

Global Suburbia

Meditations on the World of the 'Burbs

August 30 to November 30, 2008

Chris Ballantyne • Amy Bennett • Mark Bennett • Center for Land Use Interpretation
Goetz Diergarten • Barbara Gallucci • Fritz Haeg • Michael Barton Miller
Sarah McCoubrey • Matthew Moore • Hiro Sakaguchi • David Schafer • Mark Shetabi
Lee Stoetzel • Eva Struble • Thomas Wrede Curated by Sue Spaid

The idea to assemble artworks addressing the suburbs reflects Abington Art Center's interest to consider and rethink the identities of its neighboring communities, especially since planners the world over are currently restaging the suburbs. As computer/telecom technologies make working from home increasingly feasible, transportation costs soar, and environmental concerns such as air pollution and global warming gain currency, more people than ever will not only live in the suburbs, but will opt to work (and play) locally as well. This new reality signals an urgent need to invigorate the 'burbs, so as to maximize their cultural, social, environmental, and political potential in ways that meaningfully reflect inhabitants' aspirations. Even though ecologists consider cities more environmentally sound, it would be ridiculous request everyone to move back to the city. Instead, suburbanites can create innovative ways to render suburbia no less culturally desirable or ecologically resourceful than today's cities. This will have the additional impact of creating town identities that reflect environmental friendliness, cultural institutions, and ethnic diversity. In this election season, the presidential candidates are asking us to "re-dream" the American dream, to assess the nation's global impact and reconsider its values, so as to reroute its potential. "Global Suburbia" aims to partake in this national discussion by presenting paintings, drawings, photographs, and sculptures that raise awareness of the suburbs as a global phenomena, while facilitating a public forum that enables suburbanites to re-imagine the potential of their 'burbs.

Jenkintown is a town in its own right (settled in 1697 and incorporated in 1874), yet city slickers often mistakenly view it as just another Philadelphia bedroom community, even though it is far denser than typical sub-divisions. Generally speaking, suburbs are residential communities that crop up around cities to accommodate city workers looking for cheaper living spaces, newer amenities, personal safety, and quality public schools. Victoria Park, the first ever suburb, began as a gated community outside Manchester, England. The first U.S. suburb came 20 years



Eva Struble, *22@ Development*, 2008.

later when Llewellyn Park in West Orange, NJ was built 12 miles from New York City.¹ Despite the stereotypes perpetuated by television series and teen movies, suburbs are diverse in scope and services. Dolores Hayden's 2003 book *Building Suburbia, Green Fields and Urban Growth* traces the suburbs' seven-stage development from the early 19th Century, when wealthy urbanites found solace in "borderlands" to the more recent commercial exploitation of the nation's "rural fringe."² Wyncote's Victorian "painted ladies" date from the era when prosperous Philadelphians sought refuge to escape the city's heat, poor air quality, and contagions such as tuberculosis or yellow fever. As homeowners and commercial venues seize fresh spots on the town's outskirts, suburbanization has decentralized downtowns across the nation, evaporating many small towns into ghost towns by creating what William Dobriner dubs "reluctant suburbs."³ We can credit Jenkintown's creative entrepreneurs for preventing our hub from disappearing, as developers push demand to the hinterlands.

The existential questions of who we are and what we are, characteristically plague people dwelling in cookie-cutter sub-divisions, where homes appear indistinguishable, streets have banal names, residents gain solidarity from school rivalries, and shopping malls furnish one's cultural life. Even if life in your town is a far a cry from this grim characterization, you should still question your identity and ask yourself what would make your town more livable. We must also wonder why hundreds of homogenous suburbs have sprouted up globally, especially since the model of suburbs stressing city limits and natural resources has not been without ominous consequences.⁴ As U.S.

cities adopt plans to preserve open space and enact principles of “smart growth,” the suburbs of global cities are expanding at record rates. None of the world’s 28 largest suburbs (>800,000 people) are in the U.S.⁵ So long as U.S. suburbs are a “living laboratory for the world,” we owe it to our globalized futures to erect sustainable villages worthy of emulation. Consider this absurdity: “Outside Beijing and Shanghai, tract-home developments designed to mimic Spanish or Italian architecture have all-American names: Yosemite and Napa Valley.”⁶ Alternatively, enlightened planners are discovering ways to avoid the “sprawling, cookie-cutter subdivisions” in favor of “sustainable communities that will not deplete natural resources.” Even China is building Dongtan, the world’s first sustainable city, which houses 50,000 people, yet also bans cars, grows its own food, recycles everything, and creates its own energy.⁷

