

The Suburbs: The New American Nightmare (1956)

John C. Keats (b. 1920)

Eighty-five percent of the 13 million homes built in the United States during the 1950s were in the suburbs—the areas just outside established towns and cities. These fast-growing regions were the subject of much analysis—and criticism—by sociologists and others studying American ways of life. The following viewpoint, excerpted from the 1956 book *The Crack in the Picture Window* by writer and social critic John C. Keats, provides a sharply satirical look at suburban life in the 1950s. A former newspaper reporter, Keats has also written biographies of Howard Hughes and Dorothy Parker, and has contributed articles to various magazines, including *Esquire*.

How important have federal government programs been to the growth of the suburbs, according to Keats? Why are suburbs continuing to be built, in his view? How do the opinions of both Keats and of sociologist Harold Mendelsohn (quoted in this viewpoint) concerning suburban neighborliness differ from the views expressed by Harry Henderson, author of the opposing viewpoint?

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For literally nothing down—other than a simple two per cent and a promise to pay, and pay, and pay until the end of your life—you too . . . can find a box of your own in one of the fresh-air slums we're building around the edges of America's cities. There's room for all in any price range, for even while you read this, whole square miles of identical boxes are spreading like gangrene throughout New England, across the Denver prairie, around Los Angeles, Chicago, Washington, New York, Miami— everywhere. In anyone of these new neighborhoods, be it in Hartford or Philadelphia, you can be certain all other houses will be precisely like yours, inhabited by people whose age, income, number of children, problems, habits, conversation, dress, possessions and perhaps even blood type are also precisely like yours. In any one of these neighborhoods it is possible to make enemies of the folks next door with unbelievable speed. If you buy a small house, you are assured your children will leave you perhaps even sooner than they should, for at once they will learn never to associate home with pleasure. In short, ladies and gentlemen, we offer here for your inspection facts relative to today's housing developments— developments conceived in error, nurtured by greed, corroding everything they touch. They destroy established cities and trade patterns, pose dangerous problems for the areas they invade, and actually drive mad myriads of housewives shut up in them.

These facts are well known to responsible economists, sociologists, psychiatrists, city managers and bankers, and certainly must be suspected by the people who live in the suburban developments, yet there's no end in sight to the construction. Indeed, Washington's planners exult whenever a contractor vomits up five thousand new houses on a rural tract that might better have remained in hay, for they see in this little besides thousands of new sales of labor, goods and services. Jobs open for an army of bulldozer operators, carpenters, plasterers, plumbers, electricians, well-diggers, bricklayers, truck drivers, foremen and day laborers. Then come the new householders, followed by their needs. A shopping center and supermarket are hurriedly built, and into this pours another

army of clerical and sales personnel, butchers, bakers, janitors, auto dealers, restaurateurs, waitresses, door-to-door salesmen, mail carriers, rookie cops, firemen, schoolteachers, medicine men of various degrees—the whole ruck and stew of civilization's auxiliaries. Thus with every new development, jobs are born, money is earned, money is spent, and pretty soon everyone can afford a new television set, and Washington calls this prosperity.

That such prosperity is entirely material, possibly temporary and perhaps even illusory, causes little concern at present. . . .

The GI Bill

Let's step back in time to consider the history of today's housing developments:

The first good intentions which pave our modern Via Dolorosa were laid at war's end. Conscious of the fact that some 13,000,000 young men risked disfigurement, dismemberment and death in circumstances not of their choosing, a grateful nation decided to show its appreciation to the survivors. The GI Bill of Rights was enacted, and one of the articles provided an incentive for bankers to assume low-interest mortgages on houses purchased by veterans. The deal was, the bankers could recover a certain guaranteed sum from the government in event of the veteran's default. The real-estate boys read the Bill, looked at one another in happy amazement, and the dry, rasping noise they made rubbing their hands together could have been heard as far away as Tawi Tawi. Immediately, thanks to modern advertising, movable type, radio, television and other marvels, the absurdity was spread—and is still spread—that the veteran should own his home.

There was never the slightest justification for this nonsense. Never in the last 180 years of United States history was there an indication that a young man entering civil life from childhood or war should thereupon buy a house.

