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Stefanie Strebel

Between Dream Houses and "God's Own Junkyard"

Architecture and the Built Environment in American Suburban Fiction

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The purpose of construction
is to make things hold together;
of architecture to move us.

– Le Corbusier

The Rise and Fall of Suburbia: History, Popular Culture and Architecture

Nowhere in the world does the suburb, or the sphere of suburbia, have a greater impact on national culture than in the United States. Having first been predominantly exclusive to the wealthier segment of society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century – when they were "a sort of green ghetto dedicated to the élite" (Mumford, *City in History* 561) –, American suburbs became a phenomenon of mass production and artificial planning after World War II, and are now the home of more than fifty per cent of the country's population. Once conjured up as a utopian ideal of a community by both urban planners and advertisers, the suburbs have come into remarkable disrepute since the second half of the twentieth century. They have developed from an imagined Arcadia-like utopia into a dystopia for many of their disillusioned residents, and they are accused of standing for everything that is wrong with modern society – be it in terms of materialism, consumerism or individualism. They turned out to be a dead end for many who were born and raised in them, and the voices of cultural critics, architects and urban planners turning against this environment have always been loud. The urban periphery is considered mundane, ordinary, repetitive, uniform and characterless. It is torn between city and countryside, between progressiveness and conservatism, and it remains a grey area, a space in-between, on both the geographical and the mental map.

Owing to the fact that the suburbs are a grey area and thus difficult to define, they are a border as well as a gateway zone, and they can occupy any spot on the spectrum between utopian ideal and dystopian nightmare at any time. As the character of Evan reads an old entry of his mother's diary in the 1984 film *Suburbia*, what comes to the surface are the misguided utopian expectations the previous generation had when first moving to the outskirts: "They call it suburbia, and that word's perfect because it's a combination of the words suburb and utopia." In order to stress the dystopian notion about these man-made landscapes, however, Evan's friend points out that people back then failed to see that the suburbs would eventually become "the slums of the future" (Spheeris, *Suburbia*). In a similar vein, Ian MacBurnie, late professor of architecture, describes the sphere framing the city limits fittingly as a middle landscape:

> The periphery, variously conceived as edge city, middle landscape, perimeter centre, or technoburb but consistently perceived by the majority of Americans as suburbia, presents a demonstrably ironic environment – one that promotes diversity at the retail-office-industrial level, where transformation is endemic, yet that enforces homogeneity at the residential precinct level, where continuity is paramount, and the myth of timelessness sacrosanct; one that embraces technology yet values artifact; one that is premised on democracy but perpetuates itself by manufacturing consensus; an incongruous, multilayered milieu that means what it reveals but does not readily reveal what it means; a concept whose implication is as yet little understood and whose opportunity is as yet ill considered. (MacBurnie 136)

Despite this quasi-schizophrenic nature of the urban periphery, the suburbs are regarded as convenient, comfortable, peaceful and safe. In the United States in particular, they have come to represent the preferred way of living of the average middle-class citizen since the immediate postwar years. Suburbia is an architectural manifestation of normality, conformity and mediocrity, with all these characteristics being a product of the symbiotic relationship between suburbanites and the built environment. The normal, conformist and mediocre aspects of people shape the architecture of the outskirts, and the normal, conformist and mediocre aspects of architecture shape their inhabitants.

A Brief History of the Suburb

Historically, even though suburbs – a term originating from the Latin "sub-urbe," literally the inhabited land below a town, or rather below "the pre-urban nucleus, often fortified, sometimes a castle" (Harris and Larkham 3) – already existed in the Middle Ages and were mentioned in literature as early as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the concept of the suburb first made a significant impact on the Western world map in the nineteenth and then on a larger scale in the twentieth century. During that time, commuting between home and work became a new phenomenon: industrialisation promoted the development of public transport systems, the affordability and accessibility of cheap oil, but it also caused rapid urban growth which led to spatial problems and social tensions in inner cities. These developments prompted people who were able to afford a house and pay for transportation to leave the cities for the outskirts, and, in a historical context, the emergence of suburbia thus accompanied, or rather, the emergence of suburbia thus was a by-product of the modernisation of the world.

Now a mass phenomenon, it is widely assumed that the first suburbs in the present understanding of the concept came into being about two hundred to two hundred and fifty years ago in London, where during the Industrial Revolution, the arrival of large numbers of rural workers prompted the emerging middle

class to purchase villas and country estates outside the city limits. Prior to this time, however, the outskirts had been a place for the poor and the outcast, and the city centre, in contrast, had been considered the prime location for life and pleasure. The dichotomy between city and suburb was a classic example of a physical and symbolic centre-periphery relationship, in which being in the centre signified acceptance, whereas the periphery was a place for those who for various reasons were expelled from the core, or who were denied access to the core in the first place.[1] In many European cities, as opposed to the majority of American ones, this is still the case today. The "banlieu" of Paris is one of the most notorious examples in this context, since its social landscape mainly consists of immigrants unable to afford the high rents in the inner city. As a consequence, immigrants are pushed to the physical urban and symbolic social boundaries, which leads to dissatisfaction, violence and revolts.

Corresponding to the status of the suburban sphere of London prior to the Industrial Revolution, one of the earliest definitions of the term "suburb" – in use from the fourteenth to the mid-eighteenth century – is "a place of inferior, debased and especially licentious habits of life" (qtd. in Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias* 6). Evidently, the public attitude towards this environment – in the United States much more so than in other countries – has changed drastically since then. According to Fishman ("Rise and Fall" 14), this shift in thinking initially had a close connection to Evangelical Protestantism in England, in the context of which the pleasures offered by the city became disreputable and were regarded as decadent. This fall from grace of the cities was favourable for the urban periphery, and even more so for rural areas back then. Now that the dichotomy between city and suburb is considerably less defined and boundaries are increasingly blurred, public perceptions and opinions regarding city and suburbia have shifted again. It is particularly since the late twentieth century, with the increasing visibility of urban sprawl and its impact on the environment, that American suburbia has come under renewed and reinforced scrutiny and has received its fair share of criticism. However, this circumstance

1 Chaucer's depiction of the suburb in "The Canon's Yeoman's Tale" is a clear indication of the low social status pertaining to this environment several centuries earlier, when the concept of the suburb existed, but was far from having any middle-class connotations:

> "In the suburbes of a toun," quod he,
> "Lurkynge in hernes and in lanes blynde,
> Wheras this robbours and thise theves by kynde
> Holden hir pryvee fereful residence,
> As they that darn at shewen hir presence;
> So faren we, if I shal seye the sothe." (657-662)

did not necessarily lead to a reconsideration of the city as a better place to live, although there has been a trend for younger people to move back to urban areas in recent years. It is rather the case that there seems to be no residential utopia, and no ideal to aspire to anymore.

In addition to the fact that the American suburb is criticised as a concept, this criticism is itself criticised for being fashionable, and the accusations are sometimes considered superficial and ill-founded in their argumentation. It is often argued that it is simply fashionable to bring the suburbs into disrepute, especially among young people and intellectuals. As Hitchens (122) observes, anything suburban is continuously and sternly disapproved of by the country's intellectuals, and along with the bohemian urban sphere, they would also rather choose the "idiocy" of rural life than move to the suburbs. Considering the wealth of publications, both literary and cinematic ones, which portray suburbia in a negative light, it cannot be denied that badmouthing this sphere is indeed fashionable. However, as already pointed out, whether it is justified to target suburbia with such vast amounts of negativity is a matter of dispute, not least a political one between conservatives, who tend to condemn the criticism, and liberals, who tend to criticise.

The Suburb in Popular Culture

All criticism aside, the suburb in the United States, which for a long time was merely a marginal phenomenon with limited cultural significance, is now the core, or the essence of the country's society and ideology. As Coon (4) underlines, "[u]nderstanding American suburbia is an essential step toward understanding American culture." Millard (220), too, points out that "[a]ny serious understanding of the individual and collective behavior of Americans requires a deep, nuanced understanding of suburban mindsets," since "suburban ways of life have distinct consequences for practically every important aspect of a civilization: energy use, economic variables, sociopolitical attitudes, [and] cultural formations."

The current cultural and political significance of the suburbs is especially impressive when considering the short time in which they evolved. It has been less than one hundred years since the outskirts began to flourish significantly and gain more influence. Until the 1920s, it was the city that exercised power in cultural and political domains, but since then, many urban centres have found themselves in an increasing state of decay, and their significance has diminished greatly. In political terms, it was especially in the 1996 election, with Bill Clinton and Bob Dole running for president, that due to the candidates' heavy campaigning in suburbia, the loss of power of the city centres became

apparent. As G. Scott Thomas (9) observes, "[t]he 1996 campaign, if nothing else, proved that cities are no longer strong enough to dictate national policy […]. Power has shifted to the smaller, quieter communities lying beyond the city limits. The United States has entered the Suburban Age." Stilgoe, too, sees the suburbs as the driving force behind political decisions, and additionally notes that they are now also considered the hotspots of other cultural and economic domains:

> Suburbs control state and national elections, suburbs consume the bulk of manufactured goods, suburbs sprawl across vast areas that defy traditional political nomenclature or topographical analysis. If opinion polls prove accurate, suburbs represent the good life, the life of the dream, the dream of happiness in a single-family house in an attractive, congenial community that inspires so many urban apartment and condominium dwellers to work, to save, to get out of cities they perceive as chaotic, inimical to childhood joy, unnaturally paced, incredibly polluted, and just too crowded. Suburbs now set standards – standards as simple as the "proper" sort and amount of domestic indoor space and as complex as the naturalness of a contrived forest – by which a majority of Americans judge cities and find them wanting. (Stilgoe 2)

There is no denying that in many metropolitan areas of the United States, life now happens in the suburbs. People cling to the suburban dream and often voice great satisfaction with their living environment despite the vast array of criticism targeted at it, and due to its perpetual appeal and ensuing ever-growing population, American suburbia remains in control of national politics.

Regardless of the seemingly happy suburbanites, and corresponding to their negative reception by critics, in popular culture, the suburbs have been portrayed in a predominantly adverse light in their various representations. As mentioned already, works of fiction set in this environment have a strong tendency to echo the critical attitude that was and still is voiced by intellectuals primarily, with authors heavily emphasising the idea of crumbling values and the general disillusionment this artificially created landscape has caused over the decades. While it used to be the American inner-city neighbourhoods that had a particularly bad reputation when it comes to decaying social and moral values, people have realised that suburbia is not exempt from decadence, and that it may in fact contribute greatly to the loss of social coherence.

This increasingly critical attitude does not change the fact that the suburbs remain the preferred living environment for the average American citizen, however, and that they thus have an enormous impact on politics as well as on cultural concerns. "The Suburbs Have Won" is the title of a 1997 article by

Nicholas Lemann published in the online magazine *Slate*, in which the author describes how the urban periphery dominates both everyday life and popular culture in America. When considering the plethora of books, films, television series and songs that are based on suburban life, Lemann certainly has a point in acknowledging the victory and triumph of this sphere. Television series that take place in and are defined by a suburban setting have had a longstanding tradition in the United States, which is certainly owing to the fact that these shows are family-centred – and families, in the ideally shaped and stereotypical self-image of Americans, live in suburbia. This scenario is what the average audience can identify with since it represents their living environment in a more dramatic and embroidered version – a more exciting, a more interesting interpretation of their existence which nonetheless remains relatable.