In light of the suburb’s next stage, whereby people spend more time locally, Abington Art Center Executive Director Laura Burnham’s 2006 essay, “Creating Creative Assets for the Suburbs” recommends that communities develop cultural assets in ways that engage inhabitants in creative endeavors that augment their existing lifestyles. She remarks:

Within the suburban landscape are potential physical assets suitable for cultural economic development, not unlike those employed in urban settings. The rural fringe and remnants of borderland estates harbor landscapes and buildings of historic and architectural value. ...While amassing the resources to acquire and transform these assets into viable spaces is significant, the infrastructure needs for a cultural strategy are just as critical. They go beyond the basics of sewer, electricity and roads that are readily accessible to include a distribution system of connectivity, accessibility and authenticity-- conditions that are often not included in plans for the suburbs.⁸

In reading this, one can already recognize the role that Abington Art Center plays in transforming a borderland estate into a local site that supplies its community social opportunities for connection and furthers its identity by providing it authentic activities in accessible venues, which cannot be replicated elsewhere.

The Suburb’s Cultural Impact

As noted above, communities the world around are

increasingly emulating suburbia. This allure is not surprising, given the inordinate number of television shows set in the ‘burbs, unwittingly broadcasting yesteryear’s American dream to billions of vulnerable viewers. The URL www.burbia.com/node/1504 happily lists the top twelve T.V. shows “centered in suburbia” and is currently taking requests for its next “co-equal TV series list.”⁹ Although neither “The Dick Van Dyke Show” nor the “Brady Bunch” made their first list, Mark Bennett’s drawings of floor plans for these television families’ homes, *Home of Rob and Laura Petrie* and *Home of Mike and Carol Brady* (both 1997), were specifically selected, since their lifestyles effectively played character roles in early T.V. shows bent on glamorizing suburban properties (lawns, sleek décor, two-car garages, T.V. rooms, driveways, breakfast nooks, surrounded by neighbors but not trees).

Not surprisingly, America’s most iconic suburb, Levittown (Long Island, New York) has identically-named replicas in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Puerto Rico. Between 1947 and 1951, 17,000 families moved into indistinguishable homes in Levittown, New York. In 2002, Barbara Gallucci documented dozens of homes known as the *Ranch ‘50* for *Nest* magazine. Each *Ranch 50* offered a built-in TV wall, whose Admiral T.V. inevitably broke down, inspiring plentiful renovations and remodels. Amazingly, people turned originally identical dens into extremely varied

spaces, whose portraits are assembled in a book published by Palm Press.

Lee Stuetzel’s *McMansions*, photos of homes built using post-consumer fast-food waste (re-cycled foodstuff such as crumbled burgers, containers, lids, straws, sauce packets, and chicken bits) reiterate the ever-growing appetite for ever-more super-sized quarters. Modeled after Volkswagen’s beloved T2 Kombi Van (1968-1979), Stuetzel’s *VW Bus* (2007) immediately evokes family road trips to escape suburbia or surprise encounters with

camping hippies performing counter-cultural rituals. Introduced in 1950, the VW Van became synonymous with the growth of the suburb, paving the way for the suburban fleet: station wagons, Suburban vans, minivans and eventually SUVs.

The Suburb’s Environmental Impact

While most environmentalists consider densely-packed cities greener than suburbs, it’s difficult to measure which is actually more or less environmentally friendly, especially since cities beget suburbs. So long as commuters commute, cities engender commuter pollution. “Calculated by the square foot, New York City generates more greenhouse



Lee Stuetzel, *VW Bus*, 2007.

gases, uses more energy, produces more solid waste than most other American regions of comparable size... [However,] if you plotted the same negative impacts by resident or by household," Manhattan would look incredibly green.¹⁰

