

## **The Suburbs: The New American Dream (1953)**

### **Harry Henderson (b. 1914)**

Between 1945 and 1960, 40 million Americans migrated from the cities to the suburbs. Spurred by government programs designed to encourage home ownership, developers created whole new communities. Many developments, such as those by builder William Levitt, consisted of row upon row of nearly identical mass-produced homes. In the following viewpoint, journalist Harry Henderson examines the lives of people living in these "Levittowns" and other suburban areas. The article, first published in Harper's Magazine in November 1953, offers a mixed but generally positive portrayal of American suburbia.

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What attractions do the new suburbs have for the people living in them, according to Henderson? What generalizations does he make about the economic and social situation of these suburban residents? What does he find most appealing about this form of suburban life?

Since World War II, whole new towns and small cities, consisting of acres of near-identical Cape Cod and ranch-type houses, have been bulldozed into existence on the outskirts of America's major cities. Begun as "veterans' housing," and still commonly called "projects," these new communities differ radically from the older urban areas whose slow, cumulative growth depended on rivers and railroads, raw materials or markets, industries and available labor. They also differ from the older suburbs which were built around existing villages. These new communities are of necessity built on open farmland—to house people quickly, cheaply, and profitably. They reflect not only the increased number of young American families, but an enormous expansion of the middle class via the easy credit extended to veterans.

The best known of these communities, Levittown, Long Island [New York], is also the largest; its population is now estimated at 70,000. Lakewood, near Long Beach in the Los Angeles area, is a close second. Park Forest, some thirty miles south of Chicago—which has significant qualitative differences from the others, in that its social character was as conscientiously planned as its physical layout—now has 20,000 people and will have 30,000 when completed. No one knows exactly how many of these postwar communities exist in all. The Federal Home and Housing Authority, which insured mortgages for nearly all the houses, has no records in terms of communities or even large developments. However, one can safely assume that their combined population totals several million people.

These communities have none of the long-festering social problems of older towns, such as slums, crowded streets, vacant lots that are both neighborhood dumps and playgrounds, or sagging, neon-fronted business districts that sprawl in all directions. Instead everything is new. Dangerous traffic intersections are almost unknown. Grassy play areas abound. Shops are centrally located and under one roof, at least theoretically, with adjacent off-street parking.

Socially, these communities have neither history, tradition, nor established structure—no inherited customs, institutions, "socially important" families, or "big houses." Everybody lives in a "good neighborhood"; there is, to use that classic American euphemism, no "wrong side of the tracks." Outwardly, there are neither rich nor poor, and initially there were no older people, teen-agers, in-laws, family doctors, "big shots," churches, organizations, schools, or local governments. Since the builder required a large cheap site, the mass-produced suburbs are usually located at the extreme edge of the commuting radius. This means they are economically dependent on the big city, without local industry to provide employment and share tax burdens.

### **Studying the Suburbs**

Three years ago I began a series of extensive visits to these new communities to learn what effect this kind of housing and social organization has on people. I was particularly interested in what customs developed, what groups became important, what attitudes and ways of handling problems were created. I wanted to know, for instance, how people made friends, how you became a "big shot," and how life in these towns differed from that of our older towns.

The notes below are an attempt to describe what I found out, a reporter's report on a new generation's version of the "American way." They are based on interviews and my own observations in six such communities, including Levittown and Park Forest. While each community is different, certain common patterns exist, although their strength varies in accordance with two factors: screening and size.

Screening—or the selection of people by fixed criteria—obviously affects the economic, social, and cultural life. Where screening is based on something more than the ability to make a down payment, the population tends to become a narrow, specialized, upper stratum of the middle class. Size affects the community in another way. The construction of fifty or a hundred new homes on a common plot immediately beside a suburb of 5,000 merely results in their becoming part of that community, adopting its social structure. But when the number of new homes is many times larger than the old, both problems, and new ways of living emerge with greater force. (However, even in small projects some new patterns are present.)

These notes are, of course, subjective and as such liable to personal distortion. Valid statistical data—because of the short time people stay put in these towns, plus a host of other factors—are simply beyond the reach of one man. But, for whatever they are worth, here they are.

