation or restoration of the natural environment that once was. Visions of green suburbia mostly participate in discourses and affect practices related to the latter option, but in cultural narratives like the film version of *The Lorax* we see a progression through each type of response to eco-devastation, winding up at the same end point as many would-be green reformers of suburbia, working to reintroduce even small elements of nature and tenuous connections to a more natural life into suburban sites long ago cleared for and built up by human development. Scenarios of eco-revival post-eco-pocalypse, and the cultural critiques they engender, are found in a variety of mediated examples of eco-crisis, both as imagined in the future and as experienced in the present. What follows is a brief look at how more sedimented discourses of nature and suburbia intersect with and inform more recently emergent discourses of green in this context, clarifying, but at times also confusing, the terms of suburban sustainability, and sharing a visual vocabulary by which that possibility is both dreamed and contested.

It's Not Easy Seeing Green: Remediating Suburbia as Sustainable

[E]nvironmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it.

— Lawrence Buell (1995)

One significant thread in the interwoven discourses of green suburbia considered throughout this dissertation remains at times unspoken and unseen—a profound fear of environmental crisis underlying surface expressions of hope for a sustainable today and tomorrow. Selling suburbia as somewhere that's green often depends on carefully balancing the direness of the situation, locally or globally, while simultaneously stoking desires for a better home, a better garden, a better community, a better life—ideally one that does not stray too far or wide from familiar, popular, proven formulae. Sustainability of the American dream here means that both nature and suburbia are able to survive current and future crises. Envisioning how this can possibly be accomplished without fundamentally compromising either is one of the more difficult challenges of representation, especially in visual discourses that default to use of images and rhetoric signifying either a mostly un-green suburbia or a mostly un-suburban nature. In *The Lorax*, as in other environmentally themed fictional and factual media texts, this crisis of imagination is addressed through the imagination of crisis. Seeing suburbia as green, and green as suburban, may indeed be easier in and through mediated scenarios where *being green in suburbia* is the only remaining option. Disaster, man-made or natural, impending or in its aftermath, presents an opportunity for reflection and reinvention whereby individual and communal efforts are more readily recast as “green.” There is, however, a certain eco-political logic ordering such visions of survivable eco-pocalypse.

In popular media eco-disaster often has at the very least a hopeful ending if not a happy one. Thneedville will once again be blessed with well-loved trees, and the oxygen byproduct its people need to survive and thrive. In the similarly themed Disney/Pixar animated feature *WALL-E* (2008), Earth's spaceship-bound refugees finally return to a home they thought ruined, nurturing the one precious green seedling found growing out of the planet-wide garbage heap they left. Both eco-friendly, family-friendly films give great visual as well as narrative focus to tiny though resilient green proto-trees that represent natural remediation, and therefore hope. Projection of humanity's artificially pacified suburban-ish refuge in *WALL-E*'s futuristic vision of space travel is meant as an extrapolation of a more familiar though equally synthetic terrestrial life without meaning or connection to a natural world that can no longer support it. There is only one Earth. Where—and how—do we live once we've depleted it of its life sustaining resources? One common theme in such recent narratives is that it is humanity who destroys the natural world, unaware or unconcerned with the fact that human beings are just as dependent on its health and vitality as the mammals and the birds and the fish. It is not just that we are supposed to understand the Once-ler's story, we are meant to see that we too are Once-lers, whether building industrial complexes or simple suburban homes.

Other narratives of environmental catastrophe have attempted to demonstrate how sorry we will be if we fail to protect what remains of the natural world after centuries of unsustainable development and devastation. Just two years after the first Earth Day celebrations and one year before publication of *The Lorax*, a science-fiction film titled *Silent Running* (1972) imagined for us a future in which the only plant and animal life left, including trees, were not on earth, but rather preserved on orbiting space ships carrying giant geodesic biome domes. Freeman Lowell (Bruce Dern), one of the astronauts

tasked with caring for the near-extinct biologic specimens, expressed why this project is so important to the future of humanity: “On Earth, everywhere you go, the temperature is 75 degrees. Everything is the same; all the people are exactly the same. Now what kind of life is that?” As in the original and film versions of *The Lorax*, “suburbia” is never once called out by name, but Lowell’s characterization of the quality of Earth-bound civilization rings familiar, echoing many modern critiques of the conformity of artificially constructed and maintained suburban environments, and the people who live in them, never knowing the pleasures or benefits of “nature.” Futuristic scenarios displacing the remnants of natural amenities onto space ships and stations, or on terraformed planets, moons, and asteroids, are most usually shown to be false paradises, built and sought by those misguided enough to think we can recreate the natural world in various extraterrestrial extrapolations of the suburban paradigm. Whether it is faith in technology, markets, or just plain human ingenuity, in the more dystopian media visions of humanity’s future, our connection to nature is often severed beyond repair, beyond hope. The function of texts like *Silent Running* in environmental discourse is similar to “scared straight” rhetoric developed in the 1970s to tackle the social problem of juvenile delinquency. The point was to raise awareness of what we can do now for the environment, before it is too late. Giving up entirely on the suburban dream, though, has been a difficult option to sell the public despite the proliferation of eco-horrors projected on movie screens.

Realistic or fantastic, visual media like film have the ability to condense time or transcend our current moment, showing possibilities for ecological ruin, but also for ecological redemption. This point is illustrated in *Evan Almighty* (2007), which, as with the eco-themed *Lorax* adaptation, was part of the broader ecomaginationsm initiative by Universal’s parent company at the time, General Electric. Like Evan Baxter, as a society

we've lost sight of the environmental context of suburban development since we are only used to seeing "nature" in between and beyond vast expanses of houses, roads and shopping centers. Morgan Freeman plays "God," taking a confused Evan (Steve Carell) to a spot (and time) where they can together admire a pristine view from on high:

God: I remember creating this valley. Notice how the mountains lie from east to west.

Evan: Where are we?

God: Don't recognize, eh? This is where you live, son. This is Prestige Crest. I just wanted you to see the original design.

This magnificent view of "the original design" is reminiscent of artistic visions of nature as sublime rather than as the more garden variety landscapes we encounter in everyday life. Once Evan comes to terms with the fact that he really is talking to "HIM," he asks why, like Noah, he was "chosen" to build an ark—only this time in the undeveloped lots next to his brand new suburban dream home outside of Washington, D.C.³ God's response: "You said you want to change the world. So do I." The challenge for Evan is to cultivate a vision of the natural world as within his power to protect, both through his personal and family consumer choices as well as through his political power as a representative to Congress. Invocation of the biblical flood story, where both nature and humanity suffer near-complete destruction, is the environmentally catastrophic counter tale to the solely human crisis of expulsion from Eden, a paradise that goes on without us. While environmental narratives often draw upon that mythical lost garden to imagine a world worth recreating, references to the flood and other worldwide disasters aid in constructing a world we are in danger of destroying—whether by divine intervention or human invention. In either discursive construction, suburbia is frequently featured as a consequential landscape in relation to nature: as an attempted restoration of paradise, a futile effort to avoid the worst conditions and effects of industry, or the very cause of the

natural world's destruction. Many visions of suburbia rendering it a suitable, sustainable site "close to nature" are eventually shown to be illusions, and dangerous ones at that.

Our view of nature, though, is as much of a cultural construction as our views of suburbia or the cities they surround. In his introduction to *The Invention of Nature*, Thomas Bargatzky points out that the "modern Western concept of nature was developed partly in the age of Enlightenment," "came into being" in its current formulation around 300 years ago, and only "fully developed" in the immediate aftermath of the industrial revolution.⁴ This is concurrent, as John Archer has demonstrated, with another Enlightenment invention—suburbia.⁵ Popularization of the once rather elite *rus in urbe* paradigm at the height of industrial capitalism meant developing suburban homes and communities that combined some level of idealized nature, or "the country," with equally idealized aspects of "the city," yet this project was not fueled only by individual dreams of the benefits enjoyed in this conceptual as well as physical merger. Suburbanization also served political and economic power. William Leiss argues that the

... last form of mastery over nature developed when the predatory phase of capitalism was curtailed, when the welfare-state apparatus and the ideology of managed capitalism promised abundance to all citizens and sought to cement their allegiance to the economic system by demonstrating that a steady rise in everyone's standard of living could be achieved.⁶

In media focusing on ecological as well as economic devastation, it is this version of the mass suburban narrative that most usually plays out to a bitter end. Closeness to nature for everyone is no more feasible than "promised abundance" accompanying an expected "steady rise in everyone's standard of living." Mediated eco-disasters are staged to illustrate this delusion of dreamers who bought into a system that could not perpetually make good on its promises, destroying in the process the "abundance" of the natural world on which prosperity is based. This is central to *The Lorax's* theme and critique.