Analogous setbacks accompany each suburban asset. Even communities that have an abundant amount of trees that absorb Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) and release oxygen, typically have vast spans of "mandatory" impervious surfaces (roads, parking lots, roofs, driveways, and playgrounds) that make stormwater runoff and soil erosion environmental hazards. Suburban buildings don't warm the surrounding air temperature, but they also don't absorb heating and cooling the way densely-packed buildings do. Such energy efficiency enables city dwellers to consume half as much electricity per person as suburbanites (power plants produce 40% of CO₂ emissions).¹¹ Suburban lawns absorb 33% of all drinking water, while synthetic fertilizers leach into nearby watersheds, inevitably causing algal blooms that produce "dead zones".¹² Suburbia's high-speed connector roads, designed to circumvent suburbs rather than navigate them, foster traffic congestion, which intensifies greenhouse emissions (cars and trucks contribute 33% of CO₂ emissions, while creating the fuels (oil and electricity) that power cars generates methane, which traps 20 times more heat than CO₂). Deforestation to build homes is responsible for another 20-25% of CO₂ emissions.

In addition to synthetic fertilizers' causing "dead zones," aquatic spots where there is not enough oxygen to support flora or fauna, the widespread use of nitrogen-based fertilizers on lawns, automobile exhausts and sewage treatment plants trap noxious Nitrous-Oxide (N₂O) fumes in the atmosphere for 100 years. Elizabeth Kolbert's fascinating recent *New Yorker* article, "Turf War" points out how "unsafe" American lawns actually are. She quotes Ted Steinberg, a professor of history at Case Western Reserve University, who described lawns as "a nationwide chemical experiment with homeowners as the guinea pigs" in *American Green: The Obsessive Quest for the Perfect Lawn* (2006). Were suburbanites to restore biodiversity by planting native-species corridors, animal habitat would be restored and water and fertilizer consumption would be significantly reduced. Given the suburbs' uneven environmental scorecard, the deep potential for eco-sensitive 'burbs proposes a community-building strategy.

Settlement and *Settlement with a Road* (both 2005), Thomas Wrede's digital images of emergent sub-divisions abutting

snowy peaks or sand dunes suggest that developers could herd people anywhere, despite the absence of essential infrastructure or a locale's noticeable desolation. By contrast, Chris Ballantyne's drawings sometimes erase houses, focusing instead on suburban infrastructure such as culverts, dug holes, fences, and hideouts like bunkers and hunting blinds that landscape paintings typically neglect. Like Wrede's images, Ballantyne's work forewarns nature's incursion on civilization as a result of man's invading nature.



Matthew Moore, *Rotations: Moore Estates: 2*, 2005-2006.

In 2001, Arizona native Matthew Moore learned that developers eager to build 250 new homes had purchased 400 acres of his family's citrus farm. Acquiring the blueprint for the new sub-division, Moore and his dad planted the neighborhood at one-third scale on remaining farmland, using sorghum for the houses and black-bearded wheat for the roads. His aerial documentations of

this project at every stage, *Rotations: Moore Estates* (2005-2006), depict their planting sorghum homes in July, homes sprouting in September, their seeding roads in November, homes shooting up the next June, and end with their harvesting boulevards of wheat the following August. The gang of researchers known as the Center for Land Use Interpretation has published two books that explore the suburbs' impact on the environment: *Up River: Man-Made Sitings of Interest on the Hudson from the Battery to Troy* (2008) and *Pavement Paradise: American Parking Spaces* (2007).

The Suburb's Social Impact

Ballantyne's *Untitled (Split mobile home)*, (2003) and *Untitled (Isolationist)*, (2003) both suggest the non-urban setting's remoteness. Absent any human interactions, Amy Bennett's painting *We Can Never Go Home Again* (2006) also evokes the sense of loneliness and despair made familiar by Edward Hopper's paintings typically framed in urban settings. Rarely discussed are the "suburban blues," the severe depression afflicting the high-school age children of affluent parents (earn more than \$120,000). As compared to inner-city kids, suburban teens smoke cigarettes more, drink more, do more drugs, and have higher rates of depression. In fact, affluent suburban girls are three times more likely than average teen girls to report clinical depression. Among upper-middle class suburban kids, alcohol and drug use directly correlate with depression and anxiety.¹³ One explanation centers around achievement pressures and the fact that suburban kids' parents have greater professional demands, leaving kids shuttling between various after-school activities. Dinner with one parent is seen as a big deal. Michael B. Miller's hand-rendered *Stoned* (2007), inspired by suburban kids'

posting “shamings” on the Internet that feature friends passed-out drunk, draws attention to this neglected condition.

