Suburban Spaces: Rethinking the U.S. Dream

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ABSTRACT

When asked to create two-dimensional paper model communities without adequate analysis of the US lifestyles and architectural development, elementary education teacher candidates (TCs) in the Mid-west created residential areas with very little civic architecture, public transportation or amenities. The communities emulated suburban sprawl and reflected the students' memories and lifestyles. A redesigned project included in-depth class discussion of social, economic, and ecological issues, along with a critical review of suburban history. Through democratic action TCs designed and created more socially and environmentally equitable model environments. Within the study the author reflects on the initial practice and pedagogy that she employed and then revised to enable TCs to think and organize civically, rather than materialistically. The author recommends built environment education within the pre-service education classroom to prepare students to be critically knowledgeable citizens. The practice can be extended to the public school classroom.

*Keyword*s: suburbs, sprawl, subdivision, built environment, art education

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People develop a relationship to space and place that is dependent on their cultural and physical backgrounds (McFee and Degge, 1980; Neperud, 1995). These relationships represent values, cognitive structures, and subconscious patterns for dress, language, comportment, and consumption that are developed over time (Bourdieu, 1984). The use of space as an environmental imprint lends itself for review. Memories and social interactions that people have within these spaces contribute to their personal identities and sense of place. When we review our personal spaces we reflect upon our ways of living and our cultural values (Hicks & King, 1999; Vande Zande, 2011). A study of built spaces can reveal social, cultural, and

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historical narratives that reveal complex issues of race, class, and gender (Powell, 2008; Teaford, 2008; Tuazon, 2011). This paper is the result of a study in which the researcher asked how elementary education teacher candidates (TCs) could envision built sustainable environments that are socially, economically, and ecologically equitable. Within this process it is important to understand the history of the built U.S. environment, especially that of suburban expansion.

Suburbs and Feminist Theory

Suburbs are outgrowths of urban centers. They are diverse collections of communities with varying patterns of ethnic and socioeconomic development (Teaford, 2008). I define community as a coalition of shared meaning—values, memories, and expectations—that manifests itself in streets, homes, businesses and public institutions and structures of power (Levine & Harmon, 1992, as cited in Baxandall & Ewen, 2000). Suburbs are characterized by low-density land use, heavy reliance on automobiles, inadequate public transit, absence of city centers, lack of multi-use development patterns, and expensive infrastructure needs (Morris, 2005). Well over half of the population in the United States lives in suburban areas, and the numbers continue to grow as new subdivision developments increasingly destroy farmland and natural areas and continue our reliance on the automobile (Chow, 2002; Lindstrom & Bartling, 2003). A subdivision is a piece of land that a developer purchases and uniformly divides into lots intended for sale as future sites of mostly pre-designed single-family detached homes (Morris, 2005). The culture of consumption, combined with a sense of individualism and pastoral romanticism, has contributed to the growth of suburbia and suburban subdivisions (Knox, 1993; Lindstrom & Bartling, 2003; Teaford, 2008).

Feminist urban theorist Delores Hayden (2002) asserts that as an educated citizenry we must create sustainable communities that intertwine public and private spheres, question consumerism as identity, analyze how lived environments determine social roles, and understand how civic engagement can play a part in changing the way that we live. Sustainable communities offer a variety of equitable and affordable housing options at various economic levels and are situated close to frequent destinations. They provide safe and walkable environments and affordable public transportation. They promote economic competitiveness and maximize federal polices and investments to their best advantage. Such communities preserve historic sites and value existing community structures and mores within their neighborhoods. Sustainable communities are ecological communities that value the natural environment, efficient and sustainable energy use, and the environmental and physical health of their citizens (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2014). This vision includes the necessary inclusion of an economically viable framework of public services, amenities, and built spaces that include racial, gendered, and abled equity within privates spheres. It also challenges the gender roles that have been embedded within suburban subdivision housing that equate females with hearth and home, and, in turn, makes provisions for public and private spaces for self and for social interaction. It includes provisions for childcare, transportation, and access to needed commodities. From an ecological viewpoint, Hayden advocates re-envisioning existing suburbs, rather than continuing expansive growth. Viewing community as an interconnected network of spaces rather than as tracks of disparate volumetric residences suggests flexibly-planned houses with shared walls, courtyards, and communal spaces that would allow for varying family structures and lifestyles (Chow, 2002). To help us rethink the Victorian arcadian ideal[2] upon which the U.S. dream is based, the fabric of housing would interweave with the fabric of the community.

