**MEANING OF SUBURBIA**

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Topic(s): Town and city planning, 50's culture

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**Introduction**

*A Documentary Source Problem*

As the United States emerged from World War II, suburbs began to spring up with amazing speed. They were advertised as the perfect place to live - a utopia in which the family would flourish. The suburbs, with their promise of an escape from the ills of city life, were not entirely new. Suburbs had already appeared next to major American cities by the middle of the nineteenth century.

But there were distinctly new aspects to the expansion of suburbia in the United States between 1945 and 1960, qualities that you will discover in the following documents.

**Assignment**

You have decided to write a history of the post World War II era, and want to tell the story of postwar suburbanization and interpret its meaning. Using the documents, develop a clearly-organized account in a 2-3 page, double-spaced, typewritten essay. Use the questions below to give your paper focus:

1. Suburban living seemed to transform its inhabitants from what they were before the move. Was this really the case? If they were transformed, what were the significant changes?

2. Were these changes the product of physical settings?

3. Were the changes consciously chosen? Were they part of a search for community or for a more privatized existence?

4. How did such factors as class, age, race and gender influence the "meaning of suburbia?"

5. How did the national and international events from 1930 to 1960 help shape its meaning?

6. How is your life different from suburban life in the 1950s? Or is it?

**Document #1: Douglas T. Miller and Marilyn Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (1975).**

The 1960 census revealed that while central cities had grown about 25 per cent in population since 1950, the suburbs had increased over 50 per cent….Several central cities, including Detroit, St. Louis, San Francisco, and Washington, actually lost population, something unprecedented in the history of American cities.

**Document #2: Douglas T. Miller and Marilyn Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (1975).**

On July 3, 1950, William J. Levitt was pictured on the cover of Time. The portrait showed him standing in front of a neat row of identical boxlike houses set up like Monopoly pieces on land newly bulldozed to a uniform flatness. The cover caption read: "HOUSE BUILDER LEVITT: For Sale: a new way of life"….He turned farmlands into giant Levit-towns. His houses were unvarying in floorplan, though there were four slight variations in exteriors and seven color choices, mostly pastels. "The best house in the U.S.," bragged Levitt of his picture-windowed box complete with refrigerator, stove, Bendix washer in each kitchen, and an Admiral TV built into every living room. Deeds to Levitt's houses specified that no fences were to be built, lawns were to be mowed at least once a week in season, and laundry could be hung only on rotary racks, not on clotheslines, and never on weekends. Demand for Levitt's houses ran far above supply. Other builders were quick to adopt his methods. Typical developers would buy up open land as cheaply as possible, clear it of…trees, brush, flowers, hills, swamps, even streams, install utilities, build roads, subdivide into tiny lots, construct a few model houses to show prospective buyers and then with prefabricated units construct the houses, sell, and come away with high profits.

**Document #3: William J. Levitt, as quoted in John Keats, The Crack in the Picture Window (1956).**

"No man who owns his own house and lot can be a Communist. He has too much to do."

**DOCUMENT #4: U.S. Government: HUD Trends: Annual Summary; and Housing Construction Statistics, 1889-1964.**

New Housing Starts in the United States, 1935-1960 (in thousands):

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Total Starts** |
| 1935 | 216 |
| 1940 | 530 |
| 1945 | 325 |
| 1950 | 1408 |
| 1955 | 1627 |
| 1960 | 1230 |

**DOCUMENT #5: Edward P. Eichler and Marshall Kaplan, The Community Builders (1967).**

At the end of World War II….the housing demand swelled with the rising income of the population, programs of the Federal Housing Agency and the Veterans Administration, increasing automobile ownership, and massive road building. The situation after the War…made the production of houses an industry….In the fifties, the country's urban area expanded by nearly 5,000,000 acres - primarily through growth at the city's edges…. The face of the country was transformed - developments, freeways, giant shopping centers sprang up as if overnight. Though it had begun decades before, a whole new mode of life, suburbia, seemed to come into being all at once.

