

**History 500**  
**Going Back to Suburbia: The History of the American Suburb**  
**Fall 2013**  
**Monday 11AM-1PM**  
**5245 Mosse Humanities Building**

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**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:

- Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Knopf, 2003. (ISBN: 0375707379)
- Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. (ISBN: 0195049837)
- McGirr, Lisa. *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. (ISBN: 0691096112)
- Waldie, D.J. *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1996. (ISBN: 0393327280)
- Wiese, Andrew. *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. (ISBN: 0226896250)

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 20<sup>th</sup> 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>

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?**

Mary Erpenbach, "The Real Suburbs of Dane County," *Madison*, June 2013.

#### **September 16**

##### **Early Suburbs**

Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985): 12-102, 116-137, 172-189.

#### **September 23**

##### **The Mass-Produced Postwar Suburb**

\*Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth: 1820-2000* (2004): 128-153.

Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*: 190-218, 231-245.

#### **September 30**

##### **Spaces of Exclusion**

Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 219-230.

Lizabeth Cohen, "Residence: Inequality in Mass Suburbia," in *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (2003): 194-256.

\*Thomas J. Sugrue, "Jim Crow's Last Stand: The Struggle to Integrate Levittown," in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*, ed. Dianne Harris (2010): 175-199.

#### **October 7**

##### **New Political Landscapes**

Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (2002): 3-110.

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.

\*John Cheever, "The Swimmer" (1964).

#### **October 21**

##### **Sprawl! Physical Critiques**

\*Malvina Reynolds, "Little Boxes" (song), 1962.

\*Peter Blake, *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape* (1979): read introduction (scanned) and peruse photographs (in copy on reserve).

\*Adam Rome, *Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* (2001): 87-152.

\*Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck, *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream* (2000): ix-xiv, 1-20

## **Unit II: Reassessment and Revision**

**October 28**

### **Holy Lands**

D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land* (1996): entire book (it's a fast read).

\*Bill Griffith, "Levittown, My Levittown," in *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*: 60-66.

\*Robert Bruegmann, "Introduction," in *Sprawl: A Compact History* (2005): 1-13.

**November 4**

### **Just Little Boxes?**

*Field Trip: University Hill Farms; Hilldale Shopping Center (with Daina Penkiunas)*

\*Daina Penkiunas, "University Hill Farms: A Project for Modern Living," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Autumn 2005: 16-27.

\*Paul Adamson and Marty Arbunich, *Eichler: Modernism Rebuilds the American Dream* (2002): 20-42.

**November 11**

### **In the Mall, On the Road**

Lizabeth Cohen, "Commerce: Reconfiguring Community Marketplaces," in *A Consumers' Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*: 257-289.

\*Margaret Crawford, "The World in a Shopping Mall," in *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space*, ed. Michael Sorkin (1992): 3-30.

\*Reyner Banham, "Ecology IV: Autopia," in *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971): 195-204.

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:

*Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H2DeBG7pAXU>

*The Blues Brothers* (1980) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTRXnuoK1ss>

**November 18**

### **Finding Places of Their Own**

Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (2004): 110-163.

\*Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965*: 215-271.

## **Unit III: The Contemporary Scene**

**November 25**

### **New Forms**

\*Joel Garreau, *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* (1992): xix-15, 441-460.

\*Dolores Hayden, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (2004): selections.

\*Lisa W. Foderaro, "In Suburbs, They're Cracking Down on the Joneses," *New York Times*, 19 March 2001.

\*Fred A. Bernstein, "Are McMansions Going Out of Style?" *New York Times*, 2 October 2005.

\*"The McMansion Wars," *New York Times*, 23 July 2006.

\*Dan Zegart, "Living Larger, and Drawing Fire," *New York Times*, 20 May 2007.

## **December 2**

### **Nueva Vida/New Life, New Residents**

Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own*: 255-292.

\*Wei Li, "Building Ethnoburbia: The Emergence and Manifestation of the Chinese Ethnoburb in Los Angeles' San Gabriel Valley," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 2, no. 1 (Feb. 1999): 1-28.

\*Audrey Singer, "The New Geography of United States Immigration," Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, July 2009.

\*Nick Miroff, "Bringing Nueva Vida to Aging Strip Malls," *Washington Post*, 19 December 2006.

\*Tara Bahrapour, "Immigrants Gather at a Starbucks in Northern Virginia for a Taste of Home," *Washington Post*, 25 June 2011.

## **December 9**

### **Future Challenges and Future Opportunities**

\*Elizabeth Kneebone and Emily Garr, "The Suburbanization of Poverty: Trends in Metropolitan America, 2000 to 2008," Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program, January 2010.

\*Elizabeth Kneebone and Alan Berube, "Cul-de-Sac Poverty," *New York Times*, 20 May 2013.

\*Sabrina Tavernise, "Outside Cleveland, Snapshots of Poverty's Surge in the Suburbs," *New York Times*, 24 October 2011.

\*Christopher B. Leinberger, "The Next Slum," *Atlantic*, March 2008.

\*Patricia Lee Brown, "Animal McMansion: Students Trade Dorm for Suburban Luxury," *New York Times*, 12 November 2011.