The list of television shows set in the suburbs is seemingly endless and reaches back to the beginning of the format, when the traditional suburban sitcom family was born. *I Love Lucy*, one of the most popular and influential American sitcoms of all time, aired from 1951 to 1957 and featured the iconic Ricardo family. While the vast majority of the series is set in a New York City brownstone apartment building, the family eventually move to Westport, Connecticut – into "a quaint old early American," as it is described in the episode "Lucy Wants to Move to the Country." Rather ironically in the context of the current idea of suburbia as a figurative dead end, this is where the show comes to a close a few episodes later. Other popular sitcoms set in the outskirts at the time include *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960), and in 1957, in the same year that the final season of *I Love Lucy* aired, *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) premiered, a sitcom narrated from the perspective of a young boy named Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver. *Leave It to Beaver* is concerned with the idealised American family, and therefore contributed greatly to the way in which suburbia was and continues to be perceived, not least in terms of idealised nostalgic housing in "an old-fashioned neighbourhood filled with classic pre-World War II suburban architecture, a sharp contrast to the many monotonous 'little boxes made of ticky-tacky' that came to define suburbia in the years preceding, during and after the series' initial run" (Wlodarczyk 15). These early examples of television families moving to or being rooted in the urban periphery paved the way for numerous subsequent shows set in the same environment and targeting a similar audience, such as *The Brady Bunch* (1969-1974) and various other family-oriented sitcoms, a tradition which was only seriously challenged in the late 1980s and 1990s with shows like *Seinfeld* or *Friends*, which, instead of focusing on the suburban family, were centred around the urban individual.

Out of the more recent and critically acclaimed series, it is arguably *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012) and *Weeds* (2005-2012) that stand out the most. Their respective narratives are typically based on the superficial normality encountered in the American suburb, with dark secrets, mysteries, scandals, crime and intra- or interpersonal struggles lying hidden beneath this deceiving front of mediocrity. While it is the definition of a drama series that it deals with said issues, it is by no means a coincidence that the urban periphery has often become the setting of choice for Hollywood as well as independent directors and screenwriters, as the suburban setting allows their stories to evolve in a highly specific way and thus reach their full narrative potential. With regard to suburbia, the central assertion of these stories is that normality is not only deceiving – as normality does not exist –, but that it is in fact eerie and disquieting. The stereotypical hypocrisy of mediocrity encountered in the suburbs makes them the perfect setting to bring this idea across in a parodic manner, bringing to the surface the dark underbelly that is inherent to them.

A variety of animated series, such as *The Simpsons* (1989-present) or *South Park* (1997-present), use the suburbs as more than a simple backdrop, too; their respective plots, it can be argued, would not work in any other environment, so that suburbia becomes a crucial element of, or motif for, the storyline.[2] *The Simpsons* is set in the outskirts of Springfield, a fictional town in a deliberately undefined location in the United States. The fact that the geographical surroundings of Springfield are strikingly flexible – depending on what the plot requires, the city can border on deserts, the ocean, mountains, lakes, meadows or forests – makes the setting highly relatable, as viewers can make it their own and match it against their personal experience of suburbia.[3] *South Park*, as part of the metropolitan area of Denver, Colorado, in contrast, is bound to a specific geographical location, and typically exploits the boredom and triteness of the suburbs by making the sleepy mountain town a stage for the extraordinary, the supernatural and the bizarre.

While television shows set in the suburbs have had a long history and have been springing up like mushrooms since the postwar era, there was a noticeable rise in mainstream cinematic interest in this setting towards the end of the twentieth century. This does not mean, however, that the outskirts

2 Further examples that are very similar to *The Simpsons* are *Family Guy* (1999-present), set in suburban Quahog, a fictional city in Rhode Island, and *American Dad!* (2005-present), set in the fictional suburb of Langley Falls, Virginia.

3 Furthermore, Springfield is the second most popular place name in the United States after Washington, which adds to the flexibility and versatility of the setting.

failed to receive their fair share of attention before. Apart from visually framing adaptations of novels or short stories such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), *The Swimmer* (1968) or *Ordinary People* (1980), the suburbs were often the setting of comedies, for instance *The 'Burbs* (1989), but also of social dramas like *Suburbia* (1984), a film about runaway teenage punks squatting in an abandoned and decrepit tract house. Yet the sheer volume of mainstream Hollywood cinema focussing on suburban angst and receiving widespread critical acclaim especially shortly before the turn of the millennium is nonetheless striking. Films like *Pleasantville* (1998), *The Truman Show* (1998), *Happiness* (1998), *American Beauty* (1999), as well as Hollywood adaptations of novels such as *The Ice Storm* (1997), *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), and then later *Little Children* (2006) and *Revolutionary Road* (2008) have reinforced the position of suburbia on the map of mainstream cinema. This rising interest in suburban angst and anxiety is likely to have resulted from the fact that perceptions of sub- and peri-urban life continued to shift in the public eye and had become increasingly critical towards the end of the millennium, when there was a general atmosphere of anxiety in the population. All the above films portray suburbia in a highly negative light, focusing on escapism, despair, suicide, perversion, on deceptive normality as an eerie and disturbing suburban characteristic, as well as on people leading unconventional lives in houses that are the epitome of conventionality.

In literature, it appears as though the suburb is slightly more elusive than in the visual arts. With the exception of a handful of novelists, among whom John Updike and John Cheever are the most prominent, suburbia is not a setting or theme encountered consistently throughout the body of work of a given author. In contrast to the plethora and popularity of cinematic suburban representations at the turn of the millennium, there also appears to be no similarly obvious parallel development for preeminent literary publications. In addition, literary suburban narratives are often repetitive in topic and tone to an extent, which may be due to the stereotypical nature of the setting as well as its mediocrity and homogeneity. These characteristics certainly add to the lack of true diversity in suburban narratives, and this monotony is doubtlessly also the reason that the academic discourse on literary suburbia is far less pronounced than that of the urban, the cosmopolitan, or the multifaceted. Due to the city conventionally being the place where life truly happens, where the senses are stimulated, authors have historically been more inspired by the urban environment and have chosen it as a preferred primary backdrop for their narratives.

In spite of the perceived imbalance between novels set in the city and the suburbs, the distinctive characteristics commonly ascribed to the American outskirts have brought to life a new genre, the Suburban Gothic – a sub-genre

of Gothic literature, as well as of Gothic film and television. These distinctive characteristics of suburbia refer to the feeling of eeriness that people sometimes experience when thinking of this space, which is likely to stem from the fact that the suburb is often portrayed as an architectural and social quasi-automaton. Interestingly, people often have this particular idea of suburbia without ever truly having been immersed in this environment, which demonstrates the power of popular culture, the arts and the media in shaping public opinion. Even though a large proportion of stories set in suburbia have a subtle Gothic undertone, the rise of a genre emphasising the Gothic aspect underlines people's growing discomfort and unease towards the suburban sphere.

The focal points of the Suburban Gothic are anxieties associated with the suburb – anxieties which began to emerge with the rapid artificial creation of suburban communities from the mid-1940s onward. Among the most important literary representatives of the genre are Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and Anne Rivers Siddons' *The House Next Door* (1978), but also more recent publications such as Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* (2005) belong to the Suburban Gothic. As far as film is concerned, it is arguably Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982) and Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* (1990) that stand out the most, and the same holds true for David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) in television. The already mentioned drama series *Desperate Housewives* certainly has Gothic undertones relating to the secret world that evolves behind immaculate architectural façades, too. As Murphy observes in her book on *The Suburban Gothic in American Popular Culture*, "[i]n the Suburban Gothic, one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats" (*Suburban Gothic* 2), and this is doubtlessly a central underlying premise of this highly popular series.

Although there has been an emphasis on the importance of the suburb in the United States and a focus on American texts and culture heretofore, it must be emphasised that the suburb is by no means an American invention, and that wherever in the world there are cities with adjacent flat or, as seen in many South American favelas, also mountainous land, there is bound to be a suburban sphere corresponding to the various definitions of the concept. Possibly due to the similarities of culture brought about by a shared origin and common language, most parts of the world permanently colonised by the British have suburban patterns that are comparable to those in the United States to a large

extent, even though they often have a less pronounced presence in the social discourse, in popular culture and thus also in literature.[4]

While it is undeniable that the cultural output on suburbia is the most visible and perceptible in the United States, there are certainly works in other literatures of the Anglosphere that prominently feature the suburb as a core concept. In the United Kingdom, for instance, novels such as Leslie Thomas' *Tropic of Ruislip* (1974), Julian Barnes' *Metroland* (1980), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), as well as J. G. Ballard's *Kingdom Come* (2006) are part of the literary suburban discourse. All these novels are set in the London metropolitan area, where the modern suburban history of England and the world began. *Tropic of Ruislip* and *Metroland* are both set in the Northwest London "Metroland" promoted by the Metropolitan Railway in the early twentieth century, whereas the story of *The Buddha of Suburbia* begins in the suburbs of South London. Only a few decades earlier, until well into the 1930s, the Metroland was still advertised as an Arcadian idyll, and it is therefore interesting to observe how attitudes towards this specific landscape had changed by the 1970s and 1980s. South London, in contrast, never enjoyed the same historical reputation as its north-western counterpart, and the humorous and somewhat sentimental attitude of boredom displayed towards this part of the city in Kureishi's novel is therefore not a testimony to a change in public perception. The same holds true for *Kingdom Come*, Ballard's last novel, which is set in a fictional suburb called Brooklands between Weybridge and Woking, and is thus also located outside the once-glorified Metroland.

Even though there are certainly more examples than the ones mentioned here, it cannot be denied that in comparison to the literary and cinematic output in the United States, suburbia is a concept that receives less emphasis in Anglo-European literature, and the same applies to other English-speaking countries such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand. As Nathanael O'Reilly (xi) points out in his book on the suburb in the contemporary Australian novel, for instance, "[d]espite the fact that the vast majority of Australians live in suburbia,

4 An interesting divergence concerning the concept of suburbia in the English-speaking world is that in the United States and Canada, a suburb is a residential community, separated from but within commuting distance of the core city, while in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand, the suburb is a residential or mixed-use area that is outside the city centre but part of the urban area, regardless of administrative boundaries. Therefore, there is less of a sense of separation from the urban sphere, both geographically and ideologically. This lack of separation is important for literary portrayals of suburbia, since, it can be argued, the integration of the suburban sphere into the urban one is the reason that suburbia and suburban fiction are less of a phenomenon outside North America.

Australian narratives are rarely suburban." The widespread representation of this environment in literature and popular culture is therefore a phenomenon that is attributed predominantly to the United States, and suburbia as such must be considered a far greater socially and environmentally determining force in this country.

