Course description
Popular culture has long represented American suburbia as a realm defined by a middle-class population, unimaginative architecture, political conservatism, and a social life centered on crass commercialism. Movies, music, literature, and the media teach us that cul-de-sacs, shopping malls, and cars are threats from which to escape, the very seeds of dystopia. Yet suburbia remains the destination of a vast population of Americans who choose to live, work, and play far outside traditional downtowns. Indeed, suburbia’s reality is far more complicated and in flux – politically, economically, and culturally – than we are typically led to believe. In the 2008 election, for example, half of suburban voters chose Barack Obama—the largest suburban Democratic bloc in at least 36 years. Two years later, the Brookings Institution announced that for the first time, more than half of the poor residents in American urban areas lived in suburbs. Such facts suggest changes on the urban periphery, but also a complicated story long in the making.

This seminar will examine the people, spaces, and ideas that made up suburbia over the course of the twentieth century, with a focus on the period following World War II. Our course will begin with an examination of the forces that brought the advent of the modern suburb and the cultural documents that helped to fix its identity. The second unit will focus on complicating this depiction, through close study of alternative perspectives, revisionist narratives, and appreciations of the suburban scene. Our final weeks will turn to the contemporary moment, considering the forms and practices of suburbanization in the most recent decades. We will attempt our own evaluations of such phenomena as the “McMansion,” the “Edge City,” and the SUV. Employing the interpretive frames we have gained throughout the semester, we will reexamine the past, present, and future of the American suburb. To gain first-hand perspective, we will supplement images and texts with visits to some exemplary suburban landscapes.

In “going back to suburbia,” this seminar seeks to revisit the perceptions and realities of the spaces from which so many of us hail. With a historical view of suburbia but an interdisciplinary approach to our agenda, we will reconsider suburban racial, ethnic, economic, and political diversity and reinvestigate the archetypal forms and spaces that constitute this American landscape. We will ask: what is a suburb? Who occupies suburban space? What physical spaces and places characterize the urban fringe? How do we, as historians, understand these spaces, and how have interpretations changed over time?
Readings
The following books are available for purchase at A Room of One’s Own bookstore (315 W. Gorham Street) and should also be readily available new and used online:


We will read much of these titles, as well as scanned readings, journal articles, newspaper articles, and primary sources that I have posted to our course site on Learn@UW and designated below with an asterisk (*). Please always bring each week’s readings with you so we may make reference to them during class.

Assignments and Participation
Each week, one student will be responsible for preparing a brief presentation (around 10 minutes) intended to launch that week’s discussion. This should be a very low-pressure task—I would like you to consider some of the questions that the week’s readings raised for you, introduce them to your classmates, and offer some general reactions to the week’s topic. You may bring in visual materials or other outside sources if you’d like. Weekly, every student will also prepare one very brief discussion question in response to the readings. This should be in the range of 50-100 words, and should reflect a thought or idea raised by the week’s content. This should not be a factual question but rather a historical question. Please send your question to me by Sunday night at 8PM. I invite you to voice your question in class or use it as a basis for directing our discussion, and I may also use some of your questions each week in the same way. Together, your presentations and questions will constitute 15% of your grade for the course.

In addition, I expect everyone to read carefully and participate generously in our weekly discussion. As our course is a small seminar, it provides a unique opportunity to listen to one another’s interpretations of historical material, learn from each other’s perspectives, and teach each other. Because participation is so crucial to a seminar, it represents a substantial portion of your grade (30%), but will be calculated not based simply on frequency or originality of your comments, but on your general involvement and engagement with the course each week. In other words, in the community of our seminar, all citizens should be good neighbors who listen well, participate freely, and create a welcoming environment for their peers. This means that mobile phones, laptops, and other distractions will need to remain off during class time. Also due to the nature of a seminar, attendance is mandatory. Unexcused absences will be penalized with a deduction of 4% of your participation grade for each class missed. If you do need to miss class for an acceptable reason (team travel, family emergency), please let me know ahead of time and I will ask you to write a response paper of modest length (2 pages) in reaction to that week’s
readings. Absences will only be excused after the fact in cases of documented illness or emergency.