David Schafer’s sound installations similarly walk us down memory lane, as we recall afternoons spent listening to music or watching T.V. in “remodeled” basements or family rooms, whose drop ceiling was the imprimatur of cool. Emanating from the wooden speaker box is his composition made by over-laying drum solos by Cream, Iron Butterfly, and Deep Purple. Floating through speakers attached to suspended ceiling tiles is music from Schafer’s CDs: *Times Ten Resequenced With Two Second Gap X10R.1* (47:35) and *Times Ten Resequenced With Variable Gap X10R.2* (58:41) (also playable at www.ubu.com/sound/Schafer.html). Inspired by the Muzak Corporation’s forte of “lobotomizing” songs, he deliberately selected ten songs from composers affiliated with Muzak. By superimposing ten simulated Ascending Curves, a tactic Muzak actually originated, he created a far more dynamic sound. All this creates the disorienting effect that bubbles beneath suburb’s calm veneer.

Feats of neighborly goodwill and grit, Fritz Haeg’s *Edible Estates* (since 2005) replace suburban lawns with edible front yards, exciting anti-lawn activists like Michael Pollan and foodies like Alice Waters, while enervating environmentalists and xeriscapists seeking ways to eliminate pointless water and fertilizer bills. *Edible Estates #2* (2006) features before and after images of a Lakeside, California suburban dwelling’s environmental makeover. A native of the Tokyo suburb Chiba, Hiro Sakaguchi is currently a Philadelphia resident whose drawings and paintings consistently contrast these divergent communities. Working from photographs, memory, and imagination, Sakaguchi creates realist-inspired fantastical paintings. *Chiba-Phila* (2006) literally situates one neighborhood over a flipped version of the other, suggesting either that they’re total opposites or spinning in different orbits. *Future Home Town* (2004) projects what he predicts a busy intersection from his hometown will look like in the future. *Humvee Cruiser* forecasts suburbanites transforming a stretch Humvee into a community clubhouse, replete with pools and lounge chairs. No artist has studied mall circulation more than Miller. His drawings of hundreds of people navigating the spaces of shopping malls that inhabit Thailand, Canada, and the U.S. record the circulation patterns of earnest shoppers, searching for new products and conviviality among shoppers in the absence of particular stores.

The Suburb’s Political Impact

The most obvious political impact is the displacement of the otherwise non-urban poor as wealthy residents encroach upon outlying territories, increasing property prices and driving up rents, engendering gentrification and pushing the non-urban poor further into the hinterland. *22@Development* (2008), Eva Struble’s drawing installation addresses the way Romani gypsies who populate Poble

Nou, a one-time Barcelona suburb, are being edged out as this beachfront neighborhood undergoes extreme development. Struble describes this bizarre affair as follows: “I pass a group of Romani in one recently dozed lot, still sitting there even as their apartments are gone, around a plastic table, with a small fire burning, everyone seemingly entertained with beers and a radio blasting music. Months ago, walking down the street, a dirt road caught my attention, with walls built of old appliances and others draped in blankets of vines, smoke coming from a fire behind, and children’s clothes hung to dry, next to another razed lot with stacked dumpsters.”¹⁴ Eye witnesses posted in any emerging global suburbia would no doubt encounter similar dilemmas.

The last few decades of excessive wealth hastened developers’ commercialization of otherwise public land preserves into beachfront properties. Götz Diergarten’s *Untitled (Ravenoville)*, (2000), 29 photographs of contiguous beach bungalows situated along the Normandy coast, demonstrate money’s capacity to alter cherished attitudes towards access to public space. These days, no one doubts oil’s role as a powerful currency. A diorama-like sculpture, Mark Shetabi’s *The Rapture* (2005) cleverly disguises the clandestine shenanigans of powerless evildoers, living and working inside a gas station.

Conclusion

Although this essay might seem unusually pointed for an exhibition essay, we rather expect spectators to tender multiple, if not contradictory, interpretations of these works. Of all the artists here, only Fritz Haeg and Center for Land Use Interpretation could be considered activist artists, though CLUI’s approach is rather indirect, if not deadpan. As Socrates famously remarked, the unexamined life is not worth living.

What are the suburbs? Is this the banal cookie-cutter model, an industrially standardized lifestyle, or “super-cool” serial living? What is their environmental impact? What are their cultural contributions? Are suburbs really the safe havens they pretend to be? Or has Prozac Nation become synonymous with the ‘burbs?