Despite the emphasis on literature, film and television here, when it comes to popular culture in both the United States and other English-speaking countries, it must be pointed out that the impact of suburbia is by no means limited to these cultural domains. The suburban experience has also been expressed in music, most notably in the iconic song "Little Boxes" by Malvina Reynolds, composed in 1962 as a satire targeted at the mass development of suburbs and their middle-class conformity. "Little Boxes" was also used as the theme song for *Weeds*, which popularised the piece among a new audience more than forty years after its first release:

> Little boxes on the hillside, little boxes made of ticky-tacky,
> little boxes on the hillside, little boxes all the same.[5]
> There's a pink one and a green one, and a blue one and a yellow one,
> and they're all made out of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same.
>
> (Malvina Reynolds)

Another important cultural statement is the song "Suburbia" (1986) by the Pet Shop Boys, which was inspired by the violence and social tensions in the already mentioned eponymous 1984 film by Penelope Spheeris – "Let's take a ride / and run with the dogs tonight / in suburbia" (Pet Shop Boys) –, as well as by the Brixton riots. Furthermore, a more recent example in music is the 2010 album *The Suburbs* by Arcade Fire, in which the band musically portray the processes and conflicts of growing up in the urban periphery with songs such as "City with No Children," "Suburban War" or "Sprawl I (Flatland)" and "Sprawl II (Mountains Beyond Mountains)." The album went on to serve as an inspiration for Spike Jonze's half-hour dystopian short film *Scenes from the Suburbs* (2011), which was a tight collaboration between Jonze and the band. Apart from music, the suburbs have also found their way into the arts of painting and photography, in which one of the most prominent suburban tropes was born: the aerial shot of rows upon rows of uniform tract housing stretching into infinity. Arguably the most comprehensive overview of the cultural representation of this landscape can be found in Rupa Huq's outstanding 2013 book *Making Sense of Suburbia Through*

5 "Ticky-tacky," a term coined by Reynolds, received its own entry in the *OED* as an expression for cheap or inferior suburban building material.

Popular Culture, in which every genre of popular culture from literature to rap music is covered.

The Architectural Suburb and Its Literary Representation

When it comes to architectural concerns, the deep embeddedness of the suburbs in popular culture also becomes apparent in the fact that contemporary social and planning-related developments in this environment are an ever-recurring topic in popular online magazines such as *The Atlantic* or *CityLab*. From an architectural point of view, it is exactly this close-knit tie with popular culture that makes the suburbs less interesting for this field of study, since architecture considers itself to be a high art that strives for aesthetic appeal. The symbolic elevation of the architect over other building professions is already present in the etymology of the term (Greek: "ἀρχιτέκτων," meaning chief builder, or Old English: "heahcræftiga," meaning high-crafter), and finds its repercussion in the buildings designed or constructed. As architectural critic Nikolaus Pevsner once famously claimed, "[a] bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal" (Pevsner 21).

From this proposition made in the early 1940s, it becomes obvious that architecture and suburbia are bound to have a difficult relationship with one another. Many would argue that the American postwar suburb is a place of non-architecture, and that it is a place shunned by architects with a serious claim to art. Architecture is in fact often looked at as an essentially urban or, historically, rural art – as seen in impressive high-rise structures and cultural or government buildings, and stately homes and castles, respectively –, while suburbia is accused of being a place dominated by mass production, cheap materials, mock styles and blandness. The suburb is the sphere of the "McMansion," in the context of which people's homes are the material embodiment of the fast-food philosophy. Nonetheless, owning a house in suburbia remains the epitome of the American Dream for a large segment of the population, not only due to the ideological implications of life in the urban fringes, but also due to the material house itself. The suburban house is an "indoor Arcadia," or an "Arcadia-within-an-Arcadia," in which the ancient vision of utopian pastoralism "has been folded into the insular fortified ideal" (Archer 299). It is as though with the move to the house outside the city – even though its architecture has no claim to art –, people attempt to re-approach an architectural Golden Age and distance themselves from the urban Iron Age of decadence and decline.

The importance of the suburban house in American culture and its deep embeddedness in the American Dream are undeniable, and the place that people call their architectural home is one of the most important pivots in their lives. In his book *The Poetics of Space* – a phenomenological analysis of architecture – French philosopher Gaston Bachelard underlines the importance of the residential house, stating that "our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard 4). However, in spite of its importance for the individual, architects show little interest in the suburban house due to it being a representative of vernacular architecture. According to Carter and Cromley (8), "[v]ernacular architecture is architecture that is pervasive. It is the architecture most people build and use, comprising buildings that are commonly encountered." The neglect of the suburban house and vernacular buildings as such in the academic discourse may be due to the fact that people have not learned to appreciate this building type yet. As stated by Glassie (20), "[b]uildings are neglected for different reasons. Some are the exotic products of indigenous people in places unknown to us. But others are familiar, maybe too familiar." This is why the suburbs are neglected in theoretical and critical discourse, even though "[t]he architectural historian who lavishes attention yet again on some canonical monument probably lives in a house of a kind that has wholly eluded serious study." As pointed out by Lasansky (1-2), architectural discourse privileges the individual, or the creative genius, as well as Architecture with a capital A, although the built environment consists of Architecture to only five per cent; in other words, ninety-five per cent of it is built based on mass-produced plans, designed by unknown architects and non-architects. When considering that vernacular residential constructions are one of the most important building types in the everyday life of Americans, it is certainly unsatisfactory to say that buildings are studied or fail to be studied according to their importance, and even when deeming suburban architecture insignificant, this classification is proof of a certain lack of appreciation, which, as a consequence, leads to neglect (Glassie 20).

The differences between vernacular building practices and architecture as a high art are numerous, however, and they are not only visible in the end product, but they originate in the design process. According to Carter and Cromley (15), vernacular design processes differ from those of academically trained architects in "the availability of ideas." Academically trained architects have the freedom to find their inspiration in all kinds of sources and aspire to uniqueness and innovation, whereas in vernacular architecture, the particular community of practice, as well as the intended audience or market, demands

a more limited and self-contained range of ideas. This is the reason that the architectural end product needs to stay within conventional norms, and it thus tends to be conservative and based on replication. Vernacular architecture only allows for a limited number of slowly introduced changes and new ideas, until it is time for a revolution. As Carter and Cromley suggest, vernacular design is best understood through Claude Lévi-Strauss' concept of "bricolage," that is, the assembly of already existing parts to construct and create:

> Trained designers formulate anew all elements of the designed product, while *bricoleurs* create a newly designed product out of old parts. Both are designing. […] [V]ernacular designers go about making design decisions by working from a commonly understood and shared ground of forms and materials that have been tested in a specific community over generations, in contrast to professional architects, for whom originality is an important concern. Yet, like academic designers, vernacular builders make design decisions about space, form, community values, and architectural meaning each time they build. (Carter and Cromley 15)

Despite the fact that creators of vernacular architecture engage in design processes, too, the lack of interest within the architectural discipline is certainly understandable when looking at other fields of study, in which vernacular or popular exemplars are similarly neglected. One of the few academic efforts to incorporate suburbia into a curriculum was Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's "Learning from Levittown" studio at Yale University in 1970, which in concept was the successor to their highly influential 1968 "Learning from Las Vegas" studio.[6] The "Learning from Levittown" studio, too, sought to identify symbols and decode the landscape, but rather than to read and understand the commercial messages of the environment – as had been the case in the Las Vegas studio –, students were asked to decipher suburban landscape symbols in order to gain a better understanding of the middle-class individuals behind their creation (Lautin 317).

When it comes to literary and cinematic representations of the suburban house, these not only tend to reflect the criticism of standardised, mass-produced vernacular architecture, but also the individualism and complacency that go hand in hand with owning a disproportionally large house and yard, as well as the materialism encountered in interior design and décor. Yet in many cases, the house in suburbia also represents a form of sentimentality or nostalgia relating to childhood, which is often the only context in which it acquires a

6 Levittown on Long Island was the first artificially planned and mass-produced postwar suburb.

positive connotation. Generally speaking, there is a strong correlation between character and architectural representation, as well as between architectural representation and the reality of the built suburban landscape. Nevertheless, in order to justify comparisons between the materiality of suburban architecture and the immateriality of architecture in the written word, it is crucial to first define the relationship between the two disciplines.

The study of architectural representation in literature is certainly not a thriving field, which in many respects comes as no surprise when considering the nature of literary architecture. Literary descriptions of buildings are often too vague to give the reader a clear image of the built environment of a given text, and much is left to the imagination. Moreover, the two arts are often considered to be too distinct from one another in order for their relationship to be studied in detail. This has not always been the case, however. According to Leatherbarrow, architecture, literature and other arts used to be less clearly separated. What the arts were considered to share were theoretical principles concerning mimesis, decorum and invention. Literary narratives are situated in architectural settings imaginatively designed or envisaged by an author, and architecture has often provided the material embodiment of ideas that literary texts elaborated (Leatherbarrow 7). Despite there now being a more refined distinction between them on a theoretical level, the affinities between architecture and literature are numerous, and hence their influence on each other continues to be observed in physical material constructions as well as in immaterial literary ones. Novels inspired by specific buildings or even the entire oeuvre of an architect go a long way back in literary history and include castles or stately homes in classics such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) or Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), with more modern examples being Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* (1943) – inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright and his buildings, especially "Fallingwater" –, or Simon Mawer's *The Glass Room* (2009) – inspired by Mies van der Rohe's "Villa Tugendhat." When reversing the source of influence, buildings inspired by literature include Steven Holl's "House at Martha's Vineyard" – inspired by Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) –, or "El Castell" by Ricardo Bofill – inspired by Franz Kafka's *The Castle* (1926).

Architectural representations in literature and material embodiments of literary constructions come into being not out of sheer necessity – most narratives include buildings, and every building invariably has a pre-text or can be read as a text –, but because the two arts overlap to an extent, which provides space for playfulness in their interactions with one another. What both literature and architecture have in common is an ability to speak, especially in terms of rhetoric. Wolin suggests as an example the analogy between figures

of speech and figurative operations in buildings. The author describes how language transcends its literal meaning by means of verbal shapes that come into being through figurative speech. These figures are given names based on their formal characteristics, such as hyperbole, prolepsis or alliteration. Throughout the centuries, figures of speech have been listed to a point of great refinement. However, as Wolin points out, the proposition of architectural rhetoric and expression is far more recent. She transfers the five canonical figures of speech – figures of sound, figures of resemblance or relationship, figures of emphasis or understatement, verbal games and intentional errors – into the architectural rhetoric, for instance by replacing figures of sound with figures of repetition and regularity, and verbal games with figures of overlay, displacement or disruption. Wolin claims that similar to the generic tree in linguistics, in physical constructions, too, we must assume the existence of, for example, an imaginary generic window (Wolin 17). Hence, both language and architecture, it can be argued, share the same guiding principles. Due to the similarities between the figures of speech of the two arts, a relationship can be established despite the dichotomy between materiality and immateriality found in architecture and literature, respectively.