Students will also complete three writing assignments throughout the course. First, students will be asked to write an extended response/review (3-5 pages) of a historical or critical reading from Unit I. This will be due in class on October 21 and will be worth 12% of your grade. Second, students will be asked to write an “appreciation” or a critique of a suburban type, place, or phenomenon, incorporating course readings, additional research, field observations, visual analysis, and any other methods that will enrich the task (4-6 pages). Students should feel free to approach this project as creatively as they like, in format, methodology, and topic. This will be due in class on November 18 and will be worth 18% of your grade. For the final paper, students will write a research paper of modest length (10-12 pages) situating one’s own or one’s family’s story in the broader history of suburbanization in the latter half of the 20th century; examining a cultural, historical, or theoretical topic addressed in class; or investigating a specific suburban place. A one-page paper proposal will be due to me by email on November 23 (I will return comments in class on November 25). The final paper will be due in my mailbox on December 16 and will be worth 25% of your grade. I will provide further details about each assignment in class and there will be opportunities to discuss topics and progress in class as well. Late papers will be penalized one grade increment for each day past the deadline (i.e. an A- becomes a B+ if turned in one day late, and so on).

**Academic Responsibility**

As scholars-in-training, you will be held and must hold yourselves to the highest standards of honesty. This means that all work must be original, no exceptions, and all of your writing must be properly cited and attributed. The penalties for plagiarism are severe and can include failure or expulsion. If you ever feel pressure that is making it difficult for you to complete your work on time, please let me know immediately. There is simply no excuse for academic dishonesty. The university’s policies on academic conduct can be found here: [http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html](http://students.wisc.edu/saja/misconduct/UWS14.html)

If you ever have any questions about proper citation or what constitutes plagiarism, please consult one of the many resources available to you, including me, guides such as *The Chicago Manual of Style*, and the university’s Writer’s Handbook: [http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html](http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/QPA_plagiarism.html)

**Communication**

I look forward to teaching and learning from you this semester. I am available as a resource to you and hope you won’t hesitate to ask questions about readings, assignments, our course in general, history in general, or any other ideas that interest you. I have scheduled drop-in office hours on Monday, 3-5 PM and invite you to stop by, but can meet at other times if you are unable to attend then. Please email me to schedule an appointment, and also feel free to email with other questions that arise throughout the semester. I will reply as quickly as I am able.
Course Schedule

Unit I: Foundations and Critique
September 9
Introduction: What is a Suburb?

September 16
Early Suburbs

September 23
The Mass-Produced Postwar Suburb
Kenneth Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier: 190-218, 231-245.

September 30
Spaces of Exclusion
Kenneth Jackson, Crabgrass Frontier, 219-230.

October 7
New Political Landscapes
Primary sources on California Proposition 13 (a 1978 measure, pushed by suburbanites, that sought to limit property taxes in the state).

October 14
Little Boxes, Organization Men: Cultural Critiques
*Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (1963), 1-32.
*William H. Whyte, Jr., The Organization Man (1956), 3-14, 312-330.

October 21
Sprawl! Physical Critiques
*Peter Blake, God’s Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America’s Landscape (1979): read introduction (scanned) and peruse photographs (in copy on reserve).
Unit II: Reassessment and Revision

October 28
Holy Lands

November 4
Just Little Boxes?
*Field Trip: University Hill Farms; Hilldale Shopping Center (with Daina Penkiunas)*

November 11
In the Mall, On the Road
Deadmalls (website: [www.deadmalls.com](http://www.deadmalls.com)): peruse and read about malls in or near your hometown, malls you have been to, or just random “dead” malls.
Watch Clips:
*The Blues Brothers* (1980) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTRXnuoK1ss](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTRXnuoK1ss)

November 18
Finding Places of Their Own

Unit III: The Contemporary Scene

November 25
New Forms

**December 2**  
**Nueva Vida/New Life, New Residents**  

**December 9**  
**Future Challenges and Future Opportunities**  