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2   The U.S. Victorian arcadian ideal, as defined by authors Dowling (1841/2001) and Beecher & Stowe (1869/2001), included either a cottage or stand-alone middle class home located in the country, away from urban crowding and stresses, and surrounded by gardens. Dowling and Beecher & Stowe envisioned the men of the household as gentlemen of leisure who cultivated the lawn and the women as managers of the household duties, the children, and the gardens. At the time of these authors' publications, city townhouses and domestic servants were the norm for U.S. white middle class women (Hayden, 2003).

Suburban History

Suburbs developed for diverse reasons: as garden communities, as ethnic enclaves, as industrial sites, as sites for affordable housing, as wealthy retreats, and as segregated districts (Wiese, 2004). The concept of suburbia as a rural retreat from the congestion and dangers of urban centers became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century with the publication of *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* by landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing in 1841 and *The American Woman's Home* by Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1869. Both publications, aimed at the white middle class, instructed readers to live tasteful and fashionable suburban lives by paying attention to home and garden décor. Beecher equated godliness with the domestic skills of cooking, cleaning, gardening, and child raising, removed from the stresses of work in the city. *The American Woman's Home*, the precursor of women's home magazines, offered Beecher's innovatively designed houses and a call for the purchase of new commodities to fill them (Hayden, 2002).

Garden Communities

Late nineteenth and early twentieth century garden communities provided early examples of economically and environmentally equitable planned environments. Landscape architects worked with building architects and urban planners to create leafy, suburban enclaves with curved streets and public spaces (Jackson, 1985). These model villages accommodated social interaction across economic levels. They contained multi-use and multifamily dwellings, single-family homes, green spaces, footpaths, commercial venues, access to municipal buildings, and mass transit. In 1935, the elimination of many trolley lines made these suburbs automobile-dependent (Morris, 2005).

Greenbelt Towns

 To shore up the economy during the 1930s Depression, the Roosevelt Administration built three planned greenbelt towns near Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, and Milwaukee (Arnold, 1971). They linked affordable townhouses, single-family homes, and garden apartments to retail and public spaces that included open areas, a community pool, footpaths, a library, a shopping mall, a school, a gas station, and a human-made lake within a green setting. These new suburban towns had a form of governance and a sense of community that were found in small towns and some urban neighborhoods; they acted as models for possible future town planning (Bloom, 2001; Morris, 2005). Hurt by excessive construction costs and conservative attacks from the National Association of Home Builders, Congress scrapped the greenbelt plan following World War II (Hudnut, 2003; Jackson, 1985). Without government directing the process of urban planning, private developers determined the nature of suburban development.

Federal Housing Administration and Veterans Administration Mortgages

After World War II, the federal government, faced with providing housing for ten million returning veterans, helped finance the biggest housing boom in U.S. history. The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill, created the Veteran's Administration (VA) and VA Loan Guaranty Program that, along with the FHA, insured private lenders' long-term low-cost mortgage loans for new single-family home construction. White male veterans benefitted the most from the plan. The government neglected to inform returning women veterans about their benefit eligibility, and laws at the time made it difficult for women to secure mortgage credit (Oakes, 2006). Local municipalities often denied loans to servicemen and women of color (Wiese, 2003).

The FHA set minimum standards for lot size, setback from street, separation from adjacent structures, and house width, ensuring that veterans who wanted to buy many existing homes, apartments, or

attached homes would not be able to buy them (Chow, 2002; Morris, 2005). Veterans had little choice but to buy new homes outside of urban areas. These suburbs lacked amenities and had no access to public transportation, ensuring that their inhabitants would buy cars. Between 1944-1952 the U.S. Federal Government financed four million homes, built mostly by large private developers (Jackson, 1985). New home building became a fixed part of the U.S. economy and has evolved from a private into a global financial enterprise.