Regardless of these similarities, mimetically (re)creating a material three-dimensional space is among the hardest tasks of a writer, a fact which certainly adds to the neglect of architectural aspects in literary criticism. In film, which has the advantage of being a visual form of art, architecture is of far greater concern and is widely discussed in critical studies. It would be misleading to claim that literature lacks the visual aspect altogether, yet as the visual aspect is exclusively present in a mental form derived from words, it is necessarily more fragmentary and subjective than that of the physical edifice itself. As Wolin (17) points out, "[a]rchitecture defies verbal representation. Even Alain Robbe-Grillet, with his meticulous litanies of dimensions and details, cannot describe a building that can be drawn, nor can Umberto Eco tell us what the column itself can tell us, despite pages of labored analysis." However, this does not mean that architecture should be excluded from literary discourse. Even though words can never authentically represent a building, an approximation is certainly possible. Wolin (17), too, insists that "the verbal battle against the recalcitrant architectural object must be waged, even if there can be no victory; words may never capture architecture, but they are mediators, interpreters, agents of reconciliation."

The idea of words as mediators is also present in McClung, who points out the independence of material and immaterial values and demonstrates how literature can establish a link between the two. In the case of literary architecture, this linkage is facilitated by the fact that architectural referents in

a text are part of the experience of the reader and thus constitute remembered elements:

> Literary architecture mediates between the discursive, immaterial values of the text and the implicit, material ones of organised spaces and constructed phenomena. While typically expressing the central preoccupations of the work within which it is located, literary architecture at the same time expresses the nature and values of architectural forms independent of the text. It thereby associates two otherwise mutually exclusive modes of understanding and judging: that of language, acting discursively through the unfolding of events and commentary in time, and that of phenomena, acting memorially through the linkage of discrete visual and tactile perception in combinations of the mind. ("Architectonics" 33)

Due to these affinities between literature and architecture, the dichotomy between the two arts does not defy reconciliation, and assigning too little importance to the architectural aspect in suburban narratives would leave a gap in the study of both setting- and character-related concerns.

Even though the relationship between literature and architecture is not an easily accessible one, and even though the lack of research interest in this field is thus understandable to an extent, this lack is simultaneously astonishing when considering that architectural constructions are a crucial part of the setting of most narratives. It can also be argued that the relationship between literature and any material entity is similarly elusive – geographical landscapes, physical objects, human bodies –, but to many forms of literary representation of materiality, far more attention is paid. Furthermore, having said that the study of architecture in literature is far from a thriving field, this is even more the case for the study of architecture in suburban literature. The vast majority of publications in this context have been written by architectural rather than literary scholars, among which John Archer's *Architecture and Suburbia* (2005), which is interspersed with literary and cinematic examples, is one of the most noteworthy. Another highly interesting publication is *Archi.Pop* (2014), a collection of essays dealing with the mediation of (suburban) architecture in popular culture. In literary circles, very little has been written on the topic, however. One example is Jo Gill's *The Poetics of the American Suburb* (2013), which includes a discussion of constructional features such as the iconic picture window in one of its chapters. Having already established that the suburbs are considered a place of non-architecture from an artistic point of view, this lack of publications on the topic is unsurprising. Yet especially when widening the definition of architecture to include buildings of any type, also those of the vernacular tradition, and when expanding the horizon to include the entire built environment of American suburbia, this man-made,

often inorganically developed landscape is a highly interesting field of study also in its fictional representations.

The Fictional Suburb Between Utopia, Atopia and Non-Place

When considering that the majority of the suburban development in the United States took place in the twentieth century, the literary and cinematic period from the 1920s until the present provides interesting insights into architectural choices and urban planning. It demonstrates on an architectural and social level how the suburbs rapidly developed from places of organic growth into uniform quasi-utopias in Thomas More's sense of the term – and as is the case for More's island, their status as utopias is rigorously questioned in fictional texts. Furthermore, and in order to avoid the exceedingly negative dystopian connotation, the suburbs have often come to resemble atopias – spaces without borders –, or even exhibit traits associated with Marc Augé's "non-place," but this reality largely fails to find its echo in architectural representations encountered in contemporary fiction.

The non-place as defined by Augé is the opposite of the notion of utopia, that is, it exists, and the society it contains is not organic (Augé 90). Places are defined by notions of identity, historicity and relations, whereas non-places lack these attributes (Augé 63). Therefore, non-place stands in direct opposition to what the author calls anthropological space, which is shaped and developed "by individual identities, through complicities of language, local references, the unformulated rules of living know-how; non-place creates the shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers" (Augé 81). The notion of non-place refers to both physical built spaces and to the relationship that people have with these spaces – with the author naming examples of super-modernity such as traffic infrastructures, leisure and commerce (Augé 76) –, and it creates "neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude" (Augé 83). It is important to note, however, that places and non-places are not clearly separated, and there is always a possibility for a place to turn into a non-place (Augé 86). When looking at the history of American suburbia, it is striking how well Augé's concept lends itself to an analysis of this built environment, as through the decades, the suburb has become strongly defined by a lack of identity and an absence of relations, by typical non-places like shopping malls and transit infrastructures, as well as by social isolation.

The architectural and social development of the suburbs from organic communities to quasi-utopias to atopias, or even to non-places, is mirrored in the structure of this book, which corresponds to the timeline of the suburbanisation of the United States from the 1920s until the present. In this context, it needs

pointing out that historically speaking, Harris and Larkham (93-96) differentiate between three types of suburbs – residential, industrial and unincorporated –, but the primary focus of this book lies on the residential type. Each chapter begins with an outline of the decisive suburban developments of the period in question, with a particular focus on architecture, urban planning and design. After this general overview, two literary or cinematic key works are discussed in order to illustrate and elaborate on the architectural development of suburbia on a fictional level in the corresponding time frame.

Chapter one focuses on the 1920s, a decade in which the United States experienced a first suburban boom. The "Roaring Twenties" was a time when most of the country's suburban areas still retained a sense of exclusivity and were predominantly affluent – which was mainly due to the cost of travel between the city and its suburbs –, and this affluence manifested itself in architecture, in interior design, as well as in consumer products, among other domains. The literary examples chosen for this period are Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, two works which not only portray the mentioned suburban affluence, but which are also set in the two metropolitan areas that were the first to be impacted by suburbanisation, that is, the Midwest around Chicago and Detroit, and Long Island, New York.

With the 1930s and early 1940s being dominated by the Great Depression and World War II, chapter two resumes the story of the suburbanisation of the United States in the postwar period, a time when new housing was needed quickly and cost-effectively. Mass production of development tracts on the outskirts of the country's urban centres was the result, and it proved to shape the suburban environment decisively. At the same time, however, people were dreaming of Arcadian landscapes after the horrors of the war, and they were hoping to fulfil their dreams in the suburbs. Eric Hodgins' *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* is an example of people's misguided hopes regarding life outside the city, as well as of the imminent threat that fast-paced building activities posed to rural areas after the war. As far as architectural mass production is concerned, John Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window* sheds light on the effects of this phenomenon on the average suburbanite, as well as on the largely irrevocable mistakes that have been made in the planning of the suburban landscape in the United States.

Chapter three loosely covers the aftermath of suburban mass production in the remainder of the twentieth century, when the outskirts still expanded rampantly, and when many people had lived in this environment long enough to be somewhat disillusioned by the experience. By the 1960s, the suburbs had already gained a negative reputation and were heavily criticised for a variety of reasons, most of which have persisted until this day. The 1960s were also the time

when some of the most iconic narratives of suburbia were written, and when two of the most notable authors of suburban fiction, John Updike and John Cheever, emerged. However, in order to give this chapter a new dimension, the two selected novels, Anne Rivers Siddons' *The House Next Door* and T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*, were published in the late 1970s and mid-1990s, respectively, and are not exclusively concerned with the ubiquitous discourse on triteness and conformity. *The House Next Door* was chosen as a representative of the Suburban Gothic, and the novel simultaneously portrays the changing and diversifying architectural landscape of the suburbs by means of the efforts of an architect to build a contemporary house among the omnipresent Dutch Colonials. *The Tortilla Curtain*, dealing with an important development related to suburban planning, was selected due to its focus on the gated community and the attempt to defend the suburban dream by means of the built environment.

With this phenomenon being the most defining characteristic of contemporary suburbia, chapter four deals with suburban sprawl. Since the 1920s, suburbia has never ceased to expand, and an overwhelming more than fifty per cent of Americans now live in this environment. In other words, the suburban population is presently larger than that of the urban and the rural combined. Many inner-city neighbourhoods have become deserted and dilapidated, and suburban sprawl has come to dominate the landscape. As sprawl has a highly elusive and visual dimension, when it comes to fiction, the medium of film undoubtedly provides a better representation of this phenomenon than the written word, which is why two films by independent director Todd Solondz are discussed. Within the context of his most celebrated film *Happiness*, the analysis mainly focuses on the architectural eclecticism that sprawl has brought to the American landscape, whereas within the context of his more recent release *Dark Horse*, the suburban infrastructure and the car-based lifestyle that is engendered through suburban expansion are scrutinised.

The concluding chapter offers a summary not only of the works discussed, but also of the contemporary criticism surrounding the American suburb as both a built and social space, and it outlines predictions about the future development of this environment. Furthermore, the question of the relationship between material buildings and literary architecture is addressed again, since this question underlies the discussion of texts in this book, but in the past was often perceived as an irreconcilable issue in literary criticism. Furthermore, attention is drawn to the differences between the physical suburb and its literary representation, as even though writers and directors are bound to be inspired by their built environment, they are equally bound to be inspired by the myths surrounding American suburbia, and these myths have persisted in fiction more than in reality.

1 Suburbia in the Roaring Twenties: Anti-Urban Biases and the Shaping of Suburban Identities

The 1920s – the Roaring Twenties or the Jazz Age, as they are often referred to – are a crucial period in the history of American suburbia. It was in this decade that the suburbs experienced a first boom, with roughly 900,000 homes built each year between 1920 and 1927, and the decade ending with one in six Americans living in this rising geographical, social and architectural environment (Kushner 7).[1] In fact, at the beginning of the decade, the US government set its sights on housing every family in their own detached dwelling, with the idea being strongly popularised in the media. However, suburbia was still a marginal phenomenon, especially in terms of cultural relevance, and the demarcations between city and country were much clearer than in the second suburban boom taking place in the postwar period. Stevenson (4) even goes as far as to claim that in the 1920s, "[t]here were, practically speaking, no suburbs." This statement is misleading, however. While the American suburbs of the 1920s might not have had the stereotypical appearance of those of the 1950s and 1960s, the process of metropolitanisation was in full swing, and the outskirts were growing at a faster rate than their inner cities (Barrow 200). According to architectural historian Gwendolyn Wright (195), they were even growing twice as rapidly, and mass production of residential developments, although commonly associated with the postwar period, was also practised in the 1920s, when "[e]ntire blocks were laid out with quaint Mission bungalows or enticing English cottages." As Harris and Larkham (1) emphasise, the perception that the development of the suburbs is, in essence, a postwar phenomenon, and that the touchstone decade is the 1950s, is based on half-truths and myths.

