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Suburbs: Modern Utopias or City Planning Failures?

More than half of all Americans, or about 175 million people total, live in suburban counties in the United States as of 2018 and this number is only increasing (Parker et al). Suburban living is generally thought of as the best option for people looking to be comfortable in life and it's a common goal for most average people in America to one day be able to get their own house in a suburb to raise a family. The “American Dream” typically featuring a married couple with two or three children, a dog, and a suburban house with a white picket fence around the yard, became the idyllic life for individuals around the nation. But why suburbs? How did suburbs come to be the most desirable places to live? And are suburbs really the best option? The creation of Levittown, the first suburb, and consequently, the American suburban lifestyle in the early 1950s served as the blueprint for the dominant living community design for families in the United States that would remain popular up to present times and will most likely continue on into the foreseeable future. This sweeping innovation in the way Americans lived drove economic changes, generated new environmental challenges, highlighted social issues, coincided with racial segregation, and would go on to define modern America as its known.

Levittown and the first suburbs were built with the power of the American industrial system as a response to the demand of the people following major changes brought on by the end of World War II and the Great Depression. In the previous decade, factories in large urban centers attracted domestic and immigrant workers alike, but after the war, lower-class citizens

were able to obtain their own houses on the outskirts of cities in the new suburbs with the help of the GI Bill and lessened costs of housing (Elliott, "Growth"). Construction firms and other industrial assembly-line businesses had to shift their output after the war when military weapons and infrastructure were no longer needed, so they focused more on building cars and houses to meet the new demands of the people in America. The GI Bill, more formally known as the "Servicemen's Readjustment Act," was created to aid World War II veterans as they returned to normal life back in the States. According to Dr. Kimberly Kutz Elliott, "The Servicemen's Readjustment Act offered veterans a year of unemployment pay after their homecoming; guarantees for loans to purchase homes, businesses, or farms; and tuition and living stipends for college or vocational programs." These benefits for soldiers as they returned to civilian life helped to propel the economy and allowed many people to buy a home to start a family at. The "Baby-Boom" occurred around this same time when many veterans married and produced children, perfectly coinciding with the benefits of the GI Bill and the creation of the original suburbs in New York and Pennsylvania.

The first suburbs in America sprung up in the Mid-Atlantic region to meet the new demands of the people following the war as densely populated metropolitan areas became too crowded. Outside of New York City, on Long Island, a massive plot of an old potato farm was bought by the Levitt and Sons construction company as the ambitious idea for an assembly-line produced living community was being put into motion (Elliott, "Growth"). The mass-production systems, pioneered by Ford and perfected during the war, were utilized heavily in the construction of Levittown to build the "cookie-cutter" houses. Every house in Levittown had the same inner layout, causing house-owners to sometimes mistake their neighbor's houses as their own at night. Additionally, the design of the suburbs included trees being planted at regular

intervals and each house was built following the same steps as the one before it. Not only did it allow for faster construction of each house, the assembly-line system also saved money, allowing the houses to be cheaper options than inner-city apartments for most people. \$7000 was the price of the first Levittown houses, which was equivalent to a monthly payment of \$29, much cheaper in comparison to the \$90 monthly payments required at some apartment complexes in the city (Elliott, "Growth"). The Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration also helped people to secure newly designed mortgages and loans for houses in order to stimulate the economy and housing market.

Following the success of Levittown in New York, new suburban communities sprung up on the outskirts of cities around the nation. Contractors bought up large plots of land and hired construction crews to develop suburbs on a huge scale, utilizing the same concepts as William Levitt to sell single-family homes to veterans and those benefiting from recent government programs. The percent of the population of the country that lived in suburban areas increased from 19.5% in 1940 to 30.7% by 1960 ("Rise"). The number of people owning houses increased from 44% in 1940 to almost 62% in 1960 ("Rise"). Additionally, designed living areas expanded at the incredible rate of 126.1% ("Rise"). This trend is known as suburbanization and can be seen when people leave urban areas en masse to instead live in suburban communities.

Suburbanization in America occurred as the country was booming with not only children, but economically as well.

