

**LIFE, LIBERTY, AND  
THE PURSUIT OF PASTNESS:  
  
A CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF  
NOSTALGIC ARCHITECTURE IN  
POST-SUBURBIA, USA**

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*For my parents*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie, deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears.*

*John F. Kennedy,  
Commencement Address at Yale University,  
June 11, 1962*

2015 marked the 30th anniversary of the first part of the *Back to the Future* trilogy. These movies tell the story of an American small town. They also tell the story of a family. Hill Valley, the hometown of the movies' protagonist Marty McFly, played by Michael J. Fox, is portrayed as an anarchic but hopeful and thriving frontier settlement in 1885. The protagonist's ancestors are presented as a modest and humble pioneer family, just having come to America. In the 1950s, Hill Valley is depicted as an idealized, cheerful, 1950s small town of white picket fences, tree-lined residential neighborhoods, family dinners, and a lively main street. Marty's ancestors are a stereotypical middle-class nuclear family. Outside of Hill Valley, construction on Lyon Estates, the area's first suburban development, is about to begin, the family purchases their first television, and the mayor of the town asks for people's vote "if they believe in progress." Change is coming to Hill Valley. The optimistic and mythical 1950s world of American innocence is contrasted with a depressing Hill Valley of 1985. After the opening of Twin Pines Mall and the suburban expansion of the town, Hill Valley has become a derelict wasteland, governed by an African-American mayor. The McFly family is struggling because of a pathetic, TV-addicted father and the obese mother's alcoholism. Her brother is in jail, the kids work at a fast-food restaurant, and they live in the now deprived suburb of Lyon Estates. Finally, Hill Valley is imagined as an ambiguous place in the distant future of 2015. By then, the town's courthouse has been redeveloped into a shopping center and the new mall has helped to revitalize downtown Hill Valley. Yet, the movie undeniably creates a dystopian atmosphere: in 2015 plastic surgery is an everyday affair, suburbs that were once desirable are abandoned, food is more artificial, media and communication technologies are more pervasive, and yesterday's traffic problems have extended to America's new skyways. In this future, Marty McFly's family live in the once prestigious but now sleazy suburb of Hilldale, struggling to cope financially and emotionally. Marty, like his own father,

has failed professionally and as the head of the family. Only time travelling can change the family's and the town's destiny.

It would have been possible to create a more optimistic image of the white, middle-class family's journey of progress in America. But these three movies do not celebrate the changes that took place between 1885 and 2015. They critically comment on America in 1985, and show a disillusioned, frustrating image of the future. Progress has not changed the country and its people necessarily for the better. Instead, these movies idealize and romanticize a vision of the American small-town past and the nuclear family. It is suggested that small-town America of yesterday provided a better life to families than the complex present of 1985 and the future of 2015. The trilogy claims that the families of the past were much more stable, functional, and harmonious. These movies create a connection between a positively rendered patriarchal family ideal and the American small town, and, consequently, a connection between the portrayed failure and collapse of this family ideal in contemporary suburban America. In this sense, *Back to the Future* is not so much about the future at all. It rather is about nostalgia for an imagined past and about a critical view on the present and future from a 1980s' perspective.

This nostalgia for an imagined, mythical small-town America is still thriving in the United States more than 30 years after the first *Back to the Future* movie premiered. In his book on Disney's master-planned community Celebration, Florida,<sup>1</sup> professor of Social and Cultural Analysis, Andrew Ross, observes that America used to be "a country that had always been viewed as the home of the future" and was "identified with progress and fast-forward motion."<sup>2</sup> But today, Americans' unalienable rights seem to be life, liberty, and the pursuit of *pastness*. Today's Americans appear to be less optimistic about tomorrow, pursuing *pastness* instead. Evidence for this persistent faith in America's past and an obsession with nostalgia can be observed in many interrelated aspects of American life, including politics, consumer- and popular culture as well as architecture.

I am particularly interested in the interrelationships between the ubiquitous nostalgic architecture in the vast suburban peripheries of America's sprawling cities, which are often referred to as post-suburbia, and small-town depictions in popular culture. In post-suburbia, Americans step into new lifestyle centers that mimic Main Street, USA at Disneyland (see Figure 12). At the same time, enclosed, Modernism-

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<sup>1</sup> Celebration, Florida is a neotraditional community planned in the early 1990s. It is located on the property of Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, FL.

<sup>2</sup> Ross 1999: 53.

inspired<sup>3</sup> malls from the 1970s and 1980s across the country are being shut down or are redeveloped into nostalgic “town centers.”<sup>4</sup> Americans eat in chain restaurants that recreate soda shops or classic diners reminiscent of illustrations by Norman Rockwell.<sup>5</sup> They stock up on imported merchandise in ubiquitous big-box stores and strip malls that are hidden behind layers of white columns and awnings (see Figure 8 and 10). Also, many Americans choose to live in new houses that look like from a 1950s sitcom (see Figure 7). But these nostalgic architectural decorations do in no way reflect how (mass-produced), where (in post-suburbia), and when (rather recently) these buildings were constructed. The opposite is true. Post-suburbia often resembles a historic small town from a Disney theme park or movie like *Back to the Future*.

This crucial connection between the themed environment of post-suburbia and popular culture has been marginalized so far. An analysis of these interrelationships, however, will help to answer central questions the phenomenon raises and that could not been answered sufficiently so far: why is nostalgic architecture popular in American post-suburbia today? When and why did it begin to replace more contemporary architecture? Who pursues pastness in post-suburbia and for which reason? From a cultural-studies perspective I claim that nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia mirrors and at the same time propagates the persistent myth of small-town America, which is imbued with the ideal of the white, patriarchal nuclear family, and that this and other forms of nostalgia are a white reaction to wide-ranging changes, shifts, and developments in the United States since the end of World War II.

In this introduction I will first briefly explore other examples of nostalgia to show that post-suburbia is not the only area where pastness becomes manifest. Then I will present what has been researched so far regarding the theming of post-suburbia. I will also define what is meant with suburbia, post-suburbia, and the American small town. This is followed by an overview of this dissertation and my approach in answering the research questions.

## LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF PASTNESS

To begin with, I would like to introduce other recent examples of nostalgia in the United States to demonstrate that pastness can be found everywhere. A trend in packaging and graphic design, for example, has been the usage of nostalgic banners, badges,

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<sup>3</sup> Modernist architecture became popular in the first half of the 20th century. Modernist architects reject ornamentation.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Strassmann 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Rockwell (1894-1978) was an American illustrator famous for his many covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* that today embody American nostalgia. He will be discussed later in more detail.

and ribbons which were popular from the 1890s to the late 1930s. The United States Postal Service used these elements to redesign their priority mail packages in 2013 (see Figure 1). The new red, white, and blue look is influenced by 1920s and 1930s designs, complete with a classic font.<sup>6</sup> Martha Stewart, the 1990s' icon of traditional American style, endorsed the new nostalgic packaging during the holiday seasons of 2013 and 2014 in online videos.<sup>7</sup> She taught the viewers how to package homemade gifts, such as stenciled water glasses, using the new nostalgic boxes. Stewart also appeared on *The Steve Harvey Show* to present the new packaging.<sup>8</sup> Amtrak initiated a similar redesign in 2009, when the company introduced its new, unmistakably retro-inspired corporate identity. The new corporate identity of the company that was founded in 1971 is reminiscent of the 1920s and 1930s. Amtrak now uses a combination of handwritten and printed letters. The aesthetic is comparable to vintage national park posters (see Figures 2 and 3).



**Figure 1.** The new, nostalgic USPS corporate identity becomes obvious in this priority-mail box. N.d. It features banners and badges as well as nostalgic typography. The box is red, white, and blue and shows several stars. The redesign originally was even more nostalgic and included elements such as eagles. 2016 photo courtesy Ebay seller "angieparmelee."

Nostalgic graphic design also has become popular in the packaging of food, as the new look of Hellmann's products<sup>9</sup> illustrates (see Figure 4). Many boxes and cans in today's grocery stores have been redesigned within the last years to feature

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Grand Army n.d. An overview of the design firm's nostalgic suggestions for the United States Postal Service can be found here: [http://grandarmy.com/work/projects/project.php?project=usps\\_retail](http://grandarmy.com/work/projects/project.php?project=usps_retail).

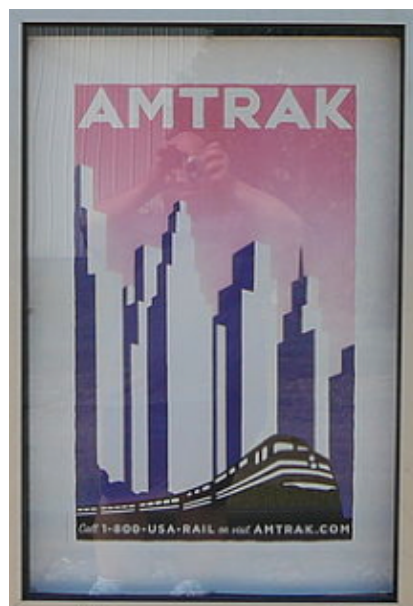
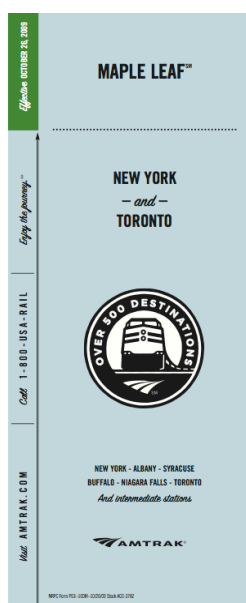
<sup>7</sup> Marthastewart.com 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Postal Reporter 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Hellmann's Mayonnaise altered the packaging of its entire range in 2017 to a nostalgic, deli-inspired design. "Hellmann's now feels like a brand that comes from a place where products are made, not manufactured. A refined tone of voice brings back the spirit of the brand's heritage, while much of the typography has been hand-drawn to fit with the new design. We think you'll agree that Hellmann's today captures the warm, welcoming realness of visiting a deli, celebrating the brand's commitment to quality ingredients and, of course, really, really good food." Cf. Design Bridge 2017.

traditional elements. Kraft, Unilever, and other companies are adjusting their packaging to more nostalgic styles, which are sometimes based on historic designs. These nostalgic adjustments happen according to consumer demand. The online trend community Trendhunter.com observes:

Understanding [Americans'] longing for the past, many brands have ditched modern aesthetics in favor of sporting a deliciously retro design. Long running brands like Doritos are feeling compelled to pull former packaging designs from the vault in a bid to catch consumers' eyes. [...] Now you can enjoy the fine and fabulous style of all your favorite bygone eras by taking a leisurely stroll down any old supermarket aisle.<sup>10</sup>



**Left: Figure 2.** A 2009 Amtrak timetable, which was nostalgically themed with fonts popular in the 1920s. Author's collection. **Center: Figure 3.** A contemporary Amtrak poster in Macomb, IL. Photo (detail) courtesy "IlliniGradResearch." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amtraksignfront.JPG>. Accessed July 6, 2018. **Right: Figure 4.** Hellmann's Mayonnaise introduced a new packaging in 2017 that recalls the brand's early-20th-century origins as a New York deli staple. 2017 photo by the author.

But nostalgia does not stop in the supermarket. During the 2012 election campaigns, an undeniably nostalgic aesthetic was the hallmark of both Democrats and Republicans. While Obama was "betting on America," the graphics of his campaign were interpreted in a design blog as "a pre-digital, possibly hand-drawn typeface, not 1980s but 1940s (or maybe 1920s). [...] [I]t looks like an ersatz version of American nostalgia."<sup>11</sup> The fonts chosen for the 2012 campaign are referred to as hipster fonts, which are characterized as having a "unique and somewhat vintage look without being outdated."<sup>12</sup> During the campaign, Obama himself was often dressed as if he had

<sup>10</sup> Keefe 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Lange 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Inspirationfeed 2017.

stepped out of a Norman-Rockwell painting or Grant Wood's iconic *American Gothic*<sup>13</sup> (see Figure 5). In Ohio, at the Wolcott House Museum Complex in Maumee, Obama talked about America's future in front of a reassuring collage of America's past. In the background, there were a historic building with a porch, an American flag, and a white picket fence. Obama was wearing a casual checkered shirt and chinos. Mitt Romney's campaign went into a similarly nostalgic direction. His team developed a line of clothes with retro-inspired prints.<sup>14</sup>



**Figure 5.** The nostalgic signs used during the 2012 Obama campaign. Photo courtesy "GrapedApe." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President\\_Obama\\_\(7516905800\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:President_Obama_(7516905800).jpg). Accessed July 6, 2018.

Four years later, as Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump were running for president, nostalgia was heavily employed on both sides. Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" suggested that in the past the country was better than it is in the present. The *New York Times* observed: "It seems safe to assume that in the eyes of Mr. Trump's overwhelmingly white male fans, America was greater a half-century ago. Indeed, it was pretty great for them."<sup>15</sup> The nostalgia stirred up by Trump during the 2016 election was a male, white supremacist nostalgia. African American and Bernie-Sanders supporter Krystal Lake's reaction to Trump's slogan was that she had a cap custom-made with a variation of the phrase: "America Was Never Great." She

<sup>13</sup> *American Gothic* is a painting by Grant Wood (1891-1942). It shows a farmer and his daughter from the Midwest in front of a Gothic Revival house made from wood.

<sup>14</sup> Green 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Covert 2016.

questioned the nostalgia for a better white America of the past. A photo of her wearing the hat went viral on social media and led to death threats against her.<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 6.** Martha Stewart (and her dog Sharkey) in the set of *Martha – The Martha Show*. Hillary Clinton was staged in a very similar environment in her biographical video shown during the National Democratic Convention. The full video is available on *YouTube*. 2010 photo by the author.

Meanwhile, Hillary Clinton was staged sitting in an all-American, traditional kitchen in her biographical video produced for the National Democratic Convention which was narrated by Morgan Freeman. *Architectural Digest* immediately commented “Hillary Clinton’s kitchen is classic Americana. Wood accents, clean lines, and an all-white palette make this space instantly pinnable.”<sup>17</sup> Previously, Clinton had been shown in a similarly nostalgic setting. In the *YouTube* video in which she announced her candidacy, she stood outside a nondescript traditional American home. The white woodwork corresponded with her red and blue Ralph-Lauren<sup>18</sup> outfit. The similarity between her and domestic icon Martha Stewart is striking (see Figure 6). Hillary Clinton, the first woman to run for president of the United States, was staged in key situations such as her candidacy video and her biographical video as the conservative, white, all-American middle-class homemaker while Donald Trump’s campaign slogan related to a

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mele 2016.

<sup>17</sup> Fernandez 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Ralph Lauren is considered “the most ur-American of American designers: a man who built an empire on the mythology of the untrammled West, where cowboys roamed free among herds of bison, along with a kind of ‘Brideshead Revisited’ Anglo past.” Friedman 2016.

nostalgic ideal of a lost, great, white, America. Both campaigns were completely different and both baby-boomer personalities were completely different as well. Yet, both political campaigns alluded to visions of American nostalgia and, by doing so, tapped into issues of race, class, and gender.

## STATE OF RESEARCH

If nostalgia in political campaigns is connected to race, class, and gender, this must be true for other areas of nostalgia, including nostalgia in post-suburbia. As said before, my focus in this dissertation is neither political campaigns nor advertisements or product design but post-suburban architecture. In post-suburbia, Americans drive through a maze of new, master-planned yet nostalgically themed housing developments and strip malls that aesthetically often aspire to an idealized past (cf. Figures 7-10). Theming is defined by Per Strömberg from the Telemark University College in Norway as the “holistic and cohesive spatial, cultural, and social organization of a consumer venue.”<sup>19</sup> It “serves as a narrative stage for human interaction in a commercial context.”<sup>20</sup>

This particular American landscape, which is new but is themed to look old, is “the product of a suburban building tradition in which commercial builders are finely attuned, and readily adapt, to consumer taste”<sup>21</sup> as urban geographers Nadine Dostrovsky and Richard Harris from the McMaster University, California, write in 2008. To them, there has occurred a complex “historicist revival”<sup>22</sup> in suburbia. The architecture this revival produced will be described in detail in chapter two. It will also be argued, that this architecture produces meanings like cultural text. Dostrovsky and Harris suppose that the pursuit of pastness is not imposed but seems to originate as a collective desire. The new-urbanist<sup>23</sup> architect Peter Calthorpe also claims that the demand for traditional styles in suburban housing, and consequently for themed shopping centers and consumer goods, “comes from the marketplace itself, not from the intentions of any designers or any intentional design ethos.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Strömberg 2015: 1.

<sup>20</sup> Strömberg 2015: 1.

<sup>21</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 167.

<sup>22</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a and 2008b.

<sup>23</sup> New Urbanism is an architectural movement that took shape in the 1980s. New Urbanists want to return from suburban to traditional urban planning in order to create more walkable and sustainable communities. Celebration, FL, is an example of this form of urban planning.

<sup>24</sup> Calthorpe 2005: 17 quoted in Knox 2008: 103.



**Left: Figure 7.** A nostalgic subdivision in Virginia Beach, VA. 2012 photo by the author. **Right: Figure 8.** The Yankee Candle factory outlet in Williamsburg, VA. 2012 photo by the author.



**Left: Figure 9.** Peninsula Town Center in Hampton, VA: an open-air shopping center opened in 2009 that is decorated to look like a much older small town. 2012 photo by the author. **Right: Figure 10.** A Wal-Mart Supercenter in Plymouth, MA. 2010 photo by the author.

An early detection of this American phenomenon dates back to the 1970s. Following their well-known study *Learning From Las Vegas*,<sup>25</sup> postmodern architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi focused on another quintessential American landscape: suburbia. Although a planned follow-up publication titled *Learning From Levittown* was never published, “part of the research did materialize in the exhibition *Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City* at the Renwick Gallery in Washington in 1976” where the architects “put together the signs and symbols in the commercial strip and in the home, in a way bringing together *Learning from Las Vegas* and *Learning from Levittown*.”<sup>26</sup> Part of this exhibition was a collage titled “Precedents of Suburban Symbols.” It showed a typical suburban ranch house in Levittown, which had been decorated by its owners. Scott Brown and Venturi suggested that both the suburban layout as well as the decoration was symbolic. The curving streets, for example, alluded to winding country roads; the newly planted trees suggested a forest. In the exhibition, large photographs were dotted with speech bubbles that explained the

<sup>25</sup> *Learning from Las Vegas* is a study on the architecture of Las Vegas. The architects found that what differentiates the different buildings on the Las Vegas Strip is their theme and decoration. They concluded that ornamentation – which had been abandoned by modernist architects – is important to convey the function of buildings. Cf. Izenour, Brown, and Venturi 1977.

<sup>26</sup> Colomina in Blauvelt 2008: XX.

aesthetic meaning and context of each element of the decorated suburban homes in Levittown such as “colonial shutters,” “colonial sidelights,” “Cape Cod shingles,” and “elegant urban elements.” Scott Brown and Venturi used the same methods they had utilized in their earlier study of the theming of Las Vegas and suggested that the suburban house, just as a casino in Las Vegas, was also a decorated shed; a box with ornamentation. The quintessence of their studies was that they “rediscovered” the forgotten symbolism of the architectural form, which, they argued, had been abandoned by modernist architects. They claimed that a reassessment of ornaments and symbolism in architecture was needed and beneficial. The architects showed that the symbolic decorations found in suburbia were nostalgic and departed from Modernism. Their observations illustrate that the decoration of suburbia was already a practice in the 1970s.

Most observations of the phenomenon are much more recent than those of Venturi and Scott Brown because the phenomenon has become more and more visible throughout the years. In *Thirdspace – Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real and Imagined Places*, 1996, spatial theorist Edward Soja claims that all of Orange County California is a themed landscape. Urban geographer Paul Knox identifies the phenomenon in suburban America in *Metroburbia*, 2008. He argues that today, malls “rather [...] mimic old-fashioned Main Street settings, with tree-lined streets and lampposts, manicured shrubbery, made-up street names, and plenty of free parking.”<sup>27</sup> Knox, too, observes that the “preferred styling for signage, street-furniture, and nonresidential buildings in many upscale subdivisions and master-planned communities [...] draws heavily on nostalgic and vernacular references and is a major selling point.”<sup>28</sup> The same is true for individual suburban houses, as urban historian Dolores Hayden detects. She remarks in *Building Suburbia* from 2004 that in the last two to three decades, many

attempts have been made to distinguish the [functional,] bloated architectural scale of big boxes and outlet malls [in post-suburbia]. Developers may present them as villages by decorating them with Victorian trim on the central public circulation, leaving the rear for the trucks. Sometimes, old-fashioned items designed at the human scale, such as sailboats or train coaches, have been added to an outlet mall’s design. Their purpose is to serve as ‘memory points,’ landmarks to get thousands of customers from getting lost in a row of warehouses.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Knox 2008: 3.

<sup>28</sup> Knox 2008: 101.

<sup>29</sup> Hayden 2004: 177.

Nadine Dostrovsky and Richard Harris discuss the nostalgic theming of suburban developments in two 2008 articles titled "Style for the Zeitgeist: The Stealthy Revival of Historicist Housing Since the Late 1960s" and "The Suburban Culture of Building and the Reassuring Revival of Historicist Architecture since 1970." They argue the "revival of historicist styles [...] signaled a change in the zeitgeist,"<sup>30</sup> concluding that the greatest challenge is "to understand the zeitgeist that the domestic architecture signaled."<sup>31</sup> They also observe that in "some commodity realms" there is a "taste for retro styles, and this appears to be consistent with the revival of historicist architecture."<sup>32</sup> Professor of urban affairs Robert E. Lang and Jennifer B. LeFurgy also note that by "the 1970s there was a widespread rejection of modern styles in suburban residences. [...] Bigger and fancier suburban homes needed a new architecture, and they mostly found expression in classic revivals."<sup>33</sup>

These scholars recognize nostalgia in post-suburbia. Others even go a step further and suggest a connection between the nostalgia in the built environment and popular culture. Urban sociologist Mark Gottdiener states in *The Theming of America* from 1996 that "today's environmental symbolism is derived from our popular culture – from common themes that can also be found in films, popular music and novels. In turn, today's themed environments constitute, in fact, a part of our popular culture as well."<sup>34</sup> Gottdiener recognized several themes in the United States of the early 1990s. To him, nostalgia is "a popular thematic source" that dominates the American culture and landscape. This theme is about 1920s to 1950s America.<sup>35</sup> Urban historian Dolores Hayden (2004) also refers to this period when she assumes that homebuyers "thought they could combine historicist exteriors with wired interiors"<sup>36</sup> and that homebuilders reacted quickly. Residents "of neotraditional houses at times seemed as if they would like to step back into the frame of a Norman Rockwell painting."<sup>37</sup>

In his 1996 study *Main Street Revisited – Time, Space and Image Building in Small-Town America*, professor of history Richard Francaviglia observes that new shopping centers "look to earlier Main Streets for their inspiration."<sup>38</sup> He argues that

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<sup>30</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a: 16.

<sup>31</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a: 16.

<sup>32</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a: 16.

<sup>33</sup> Lang and LeFurgy 2007: 114.

<sup>34</sup> Gottdiener 1997: 3.

<sup>35</sup> Gottdiener 1997: 147.

<sup>36</sup> Hayden 2004: 223.

<sup>37</sup> Hayden 2004: 224.

<sup>38</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 188.

among these earlier main streets are also those from movies and Disney's Main Street, USA. To him, a

rather enduring design image of the small town has emerged in American popular culture during the mid- to late twentieth century. When portrayed in film and on television, [small-town depictions] rely, respectively, on beautifully constructed sets of the type seen in earlier Andy Hardy films of the 1930s and 1940s, or actual locations in towns such as Sierra Madre, California. Rod Serling and many other television and film writers scripted the classic or "typical" Main Street into their plots, and it appeared as a row of trim brick commercial buildings that used the street, the sidewalk, and public square as center stage. This popular imagery generates the impression that all Main Streets are much alike, when in fact, real small-town centers are rather diverse. Most towns featured on television and in films simplify complexities. An essential role of Hollywood (and of novelists, for that matter) is the actual creation of stereotypes that can be easily recognized and readily incorporated into the story, and the idealized small-town streetscape has served fiction as well.<sup>39</sup>

In a 2009 article on the rise of the lifestyle center, Professor of Architecture Mark L. Gillem suggests that the "image of Main Street has now also become the model for the latest fad in retailing. [...] These new venues are designed to mimic the much-loved Main Streets. [...] The enclosed mall is dead – replaced by the street."<sup>40</sup> In 2012, Professor of English and American Studies at Temple University, Miles Orvell, observes the same in *The Death and Life of Main Street*. He claims that some Wal-Mart stores have "undergone remodeling – including the creation of 'Main Street' facades on the otherwise massive nondescript buildings."<sup>41</sup> He believes that the small town is "a constructed space in American culture" that "lies at the heart of the American ethos" and that has a "strong and continuing appeal for Americans."<sup>42</sup> In *Rethinking Disney*, 2005, Professor of Regional Planning Frank Roost also argues that

neotraditional communities [...] are planned primarily for those Americans who have spent most of their lives in suburbia. Having grown up with postwar single-family homes, highways and shopping centers, their experience with traditional urban environments is sometimes very limited. But while their perceptions of today's urban environments may be harmed by stereotypes about cities' social and economic problems, their positive images of 'historic' small-town places are likely to derive from experiences in Disney's theme parks. Few places have influenced the collective memory of America's middle class in the past decades to the extent that Disneyland did.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 132.

<sup>40</sup> Gillem 2009: 15.

<sup>41</sup> Orvell 2012: 57.

<sup>42</sup> Orvell 2012: ix.

<sup>43</sup> Roost in Budd 2005: 278.

Here, Roost makes the point that primarily middle-class Americans aspire to nostalgia in post-suburbia. Professor of Modern History at Pennsylvania State University, Cary Cross, makes the same assumption in *Consumed Nostalgia* (2015): "Even if many adults did not grow up in Disney's small town, as over time fewer had, they often adopted Disney's fantasy of his youth as their own. Memory of a mediated past may have been more real than the one they actually knew."<sup>44</sup> To Cross the "nostalgia for a romantic version of small town" is also "repeatedly reinforced in the movies and reruns on TV."<sup>45</sup> These movies and reruns on TV also evolve around white, middle-class families. Both statements suggest that the theming of suburbia actually does not refer to lived experiences. It rather serves to activate the "memory of a mediated past" and a narrative pattern.

Holley Włodarczyk, who wrote an essay titled "The Cultural Meanings of the Leave it to Beaver House," makes another noteworthy point.<sup>46</sup> She observes that this 1950s family sitcom's setting "visually registers as an old-fashioned neighborhood filled with classic pre-World War II suburban architecture, a sharp contrast to the many monotonous 'little boxes made of ticky tacky' that"<sup>47</sup> defined postwar suburbia during the time *Leave It To Beaver* premiered. She continues to claim that at "a time when more modern, 'Contemporary' homes were increasingly incorporated into new suburban living environments, postwar television instead focused attention on the aesthetic and ideological forms of more 'homey' traditional typologies"<sup>48</sup> and the according gender setup. Włodarczyk connects the *Leave It To Beaver* house, a product of popular culture, to the built American landscape and states that this traditional house "continues to influence cultural norms directing what actually gets built and bought in suburbia today." She concludes that in

the popular imagination as in the built environment, the 'Leave It To Beaver house' still stands for a certain kind of suburban domestic dream and the popular media and images, cultural meanings and values we turn to over and over again when trying to (re-)construct it for ourselves.<sup>49</sup>

The popular imagination is not the result of lived experience in actual small towns. The truth is closer to the thesis that places such as Disneyland and other texts of popular culture, like movies, TV shows and Norman-Rockwell illustrations, helped to

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<sup>44</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

<sup>45</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

<sup>46</sup> *Leave it to Beaver* was an American TV sitcom of 234 episodes that aired from 1957 to 1963 on CBS.

<sup>47</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 15.

<sup>48</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>49</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

shape and naturalize ideas, concepts, and myths. The small-town theme has been constructed and consolidated by and in texts of popular American culture. Props (such as white picket fences or historic lampposts) known from texts of popular culture together form codes that convey the myth of the American small town in suburbia. This myth will be explored in chapter three in order to better understand the popularity of nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia. But a more precise differentiation of both suburbia and the small town is needed as well.

## DEFINING SUBURBIA, POST-SUBURBIA AND SMALL TOWNS

It is crucial to differentiate between suburbia, post-suburbia and small towns, or at least to be aware of the fact that there are small towns, “old-fashioned” suburban neighborhoods and massive postwar suburban developments that form entire post-suburban landscapes and constitute regions. Often, however, all of these different places are simply referred to as “suburban.” Nicholas A. Phelps stresses the difficulty to define post-suburbia in *Sequel to Suburbia: Glimpses of America’s Post-Suburban Future* from 2015. A differentiation will be executed in much more length in chapters two and four. For this introduction, it is sufficient to underline that postwar suburbia is different from prewar suburbia. Postwar suburbia is a “new type of terrain, that dissolved the urban/rural place distinctions that had, until that point, largely characterized American topography,”<sup>50</sup> as Robert Beuka states in *SuburbiaNation* from 2004. In postwar America, suburbia was often celebrated and was connected to a myth of American progress, as will be argued in chapter four.

A key characteristic of this landscape is the separation of living, working, shopping, and other functions of a town (see Figure 11). To new urbanist architect Leon Krier the central problem of Modernist urban planning is that it “works mainly through mono-functional zoning. As a result the circulation of people between zones by way of artificial arteries becomes the central preoccupation of the planner, generating an urban pattern” that is “anti-ecological.”<sup>51</sup> Zoning is a central characteristic of suburban planning. It basically is a method that ascribes a certain function to a given piece of land that is to be developed. There are zones for a particular type of residential development for example. Other zones are reserved for retail or for a civic function. The result is a segregated new city of different zones. Zoning is an effective tool of

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<sup>50</sup> Beuka 2004: 2.

<sup>51</sup> Harvey 1989: 67.

exclusion and discrimination, as George Lipsitz shows in *How Racism Takes place* from 2011.<sup>52</sup>

Postwar suburbia is car-centered and mass-produced. It consists of different zones of "overconcentrations of single uses."<sup>53</sup> This form of American suburbia has evolved in the postwar decades. Initially, these suburbs related to a "Central Business District."<sup>54</sup> Early suburbs were developed close to commuter rail stations that connected them to a downtown. However, this relationship between city and suburb has changed considerably. Since the late 1980s, it has been argued that suburbia has become independent from the traditional city, as all functions of the city have been dispersed throughout suburbia in mono-functional zones. The "single-focus metropolis disappeared and was replaced by an amorphous sprawl of population."<sup>55</sup> This has created a new landscape that is difficult to define. There doesn't even exist a name for this landscape either. Author, journalist and scholar Joel Garreau called it "Edge City"<sup>56</sup> in 1988, while professor of architecture and urban planning Robert Fishman introduced the term "Technoburb" in 1987.<sup>57</sup>

Later terms for the landscape in question are "Metroburbia,"<sup>58</sup> "Zoomurb,"<sup>59</sup> or "Boomburb."<sup>60</sup> Edward J. Soja introduced "Exopolis" as a discourse on what he refers to as the "Postmetropolis." The "formation of Exopolis," to Soja, is "a process that, on the one hand, points to the growth of Outer Cities and Edge Cities [...], on the other, to a dramatic reconstitution of Inner Cities."<sup>61</sup> According to Soja, the "radical deconstruction/reconstruction of the urban fabric has stimulated many other neologisms for the new forms emerging in the postmetropolis" such as "post-suburbia, metroplex, technopoles, technoburbs, urban villages, country-cities, regional cities, [or] the 100-mile city."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. Lipsitz 2011: 30.

<sup>53</sup> Krier 1987 quoted in Harvey 1989: 67.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Jackson 1985.

<sup>55</sup> Teaford 2006: 3.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Garreau 1988.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Fishman 1987a.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Knox 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Hayden 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Lang and LeFurgy 2007.

<sup>61</sup> Soja in Bridge and Watson 2000: 192.

<sup>62</sup> Soja in Bridge and Watson 2000: 193.



**Figure 11.** The impact of zoning is illustrated in this 2012 aerial photo of the eastern part of Leesburg, VA. Commercial zones are located around the intersection of the two major boulevards. Several strip malls have been constructed here. Restaurants are placed closer to the roads and in individual buildings. Various residential developments are located throughout the area. Apartment buildings are separated from single-family houses. A self-storage center, a church, an elementary school, and an office park are placed along a winding parkway. All functions of a town are present, yet they are arranged in a separated fashion that calls for frequent car trips everyday. This post-suburban landscape is self-sufficient and not dependent from any urban core. While the layout of this area is suburban, the architectural styles of the buildings are nostalgic and relate to the dominant small town. 2012 Photo by the author.

In this dissertation I use the term post-suburbia to acknowledge the changed relationship between urban core and suburbs and the independence of this landscape from a central Business district. In *The Metropolitan Revolution – The Rise of Post Urban America* from 2006, Jon C. Teaford points to an important characteristic of this new landscape, which began to take shape after the Second World War.

In 1945 metropolitan Americans knew quite clearly whether they were black or white, [...]. The metropolitan revolution of the second half of the twentieth century thus swept the spatial and racial certainties of the past. The black-white, single focus metropolis with clearly identifiable central cities and dependent suburbs yielded to a strange new world that traditional thinkers could barely comprehend.<sup>63</sup>

He concludes that American metropolitan areas “had become spatially and culturally fragmented,” being a mosaic of “enclaves for the middle-class nuclear family,” “special communities for senior citizens,” “gentrifying communities for singles, gays, [...] artists and others who deemed themselves bohemian.” He also observes that the poor “were

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<sup>63</sup> Teaford 2006: 4.

relegated to the areas no one else wanted.”<sup>64</sup> What Teaford criticizes the most about this development is that all these groups “did not need to mix on a day-to-day basis.”<sup>65</sup> This multidimensional and polycentric landscape is broadly criticized, as it clearly did not create the utopian world the optimistic postwar myth of progress had promised. This disillusionment will be addressed in chapter five.

Small towns are even harder to define than post-suburbia as will be shown in more detail in chapter three. They are smaller and grew more slowly and thus more gradually and stayed more compact. They are often not master-planned but do follow specific design principles. However, small towns can be considered predecessors of suburbia. This is especially true for those small towns that are close to bigger cities. Small towns as well as cities traditionally combine different functions so that people were less dependent on cars. This is, of course, because many of America’s small towns originate from a time when there were no or few cars. In suburbia, however, the small town’s functions are dispersed and located in specific zones. Historically, many small towns have been swallowed by expanding cities and merged with the overall postwar suburban expansion of the United States. This makes it difficult to distinguish between suburbia and small-town neighborhoods. Small towns in proximity to cities have been considered as suburban towns. In 1894, W.M. Lambert writes in *Lambert’s Suburban Architecture* that

within a circle of fifty miles of the metropolis (of New York) there dwells a population fully equal in numbers to that within its borders, and with the increased facilities of transit, thousands of New York business men have settled in these pleasant towns, where, after the turmoil of the day, they can enjoy the purer air and more pleasant surroundings of country life.<sup>66</sup>

These commuter towns often still had all the features of traditional small towns in the first half of the 20th century. They were considered desirable places to live. It was during the postwar years that these towns were increasingly incorporated into the expanding metropolitan areas of the United States. The distinction between small towns and suburbia was blurred even more. At the same time, a specific, collective image of small-town America was created and maintained in popular culture. This so-called dominant small town is a product of popular culture. It can be witnessed, for example, in Disneyland, in Norman-Rockwell illustrations, and in movies. I argue that the

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<sup>64</sup> Teaford 2006: 4.

<sup>65</sup> Teaford 2006: 4.

<sup>66</sup> Lambert 1894: 4.

dominant small town needs to be looked at in texts of popular culture more closely to answer the open questions the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia raises.

## QUESTIONS AND APPROACH

The initial questions remain unanswered. Why is nostalgic architecture popular in American post-suburbia today? When and why did it begin to replace more contemporary architecture? Who pursues pastness in post-suburbia for which reason? While several scholars have recognized the nostalgia connected to post-suburbia, others point to a link between texts of popular culture and these themed environments. In order to understand the popularity of nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia, this connection needs to be examined much more. However, this has not been done, nor has the nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia been described in detail. So far, there is both a lack of description as well as a lack of interpretation. Dostrovsky and Harris, whom I quoted before, state that the “revival of historicist styles [...] signaled [...] change.”<sup>67</sup> They conclude that the greatest challenge will be to understand the change that the historicist styles indicate. To understand the theming of post-suburbia it needs to be analyzed in ways that include the texts of popular culture because an exclusively urban geographical, historical, socio-political or architectural approach cannot answer the questions it raises. The challenge of understanding the phenomenon can only be met with an interdisciplinary approach. This approach is yet missing in the discussion of themed post-suburbia. Popular culture determines the theming of post-suburbia. Consequently only an intertextual cultural-studies approach can explain the popularity of nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia in different and more efficient ways than approaches of other disciplines.

In order to explore the interrelationships of nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia and popular culture, a detailed description of this themed landscape is presented in the second chapter. This will illustrate that the theme refers to the dominant small town known from popular culture. Using the *Back to the Future* trilogy as a blueprint I will then venture into the three constantly changing realms of past, present, and future in order to analyze the historical and cultural connections between the nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia and today’s dominant small-town (chapter three), the postwar myth of American progress (chapter four), and today’s turn away from progress to pastness (chapter five). In these chapters I will answer the open questions. Chapter three will serve to gather reasons for the popularity of nostalgic small-town

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<sup>67</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a: 16.

architecture in post-suburbia. Chapter four and five will address when and why contemporary architecture was replaced by more nostalgic styles. Together, these chapters will reveal who pursues pastness in post-suburbia and for which reasons.

## 2. NOSTALGIC ARCHITECTURE IN POST-SUBURBIA

*We're trying to bring back the DNA of towns and small cities that has been lost – in some ways, it's storytelling.*<sup>68</sup>

*Andrew B. Cougar,  
President of Historical Concepts Architecture  
and Planning, Atlanta and New York*

This chapter serves to illustrate the observation of nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia made by several scholars I quoted in the introduction. I will describe in more detail than has been done before how post-suburbia is themed to resemble a specific vision of small-town America. In doing so I want to highlight different communities and different zones such as commercial and residential zones. While the examples I present are all to be found in the American West, I will also show that the pursuit of pastness is a national phenomenon at the end of this chapter. My first place of observation is Aurora, Colorado.

### 2.1 GREATER DENVER: NEW MAIN STREETS IN THE OLD WEST

East Maplewood Lane is a random residential street in Saddle Rock Ridge, a neighborhood located in the southern part of Aurora, Colorado, near Denver. Many of the houses here have front porches and window shutters. Some of the buildings appear to be made of stone. Others seem to be built from wood. Trees grow next to the sidewalks. The gardens are all well maintained. Here and there an American flag is affixed to one of the posts of the porches. Old-fashioned lampposts add to the small-town charm of this calm neighborhood.

But a closer look at Saddle Rock Ridge reveals that it is not a small-town neighborhood. It is located in the middle of Denver's sprawling post-suburban outskirts. East Maplewood Lane is one of countless identical residential streets in suburban Aurora. These streets cover square mile after square mile. The streetscape is designed to look older than it is. It is simulating something it is not. The builders of this development tried to create the effect of a small-town residential street complete with

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<sup>68</sup> Gamerman 2016.

porches, window shutters, and old-fashioned light posts. Also, they used materials that mimic natural stone or wood. A closer look reveals the decorative nature of these small-town signifiers: the porches are too small to actually sit on. Moreover, the houses are not located close enough to the street to chat with neighbors passing by while sitting on the porch. The porches simply have a decorative and symbolic function. The trees have been planted recently and the old-fashioned streetlamps are new replicas. The sidewalks are extremely narrow, while the houses have three garages and the driveways make up most of the front yards. There are no pedestrians passing by, as there is no place nearby to walk to. Additionally, while this street has been named East Maplewood Lane, there is no maple anywhere to be found. This setting, which can be seen all over suburbs in the United States, is composed of different symbols that signify the idea of the American small town.

What could be considered the center of this post-suburban landscape is located on the other side of State Highway E 470. Here, a new regional mall has been themed to look like the business district of a historic small town. On South Main Street, old-fashioned street signs were installed and landscaped gardens face the six-lane boulevard that leads towards Town Square. The lampposts on the tree-lined street have been designed to look like old gas lamps. Festive banners adorn them. South Main Street intersects with Southlands Parkway. At this intersection, two buildings with distinctive corners mark the entrance to the main street commercial area. A monumental sign reads "Main Street" in golden letters. It is located in a small park. The buildings are decorated with materials that appear to be brick and limestone. There are awnings, on-street parking, flowerbeds, and more old-fashioned lampposts. South Main Street intersects with other streets that have been named East State Avenue, East Commons Avenue, East Town Square Avenue and East Plaza Avenue. In the middle of South Main Street, there is a clock tower with a plaque that reads: "Southlands 2006." The street ends in front of an art-deco styled cinema, which is the focal point of Town Square. This larger plaza contains two pavilions and landscaped formal gardens. Brick buildings with shops surround it. This make-belief American small town is called Southlands Mall (see Figures 12 and 13). It is one of Aurora's busiest shopping centers. South Main Street boasts an array of 150 national and international chain stores. There are no residential houses in walking distance to the mall.

The aerial view of this center shows that it is isolated from the residential developments by an ocean of parking and major roads. East State Avenue or East Commons Avenue connect the mall not with residential areas but with enormous parking lots. Moreover, these parking fields are bordered on two sides by strip malls.

Many nostalgically decorated big-box stores are lined up here, facing more parking fields. There is a Wal-Mart Supercenter, a Sam's Club, a Bed, Bath and Beyond, a Pier 1 Imports, a World Market, a Ross, and other retail mainstays. The Babies 'R' Us store imitates an entire block of historic main street buildings. On the west and south edge of South Main Street there are smaller free-standing buildings: an Olive Garden, a Village Inn, a Red Lobster – all with their own parking lots separated from South Main Street. Each of these smaller buildings is themed in a nostalgic fashion. This is the new center of the sprawling southwest end of suburban Aurora, which is expanding into the open countryside. The nostalgic developments here have names such as Tallyn's Reach, Sorrel Ranch, Tollgate Crossing, or Heritage Eagle Bend. A few miles north of Southlands there is a master-planned community that has been named "Traditions" by its developer. The community's main arterial is called Jamestown Way.



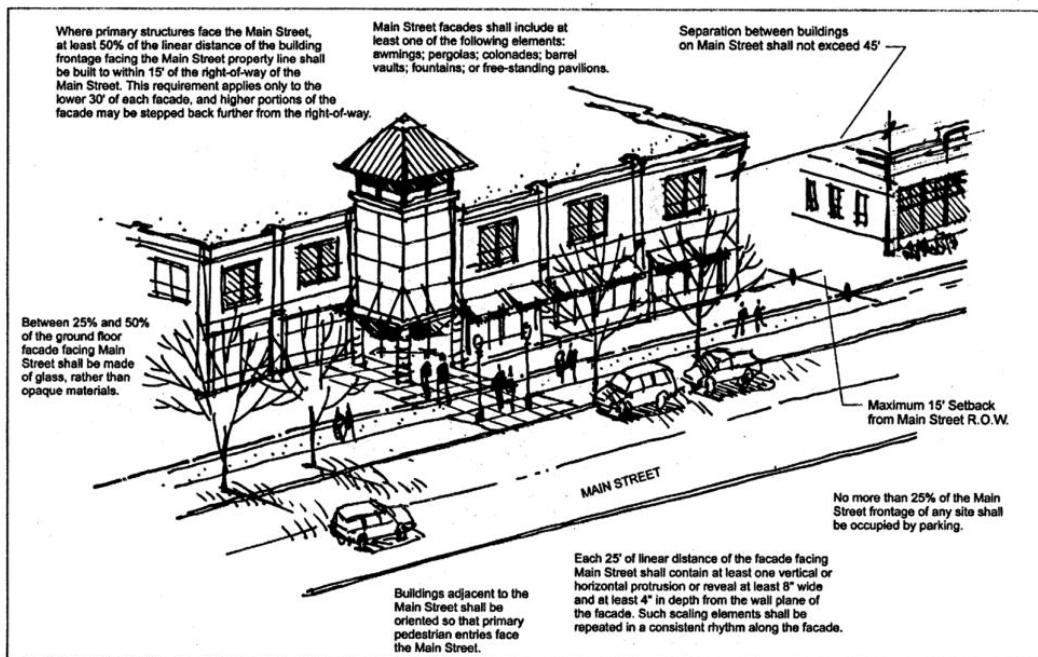
**Left: Figure 12.** Southlands Main Street in 2010. The clocktower and awnings are signifiers of the mythical small town. Photo courtesy "Mountain Mike Johans." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aurora,\\_CO,\\_USA\\_-\\_panoramio\\_\(1\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aurora,_CO,_USA_-_panoramio_(1).jpg). Accessed May 26, 2017.

**Right: Figure 13.** The parking lot behind Southlands Main Street. Even the back of the stores is loosely decorated according to the small-town theme. Photo courtesy "Mountain Mike Johans." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aurora,\\_CO,\\_USA\\_-\\_panoramio.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aurora,_CO,_USA_-_panoramio.jpg). Accessed May 26, 2018.

Aurora itself is not a "real" town either. It is considered the largest suburb of Denver, Colorado. The community has ballooned to the size of its mile-high neighbor. Aurora experienced its first major phase of growth between 1960 and 1980. Today, it is a sprawling post-suburb of 300,000 and demographically the third largest city of Colorado. Aurora mainly consists of single-family homes, shopping plazas, malls, and office parks. The city has no historical central business district. It is best characterized as a polycentric suburban landscape. In this modern and engineered landscape all the functions of a city have been separated from one another. At the same time, the engineered nature of a place like Southlands is camouflaged by nostalgic decoration. This nostalgic aesthetic has even become mandatory in Aurora.

## MANDATORY PASTNESS: THE E470 ZONE

The Aurora Planning Department offers an illustrative insight into the suburban landscape of nostalgic buildings that is emerging at the edge of suburban Denver. Southlands Mall is part of what is called the E470 Zone. The development of this zone is organized by the E470 Corridor Zoning Regulations, which aim to achieve “the highest possible levels of community and building design consistent with the healthy economic development of the corridor.”<sup>69</sup> The regulations contain planning guidelines for the new residential and commercial areas of the E470 corridor (see Figures 14-18). This document illustrates how the pursuit of pastness has become mandatory in post-suburbia. The regulations request that new developments have to be decorated according to a nostalgic aesthetic. The regulations call for several architectural features that new commercial structures must contain. Among them are patios, seating areas, arcades, pedestrian plazas, playgrounds, water features, clock towers or any other “deliberately shaped and highly visible outdoor amenity.” All new buildings must contain one of the following features: awnings, architectural tower features, or any other “easily recognized historic architectural style.”<sup>70</sup>

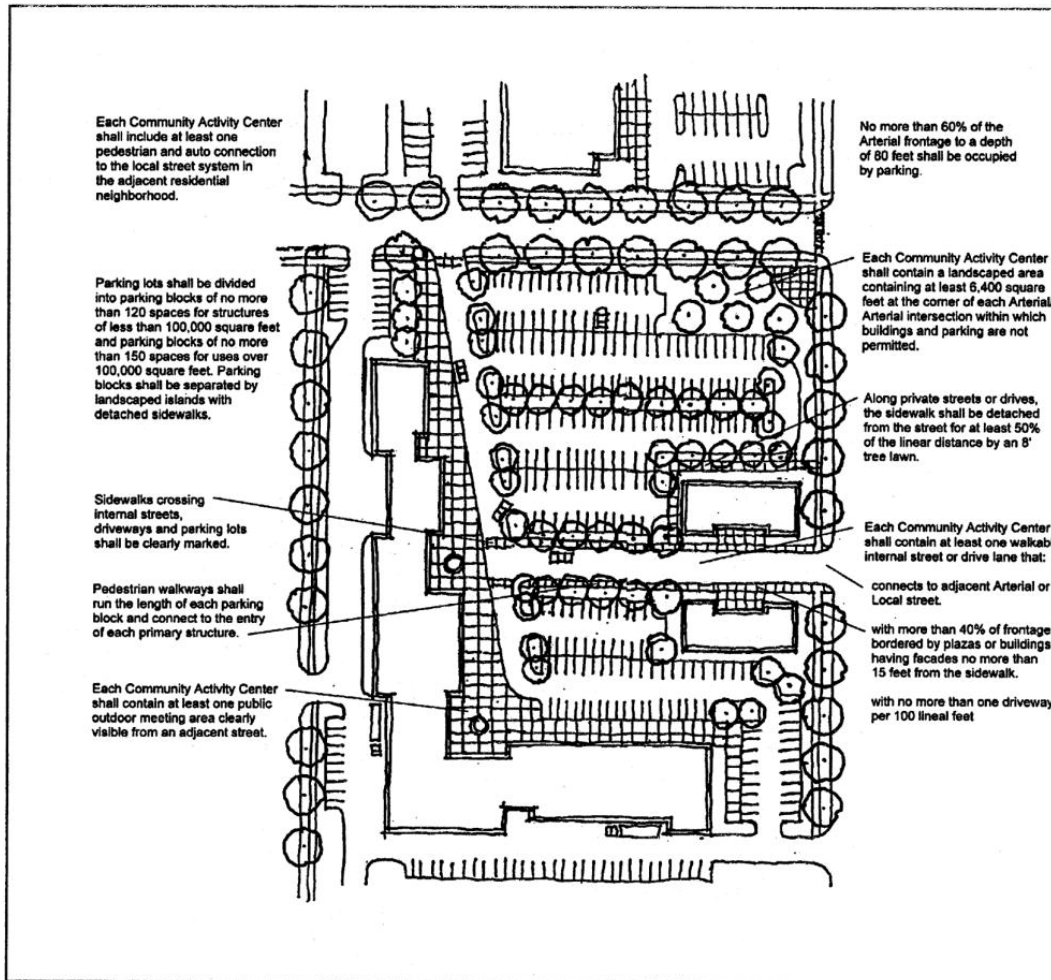


**Figure 14.** This and the following illustrations (15-18) and are taken from the planning and zoning manual for the Northeast Plains Zone District, 2005. Southlands Mall is the outcome of regulations like these. Courtesy City of Aurora. Retrieved from:

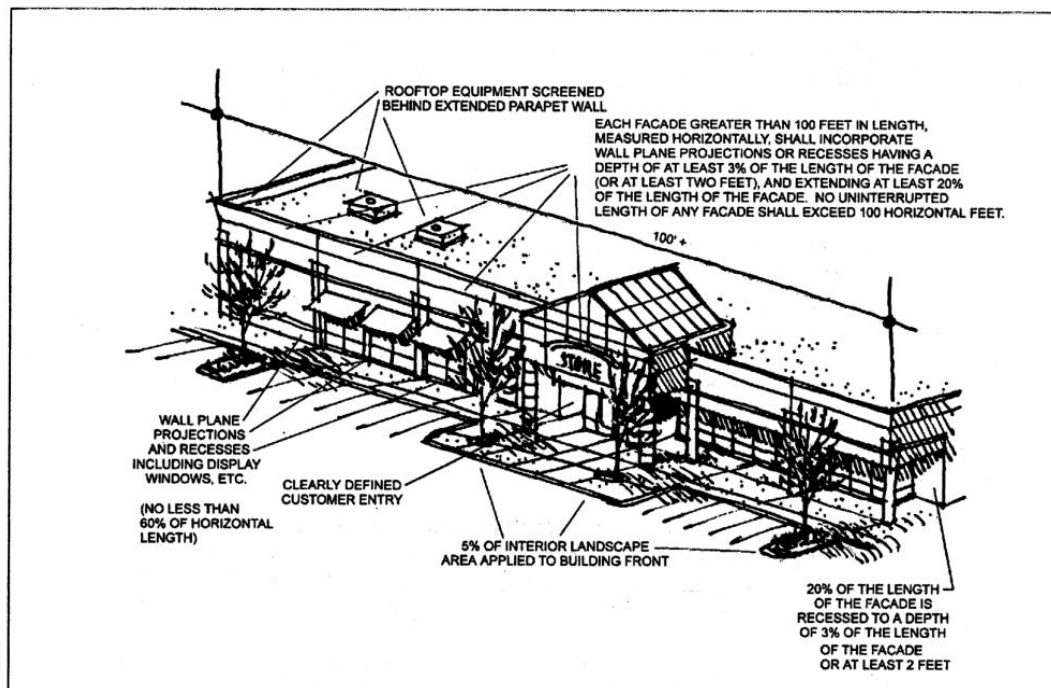
[https://www.auroragov.org/business\\_services/development\\_center/code\\_\\_\\_rules/building\\_and\\_zoning\\_code/](https://www.auroragov.org/business_services/development_center/code___rules/building_and_zoning_code/). Accessed July 6, 2018.