**DOCUMENT #6: Gallup Poll, HOUSES, 1954.**

In some places there are laws that keep builders from building houses that all look alike. Would you favor or oppose such a law in this community?

Favor: 47%

Oppose: 39%

No opinion: 14%

By Education:

College Favor: 58%

Oppose: 31%

No opinion: 11%

High School Favor: 48%

Oppose: 40%

No opinion: 12%

Grade School Favor: 40%

Oppose: 42%

No opinion: 18%

**DOCUMENT #7: Daniel Bell, The End of Ideology (1961).**

In the vast metropolitan [cities] people were isolated, transient, anonymous to each other. Americans, sensitive as they are to the criticism of others, took the charge to heart and in building the postwar suburbs, sought to create fraternity, communality, togetherness, only to find themselves accused of conformity.

**DOCUMENT #8: Scott Donaldson, The Suburban Myth (1969).**

Examples of this new housing abound throughout the land. Crackerbox homes went up and sold in astonishing numbers and with incredible speed. ... An extreme example is the tract suburb of Irving, Texas,…between the boom cities of Dallas and Fort Worth. In 1950, Irving's population was 2,621; in 1960 it was 45,489….Part of the tragedy lies in the ugliness of the…tract homes and in the suburb's "homogeneous, tasteless architecture".

**DOCUMENT #9: Frederick Lewis Allen, "The Big Change in Suburbia," Harper's Magazine, June 1954**.

These new towns have been laid out with a more thoughtful eye to the realities of the automobile age than most of their predecessors. Levittown, for instance, has wide boulevards for through traffic, well separated from the houses, which…have ample front grass-plots and room in the rear for gardens; and there is a commendable variety in exterior design and especially in texture and color, so as to mitigate the endless monotony of thousands upon thousands of basically similar houses on flat land….

To a visitor from another area, or from an earlier decade, such houses would seem very small but pleasantly simple and unpretentious, and extraordinarily mechanized….

These are very gregarious communities, in which people wander in and out of one another's houses without invitation, and organize themselves into everything from car pools to PTAs and hobby clubs of numerous sorts; and in which the churches are.…important…

**DOCUMENT #10 Lewis Mumford, The City in History (1961).**

[Suburbs are]... a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold.

**DOCUMENT #11 William Geist, Toward a Safe and Sane Halloween and Other Tales of Suburbia (1985)excerpt.**

Millions of suburban Americans are being deprived of the full status, satisfaction, and reward of suburban living because their neighborhoods and subdivisions do not have names.

I know, I live in such a neighborhood….I went out driving around the Chicago suburban area, looking for a good name, something we could build a theme around. I want to live in a theme community.

There is no sand and there are no pebbles at Sandpebble Walk. No brownstone in Brownstone Manor. No grand vista in La Grande Vista. No olive trees in The Olive Trees. No trees at all in Wine Tree. No water at Waterbury.

**DOCUMENT #12 In 1953, after a nation-wide tour of American suburbs, Harry Henderson reported on "The Mass-Produced Suburbs", Harper's Magazine, (November, 1953).**

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 cooperation.... Nothing in these communities...is more impressive than this uniform pattern of casual but warm friendliness and cooperation.

**DOCUMENT #13 Dobriner, The Suburban Community.**

Reasons Given for Moving to the Suburbs, and Percentage of Respondents Mentioning Each Type

**Type of Reason Per Cent\***

Better for children: 81%

Enjoy life more: 77%

Husband's job: 21%

Near relatives: 14%

Other: 3%

\*Many respondents gave more than one reason.

**DOCUMENT #14 Dr. Richard E. Gordon, et. al., "The Split-Level Trap," Good Housekeeping, January 1961.**

THE "GIMME" KIDS

Too many of the problems of mobile youngsters, both boys and girls, spring at least partly from the fact that the disturbia (sic) society is too giving to them. The feeling is in the air that children and teen-agers should be fed a steady diet of love -- by which is often meant coddling, protection from what is rough and unpleasant, showering with material treats. Many mobile parents have a notion that it may harm children's personalities in some way to say no to them, to frustrate them, to repress their urges, or to spank them.