Yet the promise expressed in a wider range of cultural narratives illustrating the American dream retains much of its power and appeal despite severe challenges, both economic and ecological, precipitating modifications in suburban desire and practice. Media representations follow these shifts and changes in society, including the social and political contexts of the suburban dream. This progression of mass suburban rationales, as traced by Avi Friedman, includes “a new social agenda” that aimed at first relocating urban workers, and later, returning WWII vets, from crowded cities to more “comfortable” dwellings in efficient suburban developments. He argues that in the face of changing demographic trends and an unpredictable future, “we need to build greater flexibility into the design process.” Suburbia needs to be something and somewhere that we can alter as conditions—as well as desires—change, including ecological pressures on how we live, and how we want to live. In current discourses, environmental concerns are increasingly articulated as at least part of the rationale for making better suburban choices in everything from communities, houses, cars, appliances, and the entire range of consumer products associated with “the good life.” Pointing specifically to “the environment” as one of the main suburban planning issues to emerge in recent times, though, Friedman strikes a cautious tone, noting that “it is impossible to say whether or not the environment will continue to be a high-ranking concern.” Whether global or local, he situates the precariousness of sustainable suburban planning paradigms in the context of economic cycles and priorities.⁷ Economic pressures represent another impetus for a broader green shift in everyday life and consumption, especially as it is rephrased in terms of savings that have more personal as well as environmental impacts. Discursively framed as part of wider societal crisis rather than personal choice, however, we more clearly see how inter-reliant the economic and ecological really are.

This awareness does not, however, necessarily translate into greater attention to green concerns in popular media discourse. For example, on television the quantitative peak for representations of aspirational green homes and lifestyles in new programming was between 2007 and 2008, right before the housing bubble burst and the economy fell into the worst recession since the Great Depression. For some time afterward, green was being recast as an appropriately humble and even frugal response to what seemed like past suburban intemperance. Discussing the ongoing redefinition of the American Dream in the wake of this economic crisis, preeminent pollster John Zogby suggests that “Americans should...come to grips with a new reality where excess is no longer sustainable,” especially since “sustainability is becoming the watchword of the twenty-first century,” both “by choice (the simpler life people want) and by necessity (global warming and the emerging economic power and needs of the developing world).”⁸ Green may not, under these conditions, be an option, but rather the “new normal.”

Occasionally the criteria for a necessarily new, sustainable American dream that Zogby outlines find expression in media constructions offering green suburban solutions. Just as often, though, the solutions posed are *to* rather than *of* suburbia, framing current suburban landscapes and lifestyles as the problem, and, therefore not readily part of any discursive construction of greener solutions to a crisis. In a 2009 contest to “redesign” suburbia, financial crisis was seen as an opportunity to make better use of suburban structures and places, especially the multitude of hard-hit, low-density boom-built exurban locations. Cosponsored by *Dwell* and *Inhabitat*, over 400 entrants in “Reurbia” were challenged to come up with creative ideas for sustainably retrofitting the suburbs we have today, making them more fit for a greener future.⁹ The results largely responded to notions of ecological as well as economic crises *of* suburbia. [Figure 5.2]

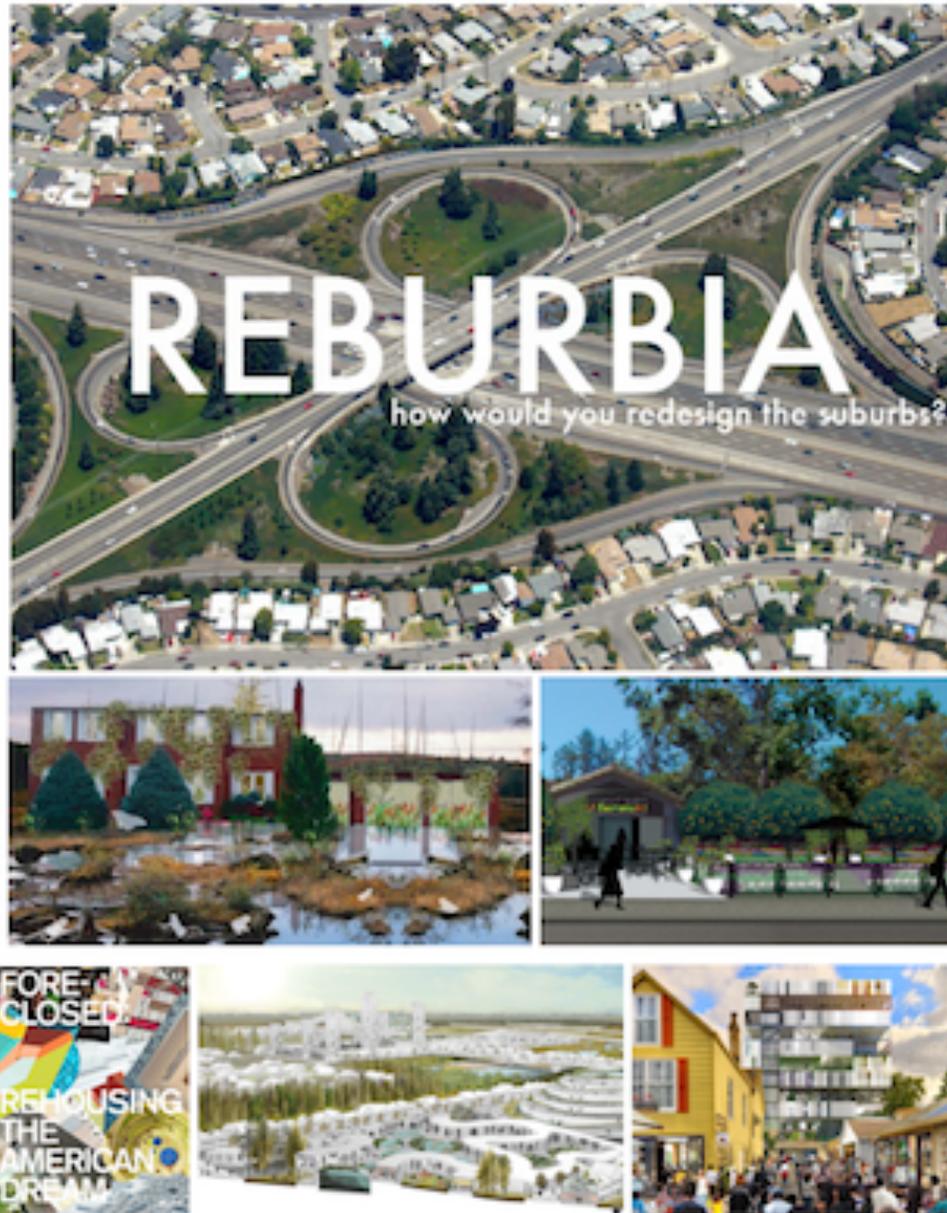


Figure 5.2: *First place of the Reurbia design contest (above) went to Calvin Chiu’s “Frog’s Dream: McMansions Turned into Biofilter Water Treatment Plants,” while “Entrepreneurbia: Rezoning Suburbia for Self-Sustaining Life” took second. Suburban re-designs in the MoMA “Foreclosed” show tended toward more urbanized solutions, even when inclusive of “nature” (below)*

Above: Images of “Reurbia” contest winners published by *Dwell* (April 19, 2009) <http://www.dwell.com/latest/article/reurbia-winners-announced>.