<sup>69</sup> City of Aurora: Northeast Plains Zone District, Article 10, Chapter 146, Aurora Municipal Code: Section 146-1019.

<sup>70</sup> City of Aurora: Northeast Plains Zone District, Article 10, Chapter 146, Aurora Municipal Code: Section 146-1019.



**Figure 15.** This is an example for a community activity center. Each of these centers should contain at least one "public outdoor meeting area" and at least one "walkable internal street." The most dominant part of this center, however, is the parking lot.

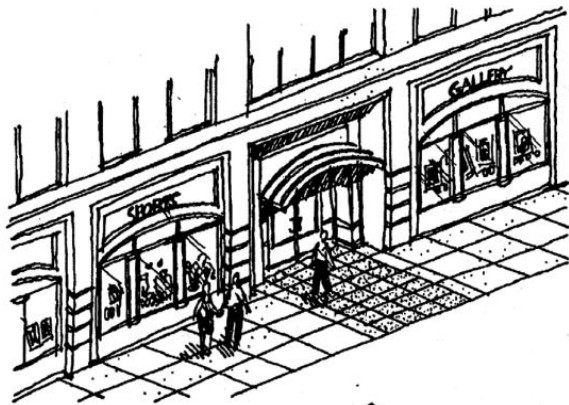


**Figure 16.** The design of big-box stores is also highly regulated. No uninterrupted part of the facade "shall exceed 100 horizontal feet."

The design of all buildings shall employ textured surfaces, projections, recesses, shadow lines, color, window patterns, overhangs, reveals, changes in parapet heights, and similar architectural devices to avoid long, unbroken, flat wall of 50' or greater.



Each building taller than 30 feet in height shall be designed so that the massing or facade articulation of the building presents a clear base, middle and top.



To promote a sense of human scale, special accent materials and design details shall be incorporated into all first floor facades and paving areas abutting pedestrian walkways. Such features shall include, but are not limited to:

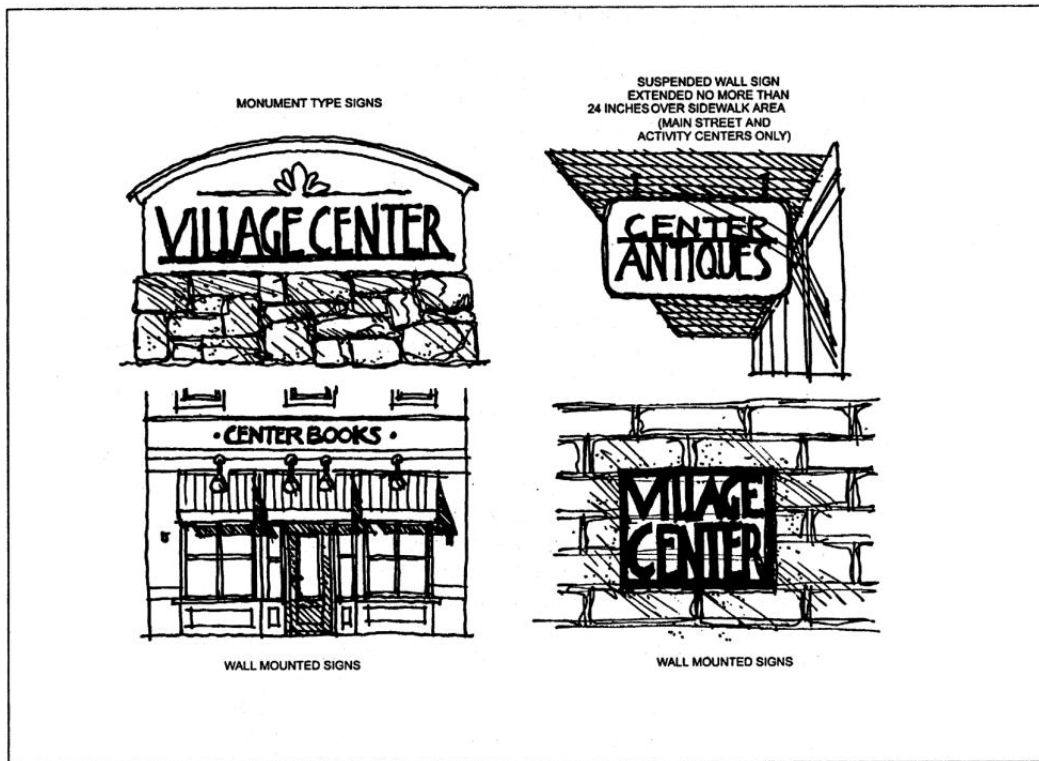
1. Changes in paving patterns at building entrances and other significant pedestrian locations;
2. Special decorative wall patterns, textures, accent materials or graphics;
3. Trim banks and reveals;
4. Special architectural features marking pedestrian entries; and
5. Display windows



Retail structures of 20,000 sq. ft. or more shall include at least one of the following:

1. An outside pedestrian covered walkway or arcade;
2. Awnings;
3. Visible areas of sloped roofs at a pitch of 1 in 3 or greater;
4. One or more architectural tower features; or
5. Buildings designed with an easily recognized historic architectural style

**Figure 17.** It is also regulated in detail how all new retail centers need to be designed to “promote a sense of human scale.” Buildings should be “designed with an easily recognized historic architectural style.”



**Figure 18.** Examples for allowed monument signs, wall-mounted signs, and suspended signs.

“Easily recognized historic architectural” styles are the law. Suburban big-box stores and malls have to be designed to appear historic and smaller than they are from the outside. They have to have an overlay of easily recognizable historic decorations. The E470 guidelines categorize commercial developments into three types: neighborhood-activity centers (NAC), community-activity centers (CAC), and regional-activity centers (RAC). CACs and RACs have to contain walkable main streets and architectural features that create a historic look. But these walkable main streets are not connected to the residential areas of the growth corridor. Instead, the regulations call for the separation of the commercial sections from the residential areas. Materials are highly regulated as well. There are further regulations about the placement and design of signs, the illumination of the buildings at night, the architectural articulation of facades, and the landscaping. As a result, each new building looks nostalgic. A nostalgic but isolated main street like the one at Southlands is the direct outcome of such regulations and the only architecture possible under the current regulations.

Similarly themed centers can be found throughout the Greater Denver area. The Shops at Northfield in Stapleton is described as a new “shopping district” on the project’s website. The mall is located in empty fields next to Interstate 70 and 210. It features another new main street. The mall is anchored in the north by a Macy’s and in the south by an art-deco themed cinema. On both sides of the main street there are huge parking facilities behind the shops. No residents live nearby. In the east and west

of the main street, further big-box stores can be found: a Super Target, a JC Penney, a Bass Pro Shop Outdoor World, Old Navy, Office Max, Off Broadway Shoes, and others. Additionally, there are chain restaurants on the periphery of the mall. Northfield belongs to Stapleton, Denver, – a New Urbanist community for 10,000 residents that is developed by Forest City Enterprises. KB Home is building a Martha Stewart community in this development, where all homes are themed according to Stewart’s private historic residences in Maine and Connecticut. In the north west of the Denver area, one more main street has been constructed. The Shops at Walnut Creek has a main street called Town Center Drive. The center is located next to the North Foothills Highway and in the middle of a sprawling suburban landscape. A clock tower is the focus of Town Center Drive, which is lined by small shops. Big-box stores are located off Main Street and behind parking lots. The stores have awnings, hanging signs and the architecture is nostalgic. Again, there are old-fashioned streetlights with banners. Several traffic circles are landscaped and have fountains. An American flag is installed in the center of Town Center Drive.

## **PASTNESS AS A NEW LIFESTYLE**

The centers described above are called lifestyle centers. They have quickly become enormously popular in the United States. In 2002, there were 20 such centers nationally. By 2015, this number had reached over 400.<sup>71</sup> Today, every metropolitan region of the United States has several of them. 20 new lifestyle centers open every year or replace older malls. They are the fastest growing retail format in the United States. None of these new centers has the word “mall” in their name. “Town center,” “walk,” “commons,” “village,” “streets,” or “market” are usually part of the new centers’ names. “To avoid that crass old M-word, high-end shopping venues now go by a new name.”<sup>72</sup> These centers are built in new, affluent suburbs and are meant to reflect the lifestyle of their residents.

In an article about lifestyle centers Mark Gillem argues that they have much more in common with Disney’s Main Street, USA, than with real main streets. Like Disney’s Main Street, USA, the new lifestyle centers are private places that are controlled by a company. Gillem also argues that like

Disney’s Main Street, U.S.A., lifestyle centers segregate themselves from the larger community. They withdraw from the real public realm – from its congested arterials, isolated land use zones, and inadequate public spaces. On

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<sup>71</sup> Hardwick 2015.

<sup>72</sup> Bhatnagar 2005.

large parcels at the suburban fringe or next to Interstate highways, they create a fantasy shopping experience, insulated by parking lots, garages, and blank walls.<sup>73</sup>

Gillem quotes Michael Southworth, who is professor of City and Regional Planning at Berkley. Gillem observes that according to Southworth,

the reason for the surge in demand for such places is that 'people are experiencing mall saturation or 'mall fatigue' and have become bored with the inwardly focused, disconnected and placeless suburban shopping center.' [Southworth] also suggested that 'developers have come to realize there is something about Main Street that people want, and if malls are going to survive, they are going to have to have some of the features of Main Street.' These features, however, will not be the small-scale, local businesses once at the heart of most Main Streets. Nor will they include the public places that once occupied prominent positions on many Main Streets; libraries, city halls, and churches are not part of the pro-forma. Rather, developers are trying to capitalize on image – to use imageability to capture market share.<sup>74</sup>

This is very true for the themed places in Aurora, where chain stores are located in buildings that mimic traditional main-street architecture. These buildings are neither home to local businesses nor are they public places. They are only references to images. Let's move to Northern California now to explore how malls used to look like in the United States.

## **2.2 NORTHERN CALIFORNIA: BACK FROM THE FUTURE IN THE BAY AREA**

Hilltop Mall outside of Richmond, California is an enormous concrete structure which has been sitting like a rock in a sea of parking fields since it opened in 1976. This mall is no lifestyle center like Southlands. It was developed by the retail pioneer Alfred Taubman and was designed by architect Avner Naggar. The facades are bleak and monumental. There are no windows and almost no decoration. The mall was built to be visible from a distance. Some of the edges of the building are rounded and some parts of the facades have rounded indentations. A circular road and several parking fields surround this modern structure that is the complete opposite of the Southlands project discussed before. Constructing a building like this would be illegal in many American municipalities today: it has no awnings, no clock tower, and does not boast an easily recognizable historic style.

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<sup>73</sup> Gillem 2009: 24.

<sup>74</sup> Southworth 2005: 152f. quoted in Gillem 2009: 15.

A description of the mall's 1976 interior (see Figure 22) on BigMallRat.com, a blog that rates malls and publishes vintage images and information, reads:

Taubman-esque features are evident. Keeping with the style of the time, you'll find eye-catching red carpet and a groovy circular walkway. [...] In a contrast to moody browns of the early Seventies, Hilltop mall featured futuristic trends in color choices. As was popular in the late seventies, you'll find the basics: black, white, and any primary color.<sup>75</sup>

Today, the inside of the mall still is as modernist as it is outside, but the bold color scheme has been altered to match the facades: grey and white flooring have replaced the red and violet carpets in the central rotunda. There is a futuristic spiral ramp that connects the two levels in the central rotunda. Beneath the ramp there is an illuminated fountain of terraced circular basins. Near the fountain and the ramp, several steps used to surround a plaza. The entire area is framed by in-built seating. Circles and round shapes are the main motif of Hilltop Mall. Even floor tiles, light fixtures and the mall furniture were designed to fit into this abstract theme, as did the font of the original signage of the mall. The information booth features a cylindrical signpost and an elegant circular black desk that corresponds to the shape of the central court. A futuristic sculpture, *Solar Cantata*, by artist Charles Perry hangs from the ceiling. The artist created artwork for many Taubman centers. The sculpture is made from golden steel tube circles that intertwine and enclose each other. It was especially designed for this particular spot.<sup>76</sup>

Hilltop Mall in suburban Northern California (see Figure 19) is a good example to illustrate how technology and research were used in the 1970s to maximize profit and to create a truly suburban shopping experience. Regional malls such as Hilltop provided

an ordered center for suburban retail commerce that would take advantage of the shift in population and the creation of the new highway networks. [They] would provide a social and commercial center for that lynchpin of the new postwar economy, the consumer housewife.<sup>77</sup>

In his biography, Taubman describes the characteristics of the suburban malls his company built in the 1970s:

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<sup>75</sup> Mall Memories 2007.

<sup>76</sup> This information was given to the author in an Email from Perry's wife.

<sup>77</sup> Orvell 2012: 52.

We stacked the stores on two levels, creating mall corridors between the anchor department stores of around 1,000 feet, a comfortable stroll of three city blocks. We punched holes in the upper floor, allowing customers to see the stores on both levels and encouraging shopping on both sides of the corridor [...] We also installed clear handrails on the upper level to preserve unobstructed sight lines [...] We surrounded the mall with convenient, close-in parking fields, free of charge.<sup>78</sup>

Taubman explains that his malls were so meticulously planned that even the elevation of the site was changed to create two different levels of surrounding parking. In the case of Hilltop Mall, the northern parking fields are one level higher and 15% larger compared to the southern parking fields. This manipulation of the site was done to create an equal stream of customers to both levels of the mall. Shoppers parking on the northern parking fields enter the mall on the second level, while those who choose to park on the southern parking fields have only access to the first floor. This system guarantees an equal distribution of shoppers throughout the entire mall; all people frequent the same shops, being forced to get to different floors. Taubman proudly notes that “even regular visitors to [his] malls may not notice that there are upper and lower parking lots.” But Taubman did even more to modernize and control shopping in suburbia:

To allow easy access to any parking area (our centers have no front door or back door), we designed a ring road circling the entire property [...] Inside we created an environment in which very little would stand between the customer and the merchandise. Every surface was important. For example, we determined that the flooring [should be] attractive terrazzo tile patterned with regular grout joints to allow economical repair and give women with thin-soled shoes more confidence and comfort as they walked the mall. This was a dramatic improvement over a typical city’s cracked sidewalks, gutters, and gratings. And to assure easy access for baby strollers and wheelchairs, our centers were built essentially barrier free. Above, ceilings were designed of sculptured white plaster, mimicking the effect of billowy clouds – comforting but not interesting enough to draw shoppers’ eyes away from the all-important store fronts and merchandise. Skylights were installed to spill pools of light into the space, encouraging movement. [...] To enliven the space we also incorporated food court areas, punctuated by museum-quality art, into our design.<sup>79</sup>

This quote reveals much about Taubman’s malls. He created a completely controlled environment. These modern malls are places where everything has been done to make shopping more efficient than on the old American main streets. They were targeted at

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<sup>78</sup> Taubman 2007: 36.

<sup>79</sup> Taubman 2007: 37.

suburban mothers and were seen as an efficient alternative to traditional American downtowns.

Taubman stresses throughout the first chapters of his autobiography how very dysfunctional – from an economic point of view – he considers traditional American downtowns to have been. He explains that many elements of a traditional downtown hold the customer back from shopping and spending money. To him, the shop density is not concentrated enough, the pavement is not comfortable enough and parking is not sufficient. The results of these observations were his malls: 100% functional new retail environments for the new suburbs. Every design decision in these malls has to do with increasing sales in every single store. This became the philosophy of the Taubman Company. The aesthetic malls express a firm belief in progress and the future. Taubman malls were made for new suburbia and consequently did not imitate historic urban realms.

Avner Naggar, the architect of Hilltop and of every other Taubman center west of the Mississippi stresses that his work as an architect evolved around this main philosophy of the Taubman Company. Naggar and a team of ten architects were free to design everything they fancied around the fundamental cornerstones described above. Nothing should distract the customer from the merchandise. The limited variations of themes and the standardized design of Taubman malls is part of their success. Eastridge Mall was designed by Naggar and developed by Taubman as well. It was even praised by mall-pioneer Victor Gruen, who had developed the first fully enclosed shopping center in 1956. Eastridge was designed around the motif of the hexagon. Here, “a triangular composition of outwardly moving power, upward and downward, generating energy on all sides, and traveling strongly down the vistas of the long malls, interlaced with ramps and stairs, with views from level to level beneath angular skylights.”<sup>80</sup> Naggar remarks that “to many customers this was too powerful – even ‘awesome.’”<sup>81</sup> As a reaction to these public comments, Hilltop was designed around a softer theme of circles. Avner Naggar recalled in an interview the author had with him in 2010: “I thought: Let’s do circles. They are more inviting than straight lines.”<sup>82</sup> Terrazzo tiles that were produced by a Mexican vendor inspired this theme. As soon as this theme had been chosen, everything was designed around it.

Naggar described several obstacles that occurred while following the circle theme for Hilltop Mall. The characteristically vaulted and sculptured ceiling of Taubman

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<sup>80</sup> Temko 1993: 171

<sup>81</sup> Temko 1993: 171

<sup>82</sup> Naggar 2010.

malls that was to resemble clouds had to be adapted to the circle theme. The shapes had to be round. To achieve this, a new method had to be invented for Hilltop Mall: bending gypsum board. Hilltop was the first mall where this method was applied. During the day the mall is lit by natural light. At night, special fixtures that were designed especially for Hilltop illuminate the mall. Artificial light is used throughout Taubman malls to make people forget time and shop past dusk. Another obstacle Naggar faced when planning Hilltop Mall was the fountain area in the central court. Here, black concrete had to be molded in a difficult technical process because this was the only way to form circular shapes. The ramp in the central court was the most challenging part of the mall, he recalled. It embraces a hanging sculpture. Naggar stressed in the interview that building these Taubman malls was not only about finding new and innovative designs and themes, but also about finding new building methods. These modern structures were about functionality and innovation. A mall like Hilltop was designed to be 100% functional and at the same time aesthetic in its own right.



**Figure 19.** Aerial view of Hilltop Mall in Richmond, CA. 2014. Photo courtesy Michael Rymer.

Hilltop and other malls such as Eastridge (see Figure 23) serve specific suburban functions and their design is the outcome of rational, innovative thinking (see Figures 20 and 21). Still today, although the bold colors have been changed and a nostalgic carrousel has been installed in the center court, the entire interior of Hilltop Mall looks and feels very radical and not nostalgic at all. Another Taubman mall of the era - Fairlane Town Center in Dearborn, Michigan - featured a monorail, which

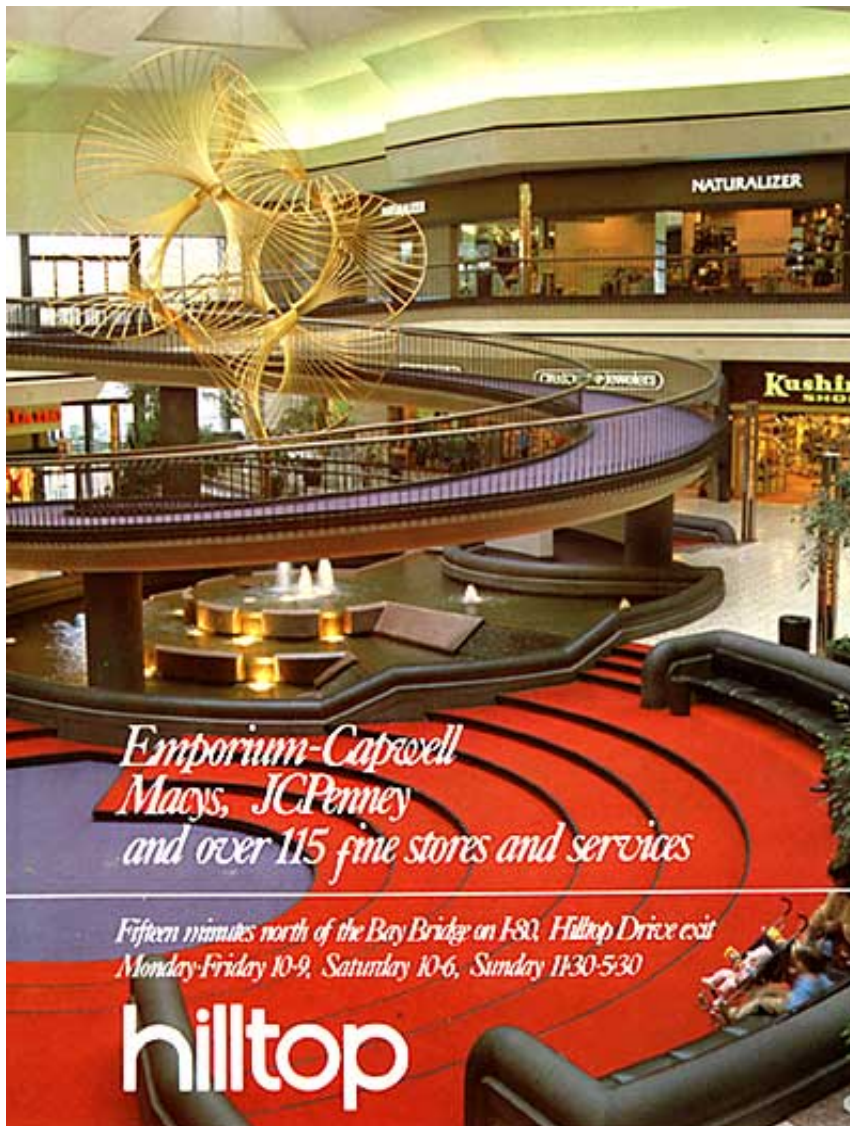
connected the mall to the nearby Hyatt Regency. These modern malls expressed optimism about the future and did not deny their suburban condition.



**Figure 20.** The tiles, the fountain, the ramp, and Perry's soaring sculpture in the center of Hilltop Mall all reflect the circular theme. 2009 photo by the author.



**Figure 21.** The second floor and the ceiling are designed to match the circular theme. The handrails are clear to enable unobstructed views to the stores on the upper level. 2009 photo by the author.



**Figure 22.** The original interior of Hilltop Mall. Scan of a 1970s postcard courtesy "Mall Memories Blog." Retrieved from: <http://bigmallrat.blogspot.de/search?q=hilltop+mall>. Accessed July 6, 2018.



**Figure 23.** Eastridge's has a hexagonal theme and also features a sculpture by Charles Perry. Scan of a 1970 postcard courtesy "Mall Memories Blog." Retrieved from: <http://bigmallrat.blogspot.de/search?q=eastridge>. Accessed July 6, 2018.



**Figures 24 (top) and 25 (bottom).** The entrances to two of the mall's anchor stores still feature the modern architecture of 1976. 2009 photos by the author.

**APPLE PIE COURT**

The detailed discussion of Hilltop, a typical mall of the 1970s, is important to realize the profound differences between a place like Southlands and the Modernist suburban malls that were built between the 1960s and 1980s. Their detailed discussion also

highlights the contrast between Hilltop Mall and a new housing development on the edge of the mall's parking lot. The wide ring that completely surrounds the mall and its vast parking lots forms a large, perfect oval that measures nearly 600 meters at its widest point. Along the ring road one finds dispersed buildings that house banks and other services (see Figure 19).

But in the eastern part of this road these dispersed buildings give way to an extremely dense row of nostalgically themed town houses built directly on the edge of the ring road. This housing development from around 2005 creates a remarkable contrast to the older mall. Here, it feels like returning back from the future that the suburban mall still embraces. The architecture of the houses does not follow the bold aesthetic of the mall's style but puts forward a very traditional style. This has the consequence that the town houses from the early 2000s look older than the 1970s mall. While the mall lacks any nostalgic decoration and just consists of functional, largely unarticulated walls, the row of town houses is embellished with decorative adornments all over. There are picket fences and old-fashioned lampposts. The houses themselves vary in their design: they are painted in different pale colors, their rooflines show much variation, as does the arrangement of the windows and entries (see Figures 27 and 28).



**Figure 26.** Hilltop parking lot bordered by townhouses. 2009 photo by the author.

The layout of this subdivision is very different from older neighboring suburban communities. The houses stand together very closely; they have no front yards or backyards. The garages are located on the first floor and in the back of the houses. They are accessed via narrow alleys behind the houses. These alleys are very unattractive as they only contain garages, but they are used to add to the nostalgic theme of the development. They have names such as Fishing Court, Baseball Court, Apple Pie Court, County Fair Court, Lemonade Court, or Picnic Court. The three

broader streets are called Kite Way, Beach St., and Summer Lane. Street names and community names play an important role in setting the tone for housing developments as Gottdiener observed in *The Theming of America* from 1997:

[B]uilders resorted to differentiating their similar products through symbols. They used exotic and fantasy themes for their development names. The mundane 'Levittown' of the 1940s gave way to the less ordinary 'Mountain Estates' or the exotic 'Wildwood Houses.' Streets and home models themselves were also endowed with thematically stylized names, such as 'River Run,' 'Bord Wing,' and 'Maui Court.' All this symbolic work stood alongside terrains that showed little evidence of mountains, nature, or tropical scenery. Yet, symbolic naming and the search for labels with ever increasing appeal currently characterize [the American] environment.<sup>83</sup>

The pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia is about a search for labels with an ever-increasing appeal to the customer. Just as Gottdiener argues, the townhouses at Hilltop Mall show no evidence of a county fair, picnic areas, lemonade stands, moms baking pies, or children flying kites in the (parking) fields. Before the mall was built, there had been a Chevron tank farm on the site.<sup>84</sup> The mall itself – although in walking distance – is not the hometown that labels like apple pie and county fair suggest.



**Figure 27.** Townhouses at Hilltop Mall. 2009 photo by the author.

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<sup>83</sup> Gottdiener 1997: 42.

<sup>84</sup> Temko 1993: 170.



**Figure 28.** These decorated townhouses form a contrast to the mall. 2009 photo by the author.

## AMERICAN LIVING

The pursuit of pastness does not only happen outside of Hilltop Mall, where the aesthetic of the 1970s clashes with contemporary nostalgia. Nostalgia emerges from within the 1976 mall itself. In 2008, American Living was launched as a new lifestyle brand, created for JC Penney's "classic traditional lifestyle customer, by Global Brands Concepts, a division of Polo Ralph Lauren."<sup>85</sup> The logo of *American Living* is<sup>86</sup> an eagle spreading its wings and clutching the Stars and Stripes. Around the eagle, several words are printed in historical fonts: "American Living, Estab. MMVII. Clothing & Furnishings, Quality Brand." The addition "Clothing and furnishings" are printed on stylized banners. The symbols are "unmistakably from Laurenland, an upscale suburb or beach community of chukkers, clambakes and khaki,"<sup>87</sup> the *New York Times* comments (see Figure 29).

Before the line's discontinuation, American Living products were presented in a shop-in-shop environment. The official press release from JC Penney claims that "emulating an authentic, country store feel [...], American Living merchandise can be found on distinctive white, wooden fixtures across numerous departments of nearly 600

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<sup>85</sup> J.C. Penney Company, Inc. 2008.

<sup>86</sup> American Living was discontinued in 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Elliott 2008.

JC Penney's stores."<sup>88</sup> The brand included classic apparel for men, young men, women and children, as well as traditional furniture and home decorating products. It encompassed a total of 40 merchandise categories. The names of the products sold under the American Living brand are noteworthy as well. Several curtain rods for example were named after former American presidents. There was a "Garfield rod kit" and a "Madison rod kit." One curtain set was called "Truman." Other curtain kits were named "Bar Harbor Club," "Brooklane," "Georgiana," "Estate," "Enfield," or "Farmington." Bedding lines were named "Eastbourne," "Laurel Grove," "Coral Gates," or "Ridgemont." A line of informal dinnerware was sold as the "General Store" collection. The names of these products all evoke nostalgic associations. Some names refer to American presidents, some to American regions, which are associated with country living. Some names sound like American small towns. In the case of the "General Store" dinnerware line, the name refers to a nostalgic retail institution of small-town life. It is fitting that these items were sold in an emulated country store atmosphere to what JC Penney considered their "classic traditional lifestyle" customers.

The launch of American Living was accompanied by emotional television commercials that aired nation-wide.<sup>89</sup> The *New York Times* observed that

the American Living ads closely resemble the familiar campaigns for Ralph Lauren that present picture-perfect preppies in all-American settings like July Fourth parades, small-town picnics and golf courses. There are patrician families, shirtless hunks, dreamy couples and tow-headed children.<sup>90</sup>

One commercial was a collage of nostalgic images evolving around the good life in the All-American small town. The first shots show the ocean, highway bridges and country roads. Then there follow shots of a well-dressed white family having breakfast, preppy young men playing Frisbee in a garden, a long shot of a prototypical American main street, golden wheat fields, quaint neighborhoods of white wooden houses with porches and gardens dotted with shady trees, a birthday party, a Fourth of July parade, a church at night, a young couple, an old couple, a man building a wooden frame house, another typical main street, a wedding with a white wooden frame house in the background, more couples, white houses in the fields, and finally a Fourth of July celebration. The people shown in these commercials are predominantly white and middle class, but African Americans and Hispanics were included as well. All couples are heterosexual. According to the official press releases, the brand was marketed to

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<sup>88</sup> J.C. Penney Company, Inc. 2008. These commercials are available on *YouTube*.

<sup>89</sup> Matousek 2008.

<sup>90</sup> Stuart 2008.

offer something “truly aspirational” and to celebrate American everyday culture. The commercials stress this strategy. JC Penney stated in their press release that “from baseball, picnic and trips to the beach, to tractors, pick-up trucks and life on the farm, the new campaign brings the aspiration of American Living to life by capturing the little, every day moments of American culture.”<sup>91</sup> The street names of the subdivision from the early 2000s next to Hilltop communicate the same “aspirational” images of American culture: Baseball Court, Apple Pie Court, Picnic Court, and Summer Lane.



**Figure 29.** Detail of the highly nostalgic packaging of the “Gately Sheer Panel” from the American-Living range. N.d. This American-Living product, however, is “Made in China.” Photo courtesy Ebay seller “beetler517.”

## KINKADE VILLAGE

This nostalgia can also be found at Hiddenbrooke, a master-planned community located north of Hilltop just off Interstate 80, the Dwight D. Eisenhower Highway. The entrance to this community is in a nowhere land close to the interstate. Next “to a Smorga Bob’s restaurant and a Rite Aid – there is a freeway signboard with the slogan ‘Get Away, Every Day. The Village at Hiddenbrooke.’”<sup>92</sup> To communicate this sense of escape, the developers built an artificial waterfall that embraces the entry sign of

<sup>91</sup> J.C. Penney Company, Inc. 2008.

<sup>92</sup> Brown 2002.

Hiddenbrooke.<sup>93</sup> Beyond this gateway is Hiddenbrooke Parkway, a long and winding road that leads towards the community through landscaped areas. A decorative white fence borders the road. Hiddenbrooke Parkway serves to confirm to the residents that they really are “getting away” as they enter their home community. The center of the development is at the crossing of Hiddenbrooke Parkway and Bennington Drive. Here, a white bandstand is located in a park opposite Hiddenbrooke Plaza, a small commercial center.

Hiddenbrooke consists of several neighborhoods. One of them is called “The Village – a Thomas Kinkade Community.” This part of Hiddenbrooke stands out from the other areas of the community because it is its only gated community. Also, the theming of this development is different from the rest of Hiddenbrooke, which is designed in the familiar nostalgic style described earlier. Kinkade Village (see Figures 30 and 31) is themed more elaborately and according to the nostalgic fantasy of Thomas Kinkade. He was the best-selling American artist<sup>94</sup> and was notorious for his nostalgic and idyllic paintings of pastoral landscapes and small-town scenes. The Village was the first, and only, development to be inspired by the art of Thomas Kinkade, who referred to himself as “the Painter of Light” and also painted many religious subjects. The circumstances of the artist’s early death stand in a sharp contrast to the world that he had created. Kinkade died from intoxication of alcohol and Valium on Good Friday, April 6, 2012. He was in his 50s.

According to the development’s marketing material, The Village represents “a ‘vision of simpler times,’ a ‘neighborhood of extraordinary design and detail’ with ‘cottage-style homes that are filled with warmth and personality’ and ‘garden-style landscaping with meandering pathways, benches, water features and secret places.’ The covers of the promotional pamphlets feature a Thomas Kinkade painting of a charming, rain-dappled village – complete with church steeple, families out walking the pet Dalmatian and thickets of flowers.”<sup>95</sup> The village’s slogan is “Calm, not chaos. Peace, not pressure.”<sup>96</sup>

The Thomas Kinkade Company’s headquarters are located in Morgan Hills, California. The huge complex stands in a cul-de-sac called Lightpost Way. The light post is the trademark of Thomas Kinkade. Lightpost Way leads toward the executive parking

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<sup>93</sup> In *Field Guide to Sprawl*, 2006, Dolores Hayden characterizes entrance features like this as “putting parsley around the pig.”

<sup>94</sup> According to his company, a print of Kinkade is to be found in one of every 20 American homes. Cf. Glaister 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Brown 2002.

<sup>96</sup> Pender 2012.

lot. The Kinkade company headquarters consist of two buildings. Most of the industrial-looking buildings are completely unadorned and have no ornaments. However, the area around the cul-de-sac and the executive parking lot is highly themed, just like a suburban shopping strip mall. Two gazebos inspired by Kinkade's best-selling paintings from the "Gazebo Collection" mark the entrance area. There are two small gardens on each side of the parking lot. The facades in this area are evocative of Kinkade's work as well with their porches, gable roof and shutters. The adornments are affixed to the building in the same fashion as decorations are affixed to big-box retail stores in post-suburbia. The complex is situated in suburban Morgan Hills, next to the South Valley Freeway. In the proximity of the Thomas Kinkade Company headquarters there are several hotels and a few shopping plazas, such as Cochrane Shopping Plaza Center. The majority of the commercial buildings on Cochrane Road are constructed in neotraditional styles. There is a trailer park and some more substantial suburban developments next to the commercial strip.



**Figures 30 and 31.** Residences at Kinkade The Village, which is a gated community. 2009 photos by the author.

This post-suburban environment could not be more different from The Village or the image that the Thomas Kinkade Company sells. It is the company's mission to

create the idyllic world of Thomas Kinkade and invite people to experience it for themselves through the branded products and services [they] create. The often hurried, unsympathetic, and complex world in which we live, positions the Thomas Kinkade brand as a place of refuge, a place where the transient things of life give way to the things that matter most. A place, which focuses on faith and family, a loving home, and the people who know and love us - a place where the light of love shines most brightly. Our brand inspires people to create their own refuge, so they can look beyond imposed ideals and make conscious the things they hold dear.<sup>97</sup>

It is appropriate that Kinkade Village, "a place of refuge," is located in a master-planned community that is marketed with the promise that its residents can get away

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<sup>97</sup> The Thomas Kinkade Company n.d.

from it all every day. The discussion of the pursuit of pastness in Northern California has shown that “getting away” and resorting forms of fantasy is a major part of the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia. Whether it is Apple Pie Court, Laurenland, or Kinkade Village, the pursuit of pastness is about a refuge from the “often hurried, unsympathetic, and complex world.” Hilltop Mall stands for this hurried, unsympathetic, and complex world. The townhouses on Apple Pie Court, the American Living products sold at JC Penney and the faux-cobblestoned driveways of Kinkade Village all mirror the longing of “getting away” from this world. Let’s now turn to Las Vegas so see how the people living there seek to escape from the “Entertainment Capital of the World.”

## 2.3 LAS VEGAS:

### NORMAN ROCKWELL IN THE DESERT

From its intersection with Las Vegas Boulevard to the most western edge of the vicinity, Charleston Blvd. illustrates the development of the pursuit of pastness in the Las Vegas Valley. It is a good example of how the “spatial sequence” of commercial boulevards creates an “asphalt and concrete timeline,”<sup>98</sup> as Chester H. Liebs observes in his study of American roadside architecture. Driving west on Charleston Blvd. is like traveling from mid-century modern America<sup>99</sup> towards today’s nostalgia. At the intersection of Charleston Blvd., and Las Vegas Blvd. there is the modern and functional Gateway Motel. It is a typical example of modest and functional mid-century architecture. The simple one-story building is laid out around a courtyard. There is a vintage neon sign with the motel’s name on it.

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<sup>98</sup> Liebs 1995: xiv.

<sup>99</sup> Mid-century modern refers to the modernist aesthetic that was popular in the 1950s and 1960s.



**Figures 32 and 33.** The interior of the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market in suburban Las Vegas shows typical architectural features of small-town architecture. This effect is underlined by the addition of black and white photos on the walls, which show historic main-street buildings. 2009 photos by the author.

Driving west, there are several older buildings from the 1960s and 1970s, which are mostly in bad condition. The shopping plazas on both sides of the boulevard are occupied by drycleaners, budget buffets, tattoo studios, and liquor stores. The architecture of these plazas is very functional and lacks any decoration or theming. Between the shopping plazas there are gas stations, fast-food restaurants, convenience stores, more liquor stores, beauty parlors, and drugstores. Traveling even further west into newer parts of the city, these buildings cease to have the modern, unadorned look and begin to show articulated rooflines with gables, stucco ornaments, and awnings. Reaching newer areas of the boulevard, historicizing facades become the norm: columns, arches, and colonnades adorn the buildings in the parking lots. One of the largest commercial centers in the area is located at the crossing of Charleston Blvd. with Decatur Blvd. Westland Fair is anchored by a Wal-Mart Supercenter and stores such as Lowe's, Office Depot, PetSmart, Michael's, Smart & Final, Anna's Linens, Applebee's, Panda Express, and Starbuck's Coffee. The center consists of several freestanding franchise restaurants and service buildings that face Charleston Blvd. and Decatur Blvd. They all are decorated and themed in several styles. Awnings appear on almost every building and most of them are equipped with architectural features such as small towers, and gable roofs. The anchor stores show historical features as well. This center is very different from the older shopping plazas along Charleston Blvd. Driving west on Charleston Blvd., the architecture becomes more and more nostalgic and themed. Charleston Market Place is another shopping plaza that recreates the skyline of a small town. Then there is a Wal-Mart Neighborhood Store, which is part of a shopping plaza called Charleston Festival. This Neighborhood Store also shows off the ubiquitous nostalgic theme of the western part of Charleston Blvd. The design of Wal-Mart's smallest retail concept will be briefly discussed here because it is a good example of the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia.

In 1998, the world's largest retailer, Wal-Mart, launched a new store concept: the Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market. These stores sell mostly groceries and fewer non-food items than the average Wal-Mart Supercenter. In 2008 there were 144 such markets in the United States. Outside, the stores often feature historicizing architecture elements. Inside, the references to a traditional main street are evident as well: counters like the deli or the bakery are miniature main-street buildings (see Figures 32 and 33). Their facades are painted in sepia colors, have striped awnings in dark red and black, and fake roofs with molding. There are even blackboards with fake-chalk writing, announcing "homemade salads" and "homemade tortillas." The floor and the ceiling are painted in a dark brown and the light is soft and diffuse creating a calming and

opaque ambiance. To enhance the associations created by the small-town architecture of the store's interior, the walls are decorated with black-and-white photos showing recognizable main-street buildings from small-town America. These photos are identical in each Wal-Mart Neighborhood Market, no matter in which community it is located. These historical photos contain many of the elements from the stores' outside architecture: awnings, distinctive rooflines, and sepia colors. To stress the connection between the market and the historical photos even further, the same words used inside the store (bakery, deli) have been digitally added to the buildings in the photos. Even the fonts are identical.



**Left: Figure 34.** Vista Commons – a mid 2000s shopping plaza with the look of a village square at the very west of Charleston Blvd. 2009 photo by the author. **Right: Figure 35.** A typical shopping plaza in the eastern part of Charleston Blvd. from the late 1960s or 1970s. 2009 photo by the author.

Since the introduction of the Neighborhood concept, Wal-Mart has worked on new, more themed facades for its conventional superstores, probably also because of the changing building regulations in newer suburbs. At [walmartstores.com](http://walmartstores.com) the company presents its latest stores. They all mimic small-town architecture on the outside. The company's supercenter in Yelm, Washington, looks like a huge turn-of-the-century farm. A store in Kansas City has facades with columns and words like "bakery" on attached signs. At an Orlando supercenter, the skyline of an entire small town emerges at the edge of an enormous parking lot.<sup>100</sup> Along the western part of Charleston Blvd., there are many other examples of typical nostalgically themed commercial projects: Peccole Plaza is a shopping plaza with a Kohl's store that is housed in a building with white columns and a themed main entrance. Boca Park is anchored by a Target store. There are Orchards Marketplace, and Vista Commons, both representing historical small-town architecture with gable roofs, columns, and colonnades. Everything is painted in earth and sepia tones and there is a mix of natural stone, wood, and stucco. Vista Commons is the most western and newest commercial development of Charleston Blvd. and illustrates the sharp contrast to the older shopping plazas on the eastern part. No shopping plaza in the 1960s would have looked like this. But Charleston Blvd (see Figures 34 and 35). This is just a first taste of the themed post-suburban landscape that

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<sup>100</sup> Wal-Mart has been accused of having destroyed many American small towns' main streets by opening stores. Cf. Quinn 2005.

has become ubiquitous in Greater Las Vegas. Several residential and retail developments in the area are highly nostalgic as well.

## PROVIDENCE

Providence, Las Vegas, is a master-planned community that consists of 7,000 homes in 30 subdivisions. The entrance sign of the community is surrounded by a white picket fence. The project is marketed as a traditional small town emerging at the edge of Las Vegas: "In a simpler time, children played at the park on the walk home from school. Grandparents held hands on evening strolls. And your neighbors often became your very best friends."<sup>101</sup> The homepage from which the quote originates translates the texts into images of this "simpler time." On the welcome page, a header shows sepia and color photos of happy white children. There is a white girl who is laughing on a swing. She is pony-tailed and is wearing a simple red dress while swinging in the sun. The sky is blue, and the trees are very green. On the right, there is a blurred sepia image showing a 1950s white boy dressed up as a cowboy and sitting next to an old tree. He looks into the camera as if he was daydreaming. Other such images show an Oldsmobile car and a brick house with architectural details of historic New England homes. A house like this is not characteristic for the deserts of Nevada. In front of this New-England building, there is another white boy, driving a spotless toy fire engine that sparkles in the sun. Another scene shows white children selling homemade lemonade in front of the same New England house and boys happily polishing their dad's vintage car.

The sepia imagery dominates the site and is headlined by the slogan: "Providence. Once there was a time. Now there is a place. Inspired by tradition." This tradition is "emphatically American," according to the developer's marketing texts. A TV advertisement for the development also shows a collage of universal images of American nostalgia starring predominantly white people: children walking to school, children playing at the ballpark, children planting a tree, neighbors gathering at a party, families attending a 4th of July parade, and a couple at a gazebo in a park. The developer proclaims: "Providence is a community built on the notion that some things are just too good to leave in the past."<sup>102</sup> All this looks like advertisements from the *American Living* campaign and is reminiscent of the street names near Hilltop Mall that were discussed earlier.

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<sup>101</sup> Providence Las Vegas n.d.

<sup>102</sup> Focus Property Group 2009.



**Figure 36.** A typical street in the Liberty Square neighborhood of Providence, NV. 2009 photo by the author.



**Figures 37 (left) and 38 (right).** Typical apartment buildings in Providence’s Liberty Square neighborhood. 2009 photos by the author.

But this nostalgia does not only exist in the virtual space of the homepage. Providence won a national design award from the Modular Building Institute for its welcome center, which is located near Interstate 215. According to the developer, the “Providence Information Center emulates a classic small-town soda fountain and ice-cream shop with a large soda jerk-style counter where visitors can gather information and learn about the community.” At the information center visitors can further learn “how Providence revels in the small town traditions of the American Dream and celebrates the optimism of the American frontiers [...]”<sup>103</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Las Vegas Review-Journal 2008.



**Figure 39.** Aerial view of Providence, Las Vegas in 2014. The community is located at the northern edge of post-suburban Las Vegas and faces the desert. This aerial view illustrates how car-centered and disconnected most parts of post-suburbia are. Photo courtesy Ken Lund. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Providence\\_Community,\\_Las\\_Vegas,\\_Nevada\\_\(14017024688\).jpg?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Providence_Community,_Las_Vegas,_Nevada_(14017024688).jpg?uselang=de). Accessed July 6, 2018.

However, Providence is not the small town its marketing concept wants to communicate. The community is a master-planned development on the edge of Las Vegas that could have been built on the edge of any other city in America due to its universal traditional decoration (see Figures 36-38 and 39). The master plan of Providence shows that this community is built in a rather conventional suburban way: several builders are developing isolated subdivisions along broad landscaped arteries. Each neighborhood contains houses with a similar price. The neighborhoods have names such as Emerson, Manchester Park, Madison Grove, Franklin Park, Chestnut Hill, Monticello, Independence, Liberty Hill and Liberty Square – names that refer to the American past and could also refer to merchandise of the discontinued American-Living range at JC Penneys. Close to the Information Center, there are areas designated for The Shops at Providence, which “is planned to offer every comfort for every lifestyle. Keeping in line with the community’s look and feel, each of Providence’s commercial projects will incorporate architectural elements that support an emphatic ‘American Traditions’ theme.”<sup>104</sup>

## CENTENNIAL SPRINGS

A few miles east of Providence, there is Centennial Springs, which invites future buyers into the community to

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<sup>104</sup> Focus Property Group 2009.

imagine for a moment, a place that would blend the simplicity of yesterday with the convenience of today. A place that was designed to have you slow down and remember what is important. [...] Envision a tree-lined Main Street with a charm that invited you to meander in and out of unique shops and restaurants.<sup>105</sup>

On the homepage, the developer claims to offer “an unhurried, convenient shopping experience. [...] No other mixed-use development existing or planned offers the unique architectural theming and nostalgic ‘Main Street’ atmosphere.”<sup>106</sup> The theming of this development is more detailed and unified than that of Providence. The street signs are laden with decorations and are crowned by the seal of the village: a tree and a picket fence, “Est. 2008.” The village has a central park, which is “large enough to host Farmers Markets, kite-flying contests, fall festivals and more.”<sup>107</sup> It is called C.P. Squires Park. Squires (1865-1958) was an early Las Vegas businessman. Centennial Springs’ main street is named Norman Rockwell Lane. At the point where Norman Rockwell Lane meets the park, there is a bronze statue of Squires. He is holding a blueprint in his hand and points towards the horizon, thus staged as the founder of Centennial Springs.

There are buildings that recall New England architecture. Others are built in more local styles. This creates a collage of main-street architectures – just as the developer claims: “Carefully crafted [...] design criteria will provide a consistent framework that will impact every design element and preserve the quality of this development.” The Village of Centennial Springs attempts to be a universal main street. It is highly significant that the marketing department of Centennial Springs decided to name the main street Norman Rockwell Lane, as Rockwell is very much identified with a nostalgic all-American visual culture. He is considered

America’s best-loved and best-known illustrator. Rockwell’s dream of America at a simpler time, of a small-town world of pig-tailed kids and their parents, continues to hold a powerful and emotional appeal for young and old alike. [...] [Rockwell helps] us to recapture a time too good to forget and a vision too important to desert.<sup>108</sup>

The ethos that Rockwell captured in his paintings and illustrations is used to sell Centennial Springs. Norman Rockwell created “an image that has endured into the twenty-first century as the archetype of small-town society.” His covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* incarnated “a world of family doctors and family dinners, of drugstores

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<sup>105</sup> The Village of Centennial Springs 2009.

<sup>106</sup> The Village of Centennial Springs 2009.

<sup>107</sup> These activities were not available in 2009.

<sup>108</sup> Bauer 1996: blurb.

and barbershops, of diners and train stations, of Christmas and Thanksgiving.”<sup>109</sup> This white small-town world is the aspiration of Centennial Springs (see Figures 40-42).



**Figures 40 (top), 41 (bottom, left) and 42 (bottom, right).** Centennial Springs’ main street: Norman Rockwell Lane. It is a “privately maintained” street. A bronze statue anchors the park at the end of Norman Rockwell Lane. 2009 photos by the author.

## TOWN SQUARE LAS VEGAS

Providence and Centennial Springs are very nostalgic new places in suburban Las Vegas. But the most nostalgic project of the city is called Town Square Las Vegas – a lifestyle center which is marketed as the small town Las Vegas was lacking. A brochure for the center proclaims: “What if someone built the one place Las Vegas was missing? real. life. experience. [...] It’s a walk in the park with your family, a day of shopping with your friends, a night out for every occasion. It’s all right here, the heart of Las Vegas.”<sup>110</sup> The developer states on the project’s homepage:

Imagine a place that was close, but far away from the ordinary. A place that was designed for people who live in Las Vegas for four seasons, not just four days. When the ribbon was cut on November 14th, the people of Las Vegas found that place. [In this campaign,] we wanted to tap into the deepest desires of Las Vegas residents. Finally, they have a place of their own. A place that’s a home away from home. A place that was built just for them – complete with the stores they need, the restaurants they want and the downtown family atmosphere they’ve been missing. Through the use of rich southwestern colors,

<sup>109</sup> Orvell 2012: 42.

<sup>110</sup> Town Square Las Vegas 2008.

inspiring headlines and warm family photography, we are able to give a sneak peek into just that place. But there's no need to image it any longer. You can experience it yourself. For real. For life.<sup>111</sup>

Both texts claim that a real and authentic place is missing in Las Vegas, which is, in fact, the argument that many scholars have laid out in recent years when discussing Las Vegas as a theme park catering to tourists. Town Square Las Vegas is not targeted at the many tourists that come to the city. The center is attempting to attract local residents by tapping "into their deepest desires." Town Square Las Vegas is located at the southern part of Las Vegas Boulevard (see Figure 43). It is the most perfectly themed commercial development in Las Vegas. Its level of detail comes close to Disney's Main Street, USA. Much attention to detail was invested to create a place that looks like a living, organic, small town. The streets of this center are very distinctive and they have names such as South Main Street, The Avenue North, Market Place South, and North Street. There are banners, themed benches, garbage containers, and advertising pillars. All items show the monogram - "TS" - and the logo of the center. Even the drain covers read "Town Square." To make the small-town look even more authentic, there is on street parking in front of the shops and old-fashioned park meters. As a consequence, there is some slow traffic throughout Town Square. This creates a supposedly authentic small-town atmosphere for consumers who "increasingly evaluate the world in terms of real and fake, based on their own views of what is and is not authentic."<sup>112</sup>

The center is arranged around a park with vinyl lawn and a gazebo. The project's main axis features buildings that look like old missions in a Spanish style. To make these buildings seem older than the rest, the architects did not arrange them parallel to the streets, but at an angle. This suggests that they were there before the town square developed around them. The position of these "older" buildings breaks up the geometrical architecture of Town Square. However, they are no missions, but they contain a California Pizza Kitchen and a Godiva store.

The center's architecture is a *mélange* of many different styles. The designers of the center

turned to some of America's older cities for inspiration - those with a rich history, such as Boston, New York and San Francisco, as well as great European cities like Barcelona and Paris. [They] created rich and vibrant streets with all the layers and details found within any living city. [They] varied the tempo of the buildings, the widths of the facades and the materials and details

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<sup>111</sup> Town Square Las Vegas Leasing 2009.

<sup>112</sup> Gilmore and Pine 2007: 9.

so that each street has its own beat – from old world charm and sophistication to high-energy modern.<sup>113</sup>

There are Victorian buildings, Southwestern buildings, art-deco buildings, Moorish buildings, New-England brick buildings, and many other styles. Town Square’s “aesthetic liberties serve a purpose. Even if consumers don’t notice the stylistic quotations, they do register designs that foster human scale and offer perceptual richness or visual complexity.”<sup>114</sup> The density of historical styles is intended to cause an impression of visual complexity and perceptual richness and to evoke the complexity and richness of an actual community and to “foster human scale.”<sup>115</sup>



**Figure 43.** An aerial view of Town Square Las Vegas (center). The mal is located on South Las Vegas Boulevard where Venturi and Scott Brown once studied the architecture of the casinos. No pedestrian will ever walk to this new American small town located in the middle of nowhere. Photo courtesy Ken Lund. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Town\\_Square\\_Las\\_Vegas,\\_Las\\_Vegas,\\_Nevada\\_\(18198913071\).jpg?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Town_Square_Las_Vegas,_Las_Vegas,_Nevada_(18198913071).jpg?uselang=de). Accessed July 6, 2018.