This excess of giving springs from many causes. One is prosperity itself….The old middle-class virtues of hard work, thrift, and patience -- virtues which helped people get ahead in a less bountiful era -- no longer seem so important. Many parents, even those of solid middle-class descent, fail to teach these virtues to their children.

The combined result of the "giving" attitude and the lack of masculine firmness is that the suburbs are full of obedient parents and spoiled, lazy, materialistic children. No one has cracked down on the youngsters....They are not used to hard work, nor are they willing to try it. They have not been made to feel a sense of responsibility. They are inconsiderate of others because they have not been made to consider anything but their own desires. They're "gimme" kids.

It is the gimme kids who most often become school-behavior problems or delinquents in the suburbs….Usually all that is wrong is that the kid is spoiled.

**DOCUMENT #15 Anne Kelley, "Suburbia -- Is It a Child's Utopia?" New York Times Magazine, February 2, 1958**.

Pressures on children to conform, to be popular, to achieve and generally to fit in with the group amount to a squeeze. They…have no time left for daydreams….

Suburban life, for children, is over-organized; the father has little time at home because of commuting demands; the mother becomes sole disciplinarian and 24-hour chauffeur; population turnover is great, with a resulting lack of stability; materialism is glorified, with sports cars, patios, hi-fi and country clubs set upon an altar….

Despite the dedication to the child's interests, children in the suburbs do not distinguish themselves in tests devised to measure mental health.

**DOCUMENT #16 Douglas T. Miller and Marilyn Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (1975).**

For most middle-class youth coming to maturity in the 1950,….homes, churches, and schools taught them that adjustment to the group was essential….

"Johnny wasn't doing so well at school," one mother confided. "The teacher explained to me that he was doing fine in his lessons but that his social adjustment was not as good as it might be. He would pick just one or two friends to play with, and sometimes he was happy to remain by himself."

**DOCUMENT #17 Dwight MacDonald, "A Caste, a Culture, a Market," U November 22, 1958.**

"...a recent survey-found that in the suburbs of New York teenage crime has been increasing faster than the teenage population….The report continued: "Social workers generally said they sensed (in these suburbs) an increase in youthful offenses involving alcohol and sex. Several… noted that…10,000 (suburban) youngsters in trouble last year came from...‘good homes’."

**DOCUMENT #18 Jessie Bernard, "Teen-Age Culture: An Overview," The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science (1961).**

Our teen-age culture.…is a product of affluence. It is possible because our society can afford a large leisure class of youngsters not in the labor force but yet consumers on a vast scale, or, if in the labor force, free to spend their earnings on themselves. And they spend it primarily on clothes, cosmetics, recreational paraphernalia, records, cars, travel, and other leisure class goods and services....

They have had to be catered to. The values of teen-age culture become a matter of concern to the advertising industry....The advertisers and the mass media flatter and cajole. They seek to create desires in order to satisfy, rather than, as the parent, teacher, or minister must often do, to discipline, restrict, or deny them. The advertiser is, thus, on the side of the teenager. "The things bought are determined by what the child wants rather than by what the parents want for him."

**DOCUMENT #19 Russell Lynes, A Surfeit of Honey (1953).**

Prosperity produces not only plenty but curiously empty values and a national uneasiness. It produces strange kinds of personal economic competition in which symbols like the automobile and the freezer represent a burning desire for status. Cars get gaudier.…Open fields are swallowed up to make future slums, slums are torn down to make parking lots; pastures become drive-in movies….