Below: *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream* at the Museum of Modern Art, including WORKac, concept rendering for “Nature City” in Keizer, OR (2011), and Studio Gang Architect, concept for “Machine in the Garden” in Cicero, IL, rendering with photography by Joseph Lekas (2011)

The “Reurbia” People’s Choice Award went to Galina Tahchieva’s *Urban Sprawl Repair Kit*, focused on creating “a more diverse, cohesive urban fabric within a walkable and identifiable public realm.”¹⁰ A project similar in tone to Ellen Dunham-Jones’ *Retrofitting Suburbia*,¹¹ this envisioned solution to suburban sprawl was to adapt existing suburban structures to make them look, feel, and function more like urban places. In this view increasing density is key to greening the ‘burbs, a position resting on logic popular in eco-planning circles, accepting that cities are greener than suburbs—always. The official second place award was given to *Entrepreneurbia: Rezoning Suburbia for Self-Sustaining Life*, a collaborative small business-friendly policy rather than design proposal whose “Suburban Farms” illustration is evocative of a more urbanized agriurbia. The winner, though, was a “poetic, not practical” concept for “converting abandoned suburban tract homes into wetland areas.”¹² In *Frog’s Dream: McMansions Turned into Biofilter Water Treatment Plants* by Calvin Chiu, the eco-fantasy is that something good can come out of the housing crash, and nature can “reclaim” the land we shouldn’t have sprawled out into in the first place. It is a green vision of suburbia for nature, not nature for people, although nearby cities can enjoy its naturally filtered water.

Rather than a strictly either/or template for revisioning suburbia, though, several participants elsewhere in green suburban discourse are trying out new blends of the urban and the natural, development and environment, all in response to economic crisis while nonetheless mindful of rising ecological pressures. Keeping central the goal that suburbia could be a fine place for human and non-human to coexist, especially if it is designed—or redesigned—better, prominent institutions like the Museum of Modern Art in New York sponsored showcases for innovative rethinking of the suburban “problem.” And much like “Reurbia,” the tandem financial/housing crises served as an organizing

principle for how such a suburban exhibit would be framed. In *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream*, five suburban locations-in-crisis were real life sites for imagined sustainable solutions, with emphasis on how the ongoing foreclosure crisis affected different kinds of suburban communities in “megaregions.”¹³ “Green community” was again the focus of design as individual green suburban dreams seemed in rapid decline.

Part of MoMA’s *Foreclosed*, Studio Gang Architect’s concept for “The Garden in the Machine” in Cicero, Illinois proposed a way for this inner-ring suburb’s “problems of industrial decline, rising unemployment (coupled with high poverty rates), and environmental contamination to be transformed into opportunities for rejuvenation.”¹⁴ Another example from this exhibit, the WORKac “Nature City” project in Keizer, OR, drew upon Ebenezer Howard’s “Garden City” concept from the late nineteenth century, as well as Leo Marx’s classic *Machine in the Garden*. The team who designed it “asked, ‘What if we could live sustainably *and* close to nature?’”¹⁵ Each of the site-specific redesigns incorporated various levels of “nature” in their visual presentations, mostly signified by lush vegetation and tree canopies intermingled with different urban architectural forms. While the rhetorical focus of the show is positioned as a response to the state and fate of suburbia in times of severe financial crisis rendering their future uncertain, the projects featured here also participate in the same sort of visual discourse as *The Lorax*, and *WALL-E*, and every other environmental-crisis themed media text that inserts trees as a culturally loaded symbol of transformation from a site of both economic and ecological ruin to one signaling restoration of prosperity and nature—in *harmony*.

Despite such moves to literally and figuratively green sites of suburban decline in such contests and exhibits designed to demonstrate the possibilities for redesigning and restoring vitality to suburbia, the visual presentations and rationales put forward do not

necessarily read as familiar to or satisfying most common suburban dreams. As one critic of the MoMA *Foreclosed* show commented, “In order to change the narrative of the American Dream, the teams have attacked it,” a trend further evident in how “these projects are aggressively anti-suburban in their form.”¹⁶ Many such visions of greener development appear more like attempts to renaturalize cities rather than address the form or appeal of suburbs. Urban-centrist perspectives dominant in official planning and design discourses are also prevalent in contemporary environmental discourses, each suspicious of the value of suburbia and those who willingly, happily choose to live there. Elements of nature are certainly welcome in the green urban future, as we see in any number of green design contests and exhibits, but there is little debate over the city’s primary status as highly developed and managed real estate, more culture than nature.

Yet another strand in the discourse of green seems on the surface much more accepting of suburbia, even suburbia in crisis, as a landscape in between, drawing upon a long tradition of constructing and contemplating gardens as appropriate models for suburban design and life. As part of a 1984 British guide for those interested in making their own home “in the country,” John Brookes offered a brief historical survey of the cultural role and representation of “the garden” in a chapter titled “*Nature still, but Nature methodiz’d*,” quoting Alexander Pope. Brookes noted how the tradition of Western garden imagery conceived of them largely “as enclosures, based ultimately on fear of the environment—the garden being a space tamed from it, with man as the ringmaster.”¹⁷ This view is illustrated in the extreme in the space-bound biodomes of *Silent Running*, where the only nature that exists is far removed from everyday life on Earth, contained as distant garden enclosures. Not limited only to science fiction, such narratives imagine a future where we have so thoroughly tamed and contained nature to

the point of endangering it. Whether in the city, the country, or a suburb somewhere in the middle, this discursive tension between the human and the natural is operative in ordering how we assess the power we have over what “nature” remains in our actual, terrestrial present, as well as the power it still has over us. Various methods of constructing pleasant views of nature, garden-like, within the physical and cultural confines of human development are designed to quiet fears of too much technology, modernity, artificiality. Yet visions of too much untamed nature awakens fears of a different sort, a loss of civilization. Suburbia, including greener visions of suburbia, can satisfy a deep cultural need or desire for new experimental landscapes where a comfortable balance is sought—“*Nature still, but Nature methodiz’d.*”

This cultural function of nature, in or out of suburbia, is most widely appreciated in visual terms. In her study of the politics of nature, Kate Soper discusses “nature as *appearance*,” specifically “in everyday experience,” which she refers to as a “lay” or “loose” sense of nature. She offers the following description, bordering on definition:

...a domain of observable phenomena and directly tangible forms. This is the nature we feel for: the nature we love and revere, by which we are inspired, and with which we commune. It is also the nature we have lost, polluted and destroyed, and which we are ever more insistently enjoined by the ecologists to conserve or preserve.¹⁸

Sightings of fragile vestiges of green in eco-pocalyptic visual media further conditions us to “feel for,” to “love and revere” what they stand for. In futuristic scenarios dominated by either wholly artificial or utterly desolate environments, nature is registered through green as a color of contrast, representing hope that it might yet be present in our “domain of observable phenomena,” enriching our everyday lives. This same positioning of green remnants and remembrances of nature in built and imagined suburban places likewise holds the promise that we have not irretrievably lost all connection to nature.

Soper continues by further complicating common ideologically tinged distinctions between the city and the country, and the relative judgments of “the nature” of a space based on its respective socio-economic functions in addition to its literal greenness. The city is culturally marked in contemporary discourse as a *less* natural zone of “industry and commerce” while the countryside is perceived as *more* natural due to its “agricultural and eco-regulatory activities.” In addition to the facets of appearance and functionality, she introduces temporal considerations into the cultural calculation of a site’s “natural” credentials. As an example, she plays with Lefebvre’s use of a peasant dwelling to question the ambiguous position and value of such structures *between* culture and nature: “if the peasant dwelling is judged more ‘natural’ than the modern house, this is not so much because of a difference of function, or because it is any less an ‘artificial’ construction, but rather in virtue of its greater age and obsolescence.” Here the legacy factor counts in the tally of natural value, privileging older residential structures to newer ones because they offer the possibility to go *back* to nature through habitation of dwellings constructed at a point more distant—temporally rather than spatially—from “an always more ‘historical’ or ‘cultural’ present.”¹⁹ Discourses that imagine a greener suburban future also often must contend with a history of development, and a form of close-to-nature nostalgia that is thus operative, such as in the images and speculative narratives accompanying designs like those in “Reurbia” or MoMA’s *Foreclosed*.

In this context, reworking existing suburbs, older homes and neighborhoods, is already perceived as a more “natural,” and thus greener engagement with place. As popularly noted in green building discourses, “the greenest brick is the one already in the wall.”²⁰ There is however a point, visually, when unruly, overgrown visions of nature overwhelms building, registering as disintegration rather than preservation. [Figure 5.3]



Figure 5.3: *Whether as banal a scenario as economic decline experienced in the Detroit metro, or apocalyptic a scenario as entertained in Alan Weisman's The World without Us, the visualization of our houses "returning to nature" is a dramatic illustration of the impermanence of our built environment.*

Above: Still from "Your House Without You," an online feature video at Alan Weisman's website for *The World Without Us* (2007), <http://www.worldwithoutus.com/multimedia.html>.