Every square inch of Town Square is decorated and embellished with details (see Figures 44-46). Tony Van Vliet, a partner with Development Design Group, which worked on the master plan, says: “With variety, you feel like a place has grown up over time and not just landed at once.”<sup>116</sup> This effect is achieved by mixing different

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<sup>113</sup> Town Square Las Vegas Leasing 2009.

<sup>114</sup> Robinson 2009: 29.

<sup>115</sup> Robinson 2009: 29.

<sup>116</sup> Robinson 2009: 28.

styles from different eras and regions. Every detail is part of this general marketing strategy of Town Square.



**Top left: Figure 44.** South Main Street at Town Square Las Vegas. **Top right: Figure 45.** Market Place South. Notice the nostalgic park meters. **Bottom: Figure 46.** The Apple Store is located in the center’s most “modern” building, which is designed in an art-deco style. 2009 photos by the author.

The Development Design Group has several such projects in their portfolio and has some experience with creating open-air malls that look like a living city. They also

developed Easton Town Center in suburban Columbus, Ohio. Here, the company highlights how

[c]onservative graphics reinforce the 'All American' theme of this neo-traditional town center. [...] A carved limestone 'Est. 1999' building plaque tells the visitors of this small town's short historic past. A patriotic color palette of red, white and blue can be found throughout. While most graphic components have been designed to blend with their surroundings, some bolder elements reflect America's love of nostalgia.<sup>117</sup>

## 2.4 ANYWHERE, USA:

### LANDSCAPES OF PASTNESS

All the places described so far are located in the American West. But as a matter of fact, the American pursuit of pastness can be observed from coast to coast: The centerless city of Virginia Beach, Virginia, for example, has built itself a new town center opposite Pembroke Mall. Here, new blocks of historicized downtown buildings were constructed along a new main street. In neighboring Norfolk, Virginia, an entire deteriorated part of the city has been cleared to make way for East Beach (see Figure 68), an upscale master-planned community based on New Urban planning and designed by the same architects that created Seaside, Florida. Pleasant Avenue is lined with stately old-fashioned mansions and townhouses. The developer claims that "here, life returns to a simpler time."<sup>118</sup> Many existing trees were preserved to make the new town feel much older than it is. A retail center opposite East Beach has recently been completely redesigned to look like a historic main street (see Figure 47).

Meanwhile, in Levittown, Pennsylvania, many of the once modern interpretations of classic ranch houses from the 1950s have been redecorated by their owners to look like traditional small-town houses from the 1920s (see Figure 48). In Plymouth, Massachusetts, the new Wal-Mart Supercenter – which is part of the Colony Place strip mall – has been decorated to resemble a New England village. Not far from here, the trend of redeveloping strip malls into nostalgic places began: Mashpee Commons, Cape Cod, was the first suburban strip center to be turned into a themed main street and became the model for countless other such centers (see Figures 51 and 52). In Schaumburg, Illinois, for example, The Streets of Woodfield recreate the small-town charm of past times in an environment that is anything but this small town.

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<sup>117</sup> Development Design Group Inc. 2009.

<sup>118</sup> East Beach Company, LLC n.d.

Schaumburg became one of America's first edge cities after the opening of Woodfield Mall. The Taubman Company built the mall.

Near Cary, North Carolina, Olde Town at Carpenter Village has been constructed around a pool house that mimics Independence Hall. Not far from there, Twin Lakes has been built by KB Home in collaboration with Martha Stewart Omnimedia. Here, homebuyers are able to choose from traditional house styles inspired by Stewart's very own residences. In Stone Ridge, Virginia, near the nation's capital, developers are "building a community that celebrates old-fashioned values." Next to Stone Ridge, there is South Riding, a planned community that "celebrates small town living," a place where "summer never ends," as the developer promises on the community's website. The community's clubhouse is called Town Hall. Its interior has been decorated to look like a traditional main street. The community's logo is a picket fence.

Hometown Reunion, in the northern suburbs of Denver, is a massive master-planned suburban community that is marketed with the slogan: "A new hometown for the age-old pursuit of happiness." The center of Reunion is a red barn with a faux water tower featuring the nostalgic logo of the development. According to the developer, the community's name pays tribute to Americans' "deep appreciation for the past."<sup>119</sup> There is a new assisted living facility targeted at members of the Great Generation, born between 1901 and 1924, and the Silent Generation, born between 1925 and 1942.<sup>120</sup> The Lantern of Chagrin Valley, a new assisted living facility, is located in South Russell, Ohio. It is specialized in helping patients suffering from Alzheimer's by providing them with an environment that recreates what – the owners believe – are their earliest memories. The unique interior of the facility is a simulation of a historic small town. The residential hallways are decorated with front porches and rocking chairs; each room is designed to look and feel like an old-fashioned residential house, the floor mimics a golf course, the ceiling is fake blue skies, which change light during the course of the day. There even is a main street with a hair salon and community hall. The facility looks like a caricature of Disneyland or of a Norman-Rockwell painting. CEO and therapist Jean Makesh believes that "residents with Alzheimer's usually keep the memories they have between birth and 21 years old. Patients start losing memories after that time. 'I take them back to those memories,' he said. 'I create a time capsule.'<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Reunion – A Shea Homes Community n.d.

<sup>120</sup> Raphaelson 2014.

<sup>121</sup> Ridel 2014.



**Figure 47.** A Lions supermarket and strip mall near East Beach, VA were themed to resemble a classic main street. 2012 photo by the author.



**Figure 48.** A redecorated home in Levittown, PA. The owner added a traditional front porch and Victorian trim to this mid-century ranch house. 2009 photo by the author.



**Figure 49.** A new traditional diner in Freshfield Village, NC, a suburban lifestyle center. 2009 photo courtesy Randi Gunzenhäuser.



**Figure 50.** Each Beach, VA. This neotraditional community was planned by the architects Duany and Plater-Zyberg. 2012 photo by the author.



**Figure 51.** Mashpee Commons, MA. This was the first 1960s strip mall to be transformed into a nostalgic main street. 2010 photo by the author.



**Figure 52.** A white picket fence graces the entrance to Mashpee Common's parking lot. 2010 photo by the author.

## "A NEW ERA OF URBANIZATION"<sup>122</sup>

As I briefly mentioned in my introduction, my examples are part of a new type of terrain. All these places are relatively young, but are designed to look old. All these places are located in the suburban peripheries of older American cities. They are examples of ubiquitous situations in the contemporary American landscape and establish a particularly new American urban geography. There is no real consensus among scholars on how to call this new form of urban geography:

The challenges of characterizing this changing new metropolitan form have prompted a great number of neologisms, including exurbia, edge city, edgeless city, exopolis, boomburb, cosmoburbs, nerdistan, technoburb, generica, satellite sprawl, mallcondoville, as well as post-suburbia and metroburbia.<sup>123</sup>

There exists a greater consensus, however, on how to describe this new metropolitan form. It is agreed on that these landscapes are all relatively new and that they could only develop with the help of modern technology. These landscapes "got a boost from a new wave of inventions. They are an outgrowth of major inventions such as air conditioning, big dams, low-down-payment mortgages, tract-style houses, and limited access freeways."<sup>124</sup> These new landscapes are centerless and share certain characteristics that were identified by Robert Fishman as early as 1987: "Spread out along its highway growth corridors are shopping malls, industrial parks, campus-like office complexes, hospitals, schools and a full range of housing types."<sup>125</sup> The traditional relation between city and suburb, residents living in semi-rural neighborhoods and commuting to a central core for work, is not existent any more as all the functions of the city have been decentralized and dispersed. The majority of suburban Americans cannot "decode these landscapes or define where they begin and end."<sup>126</sup> Lang and LeFurgy, who call these expanding landscapes boomburbs, conclude that they "are urban in fact but not feel."<sup>127</sup>

The landscapes of the new American geography may contain all the functional elements of traditional cities, yet they "are not typically patterned in a traditional urban form. [They] almost always lack, for example, a dense business core and are thus distinct from traditional cities."<sup>128</sup> What define these places are their young age as well

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<sup>122</sup> Phelps and Wu 2011 in Phelps and Wu 2011: 1.

<sup>123</sup> Chaves, Elisabeth, Paul Knox, and David Bieri in Phelps and Wu 2011: 35.

<sup>124</sup> Lang and LeFurgy 2007: 32.

<sup>125</sup> Fishman 1987b.

<sup>126</sup> Hayden 2004: 3.

<sup>127</sup> Lang and LeFurgy 2007: 11.

<sup>128</sup> Lang and LeFurgy 2007: 11.

as the fact that they consist of single, engineered elements that together do not form a town in the traditional sense. Most of these master-planned elements, such as housing developments and commercial centers, however, are themed to look as if they belonged to traditional urban neighborhoods. Yet, neither the scale nor the functionality of these landscapes have anything in common with traditional notions of urban life. Walking to a destination, for example, is most often impossible in these landscapes due to the immense distances between the residential house and the stores or the schools.

More Americans live in these themed and “complex metropolitan landscapes layered with tracts, strips, malls, office parks, and highways”<sup>129</sup> than in the city and the countryside combined. “Nationally, 26 percent of Americans described where they live as urban, 53 percent said suburban and 21 percent said rural.”<sup>130</sup> An analysis of data from the 1990, 2000, and 2010 census by demographer William H. Frey shows that minorities “represent 35 percent of suburban residents, similar to their share of overall U.S. population.” In 36 of the 100 largest metropolitan areas “at least 35 percent of residents are non-white.” Suburban Houston, Las Vegas, San Francisco and Washington D.C. “became majority minority in the 2000s.” In 2010, 51 percent of African Americans, 78 percent of whites, 62 percent of Asians, and 59 percent of Hispanics in large metropolitan areas lived in suburbs. The newest, fast growing fringes of post-suburbia, however, “remain mostly white and depended overwhelmingly on whites for growth in the 2000s.” Whites “accounted for 73 percent of population growth in outlying exurban counties in the 2000s, well more than their 8 percent contribution to national population growth over the same period.”<sup>131</sup> This fact is significant for the analysis of the nostalgic theming of post-suburbia, which I observed primarily in exurban areas.

Other recent studies suggest that metropolitan America is subject to massive demographical changes as millennials decide where to live. In *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City* from 2013, Alan Ehrenhalt shows that suburbs and cities are changing their roles as millennials and affluent baby-boomers are moving to gentrified urban neighborhoods while other groups of society are flocking to suburbia from the cities.<sup>132</sup> In *The End of the Suburbs*, 2013, Leigh Gallagher uses data and reports to illustrate how the younger generation’s preferences for urban living will

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<sup>129</sup> Hayden 2004: 7.

<sup>130</sup> Kolko 2015.

<sup>131</sup> Frey 2010: 1.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Ehrenhalt 2012.

change post-suburbia.<sup>133</sup> Those who could not afford the suburbs in the past are now increasingly able to move there. One needs to be aware of the difference and connections between small towns, prewar suburban neighborhoods, postwar suburbs and contemporary post-suburbia. Different Americans move to different parts of metropolitan areas. The newest parts of this landscape, referred to as “exurban areas” in Frey’s study, are primarily white while older, formerly white suburbs are becoming more diverse. In a PBS interview demographer Frey states that today’s suburbs are “a microcosm of the whole country” and that

Hispanics are moving to some of those suburban communities that had an entirely different race and ethnicity in the ‘50s. Those Ozzie and Harriet couples are gone in a sense, but these new groups, like the Hispanics, have children too. There really is a kaleidoscope of demographic groups that characterize our suburbs today, when you just look at the suburbs as a whole, it’s really a hodge-podge.<sup>134</sup>

The complex metropolitan landscapes of America are home to a diverse group of people different from the stereotypical white, middle-class family. William Fry concludes that “substantial racial and ethnic changes in the population of both cities and suburbs in metropolitan America challenge leaders at all levels to understand and keep pace with the continuing social, economic, and political transformation of these places.” The “nuclear family out in suburbia with its kids and white-picket fences and two-car garages has been a mischaracterization for at least the last decade, if not longer.”<sup>135</sup> However, the theming of post-suburbia suggests that this ideal is still relevant.

In this text I choose to use the term post-suburbia to speak about this kind of landscape. The term post-suburbia entails that a landscape with suburban characteristics, such as the separation of uses, and motorized movement, has grown beyond its traditional connection to an urban center. Post-suburbia has emancipated itself from the postwar relationship between “black” city and “white” suburb and has become an independent yet ambiguous entity of regional proportions. It is a new landscape that emerges beyond the older suburban areas close to downtown neighborhoods, incorporating smaller towns and expanding into the hinterland. Post-suburbia represents a “new era of urbanization”<sup>136</sup> and is difficult to define geographically. Teaford concludes:

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Ghallager 2013.

<sup>134</sup> McNamara 2011.

<sup>135</sup> McNamara 2011.

<sup>136</sup> Phelps and Wu 2011 in Phelps and Wu 2011: 1.

By 2000, then, Americans inhabited a radically different world from that of 1945. Metropolitan areas sprawled over hundreds of square miles without a distinguishable common center or clear-cut edges. The black-white world had given way to a metropolitan population of every shade, an ethnic world more complex and less sharply defined than in 1945.<sup>137</sup>

My preceding observations and this dissertation do not focus on the structural dimension of this landscape – although the structure and history of this landscape are important and will be continued being discussed in more detail in chapter three, four and five. The first part of this text served to describe in detail the nostalgic theming that is dominant throughout this new urban geography. The new polycentric American post-suburban landscape often does not look engineered and decentralized. The places described above convey a sense of old-fashioned craftsmanship and centrality. This engineered landscape is themed to such a degree that its actual structure is often concealed. There is a great contrast between the technological circumstances due to which post-suburbia emerged and the complete opposite aesthetic that pervades this landscape. The nostalgic theming of a truly modern and engineered landscape is a paradox that now, as it has been described in detail, can be analyzed and contextualized.

## 2.5 THEMED POST-SUBURBIA AS CULTURAL TEXT

The theming of post suburbia works like what Stuart Hall refers to as a “signifying practice”<sup>138</sup> in *Representations* from 1997. The themed landscape is a sign system that signifies. It is a cultural text and needs to be analyzed as such. The decoration of post-suburbia with elements such as white picket fences, for example, is a signifying practice that, as Stuart Hall argues, produces meaning “like a language.”<sup>139</sup> Hall claims that “we give things meaning by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them.”<sup>140</sup> The nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia does not carry meaning on its own but only in relation to other texts. Stuart Hall argues that

we can see similar representational practices and figures being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another. This accumulation

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<sup>137</sup> Teaford 2006: 5.

<sup>138</sup> Hall 1997: 5.

<sup>139</sup> Hall 1997: 5.

<sup>140</sup> Hall 1997: 3.

of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being 'read' in the context of other images, is called intertextuality.<sup>141</sup>

The meanings of themed post-suburbia have "no single originary source." They are rather "the outcome of relationships between texts, that is, intertextuality."<sup>142</sup> The nostalgia in post-suburbia therefore needs to be contextualized and related to other texts with similar themes.

Moreover, the meanings of post-suburbia are not self-understood. Rather, they are elaborately produced and carefully constructed.<sup>143</sup> Meanings are polysemic, that is, they are the result of the interplay between cultural texts and their readers. Readers "are active creators of meaning in relation to texts. They bring previously acquired cultural competencies to bear on texts so that differently constituted audiences will work with different meanings."<sup>144</sup> If "audiences participate in cultural frameworks with producers" the "audience decodings and textual encoding will be similar."<sup>145</sup> But if "audience members are situated in different social positions (e.g. of class and gender) from encoders [...] they will be able to decode [...] in alternative ways."<sup>146</sup> This also means that texts can be encoded by their producers in ways that make a specific audience decoding more likely. Therefore, producers and audience do not necessarily need to share cultural frameworks as long as producers know the audience's cultural frameworks. Andrew Cogar, president of Historical Concepts Architecture and Planning, which created Old Town in Columbus, Georgia, is such a producer. He states about his work: "We're trying to bring back the DNA of towns and small cities that has been lost – in some ways, it's storytelling."<sup>147</sup> The places I described in this chapter indeed tell a story. It is a story of the American small town.

More evidence for the small-town theme of post-suburbia can be found when looking at how new communities are advertised. It is common that planned subdivisions, communities, and lifestyle centers in post-suburbia are marketed like branded objects or consumer goods. These places are advertised online and in print. The rhetoric used here contextualizes themed post-suburbia and underlines that it is

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<sup>141</sup> Hall 2003: 232.

<sup>142</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 94.

<sup>143</sup> Cf. Hall 1997: 5.

<sup>144</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 41.

<sup>145</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 41.

<sup>146</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 41.

<sup>147</sup> Gamerman 2016.

about small-town America. My first example is from 1998 and advertises Disney's Celebration, Florida:

Return to a better way of living. There was a time in America when kids got to school on bikes, not buses. When couples strolled into town for dinner and a movie. When neighbors knew each other by name.<sup>148</sup>

Here, a "better way of living" is associated with the past. There was a time. Back then, walking to town, riding a bike, as well as knowing your neighbors presumably characterized life in America. These words address potential buyers directly. Ten years later, exactly the same myth about small-town life is evoked in a text promoting Providence, Nevada:

In a simpler time, children played at the park on the walk home from school. Grandparents held hands on evening strolls. And your neighbors often became your very best friends. [...] At Providence, the new Focus Property Group master planned community; great care has been taken to make these memories reality. [...] even the signs and mailboxes... every detail has been conceived to create an emphatic American tradition.<sup>149</sup>

Now, the "better way of living" has become a remembered "simpler time" from the past: kids walk to school, couples stroll in the evening, neighbors are friends. It is as if the developers of Providence had copied Disney's text and used the same images. In 2009, the Village at Centennial Springs in Las Vegas, which is only a few miles away from Providence, also asks potential buyers to

[i]magine for a moment, a place that would blend the simplicity of yesterday with the convenience of today. A place that was designed to have you slow down and remember what is important. [...] Envision a tree-lined Main Street with a charm that invited you to meander in and out of unique shops and restaurants.<sup>150</sup>

In this example, the simple life of the past is connected to the concept of a main street. On a side note, it should be added that the seal of Centennial Springs is strikingly similar to the seal of Celebration, Florida.

The emphasis on a central place to go to also is made in other texts:

Southern Village's Market Street has the look and feel of a classic main street. Attractive two- and three-story buildings house shops, offices and residences surrounding a Village Green. Though the design of Market Street suggests an

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<sup>148</sup> Disney's Town of Celebration, Florida 1998.

<sup>149</sup> Providence, Las Vegas n.d.

<sup>150</sup> The Village of Centennial Springs n.d.

older town, the office and retail spaces offer what today's businesses have come to expect.<sup>151</sup>

Moreover, this example stresses that while the community has the "look and feel" of the past, it still offers amenities of today. The Village of Baxter, South Carolina, another of these countless neotraditional communities, also promises a blend of past and present in a next-generation American small town:

It's got everything you remember from where you grew up. Great neighbors and strong community connections. A Village Green, YMCA, parks, festivals and wide open places to play. A Town Center where you can shop, eat and get ice cream, plus an elementary school and public library right in the neighborhood. But Baxter also offers new generation innovations like homes wired for technology, wireless hot spots, and a neighborhood network, walking trails and a childcare center. Plus fast interstate access and big city conveniences just minutes away. Come rediscover the way things were, only better, in our next generation American small town.<sup>152</sup>

Some final examples describe in detail life in these new towns based on the same images as seen before. Longleaf is said to be a

true small town where neighbors laugh. Children play. Families love. A new home community with a unique character and a warm spirit. With village greens. A town meeting hall. Nearby shops and offices. Harmonious architecture. Tree-lined streets with wide sidewalks. Roomy front porches with swings and rocking chairs. White picket fences. Ball fields. If you long for the warmth of hometown living, the character of a small town, the comfort of coming home to peace, privacy, and community, come join us in Longleaf. A town to call home.<sup>153</sup>

Once more, neighbors, children and families are enumerated and linked to the ideal of home, small town, and community. The word "town" is used five times, the word "home" four times, the word "community" twice. The Kitts Creek, North Carolina, promotional pamphlet is even more illustrative:

Unique. Timeless. Friendly. Have you ever imagined yourself living in a simpler time? What about in a small town? In a neighborhood known for its southern hospitality and charm. A place where the community gets together, where people know your name and wave when they see you. Can you picture yourself there? Then picture yourself at Kitts Creek. Where the spirit of small-town America lives on. Where all the neighborliness and days gone by can be found waiting for you in the middle of all the conveniences of today. [...] Kitts Creek was designed to take you back in time. To tree-lined streets

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<sup>151</sup> Southern Village Community n.d.

<sup>152</sup> The Village of Baxter n.d.

<sup>153</sup> Long Leaf Town n.d.

that connect you with all your neighbors. To spacious parks that connect you with the joys of small-town living.<sup>154</sup>

The ubiquitous idea of going back to a simpler time is linked to “Neighborhood,” “neighborliness,” and “neighbors.” Finally, the focus in HomeTown Aurora, Illinois, is on the small-town architecture of its single-family homes:

In the tradition of great American neighborhoods. HomeTown offers single-family homes at townhome prices. Traffic-calmed streets, neighborhood parks, living courts, private cul-de-sacs, gazebos, white picket fences, livable front porches and big bay windows convey the warm friendly atmosphere of small-town America.<sup>155</sup>

Most of these texts about new, master-planned communities from all over the United States are remarkably similar considering their rhetoric and their message and can easily be reduced to a few catchwords: children, families, neighbors, home, community, character, comfort, charm, yesterday, today, together, tradition, tree-lined main street, simpler time, better time, white picket fence, park, porch, warm, friendly, remembering, imagining and longing. These texts clearly refer to the myth of the symbiosis of community and family in small-town America.

According to the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, language consists of signs, each sign having two indivisible sides: signifier and signified. When we read or hear the signifier “picket fence” we think of the signified, which is an object of painted pieces of wood that surround, most often, a single-family house. Roland Barthes extended this concept and added the level of the myth. He uses Saussure’s structure as a starting point. To him, Saussure’s sign (made up of signifier and signified) becomes a new signifier by itself. Consequently there is also a second signified. Together, they form another sign, which is the myth.

A famous application of this extended pattern is Barthes’ analysis of a *Paris-Match* cover. The cover shows a young African boy, wearing a French uniform while saluting the flag. The boy does not look into the camera but stares towards an object located in front of him. According to Barthes, the photo indirectly suggests that

France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Kitts Creek n.d.

<sup>155</sup> Hometown Aurora n.d.

<sup>156</sup> Barthes 2013: 256.

This is the myth that is conveyed by the cover. It naturalizes certain values and beliefs. The producers of the cover have consciously embedded this mythical dimension in the photo. Barthes' interest is in finding the motivation behind this. He states that myth

does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.<sup>157</sup>

Moreover, Barthes concludes that if

I *state the fact* of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes *without saying*: I am reassured. In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essence, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves.<sup>158</sup>

The myth and narrative of the small town that written and spoken words, images, sounds, and built objects are intended to convey is identical and is stressed by repetition. This does not only happen in marketing texts for suburban communities. M. Christine Boyer writes in a 1992 essay about the nostalgically redeveloped South Street Seaport in New York City:

What characterizes these new urban zones are the reiteration and recycling of already-known symbolic codes and historic forms to the point of cliché. [...] Most important, codes contain a schema or program that generates a narrative pattern, a kind of memory device that draws associations and establishes relations between images and places, resemblance and meaning.<sup>159</sup>

While Boyer speaks about a redeveloped urban district, such as Richmond's South Harbor, her argument can be related to the nostalgic theming of post-suburbia and the marketing texts quoted before. They also depend on a specific "narrative pattern," which is generated by signs and codes. They are what Andrew B. Cougar of Historical Concepts Architecture and Planning simply calls "storytelling" and what we have witnessed in the marketing texts.

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<sup>157</sup> Barthes 2013: 255 f.

<sup>158</sup> Barthes 2013: 256.

<sup>159</sup> Boyer in Sorkin 1992: 188.



**Figure 53.** Sign outside Providence, Las Vegas. 2009 photo by the author.

The same myth of the family in small-town America can also be found in this photo (see Figure 53). There is both a linguistic (words) and a visual code (picket fence). On a denotative level, Figure 53 shows a billboard pointing the way to the information center of Providence, a community I described earlier in this chapter. The billboard shows the community's logo: a stylized red rose surrounded by an arch. The logo includes the written name of the development. Newly planted trees and shrubbery are located on both sides and in front of the billboard. Behind it, there is a black screen and in front of it there is a white picket fence.

On the connotative level, each component contributes to the same myth. The most important component of this installation is the white picket fence which exclusively serves a symbolic function. The fence is a signifier of the dominant American small town, family, and home ownership. The red rose in the logo relates to gardening and can be seen as an allusion to female domesticity and a blossoming family. The arch suggests male protection but also dominance. The classic font chosen for the word "Providence" stresses this traditional reading. The written name of the community is the caption. Hall refers to Barthes and says that "frequently, it is the caption which selects one out of the many possible meanings from the image, and anchors it with words."<sup>160</sup> The black screen helps to make all this more visible in the landscape and hides the construction site in the background. It helps to focus the attention and, in doing so, to facilitate a "preferred meaning."<sup>161</sup>

As meanings are polysemic, this may not be the meaning everybody will produce when decoding the billboard and the white picket fence. A reading of this code can be, as any reading, dominant, negotiated, or oppositional. An example from

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<sup>160</sup> Hall 2003: 228.

<sup>161</sup> Hall 2003: 228.

another community illustrates this. In *Celebration, U.S.A. – Living in Disney’s Brave New Town*, published in 2000, journalists Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins report their experiences of living in the master-planned, neotraditional town the Walt Disney Company then was building on the southern edge of its vast Florida property. The two journalists wonder after some time in town why so few African Americans had chosen to move to Celebration despite the fact that Disney had advertised the new town in the local black press. Collins and Frantz propose two possible reasons for the lack of African Americans’ enthusiasm for Disney’s new town. First, they argued that Disney, the developer of the town, “pander[s] to a white, middle-class version of America in which the issues of race are, at best, skirted and, at worst, stereotypically reinforced.”<sup>162</sup> While whites “trusted Disney to re-create the kind of town they remembered,” this simply is not “the remembered childhood of the majority of adult blacks in America today.”<sup>163</sup> A second possible reason is linked to an architectural feature found in the community’s town center). The two open-air pavilions chosen for Celebration in an attempt to introduce regional and “indigenous architecture” in fact “looked almost exactly like the slave market in St. Augustine, Florida’s oldest city.”<sup>164</sup> So, what is decoded by one group of society as a delightful bandstand signifying wholesome small-town life is to other members of society a cruel reminder of racism and discrimination.

Disney officials were “unable to provide an explanation for the absence of minorities” and an interviewed black woman, living in an apartment in Celebration, stated “I cannot put my finger on why”<sup>165</sup> the town’s population was not more of “a mirror of the larger metropolitan area”<sup>166</sup> of Orlando. This example shows that the meanings produced by different people when reading themed post-suburbia are different as well. Small-town architecture means different things to different Americans. Consequently, the theming of post-suburbia, a landscape that remains “mostly white” and depends “overwhelmingly on whites for growth,”<sup>167</sup> may primarily attract whites because it represents to them, and not to others, the myth of “the kind of town they”<sup>168</sup> fondly remember. It can be verified now that the nostalgia in themed post-suburbia is predominantly a white nostalgia.

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<sup>162</sup> Collins and Frantz 2000: 218.

<sup>163</sup> Collins and Frantz 2000: 218.

<sup>164</sup> Collins and Frantz 2000: 218.

<sup>165</sup> Collins and Frantz 2000: 219.

<sup>166</sup> Collins and Frantz 2000: 218.

<sup>167</sup> Frey 2011: 1.

<sup>168</sup> Collins and Frantz 2000: 218.

The notion of memory is problematic, though. It needs to be stressed once again that the dominant small town is not about the memory of lived experience. The marketing texts and a white picket fence instantly create a positive image in many white readers' mind. But in fact, these "[p]ositive images of 'historic' small-town places" have entered the "collective memory of America's middle class"<sup>169</sup> through texts of popular culture, which have repeatedly been using similar codes and narrative patterns to signify the good life in small-town America, as Frank Roost argues in *Rethinking Disney* (2005). Cary Cross assumes the same and highlights Disneyland's importance as a text related to themed post-suburbia: "Even if many adults did not grow up in Disney's small town, as over time fewer had, they often adopted Disney's fantasy of his youth as their own. Memory of a mediated past may have been more real than the one they actually knew."<sup>170</sup> The small-town fantasy is not about personal memories and lived experience although this is suggested by sentences such as "The Village of Baxter has got everything you remember from where you grew up,"<sup>171</sup> "Great care has been taken to make these memories reality,"<sup>172</sup> or "It was like going back to your hometown after being gone for many years."<sup>173</sup> What Stuart Hall calls the "shared" and "preferred meaning," is in the case of the small town more often a collective, white, middle-class "memory of a mediated past."<sup>174</sup>

Meanings are accumulated "across different texts" as "similar representational practices and figures [are] being repeated, with variations, from one text or site of representation to another."<sup>175</sup> Themed post-suburbia, its marketing texts and its logos, which I described in this chapter, all accumulate meanings. But this accumulation of meanings and its repetition of representational practices have to be looked for further in other cultural texts such as movies and Disneyland, as all these texts are part of a white, middle-class discourse of the good life. They are "a network of statements, images, stories and practices by which certain beliefs or set of ideas about a particular topic are circulated and sustained in order to naturalize these as self-evident or common sense."<sup>176</sup> In the next three chapters of this dissertation I will contextualize the

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<sup>169</sup> Roost in Budd 2005: 278.

<sup>170</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

<sup>171</sup> The Village of Baxter n.d.

<sup>172</sup> Providence, Las Vegas n.d.

<sup>173</sup> Gamerman 2016.

<sup>174</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

<sup>175</sup> Hall 2003: 232.

<sup>176</sup> Giles and Middleton 2001: 68.

nostalgic architecture described in post-suburbia to reveal its “preferred meaning[s].”<sup>177</sup>  
I will start by looking at texts about the myth of small-town America.

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<sup>177</sup> Hall 2003: 228.

### 3. THE DOMINANT SMALL TOWN

*It was always the same place, a trim and sunny little city with a tree-lined Main Street full of friendly merchants ('Good morning, Mrs Smith!') and a courthouse square, and wooded neighborhoods where fine houses slumbered beneath graceful elms. [...] the background was always this timeless, tranquil place. [...] Everybody [...] lived in this middle-class Elysium. So did the people in the advertisements in magazines and on the commercials on television and in the Norman Rockwell paintings on the covers of The Saturday Evening Post. In books it was the same.*<sup>178</sup>

*Bill Bryson, The Lost Continent (1989)*

The examples in the previous chapter served to validate how post-suburbia has been decorated according to a small-town theme. The theme is apparent in the countless new lifestyle centers that mimic historic and imagined small-town main streets. It is omnipresent in the strip malls with their historical streetscape facades. The theme is also apparent in suburban street names such as Apple Pie Court. It is used in the marketing rhetoric of themed suburban developments. The theme becomes evident in sales centers for suburban homes that recreate a soda fountain or community clubhouses that look like a traditional town square on the inside. It is evident in TV commercials for JC Penney's American Living, showing Fourth of July picnics and parades on a main street. The small-town narrative is present in any of the numerous Wal-Mart Neighborhood stores, which feature black and white images of traditional main-street buildings on their walls. Physical places are decorated with props that form a code. This code is related to the imagined small town. The theming of post-suburbia conveys a positive and idealized American small-town myth. It is not connected to personal lived experiences in small towns but to a "mediated past."<sup>179</sup> Many white, middle-class Americans apparently share associations and an understanding of the signs and codes and make sense of them in similar ways. All these themed places would not function without shared associations of the signs that relate to the central cultural theme. They would also not be profitable if they were not appreciated by parts of the population. In this

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<sup>178</sup> Bryson 1989: 37f.

<sup>179</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

chapter I will demonstrate that the small town mimicked in post-suburbia does not refer to a single material place but a culturally constructed dominant ideal.

### 3.1 MATERIAL AND DOMINANT SMALL TOWNS

Frank Roost, Cary Cross and others argue that the images of small-town America, which pervade a collective, white, American memory, originate from texts such as Disneyland, which itself was already built on traditions. Obviously, Disney's Main Street, USA, is not a real main street but rather an interpretation or idealization of small-town America. This makes it necessary to separate all material small towns from the idealized small town (see Figures 54 and 55). This differentiation is a suggestion made in the introduction to Richard Francaviglia's 1996 study *Main Street Revisited*: "places like Main Street need to be interpreted as both real places and as expressions of collectively shared or experienced assumptions, designs and myths."<sup>180</sup> In *Main Street and Empire* (2012), Ryan Poll, Professor of English at Northeastern Illinois University, also illustrates the importance of this separation. He argues that the American small town is not "a real, material place. Rather it is an abstract, a historical national imaginary."<sup>181</sup> He differentiates between the dominant small town and material small towns. The latter are 'real' and material places whereas the dominant small town is the one that, according to Francaviglia's study, does "not so much exist on the map as in our hearts and minds."<sup>182</sup> To Poll, the dominant small town – that is, the imagined small town – is an "American nation form." According to him, any nation form structures a nation's master narratives and values: "In short, it structures what is recognized as reality."<sup>183</sup> In *Main Street and Empire*, he suggests that "the dominant small town" is "a complex ideological form that frames and shapes the U.S. identity and imagination throughout modernity."<sup>184</sup> Poll claims that the small town has become a national icon that widely circulates in literary, cultural, and political discourse as an authentic American space and signifier."<sup>185</sup> He believes that the dominant small town "is an ideological form" and a "reified national imaginary that is pervasive throughout U.S. literary and cultural production."<sup>186</sup> The pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia is evidence for the reiteration and pervasiveness of the small-town myth. Poll's thesis is

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<sup>180</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xxii.

<sup>181</sup> Poll 2012: 2.

<sup>182</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xiii.

<sup>183</sup> Poll 2012: 8.

<sup>184</sup> Poll 2012: 5.

<sup>185</sup> Poll 2012: 2.

<sup>186</sup> Poll 2012: 5.

that the “small town is an imagined community that is central to the United States’ imagined community.”<sup>187</sup> It is important to stress that the small town is “imagined” and at the same time this imagined place is “recognized as reality.”

Miles Orvell makes a similar distinction in *The Death and Life of Main Street* from 2012. He argues that Main Street/the small town is both “a place and an idea.”<sup>188</sup> He claims that there are countless main streets, “so many historical variations that [Main Street] escapes a singular identity.”<sup>189</sup> Yet, at the same time “we all have some broader set of associations with Main Street as a cultural ideal and an icon of American culture.”<sup>190</sup> He points out that “of course place and idea are interconnected, for it is Main Street’s force as an idea that has powered its creation as a place; and it is the place, Main Street, that has embodied and perpetuated the idea.”<sup>191</sup> Orvell considers Main Street and the small town “a microcosm of American life [which is] deeply tied up with Americans’ desire for the perfect community.”<sup>192</sup> He claims that this idea and place have a “continuing power to influence the shape of American society and culture”<sup>193</sup>

These assumptions find evidence in the theming of post-suburbia, which I described in the previous chapter. The theming of post-suburbia does not happen according to any *single* real American small town but according to the abstract historical national imaginary of the American small town. This dominant small town is “a national icon, a national tradition, and a national myth”<sup>194</sup> and the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia mirrors and propagates this specific imagined place and time – or, as Orvell puts it, the “collective fantasy, the myth of Main Street.”<sup>195</sup> American post-suburbia is “laden with symbolic meaning”<sup>196</sup> referring to this one central positive narrative.

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<sup>187</sup> Poll 2012: 9.

<sup>188</sup> Orvell 2012: 3.

<sup>189</sup> Orvell 2012: 3.

<sup>190</sup> Orvell 2012: 3.

<sup>191</sup> Orvell 2012: 3.

<sup>192</sup> Orvell 2012: xi.

<sup>193</sup> Orvell 2012: xi.

<sup>194</sup> Poll 2012: 18.

<sup>195</sup> Orvell 2012: 11.

<sup>196</sup> Knox 2008: 4.



**Figures 54 (left) and 55 (right).** The dominant small town of Main Street, USA at Disneyland Paris (left) vs. a material small town, Cape Charles, VA (right). 2011 and 2012 photos by the author. I am using photos of Euro Disneyland's (Disneyland Paris') Main Street, USA, because, despite being different from its American counterparts when it comes to its much higher level of detail and the quality of the materials used to build it, it was designed based on the same principles as the American version. In Europe, "the nationalistic character of Main Street, USA, should not be compromised in any way: it was to remain ultra-American to capture the lively spirit (as opposed to the politics) of the United States."<sup>197</sup> Moreover, Euro Disneyland's Main Street, USA, captures "America in transition"<sup>198</sup> as does Anaheim's version: "cars were beginning to replace horse-drawn carriages, electricity had just come onto the scene, and people were gingerly stepping into the promise of the twentieth century."<sup>199</sup>

## THE MATERIAL AMERICAN SMALL TOWN

It is impossible to exactly define the material American small town. However, before looking at dominant small-town America, an attempt shall be made. This is done with the help of two studies on the subject: one by Professor of History and Director of the Center for Greater Southwestern Studies and the History of Cartography at the University of Texas at Arlington Richard Francaviglia who wrote *Main Street Revisited – Time, Space, and Image Building in Small-Town America* (1996) and another by Professor of English and American Studies at Temple University Miles Orvell who is the author of *The Death and Life of Main Street* from 2012. Both scholars agree that a main street is important in defining a small town. Orvell states that a main street "is the essence of the small town and synonymous with it" and that every "town or settlement in the United States has a central artery running through it."<sup>200</sup> Francaviglia observes that there "are several thousand small towns in the United States, and, by definition, as many Main Streets."<sup>201</sup> The main street of a settlement does play a pivotal role in defining this place.

In the United States, there have developed several regional patterns of small towns. Orvell suggests several general types of small towns, differentiated by the design of their main streets:

<sup>197</sup> Lainsbury 2000: 53.

<sup>198</sup> Lainsbury 2000: 54.

<sup>199</sup> Lainsbury 2000: 54.

<sup>200</sup> Orvell 2012: 13.

<sup>201</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xix.

- "the New England town with a traditional village green and commercial streets bordering it"<sup>202</sup> and a church steeple
- "the southern town with a courthouse square at the center, the streets coming into it, typically from four directions, forming a communal, commercial and legal center"<sup>203</sup>
- the Midwest small town with a "linear Main Street" consisting of "one to six blocks" and "with commercial buildings fronting the street on one or, usually two sides, providing a matrix for future growth."<sup>204</sup>

All these patterns have in common that any small town has a center, which serves communal, commercial, and civic purposes. This center is directly connected to residential areas surrounding it. Francaviglia developed rules for the size of a small town center and the community's population. He showed that the number of main-street blocks corresponds with the population of the town. He found that for every 500 residents there is one block of main-street commercial buildings. A main street of six blocks can be found in a small town of 4,000 to 5,000 people. He also observed that usually the commercial area will not exceed four blocks and will expand "into a more squared-off or compact form – seemingly to avoid creating too long a distance to traverse."<sup>205</sup> This shows that walkability is a characteristic of a small town. Pedestrians can often easily walk to the center because these communities were not designed around the car. Generally, the population of a small town is considered by Orvell to be between 2,500 and 25,000. Francaviglia defines a small town similarly. To him small towns have a population ranging from 750 to 30,000 residents.<sup>206</sup>

Orvell concludes that if these general types of small towns are multiplied "by hundreds and thousands of individual places, of all sizes and populations each with its individual character" one gets "a picture of multiplicity almost too vast to be assimilated into a single phrase or concept."<sup>207</sup> Francaviglia recognizes the same variety. He uses the term main street to "include all small town commercial core areas, whether they be linear or nucleated."<sup>208</sup> A real definition of the small town as a place cannot be given. It is a community of up to 30,000 residents. It has some form of center

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<sup>202</sup> Orvell 2012: 13.

<sup>203</sup> Orvell 2012: 13.

<sup>204</sup> Orvell 2012: 13.

<sup>205</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xx.

<sup>206</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xx.

<sup>207</sup> Orvell 2012: 13.

<sup>208</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xx.

referred to as "Main Street." This area is compact and is in walking distance of much of the town's population.

If America's small towns and their main streets are in fact so diverse and individual, why do we today have such a clear idea of the small town? How could these individual places, these thousands of centers of small communities acquire a singular iconic visual identity and even generate a "mythical status that pervades our popular culture?"<sup>209</sup> One reason why American small towns developed such a strong visual identity may be a process of visual standardization that happened in the years following the Civil War: "The period from the 1870s to just after the turn of the century has such a strong effect in the popular mind because many main streets were built up as virtually intact assemblages of buildings [...] during this era."<sup>210</sup> While the layout of the commercial cores of small communities remained rather varied, the

American small-town streetscape took on a very stylized, and highly standardized, appearance by the 1880s. This is true from coast to coast and from the Canadian border to the Mexican border. Viewed in context, the Victorian-era commercial storefront should be recognized as the first truly national building form in the history of American architecture. Although its design roots are traceable to Europe, in the hands of American entrepreneurs it became a characteristically American form: attractive, affordable, easily constructed, easily installed and, most importantly, standardized.<sup>211</sup>

The typical main-street buildings that have been recreated in Disneyland and in suburban lifestyle centers are so iconic because they were constructed everywhere in the United States at the same time. Francaviglia observed that during this important period, several features that today qualify as small-town and main-street signifiers were established. In this period, "so many Main Street facades were constructed [...] that would provide the model for more than a century of nostalgic restorations and fabrications."<sup>212</sup>

Besides the iconic Victorian storefront, there occurred the horse-drawn streetcar, water towers with the name of the community on them, planted trees providing shade, standardized awnings from catalogues, and covered wooden porches.<sup>213</sup> But despite these standardizations, the American small town remained very heterogenic. Yet, the visual cohesion caused by the standardization from the 1870s to early 1900s may be one reason for the emergence of the dominant small town and its

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<sup>209</sup> Orvell 2012: 14.

<sup>210</sup> Francaviglia 1969: 35.

<sup>211</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 35.

<sup>212</sup> Orvell 2012: 48.

<sup>213</sup> Cf. Francaviglia 1996: 39ff.

collective visual idea. Because of this “Americans [may] have ascribed a certain mythical character to ‘the small town,’ as if there were a single template, a type, out of which the myriad versions have emerged.”<sup>214</sup> But the related media is also propagating this “mythical character.”

## THE DOMINANT AMERICAN SMALL TOWN

In his quest for *Amalgam* – the perfect American small town – American author Bill Bryson visited countless material small towns in the United States and wrote about his travels. Why did he visit all those places? In *The Lost Continent – Travels in Small Town America* from 1989, Bryson remembers watching old movies after school as a child. Among them were *The Best Years of our Lives*, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* and *It Happened One Night*. He observes that

the one constant in these pictures was the background. It was always the same place, a trim and sunny little city with a tree-lined Main Street full of friendly merchants (‘Good morning, Mrs Smith!’) and a courthouse square, and wooded neighborhoods where fine houses slumbered beneath graceful elms. [...] the background was always this timeless, tranquil place. [...] And it wasn’t just in the movies. Everybody on TV – Ozzie and Harriet, Wally and Beaver Cleaver, George Burns and Gracie Allen – lived in this middle-class Elysium. So did the people in the advertisements in magazines and on the commercials on television and in the Norman Rockwell paintings on the covers of *The Saturday Evening Post*. In books it was the same.<sup>215</sup>

Bryson’s personal imagination matches what Miles Orvell states in *The Death and Life of Main Street*. Even though Orvell did not grow up in a small town, like Bryson did not, too, he felt that on

the mythical level, [he] was acutely aware of what small-town America was like, at least in the television version; for my small town was the people and families [he] saw in American TV in the fifties, and who is to say they did not embed themselves deeply in my psyche?<sup>216</sup>

But instead of *Amalgam*, Bryson encounters depressing places such as “purplish lit islands of motels, gas stations, shopping centers and fast food places.”<sup>217</sup> He did not find the dominant small town, but visited many contemporary material small towns. Bryson’s voyage underlines the difference between material and dominant small towns. His failure to find *Amalgam* shows that the mythical, dominant small town that is

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<sup>214</sup> Orvell 2012: 14.

<sup>215</sup> Bryson 1989: 37f.

<sup>216</sup> Orvell 2012: x.

<sup>217</sup> Bryson 1989: 152.

aspired to today in post-suburbia in the form of nostalgic architecture is a product of popular culture. Bryson's appreciation of small-town life does not originate from lived personal experience in material small towns. It is the result of the consumption of images of the dominant small town in movies and also in Disneyland. In *The Life and Time of the Thunderbolt Kid: Travels Through my Childhood* (2006) Bryson remembers his first visit to the theme park: It was

the finest thing I had ever seen – possibly the finest thing that existed in America at that time. My father was positively enchanted with the place, with its tidiness and wholesomeness and imaginative picture-charm, and kept asking rhetorically why all the world couldn't be like this.<sup>218</sup>

The dominant small town Bryson is looking for is connected to a myth of small-town life, which will be analyzed next in movies and in Disneyland.

### 3.2 HOLLYWOOD'S SMALL TOWN

The pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia can be seen as an expression of consumer taste. But the semiotic analysis of marketing texts for suburban communities and the billboard for the master-planned community of Providence, Las Vegas suggest that nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia is not only about aesthetics. Picket fences and Victorian facades communicate assumptions about small-town life related to white patriarchal capitalism. The marketing texts and nostalgic architecture intentionally convey the myth of small-town life. Barthes says the myth serves to "purify [things], it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement or fact."<sup>219</sup> Orwell believes that the dominant small town has "continuing power to influence the shape of American society and culture."<sup>220</sup>

#### PREWAR SMALL-TOWN MOVIES

While the focus will be on texts produced after the Second World War, a brief look at earlier movies is useful as they established an effective style of conveying the small town on screen. In his 1984 study *Hollywood Small Towns*, Kenneth MacKinnon analyzes how Hollywood has shaped the collective memory and imagination about the American small town. Hollywood as a producer of images is a central factor for the

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<sup>218</sup> Bryson 2006: 61.

<sup>219</sup> Barthes 2013: 255f.

<sup>220</sup> Orwell 2012: xi.

visual consolidation of the dominant small town and encoded dominant ideologies. MacKinnon's analysis of early small-town movies points to certain visual elements repeatedly used in movies to convey the setting of small-town America. Referring to David Thomson, MacKinnon says "the creation of an image of America by the movies is of particular importance. [Thomson's] argument is that, America being the first man-made nation in the world, [...] is an invented place 'where imagined ideals were invoked as a structure for reality. It is the product of artifice, not nature.'"<sup>221</sup>

MacKinnon supports this claim by showing that certain visual and iconographic elements are used to invent the small town as a place of imagined ideals. They establish a distinct small-town setting that is instantly familiar: "Roads are generally tree-lined, the wooden-frame houses equipped with white picket fences and lawns with concrete paths leading up to the front doors." Moreover, the "wooden-frame houses always have a porch (occasionally running around three-quarters of the houses) on which the characters sit on summer evenings, for example."<sup>222</sup> This description of key visual elements of small-town residential streets in movies is exactly like the marketing rhetoric for themed subdivisions like these ones:

Kitts Creek was designed to take you back in time. To tree-lined streets that connect you with all your neighbors.<sup>223</sup>

White picket fences, livable front porches and big bay windows convey the warm friendly atmosphere of small-town America.<sup>224</sup>

A true small town where neighbors laugh. Tree-lined streets with wide sidewalks. [...] Roomy front porches with swings and rocking chairs. White picket fences.<sup>225</sup>

These texts enumerate the same visual and iconographic elements that convey the dominant small town. Similar variations of these visual clues can be found in many modern suburban housing developments. Kenneth MacKinnon's observations on small-town movies also include the small town's center: "Civic buildings (schools, hospitals, libraries, for example) tend to be red brick. [...] Two further useful visual clues to the small-town movie are the town square, generally with brick buildings set about it, and a park in the center."<sup>226</sup> This is the aesthetic of many themed lifestyle centers or town

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<sup>221</sup> Thomson 1977: 37 quoted in MacKinnon 1984: 169.

<sup>222</sup> MacKinnon 1984: 168.

<sup>223</sup> Kitts Creek n.d.

<sup>224</sup> Hometown Aurora n.d.

<sup>225</sup> Long Leaf Town n.d.

<sup>226</sup> MacKinnon 1984: 168.

centers described earlier. Another central way to convey the small-town setting in movies are the people:

The safest iconographic evidence is probably that of certain kinds of people, young girls in simple cotton dresses, boys in open-necked shirts [...], middle-aged women in flowery dresses, men in tidy but never modish business suits, [...], in such locations as leafy-tree sidewalks decorated with picket fences or against white-painted wooden-spired churches.<sup>227</sup>

The same look is apparent in the commercials for the discontinued American-Living line developed by Ralph Lauren's Global Brands, Inc. Moreover, looking at the sepia images used to promote Providence, Las Vegas, and other nostalgic post-suburban developments, it can be said that the same type of white persons is used here to communicate the small-town narrative. The people in the Providence images exactly match MacKinnon's description. It should once more be stressed at this point that these "certain kinds of people" are all white, middle-class Americans. The dominant American small town is a white, middle class, patriarchal space. Even President Barack Obama was staged as a whitened, middle class, American, small-town resident from the past in the 2012 campaign, "Betting on America," at the Walcott House in Ohio, as was Hillary Clinton filmed in her kitchen in 2016.

These white people are irrevocably connected to a specific architecture. Francaviglia discusses the influence of Hollywood in the creation of the dominant small town as well:

A rather enduring design image of the small town has emerged in American popular culture during the mid- to late twentieth century. When portrayed in film and on television, [small-town depictions] rely, respectively, on beautifully constructed sets of the type seen in earlier Andy Hardy films of the 1930s and 1940s, or actual locations in towns such as Sierra Madre, California. Rod Serling and many other television and film writers scripted the classic or "typical" Main Street into their plots, and it appeared as a row of trim brick commercial buildings that used the street, the sidewalk, and public square as center stage. This popular imagery generates the impression that all Main Streets are much alike, when in fact, real small-town centers are rather diverse. Most towns featured on television and in films simplify complexities. An essential role of Hollywood (and of novelists, for that matter) is the actual creation of stereotypes that can be easily recognized and readily incorporated into the story, and the idealized small-town streetscape has served fiction as well.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>227</sup> MacKinnon 1984: 168.

<sup>228</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 132.

Besides Hollywood, the artist Norman Rockwell also helped to create the stereotypical look of the small town. His contributions to the construction of the dominant small town will be illustrated next.

## NORMAN ROCKWELL AND THE SMALL-TOWN LOOK

According to MacKinnon, the small-town movie's visual aspects originate from "popular American magazines and household calendars. The 'look,' which the cameraman strives for in the small-town movie, is often that of calendar art or rather the *Saturday Evening Post* front covers, the paintings of Norman Rockwell."<sup>229</sup> Norman Rockwell is considered "America's best-loved and best-known illustrator."<sup>230</sup> He lived from 1894 to 1978 and is famous for creating more than 300 covers of *The Saturday Evening Post*. Moreover he worked on many other iconic paintings such as *The Four Freedoms*. The pictorial *Norman Rockwell: Faith in America* proclaims:

Rockwell's dream of America at a simpler time, of a small-town world of pig-tailed kids and their parents, continues to hold a powerful and emotional appeal for young and old alike. [...] [Rockwell helps] us to recapture a time too good to forget and a vision too important to desert.<sup>231</sup>

The same white, middle-class small-town folks that can be seen in many of Rockwell's illustrations are evident in marketing material for post-suburban developments such as Providence, Las Vegas. The white dream of a simpler and better time that Rockwell seemingly captured in his paintings and illustrations is also apparent in a post-suburban development like Centennial Springs, where the central commercial street is deliberately named Norman Rockwell Lane to allude to the artist's small-town universe.