It is in this vein that we broach the topic of suburbia. Most of us are products of this lifestyle, whether by upbringing or television routines. Our main goal is to get inhabitants to envision the future and keep on asking...



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enjoy join support volunteer



David Schafer



Thomas Wrede



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Michael Barton Miller



Amy Bennett



Barbara Gallucci



Hiro Sakaguchi

Mark Shetabi



Goetz Diergarten



Sarah McCoubrey



Mark Bennett

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¹ "Modern Suburbia not just in America anymore" from www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-04-15-suburbia_N.htm.

² The seven stages that Dolores Hayden outlines are as follows: 1) Borderlands (1820) offered isolated retreats to cleaner air and water. 2) Picturesque Enclaves (1850) featured country cottages with gardens and neighbors. 3) Streetcar Buildouts (1870), such as Philadelphia's Main Line, engendered densely settled communities built along streetcar routes. 4) Mail order & Self-built Suburbs (1910) spawned chaotic communities of unregulated, mass-produced homes. 5) Encouraged by FHA and VA home loans, Sitcom Suburbs (Post WWII), such as Bucks County's Levittown, sprouted 10 million new homes between 1946 and 1953. 6) Edge Nodes (1960), inspired by commercial construction tax incentives and the 1956 Interstate Highway Act, engendered the cheaply constructed shopping complexes to service the 'burbs. 7) The Rural Fringe (1980) has gobbled up farmland, randomly distributing edge nodes and sub-divisions that rarely connect to existing infra-structure, spending resources unnecessarily to construct it.

Today's rural fringes cover more square miles than central cities, older suburbs and edge nodes combined (Hayden, p. 181).

³ Hayden, p. 188.

⁴ www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-04-15-suburbia_N.htm.

⁵ Of the world's 28 largest suburbs, 3 are in Indonesia, 4 are in Mexico, 4 are in Japan, 5 are in Brazil, 6 are in India, 1 is in the Philippines, 4 are in S. Korea, and 1 is in Egypt from www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_suburbs_by_population

⁶ www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-04-15-suburbia_N.htm

⁷ www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-04-15-suburbia_N.htm

⁸ Burnham, p. 41-42.

⁹ "Top 12 TV Series Centered in Suburbia" from www.burbia.com/node/1504.

¹⁰ "New York City is the Greenest City in America" from <http://www.walkablestreets.com/manhattan.htm>

¹¹ "Causes of Global Warming" from www.ecobridge.org/content/g_cse.htm

¹² "Turf War" from http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2008/07/21/080721crbo_books_kolbert?currentPage=all

¹³ "Teens: Suburban Blues" from www.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20050322-000002.html

¹⁴ Eva Struble, "Poble Nou" June 2008.

Related Suburbia Resources

Rachel Carson *Silent Spring* (New York City: Houghton Mifflin, 1962)

Fritz Haeg, *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn* (New York City, Metropolis Books, 2008)

www.barbaragallucci.com

www.clui.org

www.davidschafer.org

www.fritzhaeg.com

www.leestoetzel.com

www.urbanplough.com

www.westcollection.org

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suburb>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Environmental_issues_in_New_York_City

Dolores Hayden *Building Suburbia, Green Fields and Urban Growth: 1820-2000* (New York City: Pantheon Books, 2003)

Joel Kotkin, "Suburban Culture" from

www.opinionjournal.com/la/?id=110006175

Joel Kotkin, "Rule, Suburbia" from

www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A364-2005Feb5.html

Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York City: Grove/Atlantic, 1991)

"Interview with Mark Bennett" from

<http://www.tvland.com/video/index.jhtml?bcpid=192878498&bclid=196439507&bctid=196439448>

Special Thanks to:
All of the artists, The West Collection, Bruce Humphries, Roxana Hojat, Jen Koch, Molly Morlock, Ariana Katz, Jay Viola and Montgomery County Juvenile Probation, Laura Burnham, Adam Cole and the entire Art Center Staff.



Abington Art Center receives operating support from the William Penn Foundation, the Philadelphia Cultural Leadership Program of The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the Independence Foundation, the Beneficia Foundation, the Barra Foundation and the Members of Abington Art Center.

GALLERY HOURS: Tuesdays to Fridays 10am-5pm; Thursdays to 7pm; Saturdays & Sundays 10am-3pm