In fact, the United States embarked on its suburbanisation much earlier than the twentieth century. Historically, the country has always had an "anti-urban bias," and suburban settlements and their commercial infrastructure "arose from the idea, rather peculiar to America, that neither the city nor the country was really a suitable place to live" (Kunstler 40). A convenient way to illustrate the development of the American suburb is to distinguish between four rough

1 Figures on the suburbanisation of the United States vary. According to a 2002 census report, 9.2 per cent of the population lived in the suburbs in 1920, and 13.8 per cent in 1930 (Hobbs and Stoops 33) – which would mean that roughly one in seven Americans lived in a suburban environment at the beginning of the 1930s.

phases or eras, as proposed by Baldassar (476-478): the pre-industrial, the early urban-industrial, the late urban-industrial and the metropolitan era. In the pre-industrial era, there were few suburban settlements with sparse populations; it can be considered a sleeper phase. The division between city and country was still strong, as people were unable to cover long distances to travel to work on a daily basis. In the early urban-industrial era – which the 1920s are part of –, however, suburbanisation was a far more rapid process, as white-collar workers moved out of the cities into their close vicinity in increasing numbers. As Christopher Hitchens remarks in a 2008 article for *The Atlantic*, "agrarian population moves as soon as it can to the cities, and then consummates the process by evacuating the cities for the suburbs" (122). When it comes to demographics, the inhabitants of suburbia were predominantly white, middle-class and family-oriented at the time. They were attracted by the almost utopian or at least escapist discourse surrounding suburbia in the early urban-industrial era, which promoted this environment as a solution to various problems encountered in the urban sphere.

The American suburb was not without its critics in the early urban-industrial era, however. In fact, the criticism that still defines the suburban discourse in the arts already began to be heard in the nineteenth century, for instance in the following passage of Henry A. Beers' short story "A Suburban Pastoral" (1894) – a sarcastic title for a text in which the disappearing rural landscape is bemoaned:

> There is one glory of the country and another glory of the town, but there is a limbo or ragged edge between which is without glory of any kind. It is not yet town – it is no longer country. Hither are banished slaughter pens, chemical and oil works, glue factories, soap boilers, and other malodorous nuisances. […] Land, which was lately sold by the acre, is now offered by the foot front; and no piece of real estate is quite sure whether it is still part of an old field or has become a building lot. Rural lands and turnpikes have undergone metamorphosis into "boulevards," where regulation curbstones prophesy future sidewalks, and thinly scattered lamp-posts foretell a coming population. […] [T]he cows have disappeared, and pasture and orchard – where a few surviving apple trees stretch their naked arms to heaven – have passed into unfenced lots intersected by diagonal paths, short cuts of tin-pailed mechanics; bediamonded in the centre by local ball nines, who play the national game there on Saturdays (and eke, it is to be feared, on Sundays); and browsed by the goat – cow of the suburb. (5-6)

Beers depicts the American suburb as a space in-between at the turn of the twentieth century, as a place that destroys the rural pastoral and is devoid of the benefits of the city. At that time, it was a space in transition, still striving to find

its purpose and aesthetic. The excerpt above mirrors the accelerating growth of suburbia, in the context of which much was built without proper planning, and which thus paved the way for the eclectic suburban architectural and social landscape of today.

Other sources, too, emphasise the fact that the suburban history of the United States began considerably earlier than with the mass production of tract housing in the postwar years. According to Blakely and Snyder (14), industrialisation – in addition to fostering urbanisation – also spawned suburbanisation, so that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, there emerged a middle class which quickly found its way out of the urban cores. Brooklyn Heights, Long Island, the Bronx and Yonkers, for instance, were suburbs of Manhattan, and by 1911, more than one in three lawyers resided on the periphery of this central borough. Stern, Fishman and Tilove report in their book *Paradise Planned* that by the 1880s, roughly 300,000 people commuted between New York City and its surrounding suburbs, and they quote a *New York Times* article from 1878 which states that "the continuous region from twenty to thirty miles around is little else than a vast dormitory of New York" (qtd. in Stern, Fishman and Tilove 47). However, back then, American suburbia had a different appearance and different social characteristics compared to its current form, as becomes obvious in the following observations made by historian Lewis Mumford after a walk through Brooklyn in 1921: "It was a little hard to realize that this dissolute landscape, this no-man's-land which was neither town nor country, was part and parcel of the greatest city on the continent. It seemed to me that I had passed through the twilight zone of an essentially suburban civilization" ("Wilderness" 44). Hence, in some instances, American suburbia was still considered a no-man's-land, a mysterious twilight zone, a wilderness. It is the suburban landscape of the postwar period that is responsible for the suburban myth, a myth "which poised that suburbs are homogeneous landscapes of white middle-class conformity and uniformity" (Dunham-Jones and Williamson 17). The emerging suburbs of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were architecturally more diverse, which is the main reason they are often not thought of as proper suburbs from a present-day point of view; they do not comply with the image conveyed by the suburban myth.

The Suburb as an Anti-Urban Utopia

Although they were less stereotypical in appearance, the suburbs were clearly on the rise in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and the suburban growth of the 1920s was particularly pronounced. With the Roaring Twenties being the first decade in which more Americans lived in urban than in rural areas, cities

began to feel crowded with regard to both population and architecture, and there was a growing discomfort with the urban sphere among large numbers of city dwellers. There was also an increasing dissatisfaction with the modern characterless architecture that had begun to dominate urban territories, so that the newly marketed picture of the detached dwelling became more and more appealing. In King Vidor's 1928 silent film *The Crowd*, for instance, the vision of a quiet family home away from the noise of the city is what prompts the protagonist to propose to his partner, and on the train journey to their honeymoon destination, he shows her an advertisement for a model home in a magazine and tells her that this is where they would live. The suburbs thus undoubtedly had a strong appeal even before they began to be marketed on a larger scale, and people felt the urge to escape the crowded American cities with their increasingly oppressive high-rise architecture.

The notion of strongly and oppressively vertical architecture is one among many urban characteristics against which prospective suburbanites reacted. From an architectural and economic perspective, the often-criticised high-rise seemingly became a necessity in the light of booming land prices in cities such as New York and Chicago, but more often than not, high-rises were built out of sheer megalomania, as well as in order to transmit a semiotic message. Edgell (358) insists that "[m]en build skyscrapers because they like skyscrapers. They concentrate them in a district because they like so to concentrate them." Ignoring all considerations regarding their impact on the individual, high-rises stand as status symbols of individual cities or even entire nations, and they are a translation of political and economic power into the built environment. At the beginning of the twentieth century, buildings grew taller and taller, more often than not in a sculptural and massive style, and were in increasing competition with one another.[2] As Frank Lloyd Wright argues, the high-rise or, in order to maintain the Babylonian notion, the skyscraper "demoralizes its neighbors, when it does not rob them, compelling them to compete in kind or perish" (*on Architecture* 98) – and this demoralisation and increasing architectural competition soon began to mirror itself in the urban population, causing unease and discomfort with regard to the architectural city. As a consequence, urban flight became a new phenomenon.

In addition to the birth of the high-rise, Futurism had emerged in Europe as a pro-urban movement with utopian ideas relating to the look of the modern city, and this movement strongly influenced Art Deco, a style commonly found

2 The 1920s marked the birth of the race for the world's tallest building. By the beginning of the 1930s, 40 Wall Street (1930), The Chrysler Building (1930) and The Empire State Building (1931) were completed.

in the high-rise architecture of the 1920s and 1930s. Futurism emphasised the rejection of tradition and was inspired by the symbol of the machine (Tod and Wheeler 131) – a symbol that was incorporated into the arts in terms of both utopianism and dystopianism, for instance, by Fritz Lang in his 1927 film *Metropolis*. Futurists dismissed traditional cities and embraced the appearance and character of modern urban settlements (Tod and Wheeler 133). They felt that modern life was not represented by cathedrals or palaces anymore, and that train stations, immense streets, big hotels and glittering arcades were closer to their reality. Italian architect Antonio Sant'Elia, for instance, thought that architects needed to invent a dynamic city resembling a gigantic shipyard, with Futurist houses looking like enormous machines. He conjured up ornament-free houses of cement, glass and iron, exceptionally brutish in their mechanical simplicity. He dreamt of streets that would plunge several floors into the earth, collecting the traffic within the metropolis and connecting it to high-speed conveyor belts (Frampton 87-88).

Apart from megalomaniac, massive and oppressive building styles, as well as the threateningly utopian concepts of Futurist architects, a further modern urban characteristic that was met with criticism was the unadorned straight line that was part of the architectural utopianism of the 1920s. It was especially Swiss-French architect and urban planner Le Corbusier who promoted the straight line in his collection of essays titled *Toward an Architecture* (1922) – one of the most influential architectural works of the twentieth century. The author expresses the need to adapt architecture to the age of the machine, which would engender functional and mass-produced, standardised houses – machines for living in. He considers the city to be a tool for ordered modern life and for people fully adapted to industrial society, his maxim being order expressed through geometry:

> Man, by reason of his very nature, practises order. [H]is actions and thoughts are dictated by the straight line and the right angle. [T]he straight line is instinctive to him and his mind apprehends it as a lofty object[ive]. [H]e walks in a straight line because he has a goal and knows where he is going. [T]he modern city lives by the straight line, inevitably; for the construction of buildings, sewers and tunnels, highways and pavements. The circulation of traffic demands the straight line: it is the proper thing for the heart of the city. The curve is ruinous, difficult and dangerous; it is a paralysing thing. The straight line enters into all human history, into all human aims into every human act. [G]eometry is the foundation [and] the material basis on which we build those symbols which represent to us perfection and the divine. (qtd. in Tod and Wheeler 138-139)

While *Toward an Architecture* served as a manifesto for an entire generation of architects, it was an object of loathing for many. After all, straight lines and a rigid geometry have certain totalitarian and constricting connotations. Perhaps, it can be argued, the conspicuously curvy streets of many suburbs, often ending in cul-de-sacs, are a reaction against the predominance of the straight line and grid patterns in urban planning in the United States.

These disputed developments in the urban environment were certainly not the only factors that encouraged people to seek refuge in the architecturally less overpowering suburbs, however. Economic and technological progress, such as the increasing accessibility of transportation and modern means of communication, changed the way the individual related to space, and distances began to be measured in less mathematical terms. Physical distances became less important, as they could be overcome more easily by means of technology. Hence, both negative push factors and positive pull factors were responsible for the increasing metropolitanisation and suburbanisation of the United States in the 1920s.

When it comes to the discontent regarding living conditions as well as architecture in the cities, it comes as no surprise that utopian ruralist and suburbanist concepts such as the garden suburb, the garden village, the garden enclave or the garden city began to gain popularity in America. Originally promoted and popularised in the late nineteenth century by Ebenezer Howard in his 1898 book *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, the garden city movement sought to reduce the alienation of the individual from nature caused by the Industrial Age in the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it was a response to the abhorrent living conditions in the country's industrial cities, as well as to the increasing clash between urbanity and rurality. Similar to the idealised American suburb, the garden city was characterised by a merging of city and nature, by a return to a modernised Arcadia – it was, in the words of Le Corbusier, "a pre-machine-age utopia" (*Radiant City* 280). In many ways, the garden city can be regarded as a self-sustaining version of the modern suburb, but it was arguably even more idealised and utopian in nature.