Below: James Griffioen, from his *Feral Houses* series of photographs (2006-2010), <http://www.jamesgriffioen.net/index.php?/prairies/feral-houses/>.

This view finds apt expression in a photographic project by James D. Griffioen, *Feral Houses*, in which he documents abandoned homes in the vicinity of Detroit as the once manicured “nature” of these residential properties now nearly covers their decrepit structures.²¹ Some of them look as if they are house-shaped topiaries in need of a trim. As in many apocalyptic media scenarios, eco or otherwise, where traces of the built environment remain years or centuries after disaster struck, there is a sense of cultural loss in seeing recognizable houses, home places where families once lived. Though judging by the appearance of the gone-wild growth, the crisis happened here long ago, and no one (except the photographer) is left to witness the aftereffects of desolation. Perhaps best comparable to Alan Weisman’s 2007 bestseller, *The World Without Us*, and a simulated time-lapse illustrating “Your House Without You,”²² the *Feral Houses* photos are suggestive of a narrative opposite that found in children’s fictions like *The Lorax*, or even *WALL-E*. Here nature appears to regenerate just fine in our absence, perhaps all the better for it. Yet Griffioen’s images do not read with the same kind of ironic hopefulness intended in *Frog’s Dream*, the winning 2009 “Reurbia” design, where abandoned McMansions are put to “good” use as restored natural habitat and biological water filtration. Rather, they are fitting of the name that Griffioen gave them, *Feral*. They are green by virtue of neglect, not design, and can in no way be confused with a “tamed” garden, even an eco-sensitive xeriscaped “native” garden.

Unlike the slow decline and degeneration of suburban housing that, once abandoned, gradually returns to a more “natural” state, the dramatic expansion of new suburban housing into pristine areas provokes a different cultural anxiety. Much as in Tom’s fight to save his precious 5-acre wetland in the 1994 film *Milk Money*, in actions by the Earth Liberation Front, construction of large new homes represents a tragic, rapid

conversion of nature into property. The disastrous future imagined in eco-pocalyptic futuristic popular culture is seen as starting here, in the construction and promotion of new suburban development representing the unsustainable expansion of a “model of existence” today that is “not really relevant to the planet Earth,” as a Haight Ashbury “hippie” once told news media. Early in 2008 ELF set fire to luxury GreenBuilt homes on the Seattle Street of Dreams tour, leaving this message at the arson site: “Built green? Nope Black!” and “McMansions + R.C.D.’s r not green.”²³ [Figure 5.4] The Quinn’s Crossing subdivision was a “green” rural cluster development, consisting of a very few large, luxury “green” homes on a picturesque site cut into the woods in the suburban outskirts of Seattle, but otherwise typical of the size and type of homes featured on this regional tour prior to the housing and market crash that year.²⁴ ELF’s choice of a luxury “green” suburban site is significant prior to the housing crash. Explaining how ELF chooses its targets, Portland State criminology professor emeritus Gary Peristein says that they are “more symbols than they are useful.” The group, he explains, will “pick out something that will gain them attention—and, of course, expensive houses in the Seattle area would be something that gains attention.” The ultimate goal of these discursive acts, according to Peristein, is “to get the public angry enough at society to change some environmental laws.”²⁵ Although, anger alone is not enough to effect actual change. It requires a focal point on which efforts and energies may be directed.

Developers are often cast to fill this role in popular media, broadly caricatured as profit-only-driven, capitalist manipulators of suburban desire, more often than not vilified as destroyers of rural or wild lands rather than celebrated as creators of opportunities to live the American Dream. The Once-ler could have been refigured as the eco-unaware builder of tract homes in Thneedville, and the story remain much the same.



Figure 5.4: *The estimate \$7 million in damage at the Quinn's Crossing subdivision was covered in several stories in the local press, framing it as an environmental crime scene. (above) TV crews caught the blaze as it consumed several of the showcase homes within the gates. (below left) A banner left by ELF at the site of the Seattle Street of Dreams fire "challenges builders' assertion that the homes represented environmental sensibilities." (below right)*

Above: Image by Mark Siegel for *The Seattle Times* (March 3, 2008).

Below: Images from video by KING TV/AP, republished by *The Seattle Times*.

See more photos at <http://seattletimes.com/html/photogalleries/localnews2004256745/>.

The products of suburban developers' efforts, however, must be seen in the context of suburban desire—past, present, and future. In the news coverage of ELF arson, striking images of those burnt shells of high-end houses also represent that very dream for many who would have never even had enough money to actually live in them. The discursive function of these houses as symbols shifts between the sleek aspirational ads promoting the Street of Dreams and their appearance engulfed in flames, or as smoking husks against the background of thick, dark, primal-looking forest. As dream homes, they represent the status, comfort and security of the American dream achieved, as well as the highly valued connection to nature in an equally dreamy backyard. Though as seen in newspapers, on TV or online as targets of eco-justified arson, the now desolated high-end subdivision may discourage even green dreamers from considering such grand houses, seeing the once coveted forest setting behind it in a new light.

Yet beyond the discursive assault, the physical and economic damages of these ELF arsons are inflicted primarily on the builder class since these were interstitial *properties*, houses-in-the-making and not yet purchased or inhabited *dwellings*. As they burned they too returned to nature, but never having housed actual families, the loss they signal is one of future potential, not of personal history. While without Griffioen's camera the plight of Detroit *Feral Houses* might have gone unnoticed and unmourned in the wider public discourse, what is in essence "impersonal" property damage outside of Seattle rose to the level of domestic terrorism, investigated and prosecuted by the F.B.I. Ecocritic Lawrence Buell describes how "in societies where property rights are crucial to the rule of law, property destruction may more readily than otherwise be deemed threatening to personhood."²⁶ Since no people were physically injured in this (or any other) ELF action, their threat to suburban property was primarily economic and, in terms

of landscape, metaphorical. The forest landscape ablaze is made personal through the presence of recognizable houses in the heart of the fire, shapes and structures that connote “home” even if no one lived there yet. The particular types of residential property targeted here are closely tied to a kind of aspirational personhood-through-property—the suburban dream home that *could be* yours, but more importantly the idea that this kind of home *can also be* “green.” Its usefulness as a target was not just that this development was seen as an incursion into a forest, but that developers were promoting these oversized houses as “built green.” If there were no such claims, the media narrative would have been constructed in much more conventional terms. Green protest of purportedly green development left many viewers confused, but within the closed cultural and political context of environmental discourse, the ELF action discursively framed all suburban development as un-green, no matter how eco-friendly the lumber used build it or how renewable the energy consumed to live in it. Yet within more general media discourse, what was perhaps most striking—and most sympathetic—was that glimpse of an enflamed dream home against the trees.

Whereas in many eco-apocalyptic narratives we find that humanity’s assault on nature has rendered either an area or the entirety of the Earth inhospitable, in another line of visual discourse, which includes news coverage as well as fantastic science fiction films and television, we find scenarios in which nature herself pushes us out of or beyond those places we used to call home, whether it be a suburban community or a suburbanized planet. As both green and un-green subdivisions are increasingly built into what appear to be relatively natural landscapes, the risks of destruction from the ravages of nature also intensify. Photographic images of houses under siege from fire or flood are a staple in contemporary news media, but unless the aerial views from

helicopters capture a wind turbine standing above the flames, or solar panels next to people waiting on their roof for rescue from the water below, there is little to inform us if that house is really “green” in any way, and thus if it figuratively “deserved” nature’s wrath. This, too, has informed the shape and direction of green suburban discourse. Questions arise as to how *durable* the idea, the dream of suburbia, even “green suburbia,” really is in the face of natural forces, as well as economic forces (foreclosure) or even political forces (eco-protest/eco-terrorism). Complicating the discussion is how human factors, the legacy of how we have previously built and resided in the landscape, might also make us more vulnerable to something as mundane as the weather, as well as our role in exacerbating the unpredictability of weather in a changing climate.