With regard to the small-town myth, Norman Rockwell indeed created "an image that has endured into the twenty-first century as the archetype of small-town society." His covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* incarnated "a world of family doctors and family dinners, of drugstores and barbershops, of diners and train stations, of Christmas and Thanksgiving."<sup>232</sup> This list of motifs instantly evokes the myth of small-town America. Rockwell depicted white, middle-class Americans and small-town life in a highly positive and charming way. He made this idea of small-town America familiar and naturalized it as "his covers for the *Saturday Evening Post* brought his work into

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<sup>229</sup> MacKinnon 1984: 168.

<sup>230</sup> Bauer 1996: blurb.

<sup>231</sup> Bauer 1996: blurb.

<sup>232</sup> Orvell 2012: 42.

millions of American homes for almost half a century."<sup>233</sup> In doing so, he helped to shape dominant small town. He created appealing illustrations of white, middle-class American characters living in their hometowns according to traditional gender conventions. Illustrations like these inspired the way Hollywood shaped the American small town, as MacKinnon suggests.

In *Norman Rockwell – the Underside of Innocence*, from 2006, Professor of Literature Richard Halpern states that "some of his most memorable images have burned themselves forever into the national consciousness."<sup>234</sup> He suggests that Rockwell's illustrations have often been misunderstood. Halpern assumes and shows that there is also a darker side to the seemingly innocent world of Norman Rockwell.

Both those who love Rockwell and those who dismiss him agree on one thing: his art embodies a distinctively American style of innocence. To his admirers, Rockwell's paintings of mischievous boys, swimming holes, and small-town life offer a reassuringly wholesome if somewhat nostalgic vision that wards off the sordid, threatening aspects of modern existence. To his detractors, this same vision betrays both social and artistic naïveté, a kitschy sentimentality that promotes a sanitized view of the world.<sup>235</sup>

While Halpern does not agree with either of these two positions, these receptions of Rockwell's work are relevant for this text. Halpern shows that Rockwell wanted to be liked, and wanted to be paid well for his work. Therefore, he "painted pictures that didn't disturb anybody."<sup>236</sup> "For Rockwell, creating a world of innocence is in part a matter of meeting consumer demand."<sup>237</sup> It is this world of American small-town innocence that even today meets consumer demand and that continues to influence the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia. Rockwell consciously embedded the mythical dimension of small-town innocence in many of his illustrations.

This world of American innocence, imagined by prewar Hollywood and Rockwell, can also be observed in more recent movies. The standardized architecture of material small towns as well as illustrations by Norman Rockwell helped to create signs that generated an American small-town code. The iconic small-town "look" and the reassuring signs that MacKinnon observed in earlier small-town movies continued to be used in movies that were produced after World War II.

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<sup>233</sup> Halpern 2006: ix.

<sup>234</sup> Halpern 2006: ix.

<sup>235</sup> Halpern 2006: 2.

<sup>236</sup> Halpern 2006: 4.

<sup>237</sup> Halpern 2006: 4.

There are similarities in the way the small town is established as a setting in these newer movies. My focus is on those scenes that introduce the small-town setting. In establishing shots the entire plethora of dominant images and small-town myths is unveiled to effectively and rapidly introduce the small-town setting. This works like the marketing texts quoted earlier. While these marketing texts enumerate signs and symbols like "friendly neighbors," "white picket fences," or "roomy porches," movies most often make use of a dynamic crane or track shot that reveals a chronology of images containing small-town signifiers and symbols. The close look at the signs and symbols that are used here serves to define the small-town narrative. Also, it is worth noting what and who is missing during the establishment of the small town as a setting. This analysis is significant in order to comprehend why the small-town idea has such an enduring appeal in American culture and the signs and symbols that appear in so many movies are so pervasive, yet out of their small-town context, in post-suburbia.

#### **PETE'S DRAGON:**

##### **"SOUNDS LIKE A NICE PLACE."**

A typical example of the introduction of the small town as a setting is the live-action animated musical film *Pete's Dragon*, produced by Walt Disney Productions.<sup>238</sup> The movie stirred nostalgia for small-town America in a time when the country had already become a suburban nation and was turning into a post-suburban nation. The setting is the fictional New England small town of Passamaquoddy around 1900. Orphan Pete is searching refuge in this community after he accomplished to escape from his adoptive family, who abused him. The Gogans do not belong to the middle class but is portrayed as white-trash hillbillies. Pete's only company is his dragon Eliot who can turn invisible. In this desperate situation the small town symbolizes a place of hope and refuge to Pete. To him Passamaquoddy "sounds like a nice place." At the same time it is suggested that the small town is an exclusive community to which one does not belong automatically. Here, everybody has to conform to certain rules in order to fit in. Pete is aware of the conventions of small-town life. He tells his dragon "we want the people of Passamaquoddy to like us" and not to "scare anyone." Therefore, he asks Eliot to stay invisible at all times. Pete knows that only conforming to the rules of the community is his ticket into this world, which he desires so much.

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<sup>238</sup> *Pete's Dragon*. USA 1977. Don Chaffey (live action) and Don Bluth (animation). Walt Disney Productions, Buena Vista International.

The first thing the viewer sees of Passamaquoddy is a scenic long-distance shot of the community. Passamaquoddy is located on the New-England coast. It is a small coastal community. As soon as Pete enters the town, small-town signifiers are used to convey the setting to the 1977-audience within seconds. The entire introduction of Passamaquoddy takes less than two minutes. First, there is a tranquil, tree-lined residential street with wooden-frame houses, white picket fences, porches and sidewalks in front of them. A woman picks up a bottle of milk from the steps of her large porch. There is a rocking chair on the porch. In the background, there is the sound of horseshoes on the street. Another well-dressed woman passes the house and waves towards the first woman: they obviously know each other. Pete sighs happily as if he had finally arrived home and marches on. A man is reading the newspaper sitting on his porch. Close to this quiet residential area, there are a town hall, stores, and a red school building. The stores have awnings and shop signs. The town is presented as a safe and friendly place. The mayor proclaims in total self-content that Passamaquoddy is "a beautiful community, where the sun always rises and the sun always sets. It's a place of serenity and security, where the unexpected never happens." This is about to change. Pete and Eliot's arrival is presented as an intrusion into the tranquil and expectable small-town life in Passamaquoddy. Although invisible, Eliot is causing much trouble due to his physical size. He tears down the white picket fence as he passes it. Eliot leaves huge footprints in the freshly paved sidewalk and smashes a shop sign. Later in the movie, he destroys the wall of the red school building.

The familiar code used in *Pete's Dragon* conveys the small-town setting and also communicate the small-town narrative. Here, the small town is an exclusive place to which strangers, like Pete and Elliott, cannot simply have access. The small town is a place of conformity and conventions. Pete, a poor child in ragged clothes, and his unusual friend, a green dragon, do not fit into the proper and clean, white, middle-class environment. They start out as an excluded minority. At the same time this exclusive world of conventions is aspirational and considered "a nice place." Pete feels right at home and wants to fit in. He does not want to be part of a minority any more. Pete wants to be part of this community where people wave when they recognize him on the street and where one can sit on the porch and read a newspaper.

Pete is eventually integrated during the story. He finds a loving home. A woman called Nora and her father Lampie take care of Pete while Eliot stays in a cave on the beach. Nora and her father run the lighthouse of Passamaquoddy. The small-town folks initially make the stranger Pete responsible for the lack of fish in the bay. He is also treated badly by the teacher at school. Nora defends Pete and demands the

people of Passamaquoddy to welcome him and to show some respect. Pete gets dressed properly and turns into one of the white, middle-class, small-town folks he always wanted to be. In the end, Nora's fiancé Paul returns and the two seemingly adopt Pete. They form a nuclear family. Elliott however, being a green dragon, cannot be integrated as easily into this world of white, middle-class conformity. He moves on and becomes friends with another kid. But why couldn't he stay? The movie offers the explanation that somebody else needs Eliot's company now that Pete is cared of. The impossibility of including Eliot is taken for granted and not questioned in this movie from 1977. This end supports the interpretation of the dominant small town as an all-white, middle-class realm that marginalizes and expels those who cannot fit in because of their otherness.

### **BACK TO THE FUTURE:**

#### **"A COLORED MAYOR? THAT'LL BE THE DAY."**

The *Back to the Future* trilogy<sup>239</sup> is of special importance. Screenwriter Bob Gale says that it "was always one of the major elements of the story even in its earliest incarnation [...] to take a place and show what happens to it over a period of thirty years. What happened to everybody's hometown is obviously the same thing. They built the mall out in the boonies, and killed all the business downtown, and everything changed."<sup>240</sup> The *Back to the Future* movies show the rise and decline of small-town America in general and of the fictional community of Hill Valley in particular. In this chapter, I will focus on how the dominant small-town idea is conveyed in these movies. In the next chapter, we will revisit Hill valley and a closer look will be taken at its decline and the critical message that *Back to the Future* communicates.

All three *Back to the Future* movies are about time travel. Yet, the destination of these travels is not distant places and times. The destination is always the same small town. Throughout the three movies, the audience is presented with Hill Valley in 1885, in 1955, in 1985 and in 2015. The protagonists of these movies are Doctor Emmet Brown and a teenager called Marty McFly. One night, Marty has to meet Brown on the parking lot of suburban Twin Pines Mall, outside of Hill Valley. Here, he learns that Brown has invented a time machine. Eventually, Marty ends up in Hill Valley of 1955 while Brown stays in the present of 1985. 1955 is presented as an innocent time before suburbanization and the movements of the 1960s. The first suburban development –

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<sup>239</sup> *Back to the Future*. USA 1985. Robert Zemeckis. Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures, *Back to the Future Part II*. USA 1989. Robert Zemeckis. Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures, *Back to the Future Part III*. USA 1990. Robert Zemeckis. Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures.

<sup>240</sup> Mayfield n.d.

Lyon Estates – is just being laid out two miles outside Hill Valley. In order to find Brown in 1985, Marty heads towards Hill Valley and is amazed to see how different America was just 30 years earlier, in 1955. The dominant small-town idea again is conveyed very effectively through dynamic shots filled with familiar small-town signifiers. It should be noted before discussing the introduction of Hill Valley that the movie set employed in this movie has been frequently used before. The set is called Courthouse Square and is located at the Universal Studios in Hollywood, California. According to [thestudiotour.com](http://thestudiotour.com) the “square has been seen in hundreds of Universal films (and those of other studios). In common with many other standing sets, simple changes like the arrangement of street furniture and signage can make the set appear to be a completely different location.”<sup>241</sup> Courthouse Square is “the most famous and most photographed town square in America.”<sup>242</sup>

Marty McFly from 1985 enters this small town of 1955. His face shows disbelief and amazement. The very detailed and dense accumulation of small-town images begins as the music sets in: *Mr Sandman, bring me a dream.*<sup>243</sup> The song instantly creates an atmosphere of American innocence, suggesting that this place is like a dream. Point-of-view shots are used to highlight what is remarkable to Marty. He passes a small billboard in front of the cinema: Ronald Reagan, who is President in 1985, is starring in *Cattle Queen of Montana*. All seats are 50 cents. This is very cheap compared to what a movie costs in 1985. The camera moves on and shows a typical main-street building in the background: a bicycle shop with a familiar red-and-white striped awning. Cycling is rather uncommon to Marty from post-suburban 1985. Next we see the façade of the movie theater: a banner has recently been affixed to it: “air conditioned.” The fact that this banner catches Marty’s attention shows that to him this technology is nothing special and he is surprised that it needs to be advertised. Still in shock, Marty almost stumbles into a passing car. The town square is very busy. A man is taking care of the public lawn while other white people are chatting. More stores can be seen in the background. There is a full-service Texaco station and a woman walks by with a shopping stroller. In the record store a sign shows that the *Ballad of Davy Crockett* has just arrived. A crane shot across the public square reveals more of Hill Valley’s typical small-town architecture and the many activities that go on in the heart of the town. We see a policeman walking by and more white people strolling around. Some boys are playing baseball. All this is the opposite of 1985, where many of the

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<sup>241</sup> “The Studio Tour” n.d.

<sup>242</sup> “The Studio Tour” n.d.

<sup>243</sup> The Chordettes, *Mr Sandman*, 1954.

businesses and residents of downtown Hill Valley have relocated to the new suburbs. But in 1955, this is the heart of a thriving community. The welcome-sign, which is placed in front of the Court House, is sponsored by all the organizations that shape life in Hill Valley: Kiwanis International, Jaycees, Rotary International, the American Legion, Future Farmers of America, the Lions Club, the chamber of commerce, the YMCA, the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry, Optimist International, and the Camp Fire Girls of America. The many organizations active in Hill Valley, most of which founded by and targeted at men, are linked to the town's prosperity.

Marty finally realizes that he is in 1955 after he has found a newspaper. He goes to Lou's Diner which has a public phone. He wants to find out where Emmet lives in order to get back to 1985. As he enters the diner, the jukebox plays the *The Ballad of Davy Crockett*. Marty wants to order a Pepsi Free, but the only sugar-free drink available is black coffee. Pepsi Free was introduced in 1982. At the diner, he encounters the only African American in the movie. Goldie Wilson works for Lou Caruthers who is the white owner of the diner. Back then Goldie probably is not a member of any of the organizations of Hill Valley's social elite. But by 1985, he will have managed to be the mayor of this town. The reason for this is Marty from 1985. There happens a significant conversation as Goldie talks to Marty's father (a teenager in 1955) who has just been bullied by some other kids:

Goldie: Stand tall! Have some respect four yourself. You know what, you let people walk over you now they will be walking over you for the rest of your life. Look at me. You think I'm gonna spend the rest of my life in this slop hole?

Lou: Watch it, Goldie!

Goldie: No, sir! I'm gonna make something of myself. I'm going to night school and someday I'm gonna be somebody!

Marty: That's right. He's gonna be mayor!

Goldie: Yeah, man... mayor! Now that's a good idea. I could run for mayor!

Lou: A colored mayor. That'll be the day!

Goldie: You will see, Mr Caruthers, I will be a mayor. I will be the most powerful man in Hill Valley. And I'm gonna clean up this town...

Lou: You can start by sweeping the floor.

This very dense scene of Marty's first encounter with Hill Valley in 1955 only takes a few minutes. In this short time, the setting is fully established and much is said about America in 1955 and in 1985. It is suggested, that small-town life in the 1950s was simpler and less complex than life in the 1980s. On the one hand, this simplicity is portrayed as positive. It is as if Hill Valley of 1955 seems more cohesive and made more sense than Hill Valley of 1985. The simplicity promoted here is about having fewer choices: no Diet Coke, no chain stores, no mall, and fewer movies to watch. But

on the other hand, the simplicity of the good old days is also about a hierarchical society. The good and simple life of 1955 is about traditional gender conventions and racial hierarchy which should not be questioned in order to maintain the status quo. But they are questioned. The conversation I quoted foreshadows the social movements that are about to change Hill Valley and America. Goldie Wilson does not accept the naturalized racial hierarchy and is not willing to toil as an unskilled worker all his life. He boldly proclaims that he wants to be someone. The owner of the diner looks down on him and makes fun of his aspirations. Goldie has been brought up to respect white people and despite being humiliated still addresses Lou with “sir” and “Mr Caruthers.” A woman working at the diner, probably Mrs Caruthers, looks at Goldie as if he was a little child with naïve dreams. She says nothing.

All this leaves the audience and Marty with an ambivalent feeling about the dreamy and innocent depiction of Hill Valley in 1955.<sup>244</sup> Just like in a Rockwell painting, there is a darker side to the innocence of Hill Valley. Marty and the audience of 1985 know precisely how Hill Valley and America will change. Lyon Estates will start the suburbanization of the area and Hill Valley will lose its function in people’s lives. In the town itself, there already is a realty office, heralding the rush to suburbia. A political campaign proclaims: “The future is in your hands. If you believe in progress, re-elect Mayor Brent Thomas.” Progress will change Hill Valley and will destroy the imagined American innocence of 1955. The movie points to the fact that all the positive aspects of life in Hill Valley in 1955 are linked to problematic hierarchal structures, and that all who are not male and white are marginalized and need to follow the rules. The marginalization of women and African Americans is also evident in the next movie I will look at.

### **JUMANJI:**

#### **“HARD WORK, DETERMINATION, AND A CHEERFUL OUTLOOK”**

*Jumanji*<sup>245</sup> is set in Brantford, New Hampshire, in 1969. The setting (see Figure 56) is, as usual, established very effectively by a short sequence of powerful small-town images. First, there is a crane shot over the main square of the small town. We see a white courthouse with a park in front of it and a memorial. A row of typical commercial main-street buildings with cars parking in front of them appears on the left. In the back, there is the spire of a church. In the next shot, a policeman is regulating the traffic.

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<sup>244</sup> This innocence will become more obvious in the next chapter, when Hill Valley of 1985 is analyzed.

<sup>245</sup> *Jumanji*. USA 1995. Joe Johnston. Interscope Communications, Teitler Film, TriStar Pictures.

Some white boys in baseball uniforms are using the pedestrian crossing. Next, the main character of the movie is introduced: Alan Parrish. As he is riding his bicycle along Main Street, he continuously is in social interaction with the local merchants and people on the street. They know his name and Alan knows theirs. This is because Alan's father owns the Parrish Shoe Company ("Four Generations of Quality").



**Figure 56.** Jumanji was partly shot in Keene, NH. Photo courtesy "AlexiusHoratius." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keene\\_NH\\_21.JPG?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Keene_NH_21.JPG?uselang=de). Accessed July 6, 2018.

As Alan rides down the street, typical visual elements of main-street signifiers flash by: awnings, decorated shop windows, and local shop owners, whom he greets. Later, some kids see Alan and want to bully him because he supposedly is the new boyfriend of one of the bullies' girlfriend. Alan tries to escape and enters the residential area of Brantford: a man mowing his lawn is a visual clue, which continues to establish the setting. In the back, there are a white picket fence, a wooden frame house, and tall trees. Alan manages to get to his father's factory. The kids leave as he enters the factory. He meets Carl, the only African-American worker at Parrish. Carl has developed a revolutionary new shoe he wants to show Mr Parrish.

Alan skeptically asks: "What is this?" Carl replies: "What is it? Man, this is the future. If I can get Wilt Chamberlain<sup>246</sup> to wear them... I bet there'll be a pair of those in every closet in America. That's gonna be the height of fashion." Alan looks skeptical and puts the shoe on a conveyor belt. It resembles the first *Nike Air Jordan 1* from 1984. Similar to *Back to the Future*, this movie shows a young African American man with high aspirations. The shoe he has developed in 1969 looks very familiar to those watching the movie in 1995. The audience knows that this type of show will become a

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<sup>246</sup> Chamberlain (1936-1999) was an African-American basketball player.

huge success in the future. However, Carl's dreams are smashed instantly. The conveyor belt transports the shoe into a machine which cuts it into pieces. As Mr Parrish asks Carl about what he wanted to show him, the only thing left is a completely cut-up shoe. Alan is to blame for this mistake but he says nothing and sneaks out of the factory. Outside, he is beaten up by the kids. They also take away his bike. As Alan recovers, he hears a sound and is drawn to the nearby construction site to find a strange game called *Jumanji*. He rushes home and accidentally starts playing the game. Alan's parents are preparing for a social event. Mr Parrish is reciting a speech he will need to deliver this night: "[...] hard work, determination, a cheerful outlook: attributes that have exemplified the Brantford-spirit since our forefathers first settled this town. Despite the harshness of our native climate and the granite of our soil we have prospered [...]."

Once more, the importance of Mr Parrish is stressed. He is a successor of the founding fathers of Brantford. He expects his son to follow his lead. We learn that all Parrish boys have gone to the same private school "ever since the 1700s." But Alan does not want to go there. His parents show him a brochure. Alan replies: "Look at this... Parrish Hall?" His father explains: "It is the main dormitory. ... It was named after my father." Alan angrily shouts: "Maybe I don't wanna be who you are. Maybe I don't want to be a Parrish." The argument he is having with his father escalates. After his parents have left, Alan packs his things and leaves. At the door, he meets his supposed girlfriend, Sarah, who wants to return his bike. The two start playing *Jumanji*. Alan is sucked into the game and gone.

There is a cut and the plot continues 26 years later. In 1995, the neglected Parrish residence is up for sale. Nora Shepherded, the aunt of Judy and Pete Shepherded, whose parents worked in advertising and died in a car crash in Canada, buys the huge house. Pete, wearing Nike sneakers similar to Carl's concept of 1969, has only spoken to his sister since his parents' death. His sister, on the other hand, tells lies all the time. Both are traumatized because of the loss. After some days in the house they find the game and immediately start playing it. Alan Parrish returns as a consequence. He has grown up and gradually realizes that he has come back not to 1969, but to 1995. He briefly meets Carl who has become a police officer. Brantford has deteriorated and the factory "has folded up like everything else in this town," as he learns from an old man Alan meets in his father's former office. The man also tells Alan more about his father and his factory: "When his kid ran away, Sam put all he had into trying to find him. His time, his money. Everything. After a while, he stopped comin' to work. He just quit carin'. I don't think anybody loved his boy more than Sam did." Alan

finds out that his parents are dead. He begins to realize the effect his disobedience against his father had on his family and on the entire community.

He then looks for Sarah. Together with her and the two Shepherded kids they form a team that is set up like a nuclear family. They finish the game together. The successful completion of the game immediately transports Alan and Sarah back to 1969. They find themselves where they had started *Jumanji* 26 years ago, in the living room of the Parrish residence. Alan's father suddenly returns because he has forgotten his speech notes. The two have a brief conversation. Both are sorry. Alan tells his father that it was him who had put Carl's shoe on the conveyor belt. Therefore, it wasn't Carl's fault. Finally, Sarah and Alan throw the game into a river and kiss each other.

The last scene of the movie takes place in a 1995 made possible by Alan's decision to give in to his father and to take on the responsibility for the destruction of Carl's new shoe. In this new future, Carl is still working for the thriving shoe factory. Sarah and Alan are married. It is Christmas. Alan is on the phone and speaks to his father whom he will pick up at the airport later. He is dressed as Santa Clause because they have invited guests to a party. Sarah and Alan have also asked the Shepherded Family to come, including Judy and Pete. Mr and Mrs Shepherded plan to go skiing in Canada but Alan and Sarah immediately ask them to do the marketing for Parrish Shoes' latest line instead, thus preventing their death in a car accident. This alternative future is only possible because of Alan's return to 1969 and his changed actions.

Accordingly, the reason for Brantford being such a prosperous place is the successful factory and white patriarchy embodied by Alan's father. He owns the family business, which is the major employer in Brantford. The central role of an African American in the prosperity of the factory is not stressed at all, neither is the role of women. Without the invention of a new kind of sneaker Parrish Shoes would probably not have survived. The movie mostly emphasizes the significance of the father-son relationship and suggests instead that primarily because of it the happier version of 1995 is possible. Although he initially refuses to become like his father, Alan is about to be the next white patriarch who does not only oversee the factory but also the thriving of his family and his hometown. White patriarchy and capitalism are rendered in a very positive light. Maintaining them is presented as the right thing to do and as a selfless, noble act. In a similar way as in *Back to the Future*, the problems in *Jumanji* can only be solved by the means of time travel and the act of improving the future by changing the past.

The final two movies I will discuss also evolve around dysfunctional father-son relationships. But while *Pete's Dragon*, *Back to the Future* and *Jumanji* all suggest that

the dominant small town is or was real at some point in time, the next two examples explicitly point to the fact that it is a space of popular culture.

#### **PLEASANTVILLE AND THE TRUMAN SHOW:**

##### **“TROUBLE AT THE BARBER SHOP”**

Two movies from 1998 question the concept of the dominant small town. *Pleasantville*<sup>247</sup> and *The Truman Show*<sup>248</sup> depict it as a constructed space and picture the implications this has. Much of the tension and many of the problems in these two movies result from the fact that the dominant small town does not exist as a material space.<sup>249</sup> Both movies suggest that many desire the small-town myth but that the “constraint worlds” they represent “are available only for the select few lucky enough to live within them.”<sup>250</sup> These worlds can only exist as a scripted reality in popular culture. The two movies criticize conformity and individualism and suggest that the price to be paid for a picture-perfect small-town life is a strict obayance to the rules. By that, these movies also question if it is worth doing so. Family- and especially father-son relationships are of importance here, too.

The dominant small town is at the core of the movie in *Pleasantville*. The movie effectively contrasts the dominant small town with post-suburbia of the 1990s. In 1998, David lives with his sister Jennifer and his divorced mother in a suburban housing development in California. While his sister is very popular at school, he is an outsider. To escape this unsatisfactory life David obsessively watches reruns of *Pleasantville*, a sitcom from the 1950s. The protagonists of *Pleasantville* are the nuclear Parker family, who are the opposite of David’s family: the parents are not divorced and the family members do not shout at each other. *Pleasantville* consequently is the opposite of post-suburban California, as well. “Nobody is homeless in Pleasantville. This is just not what it’s like.” David knows every detail of the show and is longing for the kind of family-life portrayed in *Pleasantville*.<sup>251</sup> Eventually, Jenny and David end up as Bud and Mary Sue Parker in the black-and-white fantasy of *Pleasantville* after having fought over the remote control. First in shock, they steadily begin to adapt to and also change life in *Pleasantville*.

The small town of *Pleasantville* is introduced to the audience in the form of a commercial for the upcoming *Pleasantville Marathon* on *TV Time*, a retro TV channel

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<sup>247</sup> *Pleasantville*. USA 1998. Gary Ross. Larger Than Life Productions, New Line Cinema.

<sup>248</sup> *The Truman Show*. USA 1998. Peter Weir. Scott Rudin Productions, Paramount Pictures.

<sup>249</sup> Cf. Rowley 2015: 191 ff.

<sup>250</sup> Rowley 2015: 191.

<sup>251</sup> David asks his friend as he prepares for the marathon: “Why did their parents come home early from the weekend at the lake?” He answers the question himself: “‘Cause Bud didn’t answer the phone and they were worried about him.” This shows that he is longing for the kind of family-life he has seen on TV.

on which the show will be airing for 24 hours. In this commercial the show is presented from a 1990s perspective as a “flashback to kinder, gentler times” and a time of “family values featuring the warm greeting.” Throughout this commercial, dominant small-town images and the small-town narrative are used to establish the setting. The first image the audience sees of Pleasantville is a white, wood-frame house with a white picket fence. The next shot shows that this house is located in a residential street with similar houses. This is followed by a shot of Pleasantville’s Main Street: there are stores with awnings and a courthouse in the distance. Episodes of *Pleasantville* have titles like: “Trouble at the Barber Shop,” “Fireman for a Day,” and “The Big Game.” Besides the Parkers other residents of Pleasantville, like Mr Jones from the soda shop, are introduced in the commercial as well.

After David and Jennifer have been transported into this black-and-white utopia, the small-town narrative initially continues. The protagonists find themselves in a ‘traditional family,’ where the father leaves home in the morning to go to work while the mother stays at home. This patriarchal setting is emphasized by the fact that Mrs Parker cooks a full breakfast on a weekday morning. All this creates a contrast to David and Jennifer’s life in Californian post-suburbia. On their way to school, David and Jennifer meet Mr Smith, their neighbor. He is watering the lawn. As they pass, they have a quick conversation. Mr Smith knows that the Parkers have just bought a new Buick. David tells Jennifer that Mr Smith owns the hardware store. This small conversation delivers another cliché of small-town life: neighbors know each other by name and greet each other. Residents of the community run local businesses. This motif could also be seen in the other texts analyzed earlier.

Later in the movie, the presence of the two teenagers from the late 1990s causes trouble and destroys the balance of dominant small-town life. Just as in *Pete’s Dragon*, the intrusion of strangers into the small town is presented as a threat. While David tries to fit in and works at the local diner, Jennifer starts a love affair with Skip who is the head of the school’s basketball team. Eventually, Jennifer’s behavior inspires her classmates to engage in romantic endeavors as well. These new emotions cause a visual sign of transformation. Many people gradually turn from black-and-white to color. Especially women and teenager are open to the new emotions and become increasingly rebellious against the established patriarchal social order. Only the town fathers of the chamber of commerce are supposedly immune to all of this. These white patriarchs want to fight change and therefore initiate a ban on color as they see their town collapse and drown in what they consider chaos. Further steps in their attempts of taking back their town are new rules that prohibit visits to the library, listening to music,

and paint other than black, white and gray. Despite all the white men's efforts the situation escalates further. David ends up in court where he manages to provoke the mayor to such a degree that he, too, turns from black-and-white to color. The utopia of Pleasantville comes to an end. Timothy Vermeulen, who considers Pleasantville to be a 1950s suburb, proposes this movies says to its viewers:

'This world is safe, orderly, affluent, perfect,' evoking nostalgia for a particular idea of the 1950s, but also 'Bear in mind that you are looking at a world that purports to be safe, orderly, affluent etc., but can only be so by disavowing, repressing and excluding the unpredictable, messy, poor, imperfect and open,' eliciting far less nostalgic sentiments.<sup>252</sup>

This "exclusion of the unpredictable, messy, poor, imperfect and open" as a means to purport a perfect world is also part of the next movie I will discuss. *The Truman Show* is about the life of Truman Burbank, played by Jim Carey, whose life has been filmed and broadcasted to the world from the day of his birth. He does not know about this. Truman lives in a giant TV studio in which an entire small town has been built: Seahaven.<sup>253</sup> All his friends, family, and colleagues are actors. In this movie the small-town setting is established in a way similar to the other movies discussed here. The movie begins with day 10,909 of *The Truman Show*. Protagonist Truman leaves his wooden-frame house in Seahaven and – as every morning – greets his neighbors, an African-American nuclear family. They are standing at a white picket fence outside their home. Truman says: "Good morning. Oh and in case I don't see you: good afternoon, good evening and goodnight." As Truman walks to his car, he meets another neighbor who has a dog called Pluto. Into this picture-perfect scene of small-town life, a light fixture crashes from the ceiling of the TV studio. It is from this moment on that Truman realizes that something is wrong in Seahaven. But first, the setting is continued to be established in the familiar and effective way. There is a long shot of a residential street of Seahaven: many wooden-frame houses in pastel colors line the street. There are many people walking by and just a few cars. We see Truman sitting in his car while listening to the local radio station. He is on his way to work. On the radio, it is explained that the fixture that crashed down in front of Truman's house belongs to a plane that lost parts over the town.

As Truman enters the center of his hometown (see Figure 57) one sees several commercial buildings with shops and awnings grouped around a green square. There

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<sup>252</sup> Vermeulen 2014: 23.

<sup>253</sup> The movie was shot in Seaside, FL. It was founded in 1981 and was the first neotraditional community. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberg planned it.

are pedestrians, a bus, bicycles, and cars. The pedestrians are all dressed according to the look observed by MacKinnon to conform to the dominant small town.<sup>254</sup> Truman goes to a newsstand and, like every morning, buys the newspaper: "Give me a paper there, will you, Earl?" The man from the newsstand asks: "Will that be all for you, Truman?" As Truman leaves, we see many people walking in the public square. Some are waving to each other. People are talking and greeting each other: "Hank!" – "Good morning Truman!" Truman runs into a man who greets him. They are having a small talk just in front of an advertisement for "free range Kaiser Chicken:" "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" "Oh, always." "Oh, and how's your lovely wife?" "Good, good, how about yours?" "Oh, couldn't be better." "Fine, fine, fine." "Nice talking to you, Truman." Finally Truman reaches his office.



**Figure 57.** The town center of Seaside, Florida, where the Truman Show was filmed. 2009. The community was founded in 1981 and was designed by the New Urbanist architects Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberg. Photo courtesy "paigeh." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seaside,\\_Florida.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seaside,_Florida.jpg). Accessed July 6, 2018.

As the movie progresses, it becomes clear that Truman is not happy in this bubble that to everybody watching is the perfect small town. He desperately wants to travel and see the world. But his attempts to leave fail because the producers of the show find ways to stop him from leaving the town. The most drastic measure they have taken to make Truman stay involves his father. When Truman was a child, his father 'died' during a staged boating accident. This caused Truman to develop aquaphobia and has successfully kept him from running away from Seahaven and the show. While all around him are actors and play to be happy in Seahaven, Truman continues to want

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<sup>254</sup> Cf. MacKinnon 1984.

to get away. In order to distract him the producers reintroduce Truman's father who is said to have suffered brain damage after the accident. This, however, does not stop Truman from getting away. His growing nonconformist individualism paves the way to end of the movie. Against all odds he manages to leave the town in a boat. This is especially remarkable because of his fear of water. He sets sail and soon crashes into the painted walls of the studio he has been living in so far. He then finds a door and leaves.

*Pleasantville* and *The Truman Show* use similar strategies to convey the small-town setting and to tell the small-town narrative. Many familiar visual clues are used. What makes the small town exceptional in these examples is the fact that it is not presented as reality, but as explicit fiction. It is central to the plot of both movies that *Pleasantville* and *Seahaven* are imagined, staged, and controlled spaces. Both towns are products of popular culture and serve as the setting for TV shows. At the same time, the audience recognizes these spaces as normative. In *Pleasantville*, David considers the dominant small town and its values as superior to his dysfunctional family in post-suburbia. Jennifer feels similar at the end of the movie. She ceases to be who she has been before, a stereotypical and superficial Valley girl, and decides to stay in *Pleasantville*. In *The Truman Show*, *Seahaven* is presented by the producers of the show as a better place than reality. People only watch the show because it showcases a better world than America in the late 1990s supposedly was. It is possible to buy everything seen on the show, even the houses. The show is a lifestyle brand. What the majority of the audience of both TV shows do not question is the fact that both scenarios are only possible because everybody in *Pleasantville* and *Seahaven* has to conform to a dominant culture. Individualism ultimately causes the destruction of the ideal and the dominant small town. Both movies present a darker side of the small-town ideal, suggesting that "imagined ideals" may not be "a structure for reality."<sup>255</sup> By this, they also question the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia. After having discussed several movies, a look at the small-town narrative told in a different text will follow. Disneyland is another vital example that suggests that small-town life is desirable. Yet, it does not include a critical side to the narrative, as do most movies discussed so far. How is this achieved?

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<sup>255</sup> MacKinnon 1984: 32.

### 3.3 DISNEY'S SMALL TOWN

Besides Hollywood, another significant cradle of American popular culture has contributed to the small-town narrative and its mostly positive associations: Disney. Many projects of the Walt Disney Company can serve as examples of America's pursuit of pastness and their analysis can contribute to a discussion of the phenomenon. These projects do not represent single, isolated events, but were developed chronologically and are related to each other. Disney theme parks share similarities to the movies discussed but they also differ from them in profound ways. While a movie is a static product that usually is not changed once finished, theme parks are built environments that can be actively rearranged, and thereby reinterpreted at any time. Movies are also reinterpreted all the time but they usually do not change their form. Disney theme parks react to and enhance people's desires. They keep changing while movies themselves cannot be changed that easily.

The discussion of Disney in the next three chapters will show that Disney has constantly rewritten and changed what past and future mean in their theme parks since 1955. This sets the Disney Company apart as a unique producer of popular culture and makes analyzing its projects especially helpful in understanding the popularity of nostalgic architecture in contemporary post-suburbia. Professor of Anthropology at Florida International University Stephen M. Fjellman says "to explain [Walt Disney World Resort] is to explain a good deal about twenty-century America."<sup>256</sup> I would like to extend this hypothesis. For me, to explain and to analyze the projects of the Walt Disney Company is to explain and analyze twenty-century America and one of its most prevalent phenomena, the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia.

The Walt Disney Company is exceptional when it comes to shaping collective memory. Disney's theme parks have been attracting millions of visitors each year since 1955 and they are among the most visited tourist destinations in the world: each year, more than 100,000,000 people visit Disney's resorts worldwide. Disney successfully operates theme resorts in Anaheim, Orlando, Paris, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Shanghai. Disneyland California alone has welcomed more than one billion guests since 1955. Furthermore, the Walt Disney Company is an ever-growing media giant – having acquired Lucasfilm, Marvel Studios, and 20th Century Fox – with countless media products being distributed via various channels worldwide. There are movies, magazines, websites, TV shows, books, TV channels, DVDs, CDs, Disney Stores, Disney Cruises, Disney Resorts, Disney vacations, to name only a few. Disney is also strongly

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<sup>256</sup> Fjellman 1992: 2.

engaged as an educational publishing company. In this Disney universe, all components promote each other.

Disney is part of the shared experience of Americans. In the United States, no other cultural force has so much influence and control over ideas and images as Disney. Disney plays a pivotal role in “shaping public memory, national identity, gender roles, and childhood values,”<sup>257</sup> and has become the greatest “icon of American culture and middle-class family values,”<sup>258</sup> as Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock claim in *The Mouse that Roared – Disney and the End of Innocence* from 2010. With regard to the American pursuit of pastness, Disney can be seen as a fundamental cultural power propelling the phenomenon discussed in this text. The Walt Disney Company has actively edited the “public memory to foster nostalgia for a past unsullied by historical injustice”<sup>259</sup> as we will see. The Disney version of the past is the dominant small town. Therefore, the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia needs to be seen in relation to Disney’s attempts to edit the public American memory.

Professor of education Henry A. Giroux and Grace Pollock, who extensively studied the Disney Company, show that Disney executives are well aware “that popular culture does not merely reflect the world but actually plays a role in shaping it.” Disney executives are also aware of the fact that “popular culture functions as an educational force in mobilizing people’s interests and desires.”<sup>260</sup> These assumptions are important as they suggest that corporations like Disney have actively fostered the American pursuit of pastness through their products. Today, as “suburban America witnesses urban violence invading its own schools, homes, and neighborhoods, Disney becomes a symbol for the security and romance of the small-town America of yesteryear.”<sup>261</sup> Disney is the epitome of the idealized vision of America and its dominant small town. “In a pluralistic society, where experiences of church, school, ethnicity, and the like were not apt to be universally shared, Disney motifs constituted a common culture, a kind of civil religion of happy endings, worry-free consumption, technological optimism, and nostalgia for the good old days.”<sup>262</sup>

This dominant culture nowhere becomes more obvious than in Disney’s theme parks. After having already shown how the small-town narrative is part of the Disney movie *Pete’s Dragon*, this part of my texts looks at how the Walt Disney Company is

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<sup>257</sup> Giroux and Pollock 2010: 12.

<sup>258</sup> Giroux and Pollock 2010: 27.

<sup>259</sup> Giroux and Pollock 2010: 32.

<sup>260</sup> Giroux and Pollock 2010: 29.

<sup>261</sup> Giroux and Pollock 2010: 17.

<sup>262</sup> Marling 1994: 119.

fostering nostalgia and the dominant small town in their theme parks. Disney theme parks – are complex texts of popular culture that consolidate the dominant small town in the American public memory. They are “a new form of mass medium, bringing together into one site the previously separated commercial activities of entertainment, advertising, marketing and public relations.”<sup>263</sup>

Moreover, Disney theme parks aesthetically evolved in the context and from the history of Hollywood movies. After all the Walt Disney Studios were foremost a movie studio before the invention of the theme park. In designing Disneyland, techniques and strategies from the realm of movie making were employed. Thus, the classical Hollywood style is echoed throughout Disneyland. This classic style is “a set of formal and stylistic conventions” that were developed by Hollywood filmmakers to make people watch and easily understand movies.<sup>264</sup> Just like in movies, the main focus of Disneyland is

to ‘spoon feed’ story information to the spectator, thus keeping everything clearly understood by the audience. [...] Hollywood’s invisible style subtly eliminates complexity. [...] All of the formal aspects of cinema under the classical Hollywood style work to keep the story clear and characters simple and understandable.<sup>265</sup>

The strong connection between Hollywood and Disneyland underlines once more the influence that texts from popular culture have on the built environments in post-suburbia.

## DISNEYLAND

In *Walt’s Utopia – Disneyland and American Mythmaking*, independent popular cultural analyst Pricilla Hobbs states that “a trip to Disneyland is like a pilgrimage to one of America’s holy places.”<sup>266</sup> She believes that “Disney is ubiquitous to the American experience” and that a “little piece of Disney is present in all aspects of American culture. [...] Disneyland has touched many, if not all, Americans somehow.”<sup>267</sup> Walt Disney and the Walt Disney Company are influential protagonists of the American pursuit of pastness. They play an ambiguous role in the rise of the phenomenon, as will be shown later in more detail. The company’s founder tapped into a sense of nostalgia in American society and his company later intentionally reacted to

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<sup>263</sup> Davis 1996 quoted in Dicks 2004: 102.

<sup>264</sup> Beshoff and Griffin 2009: 23f.

<sup>265</sup> Beshoff and Griffin 2009: 24.

<sup>266</sup> Hobbs 2015: 2.

<sup>267</sup> Hobbs 2015: 17.



during a speech on Main Street, USA, in the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida. Disney theme parks also have become the setting of American naturalization ceremonies.

This “quintessential American” place started in 1955 in a then small rural community south of Los Angeles. The first Disneyland is located in Anaheim, Southern California, next to the Santa Ana Freeway on grounds that used to be orange groves since the first German settlers had come to the area in the 1850s (see Figure 58). Today, Disneyland is in the middle of an urbanized area in post-suburban Orange County, once the fastest-growing county in the United States. In 1955, Disneyland was a mirror of Walt Disney’s personal interests and beliefs, “his sense of nostalgia for his formative years, his fascination with the future, and his vision for family entertainment,”<sup>271</sup> as Jeff Kurtti, who worked for the Walt Disney Company, says. The park was a

powerful dramatization of history and destiny, a story geared to the 1950s [which] arose directly from Walt Disney’s own childhood memories. In an act of almost stupefying self-assurance, he made himself – his life, his hobbies, his movies, his TV shows – the objective correlative for a whole culture, past, present and future.<sup>272</sup>

Disneyland is structured according to Walt Disney’s memories and interests. Each “land” represents a different theme. These lands are grouped in an axial layout around a central hub. Each land tells another narrative: Frontierland is about America’s Old West, Adventureland is about more distant and exotic places such as the Caribbean or Africa, Fantasyland is about the fairy tales of Europe, and Tomorrowland about America’s future in space. With regard to the small-town narrative, the most important land of Disneyland is the entrance area of the theme park, Main Street, USA, which recreates an idealized small town at the turn of the century.

Walt Disney was able to create these themed lands because their signifiers had been consolidated before the opening of the park. The “architecture from the theme park was familiar [to Americans] from movies and television shows,”<sup>273</sup> as professor of Art History and American Studies Karal Ann Marling observes. In order to make Americans familiar with Frontierland, for example, the Walt Disney Studios produced the *Davy Crockett* TV show long before the actual opening of the park. Disney also initiated a TV show called *Disneyland* years before the actual opening of Disneyland.

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<sup>271</sup> Kurtti 2008: ix.

<sup>272</sup> Marling 1994: 119.

<sup>273</sup> Marling 2000.

This program contained content based on the narratives and themes of Disney's new theme park. Walt Disney himself also reported about the construction and his vision of Disneyland. Consequently, on opening day, "the mental map of Disneyland was already emblazoned upon the collective consciousness: Train, Main Street, [...] The pictures made the park. The pictures were the park."<sup>274</sup>

## MAIN STREET, USA:

### "THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE SMALL-TOWN MYTH"<sup>275</sup>

While Walt Disney incorporated idealized urban settings in all the 'lands' of his theme park, the entrance area of Disneyland called Main Street, USA, enshrines the dominant American small town possibly more than movies and magazine covers had done before. Main Street, USA, is a dense collage of an American main street from about 1890. It is densely layered with small-town signifiers.

This themed space had an unparalleled influence on the collective perception of the American small town and main street: "The key figure in [this] development was Walt Disney, less in his films than in his brilliant articulation of a reduced-scale archetype of the Main Street landscape at Disneyland."<sup>276</sup> Former *Miami Herald* architecture critic Beth Dunlop states in *Building a Dream: The Art of Disney Architecture*, which is a book approved by the Disney Company, that Main Street, USA, is "one of the most influential streets in America."<sup>277</sup> According to her, no "other single element of Disneyland or of the Magic Kingdoms to follow had as much impact."<sup>278</sup> What sets apart Walt Disney's role in the shaping of a dominant small town is that he invented this physical space. He elevated it from the two-dimensional movie screen or magazine page to a three-dimensional and interactive experience. In doing so, Walt Disney and his designers continued the already established small-town theme in American culture: "Disney simulations remind visitors of something they know, somewhere they've been, something they've seen or heard."<sup>279</sup>

Disney's Main Street, USA, is a collection of consolidated signifiers that were successfully combined and intensified to create the ultimate all-American small town. Disney's Main Street, USA, was nothing new – it was and is utterly familiar to everyone:

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<sup>274</sup> Marling 1997: 76.

<sup>275</sup> Orvell 2012: 37.

<sup>276</sup> Franklin in Francaviglia 1996: xii.

<sup>277</sup> Dunlop 1996: 117.

<sup>278</sup> Dunlop 1996: 117.

<sup>279</sup> Fjellman 1992: 11.

We've all been there before, even if we've never lived in – or have been to – a small town. [...] If there's an irony here, it's that we have adopted as a symbol of our common past, a place that never quite existed in the form that Walt's imagination gave it.<sup>280</sup>

The essence of the all-American small town just had to be turned into concrete and fiberglass. Beth Dunlop quotes John Hench, a designer at Disney, with the statement, "Walt had an appreciation for the essence of things. For example, the Main Streets across America have many contradictions in architecture. Walt eliminated these contradictions."<sup>281</sup> Main Street, USA, embodies the myth and thus serves as the best-known blueprint for everybody's idea of the American small town. In 1955, people recognized the small-town images that had been consolidated earlier in Norman Rockwell's illustrations, small-town movies and advertisements. Walt Disney intensified and simplified these familiar images to create a new, idealized place that felt utterly familiar to Americans although this place never existed. Walt Disney "created small town America as it should have been"<sup>282</sup> as Francaviglia points out. To him, Disney "is clearly a parental figure when he so manipulates space and time to reassure a culture."<sup>283</sup> Orvell refers to Disneyland as the "apotheosis of the small town myth"<sup>284</sup> (see Figures 59-64).

Disneyland became an important producer of the theme and further established and consolidated small-town images. Main Street, USA, has become an iconic place and a central text of the small-town narrative. In choreographing Main Street, USA, Disney became an active force in the production of the small-town narrative. Also, Disneyland has not only become an inspiration for the historic preservation of American main streets,<sup>285</sup> but served as an inspiration for the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia as well. Writer, editor, and literary critic William Zinsser says that he had seen Main Street, USA, replicated in "upscale shopping malls and upscale towns across America."<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Dunlop 1996: 122.

<sup>281</sup> Dunlop 1996: 120.

<sup>282</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 156.

<sup>283</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 154.

<sup>284</sup> Orvell 2012: 37.

<sup>285</sup> Cf. Dunlop 1996:121.

<sup>286</sup> Cf. Dunlop 1996: 123.



Top left: **Figure 59.** The Storybook Store, Main Street, USA, Disneyland Paris. Top right: **Figure 60.** Liberty Arcade, Main Street, USA, Disneyland Paris. Bottom left: **Figure 61.** Disneyland City Hall, Main Street, USA, Disneyland Paris. Bottom right: **Figure 62.** Main Street Gazette Building, Main Street, USA, Disneyland Paris. 2011 photos by the author.



**Top: Figure 63.** The fire station. Main Street, USA, Disneyland Paris. 2011 photo by the author. **Bottom: Figure 64.** The Coffee Grinder. Main Street, USA, Disneyland Paris. 1996. Photo courtesy Peter Berkemeier.

## THE DESIGN OF MAIN STREET, USA

Much has been written about Disney's Main Street, USA. With regard to this dissertation, it is interesting to see how this influential street was designed and where the creators looked for inspiration. The most famous source of inspiration is the small town of Marceline, Missouri, where Walt Disney spent his childhood. "Walt Disney looked back on Marceline in particular, and the small town in general, with a great deal of nostalgia."<sup>287</sup> When planning Disneyland, it was clear from the beginning that the entrance to the park should be a main street of an American small town. Disney designer Harper Goff delivered the first sketches of Main Street, USA: a drugstore and a barbershop. As he designed Main Street, USA, he was influenced by Walt Disney's hometown memories as well as his own memories of Fort Collins, Colorado, where he had grown up. Material small towns were an important inspiration for Main Street, USA. Walt Disney and his designers created buildings that "possessed some of the architectural character seen in towns like Marceline," but they actually "very carefully engineered the streetscape."<sup>288</sup> Main Street, USA, is a place unlikely to be found anywhere in the United States at the turn of the century.

The themed area forms the entry and the exit of Disneyland. Main Street, USA, is like a movie set, which has all features MacKinnon<sup>289</sup> observed as small-town signifiers. The area starts as an idealized public square of an American small town from around 1890 with a small park in its center. The railroad station, the city hall, a department store, and a movie theater frame this landscaped square. All buildings appear to be made of brick or wood but are made of fiberglass. Main Street, USA, extends along north two tree-lined blocks of themed shops and restaurants, mostly behind wooden Victorian facades. There is even a set back residential building with a porch which suggests that the street has grown into its present form. The two blocks are interrupted by a non straight-angled intersection. The intersection creates a more interesting perspective, yet it is untypical for an American town, where most streets cross in a right angle.

Richard Francaviglia closely studied the design of the buildings found on Main Street, USA, and found that they are very much inspired by Harper Goff's hometown of Fort Collins, Colorado, which was a small town when the designer grew up there. Francaviglia showed that Goff "synthesized elements from numerous high-style

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<sup>287</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 145.

<sup>288</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 146.

<sup>289</sup> Cf. MacKinnon 1984.

Victorian buildings rather than copying, detail for detail, any particular building."<sup>290</sup> In discussing Disneyland's City Hall, Francaviglia demonstrates how Goff worked. The overall shape of Disneyland's City Hall is inspired by Larimer County's courthouse in Fort Collins, while the city hall's details are

reminiscent of other Fort Collins buildings, including the Fire Station and the 'Old Main' building at Colorado State University, these buildings probably helped inspire Goff, for they were landmarks in the early twentieth century. They were also rather representative of Victorian-era buildings in prosperous American towns.<sup>291</sup>

The urban layout of Main Street, USA, however, was much more inspired by the simple layout of Marceline, Missouri, where a single commercial main street developed due to the small size of the town, a typical pattern in the Midwest. Fort Collins was larger and more complex. It was "more complicated and more prosperous than Marceline."<sup>292</sup>

Main Street, USA, is anchored by a public square which was

designed [...] to a Philadelphia Square model, traffic must circle around it. This public square creates an element of drama and even grandeur, for it features well-tended (even sculpted) trees and bushes, iron fencing, a cannon, globe lights, and Victorian-era styled benches. The public square in Disneyland is open – a classic node – and is faced by the commercial and institutional buildings that front it.<sup>293</sup>

Here, the visitor is exposed to the "visual mythology about the small town."<sup>294</sup> This visual mythology is a "composite of abstracted designs from many communities" such as Marceline and Fort Collins.

## MAIN STREET, USA, AND THE SMALL-TOWN MYTH

Francaviglia observes that on Main Street, USA,

architecture becomes the facades that create the impressions that all was right with the world in the small town at the turn of the century; it implies that commerce (and merchants) thrive along Main Street and that society and community are working together in harmony.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 149f.

<sup>291</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 150.

<sup>292</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 150.

<sup>293</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 151.

<sup>294</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 151.

<sup>295</sup> Francaviglia 1996: 156.

This quote raises the question which members of today's society feel that all was or should be right with the world in small-town America at the turn of the century. Besides, who thinks that this is how the dream of an intact America looks like? The previous discussion of movies suggests that only those who would have been in naturalized positions of power at the turn of the century might make this evaluation today. Primarily, these would have been white men. But a visit to any Disney park around the world reveals that not only white, middle-class men go there to marvel at the ideal small town. The audience of Disney is highly diverse. Of the millions who visit Disney theme parks, the majority is not white, male, and middle-class. There are more Disney resorts in Asia than in the United States. There are so-called *Disney Gay Days* at both Walt Disney World and Disneyland Resort. The Anaheim resort now targets the Latino Community, as Hispanics have become the largest Ethnic group in California.<sup>296</sup> More than a third of all Brazilians who visit the United States visit a Disney Theme Park.<sup>297</sup> All North American Disney webpages have a Spanish-language option. There is an online community called *The Disney Moms*, where mothers find and exchange information to plan the next family trip to Walt Disney World. Of course, African Americans frequent Disney theme parks as well.