As more and more people moved into their own houses in suburban neighborhoods, demand for in-home appliances and private automobiles increased. At the time, buying power was flowing into the hands of suburban house owners as wages increased and more credit-based purchases were offered. Washing machines, dryers, cars, refrigerators, and the newly invented

television sets were extremely popular buys for families starting their new lives in the suburbs. These items were glamorized heavily in advertising as seen below in the August 1950 issue of Science and Mechanics magazine, which helped generate sales and interest for the companies supplying the new technologies (Digital Public Library of America). The advertising seemed to work and is evident in the raw sales and ownership percentages. According to Lumen Learning, the percentage of American families owning cars increased from 54% in 1948 to 74% in 1959 and motor fuel consumption rose from some 22 million gallons in 1945 to around 59 million gallons in 1958. Cars were especially popular because they became almost a necessity for everyone that held jobs within the city. Commuting by car into the city was the only option for most people because public modes of transportation were not integrated into the designs of the suburbs at the time. With the increase in car ownership rose the “car culture” of America in which industries adapted to cars being the main mode of transportation for most people. Drive-in restaurants and drive-in movie theaters allowed people to enjoy a meal or some entertainment without ever leaving their car. Pictured below is a 1950s postcard depicting a drive-in restaurant (Digital Public Library of America).

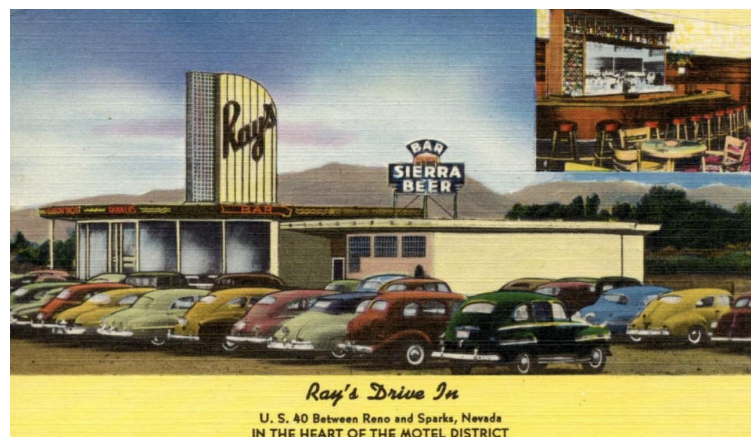


Figure 1 (left). Arthur C. Base, August 1950 issue of Science and Mechanics.
<https://courses.lumenlearning.com/ushistory2ay/chapter/the-rise-of-suburbs-2>
/ Figure 2 (right): “Ray’s Drive In,” from Digital Public Library of America.
<http://dp.la/item/c5bc736e85fe4e5d0b105fca67ced07e>

The increasing popularity of suburban living and car culture resulted in a phenomenon called “sprawl” as living communities expanded outward from metropolitan city centers, harming the environment and furthering the necessity of personal vehicles for individuals. According to Samuel Brody, a director at the Institute for Sustainable Coastal Communities at Texas A&M University, sprawl can be defined by six characteristics. These include low density single family housing, car dependency, proximity to and growth away from urban areas, “leapfrogging” development styles, “strip development,” and an unclear boundary between suburban and rural neighborhoods (Brody). Most examples of sprawl will be able to be identified by these markers, however they are vague due to the nature of development patterns and styles being dependent on geographic location. Additionally, sprawl happens over long periods of time on a large scale and thus cannot be accurately identified in the short term when new developments are made.

While sprawling suburban areas might provide cheaper housing options for some people, its negative effects prove it is not the best design for living communities and businesses. Brody explains, “These negative impacts include, among others, air pollution resulting from automobile dependency, water pollution caused in part by increases in impervious surfaces, the loss or disruption of environmentally sensitive areas, such as critical natural habitats (e.g., wetlands, wildlife corridors), reductions in open space, increased flood risks, and overall reductions in quality of life.” When suburban areas sprawl outwards from bigger cities, vast plots of land are used to build new developments, destroying animal’s habitats and disrupting the natural

environment. Pollution, in various forms, also harms the natural habitats as well as the air and water that everyone needs. This pollution is due, in part, to increased burning of fossil fuels and use of gasoline in individual cars and trucks within suburban areas. Public transportation, like buses and trains, that are normally available in metro and urban areas, are left out of suburban development plans. These places are designed so that each individual needs their own automobile in order to complete essential tasks, like get groceries or go to work, adding unnecessary strain to the air quality and natural environment. Additionally, with less emphasis on social interaction that would normally occur in larger public settings, common areas, and on public transportation, morale and satisfaction with life of those living in suburbs decreased. Humans require frequent social interaction to function properly, and sprawl had the effect of pushing humans further away from each other.