Nine million people, six percent of the population, moved to the suburbs in the decade after World War II. In 1956 the Interstate Highway Act led to the eventual creation of 42,000 new highways that cut through city neighborhoods and that increased the flight to suburbia. Suburban neighborhoods were often racially segregated. Subdivisions frequently enforced covenants that prevented the sale of property to African Americans, making the suburbs the symbol of white flight and uniformity (Jackson, 1985; Morris, 2005; Wiese, 2003).

Levittown and the Creation of the Subdivision

Builders, such as Levitt and Sons of Long Island, mass-produced huge tracks of affordable single-family detached homes (Kelly, 1995). Builders marketed the identical interiors, complete with radiant heating, eat-in kitchen, General Electric stove and refrigerator, Bendix washer, venetian blinds, and Admiral television to women and lawns and carports to men (Jackson, 1985; Kelly, 1995). Pervasive public media detailed the perfect lifestyle of the male provider and the female homemaker, based on consumer products. Developers kept housing costs low to facilitate the one-worker family. Community facilities in the forms of shopping malls, playgrounds, and schools focused on women, emphasizing their domestic roles.

The Levitts displayed five models of pre-packaged homes in air-conditioned showrooms reminiscent of car dealerships. According to the Levitts, the U.S. consumers' dream was a 750 square foot single-family, two-bedroom, one-bath Cape Cod bungalow or open ranch style dwelling set in the middle of 6,000 square feet of land

(Kelly, 1995). Although today's average house has 2,000 square feet of living space, it still is sold in a manner similar to that of Levittown (Chow, 2002). Urban theorist Paul Knox (2008) wrote that the spirit of modern consumerism, as epitomized by suburbanization, blossomed in the 1950s and beyond as people engaged in romantic capitalism, constantly seeking pleasure. This U.S. dream of upward mobility and passion for discretionary spending escalated in the late 20th century and was marketed as social capital in the form of upscale malls and lifestyle villages (Knox, 1993).

Development Issues

The suburbs' lack of community due to the absence of communal spaces such as town centers, coffee shops, and municipal centers often created a sense of isolation (Morris, 2005). Developers left overworked municipal governments to make up for the shortfall in public buildings and services in the wake of their residential planning (Hayden, 2003), finding it more profitable to build low-density, highly-priced detached houses than mixed-use buildings and family apartments (Teaford, 2008). Workers often no longer travelled into city centers via public transportation, but spent increasingly more time in their cars commuting from suburb to suburb (Knox, 2008). The 2008 gasoline crisis, the 2009 recession, and concerns about global warming forced a reconsideration of the American lifestyle that has developed over several generations (Kamp, 2009). In 2013, only 20% of households consisted of married couples with children, and a majority of these consisted of two-wage earning parents. The share of households with only one or two people rose to 61% (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Current zoning patterns favor single-family households and do not reflect changing economic and demographic patterns that call for multi-family or communal households in the case of life changes, divorce, retirement, relocation, unemployment, or choice (Hayden, 2002).

Description of the Study

Over the course of two-and-one-half years, within an undergraduate Arts for Elementary Education Majors: Visual Art course that I taught at a university two hours south of Chicago, I engaged teacher candidates (TCs) in a built environment community lesson for the elementary classroom. The project took place over two one-hour and fifty-minute class periods each semester and was meant to be an exercise that could be adapted by elementary educators to any public school environment. Although the project could have been expanded to include community interviews (La Porte, 2011), photo collages, personal maps, and journals (Powell, 2008), design analyses of local buildings and public amenities (Vande Zande, 2010), an exploration of ecological architecture (Muller, 2014), and a critical ecological review of the environment (Graham, 2007), the course time frame and structure at that time did not allow for this expansion. One hundred seventy-eight TCs—164 females and 14 males—participated in the project for the two years and a summer before I instigated a change. Sixty-four additional TCs, 59 females and five males, participated in the revised project. The TCs somewhat reflected the university's demographics: about 84% were under the age of 25; 93% were white, and only one student was not a U.S. national (University Quick Facts, 2014).