Most of the visitors to Main Street, USA, are not part of its traditional narrative and would be "the others" if this place was a real small town. To the millions of people from all over the world that stroll down any of the six Main-Street like entrance areas on three continents<sup>298</sup> the street showcases a flawless community based on white patriarchy and capitalism. In 1955, Disneyland's "delineation of social order included an emphasis on patriarchal social relations."<sup>299</sup> This ideal of a white patriarchal community "guided the design of Main Street, USA, where the absence of mummies, Indians, and savages reified Disney's racialized and deeply nostalgic vision of"<sup>300</sup> America. The all-white community is working in harmony: there are no conflicts on Main Street, USA. The lack of diversity is its key feature. The entire setting is characterized by safety and impeccable cleanliness. It is important to notice that the buildings grouped to convey this idealized setting represent the government (City Hall), commerce (stores and restaurants), and cultural life (movie theatre). Everything thrives on Main Street, USA, – just as in the movie scenes discussed before. Main Street, USA,

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<sup>296</sup> Valot 2014.

<sup>297</sup> Ferdman and Yanofsky 2013.

<sup>298</sup> There are variations of Main Streets, USA, at Disneyland Resort, Walt Disney World Resort, Tokyo Disney Resort, Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland, and Shanghai Disney Resort.

<sup>299</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

<sup>300</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

is a prosperous place full of local businesses<sup>301</sup> in which poverty, social tensions of race, class and gender, or any signs of urban decay are absent. Main Street, USA, is interpreted by the Disney Company to be “a communal dream [...] that life can be good.”<sup>302</sup> It is the epitome of white patriarchy and all social groups that are not white, middle-class, and heterosexual are excluded from this “communal dream” of the good life. They are only spectators.

Unlike as in some of the movies I analyzed, Main Street, USA, does not debate the hierarchies of race, class and gender it is based on. Instead, Disney manages to create a sugarcoated place that is appreciated by all its diverse visitors even though most are ultimately excluded from its narrative and its ideology. In a place like Disneyland, hierarchies are the assumed and naturalized norm on which a space like Main Street, USA, is built on.

### 3.4 FAMILY- AND TOWN FATHERS

In the previous chapter I showed that the nostalgic architecture found in today’s post-suburban landscapes refers to the dominant small town and that it articulates white nostalgia. In this chapter I explored this white, American fantasy and the nostalgia it entails in order to find reasons why white, middle-class Americans have come to see it as a positive place that they “remember” and are longing for. A discussion of different texts showed that the ideal of the American nuclear family is fused with the dominant small town. This ideal of family life is based on compulsive heterosexuality between men and women and on patriarchy in small-town America. Disneyland and other texts discussed emphasize “patriarchal social relations”<sup>303</sup> and fathers play the central role in this constellation.

A weak father as in *Back to the Future* is equally harmful to the small town and the family as a missing father is in *Pleasantville*, *The Truman Show*, *Jumanji*, or *Pete’s Dragon*. Not only is a father always needed as the head of the family, but town fathers are also needed as heads of their communities. There is the clear suggestion of a vital relationship between the good life and the town fathers who are upholding white patriarchy and capitalism in both movies and Disneyland while missing or weak father figures are at the core of all problems in the movies discussed and eventually cause the collapse of the entire community. A healthy family equals a healthy small town and vice

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<sup>301</sup> The importance of local businesses to the narrative is stressed by the fact that Disney fans were outraged when it was announced to open Starbucks and McDonald’s branches within its theme parks. Cf. Northrup 2013.

<sup>302</sup> Dunlop 1996: 120.

<sup>303</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

versa. A strong male figure is always the key to this. The dominant small town and the simple, good life it embodies are connected to a powerful myth of white patriarchy. Here, the postwar modern man “was acculturated to value as being *useful* at work, to his family and to the community at large.”<sup>304</sup> In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), Susan Faludi calls this the “promise of post-war manhood.”<sup>305</sup> This concept of manhood and its naturalized implications can be observed in all the texts discussed.

According to the different texts gathered in this chapter, a healthy nuclear family, stable hierarchies, and powerful, responsible, white town fathers guarantee everything that is good about small-town life for white middle-class families. The small-town myth reveals various benefits of this naturalized relation. Community and belonging to a community are central to small-town life. By looking at how the small-town setting is introduced in movies, it showed that a small town’s main street is a lively place of social interaction and activity: locals meet, communication takes place, people greet each other. The prospering businesses are locally owned and people know the male shop owners. The residential areas are safe and tranquil. Neighbors wave when they see each other. Policemen and firemen are shown to convey a sense of security. Scouts hoist the American Flag. Children ride their bikes. Boys are shown practicing baseball or another sport. All this unfolds amid the characteristic small-town architecture. This myth of the dominant small town, as Barthes puts it, appears to be pure, innocent and just.<sup>306</sup>

Stephen Rowley, lecturer in the School of Global, Urban, and Social Studies at RMIT University, Australia recognizes these positive aspects in “notional places” such as “film and television depictions of small towns and suburbs.” These places are “formed by overlapping representations from multiple sources.”<sup>307</sup> He refers to these positive aspects as “the physical and social properties of Hollywood’s movie towns” and categorizes them like this: “a distinctive retail and social hub,” “strong community institutions,” “locally owned and socially integrated businesses,” “classic architecture,” “fluid interface between the public and private realm,” “a highly walkable community,” “an intimate and well-connected social structure,” and “family units as the essential

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<sup>304</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 377.

<sup>305</sup> Cf. Faludi 1999.

<sup>306</sup> Cf. Barthes 2013: 255.

<sup>307</sup> Rowley 2015: 9.

building blocks of the community."<sup>308</sup> This list sums up the white myth of small-town America as seen in the texts gathered in this chapter.

This dominant small town is a highly exclusive space: strangers are identified, are looked at suspiciously and, depending on their willingness to conform, excluded immediately. This exclusive character of the dominant small town, however, adds to the positive notions of community and security. Because the small town is not as anonymous (and diverse) as the city and everybody supposedly knows each other, it takes a while for strangers to integrate into the community. The process of integration is very much a process of assimilation and conforming. People subordinate to the unwritten rules and conventions of small-town life. Maintaining social and physical order is part of this codex. Men mowing the lawns are a common visual clue. Women pick up bottles of milk from the steps of the porch or are seen running errands.

Being a space of exclusion and traditional gender conventions, the aspects that are missing in the discussed texts are of equal significance to the dominant small town. It is pivotal to realize that the dominant small town in the texts I analyzed is a white, middle-class space, which explicitly excludes everyone who is not white and middle class. African Americans, Hispanics, or Asian Americans are marginalized in the dominant small town. Accordingly, a green dragon cannot be integrated into the community, while a white boy can be, as long as he shapes up. At Disneyland, those who are not part of the park's white narrative tend to be reduced to passive viewers of the spectacle of the perfect white community. The whiteness of the dominant small town is a "universal state of representation."<sup>309</sup> Because whiteness is often "unmentioned," in these texts, it becomes the "assumed norm on which everything else is based."<sup>310</sup>

The myth of the family ideal in small-town America evolves around whiteness, patriarchy and capitalism. It is connected to what Associate Professor of Radio, Television and Film at the University of North Texas, Harry M. Benshoff, and Associate Professor of Cinema and Television at Southern Methodist University, Sean Griffin, identify as the dominant ideology of the United States. Ideology, which is a scrutinized concept,<sup>311</sup> can be "regarded as discourses that have specific consequences for relations of power at all levels of social relationships (including the justification and maintenance of ascendant groups),"<sup>312</sup> according to Barker and Jane. Benshoff and Griffin, state the "United States was founded on and still adheres to the dominant

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<sup>308</sup> Rowley 2015: 22ff.

<sup>309</sup> Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 53.

<sup>310</sup> Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 52 f.

<sup>311</sup> Cf. Barker and Jane 2016: 80ff.

<sup>312</sup> Cf. Barker and Jane 2016: 80ff.

ideology of white patriarchal capitalism."<sup>313</sup> This ideology "permeates the ways most Americans think about themselves and the world around them. It also permeates most American films"<sup>314</sup> and consequently other texts of popular culture. According to Benshoff and Griffin, this dominant ideology entails distinct aspects:

The first – white – refers to the ideology that people of Western and Northern European descent are somehow better than are people whose ancestry is traced to other parts of the world. Patriarchal (its root word means 'rule by the father') refers to a culture predicated on the belief that men are the most important members of society, and thus entitled to greater opportunity and access to power. As part of American patriarchy, sexuality is only condoned within heterosexual marriage, a situation that considers all other sexualities taboo and reinforces women's role as the child-bearing and child-raising property of men. The third term – capitalism – [...] can be defined as the belief that success and worth are measured by one's material wealth. This fundamental aspect of capitalism has been so ingrained in the social imagination that visions of the American Dream almost always invoke financial success: a big house, big car, yacht, closets full of clothes, etc. Capitalism (both as an economic system and ideology) works to naturalize the concept of an open market economy, that the competition of various businesses and industries in the marketplace should be unhindered by governmental intrusion.<sup>315</sup>

In the glossary of *America On Film* (2009), white patriarchal capitalism is wrapped up as the "dominant ideology of the Western world" suggesting "that heterosexual Caucasian males and gaining wealth are the most important things in the world."<sup>316</sup>

Professor of English at City College New York bell hooks is more specific and omits the term "ideology." In *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* from 2004, she writes that she uses "the term imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy to describe the interlocking political systems that are the foundation of our nation's politics."<sup>317</sup> She uses telling adjectives to emphasize the noun patriarchy. To her, patriarchy "is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence."<sup>318</sup> She states that

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<sup>313</sup> Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 8.

<sup>314</sup> Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 8.

<sup>315</sup> Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 8f.

<sup>316</sup> Benshoff and Griffin 2009: 430.

<sup>317</sup> hooks 2004: 17.

<sup>318</sup> hooks 2004: 18.

I began to use the phrase in my work “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” because I wanted to have some language that actually remind us and not just have one thing be like, you know, gender is the important issue, race is the important issue, but for me the use of that particular jargonistic phrase was a way, a sort of short-cut way of saying all of these things actually are functioning simultaneously at all times in our lives.<sup>319</sup>

In *Reel to Real* from 1996, bell hooks gives an example of this system. She observes in an essay titled “Doing it for Daddy: Black Masculinity in the Mainstream” that in “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, black males and white females are uniquely positioned to compete with one another for the favors of white ‘daddies’ in power can extend to them.”<sup>320</sup> hooks argues that

representations that socialize black males to embrace subordinate as ‘natural’ tend to construct a worldview wherein white men are depicted as all-powerful. To become powerful, then, to occupy that omnipotent location, black males (and white females) must spend their lives striving to emulate white men. This striving is the breeding ground among black males for a politics of envy that reinforces the underlying sense that they lack worth unless they received the affirmation of white males.<sup>321</sup>

hooks shows that in movies, black males and white females compete for white male affirmation and attention. Also, they strive to attain status with respect to a white male. Thus, they assume his position to be ideal. In doing so, the supremacy of the white male is confirmed and maintained because it is portrayed as natural. The same mechanisms are at work in the texts I discussed in this chapter.

A specific family ideal is also portrayed as natural. All the families in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s texts I analyzed directly or indirectly refer to the iconic 1950s sitcom families. This family represented, as author and historian Stephanie Coontz argues in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, first published in 1992, a new, that is, postwar invention. “From the hardship of the Great Depression and the Second World War and the euphoria of the postwar economic recovery came a new kind of family ideal.”<sup>322</sup> This new, postwar family, according to William Douglas (2003), was fabricated “around two propositions,” the first being the strict division of “spousal rights and responsibilities [...] on the basis of gender such that males assumed a strong provider role and retained authority in the family while females were relegated to a domestic and subservient role in service of the

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<sup>319</sup> “Leocine” 2006.

<sup>320</sup> hooks 1996: 105.

<sup>321</sup> hooks 1996:106.

<sup>322</sup> Coontz 2000: 14.

family." The second proposition was reducing "the role and expectations of women" to "their anticipated motherhood."<sup>323</sup> He agrees that "this artificial family ideal" was "expressed and encouraged"<sup>324</sup> on television. Coontz adds that "the happy, homogeneous families we 'remember' from the 1950s," and that we witnessed (recreated in retrospect) in the texts discussed in this chapter, were "partly a result of the media's denial of diversity."<sup>325</sup>

The postwar invention and naturalization of this family ideal was "a historical fluke, based on a unique and temporary conjunction of economic, social, and political factors."<sup>326</sup> Middle-class Americans adopted "family values and strategies that assumed the availability of cheap energy, low-interest home loans, expanding educational and occupational opportunities, and steady employment."<sup>327</sup> This encouraged "early marriages, early childbearing, expansion of consumer debt, and residential patterns that required long commutes to work."<sup>328</sup> In other words, this encouraged the white flight to suburbia. The "historical fluke" described here did *not* materialize in new, Norman-Rockwell inspired small towns after World War II but in the unprecedented creation of a "Suburban Nation"<sup>329</sup> of Modernism-inspired, mass-produced houses that was completely different from the dominant small town. This is also what we have seen in *Back to the Future* where the suburb of Lyon Estates is about to be constructed, representing an aesthetic and spatial separation from the small town of Hill Valley with its "simple, informal, one-story"<sup>330</sup> ranch houses. In an essay titled "Ranch House Suburbia: Ideals and Realities" (1989) Clifford Clark observes that from "their beginnings in the 1930s to their enthusiastic promotion by home magazines in the 1940s and 1950s, ranch houses were identified with the new ideal of the family."<sup>331</sup>

But have we seen this new American family living in a mass-produced ranch house in this chapter? No. They all lived in peaceful small towns and in traditional town houses. I would like to return to Holley Włodarczyk who points to the important but often ignored or marginalized fact that in the 1950s, as "more modern, 'Contemporary' homes were increasingly incorporated into the new suburban environments, postwar television instead focused attention on the aesthetic and

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<sup>323</sup> Douglas 2003: 74.

<sup>324</sup> Douglas 2003: 74.

<sup>325</sup> Coontz 2000: 31.

<sup>326</sup> Coontz 2000: 28.

<sup>327</sup> Coontz 2000: 29.

<sup>328</sup> Coontz 2000: 29.

<sup>329</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000.

<sup>330</sup> Clark in May 1989: 174.

<sup>331</sup> Clark in May 1989: 174.

ideological comforts of more 'homey' traditional typologies."<sup>332</sup> However, she suggests that the house in *Leave It to Beaver*, which she studies, "still stands for a certain kind of suburban domestic dream."<sup>333</sup> Do Americans of today "reconstruct"<sup>334</sup> a suburban dream when they buy nostalgically themed houses and shop at lifestyle centers that mimic Main Street, USA? Was *Leave it to Beaver* about a suburban dream? Is it not a dream of the good life in the mythic all-American small town that this and other sitcoms, as well as the texts discussed in this chapter, portray? In 1958 American sociologist Anne Kelly states it "might be interesting to consider why many of us, seeking a lair in the middle-class wilderness, choose the suburbs as the place to have and rear our children – and the alternative we had. That cozy small-town of 1900 was, except in fantasy, out [...]."<sup>335</sup> I argue that *Leave It To Beaver* – with its "old-fashioned," "classic pre-World War II" neighborhoods is part of a small-town fantasy, which was not available, and that it does not show a suburban fantasy.

Włodarczyk assumes that Levittown, New York, and the fictitious community of Mayfield – setting of the TV show *Leave It To Beaver* – are suburban. To her, the only difference is of aesthetic nature. Levittown is "ticky tacky,"<sup>336</sup> Mayfield more "homey" and "old-fashioned." But Mayfield is not only "old-fashioned," it is an idealized small town. It is much different from the car-centered new landscapes that mushroomed all over America in the postwar years. Mayfield is closer to *Back to the Future's* Hill Valley in 1955, Norman Rockwell's iconic illustrations and Disney's Main Street, USA than it is to Levittown. The sitcom families of the 1950s lived in an idealized version of small-town America.

The difference between what is considered as "ticky-tacky" suburban and "old-fashioned" suburban needs to be emphasized. While the first concept clearly is related to the mass-produced suburban landscape I deal with in this text, the second concept actually does not relate to this idea of suburbia at all. It rather represents the myth of the American small town created and propagated by popular culture. The United States are not dominated by a suburban myth but by a small-town myth that influences "cultural norms directing what actually gets built and bought in suburbia today."<sup>337</sup> It dictates the theming of suburbia which is decorated according to "positive images of

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<sup>332</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>333</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>334</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>335</sup> Kelly 1958 quoted in Hadden and Masotti 1974: 24.

<sup>336</sup> "Ticky tacky" means of poor quality and mass-produced. This expression is taken from the song *Little Boxes* which was written in 1962 by Malvina Reynolds.

<sup>337</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

'historic' small-town places" that are part of the "collective memory of America's middle class."<sup>338</sup>

Postwar television not only denied diversity, it seemingly also denied the fact that the average American family did not move to a colonial revival house in a cozy small town after the war, but to a mass-produced and Modernism-inspired ranch house in a massive new development. The sitcom families of the 1950s (and their home towns) have influenced the way 1950s families are portrayed in more recent historicizing texts such as those looked at in this chapter. The family ideal and TV's "most powerful visions of traditional families"<sup>339</sup> that still circulate today were linked to the "homey"<sup>340</sup> dominant small town and *not* to mass-produced suburbia, as this chapter shows. Others have pointed to this fact as well. Stephen Rowley argues in *Movie Towns and Sitcom Suburbs: Building Hollywood's Ideal Communities* (2015), that the "communities presented in these shows were a modified version of the ideal small town."<sup>341</sup> Media scholar David Marc also suggests in *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture* (1997) that television showed "nominal" small towns which, however, "represented suburbs and 'sold' an aspirational image of suburbs."<sup>342</sup> To him, the "domestic sitcom romanticized the suburb as an idyllic small town that was located not merely miles from the modern city, but the better part of a century as well."<sup>343</sup> The same important point is made by Gerard Jones in *Honey, I'm Home! Sitcom: Selling the American Dream* (1992). He underlines that "the suburb and the small town were always blurred together on television."<sup>344</sup> Rowley concludes that the "national suburb of the 1950s sitcom is therefore something of a transitional community, blending traditional small towns and the emerging postwar suburbs to emphasize the links to the former and create an idealized depiction of the latter."<sup>345</sup>

It is important to be aware of the fact that the dominant small town was used to create an idealized and inaccurate vision of postwar suburbia. On television, the new American family was separated from their suburban ranch house and connected instead to the much more desirable dominant small town. Television's "perfectionist ideal of the perfect home and family appealed to the middle-class suburbanites in the 1950s" despite "the reality of choosing among different [Modernism-inspired and mass-

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<sup>338</sup> Roost in Budd 2005: 278.

<sup>339</sup> Coontz 2000: 26.

<sup>340</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>341</sup> Rowley 2015: 59.

<sup>342</sup> Rowley 2015: 59.

<sup>343</sup> Marc 1997: 44.

<sup>344</sup> Jones 1992: 100

<sup>345</sup> Rowley 2015: 60

produced] housing alternatives" in postwar suburbia. After all, very few "families had the financial means to purchase the house that they most wanted."<sup>346</sup> This unattainable dream house was a house in the dominant all-American small town and not in suburbia. But for "a society that has never been completely content with what it had," the suburban ranch house "was enough, at least until the end of the decade."<sup>347</sup>

The naturalized nexus between the postwar nuclear family and the dominant small town is not a historical fact but a fabrication of popular culture. It has become the model for what is being built in post-suburbia today. The nostalgic architecture found here establishes what Jean Baudrillard calls hyperreality: "a reality effect by which the real is produced according to a model so that representations become more real than the real."<sup>348</sup> Post-suburbia, being themed according to the dominant small town known from Disneyland and other texts such as sitcoms and movies, "is produced according to [these] model[s]"<sup>349</sup> that are "not given but artificially reproduced as real – a real retouched in an 'hallucinatory resemblance' with itself."<sup>350</sup> Models "replace the real, as exemplified in such phenomena as the ideal home in women's or lifestyle magazines,"<sup>351</sup> the sitcom families of the 1950s, or Disney's small-town ideal. In this process, "the model becomes a determinant of the real, and the boundary between hyperreality and everyday is erased."<sup>352</sup> Baudrillard argues with regard to Disneyland that it "is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. [...] [Disneyland] is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real."<sup>353</sup> The result is the collapse of the boundaries between real and simulations in themed post-suburbia. This in itself is not a problem because we never have (or had) the real. But the awareness of real exclusion and real power relations in post-suburban America gets lost as well.

In the next chapter, the origins of post-suburbia will be addressed as I examine what Stephanie Coontz calls the "historical fluke"<sup>354</sup> and the related postwar myth of progress. This discussion will also continue to emphasize that the 1950s nuclear family indeed was a postwar invention which was also originally pictured in mass-produced

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<sup>346</sup> Clark in May 1989: 189.

<sup>347</sup> Clark in May 1989: 189.

<sup>348</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 639.

<sup>349</sup> Best and Kellner 1992: 119.

<sup>350</sup> Jane and Barker 2016: 243.

<sup>351</sup> Best and Kellner 1992: 119f.

<sup>352</sup> Best and Kellner 1992: 119f.

<sup>353</sup> Baudrillard 1983: 24.

<sup>354</sup> Coontz 2000: 28.

suburbia despite being associated today with the imagined small town of prewar America.

## 4. THE POSTWAR MYTH OF PROGRESS

*As father choses the route in advance on a push-button selector, electronics take over complete control. [...] With no driving responsibilities the family relaxes together. [...] On entering the city, the family separates: father to his office, mother and son to the shopping center.*

*Walt Disney's Magic Highways, USA, educational film, 1958*

The previous chapter revealed that today's small-town myth is linked to an ideal of the American nuclear family which is an invention of the 1950s. In this chapter I will discuss the origins of this quintessential American landscape and I will link it to a postwar myth of progress. The postwar suburbanization of the United States is the reason why the majority of today's Americans<sup>355</sup> live in sprawling suburban landscapes orbiting around older metropolitan centers. The rise of post-suburbia can be explained by an event that fundamentally changed the United States: the end of World War II. After the war, a myth of progress supported an unequalled movement of people and resources to suburbia. The myth was about an optimistic faith in the positive effects of progress, change, technology, and modern inventions. It was about confidence in a brighter tomorrow and about the belief that American white patriarchal capitalism will continue to transform the country (and the world) for the better and that America will conquer Kennedy's New Frontier.<sup>356</sup> Ultimately, it is about the conviction that "America's best days are yet to come," and, that it is still "morning in America."<sup>357</sup>

### 4.1 A SUBURBAN NATION

Dolores Hayden observes in her 2004 study *Building Suburbia* that

flying across the United States, airline passengers look down on dazzling, varied topography, yet from Connecticut to California, monotonous tracts of single-family houses stretch for miles outside downtowns of major cities. Subdivisions interrupt farms and forests. They crowd up against the granite coast of Maine and push into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains.<sup>358</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Cf. Frey 2010.

<sup>356</sup> President Kennedy used this term in his acceptance speech.

<sup>357</sup> This was the theme of the Reagan-Bush campaign in 1984.

<sup>358</sup> Hayden 2004: 3.

Post-suburbia covers the United States. Here, the residential streets are arranged in characteristic and identical repetition. Seen from above, the many streets look like whimsical patterns that are laid out very neatly. Some streets end in cul-de-sacs. Other clusters of these streets form pods<sup>359</sup> or frame golf courses. Often, these patterns of residential streets are located in squares of larger boulevards. All together, these repeating configurations cover square mile after square mile and create a completely engineered landscape. On the fringes of urban areas the suburban streets expand into the countryside. The streets create characteristic patterns that are repeated over and over again in this landscape from coast to coast. In its endless addition the engineered pattern can be best described as a standardized maze. Seen from above, countless roofs sit like pearls on a string along these many streets. The residential streets lead to wider boulevards. These are connected to highways. At the intersections of highways and boulevards there are larger commercial buildings in equal distance to each other. They are surrounded by huge parking lots. Every now and then enormous malls appear. An oval ring of roads often surrounds these complexes. Between this ring and the buildings, there are several vast fields of parking. Around the whole complex there are other big and some smaller buildings in separate tracts with their own parking lot (see Figures 65-67).

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<sup>359</sup> Hayden 2004: 76. A pod is an "area of single-use zoning (such as a shopping center or residential subdivision) located off a major road."



**Figures 65 (top) and 66 (bottom).** Post-suburbia in Clifton, VA: Notice that the different types of houses are separated from each other and that they are nostalgically themed. Neither the school (upper left) nor the shopping center (center) can be accessed other than by car. A detailed view of the shopping center (The Colonnade at Union Mills) reveals that small-town facades appear to be clued onto the otherwise completely bland facades. They have a purely decorative function and convey the dominant small town. But instead of a communal space, this row of themed facades embraces the parking lot. These photos illustrate that post-suburbia is themed to look like a small town while the different functions of a community are kept separate from each other in a suburban fashion. 2012 photos by the author.

Only cars navigate through this maze. This landscape of golf courses, residential houses, malls, office parks, and freeways is the all-pervading American condition. Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberg and Jeff Speck state that this is

the direct outcome of regulations governing modern engineering and development practice. Every detail of this environment comes straight from technical manuals. After reading them one might easily conclude that they are organized, written, and enforced in the name of one single objective: making cars happy.<sup>360</sup>

The United States indeed has become an engineered suburban nation designed for individual motorized movement.



**Figure 67.** Aerial view of post-suburban Las Vegas, NV. A mall and big box stores are located near major boulevards and the highway. Residential developments are located in specific zones. 2009 photo by the author.

## POSTWAR SUBURBANIZATION AND ITS ORIGINS

The postwar creation of these vast, engineered landscapes, designed according to individual motorized movement, was ideologically supported by a belief in America's inevitable progress and a wish to modernize the country. It is important to recall that today's "revival of historical styles of domestic architecture [that] has occurred in North America, [...] followed a period when modernism held sway."<sup>361</sup> After the Second World War, influenced by architectural Modernism, a dramatic "transformation from

<sup>360</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000: 13.

<sup>361</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a: 6.

an urban to a suburban settlement pattern<sup>362</sup> took place in America. Lang and LeFurgy effectively sum up the result of this transformation that began in the late 1940s: Today, "Americans are building very different places than in the past."<sup>363</sup>

To understand the origins of today's post-suburban American landscape it needs to be recalled that semi-rural living has been regarded as superior to urban living in America for centuries. Long before World War I and II there had been major suburban dispositions in the American society. In 1854, Henry David Thoreau asked in *Walden*: "What is a house but a sedes, a seat? – better if a country seat."<sup>364</sup> 50 years later, *Good Housekeeping Magazine* wrote: "The suburban house is a structure of good intentions. It affords the pleasantest kind of life, and it is doing more to humanizing humanity than any other single source of civilization."<sup>365</sup> The city has never been seen as a healthy place to raise a family but rather as a place of doubtful morals and crime.

But American suburbia can be traced back even further. George Lipsitz, who is a professor at the Department of Black Studies at the University of California in Santa Barbara, explores in *How Racism Takes Place* (2011) how white spatial imaginary has shaped the settlement of North America:

Starting in the seventeenth century, European settler colonialists imagined that American space might offer a refuge from the corruptions of European time. Coalescing around what [Historian David W.] Noble calls 'the metaphor of two worlds' – the idea that America is an island of virtue in a global sea of corruption – these ideals became institutionalized within the national culture of the United States through the writings of transcendentalists, the visual art of the Hudson River School, evocations by historians of the frontier as a unique source of regeneration, and ultimately, in the ideal of the private properly ordered suburban home and homogeneous community.<sup>366</sup>

Creating this "homogeneous community" called for the removal and marginalization of impure parts of the population: "Rather than sharing North American space with Indians as common ground, the moral geography of the colonists required conquest, genocide, and Indian removal to produce the sacred ground that Europeans felt would be pleasing to God as a City on a Hill."<sup>367</sup> However, as the frontier became increasingly civilized in the 18th and 19th century, "it became more and more difficult

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<sup>362</sup> Adamson in Deckker 2000: 214.

<sup>363</sup> Lang and LeFurgy 2007: 5.

<sup>364</sup> Thoreau 2009: 53.

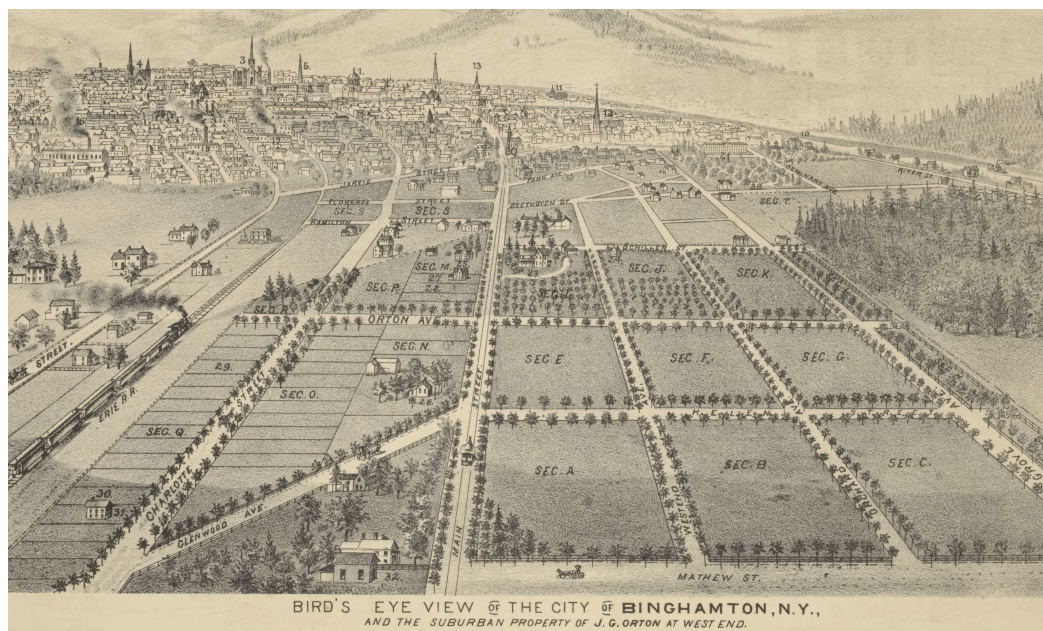
<sup>365</sup> Davison 1994: 49 quoted in Frank 2003: 300.

<sup>366</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 29.

<sup>367</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 29.

for Americans to believe that they inhabited" a "sacred" landscape. Lipsitz suggests that consequently the "properly ordered prosperous private dwelling" became America's "key symbol of freedom, harmony, and virtue" and that it took the place of the frontier as being the "nation's moral geography"<sup>368</sup> (see Figure 68).

What remained, however, was the "association of freedom with pure spaces" and this association shaped "ideas about the prosperous ordered private dwelling."<sup>369</sup> Suburbia is the result of this idea. It is "not only an engine of self-interest, but also a place that has come to be imbued with a particular moral value consistent with deeply rooted historical ideals and illusions."<sup>370</sup> Suburbia is historically a white space and depends on "systematic exclusion."<sup>371</sup> The postwar suburbanization of the United States continued this exclusion and was "supported by deep-seated popular sentiments. Historically, Americans have regarded the semi-rural domestic environment as inherently morally superior to city life."<sup>372</sup> Racial exclusion and the quest for pure spaces are a vital part of this ideal.



**Figure 68.** This illustration (detail) from 1876 shows the suburban expansion of Binghamton, NY. While the city is depicted as crowded and dirty, the suburban neighborhood is pictured as ordered, airy, and open. There is a horse-drawn streetcar which connects this neighborhood to the inner city. There exists a strong dependency between city and suburb. This is an example of what could be considered an old-fashioned suburban neighborhood. Photo courtesy "Fae." Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bird%27s\\_eye\\_view\\_of\\_the\\_city\\_of\\_Binghamton,\\_N.Y.,\\_and\\_the\\_suburban\\_property\\_of\\_J.G.Orton\\_at\\_West\\_End;\\_%22The\\_Grove%22,\\_Residence\\_of\\_Dr.\\_J.G.\\_Orton,\\_at\\_West\\_End,\\_Binghamton,\\_N.Y.\\_NYPL1575966.tiff?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bird%27s_eye_view_of_the_city_of_Binghamton,_N.Y.,_and_the_suburban_property_of_J.G.Orton_at_West_End;_%22The_Grove%22,_Residence_of_Dr._J.G._Orton,_at_West_End,_Binghamton,_N.Y._NYPL1575966.tiff?uselang=de). Accessed July 6, 2018.

<sup>368</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 29.

<sup>369</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 30.

<sup>370</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 29.

<sup>371</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 30.

<sup>372</sup> Adamson in Deckker 2000: 217.

## POSTWAR SUBURBIA AS PROGRESS

It was at the end of World War II that several factors made suburban living, a variation of semi-rural living, accessible to millions of white Americans. This era was a unique situation in American history. The collective preference of a semi-rural domestic environment coincided with a massive deficiency of affordable housing in the existing cities. Millions of young American soldiers from Europe and Asia who had accumulated wartime savings simultaneously returned home:

The year 1945 was the sixteenth in a row when new construction did not meet the demand for new housing. The need was strong. People were doubling up with relatives, friends, and strangers. War workers and veterans lived in rooming houses and camped out in cars.<sup>373</sup>

There was the ideological conviction that primarily the American industry and not the American government ought to solve the problematic housing situation. "Americans hungered for a world of plenty, the wonders of modern technology, and a home of their own."<sup>374</sup> A strong belief in American progress and the self-confidence of two won wars served as the ideological backbones of America's suburbanization. To Lang and LeFurgy, the year 1950 marked an "important benchmark for American cities,"<sup>375</sup> as the year in which many older American cities had their population high point. Also, large-scale suburbanization was really beginning in all metropolitan centers of the United States in 1950. Publications such as *Fortune* and *Readers' Digest* urged the housing industry to start building new single-family homes the same way Ford had delivered cars to Americans decades before.<sup>376</sup> Consequently, "more and more people wanted houses to be produced on the assembly line like autos, shoes, and radios."<sup>377</sup> It became a consensus that if these products could be mass-produced, new houses could and should be constructed in such an efficient way, too, to make homeownership accessible and affordable for more Americans and to solve the housing crisis. In 1947, *Fortune Magazine* wrote that there was a mass market for houses renting at \$60 or selling at \$7,000.<sup>378</sup> Efficiency through new building methods executed by the American industry and modern design were considered the solution in solving the housing crisis. Mass-production was regarded progress (see Figure 69).

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<sup>373</sup> Hayden 2004: 132.

<sup>374</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 82.

<sup>375</sup> Lang and LeFurgy 2007: 4.

<sup>376</sup> Cf. Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 96.

<sup>377</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 97.

<sup>378</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 118.



**Figure 69.** A 1950s house designed by Eichler, Terra Linda, CA. 2009 photo by the author.

Despite fears and threats during the Cold War, there was an infinite ideological “faith in the American industrial process, [as it had been] this industry that during the war enabled the US to launch successful battles and reach decisive armistices simultaneously on two fronts a world apart.”<sup>379</sup> Consequently, the “philosophical belief that a speculative market, left to its own devices, would provide economic prosperity prevented government and regional institutions from investing in effective urban planning for many years.”<sup>380</sup> President Joseph McCarthy “insisted that private enterprise should assume responsibility for housing the nation.”<sup>381</sup> Any governmental control of urban growth was seen as a control of private investment and was associated with socialist ideologies.<sup>382</sup> Moreover, William Levitt, the developer of Levittown, held the “belief that his entrepreneurial efforts were playing a part in supporting American interests in the Cold War. As he said: ‘No man who owns his own home and lot can be a Communist; he has too much to do.’”<sup>383</sup> Soon,

backed by the FHA<sup>384</sup> and the VA,<sup>385</sup> banks gave loans for the construction of ten million new homes between 1946 and 1953, creating a gigantic private

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<sup>379</sup> Adamson in Dekker 2000: 214.

<sup>380</sup> Adamson in Dekker 2000: 214.

<sup>381</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 117.

<sup>382</sup> Cf. Adamson in Dekker 2000: 215.

<sup>383</sup> Kushner 2009.

<sup>384</sup> FHA = Federal Housing Act.

housing industry. [...] By the late 1950s, about two thirds of the new houses in the United States were produced by large builders.<sup>386</sup>

This resulted in "a hectic period of largely commercially-driven development."<sup>387</sup>

Adamson observes that

the combination of a laissez-faire capitalist economic system and the desire to promote land ownership resulted in a somewhat hectic and largely unplanned building of rural landscapes around large cities. Lacking established planning criteria for the cultivation of the suburban form, other than the inherited sense of eminent domain and the belief in the organic problem-solving process of a free market economy, post-war suburban development proceeded with little recognition of traditional relationships between public and private spaces.<sup>388</sup>

A completely new suburban landscape, swiftly constructed by commercial builders and developers, became apparent everywhere.

Rapid and weakly controlled suburbanization (the answer to every demobilized soldier's dream, as the rhetoric of the time had it) was privately developed but heavily subsidized by government-backed housing finance and direct public investment in highway construction and other infrastructures.<sup>389</sup>

The American solution to the housing problem

relied heavily upon mass production, industrialized construction systems, and a sweeping conception of how a rationalized urban space might emerge when linked [...] through individualized means of transportation using publicly provided infrastructures.<sup>390</sup>

This postwar "period represented the height of the United States' political and economic hegemony at the apex of what has been called the 'American Century.'<sup>391</sup>

The white flight to suburbia in the United States "was so powerful that it was like a tide that washed over all precedents. It was as if suburbanization began in 1945."<sup>392</sup>

Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck conclude that "the American city was reduced into

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<sup>385</sup> VA = Veterans Act.

<sup>386</sup> Hayden 2004: 132.

<sup>387</sup> Adamson in Deckker 2000: 215.

<sup>388</sup> Adamson in Deckker 2000: 228.

<sup>389</sup> Harvey 1989: 69.

<sup>390</sup> Harvey 1989: 69.

<sup>391</sup> Smith in Armstrong 2008: 66.

<sup>392</sup> Fishman 1987a: 183.

the simplistic categories and quantities of sprawl."<sup>393</sup> This new American city created a new suburban lifestyle and a new aesthetic of prefabrication.

## A NEW LIFESTYLE AND A NEW AESTHETIC

Today, suburbia is often perceived negatively. However, in postwar America it was seen as progress. The new, modern suburban lifestyle was often pictured and interpreted as a prelude to life in outer space. In the 1950s there

was a growing national consensus that proclaimed that cleanliness and uniformity was a sign of progress. With the spread of freeways, people preferred to patronize modern, familiar motel chains and eat in clean coffee shops housed in space-age Googie-style<sup>394</sup> buildings.<sup>395</sup>

Homes built by national builders mirrored this faith in corporate America. The American progress narrative and the dominant ideology of white patriarchal capitalism found their postwar expression in a drastically modern and new way of life that became an instant reality for millions of Americans almost over night after the end of World War II.

This was the "age of the push-button" as *Redbook Magazine* exulted in the 1957 documentary *In the Suburbs*.<sup>396</sup> A new generation of Americans, the Baby Boomers, was growing up in new suburbia. This generation would one day

remember all the way back to Eisenhower. [It would be a generation that] probably never saw their mother use a wringer, who think automobiles are household appliances and now have reserved seats on the next rocket to leave the earth.<sup>397</sup>

This new way of life in suburbia was broadly advertised throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. Architectural modernism had turned into a desirable, informal

lifestyle, which [...] [by 1958] had become codified and stylized after a decade of absorption into the American public consciousness through the growing avenues of mass media, including shelter and lifestyle magazines such as *House and Gardens*, *Life*, and *Playboy* as well as films and television.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000: 11.

<sup>394</sup> Googie is an architectural style which is a form of modernist architecture. It is influenced by the car culture and the space age.

<sup>395</sup> Gennawey 2011: 147.

<sup>396</sup> *In the Suburbs*. USA 1957. Tracy Ward. On Film Inc.

<sup>397</sup> *In the Suburbs*. USA 1957. Tracy Ward. On Film Inc.

<sup>398</sup> Smith in Armstrong 2008: 64.

The informal Californian way of living, made popular by movies and magazines, was translated into open-plan houses with a single level and huge floor-to-ceiling glass windows and picture windows. The influential architect Quincy Jones stated:

I have been convinced for a long time that the old flow patterns no longer make much sense. [...] I know you can't plan your house quite so informally in New England, but you can scrap many of the old rules even there.<sup>399</sup>

The postwar ranch house with its low silhouette, its open-space floor plans and large picture windows "was also designed to allow Americans to recreate the California way of life elsewhere."<sup>400</sup> Modern building technologies were central in building these new houses. Jones built his own house completely from steel and designed it in such a way that all the material could be brought to the building site with only one truckload. The construction of his entire house took only three months. The design was modern, functional, and the result of efficiency and rationality.<sup>401</sup>

In this progressive and optimistic period, traditional American urbanism ended and was replaced by a modern suburban settlement pattern. Civic town planning was traded in for initially hectic commercial subdivision development that eventually turned into contemporary zoning ordinances. After World War II, housing white, middle-class Americans did not become the task of the government or individual homebuyers but of several private enterprises employing methods of mass production. After the Second World War, millions of Americans, especially young adults, wanted to move to the new mass-produced suburbs in search for their share of the good life. They were "consumers who bought cars and appliances with savings accumulated during the prosperous wartime economy. The money they spent on mass-produced goods of the machine age made it clear that they could afford homes, too."<sup>402</sup> This accelerated the growth of the modern home-building industry. In this sense, postwar "suburbia was a commercial response to a long-standing social need: housing for a third of the nation."<sup>403</sup>

Geographers Dostrovsky and Harris observe that suburban houses in postwar America "presented a bland façade"<sup>404</sup> (see Figure 70). Houses were mostly free of architectural ornaments and some even conformed to high Modernism. Even the rather traditional houses built by Levitt seem to have a Modernist look when compared with

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<sup>399</sup> Buckner 2002: 58.

<sup>400</sup> Clark in May 1989: 177.

<sup>401</sup> Cf. Buckner 2002: 58.

<sup>402</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 118.

<sup>403</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 167.

<sup>404</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008a: 2.

today's houses.<sup>405</sup> This is much more true for developments in California. The Case Study House Project in Greater Los Angeles (1945-1966), the Eichler houses in Northern California, the many houses built by Quincy Jones, or modern malls designed by Victor Gruen, as well as countless advertisements show that architectural Modernism was the mainstream aesthetic in postwar America expressing optimism and faith in the future.

New technologies led to new and innovative floor plans in suburban homes, where a new way of life could happen. The new open-space floor plan was about fewer walls and one big living area. It was the architectural consequence of the ideal of togetherness in American society, which is also mirrored in 1950s family sitcoms. In 1954, *McCalls Magazine* published a photo essay titled "Live the Life of the McCalls:"

Thanks to our heritage of freedom, men, women and children are achieving it *together*. They are creating this new way of life not as women *alone* or men *alone*, isolated from each other, but as a *family* sharing a common experience.<sup>406</sup>

This common experience was pioneering the *new*, modern, suburban way of life. During the housing boom in the 1950s, the idea of family togetherness and the new family ideal were incorporated into the design of the new suburban homes. Houses in Levittown, for example, included

such family oriented features as a picture window where the housewife could watch her children playing and an attic that could be expanded to make room for future children. Levittown changed the way many Americans thought about homes. Despite the loss of individuality that accompanied such massive building programs, people appreciated the family-centered values that new houses represented.<sup>407</sup>

But it was not only the mere existence of places like Levittown that changed America's perception: it was the optimistic presentation of the new suburban way of life everywhere. "There was a direct relationship between the new house plan and the women's magazines."<sup>408</sup> Technology and ideology were the key ingredients that helped to create the open-space plan. The dining room disappeared and was replaced by the family room. It was the media that created the market for the open-space plan by making it socially acceptable. The main characteristic of the open-space plan was its

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<sup>405</sup> *Time Magazine* (July 3, 1950) featured Levitt on its cover titled "For Sale - A New Way of Life."

<sup>406</sup> Cf. Leavitt 2002: 172.

<sup>407</sup> Leavitt 2002: 172.

<sup>408</sup> Leavitt 2002: 177.

L-shaped living area, which included the dining table. Traditional rooms like the nursery were dropped to create an “expanded living/activity/dining room so that the entire family could play, read, work, eat and watch television together.”<sup>409</sup>

After 1945, the “spatial aesthetics established by the Modernists appeared in a watered down, mass produced version when the Levittowns across the country offered their consumers large picture windows or glass walls and continuous dining-living areas [...].”<sup>410</sup> Modernism was watered down, but the aesthetic was Modernist and not as traditional as it is today. Developments by Eichler

are distinct from contemporary alternatives by their near complete absence of nostalgia. The security of gated communities and the reassuring familiar imagery of today’s New Urbanist designs suggest a rather defensive posture in response to the changing realities of contemporary residential conditions, whereas the Eichler tracts exhibit a straightforward acceptance of the suburban condition on its own terms.<sup>411</sup>

Suburban architecture often accepted and boldly indicated its suburban condition. The opposite happens today, as suburban architecture is decorated to mimic small towns of the past. But in the 1950s

it did indeed become fashionable [...] to laud the virtues of the international style, to vaunt its capacities to create a new species of human being, to view it as the expressive arm of an interventionist bureaucratic state apparatus that, in conjunction with corporate capital, was reckoned to be the guardian of all further advances in human welfare. Some of the ideological claims were grandiose. But the radical transformations on the social and physical landscapes of capitalist cities often had little to do with such claims.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Leavitt 2002: 178.

<sup>410</sup> Spigel 1992: 104.

<sup>411</sup> Adamson and Arbutich 2001: 23.

<sup>412</sup> Harvey 1989: 70.



**Figure 70.** A typical Modernism-inspired house in Levittown, PA. These houses were abstract versions of traditional architecture and lacking any nostalgia. 2009 photo by the author.

An important role in spreading and promoting acceptance for this new aesthetic can be attributed to *Life Magazine* whose editors, especially Henry Luce, proclaimed the “American Century.” Articles

reveal a subtle but far-reaching agenda [...], one that sought to teach the American public – or at least that percentage of the American public that included *Life’s* six million largely white middle class and urban/suburban readers in the 1950s – how to comprehend the contemporary landscape that seemed to be changing before their very eyes, everywhere they turned, spawning new typologies and infrastructures and producing new forms and spaces.<sup>413</sup>

The editors of *Life Magazine* intended to make Americans

appreciate modern architecture and design, to value comprehensive and master planning in commercial and corporate endeavors, to equate private development with the civic realm, and to discern quality and not just quantity in the contemporary built environment of the United States.<sup>414</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Esperdy in Lasansky 2014: 18.

<sup>414</sup> Esperdy in Lasansky 2014: 18.



**Figures 71 (top, left) – 73 (bottom).** Modernist commercial structures from the 1950s and 1970s outside Norfolk, VA. 2012 photos by the author.

Ironically, this new, progressive, and unconventional take on providing houses for Americans was based on very traditional values and the according gender conventions. The creation of postwar suburbia was “a central part of a larger perfectionist impulse that swept through postwar society.”<sup>415</sup> This new, family-oriented settlement pattern of “identical houses on identical plots [as] a result of the developers having followed the quickest, easiest, and most profitable building methods” turned into the “typical, even stereotypical ‘American Dream.’”<sup>416</sup> The ability to build this new suburban America (see Figures 71-73) “stressed the possibility of creating the perfect

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<sup>415</sup> Clark in May 1989: 171.

<sup>416</sup> Beuka 2004: 5.

society"<sup>417</sup> as well. This included the patriarchal nuclear-family ideal discussed at the end of the last chapter.

## FROM SUBURBIA TO POST-SUBURBIA

Since the postwar decades, the suburban expansion has continued at a drastic pace and suburbia has evolved. Robert Fishman established a new understanding of what until then had been perceived simply as suburbia and suburbanization in his important study titled *Bourgeois Utopias* (1987). To Fishman, traditional suburbia is characterized by commuting to one single core. But he argues that after 1945, there happened a large-scale rebuilding of America. During this rebuilding, the concept of commuting to a center and living on the periphery of that center became increasingly invalid. The new suburban landscapes do not have one downtown-business district as their main focus, but multiple single-use pods scattered along highways. To him,

the most important feature of postwar American development has been the almost simultaneous decentralization of housing, industry, specialized services, and office jobs; [...] For most Americans, the real center of their lives is neither an urban nor even a suburban area, as these entities have been traditionally conceived, but rather the technoburb, the boundaries of which are defined by the locations they can conveniently reach in their cars. The true center of this new city is not in some downtown business district but in each residential unit. From that central starting point the members of the household create their own city from the multitude of destinations that are within suitable driving distance.<sup>418</sup>

The technoburb became possible through technologies, the car, the telephone and air-conditioning. Today, new technologies such as the Internet or satellite navigation are part of this landscape as well. The term technoburb points to the difference between the prewar suburbs, which were arranged around cities to enable commuting to one single core and the emerging postwar suburban landscape.

Fishman's technoburb is a landscape of single-use pods that are arranged along arteries. In this mosaic of functional units, each element follows the central architectural rule of suburbia, which is to "keep up the basic contrast with urban forms."<sup>419</sup> The quintessence of the first suburbs outside of London in the eighteenth century is building "houses in a park."<sup>420</sup> Today, suburbia is basically the same in so far as it consists of independent mono-functional "houses in a park." This is the antithesis of

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<sup>417</sup> Clark in May 1989: 171.

<sup>418</sup> Fishman 1987a: 184f.

<sup>419</sup> Fishman 1987a: 71.

<sup>420</sup> Fishman 1987a: 71.

the urban experience. Each element, each single-use pod is sitting in the center of a landscaped portion of greenery. This is not only true for millions of single-family houses, but also for schools, banks, gas stations, or shopping centers. These single-use pods form a landscape that is neither urban nor rural. It is suburban. However, postwar suburbia is difficult to define physically. It is decentralized and forms a confusing, yet standardized agglomeration.

Fishman argues that the American metropolitan peripheries are the true centers of American society and that people driving their cars individually define their borders. This new form of city “has taken shape on the outskirts of all [...] major urban centers.”<sup>421</sup> Fishman observes that the postwar suburban landscape

has no clear boundaries; it includes discordant rural, urban, and suburban elements; and it can best be measured in counties rather than city blocks. Consequently the new city lacks any recognizable center to give meaning to the whole. Major civic institutions are scattered at random over an undifferentiated landscape.<sup>422</sup>

The American metropolis does not have one single center any more. These “complex metropolitan landscapes”<sup>423</sup> do not focus on one center any more but grew around the beltways of American cities. The commutes have become multidirectional and follow the beltways around the downtown business districts, creating multi-centered, decentralized landscapes that each individual uses differently. Fishman describes life in these landscapes:

One spouse might work at an industrial park two exits down the interstate; the other at an office complex five exits in the other direction; the children travel by bus to comprehensive schools in their district or drive themselves to the local branch of the state university; the family shops at several malls along several different highways; every weekend they drive fifty miles to a rural (but rapidly developing) area where they have a second house; all they need to consume, from the most complex medical services to fresh fruits and vegetables, can be found along the highways. Once a year, maybe at Christmas, they go ‘downtown,’ but they never stay long.<sup>424</sup>

Modern technology and modern engineering made possible this decentralized post-suburban American landscape and this new way of life. The lifestyle described here by Fishman is not the small-town lifestyle depicted in texts of the small-town narrative. The neatly arranged streets and boulevards of post-suburbia illustrate the modern

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<sup>421</sup> Fishman 1987a: 184.

<sup>422</sup> Fishman 1987a: 203.

<sup>423</sup> Hayden: 2004: 7.

<sup>424</sup> Fishman 1987a: 184f.

dimension of this engineered landscape. In this modern, planned maze of monofunctional destinations, each single element follows the central architectural rule of suburbia, which is separation of uses. This “separation of uses was, in general, a modernist idea”<sup>425</sup> and it was backed by a myth of progress. In the next part of this chapter I will examine this myth further by looking at how Disney theme parks related to the postwar suburbanization of the United States and how they promoted America’s inevitable progress.