Suburban planning designs played an integral role in the segregation of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States throughout the decades following its conception and beginnings

in Levittown. Although the rise of suburbia coincided with macroeconomic prosperity and lessening of wealth gaps in America, racial divides were still strong as ever. In fact, the original creator of the first suburb, William Levitt was blatantly racist and not all ashamed about it. He made it clear that his neighborhoods were meant only for white people and his word became reality seeing as zero inhabitants of New York's Levittown were Black 10 years after its creation (Elliott, "Dark"). As white people moved out of the urban areas and into the suburbs, Black people were left in the crumbling inner city areas of many large metro areas. They rightfully felt left out and were upset at the fact that they were not able to live in the suburbs, even though they had the money to pay for it. This sentiment is depicted below, in the political cartoon by Tom Englehardt that says "They can't keep you out for being black, but they might decide your money isn't green enough" (Digital Public Library of America). This cartoon takes a jab at wealthy white suburban project owners that would find ridiculous ways to justify keeping Black people out of suburbs, even when they had enough money to pay for a house.

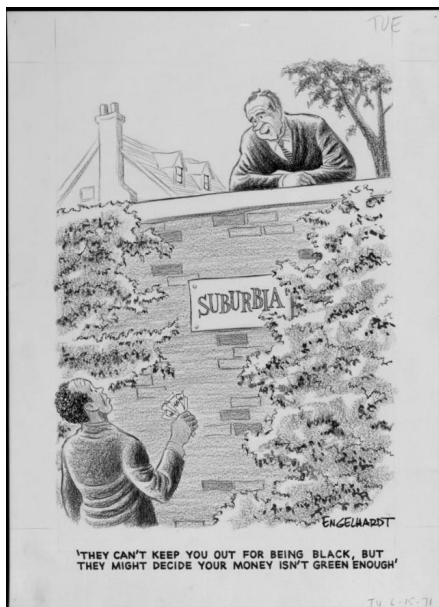


Figure 3: "They Can't Keep You Out for Being Black, but They Might Decide Your Money Isn't Green Enough," by Tom Englehardt from Digital Public Library of America. <http://dp.la/item/622064b0694fc1ffa26268038fed732>

Prior to Levittown's creation, there were already discriminatory lending practices in which private banks, lenders, and real estate agents viewed Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color as liabilities when it came to credit and housing loans. Local housing appraisers would survey housing communities and neighborhoods in their respective real-estate areas and pass on the information they gathered. Depending on those figures, the HOLC gave each living community an alphabetic rank and a color. The worst rated living communities, seen as liabilities for loans and credit, were assigned a D grade and were colored red ("Rise"). The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) was a government-sponsored housing program started by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to try to fix the housing problems brought about by the Great Depression. The HOLC's practice of assigning the mostly minority-inhabited neighborhoods with bad grades and the letter red is better known as "redlining." Redlining is responsible for the racial segregation in America's cities because Black people and other racial minorities were unable to get the loans or credit that they needed to move out of the inner-city and into the suburbs. These racist segregation tactics remained in practice until the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s when the federal government acknowledged their role in creating a system of segregated living communities within the country and federal laws were put in place to try to combat the system of justice. The Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968 that allowed Black people to have equal opportunities to purchase houses in suburbs, but by that time, it was already too late and the damage done was not easily reversible.

The Federal Housing Administration (FHA), another government program, picked up where the HOLC left off in blocking Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color from purchasing and living in suburban neighborhoods in the decades following the Great Depression.

The effects of the FHA barring Black people from owning houses were long lasting and contributed greatly to the racial wealth gap seen in America. As of 2017, the mean earnings of Black people in the United States was only about 60% of the mean earnings of white people (Gross). More importantly, the equity, or wealth, owned by Black people in the U.S. was only about 5% of equity owned by white people (Gross). The massive disparity of wealth seen in modern America can be traced back to the system of segregation headed by the FHA, coinciding with the creation of the first suburbs. Houses were great sources of equity and wealth for white people because properties rose in value. White people were able to purchase houses when they were first available, saving money initially and building up wealth over time as the property value and house appreciated. These original house owners then utilized their wealth to send their children to college and take advantage of opportunities allowing them to accrue even more wealth. This wealth was passed down through the generations, giving each new generation of middle-class white people a head start and a privilege that was not available for all. Since Black people were systematically shut out from purchasing homes in the 1940s and 1950s, they were essentially doomed to stay in poverty and to pass that poverty on to their children and future generations. By the time that laws came into effect that would allow Black people to buy houses in suburbs, the prices of the houses were so high that the impoverished people could not afford to move into them anymore.