**DOCUMENT #20 U.S. Government, Statistical Abstracts, 1959**.

Dwelling Units - Electric Lighting, Toilet, and Bathing Facilities, 1940 and 1950 Stated in Percentages

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **1940** | **1950** |
| Units with electric lights | 78.7% | 94.0 |
| No electric lights | 21.3 | 6.0 |
| Units with flush toilet inside structure, exclusive use | 50.7 | 71.4 |
| Flush toilet inside structure, shared | 5.0 | 4.1 |
| Other toilet facilities (including privy) | 32.5 | 22.4 |
| No toilet | 2.8 | 2.1 |
| Units with installed bathtub or shower, exclusive use | 56.2 | 69.3 |
| Installed bathtub or shower, shared | 4.7 | 3.9 |
| No bathtub or shower | 39.1 | 26.8 |

**DOCUMENT #21 Gallup Poll: Television, September, 1953.**

**Do you have a television set in your home?**

Yes: 49%

No: 51%

**DOCUMENT #22 Hal Himmelstein, Television Myth and the American Mind (1984).**

Television's version of suburban life was most clearly presented in the situation comedy. An idealized vision of suburban living, the myth of the suburban [class] reinforced basic American notions of progress….The suburb was the mythical space between the untamed rugged frontier -- the wilderness -- and the chaotic, dangerous inner city. It was a place where sanity prevailed, a place of full employment; conventional white, white-collar corporate families; clean streets, well-kept, weedless lawns, neatly trimmed hedges….This was a surface world cut off from the larger social environment with its racial tensions, its decaying urban industrial centers…and its Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, with the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. [In] television's myth,….principles of fair play prevailed; judges were sober, lawyers were intelligent and honest; police were calm, understanding, brave, and, above all, incorruptible; everyone had a right to freedom of speech; everyone was entitled to the best possible education....

Of all the suburban-middle-landscape television comedies of the 1950s and 1960s, four stand out as significant examples of the genre: The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet (1952-66), Fathers Knows Best (1954-60,…Leave It To Beaver (1957-63), and My Three Sons (1960-72).

**DOCUMENT #23 Douglas T. Miller and Marilyn Nowak, The Fifties: The Way We Really Were (1975).**

Skyrocketing Bible sales were another good index of the religious revival. Between 1949 and 1953 the yearly distribution of Bibles rose 140 per cent, reaching the incredible figure of nearly ten million Bibles a year by 1953. Stories from the Bible became common features in the comic sections of Sunday newspapers…..

Contributions to religious causes reached a record $3.4 billion by 1957, and a major religious building boom occurred, particularly in the burgeoning suburbs…. Ministers spoke proudly of their new "plants." Even drive-in churches appeared…

**DOCUMENT #24 Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew (1955)**.

The current turn to religion and the church [is]…a reflection of the growing other-directedness of our middle-class culture. The people in the suburbs want to feel psychologically secure, adjusted, at home in their environment….Being religious and joining a church is, under contemporary American conditions, a fundamental way of "adjusting" and "belonging".

**DOCUMENT #25. Modern Living: "Man, Oh Man." Time, February 1, 1954.**

"This movement to the suburbs means more automobiles, more mileage per car and more multiple-car families….Married couples today are having far more second, third, fourth and fifth children. Just for the record, 1953 v. 1940....We have 65% more children under five years of age and 50% more between five and nine ...." In the '30s and '40s it was fashionable to compress the kitchen into a space-saving, antiseptic cubicle. But as postwar families grew, kitchens grew with them. Since the war and the shortage of domestic help, whole houses are virtually being designed around colorful, labor-saving kitchens that can also serve as all-purpose living space for the family....Said a Michigan housewife: "We have almost all the appliances there are. And we do have a nice kitchen….But when we build the one we want, we'll have a kitchen about 20 feet long, with all the cooking equipment at one end and a big Lazy Susan table with captain's chairs and a fireplace at the other."

**DOCUMENT #26 Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (1963).**

A distinguishing feature of these suburbs is the fact that the women who live there are better educated than city women, and the great majority are full-time housewives…..