I noted that community was a geographic location of streets, homes, businesses, public institutions, as defined by the people and their practices within it and the power structures that shaped it (Levine & Harmon, 1992, as cited in Baxandall & Ewen, 2000; Neperud, 1999). I presented a lecture on housing history that demonstrated how government policies and mass marketing created our contemporary notion of residential housing, particularly suburban housing. I emphasized the evolution of contemporary housing expectations of increased house size and luxury items in comparison to post World War II two-bedroom, one-bath bungalows of Levittown. I provided alternatives to subdivisions with the possibility of planned communities of mixed-use housing. However, I did not engage students in an in-depth discussion about their own experiences with social and economic issues within their own communities before they began community construction.

TCs worked on structures individually, then worked in groups to lay out streets and their facsimile two-dimensional communities on bulletin board paper. TCs reflected on the project within a final questionnaire that asked them to describe the structure they had created, the kind of house they lived in at home, if they lived in a subdivision, if the subdivision had been built in the last 15 years, what the subdivision says about the U.S. lifestyle, if they'd live in a subdivision when they bought their own home, and, to this last question, why or why not? The TCs created communities that were familiar to them and that reflected their lifestyles and concerns. The end results contained very little civic architecture, public transportation, or amenities. One quarter of the students said that they had copied the homes in which they had grown up. Another quarter said that they had created their dream homes. Two-thirds of the TCs had lived in subdivisions, over one-third of which were built in the last fifteen years, revealing the nation's recent rapid housing growth. A little over a quarter of the TCs wrote that subdivisions either expressed our need to conform and to live near people like ourselves or expressed our desire to show off our material wealth, especially through house size and location. Almost three-quarters said that they would like to live in subdivisions when they buy homes, citing neighborliness and the fact that they grew up there as their main reasons for living in such an environment.

Upon reviewing student responses and my teaching practices I realized that I had done little to encourage a collective consciousness among the TCs that would enable them to work collaboratively to share ideas and to discern equitable and ecological community needs. I had relied upon individuals to take it upon themselves to create civic structures, amenities, and public transportation. Although I had valued the ideas of garden communities and greenbelt towns within my lecture, I had done little to enable this planning to happen.

Instead, by having the students work individually and uncritically, I had facilitated the creation of unplanned sprawl. After coming to know the students and their backgrounds, I realized that I needed to actively engage future classes in the process of community planning and reflection so they could put the concepts from the lecture and discussion into practice.

A Revised Lesson

In a revised lesson I made my approach to built environment education more direct. We spent an extra day in whole class discussion. This discussion included in-depth engagements about community housing alternatives and ecology. We talked about changing family structures and lifestyle patterns, multigenerational families, extended families, and non-traditional families. I connected single-family housing to the gender specific nuclear family that was no longer the norm. I linked suburban expansion with commerical development, commodification, and stereotyped advertising. We discussed the physical needs of low-income families, mostly headed by women, and the need for available childcare, transportation, and green space. We recounted the prospect of developing multi-use buildings like those that were being built in the town where the university is located—structures incorporating apartments, offices, and retail spaces built near public transportation—a revitalization effort that included green technology.

TCs elaborated on the economy since the recesssion, the environment, the unsustainability of unbridled growth, and the conflation of well-being with material opulance. I used McFee and Degge's (1980) method of analyzing individual and shared space within a city as a model for inquiry. TCs democratically decided what type of community they wanted to create and where they wanted it to be located. Viewing community as a political and social entity in which participants have voices and agency is crucial to this civic process (Knox, 2008).

I helped each class form community development associations; TCs divided themselves into designated development groups consisting of four to eight persons; some created landfoms, some created civic spaces, some created residential buildings, and others created commerical properties. TCs conducted brainstorming sessions in which they named buildings and forms within each group, using these as prompts for construction. Those who chose to be a part of the landform group also acted as town planners and, with the advice of the other class members, created the town's structure. TCs in each group selected what they would make, often basing their selections on personal preferences and experiences; however, they now made these decisions with social consciousness.

Results

The resulting communities contained planned streets and footpaths, public transportation, childcare centers, residences located near places of work, public housing, apartments, townhouses, green spaces, civic buildings, as well as mixed-used residences and commercial spaces. Some of the commercial spaces reflected the TCs' interests as well as experience with corporate U.S. TCs carefully thought through the placement of community components to ensure that residents of all economic levels would have easy access to amenities and that corporate-owned business would not compete side-by-side with family-owned ones.