## 4.2 DISNEY’S PROGRESS CITY

In the foreword of *1950s All American Ads* Jim Heiman states that

despite the shadow of atomic obliteration hanging over the American consciousness, advertisers continued to barrage the public, a new ‘mass market,’ with products that were newer, better and faster. And Americans felt entitled to it. Striving to lead normal productive lives after saving the world from axis aggression, the American public looked beyond their World War II days and gazed to the future – and the future looked great. At least seen through the eyes of television, magazines and advertisements.<sup>426</sup>

Through television, magazines, advertisements, and at Disneyland, a myth of American progress was communicated that suggested that tomorrow would be better and full of technological wonders. Tomorrow would happen in a new, suburban America. Car advertisements, for example, proposed that postwar America was merely decades away from life in outer space. In 1952, advertisements for Lincoln cars stated that their cars met “the test of modern living” and that they made “your driving as modern as your living.” An advertisement from 1953 asked: “Why be tied down to yesterday? [...] Now you can let a magnificent new Lincoln for 1953 put you in step with the effortless power and pace of the century.” Oldsmobile featured what they referred to as a “rocket engine” in 1952. Pontiac offered “a bold new car for a bold new generation.”<sup>427</sup> These advertisements and magazines showed shiny new cars in the new suburban landscape: in front of modern residential homes or country clubs. Confidence and optimism were often expressed in postwar-American advertisements. Disneyland and other Disney projects are another conveyor of this myth of American progress.

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<sup>425</sup> Talen 2005: 63.

<sup>426</sup> Heiman 2001: 26.

<sup>427</sup> A detailed collection of these advertisements can be found in Heiman 2001. I am referring to examples from his collection.

## DISNEYLAND:

### “THE CHARM OF THE OLD WORLD AND THE PROGRESS OF THE NEW WORLD”<sup>428</sup>

As was already discussed earlier, America was changing rapidly in the postwar years. Optimism and faith in future progress dominated advertisements in this time. It was the age of the Cold War and the space race. Each year, millions of new mass-produced suburban homes were built on former farmland; new highways were constructed following the National Highway Act, and the standard of living improved. Old main streets gave way to new strip malls, and Victor Gruen introduced Americans to the first enclosed and climate-controlled shopping center: Northland Center (1954) was a enormous modern structure that had nothing to do with the public spaces Americans used to know before the war. Over night, America was turning into a nation of new suburbs, connected by new roads and new means of communication and information. The country was entering an age of prosperity and consumerism that was believed to lead to space travel.

To Walt Disney, all this was great progress. He was at the ideological forefront of American postwar optimism. His faith in progress can be observed in projects such as Disneyland and in Disney’s utopian vision for an experimental community in Florida. I discussed Disney’s Main Street, USA, in the previous chapter and focused on the nostalgia it created. Now, Main Street, USA, will be seen in the broader context of Disneyland and also in the context of postwar America. During a time when everything in America became bigger, newer, and supposedly better – malls, subdivisions, television sets, cars – Walt Disney decided to build an idealized, old-fashioned small town with scaled-down facades in the middle of booming Orange County, California (see Figure 74). It can easily be argued today that Disneyland wanted to spread nostalgia for the bygone past to criticize suburbia and modernist architecture in the United States. But the opposite is true. Disney’s theme park originally “worked with rather than against the rest of southern California”<sup>429</sup> and the United States. Karal Ann Marling of the University of Minnesota states that Disneyland affirmed “the ideological clarity [...] [of] the progress of the American adventure, from cowboy to astronaut.”<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Kruse 2015: 127.

<sup>429</sup> Findlay 1992: 97.

<sup>430</sup> Marling 1994: 118.



**Figure 74.** Newport Boulevard in Costa Mesa, California: a six-lane commercial strip. This is the car-centered landscape into which Walt Disney built his walkable Main Street, USA. Photo courtesy Orange County Archives. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newport\\_Boulevard,\\_Costa\\_Mesa,\\_1950s.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Newport_Boulevard,_Costa_Mesa,_1950s.jpg). Accessed July 6, 2018.

The nostalgic elements of Disneyland, which I discussed before, were connected to the most important message of the park which was white Americans' inevitable progress towards a better future. According to Pricilla Hobbs all of the lands support this optimistic postwar message:

Disneyland showcases the plot of American culture. This version of the American story is built on the myths of the people who helped create the country: the pilgrims, the founding fathers, the frontiersmen and women, and the business moguls who industrialized and technologized the country.<sup>431</sup>

While Frontierland celebrated the heroic settlement of the North American continent by free, white pioneers, bustling Main Street, USA, showed the civilized Frontier as a result of America's free-market economy and white patriarchy. Tomorrowland consequently celebrated America's next frontier in outer space, conquered by American men, enterprises, and capital. Main Street, USA, has to be seen in the context of the entire park and its central message of American progress. Disneyland celebrated white patriarchal capitalism, which was presented as the cause of America's unequalled and inevitable progress. Walt Disney himself was staged as the prototypical white capitalist patriarch, who had become rich in America and who had built Disneyland for his daughters and all Americans.

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<sup>431</sup> Hobbs 2015: 18.

The layout of Disneyland reflects this message. It is based on a “masterful cross axial design,” which contains

a series of bipolar ideals [that] counterbalance each other: New World and the Old World fantasylands in the southern and northern quadrants; past and future frontierlands in the western and eastern regions. Main Street America is juxtaposed to Fairy Tale Europe, while yesterday’s frontier of open land is balanced by tomorrow’s frontier of adventure in outer space.<sup>432</sup>

In 1955, Disneyland combined America’s pioneering past with America’s pioneering future. The dedication ceremony of Disneyland illustrates this internal dialectic. Three men spoke the dedicating words: Walt Disney, Reverend Glenn D. Puder, and the Governor of California, Goodwin J. Knight. Each speaker included the two sides of Disneyland in his dedication which took place on Main Street, USA, on the park’s opening day. Walt Disney stated that Disneyland “is dedicated to the ideals, the dreams and the hard facts that have created America” and that here adults could “relive fond memories of the past” on Main Street, USA, and in Frontierland while the “youth may savor the challenge of tomorrow” in Tomorrowland. Reverend Glenn D. Puder spoke of “memories for the mature” and “aspirations for young people everywhere.” He prayed that “beyond the creeds that divide us Disneyland “may prosper at God’s hand. Amen.” He asked the audience to join him in a silent moment of prayer. Finally, the Governor of California stated that “all America is proud as we open Disneyland. This is a wondrous community with all the charm of the old world and all the progress and ingenuity of the new world.” He underlined that Disneyland was “all filled by American labor and American capital, under the belief that this is a God-loving and God-fearing country” and that “Americans are the fortunate ones.”<sup>433</sup> The two inseparable sides of Disneyland, past and future, were stressed on the opening day of the park. Disneyland was at the crossroads of an Old America and a New America. It represented a tribute to the past but at the same time it stood for optimism in a bright future. The dedicating words of Disneyland reveal a sense of divine entitlement and a praise of white patriarchal capitalism, as the park had been built by American labor and capital in a God-fearing country.

Professor of American Studies at the California State University, Fullerton, Michael Steiner, argues in his study on Frontierland that “progress and nostalgia reinforced each other nicely in the 1950s and 1960s.” In these days, progress was fascinating, but a look back in Frontierland was as thrilling as a look forward in

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<sup>432</sup> Steiner 1998: 10.

<sup>433</sup> Kruse 2015: 127.

Tomorrowland. The location of these two lands opposite to each other suggested a linear and seamless chronology of progress and celebrated American labor, capital, and pioneering spirit. Marling quotes cultural geographer Richard Francaviglia who argues that "Main Street, USA, remained the allegorical touchstone for this 'Disneyized' history of Cold War America." Main Street, USA, "is what America was and provides the bedrock security for what is to be."<sup>434</sup> The nostalgia of Main Street, USA, was part of America's postwar faith in America's progress.

All of Disneyland echoed the American narrative of progress. Main Street, USA, and Tomorrowland made "Eisenhower-era citizens [...] assume that America's present had evolved gently, natural, and inevitably out of its past" and that it was a prelude to its future.<sup>435</sup> In this sense, Tomorrowland was the logical extension and a harmonious consequence of Frontierland and Main Street, USA. Disneyland's main street must be seen as part of a "larger trend" in the United States, where a white, "dominant culture" was "seemingly determined to come up with a happy past to match its contented present, contracted a selective amnesia."<sup>436</sup> Consequently, this happy past depicted at Disneyland was connected to a suburban present in Greater Los Angeles and an optimistic future in Tomorrowland.

### **DISNEY'S MAGIC HIGHWAY, USA**

Another aspect illustrates that Disneyland was about the myth of progress. Walt Disney supported suburban Los Angeles and California's new freeways, as the visitors to his new project were from suburbia and arrived via the new freeways. "By choosing a site next to a proposed freeway and new residential development, [Disney] tacitly embraced the characteristic suburban sprawl of Southern California."<sup>437</sup> Walt Disney loved progress.<sup>438</sup> His tactic move is illustrated by early aerial images from the construction of Disneyland: the park was created in a developing area outside Los Angeles. Pre-opening TV shows and interviews reveal Walt Disney's love for and appreciation of highways. He was fascinated with transportation. To him, suburbanization and highways meant American advancement and progress towards a brighter tomorrow. In 1954, he commented a helicopter trip from Burbank to Anaheim while flying along Los Angeles' new six lane highways:

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<sup>434</sup> Francaviglia 1977: 156 quoted in Marling 1994: 119.

<sup>435</sup> Wallace 1996: 138.

<sup>436</sup> Wallace 1996: 137.

<sup>437</sup> Findlay 1992: 105.

<sup>438</sup> Kurtti 2008: viii.

Less than a century ago, this was only a stagecoach trail. You know the super-highways of America have many names: parkways, turnpikes. But here in California – since there are no toll charges – we call them freeways. [...] Here we are: Disneyland. This location by the way was chosen with the aid of traffic experts as the most accessible spot in Southern California. And our visitors will have no parking problem. We will accommodate 10,000 cars. [...].<sup>439</sup>

Walt Disney was not nostalgic when he designed Disneyland. Highways meant progress to him and cars were not seen as a problem as long as enough lanes and parking could be provided. Walt Disney held the “optimistic belief that the future was filled with remarkable possibilities that emerging technologies could provide to century-old problems.”<sup>440</sup> Highways belonged to these new possibilities and Disney dedicated an entire educational film to, what he considered, the “most important symbol” of America’s progress: the highway. In *Magic Highway, USA, 1958*,<sup>441</sup> Disney says that

keeping on the move is an all-American custom. And a good one. The most important symbol of the progress of our nation is the highway. Our forefathers seeking plenty of elbowroom always looked upon distance as a challenge. It took great courage to open up the frontier in vehicles like this wagon. One of the many freedoms we enjoy today, yet often take for granted, is the freedom of the American road. To come and go as we please in our pursuit of happiness. Today we enjoy the pleasure of going places in engineer-marvels such as this modern automobile.<sup>442</sup>

The film told the history of the American highway from dusty paths of the pioneers to gigantic, color-coded highway systems, connecting each American suburban home to the skyscrapers of new metropolitan centers and eventually to all continents of the world in the future. Endless energy supplies enable “radiant heat” which “will keep the highway’s surfaces dry in rain, ice, and snow.” Also, “the shape of our cities will change as expanded highway transportation decentralizes our population centers into vast urban areas.”

These vast urban areas of the future are built for white, middle class families. From their new suburban home that looks like the *Monsanto House of the Future*, discussed later, the family embarks in their car. “As father choses the route in advance on a push-button selector electronics take over complete control. [...] With no driving responsibilities the family relaxes together.” But, “on entering the city, the family separates: father to his office, mother and son to the shopping center.” The film sums up that “as in the past, the highway will continue to play a vital role in the progress of

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<sup>439</sup> “Mousefiles” 2008.

<sup>440</sup> Kurtti 2008: viii.

<sup>441</sup> *Magic Highway, USA*, is available on YouTube.

<sup>442</sup> “Cjs83172” 2012.

civilization. It will be our magic carpet to new hopes, new dreams, and a better way of life for the future." The 1950s family ideal according to which males had "the strong provider role and retained authority in the family while females were relegated to a domestic and subservient role"<sup>443</sup> is evident in this film.

Sam Gennawey observes a pattern in these educational films in *Walt and the Promise of Progress City* from 2011:

We learn that every problem has a technological fix. When that fix creates new unexpected problems, we will simply find another technological fix. That solution leads to other problems, and the cycle continues. For better or for worse, this is the definition of American progress.<sup>444</sup>

Disneyland has to be seen in the same optimistic light. It was not intended to oppose past and future but to illustrate where white, middle-class Americans had come from and where they would be going. Disneyland's internal chronology from Main Street, USA, to Tomorrowland as well as the park's location in Southern California stressed Walt Disney's optimistic beliefs and his intention for Disneyland: Americans' journey "from cowboy to astronaut."<sup>445</sup>

Historian John Findlay argues that Disneyland in 1955 was only possible in suburban Southern California. Disney was as strategic as retail pioneer Taubman was when deciding in favor of a site for a new mall. Both embraced the transformation of rural roads into multi-lane highways and the construction of suburbia. The pictures seen from the helicopter show busy freeways. They resemble the later attraction of *Autopia* in Disney's Tomorrowland, where children were supposed to learn how to use modern highways. When funds ran out before the opening of Disneyland, "Walt Disney insisted that this one attraction – a replica of the new freeway system that linked America's past with a suburban future – be completed in time for the opening ceremonies."<sup>446</sup> Disney needed present-day advances such as highways and suburbia to be successful. The visitors of Disneyland came from suburbs and traveled to Disneyland via highways. Moreover, they were accustomed to Disneyland and its themes from watching television. This was something Disney and his planners were well aware of and which they anticipated when building and marketing the park.

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<sup>443</sup> Douglas 2003: 74.

<sup>444</sup> Gennawey 2011: 32.

<sup>445</sup> Marling 1994: 118.

<sup>446</sup> Marling 1994: 124.

## TOMORROWLAND

No other part of Disneyland was more about America's progress than Tomorrowland.

Walt Disney dedicated Tomorrowland with these words:

A vista into the world of wondrous ideas, signifying men's achievement. A step into the future with predictions of constructive things to come. Tomorrow offers new frontiers in science, adventure and ideas: the Atomic Age, challenges of outer space, and the hope for a peaceful and unified world.<sup>447</sup>

Tomorrowland consisted of several pavilions and landscaped areas. The dominant materials were concrete, glass, and plastic. The pavilions resembled modernist buildings. Here and there were flagpoles and futuristic sculptures. Scattered around the land were white chairs that looked like the famous chairs designed by Charles Eames. The central structure of Tomorrowland in 1955 was the TWA Moonliner, a rocket of the future (see Figure 75). A sign claimed that "this venture into space is under conditions as calculated for the year 1986 by Willy Ley and Dr. Werner von Braun."<sup>448</sup>

I would like to use two Tomorrowland attractions in particular that conveyed the progress narrative: *Monsanto's House of the Future* and *The Carousel of Progress*.



**Figure 75.** Tomorrowland in 1955. Photo courtesy Daveland Web Collection. Retrieved from: <http://davelandweb.com/tomorrowland/>. Accessed July 6, 2018.

*Monsanto's House of the Future* opened in 1957 ( see Figure 76) and was a collaboration between Monsanto Chemicals, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Walt Disney Company. It can be considered as an example of the conviction

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<sup>447</sup> Mahne 2016.

<sup>448</sup> Daveland n.d.

that private enterprises and not the government should be housing the nation. The attraction presented a single-family house of the year 1986 which was completely made of plastic. A Monsanto promotional film highlights the use of plastic, "the first truly man-made material," as the building material of the future. The *House of the Future* had a cross-shaped floor plan. The rooms spread out in four directions from the center of the house which contained the bathrooms and kitchen. The position of the kitchen in the center of the house reflects a postwar return to a "traditional vision of gender roles"<sup>449</sup> and to the ideal of the American housewife.

Betty Friedan shows in *The Feminine Mystique* of 1963, that this ideal was reintroduced to American women in 1949. It was in this year that "a change in the image of the American woman, and in the boundaries of the women's world, as sharp and puzzling as the changes revealed in cores of ocean sediment"<sup>450</sup> became evident to her in women's magazines. The stories in women's magazines in 1939 were about "New Women, creating with a gay determined spirit a new identity for women - a life of their own. There was an aura about them of becoming, of moving into a future that was going to be different from the past."<sup>451</sup> During World War II, many American women were doing jobs that earlier had been done by men who then were fighting in the war. The government funded daycare centers to help make this important female contribution possible. But after the war the government immediately ended the funding.<sup>452</sup> At the same time, women's magazines returned to advocating the old image of the American housewife. This created what Friedan refers to as a *feminine mystique*, which

says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity [...] women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.<sup>453</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

<sup>450</sup> Friedan 2001: 38.

<sup>451</sup> Friedan 2001: 34.

<sup>452</sup> Altbach 1974: 173.

<sup>453</sup> Friedan 2001: 43.



**Figure 76.** The Monsanto house of the Future. Photo courtesy Orange County Archives. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monsanto\\_Plastics\\_Home\\_of\\_the\\_Future,\\_Disneyland,\\_1958\\_\(15364290924\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monsanto_Plastics_Home_of_the_Future,_Disneyland,_1958_(15364290924).jpg) . Accessed July 6, 2018.

*Monsanto's House of the Future* at Disneyland, despite being built using the latest building methods and materials, ideologically is based on these gender conventions. Accordingly, the Monsanto promotional film<sup>454</sup> highlights how this house of the future will mostly help the female American homemaker. We see a white, middle-class woman from 1957 standing in the kitchen of the house. She dreams herself into the bright future of life in the new plastic house and suddenly is wearing an apron. "Would I like it? What a dream! Imagine living in a house like this. Just imagine! I'd be making dinner in this kitchen!" Her daughter helps this mother set the table with plastic dishes. Cooking is presented as a fulfilling and exciting activity thanks to new technology. Refrigerator units are lowered from the ceiling to the housewives' eye-level so she can choose which frozen item to take out for dinner. The dishwasher and the microwave oven both emerge from the melamine-coated countertop. The happy homemaker tidies up her son's room in the next scene. It features "tough, durable materials" that "are easily washable." Next door, the daughter is sitting at the vanity table, brushing her hair. The father is seen relaxing in the living room.<sup>455</sup> The postwar suburban concept of working men and stay-at-home mothers is extended into the future.

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<sup>454</sup> This film is available on YouTube.

<sup>455</sup> This matches Richard Clark's observation that the new ideal of the 1950s nuclear family was also about a "glorification of self-indulgence. Convenience rather than style, comfort rather than some formal idea of beauty." Clark in May 1989: 182.

“One last look through the thermopane windows with decorative, laminated safety plastic-glass. Functional. Beautiful. Another dream of the future in the house of tomorrow.”

Disney positioned “the ‘typical family of four’ at the center of the Disneyland experience and consequently matched “the tastes and values of an expanding suburban middle class” with “an emphasis on patriarchal social relations.”<sup>456</sup> The vision of the future of suburbia, which the Monsanto house pictured, “provided a setting in which postwar Americans could confront their anxieties about the changing position of women in American society, seeking comfort in cultural representations of domesticated housewives and stable nuclear families.”<sup>457</sup> This attraction as well as the film *Magic Highways, USA*, support the claim made by Stephanie Coontz that the 1950s nuclear-family ideal, “the typical family of four,” was a postwar invention.<sup>458</sup>

The second attraction I will discuss here also evolves around another nuclear, white, middle-class family and takes place in a single-family house over a period of 100 years. General Electrics and the Walt Disney Company developed the *Carousel of Progress* for the New York World Fair of 1964. After the fair it was installed in Disneyland in Anaheim. This attraction is a theatre in which a circular stage turns to reveal different scenes. Each scene tells the story of American progress at a different time. The first scene takes place in the early 1900’s and we are witness to this conversation:

Husband: “What year is it? Oh, just before the turn of the century. And believe me, things couldn’t be any better than they are today. We got all the latest things. Gas lamps, a telephone, and the latest design in cast-iron stoves. That reservoir keeps five gallons of water hot all day on just three buckets of coal. And isn’t our new ice box a beauty [...] You know it wasn’t too long we had to carry water from the well. But thanks to progress we have a pump here in the kitchen.

[...]

Wife: “It takes only five hours to do the washing. Imagine!”

Husband “That’s right folks, now, mother has time for recreations like...”

Wife: “Like canning and polishing the stove?”

Husband: “Okay mother, you just iron the wrinkles out of my shirts.”

Wife: “Yes dear.”

Husband: “It’s hard to imagine how life could be any easier.

[...]

As he speaks, the father is sitting in an armchair in a Victorian house. A white picket

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<sup>456</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

<sup>457</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

<sup>458</sup> Cf. Coontz 2000.

fence can be seen outside. The mother is hardly seen. Her sole job seems to be washing and ironing. The shirt is introduced here as a reoccurring theme throughout the 1964 version of the attraction. It conveys the middle-class status of this family and the fact that the father is the breadwinner. Each scene is connected by this song:

There's a great, big, beautiful tomorrow,  
Shining at the end of every day  
There's a great, big, beautiful tomorrow  
And tomorrow's just a dream away  
Man has a dream and that's the start  
He follows his dream with mind and heart  
And when it becomes a reality  
It's a dream come true for you and me  
So there's a great, big, beautiful tomorrow  
Shining at the end of every day  
There's a great, big, beautiful tomorrow  
Just a dream away

While this happy song is played, the stage turns and reveals the next scene. In the 1920s the following situation takes place:

Husband: "And what a difference in our home. We can run as many wires as we need in any direction for mother's new electrical servants: electric sewing machine, coffee percolator, toaster, waffle iron, refrigerator, and they all go to work at the click of a switch. [...] With an electric iron and electric lights mother has something to do to fill her evenings. Now it's no problem at all to get my collar smooth. Right, mother?"

Wife: "Yes dear."

[...]

Husband: "You know, considering all the convenience we have, it looks as though we have progressed as far as we can. But when we read about those things that the research people at General Electric are working on, well, we can be sure of one thing: There's a great, big, beautiful Tomorrow..."

Progress is reduced to the fact that it is not a problem for mother any more to get father's collar smooth. The mother is not seen or heard much at all. Next, we see the progress made by the 1940s:

Husband: "It's amazing how today's household appliances are helping to take over the hard work. Like our new electric washing machine. It does about everything but hang up the clothes. And electric ranges are a big improvement over those early models from the 1920s. And refrigerators are bigger and better than ever. It keeps vegetables garden-fresh over days. There's a meat compartment. And it makes lots more ice cubes. Dishwashing has gone electric, too. And that's real progress, believe me. [...] Kitchens are now places to relax in. [...] Thanks to progress, mother and I can spend more time together. [...] It seems like these are the best years of our lives."

GE's progress has helped the mother of the family to gain more time. This completely technology-centered concept of progress leaves out any advances of women's rights since the 1900s. The audience is taken into the future, next. Now, the mother finally speaks, but in a hectic and almost childish way:

Wife: "Merry Christmas!"

Husband: "Merry Christmas! We were just reminiscing about Christmas in the old days..."

Wife: "...when getting ready for the holidays meant hectic days of cleaning house and preparing extra food."

Husband: "And as I started to say..."

Wife: "...when Christmas day arrived I was too exhausted to enjoy it."

Husband: "But today our new..."

Wife: "Yes, today, our new electric home gives us much more time to enjoy ourselves."

Husband: "In fact, it's a..."

Wife: "Would you believe it? I'm cooking dinner? Or rather my electric range is. I just set the time and temperature controls and relax. It even has a self-cleaning oven. And we were able to pick our appliance's colors from so many beautiful combinations."

Husband: "All of the appliances have been improved today. Take a refrigerator. Well, I remember when..."

Wife: "When the man of the house had to work twice as many hours to earn one as he does today. And today we have a better product."

Husband: "You took the words right out of my mouth, dear."

Wife: "And I'm thrilled with my new dishwasher. And doing a big-family wash is simply a breeze now. Oh, how I used to dread doing that job."

Husband: "Now mother has time for..."

Wife: "For activities like my garden club and the literary society, the ladies' bowling league... Home entertainment for our family is centered in one area. And from here we can enjoy [...] music anywhere in our home. We can even change our lighting to match the mood of the music. [...] You're probably wondering what happened to Grandma and Grandpa. Well, they are not longer with us. They have their own home now in a community for senior citizens.

Husband: "Grandpa is in the 80s. His golf score, that is."

Wife: "The children are meeting Grandma and Grandpa now at our new jet airport."

Husband: "And speaking of new..."

Wife: "We haven't said anything about our community..."

Husband: "That's changed, too, and..."

Wife: "And in great, big, beautiful way. Yes, the progress of the last century has changed not only our homes, but also our transportation, recreation, and the places we work.

Husband: "Mother..."

Wife: "It has brought us convenience and enjoyment we never knew before."

Husband: "Mother!"

Wife: "Dear! You've hardly said a word. Why don't you say something?"

Husband: "Well, I would like to say this much. Progress is something we can't take for granted. Progress takes a lot of people wanting it and willing to work for it."

This attraction epitomizes a narrative of progress pushed by corporate America and suggests that while everything improves only the nuclear family and traditional gender roles stay the same as technology bridges the physical distance of the family members. The future also seems to be predominantly white. In each scene, progress has changed the life of a white, middle-class family for the better. The metaphor of progress is the white-collar shirt of the father. Washing and ironing it becomes easier for the mother so that she has more free time in the future. In each age it is hard to imagine for the protagonists how things could possibly improve even further. But they do, as the narrative suggests. The characters of this show are portrayed in an evolving domestic environment. White men contribute with their work to progress, as this line from the attraction's song underlines: "Man has a dream, and that's the start." Those who benefit from it are primarily the housewives who are provided with timesaving appliances that men invented for them. But instead of enabling women to go to work outside the house, the advent of new appliances causes something else. It is striking that in the first scenes the father explains most of the progress, while the mother is almost absent. In the future, however, she interrupts her husband all the time and speaks much more than he does. This is because of all the inventions that have made domestic work less time-consuming. The mother now has the time to join her husband in propagating the achieved progress and made possible by GE. She does not need to slave in the kitchen and basement anymore. The mother uses this gained time to attend clubs and social activities.

This kind of progress creates a utopian suburban environment of golf clubs, office parks, retirement communities and recreational facilities. At the exit of the theater, Progress City was presented to the audience in form of a large model. The father applauds the great rapid transportation system he can use to get to work. It "sure beats traffic jams." The mother speaks about how great shopping is in this new city: "Shopping is a breeze. [...] Today, our whole downtown is completely enclosed." The father adds: "General Electric calls it a climate-controlled environment. But mother calls it..." "A sparkling jewel." We learn that brighter streetlights have brought new safety to the suburbs and technology has vitalized the business areas "because it is not chore to go downtown anymore," as the mother excitedly states. "Far off to your right we have a welcome neighbor that contributes so much to making Progress City a better place to live in." The father mansplains: "Mother is talking about our GE nuclear power plant." The gender conventions are kept unchanged until the end of this attraction that was a favorite of Walt Disney's. He loved it so much that he dreamt of building this city.

## EPCOT:

### THE EXPERIMENTAL PROTOTYPE COMMUNITY OF TOMORROW

The great success of Disneyland and Walt Disney's involvement in several World Fairs as well as his belief in America's progress motivated him to secretly acquire an area in Central Florida twice the size of Manhattan. He wanted to create an entire Disney "World." But now, the theme park was not the main aspect of the project. EPCOT, the Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, was the core of Walt Disney's Florida project. Like Disneyland, it was introduced to Americans via television with a film that today is referred to as *Walt's Last Film*. This documentary outlines Disney's vision for EPCOT. It begins with a summary of Disneyland's achievements with a focus on its transportation system. Later in the film, Walt Disney presents the Disney World Project in Central Florida. Walt Disney states: "I don't believe there is a challenge anywhere in the world that's more important to people everywhere than finding solutions to the problems of our cities."<sup>459</sup> To him, these problems were mainly results of inefficient public transportation and bad roads as a result of a lack of proper planning. He goes on:

But where do we begin? How do we start answering this great challenge? Well, we're convinced we must start with the public need. And the need is not just for curing the old ills of old cities. We think the need is for starting from scratch on virgin land and building a special kind of new community.<sup>460</sup>

The film mainly is about EPCOT's transportation system and structure. EPCOT was organized around a radial plan, just like Disneyland. It had the shape of a wheel with spokes. Each section was filled with suburban single-family houses. From here, a WED<sup>461</sup> Way Peoplemover transported people to the core, passing a greenbelt. The greenbelt contained apartment towers and civic buildings such as churches and schools. The heart of EPCOT was the underground Transportation Lobby where the WED Way Peoplemover from all directions met. The Monorail Line of Walt Disney World would also pass the Transportation Lobby, connecting EPCOT with the Magic Kingdom, its hotels, an industrial park, and an "airport of the future." Concept art of the Transportation Lobby shows that the place was planned to be a huge, modernist concourse of several levels. The Transportation Lobby was not Main Street, USA. It was Tomorrowland. Automobile transportation was accommodated on two levels below the Transportation Lobby. Cars were to be separated from trucks. The core of EPCOT

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<sup>459</sup> "TheOriginalEpcot" 2013.

<sup>460</sup> "TheOriginalEpcot" 2013.

<sup>461</sup> WED = Walter Elias Disney

would have consisted of several *themed* districts that would have recalled famous cities around the world. Here, nostalgic streetscapes would also have recreated the charm of the old world in the center of the prototype community of tomorrow. The entire metropolitan center of EPCOT was to be completely enclosed by a dome and thus climate-controlled.

After his death, the plans of EPCOT – the city of the future – were shelved. Walt Disney World opened in 1971 without a utopian urban community. However, a few elements such as the monorail survived. A decade later, Epcot Center opened instead. This project will be discussed later because it needs to be interpreted not so much as an example of the myth of progress, but as a reaction to growing skepticism in a utopian future.

### 4.3 “FROM COWBOY TO ASTRONAUT?”<sup>462</sup>

In this chapter I illustrated why and how a suburban landscape emerged that is so different in structure and scale from the collective vision of the dominant small town and any traditional urban form. In the first part of this chapter, I showed that due to a coincidence of several factors, or what Stephanie Coontz calls “a historical fluke,”<sup>463</sup> America experienced a drastic shift towards becoming a “Suburban Nation.”<sup>464</sup> A powerful private housing industry took shape and suburban zoning- and building ordinances, often based on exclusion,<sup>465</sup> were established that are still working today. I argued that a myth of American progress supported this suburbanization of America. I focused on Disney theme parks and attractions to illustrate this. The myth of progress can be summed up as a utopian outlook on America’s future based on white patriarchy and capitalism. A central aspect of it is white men’s inevitable journey “from cowboy to astronaut.”<sup>466</sup> According to this myth, a free market economy, engineering, and technology are creating a better world for white nuclear families. Progress is seen as a result of capitalism run by inventive white males; the combination of “American capital and American labor,”<sup>467</sup> to use the words of the Governor of California spoken on the occasion of the opening of Disneyland in 1955. The ideal of the nuclear family is

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<sup>462</sup> Marling 1994: 118.

<sup>463</sup> Coontz 2000: 28.

<sup>464</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000.

<sup>465</sup> “Minority families were routinely marginalized by a mixture of government policy, which denied them access to new communities in the most explicit way; economic factors, which denied them the ability to purchase housing even when provided the opportunity; and social factors, which denied them the sort of friendship and support new residents find essential.” Douglas 2003: 77.

<sup>466</sup> Marling 1994: 118.

<sup>467</sup> Kruse 2015: 127.

indeed an invention of the postwar period and is central to this myth as the texts I discussed have shown.

Writer, activist, and feminist Betty Friedan criticized these naturalized traditional gender conventions in the *Feminine Mystique* in 1963. She revealed a “problem that has no name” by showing how women suffered from their limited choices and isolation in suburbia while striving for the new ideal.<sup>468</sup> This suffering of course is not portrayed in texts of the progress myth because like advertisements myths leave out anything controversial or negative about what they propagate. Faith in progress and the economical feasibility of a quest for a patriarchal nuclear-family ideal encouraged the massive and seemingly unquestioned suburbanization of America which was also an effort to modernize the country.

But men equally suffered. Chris Barker and Emma Jane (2016) state that World War II “proved to be the ‘last gasp’ of the useful and dutiful male as the ideal of manhood.”<sup>469</sup> They argue, referring to feminist author and journalist Susan Faludi that the postwar “American baby-boomer generation was offered a ‘mission to manhood’ that revolved around the conquest of space, the defeat of communism, a brotherhood of organizational men and a family to protect.”<sup>470</sup> This male mission is clearly linked to the myth of progress I looked at in this chapter. However, “the boy who had been told he was going to be the master of the universe and all that was in it found himself master of nothing”<sup>471</sup> in a landscape of strip malls and suburban tract homes. Stephanie Coontz states that these postwar suburban and social norms and “patterns [had become] highly problematic by the 1970s.”<sup>472</sup> The myth of American progress and its engrained “mission of manhood”<sup>473</sup> were and are impossible to live up to, leaving behind “distressed and confused men who inhabit the ghostly landscape of the contemporary USA.”<sup>474</sup>

This “problematic masculinity”<sup>475</sup> is portrayed in *Back to the Future* where, in a depressingly suburbanized Hill Valley of 1985, Marty’s father is seen as a pathetic and anxious man who seeks distraction and comfort in watching reruns of 1950s sitcoms on television in the living room of the family’s dated ranch house at derelict Lyon Estates. Marty’s uncle is in jail. Consequently, his mother, being left alone by both her husband

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<sup>468</sup> Cf. Friedan 2001.

<sup>469</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 377.

<sup>470</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 377.

<sup>471</sup> Faludi 1999: 30.

<sup>472</sup> Coontz 2000: 29.

<sup>473</sup> Cf. Faludi 1999.

<sup>474</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 378.

<sup>475</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 376.

and her brother, is overweight and suffers from alcoholism.<sup>476</sup> The McFlys are not the happy sitcom family they used to be in the 1950s anymore. They are an example of what has been labeled the “crisis of the family in late-twentieth-century America.”<sup>477</sup>

The disconnection of the postwar family ideal from suburbia and its merger with the dominant small town by popular culture, which I discussed at the end of the last chapter, needs to be reconsidered and analyzed further in the context of a crumbling myth of progress and the purported American family crisis. At the end of the last chapter, the fusion of the family and the small town was argued to have taken place because the dominant small town was considered aesthetically more “homey”<sup>478</sup> than postwar suburbia and because it could idealize suburbia better than pictures of actual suburbia.<sup>479</sup> But the considerations gathered at the end of this chapter suggest that there are more complex reasons for the decontextualization of the postwar patriarchal nuclear-family ideal to be revealed. Changes to the “exceptional” but “ephemeral”<sup>480</sup> conditions, looked at in this chapter, which fostered suburbia and the postwar family ideal, ultimately leading to crisis, need to be looked at historically and culturally to get a better understanding of the aesthetic shifts from the postwar ranch house to more historicized structures on screen and in the built environment. In the next chapter I will focus on the period following the postwar decades of suburban and economic expansion to explore a turn from progress to pastness which is mirrored today in the nostalgic architecture that replaced the optimistic Modernism of the 1950s.

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<sup>476</sup> The trilogy extends this crisis into the future (2015) where Marty himself fails living up to the persistent ideal.

<sup>477</sup> Coontz 2000: 277. Coontz emphasizes that this crisis is only perceived as such. “Despite ever mounting evidence that families of the past were not as idyllic and families of the present not as dysfunctional as they are often portrayed, many political leaders and opinion makers in the United States continue to filter our changing family experiences and trends through the distorted lens of historical mythologizing about the past family life.” (Coontz 2000: xi).

<sup>478</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>479</sup> Cf. Rowley 2015: 59f.

<sup>480</sup> Coontz 2000: 29.

## 5. THE TURN

# FROM PROGRESS TO PASTNESS

*It was only natural to Walt Disney to want to create a place where those who were raised under a blanket of smog, in tract homes, near noisy freeways, might see how life in Midwest America was.<sup>481</sup>*

*Brochure about Disneyland from the 1980s*

In chapter two I briefly mentioned Mashpee Commons. It used to be a typical 1960s retail center. But in the late 1980s it was transformed by the New Urbanist architects Andres Duany and Plater Zyberg into the first redeveloped strip mall in the United States. Today Mashpee Commons is a popular small-town themed shopping center. It became the template for endless redevelopments all over the country, signaling a turn away from the Modernist aesthetic of prefabrication and the postwar myth of American progress towards a nostalgic vision of the past.

### 5.1 DISCONTINUITY AND NOSTALGIA

Movies such as the *Back to the Future* trilogy reveal that the Modernist architecture, which initially dominated postwar suburbia and which I explored in the previous chapter, has been associated for decades with the failure of this landscape as well as with a crisis of the American family. The theming of post-suburbia reveals the same nostalgia for the dominant small town with its intact and harmonious families as these movies do. Nostalgia is a concept that needs to be discussed as we study the turn from postwar progress to today's pursuit of pastness. The word nostalgia derives from two Greek roots. "Nostos" means returning home and "algia" means pain or longing. The Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer established the term nostalgia in 1688 in his medical dissertation. He observed symptoms of homesickness in

displaced people of the seventeenth century, freedom-loving students from the Republic of Berne studying in Basel, domestic help and servants working in France and Germany and Swiss soldiers fighting abroad. [...] Longing for their native land became their single-minded obsession.<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>481</sup> Findlay 1992: 97.

<sup>482</sup> Boym 2001: 3.

In *Monochrome Memories*, professor of film and television studies at Nottingham University Paul Grainge develops and evaluates theories of nostalgia in order to analyze the usage and meaning of monochrome photographs in The Gap and Apple advertisements and news magazines such as *Time* of the 1980s and 1990s. Grainge opens his study with the observation that in 1997, when he began his project, “it appeared that no self-respected café bar could do without a black-and-white print on the wall; monochrome was the signature of designer chic for the likes of Armani and Calvin Klein.”<sup>483</sup> He argues that black-and-white images were utilized in marketing as a “cultural style” and as “the archival legitimacy of particular histories and versions of heritage.”<sup>484</sup> Therefore he claims with regard to the popularity of monochrome photography that if “nostalgia has developed as a cultural style in contemporary American life, it cannot be explained through any single master narrative of decline, crisis, longing or loss.” Grainge wants to avert a “critical reduction where nostalgia modes become the reflex result of anxieties and dissatisfactions with the present.”<sup>485</sup> To Grainge this “stylistic code,” however, does not exclude the possibility that

modes of nostalgia have not developed in the context of crisis, or that longing and loss are not powerful and operative narratives within certain kinds of discourses. As a cultural style, nostalgia has developed in accordance with a series of political, cultural, and material factors that have made ‘pastness’ an expedient and marketable mode.<sup>486</sup>

Nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia reflects both forms of nostalgia. It is a reaction to loss, crisis, and longing that can cause a feeling of discontinuity. Nostalgia can be triggered by a feeling of loss, for example of a phase of life that inevitably is over. This feeling can also be caused by the loss of a place – like the (imagined) small town. Nostalgia emerges in contexts of loss, crisis, and longing. But the theming of post-suburbia according to the dominant small town is also a “stylistic code” that suggests “intellectual abstraction, artistic integrity, documentary realism, archival evidence, fashion chic, and film classicism, depending on the nature of a text’s production and reception.”<sup>487</sup>

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, 2001, Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature Svetlana Boym suggests that nostalgia “inevitably reappears as a defense

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<sup>483</sup> Grainge 2002: xiii.

<sup>484</sup> Grainge 2002: 121.

<sup>485</sup> Grainge 2002: 58.

<sup>486</sup> Grainge 2002: 58.

<sup>487</sup> Grainge 2002: 69.

mechanism in a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals." Today's nostalgia as evident in the theming of post-suburbia is at

first glance [...] a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.<sup>488</sup>

If white nostalgia is understood, among other things, as a rebellion against the myth of progress, which I discussed in the previous chapter, and consequently a yearning for the imagined past, which I analyzed in the third chapter, it has to be considered now why white Americans have turned from progress to pastness. Also, it needs to be analyzed how nostalgia gets manifest and is propagated in texts of popular culture. Let's begin by looking at the crumbling of the myth of pastness in the decades following the postwar era of reconstruction, growth and expansion.

#### **"THE EROSION OF FAITH IN PROGRESS"<sup>489</sup>**

Quoting Fred Davis, author of *Yearning for Yesterday – a Sociology of Nostalgia* (1977), Grainge states that from the 1970s on nostalgia "became a routine keyword in America for the capaciously sentimental, and variously commodified past."<sup>490</sup> In his study of American roadside architecture, professor of history at the University of Vermont, Chester H. Liebs makes an observation in the suburban landscapes of America that matches this statement. He shows in a study about American roadside architecture that already in the 1960s

a ground swell of disillusionment began to build – disenchantment with 'the world of tomorrow' promised during the depression and the war and put into practice in the late 1940s and early 1950s. A public that for three decades had been bombarded with the message 'new is better' by everything from advertisement to architecture was losing its faith in newness for its own sake.<sup>491</sup>

The 1950s and 1960s world of tomorrow that attractions such as the *Monsanto House of the Future* or the *Carousel of Progress* had promoted was not believed in anymore by those white, middle-class Americans who were portrayed in these texts. This caused a "shift in public mood and aesthetic preference."<sup>492</sup> The myth of progress I focused on

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<sup>488</sup> Boym 2001: xv.

<sup>489</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 184.

<sup>490</sup> Grainge 2002: 20.

<sup>491</sup> Liebs 1995: 64.

<sup>492</sup> Liebs 1995: 64.

in the previous chapter was rapidly losing credibility. Why were white, middle-class Americans rapidly losing their faith in newness and progress and were resorting to nostalgia instead? In 1979, historian and social critic Christopher Lasch suggested these reasons in *The Culture of Narcissism – American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectation*:

Hardly more than a quarter-century after Henry Luce proclaimed the 'American century,' American confidence has fallen to a low ebb. Those who recently dreamed of world power now despair of governing the city of New York. Defeat in Vietnam, economic stagnation, and the impending exhaustion of natural resources have produced a mood of pessimism in higher circles, which spreads through the rest of society as people lose faith in their leaders.<sup>493</sup>

Lasch's reassessment of Luce's proclamation reveals the sudden decline of the euphoric postwar progress narrative as a consequence of sociopolitical events. In *Nostalgia and Sexual Difference* (1987), Janice Doane and Devon Hodges read Lasch's texts as "a nostalgic narration of loss"<sup>494</sup> and critically comment that Lasch "has long been worried about the collapse of patriarchal authority and the rise of a feminized American culture."<sup>495</sup> So, when he speaks of "higher circles" he is referring to males in power ("leaders") while "the rest of society" is primarily middle-class America.

The "dislocations caused by the 1960s"<sup>496</sup> included the second wave of feminism and the Civil Rights Movement that both attacked white patriarchal authority and the "artificial family system"<sup>497</sup> with its strict and dysfunctional gender conventions. In his analysis of the usage of monochrome photography Paul Grainge continues to summarize Fred Davis' 1979 *Yearning for Yesterday* and says that Davis relates

the cultural incidence of nostalgia to a sense of dislocation, mainly caused by sociopolitical factors such as crippling inflation, the humiliations caused by the Arab oil embargo and the withdrawal from Vietnam, the tarnishing of presidency caused by the Watergate scandal, and the confusions of sexual morality and family values that, collectively, led Jimmy Carter to speak in 1979 of an American 'crisis of confidence.'<sup>498</sup>

Grainge states that in *Chords of Memory*, 1993, professor of American Cultural History Michael Kammen, too, links American "nostalgia to the cultural consequences of swift social change, the need for stable anchors and consensus in the wake of upheavals like

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<sup>493</sup> Lasch 1979: 17.

<sup>494</sup> Doane and Hodges 1987: 49.

<sup>495</sup> Doane and Hodges 1987: 48.

<sup>496</sup> Grainge 2002: 20.

<sup>497</sup> Douglas 2003: 74.

<sup>498</sup> Grainge 2002: 42.

Vietnam and Watergate, an entrepreneurial spirit intent on selling the past, the growing interest in historical preservation and Americana."<sup>499</sup> In this context of crisis, the myth of progress did not only become implausible. It became impossible. The dominant small town on the other hand, created a reassuring antithesis to these upheavals and promised continued benefits to white patriarchs.

In her 2006 study *Retro*, professor of Art and Design History at the State University of New York, Elizabeth Guffey, uses similar arguments to explain the rise of nostalgia since the 1970s. She sees retro "as an outlook on life. [...] More than a quest for a simpler life [the] 'retro' attitude also carries a darker suspicion that recent social, cultural and political developments are profoundly corrosive."<sup>500</sup> Guffey gives a detailed account of the culture of revival. Her study suggests that there happened a nostalgic turn in the late 1960s and 1970s. Guffey begins her observations in the late 1960s and refers to several newspaper articles about the phenomenon of nostalgia and revivalism in the United States: "Quoted in an article of 1973 entitled "Why the Craze for the 'Good Old Days,'" the poet Archibald Mac Leish insisted that 'people are disillusioned by what's going on today, and they are returning to history for ideas about how to get out of this mess.'<sup>501</sup> Neither he nor Guffey say though who exactly was disillusioned.

Guffey argues that those feeling nostalgic did not long for the distant past: "The nostalgia that pervaded culture in the 1960s and early 1970s was of a distinctly modern cast, focusing on a past that had slipped away only some 20 to 100 years before. It was really the recent, modern past that people hankered after."<sup>502</sup> Americans were drawn to the dominant small-town past created by Hollywood, Disney, and Rockwell. Professor of Modern History Cary Cross underlines in *Consumed Nostalgia* that it "was a secondhand nostalgia for those born too late to experience the real thing and who instead grew up in featureless suburbs."<sup>503</sup> This collective longing of the white, suburban, baby-boomer generation "indicated a broader, long-term shift in attitudes toward the past"<sup>504</sup> and consequently, in attitudes toward the present and the future as well. They escaped and aspired to a mediated past in which their position in society was portrayed as much more stable than in the wake of the social movements of the 1960s. Dostrovsky and Harris presume that "one development that has undermined

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<sup>499</sup> Grainge 2002: 28.

<sup>500</sup> Guffey 2006: 10.

<sup>501</sup> Guffey 2006: 18.

<sup>502</sup> Guffey 2006: 18.

<sup>503</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

<sup>504</sup> Guffey 2006: 18.

modernism has been the erosion of faith in cultural and economic progress. [...] People feel less secure. It makes sense that this feeling would be reflected, perhaps above all, in domestic architecture.<sup>505</sup> They believe, that the historicist revival indeed and above all is the indication for “a search for reassurance in an uncertain world”<sup>506</sup> which increasingly was associated with Architectural Modernism.

### **“THE MODERNIST MIDDLE-CLASS HOUSE DIED.”<sup>507</sup>**

In a book about Modernist architect Quincy A. Jones Architect Cory Buckner argues in 2002 that the “loss of national self-confidence in the period following the Vietnam War, combined with revived interest in the historic architecture of America’s cities, led to a return to historic styles and an abandonment of the dynamism of the 1950s.”<sup>508</sup> Nostalgia occurred “in the context of present fears, discontents, anxieties and uncertainties.”<sup>509</sup> But America’s massive suburbanization and the new aesthetic of Architectural Modernism are crucial factors that added to the anxieties and uncertainties.

Suburbia reached its zenith of collective acceptance between 1945 and 1965. It was evaluated increasingly more negatively after this period.<sup>510</sup> However, the overall positive and euphoric image of modern suburbia had been questioned already in the 1950s. Due to its massive scale and mass-produced look, the new postwar version of the suburban utopia attracted social scientists. They forecasted that “[a]s the slum was a main key to urban disorganization in the twenties, so the suburb may well be a key in the fifties.”<sup>511</sup> The new suburbanites soon were seen as mass-people in grey flannel suits, rootless organization men, without character and individuality. Suburbia was quickly interpreted as “the setting for the dominant ‘disorder’ of” the age.<sup>512</sup> Within only two decades there occurred a complete change in the social debate about modern suburbia.<sup>513</sup> Already at the end of the 1950s, modern suburbia caused rather negative associations of conformity, uniformity, and rootlessness. The new, suburban aesthetic of prefabrication also has to do with this.

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<sup>505</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 184.

<sup>506</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 168.

<sup>507</sup> Adamson and Arbunich 2002: 22.

<sup>508</sup> Buckner 2002: 6.

<sup>509</sup> Davis 1979: 49 quoted in Grainge 2002: 24.

<sup>510</sup> Cf. Frank 2003: 226.

<sup>511</sup> Stein 1960: 200 quoted in Frank 2003: 306.

<sup>512</sup> Stein 1960: 199 quoted in Frank 2003: 306.

<sup>513</sup> Cf. Frank 2003: 308.

Originally, the architectural styles of the postwar suburban landscape were Bauhaus-inspired architectural Modernism and the International Style. These styles were “abstract and so removed from history, local condition, and pedestrian scale.”<sup>514</sup> The Modernist styles originally found in suburbia in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s often were different from more traditional architectural styles and brought with them a break with older styles. The aesthetic of prefabrication was not popular for a long time,

as in the late 1960s and 1970s, increasing numbers [of middle-class Americans] sought historical styles usually associated with well-to-do establishment. By [...] 1974, homebuyers had begun to turn away from the inherent modesty of modern design and to look again for traditional imagery and a sense of luxury. Ultimately, the concept of the modernist middle-class house died [...].<sup>515</sup>

But it was more than a pursuit of an image of high class, luxury, and well-to-do establishment that caused this trend. The turn to nostalgia in post-suburbia must be seen as a “search for reassurance in an uncertain world”<sup>516</sup> because Architectural Modernism was increasingly being seen as the epitome of this uncertain world.

Besides the mass-produced suburbs that had suddenly sprung up around American cities, other Modernist structures had a lasting negative impact and were also negatively publicized. A discomfort with Modernism resulted from the aesthetic and inhuman scale of urban renewal projects that had been transforming prominent parts of America’s cities since the end of World War II. An infamous example for this is the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis. Architect Minoru Yamasaki, who also designed New York’s former World Trade Center, envisioned the development. It consisted of 33 eleven-story slab towers on a 57-acre site and was originally celebrated by architectural magazines. The 2,870 apartments replaced lower-income slums of minority groups. However, Pruitt-Igoe deteriorated immediately after its opening. Its final demolition in 1972 was interpreted as the death of Modernism in the United States.<sup>517</sup> Other such projects were considered failures as well. The brutalism of Boston City Hall and Plaza or Albany’s Empire State Plaza (see Figures 77 and 78) added to the lack of enthusiasm about Architectural Modernism as an aesthetic of the future.

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<sup>514</sup> Talen 2005: 54.

<sup>515</sup> Adamson and Arbunich 2002: 22.

<sup>516</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 168.

<sup>517</sup> Jencks 1977: 9. “Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972, at 3.32pm,” cf. Harvey 1989: 39.

The Modernist aesthetic of prefabrication was originally associated with the myth of progress and reflected the postwar doctrine of faith in America's future. Suburban architecture such as Hilltop Mall used to boldly demonstrate its anti-urban nature visually and thereby expressed optimism in American technology and progress. Suburban architecture celebrated the new car-centered lifestyle by putting garages to the front of the house and by surrounding malls with oceans of parking fields to underline their accessibility. The same emphasis on the car can be seen in typical suburban structures such as motels, drive-thrus, and supermarkets. Postwar optimism found its expression in open-plan postwar bungalows, modern shopping malls, and the massive land development by commercial builders discussed in the previous chapter. The "spatial aesthetics established by the modernists appeared in a watered down, mass produced version when the Levittowns across the country offered their consumers large picture windows or glass walls and continuous dining-living areas [...]."518 The suburban architecture of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s "celebrated the self-confidence and optimism of the post-World War II years."<sup>519</sup>



**Figure 78.** Boston City Hall is an example of modernist architecture in the United States. 2010 photo by the author.

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<sup>518</sup> Spigel 1992: 104.

<sup>519</sup> Buckner 2002: 6.



**Figure 78.** Empire State Plaza, Albany, NY, 2009. Photo courtesy Tim Schapker. Retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:EmpirePlaza1.jpg?uselang=de>. Accessed July 6, 2018.