Strongly related to Ebenezer Howard's utopianism is American architect Frank Lloyd Wright's plan of Broadacre City, first presented in his book *The Disappearing City* (1932). Broadacre City proposed a horizontal dispersion of rural dwellings in which each family would receive a one-acre plot of land; it was "a garden suburb at continental scale, destroying virtually all sense of town" (Stern, Fishman and Tilove 941). Wright's concept is thus an antithesis of urbanity, an apotheosis of the emerging suburban landscape of the Jazz Age, as well as an "idealistic version of what would become classic suburban

sprawl […]" (Kunstler 165). Even though developed at different times and in different geographical contexts, both the garden city and Broadacre City shared the goal of mitigating the clash between city and nature, and of ameliorating urban living conditions within a quasi-suburban framework.

The Birth of the "Dream House" and the Rising Importance of Domestic Space

Owing to the process of urban flight that was encouraged through the suburban promise of a compromise between city and nature, the outer reaches of American cities began to have a greater impact on national culture in the 1920s and played a significant part in the creation of dreams of luxury. Between the end of World War I and the beginning of the Great Depression, dreams and aspirations proliferated, as the 1920s "seemed a sort of accidental pause in history, much of it remembered as if it were a willful, elegant sport of time" (Stevenson 1). In the course of the popularisation of the image of a landscape of single-family dwellings, the concept of the "dream house" was born, and owning the dream house became a primary aspiration or life achievement for the American individual. According to architectural historian John Archer, "moving to a house in suburbia is perceived as tantamount to achieving the American dream." Archer observes that even though there is no precise definition behind the terms "dream house" or "American Dream," there is a general understanding that they contain the idea of opportunities, and of goals that can be fulfilled: "[The twentieth-century] American dream house has been recognized for a considerable part of its history as a highly specialized instrument for realizing many aspects of bourgeois selfhood" (Archer xv). The residential suburban house became the prime bourgeois locale in America, and an essential part of the self-realisation of the individual. The dream house was and still is an instrument to shape and mirror the bourgeois self, and it is, at least to an extent, an architectural simulacrum thereof. Even though architects had been designing suburban dwellings since the early nineteenth century (Archer 229), the rising suburbanisation of the United States in the 1920s gave suburban architecture a new purpose in that it often served to realise selfhood.

People were exposed to the marketing of the dream house in various cultural domains, and "[t]his exposure helped to raise and multiply the expectations that Americans would have of their dwellings, while at the same time identifying and expanding dimensions in which commodity culture could meet and satisfy those expectations" (Archer 250). There were ever-growing desires relating to domestic architecture among the population, and materialism was allowed to thrive in this context. Thus, even though the suburban boom and enthusiasm

of the 1920s certainly did not reach the same dimensions as that after World War II, it undoubtedly signalled and paved the way for the future development of the American landscape – and suburban life and the suburban house became part of the American Dream before this term was even coined.[3]

Apart from these quasi-utopian developments in terms of architecture and planning, the 1920s were also a crucial period and a time of departure for the development of the suburban self in other domains. Not only did women gain the right to vote at the beginning of the decade and thus become more involved in politics, but also in economic terms, people were faced with new luxuries and commodities in this time of prosperity. Hence, the traditional female role underwent a paradigm shift, with women joining the workforce in increasing numbers owing not only to their newly gained rights but also to the new living standards people sought to achieve; materialism and an emphasis on wealth dominated the decade. In this context, the suburbs are an interesting field of study. Even before the postwar period, the suburbs were the realm of families, particularly of the well-to-do variety – suburbia was largely a landscape of business-oriented husbands and stay-at-home wives. However, with regard to suffrage, the traditional role of the suburban wife and mother was seriously challenged. Furthermore, as the suburbs were generally more affluent than inner cities or rural areas, the phenomenon of materialism and consumerism had a far greater impact on the life and identity of suburbanites. Be it the architecture of their home, the distinct interior design of their dwelling, or modern commodities and appliances, people in the suburbs shaped and fashioned their identity by means of newly acquired modern luxuries.

The domestic interior is a particularly salient realm in this respect, given that interior design gained increasing importance in terms of representing the self between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to Downey (5), it was the period between 1880 and 1940 that "witnessed the emergence of the domestic interior as a generative space for modernity." This period was also when the notion of privacy gained importance in interior design and planning, and when conveniences and technology developed into an important part of the modern design aesthetic.

Generally speaking, the relation between architecture, design, commodities and identity has continuously gained importance over the decades and even centuries, and ever-greater value has been placed on it since the late nineteenth century. As Archer (4) points out, in the nineteenth and twentieth century there

3 The term "American Dream" was popularised in 1931 with *The Epic of America*, written by historian James Truslow Adams. The concept as such, however, is much older and goes back to the Declaration of Independence.

was a rapid process transforming domestic architecture, or the private dwelling, into a medium for the construction of individuality. In his book *Architecture and Suburbia*, Archer addresses the question of how built space – which not only includes architecture, but also man-made landscapes, planning and design – constructs personal identity. The first argument is concerned with how space is used and configured, and how it serves as an "anchor of cognition" from birth. The second argument deals with the built environment as a "selective medium of human practice," meaning that we consciously decide on what we build and what we do not build, and on how the built environment is used. Archer maintains that "the terms in which spaces are configured and the uses to which those configurations are put serve as apparatuses for inculcating highly particularized systems of social relations and of one's role within them," and that "because built spaces shape what people do and how they live in highly specific ways, they also necessarily shape who those people are" (Archer 5).

Archer also points out that architecture and the built environment not only shape the individual, but also the way the individual relates to others. The author uses the gated community as an example – a form of inter-community delimitation –, but the factor of intra-community inclusion or exclusion should not be neglected. The appearance of a dwelling, reaching from architectural style to size to condition, sends out signals to the community, with social status being the most important. We thus establish our position within a community and how we relate to that community through the medium of architecture and design to a large extent. However, architecture not only shapes social relations, as the author goes on to explain, but also "internal states of being and awareness," such as feelings and affect (Archer 5). It determines how individuals feel about themselves, the space they inhabit, as well as the environment that surrounds them.

Given the ways in which architecture and design shape or mirror identity, it was a common practice in nineteenth-century suburbia to build according to different styles – for instance Tudor or Tuscan – in order to establish the public identity of residents. Furthermore, the configuration of the dwelling, as well as a "properly aestheticized interior," was used to "shape the very architecture of the resident's consciousness" (Archer 8). Therefore, it can be argued that while the exterior of a house has a greater impact on public identity, the interior has a greater impact on personal identity. Even though both exterior and interior undoubtedly influence both the public and the private self, the interior is necessarily a less publicly accessible realm, and hence plays a less important role in how an individual is perceived by others. The same holds true for suburban commodities in the early twentieth century, with an expensive car, for instance,

sending out signals to the public sphere, whereas modern household appliances primarily nourished the private self.

In spite of the various spheres and means of identity creation, it cannot be denied that limited choice with regard to style and design limits the types of identity that architecture, interior design and commodities create. The question thus arises whether architecture can be held responsible for the perceived standardisation of the masses. Due to the accessibility of and the consensus on status symbols in the Roaring Twenties, for example, there emerged a standardisation of architecture and design, and suburban houses were equipped with the same state-of-the-art appliances. This mass consumption and mass production were blamed for leading to a standardisation of society, as people fashioned their identities by means of the same universally accepted designs and consumer goods. The individual, possibly due to the rising individualism in American society at the time, failed to realise that by fashioning its identity through material possessions, it became itself a mass product. The suburban self increasingly turned into a standard identity, so to speak.

The rising materialism and individualism of the 1920s were met with severe criticism in the arts, especially from the Lost Generation, a group of authors who expressed their disillusion in a highly cynical fashion upon returning from World War I. Their social criticism was aimed at materialism and individualism in the United States in particular, and in both novels discussed in this chapter – Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* –, this criticism is voiced loudly. Even though Sinclair Lewis was not nominally part of the Lost Generation, his writings nonetheless reflect the same concerns regarding the contemporary state and future direction of American society.

Drawing on *Babbitt* and *The Great Gatsby* as exemplary representations of suburbia in the 1920s reflects more than the contemporary criticism of emerging (suburban) social trends, however. Two of the most rapidly developing areas in the suburban boom of the 1920s were the Midwest around Chicago and Detroit – two cities strongly marked by their industrial history – and Long Island, or Nassau County in particular. The two novels were thus also chosen due to their geographical background, with *Babbitt* being set in a fictional Midwestern state named Winnemac, and *The Great Gatsby* being set on the Great Neck and Cow Neck Peninsula on Long Island. As will be seen, the areas serving as backdrops to the two novels, although rapidly suburbanising at roughly the same time, developed in highly different ways and directions.

In order to respect chronology, the discussion of the relation between the built environment, commodities, design and suburban identity begins with *Babbitt*, and is followed by a reading of *The Great Gatsby* within a suburban framework.

While *Babbitt* is unanimously considered a classic of suburban fiction – with readers recognising "the things they lived among: the houses, cars, roads, streets, the outward shapes and colors of people" (Stevenson 101) –, *The Great Gatsby* is classified as a typical representative of the genre far less often. This is somewhat surprising, since with regard to both time and location, the novel lends itself extraordinarily well to a reading within a suburban framework. While it may not deal with the white-façade-and-picket-fence suburbia that is so commonly a target of ridicule for authors as well as architectural and social critics, the novel should nonetheless be allotted its place in the suburban canon.

1.1. Moulding Suburban Identities Through the Built Environment, Interior Design and Commodities in Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt*

If there is an author who stands out in the literary suburban context of the 1920s, then this author is Sinclair Lewis. Lewis went down in history as the first American novelist to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, and he was awarded the prize owing to his exceptional ability to create new literary characters. One of these original characters, and certainly one of the most memorable, is the eponymous hero of his novel *Babbitt*, published in 1922. In fact, the character of George F. Babbitt is original and unique to such an extent that the term "Babbitt" quickly found its way into the English language. A Babbitt, in the *OED*, is defined as "a materialistic, complacent businessman who conforms unthinkingly to the views and standards of his social set." The effect that the novel had on language is unsurprising given the author's unprecedented satirical representation of middle-class conformity and materialism in the United States. Lewis created the literary archetype of the American suburban middle-class husband, father and businessman, and, in addition to the English language, therewith also influenced the works of other writers. In his 1926 travel book *Jesting Pilate: The Diary of a Journey*, Aldous Huxley, for instance, states that "[a]t all times the vast majority of human beings has consisted of Babbitts and peasants" (279). A further example listed by Hutchisson (89) is English author C. E. M. Joad's book *The Babbitt Warren* (1927), a sociological critique of American society. Furthermore, American journalist and satirist H. L. Mencken adopted the term "Babbittry," which the *OED* defines as "[b]ehaviour and attitudes characteristic of or associated with the character George Babbitt; […] [especially] complacency and unthinking conformity." The fact that Lewis' archetype of a character had such a vast impact on the English language and on other authors leads to the

conclusion that the social concept of the "Babbitt" had existed long before the publication of the novel, but an appropriate name for it was lacking. Love (13) argues that with the adoption of the term into the English language, "a name has been given to that which people recognize and accept as true to their experience of life, but which they [had not] realized in any palpable way, for up to that point there had been no word for it."