A revised questionnaire asked TCs how their class community was similar to or different from their home communities. Almost half of the TCs said that the classroom community was not like their community, since they lived in subdivisions where residences were futher away from commercial or civic amenities. Over one-third said that their class community reminded them of their home communities because it had a variety of civic amenities, businesses, and residential spaces that were in close proximity to each other; many did not mention public transportation, but stated that they lived either in older suburbs or in small towns. Very few students lived in rural areas

that were not like the classroom communities. Lived experience along with guided reflection played a part in how the model classroom communities developed and what was included within them. TCs who lived in communities where resources were more equitably available felt comfortable in playing a larger part in town planning. When asked what they chose to create for the community and why they chose to create it, TCs revealed their diverse tastes and values. One TC wrote, "I made the hospital because I felt it was a vital part for the community." Another TC noted, "I chose to create the town hall because you need some place that handles government issues," while a TC who created a homeless shelter and a retirement home wrote "I didn't want to forget about the smaller percentages of the population." A TC who created a library stated, "I liked to read so I wanted to do this one." Another TC created a childcare and a recreation center. She also reflected the class discussion within her creation:

I chose to create the daycare because every community has children and now a days [sic] with single parent homes, parents need more help. I also created a rec. center because it is nice to take care of your body and people like to go to relieve stress.

The questionnaire asked TCs what they liked about their model communities and what they would do to improve them. TCs approved of their model town's public transportation, layout of streets, and variety of residences, businesses, services, and green space. They liked the town's diversity of amenities and their closeness to living spaces. They could see themselves living there. One TC mentioned that everyone had access to the same resources. TCs liked their model community's public waterfront and green spaces and some wanted to create more residences, parks, playgrounds, and recreational areas. One TC suggested that we create a community recycling center. Another TC would include low-income housing throughout the community. TCs felt that they could repeat the process within their own classrooms.

Conclusion

Without prior in-depth discussion and reflection, TCs created residential communities that lacked public transportation and essential services, possibly mirroring the suburban environments in which they were raised. These communities were middle or upper class representations of many of their own experiences and made little accommodation for low-income persons or families or lifestyles other than those defined by the nuclear family and the traditional U.S. dream. After reflecting on my own pedagogy, I re-envisioned the project and initiated broader class discussion about socio-economic diversity and ecological sustainabilty. We connected residential and community development with commodification to analyze the commercial, cultural, and government forces that have created our landscape. We modeled civic responsibilty by creating a planning council and development groups. A future lesson could analyze TCs' home communities; it could include maps of personal travel routes to places of importance to trace social encounters or interactions. A review of present and past images from home and garden magazines and advertisements could enable TCs to assess and critique economic expectations and racial and gender roles. Analyzing the work of artists like Meg Aubrey, Beth Yarnell, and Michael Salter who critique suburban life would illustrate these issues, as would a review of the visionary community planning of Estudio Teddy Cruz, Charles Goodwin, and Rafael Gómez-Moriana.

Recommendations

Critically questioning materialism and cultural trends within the form of built environment education is a process that can prepare and empower students to become knowledgeable and active citizens. The designed environment impacts students' lives, physically, socially, and economically. Knowledge of suburban history can help students understand that sprawl can be re-envisioned. By opening dialogue about the spaces and places in which we live our lives, students can begin to question and reassess the values that have created them (Guilfoil & Sandler, 1999; Vande Zande, 2011). It is important that

students understand that community planning is civic planning that includes public services, public transportation, amenities, green space, and economically viable private spaces that support social interaction and sustainable lifestyles. A well-planned community integrates housing for the homeless and low-income families and includes provisions for childcare, transportation, and access to needed commodities. When TCs analyzed built environments to understand what people value and how they choose to interact with each other, they engaged in cultural critique that questioned consumerism, ecologically unsustainable growth, race, and gender roles. It is up to pre-service educators to enable future educators to recognize and to value environments that are economically, ecologically, and socially equitable and sustainable, and to rethink the U.S. dream.

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