However, as much as “American consumers were fascinated with futuristic homes, they did not eagerly embrace the avant-garde styles of client-built homes, nor did they necessarily want to live in the mass-produced homes of the future.”<sup>520</sup> This re-evaluation of postwar suburbia and urban renewal projects in the dawn of sociopolitical shifts is another reason why the progressive aesthetic of prefabrication gave way to nostalgic decorations.

### “SHATTERED SOCIAL NETWORKS AND URBAN COMMUNITIES”<sup>521</sup>

But not only the aesthetic needs to be considered a factor of perceived discontinuity. Mass-produced suburbs and many urban renewal projects did not connect to existing urban forms. Developers like William Levitt did to the housing industry what Henry Ford had done to the car industry. Levitt’s houses were built at great speed and in assembly-line style, just like Ford’s cars. Levitt “understood that the age of consumption called for new methods, styles, and tastes in homes just as it did in brand-name grocery stores, cars, and other mainstays of the mass-market economy.”<sup>522</sup> He “believed in creating a brand name; customers would buy a Levitt house rather than a small builder’s house,

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<sup>520</sup> Spigel 2001: 383.

<sup>521</sup> Wallace 1996: 21.

<sup>522</sup> Baxandall and Ewen 2000: 125.

just as they would prefer the A&P to a general store."<sup>523</sup> It is important to stress that the thousands of houses of Levittown were built without a true master plan in the potato fields of Long Island, New York. The massive community emerged step by step, as the company managed to buy more land. Levitt failed to offer suitable urban infrastructure in their development and also failed to "integrate their road system with county and state highways."<sup>524</sup> He did not intend to do so because his focus was on the product he was selling: the single-family house. The provided public facilities were minimal for a community of eighty thousand. Like Levitt, the overwhelming majority of builders "pushed the marketing of lots with houses, not the physical planning of towns."<sup>525</sup> As a result, no new towns developed and no existing towns were expanded. Instead, endless engineered landscapes that had been designed to accommodate as many identical lots with identical inexpensive houses as possible were built into the open countryside.

These new, engineered American landscapes created spatial discontinuity. Since "the late 1940s the highway and housing developments had been tearing up the material, cultural, and historical fabric of the country."<sup>526</sup> The principles of Levittown soon became the only solution to America's severe postwar housing problem. Developments like Levittown became the prototype for suburbs all over the United States and, at the same time, "highly publicized models of profitable development."<sup>527</sup> They were not connected in any way to the existing urban fabric and did not follow existing urban design patterns. These

postwar suburbs were constructed at great speed, but they were deliberately planned to maximize consumption of mass-produced goods and minimize the responsibility of the developer to create public space and public services.<sup>528</sup>

In this climate of high-speed suburban growth, architecture lost its permanence and the home became a branded object filled with consumer goods and new appliances. There were even ideas – yet not by Levitt – to produce houses that could be used and disposed like other consumer goods. In this process of suburbanization, Levittown and

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<sup>523</sup> Hayden 2004: 135.

<sup>524</sup> Hayden 2004: 136.

<sup>525</sup> Hayden 2004: 132.

<sup>526</sup> Wallace 1996: 20.

<sup>527</sup> Hayden 2004: 152.

<sup>528</sup> Hayden 2004: 128.

other developments replaced “previous forms of public space with a newly defined aesthetic of prefabrication.”<sup>529</sup>

In her study of this period of change in American history scholar of American Studies Eugenia Kaledin refers to the 1940s as an “old-fashioned world”<sup>530</sup> and the 1950s as “a brand-new world.”<sup>531</sup> This evaluation underlines how drastic the shift of patterns, from urban to suburban, was. The postwar years presented white, middle-class Americans with completely new lifestyles, which were no extensions of previous lifestyles:

The changes that took place in the United States between the 1940s and 1959 – the astonishing output of war materials, the mass production of housing, the overwhelming numbers of cars and television sets, the vast number of people going to college, and above all the ‘baby boom’ – all represented an America shifting from an easily recognizable past to a multidimensional present.<sup>532</sup>

There happened an abrupt clash between urban as well as small-town living on the one hand and suburban living on the other hand. The suburban, car-centered lifestyle was radically new, as were the building methods and sleek, modern aesthetics of prefabrication in suburbia. The flood of new products and new technology added to the impression that nothing in New America was like before the war. These developments among others created discontinuity and a sense of dislocation and loss in American society – but differently in different parts: women felt set back as they were forced to being housewives again, African Americans returned to the same old slums or were relocated to bleak apartment towers of urban renewal. Only white males may have had an interest in going back to the time before World War II.

Since “the 1940s the highway and housing industries had been tearing up the material, cultural and historical fabric of the country.”<sup>533</sup> America experienced “the most explosive growth anywhere on earth in anytime of history”<sup>534</sup> according to Robin Lewis, the author of *The New Rules of Retail*. Much has been written about the problems the suburban expansion of the United States have brought about. A notable contribution is *Suburban Nation – The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream*, from 2000, written by the New Urbanists Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-

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<sup>529</sup> Spigel 2001: 33.

<sup>530</sup> Kaledin 2000: 3.

<sup>531</sup> Kaledin 2000: 75.

<sup>532</sup> Kaledin 2000: x.

<sup>533</sup> Wallace 1996: 20.

<sup>534</sup> Strassmann 2014.

Zyberg, and Jeff Speck.<sup>535</sup> They argue that post-suburbia, which they refer to as sprawl, is made up of “very few homogeneous components, five in all, which can be arranged in almost any way.”<sup>536</sup> These components are housing subdivisions, shopping centers, office parks, civic institutions, and roadways. They criticize that this new city

doesn’t look like a place, it doesn’t act like a place, and, perhaps most significant, it doesn’t feel like a place. Rather, it feels like what it is: an uncoordinated agglomeration of standardized single-use zones with little pedestrian life and even less civic identification, connected only by an overtaxed network of roadways.<sup>537</sup>

The “problem with suburbia is not that it is ugly. The problem with suburbia is that, in spite of all the regulatory controls, it is not functional: it simply does not efficiently serve society or preserve the environment.”<sup>538</sup> Blogger, writer, and social critic Howard Kunstler, a fierce opponent of post-suburbia and the author of *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993), states that

far from being a mere matter of aesthetics, Suburbia represents a compound economic catastrophe, ecological debacle, political nightmare, and spiritual crisis for a nation of people conditioned to spend their lives in places not worth caring about.<sup>539</sup>

In 2001 Paul Goldberger, the architecture critic for the *New Yorker*, wrote that

while much was gained in the sort of new suburban automobile-landscape [...], something critical was lost. That was the experience of urbanism – being in a public place, where you walk around, see other people, and enjoy this wonderful combination of security and surprise [...]. That whole element of traditional villages had just disappeared with people going in their cars on freeways and sitting in little tracts, and not connecting in the way they once did.<sup>540</sup>

This feeling of further disconnection is considered “one of the defining characteristics of the twentieth century”<sup>541</sup> by Michael Lassell, author of *Celebration: The Story of a Town* (2004), which is a publication of Disney Editions, New York. He states that “the sprawling housing developments of the 1950s and 1960s [...], these mazes of carbon-

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<sup>535</sup> Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberg are the architects of many New-Urbanist communities such as Seaside, Florida.

<sup>536</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000: 5.

<sup>537</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000: 13.

<sup>538</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg, and Speck 2000: 14.

<sup>539</sup> Kunstler 2012.

<sup>540</sup> Lassell 2003: 19.

<sup>541</sup> Lassell 2003: 19.

copy Cape Cods became a broadly lampooned but very real symbol of dehumanization.<sup>542</sup> The dominant small town of Hollywood and Disney in turn seems like the reassuring opposite to New America and all its shortcomings. Today's nostalgia "might not be for a specific place but for a romantic idea, one easily blended and idealized in an all-white, All-American Main Street."<sup>543</sup> Nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia is a response to "anxieties and dissatisfaction with the present."<sup>544</sup> It is a rebellion of white, middle-class, baby-boomer Americans not so much against progress per se, as initially assumed, but against any social and economic changes that question and presumably diminish white capitalist patriarchy and supremacy as well as the nuclear-family ideal. These changes are perceived as causing discontinuity and decline. Next, I will analyze how change and the rebellion against it are portrayed in texts of popular culture.

## 5.2 FAILED PROGRESS IN MOVIES

American decline and discontinuity can be observed as a motif in many films, and also in Disney theme parks. I am going to focus on movies from the early 1960s to the late 2000s. With regard to Disney I am interested in a reinterpretation of Disneyland that dates back to the early 1980s. These texts contrast a vanishing Old America of patriarchal families with an emerging New America of broken relationships, suggesting that progress has changed the country and its people not for the better. The quintessence of this narrative of discontinuity is that Old America and New America are irreversibly disconnected and that this disconnection left behind rootless and forgotten people. These texts reveal a turn from progress to pastness. The first movie I would like to discuss here is *Bachelor in Paradise*, which, in 1961, ridicules the naïve faith in progress in New America.

### **BACHELOR IN PARADISE:**

#### **"HOW THE AMERICANS LIVE."**

I discussed this movie<sup>545</sup> as part of my *Erste Staatsarbeit*. For that project, I showed how three movies starring Doris Day establish a link between the happy hypernormality of sitcoms such as *Leave it to Beaver* and the suburban anxiety portrayed in texts such as *American Beauty* or *Desperate Housewives*. The 1961 movie *Bachelor in Paradise* is

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<sup>542</sup> Lassell 2003: 19.

<sup>543</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

<sup>544</sup> Grainge 2002: 58.

<sup>545</sup> *Bachelor in Paradise*. USA 1961. Jack Arnold. MGM, MGM.

a text that cynically points to the changes in America between the 1940s and 1950s. A look at this movie is worthwhile because it was produced at the same time as the texts of the myth of progress analyzed before. This movie is a reaction to this myth and ridicules it.

Protagonist Adam J. Niles (Bob Hope) is a writer who has been traveling Europe for the past 15 years. He has not been to the USA during that time. Thus he had left the United States before the massive suburbanization took place. Niles earns his money by writing books about the habits of Europeans. His books have titles such as *How the Italians Live*. Because of financial problems he has to return to the United States. Sitting in his publisher's office he begins to realize how much America has changed in the 15 years of his absence. To make money, he is asked to publish a new book about Americans: *How the Americans Live*.

His publisher demands of him to go to a typical American community. Hope is told that "nowadays the average American lives in a planned community." In order to write the new book, Niles has to move into a new housing development: *Paradise Village*, a colorful Californian version of Levittown. As soon as Niles has moved into his modern, "California-Coral" colored open space-plan bungalow with floor-to-ceiling windows, which looks similar to the so-called *Eichler Houses* which were popular in postwar California, he begins to cynically mock the place. He hates the colors and the furniture. The only architectural structures that are visible in *Bachelor in Paradise* are identical, large bungalows in bold, garish colors, the sales office of the community, a drive-in restaurant, and the supermarket, which serves as a social meeting point. Everything we see looks prefabricated and mass-produced. The scale of *Paradise Village* is massive. The streets are very wide and the many driveways dominate the treeless residential areas. People are not walking – everybody is driving around in their cars. We learn that phase two of the development is already under construction. Niles is shown stumbling through this new, artificial world.

The entire setting is not the only aspect of suburban life that Niles, coming from a different America, observes critically. His role as a stranger in suburbia is used effectively to point to and criticize this new America. Niles, in order to write about how the new Americans live, begins to observe life in this foreign American geography from an outside perspective. He dictates the following text to a recorder while scenes from life in *Paradise Village* are shown:

How the Americans live. Chapter I. [...] throughout most of the civilized world a new day is born in a silence so profound ... But our minute counting, time saving America is blasted from sleep by the explosive scream of the alarm

clock radio which will largely explain the frenetic pace that jangles the nation's nerves throughout the day. An entire community prepares for the day in a seemingly well-regulated schedule that first dispatches the adult males and gets them safely into the arms of a safe traffic system: those marvels of engineering called freeways and have contributed so much to American progress. The next major movement of which the objective observer is aware comes after noon when the adult females are attending their basic cultural chores. Then they emerge to run errands, walk dogs, stroll babies, borrow and exchange and discuss. And during the period from sun-up to sundown the typical American community is completely matriarchal. Dominated entirely by females. A Nomen's land, more foreboding than ancient Sythia, home to the Amazons.

These first observations suggest the common critique that modern suburban way of life is about conformity. Life happens according to an unwritten schedule. This initial observation corresponds to the criticism put forward in novels such as *The Organization Man*<sup>546</sup> and by *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*.<sup>547</sup>

The scenes that are shown as Niles dictates this text to a recorder add to this cynical critique: Suburbia is depicted as a military camp, where everybody seems to be doing the same simultaneously. In the morning, all alarm clocks ring at the same time in every house. Then, a father is shown, rushing through the open-space living/dining/activity area, getting dressed for the office and sipping a cup of coffee at the same time. The mother hectically supplies the children with breakfast. This is not the 1950s nuclear family ideal of blissful togetherness. Then the father leaves exactly at the same time as all other fathers of the street lined with identical houses. They all get into their cars and drive away while the mothers stay.

Niles praises the "marvels of engineering" that have contributed so much to "American progress," using a rhetoric that could come from Walt Disney's *Magic Highways, USA*. But in combination with the scenes shown as he speaks, these observations turns out to be meant highly ironic: all the fathers (dressed in shades of grey) are stuck in a massive traffic jam. Here, this movie openly questions the postwar myth of American progress and suggests its failure. The master-planned suburban

That day, Niles continues his exploration of New America. He finds himself in the parking lot of the community's new supermarket, which is the only social meeting point. The dominance of the car is apparent. The style of architecture, which is shown here, is referred to by Liebs as "exaggerated modern."<sup>548</sup> A little girl has to teach Niles how to shop in a modern supermarket, a skill she has learned from her stay-at-home mother. The mass-produced identical products that line the shelves match the uniformity

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<sup>546</sup> White 1956.

<sup>547</sup> Wilson 1955.

<sup>548</sup> Liebs 1995: 64

of the suburban houses seen before. Again, Nile's unfamiliarity with this distinctive suburban setting and how to live in it is used to convey the discontinuity between the America he has known and New America.

This entire movie of 1961 makes fun of the kind of New America which was invoked at the same time by the *Monsanto House of the Future*, the *Carousel of Progress*, and *Magic Highways, USA*. Technology is everywhere, yet it often fails and creates hilarious situations – a dysfunctional garbage grinder in one house of the neighborhood grinds up an entire broomstick, while a washing machine explodes with foam. The technological progress of America is by no means celebrated here. The movie also illustrates the suburban gender roles that Friedan criticized in *Feminine Mystique*, 1963. It is shown that the educated women<sup>549</sup> of Paradise are bored and seek distraction. All the new appliances their houses are equipped with give them time to get bored. While the *Carousel of Progress* suggests that these suburban women can now join garden clubs and play golf to do something meaningful, this movie points to the fact that this is not enough. Niles does not commute to work as all other men do in Paradise. This sets him apart and he becomes the center of attention for these suburban women. Whereas *Bachelor in Paradise* is a comedy, the next movies from the 1970s are more serious about New America.

### **AIRPORT, THE TOWERING INFERNO, WESTWORLD:**

#### **“KIND OF A SHRINE TO ALL THE BULLSHIT IN THE WORLD.”**

A decade after *Bachelor in Paradise*, which still belongs to the postwar period, a much more pessimistic picture that lacks any irony is conveyed in three 1970s movies that focus on hallmarks of New America such as international airports, skyscrapers and computer-controlled theme park resorts.<sup>550</sup> In *Airport*,<sup>551</sup> a disturbing image of 1970s America is created. The movie paints a pessimistic picture on the contemporary society under the spell of modern technologies. With regard to the discontinuity narrative, it is significant that Old and New America are constantly contrasted to create tension. The movie consists of several plots that eventually intertwine. The focus is on the airport manager of Lincoln International, which is a major airport in desperate need of expansion. The airport's manager is trying to keep the runways of the crowded airport

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<sup>549</sup> In a conversation with one of the housewives of Paradise Village Niles learns that she was on a scholarship for Romance Languages before she met her husband and became a suburban mother. She admits missing “cultural stimulation” in suburbia.

<sup>550</sup> All these aspects of New America can be observed in Walt Disney's original vision for Disney World: while the urban center of EPCOT was anchored by a tall skyscraper, the project would also have contained an airport of the future. Walt Disney World itself of course is anchored by state-of-the-art theme parks.

<sup>551</sup> *Airport*. USA 1970. George Seaton. Universal Pictures.

open during a snowstorm while his wife files for divorce. Meanwhile a suicidal bomber intends to blow up a Boeing 707 bound to Rome.

The modern but dysfunctional world of the international airport is contrasted with an Old America in decline. There are several metaphors for Old America in this movie. One of them is a family home in Meadow Wood, a neighborhood in the proximity of Lincoln International. This residential neighborhood is located directly on the edge of the runways. The impact of the proximity to the booming airport is shown very dramatically: a family is sitting together at the dinner table and everybody is saying grace. This is one of several Norman-Rockwell moments in the movie. The interior of the dining room is furnished very traditionally and creates a contrast to the highly modern interiors the audience is exposed to in the scenes taking place within the airport. While the family is saying grace, an airplane flies over the house and causes the entire structure to tremble. Plates fall out of the china cabinet and everybody panics. This scene illustrates the clash between Old America, symbolized by a family in their home, and New America, an airplane bound to a distant location. Old America is shown in decline, whereas New America is pictured as powerful but dysfunctional. In another scene, we learn that Meadow Wood is threatened to be torn down in order to expand the airport which has become too small to handle all the traffic.

Another scene where Old America is depicted as being in decline is connected to a different plot of the movie. A male character of the movie is out of luck with his life. He has not lived up to the ideal of manhood and plans to board a Trans Global plane bound to Rome with a bomb in order to commit suicide so his wife can receive the money of a life insurance. His wife owns a diner in an urban neighborhood in Chicago. This diner is shown as a run down place, yet it has the charm of old American diners. Again, the place is presented in a Norman-Rockwell way. The wife takes care of the diner: she refills sugar dispensers with sugar she stores in an old can that has been molded at the top rim to form a spout. This detail of functional and frugal improvisation sets the diner and Old America apart from the computer-controlled technology of New America and the airport. Another important character of the movie is a female senior citizen<sup>552</sup> who has found ways to fly without paying for a ticket. She is eventually captured by the airport security and is forced to explain how and why she boarded without paying for a ticket. We learn that her husband has passed away and all her relatives have left the area.<sup>553</sup> In order to see them, she has to sneak on board without

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<sup>552</sup> She looks like the women in Norman Rockwell's *Saying Grace*.

<sup>553</sup> Cf. Douglas 2003: 77. Douglas shows that families in postwar America were often physically separated.

a ticket because she does not have much money. Here, shattered social connections are depicted as another critical aspect of New America.

To conclude, there are no working relationships between people in this movie. The old lady has to travel long distances to see her family. All other characters in the movie are in problematic relationships as well. The airport manager's wife wants a divorce after her husband refuses to come home to her due to the snowstorm's impact on the airport. The pilot of the flight to Rome has an affair with a stewardess – who is pregnant – and leaves his wife at the end of the movie. The reasons for these dysfunctional relationships that are characteristic for this movie all have to do with the airport, a metaphor of New America.

I would like to briefly discuss two more movies which also reflect the disillusionment that followed the three decades in which Americans "had been bombarded with the message that 'new is better.'"<sup>554</sup> *The Towering Inferno*<sup>555</sup> takes similar elements as *Airport* and tells the story of the tallest building in the world. It is an architectural marvel and boasts all the signifiers of the failed myth of progress: it has a shimmering glass façade, a panoramic elevator connects all floors, and on top of the building there is a helipad. This building could be the center of Disney's Progress City or be featured in *Magic Highways, USA*. Parts of the movie were shot at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in San Francisco. The lobby of this hotel contains sculptures designed by Charles Perry, who also worked on the sculpture "Solar Cantata" in Hilltop Mall discussed earlier.

The tower eventually catches fire on its official opening day because the developing company cut corners in the security of the building. Due to its sheer size, it is difficult to rescue all the people from the top floors of the tower, where the inauguration celebration takes place. Again the plot evolves around broken relationships and greedy businessmen. The architect of the tower (played by Paul Newman), who feels responsible for the disaster, tries to rescue as many people from the flames as possible. In the end the fire chief suggests to the devastated architect of the tower that "maybe they just ought to leave it the way it is. Kind of a shrine to all the bullshit in the world." This statement mirrors a sense of disillusionment about American progress, just like Archibald Mac Leish's observation that "people are disillusioned by what's going on today, and they are returning to history for ideas about how to get out

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<sup>554</sup> Liebs 1985: 64.

<sup>555</sup> *Towering Inferno*. USA 1974. John Guillermin. 20th Century Fox, 20th Century Fox.

of this mess.”<sup>556</sup> *The Towering Inferno* is exactly about “this mess” – or “bullshit” – and the implausibility of the American progress narrative.

*Westworld*<sup>557</sup> and *Futureworld*<sup>558</sup> also portray New America. But here, the focus is on the obsession with leisure. These movies critically comment on the entertainment industry, which has ballooned to become large enough to build gigantic computer-controlled resorts for affluent and self-indulgent Americans. *Westworld* takes place in a huge theme park called Delos, which contains three themed sections: West World (the American Wild West), Medieval World (Old Europe), and Roman World (ancient Rome). All these lands are staffed with robots that interact with the visitors. The totally controlled theme park however experiences technical difficulties and the robots begin to attack the visitors.

After the fatal events in Delos, the sequel *Futureworld* returns to the improved theme park. The press is invited to visit the park in order to report on the new Delos in a positive way. While West World has been closed, there is now a Future World besides the familiar Medieval and Roman World. The sequel adds the dystopian topic of genetic engineering to the plot. Just like in *Westworld*, technology fails and clones and robots run berserk. The effects are as devastating as before. In both movies, technology fails, corporations are presented as greedy and untruthful, and the larger part of Americans is presented as focused on leisure and amusement, while individuals struggle to survive in this New America.

It is critical to underline that in these movies from the 1970s, large corporations or organizations are depicted as powerful and greedy. These companies are in control and they create new technologies that have a negative impact on white middle-class American families. Their motivation is not the common good but profit. Comparing the economy that is presented in these movies with the economy that is evident in texts of the small-town narrative, it can be seen that Old America is about local businesses that are rooted in the community while New America is about large corporations that only want to increase their profit. The vital connection between commerce and community often is broken. The local businesses in texts of the small-town narrative are symbolized by shopkeepers sweeping the sidewalk in front of their stores while chatting with passing residents. On the other hand, this close relationship between business owners and the public is not existent in New America. Here, business owners are shown as sitting in vast and luxurious offices with no contact to everyday people. The huge

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<sup>556</sup> Guffey 2006: 18.

<sup>557</sup> *Westworld*. USA 1973. Michael Crichton. MGM.

<sup>558</sup> *Futureworld*. USA 1976. Richard T. Heffron. American International, MGM.

corporations in these movies are represented by huge buildings, resorts and airports and not by small grocery stores. The absence of smallness is characteristic for New America. This also becomes apparent in the next text I would like to discuss.

### **BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED:**

#### **"YOU DON'T LIKE ORNAMENT?"**

*Batteries Not Included*<sup>559</sup> is another striking paean of discontinuity. A clash between Old and New America is evident throughout the movie, which takes place in Manhattan in the mid-1980s. This decade saw the destruction of numerous historic houses and neighborhoods. In the movie, the residents of an 1890s townhouse in the East Village refuse to leave their home that is about to be demolished to make way for new and modern office towers. The developer sends a gang of thugs to the residents of the townhouse in order to terrorize them and to force them out. A pair of small flying saucers with the ability to fix everything that has been broken eventually appears and helps the residents to restore their house and to stay in the building.

A sense of discontinuity between the Old and the New America is established right at the beginning. The introduction credits of the movie are a collage of nostalgic black-and-white images of Manhattan and its white, middle-class residents, circa 1930-1950. These images represent happy memories and old, white, middle-class America: family dinners, kids playing, and strong communities. These memories are contrasted with a harsh 1980s present: there is urban decay and the demolition of the entire neighborhood is pending. The black-and-white photos gradually become moving images in color and reveal that the neighborhood is completely gutted. An old woman is going shopping to find the grocery store abandoned and destroyed. At the same time a sign is being put up by a developer of a new apartment tower: "Lacey Plaza: Elegance, Convenience, Security." In the background, the only inhabited building of the area is visible. It houses Riley's Cafe on the first floor.

This scene of total decay and demolition is once more contrasted with a black-and-white image of a happier time in which the café was opened. But this memory is only a framed photo hanging on the wall of the establishment. The scene continues inside of the café that could be the backdrop of a Norman-Rockwell painting. It is this quintessential American diner that is now destroyed by Carlos, the leader of the gang hired to frightening the last residents away. The owners of the café, Frank Riley and his wife Faye represent Old America. They want to stay. Even after Carlos has vandalized

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<sup>559</sup> *Batteries Not Included*. USA 1987. Matthew Robbins. Amblin Entertainment, Universal Pictures.

the café, Frank Riley relentlessly tries to clean up the floors. When he finds his beloved black-and-white photos and their frames lying smashed on the floor, he desperately puts away his broom. Later he says out loud: "Please, somebody, help us."

Meanwhile, other residents are equally connected to the place. They are not white middle-class Americans. They have all moved to this neighborhood after the white middle class has left for the suburbs. Today's residents of the neighborhood have diverse ethnic backgrounds. Mason Baylor, for example, is a bohemian artist living on the third floor. He tries to convince a representative of the preservation society to suggest the building for historic preservation: "Look at the molding! Look at the cornice! It's terracotta. You don't like ornament? All right. Let's step back here and look at the proportions. It's got style, it's got dignity." But the representative is as little interested in the old building as Baylor's girlfriend who finds the place "old and depressing." While Baylor loves the authenticity of the building, she states: "This is the 80s, Mason, nobody likes reality anymore." Another African American resident tries to fix a historic mosaic in the entry hall of the building. At the beginning of the movie he is sitting on the floor and is putting each piece of tile back in place. But he finally gives up. A third resident of the building is a woman with Hispanic background. This ethnic diversity is used here to show that white middle class Americans have left the inner cities and that, as a consequence, these urban districts have deteriorated.

The night after Carlos has destroyed the café, the residents are visited by two small flying saucers from outer space. The first thing that these visitors do is fixing the picture frame with the black and white photo of the café. Frank Riley is so desperate the next morning that he calls a home for senior citizens in New Jersey. As he is waiting for his call to be answered he recognizes the repaired frame. The other residents also realize that broken things have been fixed. Moreover, the entire café has been restored. It suddenly looks like new. During the rest of the movie the developer continues trying to get the residents out of the building. Ultimately, he fails. The flying objects restore the entire building. It becomes a celebrated piece of historical architecture and is saved. In the last scene, the building is in the middle of a modern skyline. Two gigantic towers dwarf it. This last shot does not exactly present a happy end. It is rather a powerful image of the discontinuity narrative that contrasts the dominant Old America of cohesive urban neighborhoods with the corporate New America of anonymous office towers. The last shot also contrasts the small-scale mastery and artistic quality of the town house to the mass-produced nature of the office towers. The *Los Angeles Times* critically commented:

Director Matthew Robbins and his co-writers have spun an enchanting fantasy rooted in harsh reality. Robbins has said that when he and his colleagues were developing their story he had 'no idea how closely we were addressing a real situation in Manhattan today.'<sup>560</sup>

The *Washington Post's* review of the movie concluded: "The disenfranchised must look to the stars for salvation. What a strange lesson to teach children – that they are basically helpless."<sup>561</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* also observed that the movie was "raising serious questions in a thoroughly entertaining way."<sup>562</sup> The serious questions and the salvation indicated here both have to do with Old and New America. The depiction of Old America happens with an obvious reference to the Norman-Rockwell universe of small-town innocence. In this depiction of Old America, local people run a diner. They feel connected to their neighborhood and they take care of the place. We witness a familiar small-town feeling in the middle of Manhattan. But in this case it is not an exclusively white community. The people living in this last house are very diverse.

On the other hand, profit-oriented, white, businessmen drive around in limousines and have no interest in the local neighborhoods. They stand for New America. Like in the movies from the 1970s discussed before, these businessmen are powerful white patriarchal capitalists who do not act in a caring way. These white men are violently taking over the control of an urban neighborhood, which has deteriorated after the white flight to the suburbs. In order to gain control, a gang of Hispanics is employed. This stresses the racial hierarchy that the movie shows. All members of society who do not conform to white patriarchal capitalism are either used or pushed back in order to replace the townhouses with office towers. The last shot powerfully reveals white supremacy in New America. Yet, the small victory of the residents in the historic townhouse questions these hierarchies. But at the same time it is suggested that white patriarchal capitalism in Old America, represented by Frank Riley and his café, is positive and has a positive effect on society. The diverse residents of the townhouse stand by his side. This healthy relation between society and local white patriarchal capitalism is also suggested in the movies I will discuss next.

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<sup>560</sup> Thomas 1987.

<sup>561</sup> Kempley 1987.

<sup>562</sup> Thomas 1987.

## **BACK TO THE FUTURE, JUMANJI AND PLEASANTVILLE:**

### **“IT’S NOT A CHURCH ANYMORE. IT’S A SPEEDY BURGER.”**

I initially discussed these movies to illustrate how they tell the myth of dominant small town. In this chapter I will focus on how the myth of a supposedly better past is conveyed by focusing on how the present is portrayed in these texts.

*Back to the Future* shows Hill Valley in 1955 as the picture-perfect dominant American small town. This works especially well because it is contrasted to Hill Valley of 1985. Before the audience is transported to the dominant small-town fantasy of Hill Valley in 1955, which is presented as the universal history of all American small towns, they are confronted with the unpleasant yet familiar reality of Hill Valley in 1985. The movie begins with Marty McFly visiting Emmet Brown, the man who invented the time traveling machine. When Marty notices that he is late for school, he hurries to get there. Now, the introduction of Hill Valley in 1985 begins. Visual clues are used to communicate that this community is not prospering. Outside Brown’s house, there are many trashcans that have not been emptied in a while. Marty skates down a vast and obnoxious suburban commercial strip. There is a Burger King drive-in restaurant in the environmental-look style, power poles, and many large billboards. There are almost no pedestrians and only cars. As Marty enters the run-down town center, the audience sees that the park in front of the abandoned courthouse has been transformed into a parking lot. Stores are out of business and there are signs of decay and dirt everywhere. Marty’s high school is covered in graffiti. There is a Toyota dealer. Later we learn that the best technology in 1985 is “Made in Japan,” not in the United States. The awnings of the stores are torn and stained. “Out of business” signs can be seen in several windows. There is an adult book and movie store, a loans office and a bonds office. An advertisement for a store in the new suburban mall can be seen on a bench near the parking lot. The movie theater is open 24 hours and shows an adult movie called “Orgy American Style.” Tickets are \$5. Small-town America’s innocence and prosperity have vanished. A few senior women from the preservation society collect money to save the old broken clock tower of the old Courthouse.

The population of Hill Valley in 1985 helps to depict the town center as an urban ghetto. While minorities are almost completely missing in texts that establish the dominant small town and that convey the small-town narrative in 1955, they are present in the depiction of Hill Valley as an urban ghetto in 1985. African Americans and Hispanics are seen passing by in the background. Moreover, the mayor of Hill Valley 1985 is an African American. It is Goldie Wilson, who worked at the diner in Hill Valley of 1955. In *Back to the Future*, ethnic minorities are shown in the midst of

urban decay and thus stand for the urban ghettos that were left behind after the white flight to suburbia. Suburbanization and social change are suggested as reason for the decline of Hill Valley. Before the audience is introduced to the picture-perfect past of Hill Valley 1955, which I described earlier, a depressing present is effectively depicted.

The McFly family still lives at Lyon Estates, Hill valley's oldest suburb that has become infamous by 1985. Here, the crisis of this particular family unfolds: as described before, we see the head of the family, Marty's father, watching 1950s sitcoms on TV while the mother is having Vodka with her dinner. The table is not set in a formal way. On the Formica table we see half-empty bottles of various condiments and some bags and cans, soft drinks and a calculator, suggesting financial problems. The McFly's 1950s ranch house is cluttered and the furniture looks dated. The state of the family, their chaotic and sad environment matches the deprivation of Hill Valley.

In a similar way, *Jumanji* depicts the same narrative of the decline of small-town America. Brantford of 1969 is initially portrayed as a thriving small town in New England. The community's wealth is connected to the local Parish Shoe Factory and its owner. The crisis of the Parish family causes the collapse of Brantford's economic and social stability. By 1995, the once safe and thriving community has become an urban ghetto. On the community's main street, that was earlier shown in its entire small-town splendor, homeless people gather around garbage cans on fire. The sidewalk has not been swept in years. Dirt and decay are visible everywhere. Windows are broken, the local shops are gone, and graffiti cover the iconic main-street buildings. There are liquor- and adult video stores. Later in the movie, it becomes apparent that Brantford's decline also has to do with the suburbanization of the area. Outside of the town there are familiar shopping strips (part of the movie takes place in a discount store called Sir Sav-A-Lot) and we learn that the Episcopal Church has been turned into a Speedy Burger.

A different strategy is used in *Pleasantville*.<sup>563</sup> While the previous movies suggest that the small towns depicted were once "real," this movie critically dismantles the small-town myth. In *Pleasantville*, the contrast of 1990s America with the dominant small town of Pleasantville in 1957 conveys a sense of discontinuity. But because Pleasantville is clearly depicted as a fictional place, this movie also questions this nostalgia. To make Pleasantville appear especially idyllic, modern America in the 1990s is presented as a hopeless place. At the beginning of the movie, its protagonist, David, is standing on a very large schoolyard filled with 1990s teenagers. The building

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<sup>563</sup> *Pleasantville*. USA 1998. Gary Ross. Larger Than Life Productions, New Line Cinema.

is a typical new high school built in post-suburbia. A series of shots show a teenage girl with a tongue piercing, school buses waiting on the parking lot, and groups of teenagers in casual clothes talking to each other. This introduction paints a complex picture of the 1990s youth and compares it to the stereotypical and simplified 1950s. David is instantaneously portrayed as being overwhelmed by this. To make things worse, the teenagers of the 1990s learn that "the chance of finding a good job will actually decrease by the time [they] graduate." Other lessons deal with HIV and global warming. David is shown with an alarmed expression on his face as he listens to these lessons. Later that day, he is back home in an equally harmful environment. He lives in a typical suburban development of identical houses). Three-car garages face the street. There are no trees. A police car drives along the way as if a crime has happened in this neighborhood. David escapes from this post-suburban reality to the fantasy of *Pleasantville*. He watches a scene of the TV show's father's arrival at home after a day at work. The wife greets him with a drink. Dinner is ready. This scene is contrasted with a telephone conversation David's mom is meanwhile having with her former husband, David's father:

No, no. That was not the deal, you know. You have custody first weekend of every month. This is the first weekend. No, I'm not gonna bail you out. I'm going out of town this weekend. ... La Costa. ... Barry, if I wanna have a mud bath with my new boyfriend this is really my business.

David turns up the volume to get immersed into the perfect family world of *Pleasantville*. This clash between Old America and New America continues as we are introduced to David's sister who is portrayed as a stereotypical Valley girl. New America is presented as a culture of selfish and vain individuals creating dysfunctional families. The absence of a father is again one reason for David's misery. His belief is that the ideal he sees as reruns on TV is real. But, as Stephanie Coontz argues, these TV shows were not documentaries and blur the fact that "the reality of [postwar families] was far more painful and complex than the situation-comedy reruns or the expurgated memories of the nostalgic would suggest."<sup>564</sup> This David has to experience himself as he enters the utopia of *Pleasantville*. He learns that it exists only because of repression and exclusion. This understanding makes him return, appreciating the 1990s more than before, after he has played his part in the necessary collapse of *Pleasantville* and the liberation of its citizens. The end suggests that both, post-suburbia and

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<sup>564</sup> Coontz 2000: 29.

Pleasantville, have their shortcomings and that an alternative to both is needed. A possible alternative is explored in the last movie I look at in this chapter.

### **MERMAIDS:**

#### **“THE WORLD HAS GOTTEN CRAZY!”**

The final movie I would like to include before moving on to Disney is *Mermaids*,<sup>565</sup> which is based on a novel by Patty Dann, and is set during the early 1960s. While all the texts discussed so far have male protagonists, this example is about women. The plot evolves around 15-year-old Charlotte Flax (Winona Ryder), who lives with her mother, Rachel Flax (Cher), and her little sister Kate (Nina Ricci). Rachel Flax is a restless and unconventional person, who moves whenever a relationship of hers does not work out. At the beginning, the family is moving from Oklahoma to Eastport, Massachusetts. While Kate is an avid swimmer, Charlotte seeks a sense to her life in Catholicism, despite the fact that the family is Jewish. She misses her father, whom she never met because her parents' relationship was very short-lived.

Eastport, Massachusetts, is portrayed as the stereotypical dominant small town of happy families, representing a vision of Old America. Rachel Flax, on the other hand, is a herald of New America. She establishes a contrast to the values of the traditional New England small town that she and her kids move to. In the movie, the small town is established as a setting by using the familiar clues I discussed earlier: there is a locally run grocery store with striped awnings, kids are riding their bikes, there is a courthouse with a green lawn, and people are greeting each other. Everything is well kept and impeccably clean. The local shoe-shop owner, Lou Landsky (Bob Hoskins), who will eventually end up in a relationship with Rachel, states after Rachel asked him why he was so inquisitive: “I am a small-town guy.”

Rachel Flax is immediately recognized as a stranger in this town: due to her fashionable appearance, the people on Eastport's main street stare at her. She could not be more different from the town's traditional mothers. The way she decorates the family home is also different from the conservatism of Eastport. Rachel likes mid-century Modern furniture in bold pastel colors. Other clues that set her apart are her values. A central lesson she teaches her daughters is that every woman should learn how to drive a car in order to be independent and to be able to drive away whenever she wants. The highway seems to be Rachel's best friend. At the beginning of the movie Charlotte recalls that they have been moving all her life and that she feels as if she had grown up on the Interstate. Her mother refuses to live up to the norms and expectations of Old

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<sup>565</sup> *Mermaids*. USA 1990. Richard Benjamin. Orion Pictures.

America. She does not cook dinner, but assembles fun finger food such as cheese ball pick-me-ups and marshmallow kebabs instead. This food is not eaten together at a table. Everybody is sitting somewhere else. Rachel does not adapt to traditional white, middle-class values and the family ideal. She does not believe in the myths of her era. As the movie is set in 1963, the year Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* was published, it also includes the assassination of John F. Kennedy. He is adored by Charlotte and is like a father figure to her, the "last grown-up" in America. Joe Peretti, Charlotte's boyfriend comments the murder in tears: "The world has gotten crazy." In the context of the movie this quote does not only relate to the assassination of Kennedy. It can be seen as a statement that sums up what the white, small-town folks of Eastport feel about New America, which is beginning to emerge right at their doorstep due to the arrival of Rachel Flax and her new take on gender conventions.

Flax' daughters, however, are longing for the structured, traditional life based on conventional gender roles. This becomes obvious in two situations in the movie which evolve around the concept of the family dinner. At one point, Charlotte runs away from home. She takes her mother's car and drives around aimlessly, while singing "Onward Christian Soldiers." The car eventually breaks down and Charlotte is forced to seek help at strangers. She rings at a traditional New England house nearby and finds the picture-perfect all-American family she has been dreaming of all her life. These people have sit-down meals in a formal dining room. There is a father who works, and a mother who cooks. Charlotte loves this family: "A real-life father actually living in the same house as his wife and kids. They're perfect. This is like television." This sitcom family and their home is exactly the opposite of how Charlotte has been brought up.

Another important scene which reveals the daughters' desire for conventional, sitcom-family life takes place when Rachel needs to leave town for the afternoon and gives her kids to the owner of the shoe shop, who is her current partner. He spends the afternoon with the kids and defrosts a dinner for them which ex-wife had frozen before her death. Later that day Rachel returns and sits down with them for dinner at a properly set table. Her daughters are constantly talking about what has happened during the day and all other different kinds of topics. Rachel asks in disbelief: "Who are these people?" Lou answers: "This is what happens when the family comes together. They talk." Later that night, Rachel starts a fight with Lou about his involvement. She does not understand her daughters' desire for Old-American family life.

The last scene shows her dancing in the kitchen with her two daughters while they are all setting the table to have dinner *together*. Finger-food and popcorn are on the menu. This happy end suggests that Rachel has partly given in to the conformist family ideal her daughters are longing for but at the same time this alternative family is doing it their unconventional way. This different family is as stable and harmonious in the end as any conventional sitcom family.

### 5.3 DISNEY'S DISCONTINUITY

A turn from progress to pastness can also be observed in Disneyland and other products of the Disney company. What sets Disneyland apart from these movies is the fact that it has been reinterpreted since its opening in 1955. Disneyland is significant because here, the dominant small town I analyzed in chapter three was part of the myth of American progress I looked at in chapter four. Disneyland originally was conceived as a natural outgrowth of suburban America and as an allegory of the American adventure from "cowboy to astronaut."<sup>566</sup> It was part of a larger trend in the American society which was "seemingly determined to come up with a happy past to match its own contented present"<sup>567</sup> and its optimistic future. Just like Colonial Williamsburg, Main Street, USA was designed as "the appropriate past for the desired future."<sup>568</sup> But what happened to Disneyland's myth of progress as it began to crumble?

Disneyland's "dynamic relationship [between past and future] has sagged ever since. In a curious reversal of fates, Frontierland flourished while Tomorrowland fades. [...] people have become increasingly skeptical of the urban future and wary of space-age wonders."<sup>569</sup> This skepticism started soon after Disneyland's opening. The theme park was not interpreted as a logic addition to, or a reflection of modern America. It turned out to be seen as the complete opposite of suburbia and New America. The perception of Disneyland changed: the park revealed the discontinuity that had become characteristic of postwar America like no other cultural text. It did not communicate America's continuity anymore. Ryan Poll argues that "the dominant small town" that Disneyland embodies is rather like an "island community at the border of modernity."<sup>570</sup> These "islands" offer a "temporary escape from the crisis."<sup>571</sup> He

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<sup>566</sup> Marling 1994: 118.

<sup>567</sup> Wallace 1996: 137.

<sup>568</sup> Wallace 1996: 15.

<sup>569</sup> Steiner 1998: 15.

<sup>570</sup> Poll 2012: 79.

observes that a “tourist industry [has] emerged that cast the small town as a lost national island that exists outside of modernity, and the only way to experience this national island is by means of a car trip.”<sup>572</sup> Disneyland increasingly was seen as a contrast to its presumably progressive suburban surroundings. The lands inside the park themselves disintegrated as well and did not tell one single narrative of American progress anymore. There emerged a new meaning of the park and the Disney Company consciously reacted: “the look and feel of futurism had to wither on the vine, and it turns out that the Disney company played its own role in that story.”<sup>573</sup>

### THE UNPREFERRED MEANING OF DISNEYLAND IN 1955

Professor of Psychology Ann Sloan Devlin concludes in her 2010 study on *What Americans Build and Why* that physical locations that encourage connections to other people are “more likely to be small than large.”<sup>574</sup> In 1955, Disneyland, despite being large in size, offered small-scale environments. In that, Disneyland was different from Levittown, sprawling Los Angeles, or the Pruitt Igoe complex. Disneyland was walkable. Buildings were reduced in scale in order to make them appear smaller. They were set close to the streets. The park immediately conveyed a sense of community like no other new place in the America of 1955. Devlin assumes that today,

Americans crave something they think they have lost, and that they aren’t sure how to retrieve it. What they seem to have lost is a sense of togetherness, and perhaps a sense of safety that comes from that connection. The absolute size of our nation has to do with that loss, as does the infrastructure of roads and highways, and the creation of suburbia.<sup>575</sup>

Back in 1955, Southern California’s suburbanites began to crave exactly the qualities Devlin identified in 2010. In an essay (1990) about Euro Disneyland, Ross Miller states that “Disney [in 1950s California] provided a displaced urban setting for a suburban generation threatened by the disorder and violence of the post-war city.” He assumes that Disney’s “formula owes its success, in large part, to the fact that [Disneyland] came as close as sprawling Los Angeles had ever come to the density and excitement of a real city.”<sup>576</sup> Disneyland revealed the absence of togetherness and community in everyday suburban life. This craving made Disneyland an instant success: after a drive

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<sup>571</sup> Kunstler 1993: 217.

<sup>572</sup> Poll 2012: 79.

<sup>573</sup> Ross 1999: 52f.

<sup>574</sup> Devlin 2010: 281.

<sup>575</sup> Devlin 2010: 281.

<sup>576</sup> Miller 1990: 94.

through the congested chaos of Los Angeles, suburbanites left behind their cars on the gigantic parking lot and entered a world where the pedestrian ruled and where things had a human scale. Here, togetherness and community could take place for a few happy hours. Here, America felt familiar and safe. Disneyland and Main Street, USA, became a much-needed “architecture of reassurance”<sup>577</sup> in a world of change.

The public began to perceive Disneyland and New America as opponents, but the dominant reading of Disneyland was not the corporate reading. As early as 1958, Disneyland was seen as a sharp contrast to the sprawling chaos of Greater Los Angeles. Journalists from San Francisco claimed that Disneyland was more real, permanent, and believable than the “neon ugliness” of the center-less wasteland that was the booming Los Angeles metropolitan region. Disneyland was identified as the “only good thing about the entire smog-bound metropolis”<sup>578</sup> of Los Angeles. This new interpretation of Disneyland, seeing it not as a consequent addition to the car-oriented Southern Californian landscape of American progress, but as the “antithesis to Los Angeles,”<sup>579</sup> achieved dominance in the 1960s and 1970s. The American progress narrative that the park told in 1955 was completely eradicated. It was more and more ignored and forgotten “that Disneyland had originally celebrated southern California and had capitalized on its freeways and cars and suburbanization.”<sup>580</sup> The perfectly organized pedestrian-oriented theme park created the clearest possible contrast to modern America and Greater Los Angeles with its millions of new tract houses, congested freeways and endless miles of anonymous commercial strips. The positive example of the theme park “led many to the conclusion, that the world ought to model itself as closely as possible after Disneyland.”<sup>581</sup> Disneyland was even elevated to being “the greatest piece of urban design in the United States”<sup>582</sup> by urban planner and developer James Rouse. Architect Charles Moore referred to Disneyland as “the most important single piece of construction in the West in the past several decades.” He called it a “public place” in the “featureless, private, floating world of Southern California.”<sup>583</sup> The Postmodern figurehead Robert Venturi later claimed that Disneyland was “nearer to what people really want than anything architects have ever given

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<sup>577</sup> Gennawey 2011: 128.

<sup>578</sup> Findlay 1992: 96.

<sup>579</sup> Findlay 1992: 96.

<sup>580</sup> Findlay 1992: 96f.

<sup>581</sup> Findlay 1992: 70.

<sup>582</sup> Ross 1999: 68.

<sup>583</sup> Keim 2001: 125f.

them.”<sup>584</sup> To Karal Ann Marling, “Main Street was the real national fantasyland, since Los Angeles and its environs in 1955 constituted the future that had already come to pass for small-town America.”<sup>585</sup>

## MAIN STREET, USA’S, EXEPTIONALISM

Among the lands of Disneyland, Main Street, USA, contributed the most to the new interpretation of the park. It is the only area that visitors are *forced* to pass, as it is the entrance *and* exit of the Magic Kingdom. Main Street, USA, itself has few rides or attractions. It contains mostly shops, restaurants and guest services. It is the oldest part of the park because it was the very first thing Walt Disney and his designers envisioned, as was Frontierland.<sup>586</sup> Main Street, USA, is the first and the last impression visitors have of the park. It is the joint between the outside world and the inside of Disneyland. Here, the contrast between the featureless modern suburban sprawl and the theme park is the strongest as visitors enter Main Street, USA, just some minutes after they found their way to Disneyland through the “neon ugliness” of Los Angeles that was and is the everyday reality in Southern California in 1955 and today. “In Disneyland, the present – suburban reality 1955 style – was abandoned in the parking lot, along with the family car.”<sup>587</sup>

Disney and his designers did not intend this effect when the park was planned. They considered the park to be a logical extension of America’s present:

Disneyland did not start out to become a showcase for innovative urban design and planning policies, but this is exactly what happened. Not only did Disneyland change the public’s perception of what an amusement park could be. Walt’s innovations have forever changed the public’s expectations for the public realm and how we design these spaces.<sup>588</sup>

Disneyland “soothe[d] and reassure[d] the visitor [...] in ways the designers began to understand only after the dust had settled and they could look down from their drafting tables in City Hall and watch the happy crowds streaming down Main Street towards the castle.”<sup>589</sup> Disney’s designers did not intentionally plan this soothing and reassuring

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<sup>584</sup> Steiner 1998: 8.

<sup>585</sup> Marlin 1994: 114.

<sup>586</sup> Marling 1997: 52. One of the first intern memos for Disneyland “sets forth a detailed description of Main Street and Frontierland districts later built in Anaheim in 1955. The railroad station, the Town Hall, the streetcars, a stagecoach, and a list of potential stores are all enumerated.” The rest of the park “will be worked out later.”

<sup>587</sup> Marling 1994: 112.

<sup>588</sup> Gennawey 2011: 123.

<sup>589</sup> Marling 1997: 79.

quality of Main Street, USA. This effect occurred as the rootless suburban public, used to strip malls and parking lots, interacted with the unique human scale places designed by Disney in sprawling Orange County. On Main Street

the colors were lifted or plussed over the years, made brighter and cheerier and more varied – more colors, new colors – in keeping with an emerging theory of why Americans liked the architecture of the Gay Nineties so much. It was optimism, Walt’s creative successors thought as they built more Main Streets in Florida, in Tokyo, in France. Anyone could feel the optimism in the variety and sheer exuberant quantity of decorative details lavished on every surface. It was as comforting as a Victorian parlor stuffed with treasures. As luscious as a birthday cake smothered in pink frosting and silver sugar. On Main Street, life suddenly seemed pleasant, manageable and, well – awfully nice. Things made sense there.<sup>590</sup>

John Hench, a Disney designer, explained that the Victorian era was “probably one of the great optimistic periods of the world, where we thought progress was great and we all knew where we were going.”<sup>591</sup> It is only logical that the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia is about this period of American history, where progress was considered positive and where white Americans were less skeptical about where they would be going in the future.

## PASTNESS TRUMPS PROGRESS

Disneyland’s presence in modern postwar America powerfully dismantled the myth of progress. It was on Main Street, USA, and in Frontierland that white nostalgia for a dominant lost past was created. The pastness of Main Street, USA, was more convincing and comforting than the future of Tomorrowland and the present of Los Angeles. Disneyland presented Americans with a scenario of America’s past, present, and future. Visitors passed the gate and left the present suburban and car-centered sprawl behind. They entered the park through the nostalgia of Main Street, USA. Frontierland<sup>592</sup> also depicted an idealized and charming past, as did Adventureland (Africa, South America) and Fantasyland (Europe.) Then, visitors were confronted with the glass-and-concrete future of space-age America in Tomorrowland, which was almost like contemporary Los Angeles.<sup>593</sup> Tomorrowland was the only land that did not blend with the rest of the park. Visitors later had to leave the park through the charming

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<sup>590</sup> Marling 1997: 82.

<sup>591</sup> Wallace 1996: 137.

<sup>592</sup> For a detailed discussion of Frontierland’s impact see Steiner 1998.

<sup>593</sup> Marling 1997: 56. “The Capitol [Records] Tower (1954-1955) looked just like Disney’s Tomorrowland – or the mooring mast for a spacecraft sightseeing over L.A.”

world of Main Street, USA again to find themselves back in the harsh reality of contemporary postwar Southern California with its neon signs, parking lots and congested freeways. After a day in Disneyland, visitors indeed had left “today,” they had seen “yesterday” and a vision of “tomorrow,” just as the commemorative inscription at the entrance to the park had promised earlier.