The decision to move to the suburbs "for the children's sake" followed the decision to give up job or profession and become a full-time housewife, usually after the birth of the first baby, depending on the age of the woman when the mystique hit. With the youngest wives, of course, the mystique hit so early that the choice of marriage and motherhood as a full-time career ruled out education for any profession…

**DOCUMENT #27 Dr. Richard E. Gordon, et. al., "The Split-Level Trap," Good Housekeeping, January 1961,.**

The case of Alice Hager…was…involved in a five-year study of Bergen County in New Jersey ….Bergen County, like most of America's suburban areas, is literally a community on the move -- a factor which, as we shall see, has a far-reaching effect on the lives of most of the people who live there….

We found that Bergen residents had to cope with more heart attacks, high blood pressure, ulcers, juvenile delinquency than did the residents of a rural county….And Bergen had a higher rate of divorce and separation than the rural county did. All this can be taken as an indication that something must be troubling the people in Bergen....

**TRANSFER TENSIONS**. A transfer does not usually affect the husband as much as it does the wife and children. The husband, though he changes his domicile and his working location, remains in the same social organization: the company. But the wife is not so lucky, as Alice's case proved. To her, the new neighbors didn't seem to be at all like the gracious, charming folk of her Southern girlhood…..everybody was too busy, too full of their own problems.…to help her.

Carl, also, was too busy. He worked hard all day, and often came home late at night dead tired….

Feeling the walls closing in on her, Alice timidly inquired one day about the chances of joining the local women's club, but she was told that some of the members intended to keep the new "riffraff" out. Alice considered her rejection by the club a personal affront.

Meanwhile, her sons were growing progressively harder for her to manage….One day one of them, in a temper tantrum, hit her on the cheek, leaving a large red bruise. When she told Carl, he seemed more angry at her than at the boy. He told her that raising the children was her responsibility....

In her loneliness, with too little encouragement, and too few others to tell her that she was doing a good job or to help her do it, Alice began to dwell on the thought that -- as Carl suggested often -- she was a failure as wife and mother. She realized that she nagged more than she once had…. Were these things making her less attractive to Carl?

**DOCUMENT #28 Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique (1963)**.

When the (feminine) mystique took over,…a new breed of women came to the suburbs. They were looking for sanctuary [safety]; they were perfectly willing to accept the suburban community as they found it (their only problem was "how to fit in"); they were perfectly willing to fill their days with the trivia of housewifery. Women of this kind, and most of those that I interviewed, were of the post-1950 college generation…[They] refuse to take policy-making positions in community organizations; they will only collect for Red Cross or March of Dimes or Scouts or be den mothers or take the lesser PTA jobs. Their resistance to serious community responsibility is usually explained by "I can't take the time from my family." But much of their time is spend in meaningless busywork. The kind of community work they choose does not challenge their intelligence -- or even, sometimes, fill a real function.

**DOCUMENT #29 William Geist, Toward A Safe and Sane Halloween and Other Tales of Suburbia (1985).**

The suburbs are really short on porches. Most of what is suburban Chicago has been built in the last thirty-five years, and they stopped building front porches around fifty years ago.

Apparently, it was about the same time people started staying indoors to listen to the radio.

Then, TV. People at first were excited about it, then galvanized, transfixed, and finally glued to the cathode ray tube, unable to move…and with [this] result: cessation of brain function.

The front porch was pleasant, not exciting. It was a place to sit. To sit and talk -- something called visiting -- about anything that came up. Sometimes nothing was said for several minutes, just sharing the silence, the sound of the crickets, the lawn sprinkler, or whatever. It was okay to be silent then, not a failure to communicate that you had to seek professional help for.

It was pleasant just being there with your family, friends, or whoever dropped by.

**DOCUMENT #30 Bruno Bettleheim, The Informed Heart: Autonomy in a Mass Age (1960).**

With so much at hand that generations have striven for, how bewildering that the meaning of life should evade us. Freedoms we have, broader than ever before. But more than ever before most of us yearn for a self-realization that eludes us, while we abide restless in the midst of plenty. As we achieve freedom, we are frightened by social forces that seem to suffocate us, …from all parts of an ever-contracting world.

The tedium and dissatisfaction with life are becoming so great that many are getting ready to let freedom slip out of their hands. They feel it is all too complicated…