In an opinion piece following the natural/man-made disaster that was Hurricane Katrina, architect Gunter Plesums conjectures that “Global warming is the new form giver of cities and most other human endeavors,” and therefore “Survival rather than sustainability of the earth is the preeminent issue.”²⁷ Reconstruction of the decimated residential neighborhoods brought national media attention. This brand of humanitarian promotion highlighted crisis-born needs for newer, better housing in hard-hit areas, and in this case included A-list celebrity involvement from Brad Pitt, whose image and labor was foundational to “The Pink Project,” an environmental art piece intended to transition to permanent housing on the original home sites.²⁸ As part of Make It Right, an organization founded in 2007 and devoted to making “high-performance, well-designed homes...available for everyone,” Pitt and designer/author William McDonough gained vital publicity for green post-disaster rebuilding efforts through circulation of countless photographs of the Hollywood actor/director in front of what looked like a subdivision full of bright pink tents where homes would hopefully stand again one day soon. [Figure 5.5]



Figure 5.5: *Brad Pitt lent his celebrity to aid recovery from the devastation caused by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Tent structures from Pitt's "Pink Project," serving as temporary memorials to homes lost in Katrina, would be dismantled one by one only as new sustainable houses were constructed for displaced residents of the Ninth Ward. (below) Pitt worked hands-on to rebuild the area with sustainable principles. Celebrities like Leonardo DiCaprio likewise contributed to the promotion of an all-green recovery of Greensburg, Kansas after the town was whipped out by a massive tornado.*

Above: Aerial image of The Pink Project featured in *LIFE*; Brad Pitt in front of the "Pink Project" in 2007, from Miller "10 Celebrities Who Are Giving Back—How Will You Make a Difference?" (2009); Brad Pitt walks by properties devastated by Hurricane Katrina in the Lower Ninth," photo by M Mainz/Getty, published in Moore's UK article, "Brad the Builder in New Orleans," (*The Observer*, March 13, 2010); and Pitt sitting near one of the sustainable houses built, from *Architectural Digest*

Below: Promotion for the Discovery Network's television series on "Greensburg: A Story of Community Rebuilding" (2008) and green tours of "Greensburg, KS: Authentic Sustainable Community"

The Pink Project to rebuild homes after Katrina began before the housing crisis in 2008, when inspirational as well as aspirational green was still ascendant in mainstream culture, and still perceived a more costly solution than standard building and design practices. Despite the “feel good” nature of such spotlighted efforts, there were—and still are—a fair number of critics weighing in on the soundness of rebuilding in areas we know to be vulnerable to future disasters. Plesums argued that “All the best intentions and sustainable approaches will not restore Ward 9 to a ‘viable’ new suburbia; likewise New Urbanism will not withstand the next cycle of super-sized hurricanes.” Yet within the mediated discourses of disaster recovery, the intertwined needs and desires to rebuild on site are presented as a given, as expected. This framing includes the sometimes turbulent Midwest as well as highly suburbanized coastal or mountain areas, as seen after the entire town of Greensburg, Kansas was obliterated by a massive tornado in 2007. Despite being prone to such extreme weather, with help it was rebuilt to LEED-certified green standards as an “eco-town” in the very same spot, capitalizing on the town’s serendipitous name for added publicity and narrative congruency.²⁹ A cable TV series followed the progress, produced and hosted by another generous A-Lister, Leonardo DiCaprio. [Figure 5.5] The hopefulness of these mediated post-eco-disasters aligns with more fictional narratives where development and environment are potentially on the road to mutually beneficial and harmonious coexistence by film’s end, as in *The Lorax* or *WALL-E*. Though the “end” result of such fictional and real-life efforts and hopes is not yet known, and a future of sustainable suburban living in these eco-redeemed sites is by no means guaranteed. As Orson Welles once said, “If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story.” And even as one “chapter” of a story ends well, in life as in entertainment we can always expect sequels.

No site on Earth is completely disaster-proof, no matter how well designed, durably built, or eco-friendly. Suburbia, though, poses special challenges in the context of discursive as well as physical fortification against such undesirable possibilities. Among his provocative and at times somewhat utopian “observations and prerequisites for survival planning,” Plesums argues that suburbs are not included in what he terms “survival city,” wherein they “can exist only outside the barriers as during medieval times.”³⁰ This resonates in interesting ways within green discourses that envision suburban survivability as either a communal or individualistic effort, both scenarios having cultural relevancy in contemporary media.

Doomsday Preppers is one popular cable TV show on National Geographic highlighting the latter, individualist paradigm of suburban survivalism through weekly representation of “alternative” lifestyles ranging from off-grid independence to bunkered paranoia. [Figure 5.6] In the very first episode, an atomic explosion is superimposed over a standard postwar tract house during the opening moments of the very first segment, featuring the McClung family living way off-grid in suburban Tucson, Arizona. The narration begins by telling us that “In 2009, Dennis moved his family from a small apartment to a suburban dream home: a bedroom for each kid, a modern kitchen, and an Arizona necessity, a backyard pool, but not for swimming.” This “average” suburban survivalist then takes over much of the narration, describing how he, in true DIY fashion, converted the “large, empty, rundown pool” into a “self-sufficient, solar-powered, aquaponic greenhouse” where his nuclear family raises tilapia, chickens, goats, and produce—including protein-rich duckweed that coats part of the pool/pond water.³¹ In preparation for a coronal mass emission he expected in 2012, McClung’s goal was to be able to “survive an apocalypse,” or “as he calls it, ‘the end of the world as we know it.’”



Figure 5.6: *Two visions of how to survive in the suburbs following the collapse of civil society include Doomsday Preppers, a reality cable TV show featuring an off-grid single-family suburban lifestyle by choice (below), and Revolution, a broadcast network prime time drama that imagines a more communal way of living off-grid by necessity, in a world without electrical power (above).*

Above: Promotional images for the National Geographic channel's *Doomsday Preppers* and for the related app (2012)

Below: Stills from the pilot episode of NBC's *Revolution*, created by Eric Kripke (September 17, 2012)

Rather than try to do this far removed from civilization, or huddled in the city with communal support, the McClungs chose to carry on with their post-apocalyptic American dream in suburbia. Like many survivalists, though, they do not employ the rhetoric of green to explain or defend the family's version of the "good life," even when many of their practices and values are in line with the self-sufficiency, anti-consumer culture brands of environmentalism. They enjoy a version of connection to nature and a more "natural" life so familiar in the rhetoric of suburban dreaming, though here contained and "methodized" within the enclosed self-sufficiency of the suburban property. At first glance, their modest, overgrown home seems comparable to the Begley family abode as seen on another cable reality TV show, *Living with Ed*, though the execution and rationale of McClung's *Doomsday Prepper* dream is framed as saving his family from the environment, not it from them.

In the hit NBC series, *Revolution*, we find a different sort of challenge to Plesums' assertions that suburbia cannot practically be part of "survival city," standing beyond the protective walls of civilization both real and imagined. Rather than a natural disaster, like a hurricane, flood, fire, or even coronal mass emission, the undoing of civil society in this sci-fi family drama is the loss of literal power. Without machines or technology of any sort beyond rudimentary pre-modern tools and weaponry, we learn from the opening episode's narration that cities quickly became death traps, with people desperately struggling to escape, lest they die in place either painfully slow or brutally fast. Our introduction to this world comes fifteen years after the lights went out, as we get a long view of a now established commune of families living in a suburban cul-de-sac they walled in for security. Corn grows in the center, and the homes show their age without having the "feral" look of disrepair or abandonment. What we see does not conform to

our familiar understanding of suburbia pre-blackout, but it also doesn't give in to a wholly pastoral or romantically agrarian landscape. Neither does it express the kind of eco-idealism we find in some of the winning "Reurbia" designs responding to economic crisis. The term "green" is not used within the diegetic universe of the show, because it no longer has any meaning. Green is not a choice, or even a style; it is all there is and can possibly be in a post-electric-powered, post-carbon-fueled landscape.