### **Companionship**

At first glance, regardless of variations in trim, color, and position of the houses, they seem monotonous; nothing rises above two stories, there are no full-grown trees, and the horizon is an endless picket fence of telephone poles and television aerials. (The mass builder seeks flat land because it cuts his construction costs.)

However one may feel about it aesthetically, this puts the emphasis on people and their activities. One rarely hears complaints about the identical character of the houses. "You don't feel it when you live here," most people say. One mother, a Midwestern college graduate with two children, told me: "We're not peas in a pod. I thought it would be like that, especially because incomes are nearly the same. But it's amazing how

different and varied people are, likes and dislikes, attitude and wants. I never really knew what people were like until I came here."

Since no one can acquire prestige through an imposing house, or inherited position, activity—the participation in community or group affairs—becomes the basis of prestige. In addition, it is the quickest way to meet people and make friends. In communities of strangers, where everybody realizes his need for companionship, the first year is apt to witness almost frantic participation in all lands of activities. Later, as friends are made, this tapers off somewhat.

The standardized house also creates an emphasis on interior decorating. Most people try hard to achieve "something different." In hundreds of houses I never saw two interiors that matched—and I saw my first tiger-striped wallpaper. (The only item that is endlessly repeated is a brass skillet hung on a red brick wall.) Yet two styles predominate: Early American and Modern. What is rarely seen, except in homes of older-than-average people, is a family heirloom.

Taste levels are high. My interviews with wives revealed that their models and ideas came primarily from pictures of rooms in national magazines. Nobody copies an entire room, but they take different items from different pictures. At first most women said, "Well, moving into a new house, you want everything new." Later some altered this explanation, saying, "Nearly everybody is new. ... I mean, they are newly married and new to the community. They don't feel too certain about things, especially moving into a place where everyone is a stranger. If you've seen something in a magazine—well, people will nearly always like it." So many times were remarks of this character repeated that I concluded that what many sought in their furniture was a kind of "approval insurance."

Asked whom they missed most, women usually replied, "My mother." Men's answers were scattered, apt to be old friends, neighbors, relatives. Many women said; "I wish there was some place close by to walk to, like the candy store in the city. Just some place to take the kids to buy a cone or newspaper in the afternoon. It helps break up the monotony of the day." They considered the centrally located shopping centers too distant for such outings.

Because these communities were built from scratch, they afforded a degree of planning impossible in our older cities, and—depending on the builder's foresight and awareness of social problems—advantage was taken of this. Planners solved complex problems in traffic flow, space arrangement, play areas, heating problems, site locations to provide sunlight, and kitchen traffic. But nobody thought about dogs.

### **Dogs in Suburbia**

The people in these communities have generally escaped from crowded city apartments. Their 50 x 100-foot plot seems to them to be the size of a ranch. One of their first acts is to buy a dog, on the theory that "it's good for the children," an old idea in American family folklore, and to turn the dog loose. Usually the people know nothing about dogs or their training. Theoretically, the dog is the children's responsibility; generally they are too young to handle it.

The result is that the dogs form great packs which race through the area, knocking down small boys and girls, wrecking gardens and flower beds, and raising general hell. Then people try tying them up; the dogs howl and bark until no one can stand it. Locked

up inside the house, they are a constant worry, and charge out to bite the mailmen and deliverymen. In one community thirteen mailmen were bitten in one summer.

Dogs, along with children, are the greatest cause of tension within a block. In Park Forest, outside Chicago, dogs were finally voted out of the 3,000 unit rental area in the bitterest, hottest, meanest, most tearful fight in that community's history. But they are permitted in the private-home area because our conception of private property includes the right to own a dog even though he may be the damnedest nuisance in the world. One can hardly describe the emotions aroused by dogs in these communities. One man told me he had bought his dog simply "because I am damn sick and tired of my neighbor's dog yapping all night. I just want to give them a taste of what it's like."

### **Suburban Populations**

The populations differ strikingly from those of the older towns. The men's ages average 31 years; the women's about 26. Incomes fall somewhere between \$4,000 and \$7,000 yearly, although incomes in excess of this can be found everywhere. Their homes cost between \$7,000 and \$12,000. Roughly 90 per cent of the men are veterans. Their major occupational classifications are managers, professionals, salesmen, skilled workers, and small business men. Most communities also have sizable numbers of transient army families.