Young People Should Be Mobile

It is and has always been the nature of young people to be mobile. Rare indeed is the man whose life is a straight arrows-flight from the classroom to the job he'll hold until he dies. Many a retiring corporate officer put in his early years driving a bread truck, then had a fling at a little unsuccessful business of his own, then wandered into the door-to-door sale of cemetery lots before catching on at the buttonworks he was one day to direct. Owning property implies a certain permanence—precisely that quality a bright young man should, and does, lack. A young man should be mobile until he finds his proper path. A man with a house is nailed to its floor.

The housing article in the GI Bill, however, opened vast vistas. Not only was there a government guarantee to be had, but there was also land to be sold, and since the veteran had been led both by private and government propaganda to believe he should own his home, the remaining consideration in the hard, practical minds of the real-estate men was how much house could be offered for how little money. Or, to put it in the more usual way, how little house could be offered for how much money. Cost became the sole criterion of the first postwar house, and the first economy was in space.

Tiny Homes

The typical postwar development operator was a man who figured how many houses he could possibly cram onto a piece of land and have the local zoning board hold still for it. Then he whistled up the bulldozers to knock down all the trees, bat the lumps off the terrain, and level the ensuing desolation. Then up went the houses, one after another, all alike, and none of those built immediately after the war had any more floor space than a moderately-priced, two-bedroom apartment. The dining room, the porch, the basement, and in many cases the attic, were dispensed with and disappeared from the American scene. The result was a little box on a cold concrete slab containing two bedrooms, bath, and an eating space the size of a broom closet tucked between the living room and the tiny kitchen. A nine-by-twelve rug spread across the largest room wall to wall, and there was a sheet of plate glass in the living-room wall. That, the builder said, was the picture window. The picture it framed was of the box across the treeless street. The young Americans who moved into these cubicles were not, and are not, to know the gracious dignity of living that their parents knew in the big two- and three-story family houses set well back on grassy lawns off the shady streets of, say, Watertown, New York. For them and their children, there would be only the box on its slab. The Cape Cod Rambler had arrived.

It was inevitable that the development house was looked upon as an expedient by the young purchasers. It was most certainly not the house of their dreams, nor was the ready-made neighborhood a thing to make the soul sing. It was, simply, the only thing available. They had no choice—they couldn't afford to build their house, nor were they given a choice of architecture. Instead, they were offered a choice between a house they didn't much want and the fantastic rents that bobbed to the surface as soon as the real-estate lobby torpedoed rent control. The development house was the only living space on the market priced just within the means of the young veterans.

It is still a maxim with responsible land agents that you should never purchase a home in which you do not intend to dwell for at least ten years. Moreover, they'll say, a house in which you have no equity cannot be considered an investment. Despite these truths, houses were bought on the assumption they would serve only as brief campsites on life's wilderness trail, and incredibly enough, the government in the past two years has given encouragement to this singular point of view. With government blessing, purchasers are now being advised that buying a new house is like buying a new car. Old one too small for the growing family? Trade your old home in and buy a new one, the government suggests, meanwhile helping the developers to continue their dirty work in order that prosperity's bubble doesn't burst.

The first veterans' developments set a pattern for the builders. They sold the first houses like hotcakes, so they've been making hotcakes ever since. Today's new houses differ from those of 1947 only insofar as the materials are better and the workmen have now mastered their jobs. The basic living problems are unchanged—they're built right in. These problems will remain unchanged unless the whole construction pattern changes; until a housing development becomes something more than just a lot of houses.

Problems of Housing Developments

First of all, a housing development cannot be called a community, for that word implies a balanced society of men, women and children wherein work and pleasure are found and the needs of all the society's members are served. Housing developments offer no employment and as a general rule lack recreational areas, churches, schools, or other cohesive influences.

A second present and future national danger lies in the fact that developments are creating stratified societies of singular monotony in a nation whose triumph to date has depended on its lack of a stratified society, on the diversity of its individuals. Yet today it is possible to drive through the various developments that surround one of our cities and tell at a glance the differing social strata.

Here is the \$10,000 development—two bedrooms, low-priced cars, average income \$75 a week after taxes, three children, average food budget \$25 weekly; jobs vary from bus driver to house painter. Here is the \$13,950 house—three bedrooms, available to foremen and successful newspapermen, medium-priced cars, two and a half children per average home; men's shoes cost \$12 to \$20 at this level. Next is the \$17,450 split level, especially designed for split personalities, upper-medium cars; liquor bill is \$25 weekly; inmates take fly-now-pay-later air rides to Europe.