Myriad discourses of green suburbia are intertwined in the construction of these few images of the show's pilot episode, giving viewers a brief opportunity to imagine *something different*. How these few communal *Revolution* families are briefly depicted as remaking the suburban environment they have at hand to suit their daily needs, physically and socially, possibly offers a new way to rethink suburbia as sustainable. It also has more than a little in common with the idea—and ideal—of life articulated by the Haight Ashbury "Hippie" on the news back in 1967, yet it is unlikely that any of the show's resilient ensemble would have freely, voluntarily chosen to live this way. This most unnatural disaster effectively forces a "model of existence" that perhaps feels a bit more "natural" or "authentic" to us as we watch it on television in the creature comforts of our twenty-first-century artificially-controlled suburban environments, but the terms of its desirability are confined to the discourse of crisis in which normalcy is redefined, in effect looking "backward" and not "forward" despite the narrative's futuristic scenario.

Media discourses, intentional or incidental, that construct visions of "green suburbia" as something different and distinct from the status quo, are aligned with ingrained cultural patterns of both desire and critique that still dominate our way of seeing and valuing this landscape and lifestyle. Fictional and critical media track the historical development of suburbia, before and after the rhetoric of green emerges as

part of mainstream discourses, offering surprisingly consistent views of what it should and could be. Postwar social critics drew upon already long held views that saw little value in an outward move from the socio-cultural center of urban life. Mass migration, representing the unprecedented democratization of the American dream as a generation sought a place and way to live closer to nature, was framed as a cheapening of its aspirational worth. We see this echoed in films like Martin Ritt's 1957 *No Down Payment*, in which all suburbanites see outside their oversized picture windows is the tedious, debauched and debased everyday lives of their neighbors, not pristine nature.

A generation later, a new skepticism about suburbia's many social, aesthetic, and even ecological promises found voice in a counter-cultural moment and movement, yet still resorted to much the same rhetoric animating earlier critiques. In 1970, Ian McHarg put those critiques in environmental terms:

The paradox and tragedy of metropolitan growth and suburbanization is that it destroys many of its own objectives. The open countryside is subject to uncontrolled, sporadic, uncoordinated, unplanned development, representing the sum of isolated short-term private decisions of little taste or skill. Nature recedes under this careless assault, to be replaced usually by growing islands of developments. These quickly coalesce into a mass of low-grade urban tissue, which eliminate all natural beauty and diminish excellence, both historic and modern. The opportunity for realizing an important part of the "American dream" continually recedes to a more distant area and a future generation. For this is the characteristic pattern of metropolitan growth. Those who escape from the city to the country are often encased with their disillusion in the enveloping suburb.³²

McHarg takes issue with suburbia's lack of planning and control, and as put forward here implies a *lack of vision*—an inability to see what is being lost in this process, and a *lack of restraint*—an unwillingness to protect the "natural beauty" of a landscape from the ravages of sprawl. It positions American dreamers as responsible for and suffering from the destruction of the very "nature" they delusionally sought in their outward move.

Popular media in this same period as McHarg wrote, when Earth Day was instituted as a

way to raise awareness of and celebrate our near-forgotten connection to nature, offered new templates of critique that included the fantastic as well as the tragic, seen in films like *Silent Running* and read in children's books like *The Lorax*. One common thread in such visually mounted critiques was the notion that *we have a choice*. We can follow the status quo and find ourselves some time down the line in a town or on a planet without trees, or we can want, we can choose, something different. The limitations of this era's critique as put into practice were also echoed in the visions of proto-green that it showcased: either plant more trees in suburbia or leave the suburbs to go live among the trees wherever they might still stand, even if that's on a spaceship.

Emerging from this critical and representational tradition, however, old ways of seeing that always shifting, unstable position on the suburban border between environment and development may yet be redeployed in contemporary discourses of green to engender an alternative view of such places as more in harmony with nature than they once were, as "green." Although, contemporary voices in the debate over whether or not suburbia can be both made and seen as "somewhere that's green" tend to focus on one particular line of critique that targets a fundamental reality of how we have built the landscape we have, and what constrictions that places on our ability to prescribe and proceed toward a more sustainable future. James Howard Kunstler has been one of the loudest, most acerbic, and most cited of these critics over the last decade or two. When interviewed about his newest book, *Too Much Magic: Wishful Thinking, Technology and the Fate of the Nation* (2013), he argued that "we're investing too much of our battered national spirit and our dwindling resources on a campaign to sustain the unsustainable—namely, propping up the hyper car-dependent American Dream suburban matrix."³³ In addition to his redundant mantras of condemnation that

suburbia is the “greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world” and full of “places that are not worth caring about,” Kunstler is nonetheless confident in his repeated assertions that suburbia will ultimately fail.

Espousing the many faults with and delusions about “the national automobile slum,” Kunstler is prominently featured in several documentary films that critique the un-green auto-centricity of sprawling suburban development, including documentaries like *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream* (2004) and *Escape from Suburbia: Beyond the American Dream* (2007), as well as the Canadian docu-comedy, *Radiant City* (2006). Like most eco-feature films aimed at children, such as *Furry Vengeance* (2010) and *The Lorax* (2012), adult-oriented eco-documentaries integrate and advance the critical position of social and cultural critics like McHarg and Kunstler, denouncing suburbia as an unsustainable American dream in the face of both economic crisis and environmental catastrophe. Yet rather than in sustained media narratives, even those documentaries supported by scientific and statistical analysis and illustrated with the most unflattering views of postwar suburban development, it may be in equally dramatic yet more ephemeral media images that occasionally surface in the “news” that ultimately have the most impact on how we see the environmental dangers both of and to suburbia.

When an Exxon pipeline broke in suburban Arkansas, multiple images flooded the 24-hour news cycle and every related media venue. [Figure 5.7] This was not the first such oil spill, nor was it even the largest. What gave this oil spill story such traction in the mass mediascape was that it occurred in a most sensitive area, a place of vulnerability where discourses of suburbia and nature, development and environment, necessity and desire all clash, a place at once recognizable as *home* and as *in peril*.



Figure 5.7: *Photos of the Exxon Arkansas spill in a residential neighborhood circulated widely in print, online, and on TV news, highlighting an environmental tragedy that caused most residents to evacuate their suburban homes.*

Above: Photo by KARK, published on *Treehugger.com* (March 31, 2013)

Below: EPA photo E13611 of the Exxon Pipeline Mayflower Arkansas Oil Spill (April 2, 2013)

Unlike other major spills that contaminate large bodies of water or ruin pristine natural lands, their devastation of fragile ecosystems made more real for us at home through images of oil slicked waterfowl or blackened beaches, the “sensitivity” of this spoiled everyday residential site is cultural as well as environmental. Views of oil running like a dark, sticky, sickly stream through lawns, onto driveways, and down the cul-de-sac literally brought the crisis “home.” The suburban visual context of the spill allowed it to register as a more direct, immediate, and personal threat to person and property, the real and the ideal, allowing for clearer entertainment of the notion that “this could happen to me and my family, on my street, in my home.” Making this most un-green yet unseen portion of essential suburban infrastructure visible in this way, oil became once again a key issue in the discourse of sustainability, but for different reasons than the usual grumblings over price per gallon or the loss of polar ice habitat due to carbon emissions.

This one thread in the discursive construction of green suburbia was, for a moment, made present in photographs as resonant as anything seen in even the most fantastic fictional accounts of eco-disasters-that-could-be. The images did, however, offer a point of comparison. For example, *Revolution*'s fictional golden cornfield cul-de-sac in some measure represents sustenance, community, and continuity even following the collapse of the wider civilization. The black stain of oil spilled in a similar space has the potential to disrupt our comfortable visions and fictions of suburbia as part of that same, fragile civilization, as a site of danger rather than of safety. Ability to see what is normally hidden further exposes the base reality underwriting the dream, potentially affecting changes of vision and practice only imagined in our most fantastic and horrific media scenarios.

What good is a house, if you haven't got a decent planet to put it on?