Buying or renting a home in one of these communities is, of course, a form of economic and personal screening. As a result, there are no poor, no Negroes; and, as communities, these contain the best educated people in America. In Park Forest, where the screening was intensive, more than 50 per cent of the men and 25 per cent of the women are college graduates; the local movie theater survives by showing Westerns for the kids in the afternoon and foreign "art films" for the adults in the evening.

Initially, city-bred women, accustomed to the constant sights and sounds of other people, suffer greatly from loneliness, especially if their children are as yet unborn. One woman expressed it this way: "Your husband gets up and goes off in the morning—and you're left with the day to spend. The housework is a matter of minutes. I used to think that I had been brought to the end of the earth and deserted." Another said, "I used to sit by the window . . . just wishing someone would go by."

Generally this disappears as friends are made and children appear. Today most communities have "older" (by several years) residents who make real effort to help newcomers overcome their "newness."

Hardware stores report their biggest selling item year-round is floor wax. "Honest to God," said one store manager, "I think they eat the stuff."

The daily pattern of household life is governed by the husband's commuting schedule. It is entirely a woman's day because virtually every male commutes. Usually the men must leave between 7:00 and 8:00 A.M.; therefore they rise between 6:00 and 7:00 A.M. In most cases the wife rises with her husband, makes his breakfast while he shaves, and has a cup of coffee with him. Then she often returns to bed until the children get up. The husband is not likely to be back before 7:00 or 7:30 P.M.

### **Domestic Life**

This leaves the woman alone all day to cope with the needs of the children, her housekeeping, and shopping. (Servants, needless to say, are unknown.) When the

husband returns, he is generally tired, both from his work and his traveling. (Three hours a day is not uncommon; perhaps the most widespread dream of the men is a job nearer to the community, and they often make earnest efforts to find it.) Often by the time the husband returns the children are ready for bed. The husband helps put them to bed; as they grow older, they are allowed to stay up later. Then he and his wife eat their supper and wash the dishes. By 10:00 P.M. most lights are out.

For the women this is a long, monotonous daily proposition. Generally the men, once home, do not want to leave. They want to "relax" or "improve the property"—putter around the lawn or shrubbery. However, the women want a "change." Thus, groups of women often go to the movies together.

Usually both husband and wife are involved in some group activity and have meetings to go to. A frequent complaint is: "We never get time to see each other"; or, "We merely pass coming and going." On the one occasion when I was refused an interview, the husband said, "Gee, I'd like to help, but I so seldom get a chance to see my wife for a whole evening. . . . I'd rather not have the interruption."

Many couples credit television, which simultaneously eased baby-sitting, entertainment, and financial problems, with having brought them closer. Their favorites are comedy shows, especially those about young couples, such as *I Love Lucy*. Though often contemptuous of many programs, they speak of TV gratefully as "something we can share," as "bringing the romance back." Some even credit it with having "saved our marriage." One wife said: "Until we got that TV set, I thought my husband had forgotten how to neck."

These are the first towns in America where the impact of TV is so concentrated that it literally affects everyone's life. Organizations dare not hold meetings at hours when popular shows are on. In addition, it tends to bind people together, giving the whole community a common experience.

The Coffee Klatsch is an institution everywhere. A kind of floating, day-long talkfest, shifting from house to house, it has developed among young women to help fill their need for adult conversation and companionship. The conversation is strictly chitchat. One woman described it as "Just small talk . . . about what's new . . . about whose kid is sick . . . and then about who is apt to get sick." Yet many women complain there is "too much talk," and some are very critical of the gregariousness.

### **New Lifestyles**

When people moved into these communities, they shed many of their parents' and their home-town customs. For instance, slacks or shorts are standard wear for both men and women at all times, including trips to the shopping center. Visiting grandparents invariably are shocked and whisper: "Why, nobody dresses around here!" . . .

Gone also are most rituals and ceremonies. If you want to know someone, you introduce yourself; there is no waiting for the "right people." You "drop in" without phoning. If you have an idea that will solve some problem, you immediately call up everybody concerned. One result is that, generally speaking, there is less lag than elsewhere between an idea and "getting something done," which may be anything from organizing a dance to getting a stop sign for your corner.