As becomes apparent when considering the definition and usages of the term, *Babbitt* is a satire on America in the 1920s – on its culture, its modes of behaviour –, as well as a broadside fired at the average member of American society. The novel mainly focuses on and criticises the mid-sized industrial city, in contrast to the author's first successful publication *Main Street* (1920), which primarily deals with provincialism in small-town America. *Babbitt* is set in a fictional Midwestern city named Zenith, with the Midwest being commonly associated with mass production and the rising consumer society of the time. After all, this part of the United States, now colloquially referred to as the "Rust Belt," was the birthplace of Fordism. With respect to the current dilapidation of industrial cities like Detroit, as well as the ever-rising social criticism concerning mass production and consumerism, the Midwest has suffered reputational damage over the decades, but in the Roaring Twenties, it stood as a proud symbol of economic success and progress.

The emerging mass consumer culture of the time was based primarily on spending, leisure and entertainment. The time between 1919 and Black Tuesday in 1929 is referred to as the "big business" period due to the increased production of mass consumer goods, faster production times and technological innovations. In the years between 1921 and 1929, industrial productivity in the United States doubled under the first two Republican presidents, Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. The American Dream has always been closely linked to ideas of materialism and consumerism, but never before had people been able to indulge in this aspect of the American Dream to such an extent. The 1920s offered people an opportunity to reach prosperity and success, merging the notions of materialism and personal freedom as depicted by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. The author states that "the American dream that has lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty." Much more than this, "[i]t has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman, unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilizations, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefit of classes rather than for the simple human being of any and every class" (Adams 405). The dream of material plenty combined with personal freedom is

considerably questioned in *Babbitt*, however. Lewis is concerned with the mass production of material goods as much as he is concerned with the constricting "mass production" of American society, and that of the (upper) middle class in particular. *Babbitt* deals with the mass production of political ideals, of religious beliefs, of commercial interests, but also with the standardisation of commodities and the built environment.

In order to establish how the built environment and mass-produced commodities may contribute to the standardisation of the (suburban) individual, however, it is necessary to first characterise this standardised identity by scrutinising the protagonist of the novel. George F. Babbitt is the epitome of the well-to-do self-made businessman in the Midwest of the early 1920s, with the 1920s being a period in time when the United States had "experienced a transition from the stage of industrial accumulation to advanced corporate accumulation" (Gordon 122). Coming from a seemingly average background, Babbitt climbed the social ladder and moved from a rural area to the mid-sized city of Zenith, Winnemac – the embodiment of the "Corporate City" (Gordon 122).[4] The protagonist divides his time between his real estate business and social life in the city centre, and his private life as a suburban husband at the edge of the city, in Floral Heights. Babbitt's existence, similar to that of the majority of people in his social environment, revolves around the business world, personal success, as well as earthly possessions and status symbols.

As the story progresses, Babbitt goes through vicissitudes regarding his contentment with his professional and personal life, and it turns out that suburban life and commercial success should not have been his primary aspirations. He even begins to half-heartedly rebel against his class and its ideals, all while constantly being afraid of other people's judgement. However, Babbitt's rebellion only becomes a concern relatively late in the novel; initially, he superficially appears to be satisfied with his life situation, as well as with his social and physical environment. As Frederick (276) points out, "the suburb is the social climber's imagined paradise. […] [But] those who are sophisticated know very well the silly fallacy in this." Babbitt, lacking this sophistication and following the masses blindly at the beginning of the novel, becomes aware of this circumstance gradually as the narrative progresses, only to fall back on the security of the suburb in the end.

In terms of character and views, Babbitt is more than complacent. He shapes his opinions according to those expressed in the media or by influential figures

4 The name Winnemac is generally assumed to be a blend of Wisconsin, Minnesota and Michigan.

and movements, and he appears to have no mind of his own. According to Stevenson, he is part of an overwhelming majority that lives "in a massive, dumb affection," but that nevertheless went down in history as the "fortunate folk." Babbitt belongs to that segment of American society "with radios and automobiles, with new washing machines and toasters and vacuum cleaners, caught up in the life of instalment buying and the emulation of the heroes and heroines of the advertisements in the *Saturday Evening Post*" (Stevenson 2). Furthermore, Babbitt "pinned upon the map of consciousness the look and habits of a numerous, shallow, widespread type of American businessman, an eager, persistent, and inescapable type" (Stevenson 101). In other words, he is "the middle businessman, who enjoyed being part of the great, undifferentiated average" (Stevenson 145). He is ignorant of most aspects of life and culture except real estate, he is a conformist member of the middle class, and he is unsure as to who he truly is throughout most of the novel – in a nutshell, he is an outstanding exemplar of the "boobus americanus," to use H. L. Mencken's term.

Verticality as Achievement in the Built Environment of Zenith

How it was possible for opinion makers or the mass media to mould a 1920s businessman into a "Babbitt" is rather obvious, particularly when considering their persuasive power at the time. The role of the built environment, design and commodities in the standardisation of identity and personality is more difficult to define, however. A good starting point for examining the impact of the built environment on the characters of *Babbitt*, as well as on the "babittisation" of the United States, is to scrutinise more closely the primary setting of the novel.

The city of Zenith is the literal zenith, or the epitome of achievement, and serves as a role model for smaller towns. According to Vergil Gunch, a Zenith coal merchant, these small towns "all got an ambition that in the long run is going to make 'em the finest spots on earth – they all want to be just like Zenith" (119). The depiction of life in Zenith as the zenith of achievement is highly satirical of course, as throughout the better part of the novel, Babbitt is far from happy with his life in this environment. He dreams about the "fairy child" taking him out of his house, allowing him to escape the superficial perfection that is Zenith, as well as the pressure to achieve.

Similar to Zenith being the literal epitome of urban achievement in the eyes of its residents, Floral Heights is the literal paradisical suburban retreat, and its name suggests grandeur, too. As already mentioned, Zenith is an industrial and industrious city, and the contrast between the image of predominantly functional yet aspirational architecture in the city and the image of the floral

garden in the suburb nominally and visually sets the two settings apart. Yet in terms of social implications, the parallels are straightforward. Both names contain the notion of verticality, meaning that climbing the social ladder is synonymous with climbing the ladder in terms of the physical environment. There is an unmistakable upward movement to be discerned in the settings, and Floral Heights is not only nominally but also topographically speaking built on an elevated spot of land. Achievement in the city below thus grants access to a higher sphere, to an idyllic elevated living environment that feeds off the success of the city at its base.

Achievement in the city below also grants access to the richest part of Zenith, the suburban neighbourhood of Royal Ridge. Once more the idea of verticality and elevation is present, this time peaking at the very top of society. The image of the ridge, a continuous elevated crest, marks the literal topographical zenith of the setting, leaving the "heights" of Floral Heights below it. Although the term "royal" is suggestive of aristocracy – in this case an American interpretation of the concept –, Royal Ridge is also a place for the newly rich, even though the architecture of its houses certainly conveys a majestic and old-money feel.

One of the houses in Royal Ridge belongs to Charles McKelvey, a university friend of Babbitt's who has surpassed him in terms of financial success. His superiority finds its echo in the regalness of his distinguished suburban home, a frequent venue for high-society events and dances. His mansion is embedded in spatially generous lawns and landscaping, and the narrator considers it to be one of the most distinguished sights crowning Royal Ridge. In spite of its rather cold and mighty walls of stone, as well as its famously decorated vast rooms, it is described as merry and homelike. As far as interior architecture and décor are concerned, it is especially its vastness and spaciousness that define the mansion. The hall is so generously proportioned that with its immaculately polished hardwood floor, it is perfectly suitable as a ballroom. Furthermore, much of the building has a highly aristocratic feel to it: the long library, the baronial fireplace, the drawing-room featuring deep comfortable armchairs and shaded lamps, as well as the billiard room, transmit a sense of old money and nobility. It therefore becomes apparent that this Royal Ridge house embodies essentially European aristocratic characteristics – with billiards being a game that has been played in the courts of Europe for centuries –, and it is thus a somewhat presumptuous display of wealth. However, this mock-aristocratic house, as well as the neighbourhood it represents, is undoubtedly the epitome of achievement, and it is the geographical, topographical and social peak of the suburban belt of Zenith.

In spite of the various notions of peaks, upward mobility and achievement that are supposed to make Zenith a role model for the rest of the United States, Lewis openly suggests that he sees this place as an interchangeable locale. Despite the residents' conviction that their city embodies that to which other places should aspire, Zenith, in reality, resembles any other American urban environment. As the narrator points out, "[a] stranger suddenly dropped into the business-center of Zenith could not have told whether he was in a city of Oregon or Georgia, Ohio or Maine, Oklahoma or Manitoba" (52). Nonetheless, to residents like Babbitt, Zenith has individuality and character, and his neighbourhood gives him comfort. After a frustrating day at work in the city, the sight of his suburban kingdom has a soothing effect on him. He completely forgets his misery when he sees Floral Heights and its charms from Smith Street, "the roofs of red tile and green slate, the shining new sun-parlors, and the stainless walls" (73). The narrator also points out that Babbitt has an "authentic love for his neighborhood, his city, his clan" (28). Despite its superficial interchangeability, the people of Zenith make the city their home by personalising it with their own mental maps and emotional attachments.

The fact that both Zenith and Floral Heights are fictional settings does not necessarily imply that through their being fictional, the author sought to create a literary embodiment of the average city or suburb in order to stylise and satirise it. In fact, Lewis was critical enough of the phenomenon of mediocrity in real places and did not need a fictional setting to caricature it. Despite his satirisation of Zenith as the epitome of mediocre and conformist America, the reason behind his choice of a non-existent setting is rooted in the negative response he received from residents for his depiction of a real town in *Main Street* (Fleming 683). Following this response, the author developed the state of Winnemac, including its largest town Zenith, in his subsequent novels, and envisioned it as "more typical than any real state in the Union, and in one book after another [he] would describe the representative activities of its inhabitants, until he had completed a wide survey of American society" (Cowley 168).

The fact that Lewis did not need to invent a fictional city in order to stylise and exaggerate its features does not mean that he failed to take advantage of this opportunity, however. Zenith's urban zones, as well as its suburban belt, are well-defined and clear-cut to such an extent that they seem to have been designed with a straightedge, or taken out of a textbook. As a case in point, the suburban belt depicted in *Babbitt* is situated in the immediate vicinity of the core city, and Babbitt's house is located only a few miles from the office towers in the centre, but there are highly obvious visual boundaries. Generally speaking, Zenith is a place that is shaped by stark aesthetic contrasts: it has a

modern shiny business district at its core – the destination of Babbitt's daily commute –, decaying or derelict old structures surrounding its core, as well as new suburban houses at its fringes.