— Henry David Thoreau

Even more so than in critical discourse, popular media presents a variety of ways that we can envision the end of nature, the end of suburbia, or at times the end of both. Packaged as light entertainment or intended as age-appropriate eco-educational messaging, such texts broadcast the ideological positions and structures of their cultural moments, extrapolated into the otherwise unknown and unknowable future. Read here as discursive extensions of rather than departures from the many themes, examples, and concerns discussed throughout this dissertation, their constructions of crisis reframe the once familiar as suddenly strange, as outside of the ordinary imagination of both “normal” and “desirable” suburban landscapes and home places. Still debated within such discourses of crisis are possibilities for finding “smarter” ways to accommodate suburban growth patterns without compromising the “organic” landscapes we find so pleasing that we wish to perpetuate them, and on whose ecological health we also depend for our own. The differences between concept home fantasies and model home aspirations are still put into perspective within the contexts and constrictions of everyday practicalities, even though the social and environmental conditions of those spaces and limits may look starkly different from what we see in and know of the many extant types of suburban development. Through these myriad, at times oppositional discourses of eco-crisis, eco-disaster, and eco-pocalypse, the construction of both “green” and of “suburbia” exhibit alterations as well as continuities with past and current paradigms as they are recombined and reconstituted through mediated textual engagements with the idea of “green suburbia,” even when positioned to deny its very possibility.

In choosing this strand of the discourse to frame the conclusion to this project, my focus is less on the theme of “endings” as it is on possible beginnings, the discursive means through which greener suburban futures might yet be envisioned and enacted. Standing as a barrier to this is the bifurcation of these discourses, such as those lining up on the sides of progress versus conservation, or growth versus preservation, each of which aligns with political and economic interests as well as cultural positions informed by them. In a majority of such instances rhetoric in support of the anti-environmentalist status quo resonates as pro-suburban, while environmental critiques read as mostly anti-suburban, limiting opportunities for identifying and claiming a productive middle ground where something novel, visions of suburbia as “somewhere that’s green,” can be more clearly and purposefully imagined. The presumption of fundamental difference, such as between culture and nature, is the basis of both rhetorical positions, grounded in historical narratives and philosophical traditions invested in maintaining the split. Rather than opening the discourses of green and suburbia to less ideologically polarizing imagination and thus innovation, scenarios of crisis in which these terms are in play quite often have the effect of calcifying positions and opinions. Whether cultural critique or popular culture, the substance of the discourse is presorted according to which audience is most likely to “like” it based on its brand and target of messaging, preaching to the choir rather than seeking out more ecumenical dialogue.

The occasional eco-pocalyptic text works against the grain, reopening the discourse to more nuanced interpretations and avenues of engagement. At the end of Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *Pacific Edge*, set in the year 2065 after an unspecified series of social, political, economic, and environmental crises reshaped life as we know it, a more localized, communal, and ecologically sensitive “model of existence” is the

new norm. The whole world has “gone green;” it had no choice. Most characters navigate this brave but cooperative new world with a certain smug complacency, digging up the now buried archeological remains of suburbia with requisite commentary on how wasteful and short-sighted their recent ancestors were for living this way. Yet one character who has lived long enough to experience both eras, Tom, finally gives up on trying to write a book about utopia in this post-crisis cultural context after entertaining the possibility that his pre-crisis childhood in suburban California really was as close to utopia as we have ever come.³⁴ The narrative takes us into one possible future, through which we, like Tom, might look back on what we now know and have, less with nostalgic longing than with a sense that nothing is ever so perfect or so horrific as we might think.

There is something both powerful and durable in the suburban dream, in what it represents, and part of that appeal lies in its flexible instrumentality for seeking and finding, for seeing and constructing a blend of what each discursively partisan position articulates as ideal. This is not a matter of simultaneously holding onto contradictory beliefs about or desires for the discrete entities of culture and nature, development and environment, but rather realizing that they are not mutually exclusive. Visions of green suburbia depend on reconciliation of these concepts, on finding more sustainable ways forward through acknowledgment that suburbia—and the many diverse and distinct suburban environments that constitute this otherwise overly essentialized term—is a space of process, change, and adaptation, and not wholly static or invariable. Critical and popular media discourses of suburbia, and especially those of green suburbia, in many respects need to catch up to the reality on the ground, where person by person, community by community, even company by company, attempts are being made to define through practice what seems so difficult to articulate through representation.

Notes for the Conclusion:

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- ¹ Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel), *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971). An “earth-friendly” edition printed on recycled paper was also recently published by Random House. A faithful adaptation was produced as an animated TV special and aired in 1972. The story has always garnered political pushback, including a pamphlet/book called *Truax* by hardwood flooring industry member Terri Birkett (1994), written as a parody of/response to *The Lorax* in defense of the harvesting of forestry products. A later children’s book, *How to Help the Earth—by the Lorax*, was published in the “Step into Reading” series for grades 1-3 (1999), also teaching children how to live in a more eco-friendly way per more contemporary “green” rhetoric. Set somewhere that looks very much like today’s suburbia, the new story features the eco-version of the “3 R’s,” as well as tips on saving energy and water, and ending with the more traditional Lorax prompt of planting a tree. There was a recent media controversy over whether or not the 2012 film version further “indoctrinates children” in environmental politics, as covered extensively in cable news and on the blogosphere. See, for example, David Haglund’s February 23, 2012 piece for *Slate*, “Lou Dobbs Is Silly, but The Lorax Really Is Political,” at http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/02/23/is_the_lorax_propaganda_lou_dobbs_thinks_so_and_so_did_dr_seuss.html.
- ² This clip from NBC News’ *Frank McGee Report* featuring a Haight Ashbury “hippie” decrying suburbia was rebroadcast on MSNBC’s *Morning Joe* (6/22/12), in relation to a segment discussing a recent *Vanity Fair* piece on the Summer of Love by Sheila Weller, “Suddenly That Summer” (July 2012), <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2012/07/lsd-drugs-summer-of-love-sixties>. The MSNBC video can be seen at: http://www.nbcnews.com/id/3036789/ns/msnbc-morning_joe/vp/47918207#47918207.
- ³ In an early scene of *Evan Almighty*, newly elected Congressman Evan Baxter (Steve Carell) tells his family “welcome to the good life” as they drive up to their new home in the half-built subdivision of Prestige Crest. The McMansion boasts old growth Brazilian cherry wood, signifying that “prestige” means not having to worry about the sustainability of home materials.
- ⁴ Thomas Bargatzky, “Introduction” in *The Invention of Nature*, eds. Thomas Bargatzky and Rolf Kuschel (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 9-10.
- ⁵ See John Archer, *Architecture and Suburbia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- ⁶ William Leiss, *The Dominance of Nature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), xxv.
- ⁷ Avi Friedman, *Planning the New Suburbia: Flexibility by Design* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002), 173-174.
- ⁸ John Zogby, “Want Meets Necessity in the New American Dream.” In *The American Dream in the 21st Century*, Sandra L. Hanson and John Kenneth White, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 116.
- ⁹ Sarah Rich, “Reurbia Winners Announced!” *Dwell* (August 19, 2009), <http://www.dwell.com/latest/article/reurbia-winners-announced>.
- ¹⁰ Mike Chino, “Urban Sprawl Repair Kit Offers Simple Plans to Fix Suburbia,” *Inhabitat* (August 19, 2009), <http://inhabitat.com/urban-sprawl-repair-kit-offers-simple-plans-to-fix-suburbia/>.
- ¹¹ See Ellen Dunham-Jones, *Retrofitting Suburbia: Urban Design Solutions for Redesigning Suburbs* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2011), and her 2010 TED Talk by the same name: http://www.ted.com/talks/ellen_dunham_jones_retrofitting_suburbia.html.
- ¹² Rich, “Reurbia Winners Announced!” “Reurbia” judge Geoff Manaugh noted that he loved “the trans-species approach” in the winning design, *Frog’s Dream*, and “the acceptance of certain economically obvious shifts that are already in many a recently constructed suburb.”