The attitude toward pregnancy is unusually casual. Because it is so common, pregnancy is regarded more objectively and referred to in terms that would seem

outlandish in older communities. It is often called "our major industry"; or someone will say, "That's the Levittown Look," or "It must be the water; you don't see any men around." . . .

A marked feeling of transience pervades everything from shopping to friendships. This feeling reflects both optimism and uncertainty, and it encourages a tendency to seek expedient solutions. For instance, the question of whether or not one plans to spend his life there is shunted aside—optimistically. This has serious effects on school and town government problems.

The uncertainty stems, as one young salesman expressed it, from the fact that "you just don't know— whether you'll make the grade, whether the company will transfer you, whether you'll be getting along with your wife five years from now, whether the neighbors will move out and monsters will move in. So you hesitate to sink deep roots." In general, optimism prevails over uncertainty. Many—a majority, I would say—consider this merely their "first" house. They insist that they are young, and they confidently look forward to owning a \$15,000 to \$20,000 house some day.

Interestingly, while most look upon their present house as a "temporary deal," because "under the GI-Bill owning is cheaper than renting," the most orthodox and conservative views prevail concerning property and home ownership. There is more talk about property values than you would hear in older towns and much effort is put into "making the place look like something." This may mean the addition of fences, garage, patio, etc. A standard proud comment is: "We could walk out of this place with \$1,000 profit tomorrow."

Actual transience is high. Business transfers and increased incomes are its major causes. As a result, there is a flourishing business in the resale of houses. In one community where I interviewed twelve families in one block three years ago, all but four have since moved. From the remaining families I learned that the removals had nearly all been due to increased incomes which permitted more expensive homes. Others had moved to cut commuting time or because of company transfers. Unfortunately, no overall statistics on transience exist.

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The replacements for departed families are often older, 45 to 50 being the average age of the men. Their goal is the \$7,000 to \$12,000 house. More certain of what they can and will do, they are less anxious about "success," and financially not so hard pressed. Having resided in older towns, they like these new communities because of their friendliness and optimism. "The older towns are dead," said one small business man who is typical of this group.

Usually these "second generation" people have teen-age children and, in interviews, they emphasized the absence of "bad neighborhoods" and ample play areas as reasons for moving. Many also liked the idea that economically everyone is in the same class. One father, a skilled aviation worker, said, "Where we used to live we had both rich and very poor. Our girls were caught in the middle because the rich lads dressed better and hung out together, and the poor kids dressed poorer and hung out together.

They were nobody's friend, while here they are everybody's friend. I'd say they are happier than they ever were."

Except for Park Forest, none of the communities I visited has a local police force. Yet crime can hardly be said to exist—probably the most spectacular aspect of these new towns. In one community with 15,000 people the crime record amounted, in two years to 6 burglary cases, 35 larceny cases, 13 assault cases (husband-wife rows), and 6 disorderly conduct cases. Typically, the communities are patrolled by existing county and township police, who report their only major problems are traffic and lost children.

### **Crime in Suburbia**

Even Levittown, with 70,000 people not far from New York's turbulent, scheming underworld, has virtually no crime. According to the Nassau County police, who studied one year's record, it had no murders, robberies, or auto thefts during that period; an average city of that size during the same period would have had 4 murders, 3 robberies, and 149 auto thefts.

Levittown had 3 assault cases, 16 burglaries, and 200 larceny cases while comparable cities averaged 73 assault cases, 362 burglaries, and 942 larcenies. Larceny in Levittown was mainly bicycle stealing. (Since these statistics were gathered, the FBI has caught a Levittowner who planned a payroll robbery and a young mother, later adjudged insane, has asphyxiated her two small children.)

Police attribute this lack of crime to the fact that nearly all the men were honorably discharged from the armed services and subjected to a credit screening. This, they say, "eliminated the criminal element and riff-raff." Some police officials included the absence of slums and disreputable hang-outs as causes. Personally, I felt many more factors were involved, including the absence of real poverty; the strong ties of family, religious, and organizational activities; steady employment; and the absence of a restrictive, frustrating social structure.

