

Living in Almost-Places

The history of American suburbanization is thick with comments from suburb dwellers similar to this one: "Safety is an issue, I feel safe in the community.. we know the neighbors really well."(1) These comments often affirm two things: there is a solidarity with the familiar and there is something or someone who is on the outside of, or opposes, that solidarity.

While one can begin to unpack the psychic boundaries of race, class and Other that ooze from such common statements, what is not readily disclosed is the history and construction of legal boundaries that help enforce and maintain "safe" spaces, neighbors that we "know" and desires for a sense of place.

In many contemporary American suburbs, documents and rules travel from local governments, to developer, to home/apartment/condominium owner/occupier and eventually to Home Owner's Association (HOA). Such housing developments are creating neighborhoods from the ground up- with shade trees and recreation areas; they are the fastest growing real estate market in the country, and in some communities, they are mandated by local municipalities (2). They are called "common interest developments" or CIDs. Political scientist Evan McKenzie describes their workings: developers acquire land, target a demographic, and draw up covenants and restrictions for the land that the new dwellings will occupy (covenants and restrictions should reflect the aesthetic, fiscal and moral value of the prospective buyers); the dwellings are built; the developer sells enough dwellings, with covenants and restrictions attached, to hand over enforcement duty to a newly formed Home Owners Association (HOA); the HOA then modifies, creates and enforces rules. The HOA is recognized as a private corporation and is subject to corporation law (3).

Each development has different rules. For example, my sister's neighborhood in Charlotte, NC

restricts flagpoles, but not flags attached to the house, while my parent's development restricts clotheslines and vehicles advertising businesses in the neighborhood. Countless other developments have pioneered and carefully pruned their sites to restrict everything from certain colors, fruiting trees, animals, children and their noises. What begins to take shape is a design plan aimed at creating the look of a particular place- with color palatte and exterior design ensemble included. In other words, the aesthetics of a facade-- roofing, siding, woodwork, bricks, stones, shrubs, grass, lighting, depth of yard, drive, walk, decor of mailbox, and more-- become subject to law. Deviance from these codes of surface can, and has, landed many in court, disputing the legislation of conformity.

The common interest development and home owners associations are part of the American fabric. This type of suburban development has been worked into the landscape since the late 1800's, but first, it had to be invented. Architectural critic, Sam Jacobs, describes the suburban invention:

"City and country existed as a phenomena before they became articulated as an idea. Suburbia, however was an idea that coincided with, if not preceded its creation. Simultaneously a concept and a construction site. Suburbia was forced into existence by opposite pairings: by technology and nostalgia, desire and fear. This process began when the industrial revolution took the city and blew it up to hideous proportions, stinking, riddled and gross"(3).

In the U.S., early suburban neighborhoods such as Kenilworth, Chicago (1889), Forest Hills Gardens, New York (1908) and Hancock Park, Los Angeles (1920) were, from their inception, designed to be exclusive, idyllic and usually white and affluent. Though suburban rhetoric, at least initially, described something else. Historian Mary Corbin Sies discusses groups of early 20th century suburban home owners, who crafted manuals for the best home design, such as one well known writer who instructs: "A well-ordered home...is a tremendous missionary society. The light streaming from its windows is an ever-burning beacon of safety to our most cherished

social institutions."(4) In 1932, President Hoover's Conference on Home Buildings and Home Ownership described an ideal home: "The detached one-family house on an adequate lot in pleasant surroundings expresses the housing ideals and aspirations of most American families, particularly those with small children."(5)

If the space between the houses, the setback lines or architectural mandates didn't adequately code the neighborhood, then confrontation could. In 1948, after the Supreme Court ruled against racial covenants, Nat King Cole bought a 12 room \$45,000 house in Hancock Park, a neighborhood home to wealthy doctors, lawyers and businessmen. Neighbors mobilized to keep Cole out, eventually having the Hancock Park Home Owner's Association offer a buy out. Cole refused and the HOA requested a meeting. Maria Cole remembers: "There it was patiently explained to my husband that the good people of Hancock Park simply did not want any undesirables moving in." Mr. Cole responded: "Neither do I, and if I see anybody undesirable coming in here, I'll be the first to complain."(6)

Today, the aesthetics and language of suburbia is found in both city and country. "Pioneering" urban dwellers and suburbanites alike reside in tailored communities by joining home owner's associations, condo committees and apartment cooperatives. Each site and organization demonstrates desires for a place to call one's own. The mechanisms enabling the widespread trend in these varied, yet exclusive, communities are many: municipalities need new development, but won't raise taxes for infrastructure; developers profit by using cheap, unwanted land, selling brand and luxury; buyers, eager for the square footage and sense of place, safety and commonality, pay the price. The occupation of these neighborhoods shifts over time: the surface of the neighborhood will change, new covenants put in place, new member-neighbors willing to self select and submit to codes and restrictions, but the structure is the same. Aesthetic

restrictions are, in fact, celebrated aspects of the development; while they narrow the market of buyers, they also help sell dwellings by securing a specific demographic makeup of community. The development and its residents are not necessarily tied to the geography or history, but rather to a discerning menu of familiarity and regulation of the self and other member-neighbors. This lack of attachment to a specific place or community location is what geographers call placelessness or non places. Nigel Thrift, discussing the histories of mobility and human geography, describing them as "almost places", states:

"What is place in this 'in-between' world? The short answer is-- compromised: permanently in the state of enunciation, between address, always deferred. Places are 'stages of intensity'. Traces of movement, speed and circulation. One might read this depiction of 'almost places'...in Baudrillardian terms as a world of third-order simulacra, where encroaching pseudo-places have finally advanced to eliminate place altogether."