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- ¹³ *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream*, Museum of Modern Art, New York City, February 15-August 13, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/foreclosed/>.
- ¹⁴ The proposal for “The Garden in the Machine” Project for redesigning Cicero, IL “is based on the limited equity cooperative (LEC) model of home ownership. It decouples the ownership of homes from that of the land beneath them; residents own their spaces, and thus have an incentive to care for them, but land and shared amenities are jointly owned by all, in a private trust.” Jeanne Gang, Studio Gang Architects, in *Foreclosed: Rehousing the American Dream*, Museum of Modern Art, February 15-August 13, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/foreclosed/cicero>.
- ¹⁵ Amale Andraos and Dan Wood, WORKac team leaders for the “Nature City” project designed for Keizer, Oregon, featured in MoMA’s *Foreclosed* exhibit, 2012, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/foreclosed/keizer>.
- ¹⁶ Diana Lind, “Sympathy for the Suburbs.” *Next American City* (February 21, 2012) <http://americancity.org/daily/entry/sympathy-for-the-suburbs>.
- ¹⁷ John Brookes, *A Place in the Country* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 50. The images he considers here include a depiction of a walled medieval garden illustrated in a 15th century French manuscript, and a 1775 plan for Alexander Pope’s Twickenham garden.
- ¹⁸ Kate Soper, *What Is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1995), 180-181.
- ¹⁹ Soper, *What Is Nature?* 186-188. Soper here quotes from Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 83.
- ²⁰ Lloyd Alter of *Treehugger.com* uses the phrase often, such as in his blog titled “The Greenest Brick: City Votes to Demolish Entire Street of 41 Historic Buildings,” (June 8, 2010), <http://www.treehugger.com/sustainable-product-design/the-greenest-brick-city-votes-to-demolish-entire-street-of-41-historic-buildings.html>. In his coverage of Brantford, Ontario’s redevelopment, we see Soper’s analysis illustrated, whereby the loss of these 19th century buildings are framed as a tragedy because of their historical and therefore “naturalized” value, but also because of their “embodied energy.” New construction will use more natural resources, and in that respect, is also less eco-friendly.
- ²¹ James D. Griffioen, *Feral Houses*, 2007-2012, <http://www.jamesgriffioen.net/index.php?/prairies/feral-houses/>.
- ²² Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York, Picador, 2007), <http://www.worldwithoutus.com/index2.html>. The website for Weisman’s book also has multimedia content further illustrating the premise that, without our maintenance and intervention, all those aspects of “development” eventually return to nature. See also the History Channel series with a similar theme, *Life After People* (2008-2010), based on the 2008 documentary by David De Vries, *Life After People—Welcome to Earth, Population: 0*.
- ²³ In the provocatively titled 2009 exhibit, “If You Build It We Will Burn It,” Raleigh artist Jerstin Crosby invokes a banner with those words that was hung at the site of another eco-arson by the Earth Liberation Front. As one viewer describes the experience of this “subtly engulfing” installation, “The viewer walks into the gallery and is immediately surrounded by a cage-like construction representing the ruined remains of an apartment unit. The space is barren, except for a spray-painted warning blatantly calling to mind ELF’s 2003 exhortation.” Tina Siadak, “Lump Relives ELF Attack.” *The Chronicle* (Duke Student Publishing Company), September 10, 2009. In an interview, the artist explains that his “front room installation ‘La Jolla Crossroads’ was a literal recreation of an action by the ELF that brought the viewer into the piece as a way of engaging them within the facts of that arson.” He further states that the “entire show was influenced by modern ideas of site-specificity, land art, kinetic work, as well as advertising, news dissemination, extremism, and a genuine appeal for viewers to contemplate animal rights and environmental issues.” Molly Schafer, “Meet the ESPP Artist: Jerstin Crosby,” *The Endangered*

Species Print Project Blog, December 9, 2009, last accessed August 17, 2011, <http://endangeredspeciesprintproject.blogspot.com/2009/12/meet-espp-artist-jerstin-crosby.html>.

- ²⁴ In the wake of both the arson and the housing market crash that year, the website for Street of Dreams afterward noted that they were “taking a pause...until credit and confidence becomes more abundant,” rather than “present a compromised experience” in terms of “brand expectations for attendees, builders and sponsors.” The 5-home 2007 tour is the last one included in their “Historical Photo Gallery.” No acknowledgement of the ELF arson is made, but their impact might be read in this “pause” notice and the solicitation on this page for “quality closer-in land parcel(s) or finished building lots that would support a Street of Dreams event *that focuses on a relatively smaller finished product.*” Seattle Street of Dreams show information, *emphasis original*, <http://www.seattlestreetofdreams.com/20082009showinformation/>.
- ²⁵ Miyoko Ohtake, “From Green to Black,” *Newsweek*, March 5, 2008, last accessed August 17, 2011, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2008/03/05/from-green-to-black.html>.
- ²⁶ Lawrence Buell, “What Is Called Ecoterrorism.” *Gamma: Journal of Theory and Criticism* 16 (2009). Buell has extensively researched the relatively recent coining of the neologism “ecoterrorism,” and the subsequent “rhetorical war” over its use. He traces how in the past two decades it has emerged “simultaneously from the right—in order to stigmatize radical activists—and from the left, in order to stigmatize authoritarian state and corporate mistreatment of environment and/or animals.” Later in the essay Buell draws on historian Richard Hofstadter’s view of “the paranoid disposition” that is “a by product of the proverbial American Dream,” especially “as nurtured by ‘the rootlessness and heterogeneity of American life and, above all, of its peculiar scramble for status and ... identity,’ such that no social group—left or right—ever feels wholly secure, even when empowered.”
- ²⁷ Guntis Plesums, “Survival City.” *Journal of Architectural Education* (2006): 23-24.
- ²⁸ For more, see Paul Petrunia’s feature on “The Pink Project” at *Archinect* (December 3, 2007), <http://archinect.com/features/article/68296/the-pink-project>.
- ²⁹ For more, see the town website for Greensburgh, Kansas, “Rebuilding...Stronger, Better, Greener!” <http://www.greensburgks.org/>.
- ³⁰ Plesums, “Survival City,” 23-24.
- ³¹ *Doomsday Preppers*, “Self-Sustaining Suburbia,” webisode, part 1 of the *National Geographic* channel pilot episode (2012), <http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/national-geographic-channel/shows/doomsday-preppers/ngc-self-sustaining-suburbia/>.
- ³² Ian L. McHarg, “Open Space from Natural Processes,” *The Essential Ian McHarg: Writings on Design and Nature*, ed. Frederick R. Steiner (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2006), 63.
- ³³ Josh O’Conner, “Interview with James Howard Kunstler.” *Urban Times* (July 5, 2012), <http://www.theurban.com/2012/07/interview-with-james-howard-kunstler-author-and-urbanist-critic/>. Kunstler holds in special contempt “the endless new housing subdivisions cut off from all meaningful civic amenity, drenched in purposelessness, monotony, and repressed rage.” In this same speech, an address to the 1999 Cities of the Future Conference, he asks the “simple” question, “What is suburbia?” He frames the answer in a way that describes the earlier connotation of *green* discussed in the introduction: “The supposed antidote to life in the horrible industrial city: country life. Nature!” As he goes on to articulate how our cartoonish abstraction of “country life” in suburbia fails to deliver on its promises of “escape” and “cure,” he eventually gets to a point of nostalgic longing for the historical moment of the City Beautiful movement, which he describes as “a time in the history of our young country when we knew the difference between...dreaming and acting on our dreams.” James Howard Kunstler, “Remarks to the Cities of the Future Conference,” Sacramento (December 1999), http://kunstler.com/spch_sacra.html. His characterization of suburbia as “one of the greatest misallocations of resources” is one of Kunstler’s key phrases repeated across the range of

Kunstler's writings and speeches. Despite his combined repudiation of our reliance on suburban car culture, our ignorance of peak oil predictions, our faith in technology to save us, and our societal penchant for considering ourselves "consumers" rather than "citizens," I find it a provocative coincidence that the video for his 2004 TED Talk is sponsored online by BMW—"The Ultimate Driving Machine," <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1ZeXnmDZMQ>. Though remarkably consistent in his critiques and prognostications, the seriousness of his message is compromised by the very humor, eccentricity, and scare tactics he uses to convey it to a wider audience. As expressed by Chris Hayes, MSNBC primetime host and, at the time, a journalist writing for *The Nation*, Kunstler's aspiration "to be taken seriously as a credible expert" is undermined by his seeming "contempt for modernity," "generalized misanthropy," and "alarmist tone," which makes him seem like a "crank" even to those who tend to agree with him. Chris Hayes, "Wise Fool," *The New Republic* (May 14, 2004), <http://www.chrishayes.org/articles/wise-fool/>. Hayes was responding in particular to Kunstler's newest book at the time on peak oil, *The Long Emergency: Surviving the Converging Catastrophes of the Twenty-First Century*.

³⁴ Kim Stanley Robinson, *Pacific Edge* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 1988).

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