Steiner observes that the “dialectic between the Magic Kingdom” and the confusing world around it “mirrors dynamic contrasts within the park itself.” He illustrates that “Disneyland’s blueprint is powered by a lively dialectic of counterbalancing ideals.”<sup>594</sup> This lively dialectic was intended to create one single chronologic story of American progress. It caused dramatic and highly emotional experiences of contrasts that communicated an unintended message to those who visited Disneyland: the small-town past is more reassuring than the suburban present and space-age future. Millions of Americans made this experience. Millions visited Walt Disney’s vision of the small-town past that was not meant to be a showcase for the future. But to millions of white Americans, Disney’s idealized Main Street, USA became the mental concept for a better, reassuring, simple, All-American small-town past; a blueprint for what they expected from good civic surroundings. It became the small town they remember. Americans rediscovered their “history not through books or college courses, but from visits to themed environments that simulate the past;”<sup>595</sup> in places like Disneyland that generated an idealized dominant past. Disneyland itself was structurally part of the car-oriented environment of Greater Los Angeles, but this only strengthened its new meaning to white, middle-class Americans: the past is better than the future or present.

## DISNEYLAND RE-INTERPRETS DISNEYLAND

It is significant that Walt Disney did not intend this reception of Disneyland. Yet, Walt Disney seemingly changed his mind about the role of Disneyland in Southern California and the USA in the post-opening years as well: in a TV segment of Disneyland’s 10th anniversary in 1965, Disney stated concernedly: “It is traditional at every Disneyland celebration to have a parade down Main Street. And there aren’t many main streets left where you can see a parade.”<sup>596</sup> Ten years after the opening of Disneyland, which originally celebrated America’s suburbanization, this statement on America’s discontinuity is surprising. Disney’s observation implies that, as a consequence of the

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<sup>594</sup> Steiner 1998: 13f.

<sup>595</sup> Gottdiener 1997: 147.

<sup>596</sup> “Cjs83172” 2013.

suburbanization of the United States, not many main streets are left where parades can take place. Only ten years after the opening of Disneyland and Disney's original praise of suburbanization and freeways as part of America's inevitable journey of progress, this explicit statement of nostalgia is a sign for an ideological turn in a time when monotonous strip malls had replaced many main streets all over the United States. In 1965, Walt Disney was explicitly expressing critique on contemporary America and Southern California.

The development of Anaheim since the opening of Disneyland may have to do with this re-evaluation of suburbanization, too. Walt Disney hated what was happening outside his park in the once quiet town of Anaheim. Because of Disneyland, it had turned into one of the fastest growing cities in the United States. Tacky and poorly themed motels and drive-in restaurants had replaced former orange groves. Harbor Boulevard and West Way had experienced substantial commercial growth and motels and restaurants had sprung up everywhere. The "litter of gas stations, ineptly 'themed' motels, and fast-food outlets that sprang up along Harbor Boulevard were an affront to [Disney's] sense of a guest's ideal prelude to [Main Street, USA,] at Disneyland." He referred to it as a "second rate Las Vegas."<sup>597</sup>

But it was exactly this fast-food prelude that added to Disneyland's success: If Southern California had been as well planned and reassuring as Disneyland, who would have visited the theme park? There would be no Disneyland without a modern and suburban New America, which was increasingly interpreted as a "mess."<sup>598</sup> The more main streets in the United States were abandoned in favor of new, climate-controlled shopping malls and convenient commercial strips, the more successful and meaningful Disneyland got. Walt Disney probably never realized this connection: to the American public, Disneyland had turned into the exact opposite of Southern California and large parts of the United States and this is central to its success and the emotions people have for this place.

After Walt Disney's death and by 1984, the time that Tomorrowland 1955 optimistically pictured, Disney marketing material finally acknowledged this development. A brochure for Disneyland self-evidently explained that "it was only natural to Walt Disney to want to create a place where those who were raised under a blanket of smog, in tract homes, near noisy freeways, might see how life in Midwest America was."<sup>599</sup> Nothing could be farther away from the truth and Disneyland's

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<sup>597</sup> Gennawey 2011: 267.

<sup>598</sup> Guffey 2006: 18.

<sup>599</sup> Findlay 1992: 97.

original intention. Everything that was considered as progress in the 1950s by Walt Disney (tract houses in subdivisions, malls and freeways) now was identified as a suburban dystopia, from which people needed spiritual and physical relief in form of a visit to Disneyland. Main Street, USA, was uplifted to being the “counterpoise to ‘the rootless society and ugliness’ of Los Angeles.”<sup>600</sup> Findlay observes that it was becoming the norm to see Disneyland not anymore as the logical outgrowth of Los Angeles but as its antidote.<sup>601</sup> For the meaning of Disneyland, it is essential to stress that “only in retrospect [it was] decided that [Disney] had conceived Disneyland in reaction against Los Angeles”<sup>602</sup> and modern suburban sprawl.

### **EPCOT CENTER: “A HOPE FOR A BETTER FUTURE”<sup>603</sup>**

Awareness for the growing skepticism concerning progress and change becomes also obvious in Epcot Center, a theme park that opened in 1982 as an addition to Walt Disney World, Florida. Epcot Center can be considered the last attempt of the Walt Disney Company to spark the kind of postwar enthusiasm for the future. Host of the TV opening special Danny Kaye said the park was “covering thousands of years of progress.” Card Walker, a top executive of the company, stated on the occasion of the opening of Epcot Center that the new park was “an enormous tribute to American ingenuity, productivity and technology.” To him, it was “another demonstration [...] of what can be done in America today with free enterprise.” This is the same rhetoric that was used on the opening of Disneyland in 1955. Yet, Walker also said that the park’s mission was to “instill in our guests a new sense of belief and pride in mankind’s abilities to shape the world that offers real hope to people everywhere in the world.” The “new sense of believe” that the park was intended to spread can be seen as nothing less than an attempt to revive the postwar myth of progress that had collapsed completely by 1982 and that had given way to a combination of crisis and cynicism.

The Disney Company tried to translate as much of Disney’s original vision of a community of the future into a theme park. Unlike Disneyland, Epcot Center contrasts only two lands. Future World and World Showcase. Future World forms the entrance area and is anchored by a giant sphere called Spaceship Earth, presented by Bell System. Spaceship Earth took its visitors on a journey of mankind’s advancements in

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<sup>600</sup> Findlay 1992: 97.

<sup>601</sup> Findlay 1992: 97.

<sup>602</sup> Findlay 1992: 105.

<sup>603</sup> Epcot Center was referred to as a “hope for a better future” in the opening announcement of the park which was heard each morning.

communication: from the first drawings on cave walls to communication from earth to a space shuttle. The theme song of this attraction set the tone for Future World:

Tomorrow's Child!  
Gathering gifts from our past.  
Shaping a world that will last.  
Holding the spark as we embark on a great journey.  
Together we are learning to reach for hope and desire.  
Building a world to inspire.  
Tomorrow's Child!  
Shining a brand new way for the Future World is born today.  
Tomorrow's Child!  
Lighting the path as we are going  
Tomorrow's Child!  
Seeing that knowledge keeps growing.  
Searching through time,  
Longing to find access to guide us  
And dreams to unite us.  
Reaching to hope and desire.  
Building a world to inspire.  
Tomorrow's Child!  
Shining a brand new way.  
For the Future World is born today.

The welcome message that was heard in the park during the first years of the its operation proclaimed a similarly optimistic message:

Walt Disney was a dreamer and a doer, a man who cared about the world and its problems. He believed that people could develop solutions to problems if equipped with information, technology, and opportunity. Epcot Center was created to showcase prototype concepts and technologies that may sometime serve people everywhere. This is the essence of EPCOT Center: a collective endeavor by people for people, in the hope for a better world. [...] Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>604</sup>

This was followed by EPCOT'S anthem:

A new creation.  
It's all around you.  
A celebration.  
A celebration.  
A new sensation.  
It will astound you.  
A celebration.  
A celebration.  
An inspiration.  
A fascination.  
A celebration.

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<sup>604</sup> Opening announcement of Epcot Center in the 1980s.

A celebration.  
A better nation.  
Imagination.  
Celebrate! As we create a new tomorrow.  
Celebrate! A dream is made, a new tomorrow.  
The world awaits! Celebrates!  
A new creation. [...]  
We've just begun to dream!<sup>605</sup>

These lyrics underline the park's intention to reassure its visitors. The postwar optimism and fascination with the future had been replaced by uncertainty and anxiety by 1982. The song acknowledges the failure of the progress narrative because if there is "hope for a better world" America's progress is anything but inevitable. The world still "awaits" a "new tomorrow" and a "better nation." To reassure visitors to Epcot Center Disney partnered with America's largest companies to tell stories of how progress and technology can solve problems.

Future World is a collection of modern pavilions sponsored by American companies, focused on themes like energy, communication, or transport: *Universe of Energy*, sponsored by Exxon, took its 1982-visitors on a journey of the history of fossil fuels. The official Epcot guidebook remarks, "even though the special effects are dazzling, we never lose sight of the story – how the oil, coal, and natural gas so important to our way of life came into being."<sup>606</sup> While the attraction does not deal with the oil crisis of the 1970s, it still hints at the fact that natural resources might be limited and therefore also includes a "true and optimistic demonstration of how sun power can be tapped."<sup>607</sup> It is also suggested that natural resources have been consumed "prodigally." So, "as we leave" the attraction, "although we know the challenges are great, our spirits are lifted at the potentials and options."<sup>608</sup>

*Horizons*, sponsored by General Electric, is a revamped version as the *Carousel of Progress* of 1964 with the same message. *Horizons* was also sponsored by GE. Before looking at the future, the visitors see collage-like ideas of future visions from the past, including those of Jules Verne. "It's always fun looking back at tomorrow. [...] There's the grand old man himself, Jules Verne. This is the way a moon shot looked to him back in the late 1800s. Old Uncle Jules may not have all of the answers. But he had the right idea." The song "Great, Big, Beautiful Tomorrow," scenes of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and Walt Disney's *Magic Highways, USA* are heard and seen. This future

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<sup>605</sup> Ironically, Disney's town on Walt Disney World property was named Celebration two decades later.

<sup>606</sup> Beard 1982: 36.

<sup>607</sup> Beard 1982: 37.

<sup>608</sup> Beard 1982: 37.

of the 1950s is now considered “a bit far out” by the narrator of the 1982 attraction. As we leave these past visions behind, we learn that while “people have always dreamt of the future, we sure do.” But in 1982, the “only difference is that today, with what we know, and what we are learning to do, we really can bring out dreams to life. It takes a lot of work. But the truth is: if we can dream it we can do it. Tomorrow’s horizons are here today!”

Then, the future as imagined by GE and Disney in 1982 unfolds: “the world of liquid space,” the DNA chain, sun energy, “colonies in space, habitats where people live and work. This is just a dream. We are at the threshold now.” But before all this becomes too complex, the story now “focuses less on technology than on a historically, enduring social unit: the family.”<sup>609</sup> As in the *Carousel of Progress*, the future takes place in “pretty, white cities – Anglo middle-class technological utopias.”<sup>610</sup> The different members of a “youthful nuclear family”<sup>611</sup> are shown in Nova City, the city of the future, Sea Castle, an underwater city, Mesa Verde, “one of those desert farms,” and Brava Centauri, a space colony, “the New Frontier. Our son and his family wouldn’t live anywhere else.” The attraction highlights how the lives of white, middle-class Americans “can be enhanced by the future technology.”<sup>612</sup> Fjellman rightfully notices that this is “a world without much fashion design” as everybody is wearing the same jumpsuits and has the same “Anglo hairdos.”<sup>613</sup> The attraction’s signature song has these lyrics:

If we can dream it, then we can do it.  
Yes we can! Yes we can!  
Have you ever looked beyond today into the future?  
Picturing a world we’ve yet to see?  
The wonder of finding new ways  
that lead to the promise of brighter days.  
Have you ever dreamed the dream of the children?  
Just imagine the magic their eyes can see.  
Horizons are shining anew.  
Horizons: where dreams do come true.  
And it will be a future built with care for you and me.  
A world we all can share  
For today holds the challenge to make this world a better place to be.  
New horizons for you and for me.

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<sup>609</sup> Beard 1982: 40.

<sup>610</sup> Fjellman 1992: 323.

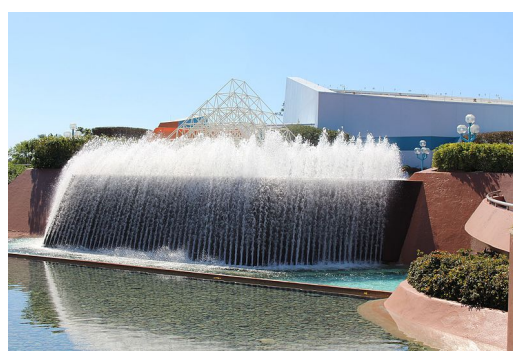
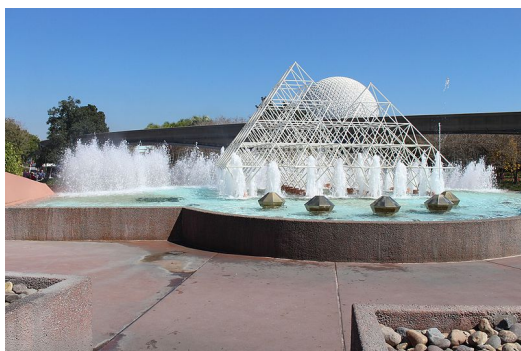
<sup>611</sup> Fjellman 1992: 324.

<sup>612</sup> Beard 1982: 40.

<sup>613</sup> Fjellman 1992: 325.

Like “We have just begun to dream,” this song, too, acknowledges white, middle- class anxieties. This song is much less euphoric than *There’s a great, big, beautiful tomorrow* which was part of the *Carousel of Progress* from 1964. In 1982, there only “the promise of brighter days” is left and there is the “the challenge to make this world a better place to be.” Other attractions of this part of Epcot Center in 1982 were *World of Motion*, sponsored by General Motors, *The Land*, sponsored by Kraft, and *Journey into Imagination*, sponsored by Kodak. The future depicted in these attractions of 1982 does not differ much from what we have already seen in *Magic Highways*, 1958, and the *Carousel of Progress*, 1964.

In November 1982, German *GEO Magazine* claimed that this particular kind of total optimism was only possible because the real problems were simply not included in Disney’s vision of the future. Disney did not include acid rain, the death of the family farm, nuclear accidents, the failures of NASA missions, and pollution in the future presented at EPCOT. Instead, Disney partnered with those companies that were basically responsible for these problems and attempted to correct public anxieties.<sup>614</sup> Fjellman comes to the same conclusion. Disney and the attractions’ sponsors did not “lay the responsibility at the doorstep of the corporations, banks, and industries that have led the way [...]. Instead the culprit is abstracted and generalized to technological man – all of us (including, I suppose, women.)”<sup>615</sup> The earth and the universe were presented as endless sources of resources and as new frontiers to encounter. Disney and corporate America once more created a naïve vision of a New America in which technology has solved all problems.



**Left: Figure 79.** Photo courtesy Michael Riviera, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fountain\\_near\\_Journey\\_into\\_Imagination\\_2.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fountain_near_Journey_into_Imagination_2.jpg). Accessed July 6, 2018.

**Right: Figure 80.** Photo courtesy Michael Riviera, retrieved from Wikimedia Commons: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fountain\\_near\\_Journey\\_into\\_Imagination.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fountain_near_Journey_into_Imagination.jpg). Accessed July 6, 2018. Future World at Epcot Center. The fountains, artwork and architecture resemble Hilltop Mall discussed in chapter two.

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<sup>614</sup> Cf. Hartmann 1982.

<sup>615</sup> Fjellman 1992: 331.

The Future World section of the park (see Figures 79 and 80) opens towards a large lagoon, which is called World Showcase. This area has a completely different atmosphere than Future World. The contrast between the two areas could not be greater. World Showcase is about the past. Nothing looks futuristic any more. Here, the American Pavilion, sponsored by Coca Cola and American Express, is located among other picturesque enclaves of soothing nostalgia. At “once stately and inviting [the American pavilion] makes the visitor feel at home.”<sup>616</sup> The miniature versions of Paris, “one of the great cities in the world for walking,”<sup>617</sup> Venice with its “wealth of details,”<sup>618</sup> or Germany, where visitors can “stroll over cobblestone to the center of the town *platz*”<sup>619</sup> form the greatest possible contrast to the vast concrete Future World of technology and modern architecture. It is striking how the focus of World Showcase is on walking, public spaces and smallness whereas the focus of Future World is on high-speed mass-transportation and futuristic mega-structures. The opposition of the new world and the old world at Epcot Center (see Figures 81 and 82) suggests an unpreferred meaning of the park.



**Left: Figure 81.** The Monorail station outside Epcot Center. Photo courtesy “BestofWDW,” retrieved from Wikimedia Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monorail\\_Station,\\_Epcot\\_\(2732354634\).jpg?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monorail_Station,_Epcot_(2732354634).jpg?uselang=de).

Accessed July 6, 2018.

**Right: Figure 82.** The American Adventure at World Showcase. Photo courtesy “Elizabeth,” retrieved from Wikimedia Commons:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Epcot-Colonial\\_America\\_\(2433488089\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Epcot-Colonial_America_(2433488089).jpg). Accessed July 6, 2018. Notice the contrast between the modernist architecture of Future World and the nostalgia of World Showcase.

## THE UNPREFERRED MEANING OF EPCOT CENTER

In Epcot Center Disney repeated the same internal dialectic that is the key characteristic of Disneyland: a clash of new and old that reveals discontinuity. Disney opposed a nostalgic, walkable area composed of whimsical, very familiar small-scale buildings based on dominant urban and national narratives with a vast futuristic area made up of

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<sup>616</sup> Beard 1982: 79.

<sup>617</sup> Beard 1982: 90

<sup>618</sup> Beard 1982: 104.

<sup>619</sup> Beard 1982: 94.

buildings “in the futurist style of modernism.”<sup>620</sup> Disney opposed huge, massive, and futuristic buildings set in landscaped areas in Future World and the charming imperfections of the small-scale World Showcase pavilions, where cracks in crooked walls were painstakingly recreated to achieve an *authentic* Old-World flair and where street cafés and faux cobblestone create a vibrant urban ambience. While this contrast must be seen as an attempt to convey the progress narrative, it does the opposite.

This clash of the new world and the old world can be interpreted as an unintended narrative of discontinuity. Like in Disneyland, visitors are confronted with a colossal concrete future of corporate control. This new world is located just steps away from the old world of an appealing and human-scale landscape of charming vistas and cozy walkways that imitates individual, organic, and memorable urban spaces. While Future World feels like a well-kept master-planned suburban office park, World Showcase is a place to call home. Against its original intention, Epcot Center did contribute to the general discomfort with New America, and to the growing appreciation for Old America. It did not succeed in conveying a “world of tomorrow [...] presented in a gala atmosphere that transforms formidable technology into something we can understand and look forward to.”<sup>621</sup> A few years after the 1982 opening of Epcot, Disney already started working on the creation of Euro Disneyland. In doing so, a radical new approach in depicting the future was chosen.

## EURO DISNEY

The design and construction of Euro Disneyland was Disney’s central project in the 1980s. Euro Disney was the key project of Disney’s international expansion. A new management under the guidance of baby boomer Michael Eisner pushed the plans of a European resort forward, which first had come up in the bicentennial year of 1976. Locations throughout Europe were being analyzed by 1983. Marne-la-Vallée Chessy, east of Paris, was finally chosen because of its central location and excellent highway and railroad connections. It was decided to buy 5000 acres of land east of Paris as early as 1984. It was also immediately decided to create an improved Magic Kingdom. Planning for the new park and the adjacent resort complex began in the mid 1980s, only a few years after the opening of Epcot Center. Construction of Euro Disney began in August 1988.

Euro Disney mirrors Reagan’s America of the 1980s and it was created to present a specific image of America to a European audience even before the end of

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<sup>620</sup> Fjellman 1992: 320.

<sup>621</sup> Beard 1982: 23.

the Cold War. Ross Miller argues in an article titled *Euro Disney and the Image of America* (1990) that the architecture of Euro Disney Resort Paris was intended to communicate a refined and noble image of America to impress Europeans, just as Daniel Burnham's plans to rebuild Chicago after the Great Fire were meant to impress visitors from the old world.<sup>622</sup> For the Disney Company, creating a park in Europe was an exceptional task as they regarded the European audience different, that is, more educated and sophisticated, than the American audience.<sup>623</sup> Thus, several aspects of Europe's Disneyland are unique and different from the company's other parks. Euro Disney represents the company's largest construction project ever – with regard to the facilities operated on opening day. The company consciously intended to “model the development of EDL<sup>624</sup> after Walt Disney World.”<sup>625</sup> The Walt Disney Company intended to create a resort destination with similar amenities as those of Walt Disney World. The European resort boasted more than 5200 hotel rooms in six themed hotels and a bungalow park on opening day April 12, 1992. Additionally, Euro Disney opened with a convention center, a nighttime entertainment center, a major railroad station, a golf course and clubhouse, as well all necessary distribution and service facilities, and housing estates for some of its 12.000 employees. This dwarfs Walt Disney World's capacity on its 1971 opening (only 2000 hotel rooms) and of course Disneyland's capacity on its 1955 opening (zero hotel rooms.) For the first time, Disney operated a complete resort destination built from scratch with plenty of hotel capacity and additional recreation and entertainment facilities. Disney had learned from past mistakes and wanted to do things right, and big, in Europe. At Disney World, 40.000 hotel rooms were constructed after the park's opening and Anaheim had seen a similar tendency since the opening of Disneyland. In Europe, Disney wanted to intimidate off-site hotel developments by building enough capacity on its own. The master plan of Euro Disney Resort Paris is a concentrated version of Walt Disney World.

## NO TOMORROW

From the very beginning, it was at no time considered to continue the idea of a conventional futuristic Tomorrowland. The Paris theme park instead would contain a land called *Discoveryland*. Tim Delaney, the designer most involved with Discoveryland, states that “originally, we were in a time fascinated by what the future

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<sup>622</sup> Cf. Miller 1990: 93.

<sup>623</sup> Cf. *Connaissance des Art Euro Disney* 1992: 56.

<sup>624</sup> EDL = Euro Disneyland.

<sup>625</sup> Eisner 1998: 282.

might become; now [in the mid- to late 1980s], the focus is to create fantasy about the future."<sup>626</sup> This change of mind about the future at Disney is a significant example for the American pursuit of pastness. In spite of copying any existing Tomorrowland, Disney designers turned their attention away from contemporary to *past* visions of the future: visions from the 1890s and 1900s, the optimistic period of Main Street, USA. In using past visions of the future, the new future became timeless and more comforting. To emphasize this timeless nature of the future, the entire land was renamed "Discoveryland," stressing that this area was not about tomorrow anymore, but about discoveries from past visionaries and *their* visions of tomorrow (see Figure 83).

Discoveryland is based on the fun visitors experience when witnessing Jules Verne's and others' naïve and optimistic ideas of space travel or time machines while being aware that this future has not become a reality. To the visitors of Discoveryland, it is amusing to see yesterday's visions of the future because we know today that these naïve and optimistic visions have not come true. Basically, Discoveryland relies on our contemporary disappointment, disbelief and skepticism in the future. Discoveryland ultimately is a pessimistic place because it shows that the utopian future dreamed of by optimists of the past is a future that has never unfolded. Today's visitors know better than those visionaries from the past to whom this land is dedicated. Promotional texts claim that Discoveryland honors these visionaries. But in reality, fun is made of their blind optimism. Discoveryland is the ultimate expression of the pursuit of pastness and the discontinuity narrative. It mirrors society's pessimism and the failed progress narrative. Euro Disneyland's Discoveryland

was intended to do three things: create an atmosphere of timeless beauty that would not be so quickly outdated, pay special tribute to the contributions of European visionaries, whose dreams of the future have shaped and enriched the present; and reassure visitors with the promise of an even brighter tomorrow.<sup>627</sup>

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<sup>626</sup> Hench 2008: 13.

<sup>627</sup> Lainsbury 2000: 73.



**Figure 83.** Discoveryland at Disneyland Paris. Here, the past's vision of the future is created. Top: a Jules-Vernes inspired Space Mountain and the Nautilus known from *20.000 Leagues Under the Sea*. 2010 photo by the author.

The last aim of Discoveryland is the one the least evident. Discoveryland was the reaction to a continuing disbelief in the future and the expression of a pursuit of pastness not only in the United States but also in Europe. Discoveryland was a necessary and logical step for the Disney Company:

confronted with frightening dystopias; which more and more frequently shaped popular views of the future from the past twenty years, park officials found themselves hard pressed to present 'a future that you'd actually want to visit.'<sup>628</sup>

Disney designers did even more to make Discoveryland as comforting and reassuring as the rest of the park. They began to introduce visitors to Discoveryland's theme right on Main Street, USA. In Europe, they linked two parts of the park that used to be opposites in their previous parks. While 1955's Tomorrowland stood for a "progressively better and better future,"<sup>629</sup> 1955's Main Street, USA, became a reminder of America's past. In Europe, these two opposite "lands" were fused. To strengthen this intention, a shopping arcade in Main Street, USA, was designed to link this part of the park with Discoveryland. These arcades were created to enable

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<sup>628</sup> Guffey 2006: 23.

<sup>629</sup> Guffey 2006: 24.

weather-independent shopping in Central Europe's rather harsh climate. Disney Imagineers named the passage Discovery Arcade and filled it with – from a turn of the century-perspective – futuristic replicas and models of inventions. There are glass showcases that contain detailed models of inventions and short texts. A special feature of the arcade is numerous posters depicting American cities in the future (1992-2000.) These posters show naïve and charming visions of the future. They as well amuse the visitors because they know better about New York City in the Year 2000. Giant steamships, fantastic flying objects and skyscrapers appear on these posters. People happily interact with these fantastic surroundings. The posters are carefully decorated with traditional fonts and ornaments (see Figure 84). Their inspiration were works of the French artist Albert Robida (1848-1926) and the *Popular Mechanics* magazine, which premiered in 1902.<sup>630</sup>

Very early in the design process of Euro Disneyland, there were even plans to link Main Street, USA, and Discoveryland with a futuristic turn-of-the-century elevated train similar to Chicago's EL. These considerations stress a complete change of Disney's attitude towards the future and the strong connection between Main Street, USA and Discoveryland. Disney took the most popular and successful of the park's lands and paired it with the most unsuccessful and unpopular. Euro Disney's future melts "more seamlessly with the nostalgia of neighboring lands."<sup>631</sup>

The concept of Discoveryland was so successful that Disney rapidly adjusted Walt Disney World's Tomorrowland in 1995 and Disneyland California's Tomorrowland in 1998, creating "the future that never was."<sup>632</sup> Plans for this total redevelopment were already made during the construction of Euro Disney in the late 1980s:

One day in 1989, while chief designer Tony Baxter was finishing plans for Tomorrowland 2055, Disney CEO Michael Eisner stopped by to check up on the project, and he was dismayed by the plan's images of a gleaming megapolis. 'This isn't the future people want,' he told Baxter. 'People no longer believe in dazzling visions of monorails and everyone wearing gold lame jumpsuits with zippers down the front,' Eisner continued. 'It's impossible to see anything but the Blade Runner in these urban visions of the future when Montana is the future? Put a PC in a log cabin. Montana, Wyoming – they're the places that represent a wonderful vision of tomorrow. You could put the signs of Tomorrowland in front of Frontierland' Disney's heir concluded, 'And people would be happy.'<sup>633</sup>

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<sup>630</sup> Cf. Littaye 2002: 51f.

<sup>631</sup> Lainsbury 2000: 75.

<sup>632</sup> Schiesel 1997.

<sup>633</sup> Steiner 1998: 15.



**Figure 84.** An 1892 vision of Washington D.C. in 1999 which was designed in 1992 for the Discovery Arcade of Main Street, USA at Disneyland Paris. 2010 photo by the author.

Michael Eisner calls this the “Montana Future.”<sup>634</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, visitors to Disney theme parks in 1998 “want to live in a Ralph-Laurenized mega-cabin in the Bitterroot Mountains, wired with fiber optics and a fast modem. [...] We want good takeout. We want aromatherapeutic herb gardens and a nearby trout stream where nothing ever dies.”<sup>635</sup> Americans “don’t want to wear polyester, vacation on the moon and drink Tang, the drink of the astronauts. Instead, we want copper pots and fresh pasta with virgin olive oil and really good reproduction Shaker furniture.”<sup>636</sup> Tony Baxter assumes, reflecting on the motivations behind Disney’s new Martha-Stewart and Ralph-Lauren inspired 1990s future, that Americans “want continuum.”<sup>637</sup>

According to Andrew Ross, author of *The Celebration Chronicles* from 1999, this realization that is put forward here self-evidently by Eisner and Baxter in fact is the result of a never published baby-boomer consumer report by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman from 1988 which Ross believes Disney had access to. The report was the “result of eighteen years of annual research” and was “a fast and loose assessment of how boomer consumer attitudes had changed since their ‘outright rejection’ of the

<sup>634</sup> Booth 1998.

<sup>635</sup> Booth 1998.

<sup>636</sup> Booth 1998.

<sup>637</sup> Booth 1998.

'traditional values system' twenty years before.<sup>638</sup> The study suggests that by the end of the 1980s, there had developed "a new social climate" called 'Neotraditionalism.' It is defined by the conductors of the study as a "synthesis of the best parts of the two previous value systems, combining the security and responsibility of the 50s with the individual freedoms and personal choice of the 'Me Generation.'"<sup>639</sup> 1990s "consumers seem to be seeking a state of equilibrium."<sup>640</sup> These and other market research "fed into the final conception"<sup>641</sup> of Disney's town of Celebration and, most likely, also influenced the new Tomorrowlands and Disney's new take on the future in Europe, all of which need to be seen in the context of crisis and a crumbling myth of progress, as I have argued in this chapter.

## 5.4 FROM ASTRONAUTS TO "DEPLORABLES"<sup>642</sup>

In this chapter I examined the turn from progress to pastness and showed that it does not only reveal a shift in taste and aesthetic preferences but that it is also connected to a much broader context in which white nostalgia prospered. Different events following the rather euphoric period of postwar expansion brought a particular myth of white Americans' inevitable progress to a crashing halt. The assassination of Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Arab Oil Embargo, NASA disasters, increasing pollution, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Liberation Movement and the counterculture of the 1960s threatened established hierarchies and menaced white supremacy and the suburban, patriarchal nuclear-family ideal. Referring to Susan Faludi, Barker and Jane (2016) point out that "downsizing, unemployment, the Vietnam and Korean Wars, feminism and a decline in public concerns with space travel all undermined the confidence and security of post-war American men"<sup>643</sup> and challenged their naturalized roles in society and in their families. Technological progress, the growing power of corporations, which began to outsource American manufacturing jobs to overseas, and the ceaseless suburbanization of the United States added to a sense of insecurity, loss, and discontinuity among middle-class America. Themed post-suburbia with its nostalgic single-family houses, Disney-esque shopping centers, and streets called "Baseball Court" or "Apple Pie Court," is a manifestation of

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<sup>638</sup> Ross 1999: 27.

<sup>639</sup> Ross 1999: 27.

<sup>640</sup> Ross 1999: 27.

<sup>641</sup> Ross 1999: 28.

<sup>642</sup> Reilly 2016. Hillary Clinton referred to a part of Trump voters as "deplorables" while speaking at a fundraising event.

<sup>643</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 378.

a powerful vision of a mythical “simple past” that is shown to have been irrevocably replaced by a much more “multi-dimensional present”<sup>644</sup> in the texts I analyzed. A quote from the 1989 movie *Mermaids* sums up nicely what those Americans felt when they were threatened by change. To them, the “the world ha[d] gotten crazy!”<sup>645</sup>

Thus, Architectural Modernism was not considered “homey”<sup>646</sup> by postwar television. It increasingly was employed in popular culture not to glorify progress but to signify the supposed chaos of New America and its dysfunctional families, as I showed in this chapter. With the exception of Epcot Center, New America was not depicted as a landscape of prosperity and happy nuclear families flying in saucers from their low-maintenance plastic homes to the enclosed and climate-controlled shopping center any more. A narrative of decline began to replace the myth of progress and New America was portrayed as a nation of dominating, yet failing technology, selfish individuals, profit-oriented corporations, and working women, all represented by ‘cold’ Modernist Architecture.

To this America, a writer returns like a stranger in his own country and to a suburbanized postwar nation in 1961. Men and women alike suffer in their new, garishly-colored ranch houses (*Bachelor in Paradise*). In this America, a sprawling 1970s airport demands so much attention from the men and women working at it that their families and relationships degenerate (*Airport*). The tallest tower of the world goes up in flames as a result of failed technology and corporate greed while rescuing its inhabitants is a major problem because of the incredible size of the building (*The Towering Inferno*). A state-of-the-art theme park resort for a nation obsessed with spectacle turns into a battlefield because robots are programmed the wrong way (*Westworld* and *Futureworld*). Skyscrapers replace old neighborhoods in the 1980s and dwarf the last townhouse of a once thriving, urban community (*Batteries Not Included*). The suburban ranch house of the McFly family is not the setting of happiness but of utter misery in a derelict Hill Valley of 1985 which is run by a black mayor. (*Back to the Future*). A teenager from the post-suburban nightmare of the 1990s dreams himself away into a 1950s sitcom of happy family life in small-town America (*Pleasantville*).

Accordingly, Disneyland did cease to embody the postwar myth of progress. The park was radically reinterpreted while Disney’s nostalgic settings shaped

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<sup>644</sup> Kaledin 2000: x.

<sup>645</sup> Trump used the expressions “It’s a mess” and “It’s crazy” frequently when speaking about the American condition during his 2016 campaign.

<sup>646</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

Americans' understanding of good design. Marlin claims in her study on Disney architecture that Disney's "approaches to designing recreational space, to the representation of historic architecture, and to the shaping of an urban narrative have had a massive impact on the 'real-world' architecture of the shopping center and the resort, and on public expectations of townscape."<sup>647</sup> Main Street, USA, created a familiar and positive urban narrative for whites, which had a huge impact on the theming of post-suburbia. In his book *American Places*, William Zinsser suggests, that as "America's post-war architects inflicted on our landscape the glass boxes of their revered Bauhaus modernism, their successors have taken their inspiration from Anaheim Victorian, building mini-Disneylands across the country to soothe our worries away."<sup>648</sup> These successors are "the first generation of post-Disneyland architects."<sup>649</sup>

The reassurance that nostalgia promises whites can also be observed in politics. Hillary Clinton stated in September 2017, while promoting her latest book *What Happened* on CBS, that Donald Trump "was quite successful in referencing a nostalgia that would give hope, comfort, settle grievances, for millions of people who were upset about gains that were made by others." Upon request she specified that she meant "millions of white people."<sup>650</sup> The pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia, which is primarily a white space,<sup>651</sup> needs to be seen in similar ways. It pictures the small town of the past before any "gains that were made" by minority groups and women and before its "patriarchal social relations"<sup>652</sup> were challenged.

In popular culture, attacks against white patriarchy are often portrayed as having catastrophic consequences. The *Back to the Future* trilogy paints a frustrating image of white American's journey. I showed how other movies also depicted contemporary America as a derelict place. In *Jumanji*, for instance, Brantford deteriorates in the shadow of the closed shoe factory and the absent family- and town father. Consequently, the white, nuclear family collapses as well. Listening to Donald Trump's 2017 inaugural address I was reminded of these failing small towns from these 1980s and 1990s movies. Trump spoke of an "American carnage" and of

mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students

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<sup>647</sup> Marling 1997: 9.

<sup>648</sup> Zinsser 1992: 154.

<sup>649</sup> Lassell 2003: 19.

<sup>650</sup> Landsbaum 2017.

<sup>651</sup> Cf. Fry 2011: 1.

<sup>652</sup> Avila in Mintz 1994: 230.

deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and the gangs and the drugs that have stolen so many lives and have robbed our country of so much unrealized potential.<sup>653</sup>

It was as if Trump was describing Hill Valley or Brantford, telling the narrative of America's postwar decline. Steven Bannon, founding member of Breitbart News, wrote the speech. Daniel Kreiss, associate professor in the School of Media and Journalism at Chapel Hill, observed a theme in articles published on this far-right news website prior to Trump's victory:

Perhaps the most common theme to emerge in these articles was the general idea and refrain of "taking back our country." Trump himself tweeted after Brexit "They took their country back, just like we will take America back." Across Breitbart's articles, Trump supporters were taking the country back from a litany of explicit targets including Democrats, the socialist left, the media, people of color, women, immigrants, establishment Republicans, free traders, Wall Street, and Washington, D.C. insiders. Throughout many of these articles, the people on whose behalf the country would be "taken back" were characterized as "middle America," "real America," "deplorables," and "fly-over country" – all standing up, asserting themselves and their values, and rejecting those who would repudiate them.<sup>654</sup>

According to journalist and author Sarah Posner, Steve Bannon believes "that the civil rights movement, or the women's rights movement, have altered American society in terrible ways, that it has changed life for white Americans in ways that have been detrimental to them."<sup>655</sup> This idea – according to Posner – is part of the ideology that has fueled the Alt-Right and Trump's rise. This vision of a "real America" however is not new. Grainge states that Ronald Reagan's "politics of nostalgia invoked a vision of America unaffected by the social ruptures of the 1960s and the political and economic humiliations of the 1970s."<sup>656</sup> Reagan developed "a mythic conception of America's past where ideas of small-town normalcy and its composite institutions – family, church, community, and business – were supposedly manifest."<sup>657</sup> In this dissertation I showed that this persistent myth of America, which goes back further than Reagan, materializes in themed post-suburbia where the nostalgic architecture translates into "small-town normalcy" to those longing for it.

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<sup>653</sup> The White House 2017.

<sup>654</sup> Kreiss 2017.

<sup>655</sup> "Democracy Now!" 2017.

<sup>656</sup> Grainge 2002: 45.

<sup>657</sup> Combs 1993 quoted in Grainge 2002: 45, cf.

# SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

*The fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on'), and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, [...]. In the seventies, power was still there, but the spell was broken. [...] The US, like everybody else, now has to face up to a soft world order, a soft situation.*<sup>658</sup>

*Jean Baudrillard, America, 1988.*

The aim of this dissertation was a cultural analysis of nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia. In the introduction I argued that the nostalgia pervading the contemporary architectural landscape of post-suburbia is not simply historicizing but that it is related to the myth of the all-American small town fabricated in popular culture. I was interested in the interrelationship between this American landscape and popular culture. From a cultural-studies perspective and based on observations made in the *Back to the Future* trilogy, I claimed that nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia mirrors and at the same time propagates the myth of small-town America that is imbued with the ideal of the patriarchal nuclear family and that this and other forms of nostalgia are a white reaction to wide-ranging changes and developments in the United States.

In the introduction, I could build my argument on findings from various fields. The theming of post-suburbia was noticed before, for example, by postmodern architects Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi (1976), spatial theorist Edward Soja (1996), Robert E. Lang and Jennifer B. LeFurgy (2007), urban geographer Paul Knox (2008), as well as Nadine Dostrovsky and Richard Harris (2008). Several scholars suggested a link between post-suburban nostalgia and popular culture such as urban sociologist Mark Gottdiener (1996). The phenomenon was associated with Disney's Main Street, USA, by historian Richard Francaviglia (1996), Frank Roost (2005), professor of Architecture Mark Gillem (2009), professor of American Studies Miles Orvell, and historian Cary Cross (2015), as well as others. Urban historian Dolores Hayden (2004) briefly proposed a connection to artist Norman Rockwell. Moreover, the nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia has been linked to movies and TV shows for example by Holley Wlodarczyk (2014). She made the important point that 1950s sitcom families were always depicted in traditional, "homey"<sup>659</sup> houses despite

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<sup>658</sup> Baudrillard 2010: 117.

<sup>659</sup> Wlodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

Architectural Modernism which originally dominated postwar suburbia. There are in fact many approaches from various fields. But none of these could establish the crucial link between themed post-suburbia and other non-architectural cultural texts and therefore failed in answering the central questions this phenomenon raises: Why is nostalgic architecture popular in post-suburbia today? Why did it replace more contemporary architecture? Who pursues pastness in post-suburbia for which reasons?

To address these questions I began by describing themed post-suburbia in detail to find out more about the nostalgia it conveys in the second chapter, "Nostalgic Architecture in Post-Suburbia." I focused on three locations: Aurora, Colorado, Las Vegas, Nevada, and Northern California. Referring to Stuart Hall (1997, 2003), I argued that the themed landscape I described works like a language and thus needed to be considered and analyzed as cultural text. I was able to verify at this point that the central theme of post-suburbia is indeed the American small town. This part of my hypothesis was further validated by quoting and briefly analyzing marketing texts for new communities in post-suburbia and by discussing a billboard outside Providence, Las Vegas, using Roland Barthes' concept of myths. Referring to a demographical study by William Frey (2010) about the population of suburbia and its "exurban areas" and to observations made by journalists Douglas Frantz and Catherine Collins (1999) in Disney's town of Celebration, I was also able to draw the conclusion that the nostalgia in question is mostly a white phenomenon. Frantz and Collins argued that minorities did not move to the same degree to Celebration as whites because the neotraditional town did not represent their "remembered childhood."<sup>660</sup>

Due to the connection between themed post-suburbia and texts of popular culture emphasized before, I considered the notion of lived memory as problematic in this context. Frank Roost and Carry Cross argue that "[p]ositive images of 'historic' small-town places"<sup>661</sup> are not the result of childhood memories in material small towns, but rather the "memory of a mediated past."<sup>662</sup> Therefore, the landscapes I had described in detail had to be contextualized with other texts in order to explain the popularity of nostalgic architecture among whites rather than among minorities. The evolution of the American small town and the American family as depicted in *Back to the Future* served as a blueprint for the following three chapters in which I examined post-suburbia's relationship with myths of the past, the present and the future in order to answer my central questions.

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<sup>660</sup> Collins and Frantz 1999: 218.

<sup>661</sup> Roost in Budd 2005: 278.

<sup>662</sup> Cross 2015: 209.

In chapter three, "The Dominant Small Town," I examined why the all-American small town brings about positive connotations among white Americans in order to better understand the popularity of the nostalgic architecture I had described before. I first differentiated and defined the material and dominant small town, referring to Ryan Poll (2012) and Miles Orvell (2010). The subsequent analysis of several movies and Disneyland helped to outline the dominant small-town myth. At the heart of this myth I discovered a vision of the good life based on the naturalized ideal of the white, patriarchal nuclear family prospering in small-town America. The father was ascribed a central position in this scenario as he was "acculturated to value as being *useful* at work, to his family, and to the community at large."<sup>663</sup> Stephanie Coontz (1992) and others suggest, however, that this particular family ideal and its gender conventions were postwar inventions based on "a unique and temporary conjunction of economic, social and political factors"<sup>664</sup> that caused the white flight to suburbia.

The postwar families portrayed in the texts I looked at in this chapter, such as *Back to the Future* (1985), *Jumanji* (1995), *Pleasantville* (1998) and *The Truman Show* (1998), did not live in mass-produced Modernist ranch houses. They lived in the mythical dominant small town of prewar America. I returned to Holley Włodarczyk (2014) and introduced other scholars who argue that postwar television considered traditional prewar houses to be more "homey"<sup>665</sup> than the ranch houses of the 1950s. The new family ideal was originally connected to postwar suburbia and to more contemporary architecture but was merged by postwar television with the idealized prewar small town to make contemporary suburbia more attractive. The myth of the nuclear family in small-town America, which I had identified in this chapter, is therefore not a historical fact but rather a fabrication of popular culture.

To substantiate this finding further, I explored the "unique and temporary conjunction"<sup>666</sup> that had made the invention of the postwar nuclear family and the white flight to suburbia possible. I focused on the postwar era and the origins of suburbia in chapter 4, "The Postwar Myth of Progress." I showed that the unprecedented rise of a "Suburban Nation,"<sup>667</sup> which I discussed and contextualized historically, was ideologically connected to a white quest for "pure spaces"<sup>668</sup> and a postwar myth of American progress. I analyzed this myth by looking at cultural texts such as Disney

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<sup>663</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 377.

<sup>664</sup> Coontz 2000: 28

<sup>665</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>666</sup> Coontz 2000: 28

<sup>667</sup> Duany, Plater-Zyberg and Speck 2000.

<sup>668</sup> Lipsitz 2011: 30.

attractions and Disney educational films from the 1950s and 1960s. These examples revolve around white, patriarchal families living in utopian suburbs of tomorrow (not in historic small towns) and the ways progress (achieved by “useful” and “dutiful” white males<sup>669</sup>) and consumerism had made the lives of American nuclear families (especially its housewives) better. These harmonious families of the future were indeed an invention of postwar America and were portrayed in decentralized landscapes and *not* in nostalgic small towns.

I argued that the texts I had looked at were like advertisements that blinded out anything negative. But both, men and women, were affected negatively by the postwar gender conventions.<sup>670</sup> Moreover, I referred once more to Stephanie Coontz who suggests that the postwar suburban and social norms and “patterns [had become] highly problematic by the 1970s.”<sup>671</sup> I therefore concluded that the disconnection of the nuclear family living in postwar suburbia and its fusion with the dominant small town of the past by television cannot only be about what was considered (by television) as more “homey”<sup>672</sup> but points to much more complex issues. The rise of white nostalgia and the turn from progress to pastness in the period following the postwar era of reconstruction had to be addressed next.

In chapter five, “The Turn from Progress to Pastness,” I first presented theoretical concepts of nostalgia. It is described as “homesickness,” a reaction to loss, crisis, and longing,<sup>673</sup> or as a “defense mechanism in a time of [...] historical upheavals”<sup>674</sup> and a “rebellion” against “time” and “progress.”<sup>675</sup> I argued that if white nostalgia is “a yearning for a different time” and a “rebellion [...] against progress,”<sup>676</sup> I needed to find out why some Americans felt that way and also how this nostalgia is apparent in cultural texts. I gathered examples that presumably have caused an “erosion of faith in progress”<sup>677</sup> among whites, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, the Arab Oil Embargo, NASA disasters, increasing pollution, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women’s Liberation Movement and the counterculture of the 1960s. I showed that both Architectural Modernism and the creation of postwar suburbia have to be included in

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<sup>669</sup> Barker and Jane 2016: 377.

<sup>670</sup> Cf. Friedan 1963 and Faludi 1999

<sup>671</sup> Coontz 2000: 29.

<sup>672</sup> Włodarczyk in Lasansky 2014: 28.

<sup>673</sup> Grainge 2002: 58.

<sup>674</sup> Boym 2001: xv.

<sup>675</sup> Boym 2001: xv.

<sup>676</sup> Boym 2001: xv.

<sup>677</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 184.

this list of events that are said to have eroded white faith in progress and had caused feelings of discontinuity.

I then looked at several movies and at Disney attractions to see how they reacted to and portrayed the “erosion of faith in progress.”<sup>678</sup> Whereas most examples analyzed to this point of my text included the idealized nuclear family in the small town (chapter three) or in suburbia (chapter four), this idealized white, middle-class family was now presented as disintegrating and dysfunctional in the movies from the 1960s to 2000s I looked at in chapter five. References were made in these movies to all the events listed above, suggesting that the “family crisis,”<sup>679</sup> from a white, patriarchal perspective was the outcome of the changes and problems that progress has brought.

While movies such as *Bachelor in Paradise* (1961), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), or *Airport* (1970), explicitly pictured calamity, Disney theme parks revealed different approaches in dealing with the crisis of confidence felt by white Americans. I showed that Disneyland was reinterpreted first by its visitors and later by its creators. It was not advertised anymore as a monument to the myth of American progress and white, male Americans’ journey from “cowboy to astronaut.”<sup>680</sup> Beginning in the 1960s, Disneyland was perceived as the antidote to suburban Southern California and the rest of America. The Walt Disney Company acknowledged the collective turn away from an optimistic faith in progress when planning Epcot Center. I showed how the designers of the park tried to invigorate the ebbed postwar optimism but ultimately failed in doing so. Euro Disneyland’s mid-1980s vision of the future is a reaction to this failure. Here, Tomorrowland was introduced as Discoveryland and based on future visions of the 19th century which the designers of the park hoped would reassure its visitors.

I concluded this last chapter by pointing out that the nostalgic architecture in post-suburbia can be interpreted as a rebellion of white, middle-class Americans not so much against progress per se, as initially assumed, but against any social and economic changes that question and presumably diminish white capitalist patriarchy and supremacy as well as the nuclear-family ideal. This chapter showed that Architectural Modernism is used in popular culture not to glorify American progress but to signify decline, chaos and the disintegration of the American family. The dominant small town, on the other hand, was simultaneously depicted and imagined as a reassuring haven and the only place where traditional families and community are

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<sup>678</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 184.

<sup>679</sup> Coontz 2000: xi

<sup>680</sup> Marling 1994: 118.

possible and immune to change. The analysis of various non-architectural cultural texts has shed a new light on the nostalgia that pervades post-suburbia. This could answer the central questions in more effective ways than approaches from other fields. My cultural-studies approach was able to demonstrate that the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia unfurls a complex culmination of American myths about the past and future that mean different things to different Americans at different times.

Consequently, future research may explore how the pursuit of pastness in post-suburbia will evolve. In an article titled "What Millennials Know: We Can't Return to Rockwell's America," Charles J. Johnson of the *Chicago Tribune* argues that the nostalgia stirred up by Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in their 2016 campaigns was "not describing an America familiar to [Johnson] or to the millennials who share the same national signpost."<sup>681</sup> "One wants America to be a Norman Rockwell painting again. The other also wants a Rockwell painting, but with maybe two women at the head of the table." Johnson argues that both candidates described "a rosier period when the middle class was stronger, the military more incisive and America's elected leaders more in tune with the metaphorical farmers' fields they left when taking up office." He concludes that "whatever Rockwellian time campaign speechwriters are selling, I'm not familiar enough to buy. [...] The America [Clinton and Trump] hope to lead? I've only seen it in paintings."<sup>682</sup> Johnson's evaluation suggests that younger generations will yearn less for Rockwell's America because, other than their parents and grandparents, they cannot relate to it to the same degree. Accordingly, post-suburbia is likely to change, being themed in large parts to visually mimic the white, Rockwell- and Disney-inspired all-American small town of the past, and all that this myth entails. William Frey argues that "racial diversity will be the most defining and impactful characteristic of the millennial generation" and that it will play a central role "in transitioning America to the 'majority minority' nation it is becoming." This generation "will serve as a demographic bridge between older, whiter generations and subsequent, more diverse generations."<sup>683</sup>

While these diverse millennials were said "to have a deep love for cities" there also is "mounting evidence that" this "love of cities was a passing fling."<sup>684</sup> They likely "are about to leave cities in drones."<sup>685</sup> Alan M. Berger, a professor of landscape architecture and urban design at Massachusetts Institute of Technology writes in the

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<sup>681</sup> Johnson 2016.

<sup>682</sup> Johnson 2016.

<sup>683</sup> Frey 2016.

<sup>684</sup> Morris 2016.

<sup>685</sup> Morris 2016.

*New York Times* that the “suburbanization of America marches on. That movement includes millennials, who, as it turns out are not a monolithic generation of suburb-hating city dwellers.”<sup>686</sup> Berger argues, backed by Census Bureau statistics, that millennials are returning from the city to suburbia and that they “want a new kind of landscape.”

They want breathing room but disdain the energy wastefulness, visual monotony and social conformity of postwar manufactured neighborhoods. If new suburbs can hit the sweet spot that accommodates the priorities of that generation, millennial habitats will redefine everyday life for all suburbanites, which is 70 percent of Americans.<sup>687</sup>

This indicates that the iconic, suburban single-family home, and the way it is arranged in the fabric of the American metropolitan landscape, will change but that it will continue to be as relevant for millennials as it has been to previous, more homogeneous generations. A survey conducted by Harvard University in cooperation with the real-estate website Zillow found that “millennials were [indeed even] more likely to associate homeownership with the ‘American Dream’ than Generation X or baby boomers.”<sup>688</sup> Future research may examine why that is the case. Also, it might be paid attention to the aesthetic preferences of America’s most diverse generation<sup>689</sup> when it comes to buying new homes, as commercial homebuilders will continue to be “finely attuned, and readily adapt, to consumer taste.”<sup>690</sup> Are millennials’ aesthetic preferences radically different from those of previous generations? And if they are, or aren’t, what does this reveal about them? Do millennials strive for nostalgia? A cultural-studies approach will help answering these questions, as it has helped answering the questions the pursuit of pastness of previous generations in post-suburbia has raised.

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<sup>686</sup> Berger 2017.

<sup>687</sup> Frey 2016.

<sup>688</sup> Molnar 2017.

<sup>689</sup> Frey 2016.

<sup>690</sup> Dostrovsky and Harris 2008b: 167.

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