### **Family Economics**

Every family operates, or tries to operate, under a budget plan. Most families report their living standards have been raised by moving into the community. There is almost constant self-scolding because living costs outrun the budget. The shining goal: economic security. The word "success" is on everyone's lips and "successful people" are those who advance economically.

Most families report it costs a minimum of between \$100 and \$150 a month to live in these communities. While the rent or mortgage payment may come to only \$65 or \$75 monthly, other expenses—commuting, garbage, water, utilities—push the total much higher. In addition, distances to the shopping center and commuting stations virtually require a car and all its expenses.

If the axiom, "a week's pay for a months rent," is applied, it is obvious that many families are barely making ends meet and some are having real difficulty. Typical comments on their economic situation: "We're just like everyone else here—broke," or, "We're all in the same boat, economically. Just getting by, I'd say." I estimated the average man's income from his regular job to be under \$100 a week.

Where screening was based only on ability to make the down payment rather than ability to pay, you often find a sizable number of men seeking supplementary work:

weekend clerking in stores; finishing attics; door-to-door selling. In one community a man who acts as a clearing house for jobs told me: "I'd say that 50 per cent of these people are running on their nerve. One winter of sickness would knock them out." A great number of women whose children have reached school age seek work, but it is hard to find and pays less than they were used to earning in the city. I talked to a night taxi-driver in one community whose job stemmed from his children's illnesses. This supplementary work left him only six hours between jobs. It was rough, he admitted, "... but I figure it's worth it to have the kids here. I couldn't stand taking them back to the city. I'll get these bills cleaned up yet."

In addition, the economic pinch is relieved in some families by subsidies from parents. "There are a fair percentage of them who are still leaning on Mama and Papa," one store proprietor said. "I know because I cash their checks." In other cases the pressure is relieved by "doubling up." This seldom means two young families in one house; usually the "doubling up" is with in-laws, who share expenses. Technically this produces substandard housing; the people involved regard this as nonsense. No stigma is attached to the practice and many women expressed the wish to have their parents live with them, mainly because they wanted companionship and guidance on child-raising. . . .

### **Optimism**

Both the individual and the community face these economic stresses with a powerful, deep-seated optimism based on the conviction that they are just starting their careers. The men sometimes say with a grim: "After all, this is only the first wife, first car, first house, first kids—wait till we get going." Though, in the long run, they measure success in economic terms, people are frank about "being broke" and there is no stigma attached to it by anyone, including families with larger incomes. "Money just doesn't cut any ice around here," said one young engineer whose earnings put him in the \$8,000-a-year class. "We've all been broke at one time or another. The important thing is, nobody expects to stay broke." . . .

Socially, the outstanding characteristic of these people is their friendliness, warmth, and lack of pretentious snobbery. Outgoing and buoyant, they are quick to recognize common problems and the need for co-operation, one does not find the indifference, coldness, and "closed doors" of a long-established community. There is much casual "dropping in" and visiting from house to house which results in the sharing of many problems and pleasures. Often the discussion of a few women over supper plans will end up with four or five families eating together. This may then lead to "fun," which may be anything from cards to "just talk" or "everybody trying to roller-skate, acting like a bunch of kids." Nobody goes "out" often. Many report that, as a result of this pattern of living, they "drink more often but get high less" than they used to. Drinking, it seemed to me, had become much more of a social amenity and less of an emotional safety valve than it is elsewhere.

### **Suburban Friendliness**

This generalized, informal friendliness assumes so many forms that it is a very real part of everyone's life, replacing the thousand-skeined social structure of older American towns. It explains why the people who live in these communities are for the most part enthusiastic about them. "Here, for the first time in my life," one salesman said,

"I don't have to worry about my family when on the road. Here at least a dozen families are constantly in touch with them and ready to help if anything goes wrong, whether it's the car, the oil heater, or one of the kids getting sick. In Pittsburgh I had to rely on scattered relatives who weren't in touch with my family more than once a week."

This is the big cushion which, while making life more enjoyable, protects the inhabitants of the new suburbs and solves their minor problems. It absorbs innumerable small transportation needs, puts up TV aerials, repairs cars, finishes attics, and carries the load of sudden emergencies. Nothing in these communities, to me, is more impressive than this uniform pattern of casual but warm friendliness and cooperation.