It is clear that the suburbs were specifically designed to benefit white people in America, but that is not to say that they didn't face their own struggles with their new way of living. Prominently, white women dealt with problems stemming from the housewife role assigned to them by the overbearing patriarchal society that dominated the time period. According to Washington University Professor, Kim V. L. England, "[Women] became all-purpose,

high-value, low-cost housewives whose job was to maintain a detached, single-family dwelling as a private, safe haven for the emotional well-being of their family” (26). Nuclear families with a husband, wife, and two or three children were the most common residents of suburbs and the typical family dynamic featured a breadwinning male father authority figure who drove his car to work in the city every day, leaving his wife to care for the kids and the house. Given the popular design of most suburbs, with cars being essential to get anywhere important, it was hard for women to have a sense of freedom or to be able to get their own job. Women of this time were expected to conform to this way of living, regardless of their aspirations for a career or other purpose of life. “From the time the kids were born until they were about ten years old, I took care of the kids at home and Ron went out and did his job and went to school and got his education. I started to wonder, "There's got to be more than kids and housework," and I can remember fighting my inner self trying to say ‘I'm not happy,’ and being a pain in the neck to live with (Monica, age thirty)” (England 32). This excerpt is from a 1993 study in which average suburban women from Ohio were interviewed and asked about their feelings and thoughts regarding their lives in the suburbs. It is clear that this woman, Monica, was striving for a stronger sense of purpose in her life and was not happy with her role as a housewife and sole caretaker of her children. Most white women saw getting a job as a remedy for these feelings, but it would take a long time for women to be adequately accepted in the workplace in America.

As suburbs continue to grow and thrive, it is important to consider both the positive and negative overarching impacts of suburbanization on America stemming from the creation of the first suburb in Levittown. After being pioneered by William Levitt, suburbs began to spring up around the Northeast United States and eventually reached all corners of the nation as America entered the postwar period following World War II. In the late 1940s, veterans returned from

the war and received benefits from the government that allowed them to get an education, purchase a house, and feel comfortable enough to settle down and start a family. The Baby-Boom happened during this time and middle-class working white people fled the overcrowded apartments in large urban areas and headed to the brand-new suburbs. This movement, coexisting with a shift in industrial output, led to an age of consumerism in which the United States prospered macroeconomically. America seemed to be great, however, suburbanization had many detrimental effects on the environment and on social issues. As suburbs continued to expand outward from metropolitan areas, the negative impacts of sprawl began to show. Pollution due to reliance on personal automobiles and lack of public transportation, destruction of natural wildlife habitats, and general decrease in life satisfaction and human morale are all products of suburban sprawl, stemming from increased popularity and expansion of suburbs.

Most important though, is the role that suburbanization played in the systematic mistreatment of Black people and the furthering of the racial wealth divide within the country. Black people were specifically targeted by those with the most power and of highest authority in the housing markets and within individual suburbs. The Underwriting Manual for the Federal Housing Administration, a handbook of rules that directed employees on how to properly evaluate properties and mortgages, explicitly led staff members to discriminate based on race. The Underwriting Manual stated, "If a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes" ("Postwar"). It was written directly in the Federal Housing Administration's handbook in the late 1930s that segregation by neighborhood was necessary. Additionally, William Levitt, the founder of Levittown, forbade his houses from being sold to anybody that wasn't white. He made this

decision factoring in the principle that his white customers were also racists and would boycott his properties if he allowed Black people the equal opportunity to live in his suburb.

Given that the original suburbs were built on foundations of systemic racism and the trend of suburbanization that has been ongoing since the creation of Levittown has created so many problems for the environment and highlighted other social issues, one has to again wonder: are suburbs really the best option? It seems in the best interest for America to take a deeper look at the way its people live and interact with their living spaces and consider making some changes. Neighborhoods and houses are not things that can easily be changed though, due to the nature of their being large infrastructure projects that took years to create in the first place. So how can and how should America move forward? Evanston, a suburb of Chicago, recently began paying out reparations to its Black residents in an attempt to make up for racist housing policies of the past. This is one potential solution to the problems faced by city planners and government officials moving forward. Going in a different direction, the neighborhood of Serenbe, in Georgia, for example, has created a new housing project meant to be an alternative to suburbia. “Serenbe is a community built around health, wellness and integration with nature. Modeled after the traditional, walkable urbanism of something approximating an English country village” (Herriges). Evanston and Serenbe are both examples of ways the problems of suburbia are being dealt with currently, but there is still much to be done. While it is out of the power scope for most people to deal with these problems, it is a good starting point to simply recognize that they exist and be mindful of how suburbs are part of a complicated web of injustices that have yet to be solve.

Remix

[Twitter Thread Remix](#)

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