In this way, CIDs are similar to the 'almost place' of chain restaurants. Take for example, Applebee's, a private corporation owning 1,900 restaurants in 49 U.S. states and 17 other countries. Their advertising jingle is "Eatin' Good in the Neighborhood", and their model, like that of so many other chain markets, succeeds by establishing a narrow parameter in which the diner feels she can "be part of something exciting" and have a personal experience, especially when ordering from the menu category "Neighborhood Favorites". (8)

While Applebee's constructs the same menu and 'neighborhood restaurant' across the globe, many American suburbs similarly aim to create a specific, individualized identity. By honing in on the particulars a facade and conflating aesthetics with cleanliness, safety and class aspiration, common interest developments, in effect, use visual culture to their advantage. On frequent visits to various suburban neighborhoods, I've been struck by a common trend, another facade, which marks the boundary of these spaces. The entrances are often elaborated with names: Oak Bluff, Burning Tree, Sardis Plantation, Robinwood Estates, Bell Grove,

Candlewyck, Wessex Square, The Magnolias, The Forest, Timberlake, Sun City, Princeton, Settlers Landing, Paces Commons, Oak Creek Estates, Providence Glen, Five Knolls, Newman Manor, Oakbrooke, Landsdowne, Hembstead, Devereaux, Coventry, Green Park, Glynmor Lakes, Crowne Point, Echo Forest, East Providence Estates, Churchfield. Each name is articulated in carved wood, cut out of brass, masoned in stone or carefully hand painted, well lit with spotlights and landscaped. Some entrances have waterfalls, ponds, or other 'natural' elements, others have guard houses or mechanized gates. The entrance has a triple function. To member-neighbors, the entrance creates a visual language for the whole community, a reminder of their selective demographic, their sense of belonging to each other. Entrances also set a standard of upkeep, setting an example for the rest of the development. Although there are no direct ties to the aesthetics of entrance and the type of restrictions the community might enforce, by selecting a type, texture, and material ensemble implications are set, and their 'almost place-ness' is articulated. Most, if not all entrances are visible from the street and replicated throughout the neighborhood where accessible boundaries to the territory begin and end. The third function of the entrance could be to signal to non-member-neighbors dis-identification with surface/facade, or a gentle: 'this is not your space, it's ours'.

A brief survey of these named, marked spaces show their "investment in consumption spectacle, the selling of image of place.." (9). But the entrances not only sell the image of place, they also establish it. Just one sign of many in a private corporation, such as a HOA neighborhood, the entrance sign literally notes 'aesthetics are subject to law here'. They mark, not only 'member-neighbor solidarity', but the way surfaces and facades can operate, infiltrate and here, adjudicate. These communities, not tied to place, but rather to status specificity (bound up in the rhetoric of safety and community) create a lens in which alliances are magnified and others

are distanced. Sam Jacob states, "Suburbia allowed us to escape from the ties of circumstance: geography, place community, class and history. It also allowed us to invent where we were going." (10)

Where we are going-- both back to the urban core, and to the edges of the city-- is characterized by how we invent it. If the garden city, the company town, or the gated community weren't enough to prescribe a community, CIDs might be. Allied likenesses, combined with a fear of abstract crime, potential change and varying values, drive residents to create, abide by and enforce rules that, superficially, rule out such contingencies in both landscape and demographics. For the right price, CID member-neighbors can create a community drawn from a particular palette, based not just on communal facilities, but on commonality to an ideal self. Here, creating one's space -an enclave, safe from phantoms of the city, that looks like 'we' do-- is the ability to reshape both the physical and psychic landscapes of the urban, suburban and beyond.

- 1) Moran, Sarah and Lora Pabst "Gated Communities Offer Residents Security, Status." *Chicago Tribune*. Oct. 22, 2006.
- 2) Seigel, Steven. 2006. "The Public Role in Establishing Private Residential Communities: Towards a New Formulation of Local Government Land Use Policies that Eliminates the Legal Requirements to Privatize New Communities in the United States." *The Urban Lawyer*, Vol. 38, No.4. American Bar Association Press.
- 3) McKenzie, Evan. 1994. Privatopia: Homeowner Associations and the Rise of Residential Private Government. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 4) Jacob, Sam. 2006. "Utopia of Fear." In Igmade (Ed.) *5 Codes: Architecture, Paranoia and Risk in Times of Terror*. pp. 113-119. Basel, Switzerland. Birkhauser.
- 5) Sies, Mary Corbin. 1991. "God's Very Kingdom on the Earth': The Design Program for the American Suburban Home, 1877-1917." In Nicolaides, Becky M. and Andrew Wiese (Eds.) *The Suburb Reader*. pp. 186-191. New York, Routledge.
- 6) Architects' Small House Service Bureau, copyright 1932. "White House Panel of Experts Depicts the Ideal Home, 1932." In Nicolaides, Becky M. and Andrew Wiese (Eds.) *The Suburb Reader*. pp. 239. New York, Routledge.
- 7) Fogelson, Robert M. 2005. Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 8) Cresswell, Tim. 2004. Place: a short introduction. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

9) <http://www.applebees.com/MediaLanding.aspx>

10) Cresswell, Tim. 2004. Place: a short introduction.

11) Jacob, Sam. 2006. "Utopia of Fear." In Igmade (Ed.) *5 Codes: Architecture, Paranoia and Risk in Times of Terror*. pp. 113-119. Basel, Switzerland. Birkhauser.