The appearance of several square miles of new housing units in a once rural area adjacent to a city normally brings about a violent clash of interests.

The young new householders, conscious only of their unmet needs, are intolerant of the political milieu they've invaded. Indeed, if there was any cohesive force acting on typical development householders, it would be that of hatred. Well might they form a sort of mutual loathing society where the first target of their wrath is the builder, the second, the community around them.

For its part, the invaded community eyes the newcomers with something less than wild enthusiasm. The administrative problems handed a county government by the sudden appearance of several thousand new families are enough to make a strong man blench. And, when the guts of a city are deserted by a middle class that flocks to the suburbs, the tax problems created for the city fathers are even more frightening. . . .

A Lack of True Community

The first and most important fact to realize about housing development neighbors is that they are not really friends. They can never be friends; the best relationship they can achieve with one another is a superficial acquaintance based on service needs. Harold Mendelsohn, American University sociologist, put it thus:

"In housing developments patterns emerge which make for superficial cohesiveness. It is entirely artificial, based on providing mutual conveniences, rather than on a basis of friendship, or on a basis of fundamental needs. A wants a hammer. He borrows one from B. If he is feuding with B, it makes no difference, he'll borrow one from C. D and E get into a mutual baby-sitting agreement. There is a car pool. All these are conveniences, just service needs. A man in a development has no need to socialize with the other men; his socializing takes place in the city where he works. Therefore, development men are apt to nod to one another, or borrow things from one another, and their relationships in borrowing hammers, say, are no deeper than the relationships you have with the man who comes to fix the plumbing in a city apartment. The development

women socialize because they can't escape one another—they're always out on the lawns with their children and the children play together and therefore the mothers meet. But most of their acquaintance is based on service needs—the borrowed cup of sugar; the spoonful of cornstarch for baby's sore bottom. They merely supply services to one another—the same services a city would normally supply through its stores and delivery services.

"Moreover," Mr. Mendelsohn said, "these people lack a basis of deep friendships with one another. They are too much alike in age, jobs, number of children, and so on. Normally, you make friends where you live, or where you work. If you live in a community of people very much like yourselves, the pressure for making friends is great. But in an homogenous community, no one has anything to offer anyone else. What ideas are expressed? What values formed? What do you give to your neighbor? What can he give you?"

"Development people," Mr. Mendelsohn answered himself, "have nothing to gain from one another. There is a great deal of neighboring among the women, but no real friendships emerge, for too-much-alike people have nothing to communicate to each other; no fundamentally different ideas are exchanged." . . .

Suburbs and Children

"In a normal community," Mr. Mendelsohn said nostalgically, "there would be YMCA and church facilities for dances, sports and social life; there would be public libraries—even corner stores. In the modern development the houses are too small for young families. Today's families can't entertain at home now, and when today's children are teen-age, where do you suppose they will hold their parties and normal social life? They certainly won't be able to conduct it anywhere in a development that is simply a lot of houses.

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"To a sociologist," Mr. Mendelsohn said, "a community is a cohesive entity that supplies essential needs and services to all the people who live in it. In developments, we have already seen that churches are nonexistent or too few; that parks and recreational areas are most often missing. These developments are just bedrooms on the edge of town. What do you suppose will happen when the preschool children in all these places are ten years older? Where will they go, and what will they do? You know perfectly well they will find all their pleasures outside the development.

"Since even the movies are often miles away in the shopping center at the other end of the development, you know the only thing for tomorrow's children will be to borrow the family car. In other words, all their recreation will be away from home. There will be no chance for them to associate home with fun. To them, fun will always mean something that happens away from home—away from any sort of parental supervision.

"Not all the features of a development are bad," Mr. Mendelsohn said judiciously. "For one thing, there is no question that the development is a far healthier place to live

than the tenement or row house on a dingy, traffic-choked industrial street. Crime rates in the development areas are insignificant at present. Of course, what the crime rate will be ten years from now when the children grow up with no place to meet or play under adult supervision is something else again.”