The importance of the setting and its contrasting architecture is emphasised in the opening lines of the novel, as the environment and its built structures are the first details to which the reader's attention is drawn. The narrator draws a picture of how "[t]he towers of Zenith aspired above the morning mist; austere towers of steel and cement and limestone, sturdy as cliffs and delicate as silver rods. They were neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office-buildings." With nature as an agent in its interaction with architecture, "[t]he mist took pity on the fretted structures of earlier generations: the Post Office with its shingle-tortured mansard, the red brick minarets of hulking old houses, factories with stingy and sooted windows, wooden tenements colored like mud." As far as old, fretted structures are concerned, "[t]he city was full of such grotesqueries, but the clean towers were thrusting them from the business center, and on the farther hills were shining new houses, homes – they seemed – for laughter and tranquillity" (1). Hence, Lewis not only establishes the importance of the setting through its detailed description in the opening paragraphs, but he also emphasises the relationship between the different urban and suburban neighbourhoods in terms of their historical development, as well as their architectural and social demarcations. The mighty, modern and overpowering towers of the financial district clash with the derelict architectural remnants of an earlier time, a time which was determinately more industrial and less business-oriented. While the perceived clean architectonic beauty of the modern business district rises proudly above the mist into visibility, the decaying and unsightly "structures of earlier generations" are suppressed into invisibility. Similarly rising above the mist are the suburban houses on the hills into which businessmen retreat after a day of work spent in the austere concrete towers in the centre. Therefore, the idea of physical and topographical verticality as a marker of achievement and success is emphasised in the image of the high-rise and the well-to-do suburb on the hill, that is, in structures and environments which overlook the industrial past that slides into obscurity.

The Reciprocity Between Architecture, Design, Commodities and Character

One of the polished new houses on the suburban hills overlooking the city, removed from architectural grotesqueries as well as sterile high-rises, is the home of the Babbitt family, a green and white Dutch Colonial. It is a respectable yet indistinguishable home, mirroring the respectableness and indistinguishability

of George F. Babbitt as a character: "He was not fat but exceedingly well fed […]. He seemed prosperous, extremely married and unromantic; and altogether unromantic appeared [his] sleeping-porch, which looked on one sizable elm, two respectable grass-plots, a cement driveway, and a corrugated iron garage" (2). In fact, many aspects of the house are a reflection of Babbitt's character, or at least a reflection of his perception of himself. He sees, for instance, the perfection of his yard, and attributes this sophistication to himself; his yard is that of a successful Zenith businessman, and through its perfection, it makes him perfect, too.

Paralleling the fact that Babbitt's character is mirrored in his home, his immediate neighbours, the Doppelbraus and the Littlefields, are mirrored in their architectural habitat, too. The Dopplebraus, whom Babbitt disapprovingly considers a bohemian couple, own "a comfortable house with no architectural manners whatever; a large wooden box with a squat tower, a broad porch, and glossy paint yellow as yolk" (24). Similar to the architectural appearance of their house being somewhat out of place in Lewis' suburban setting, their life is "an eternal cabaret […] dominated by suburban bacchanalia of alcohol, nicotine, gasoline and kisses" (339). The more sophisticated and academic Littlefields, in contrast, live in a more sophisticated home that matches their social standing, "a strictly modern house whereof the lower part was dark red tapestry brick, with a leaded oriel, the upper part of pale stucco like spattered clay, and the roof red-tiled" (25).

In contrast to the variety encountered in the exterior appearance of houses, standardisation of the interior is a rule that everyone adheres to in Floral Heights, as, for example, observed in the décor of the luxurious bathrooms of the suburb. Despite its moderate size, Babbitt's house, like all the other houses in Floral Heights, has "an altogether royal bathroom of porcelain and glazed tile and metal sleek as silver," and further design details are similarly regal in appearance: "The towel-rack was a rod of clear glass set in nickel. The tub was long enough for a Prussian Guard, and above the set bowl was a sensational exhibit of tooth-brush holder, shaving-brush holder, soap-dish, sponge-dish, and medicine-cabinet, so glittering and so ingenious that they resembled an electrical instrument-board" (5). The interior design of the royal bathroom, determined by the religion of "Modern Appliances" (5), is an exaggerated and blatantly disproportionate display of wealth. It is disproportionate in comparison to the size of the house and Babbitt's income, but the bathroom is a part of the home that is particularly suitable for design-related exaggeration due to its limited space. Nevertheless, despite its royal appearance, Babbitt's bathroom is indistinguishable from other examples in Floral Heights. This room

is standardised to a great degree, so that it is turned into a benchmark for the accumulation of material goods and appliances, and, as a consequence, it marks social rank. Failing to meet a certain dictated design standard would cause suburbanites to feel socially inferior to their neighbours, even though the bathroom is a private realm to which outsiders are often denied access.

As the detailed description of Babbitt's bathroom illustrates, more weight is given to interior design than exterior architectural construction in the novel. Babbitt's limited judgement on architectural taste, or his "large and complacent ignorance of all architecture" (42), does not allow him to partake in this discourse, and in the interior realm, design decisions are conveniently made for him. Public opinion makers determine taste, and as a result, the vast majority of homes in Floral Heights are equipped with the same modern appliances and proudly display the same interior décor:

> (Two out of every three houses in Floral Heights had before the fireplace a davenport, a mahogany table real or imitation, and a piano-lamp or a reading-lamp with a shade of yellow or rose silk.) […] (Eight out of every nine Floral Heights houses had a cabinet phonograph.) […] (Nineteen out of every twenty houses in Floral Heights had either a hunting-print, a *Madame Fait de la Toilette* print, a colored photograph of a New England house, a photograph of a Rocky Mountain, or all four.) (91-92)

The interior décor encountered in the houses of Floral Heights is, for the most part, a display of sheer materialism. Objects are purchased not because they are needed, because they reflect personal taste, or because they have sentimental value. They are purchased because they have aesthetic value, because they mark social status, and because they enable those who purchase them to keep up with or even surpass their neighbours.

This consumer behaviour strongly invokes Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption, that is, the behaviour of purchasing luxury items as a display of economic power and social status.[5] In this behaviour, there are also clear reverberations of Marx's commodity fetishism, on which Veblen's concept is based, and which posits that capitalist societies treat commodities as though there were an inherent economic value to them. Considering that fetishism originally referred to the idea that inanimate objects possess supernatural powers, a parallel can be drawn to the fact that Babbitt, according to the narrator, looks at material possessions and modern appliances as his religion. However, an affinity to commodity fetishism can not only be observed in the character

5 Veblen coined the term "conspicuous consumption" in his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class.*

of Babbitt, but in most of the suburban population in the novel. The residents of Floral Heights are in a constant anxious struggle to reach a certain status and express this status in material terms – and they express it through what is available to them, that is, mass-produced commodities. As Downey (4) points out, "[t]hrough making our rooms, we display to ourselves and others where we fit in the social and material world." In *Babbitt*, this is also true of certain status symbols outside the house, such as cars, cigarette cases and electric cigar lighters, to name only a few examples. The interior of houses is defined by a selection of décor that has been approved by designers and subsequently purchased by extended social circles. As a result, the interior spaces of most Floral Heights houses are strikingly similar and thus never overwhelming; they simply mark familiar, inoffensive territory. The rooms are generally devoid of interesting features; they are "as neat, and as negative, as a block of artificial ice," and they contain objects that look like "desolate, unwanted, lifeless things of commerce" (92).

The only unconventional middle-class suburban interior in the novel is encountered in the Rieslings' apartment, which lacks standardised luxury items, or at least the presence of these remains unmentioned. It is especially Zilla Riesling's unconventionality and flexibility of character that is mirrored in the unconventionality and flexibility of their architectural home. The apartment building they inhabit is experimental, condensed and excessively modern, and it features flexible rooms that can be converted from living rooms to bedrooms, as well as kitchens hidden in cupboards. Considering the numerous instances of mirroring character traits in the built environment, and in the home in particular, Lewis puts substantial emphasis on the parallels between architecture and the individual, and this applies to the Rieslings and to the Babbitts in equal measure. The direction of influence is necessarily reciprocal, and unconventional architecture and the unconventional individual, as well as standardised architecture and the standardised individual, are in constant dialogue with one another.

Standardisation and the Loss of "Home"

"All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (Bachelard 5). This is true of both unconventional and standardised interiors. However, the notion of home is unquestionably gradable, and it is due to their impersonality and radiating coldness, their similarity in architecture and décor, that standardised suburban houses lose their sense of home and are reminiscent of anonymous hotels within the context of *Babbitt*:

> The [bed]room displayed a modest and pleasant color-scheme, after one of the best standard designs of the interior decorator who "did the interiors" for most of the speculative-builders' houses in Zenith. The walls were gray, the woodwork white, the rug a serene blue; and very much like mahogany was the furniture – the bureau with its great clear mirror, Mrs. Babbitt's dressing-table with toilet-articles of almost solid silver, the plain twin beds, between them a small table holding a standard electric bedside lamp, a glass for water, and a standard bedside book with colored illustrations – what particular book it was cannot be ascertained, since no one had ever opened it. The mattresses were firm but not too hard, triumphant modern mattresses which had cost a great deal of money; the hot-water radiator was of exactly the proper scientific surface for the cubic contents of the room. The windows were large and easily opened, with the best catches and cords, and Holland roller-shades guaranteed not to crack. It was a masterpiece among bedrooms, right out of Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes. Only it had nothing to do with the Babbitts, nor with any one else. If people had ever lived and loved here, read thrillers at midnight and lain in beautiful indolence on a Sunday morning, there were no signs of it. It had the air of being a very good room in a very good hotel. One expected the chambermaid to come in and make it ready for people who would stay but one night, go without looking back, and never think of it again. […] Every second house in Floral Heights had a bedroom precisely like this. (14-15)

Architecturally speaking, the suburban houses in the novel are doubtlessly built and decorated with good – if somewhat decadent – taste. However, "there was […] one thing wrong with the Babbitt house: It was not a home" (15). Jurca (5) observes that "as the suburban house becomes the primary locus and object of consumption for the white middle class, the artifacts and habits of domestic culture are seen to jeopardize or to destroy the home's emotional texture." With the emotional aspect being crucial when it comes to turning a house into a home, and with the suburban house losing this emotional texture increasingly, the sense of home is lost, and the house is transformed into an architectural shell devoid of meaning.

The emotionless standardisation of interior décor, the idea of lifeless but familiar territory, ultimately affects the average suburbanite's character, with Babbitt being a prime example of the standardised suburban male. Furthermore, and similar to the domestic interior, Babbitt's beliefs, too, are shaped by opinion makers. As a case in point, the Presbyterian Church and the Republican Party tell him what to believe and what to represent, and advertisers determine his perceived individuality. They tell him what to buy in order to have his passions represented, with the result that material items turn into substitutes for his actual passions and joys: "standard advertised wares – toothpastes, socks, tires,

cameras, instantaneous hot-water heaters – were his symbols and proofs of excellence; at first the signs, then the substitutes, for joy and passion and wisdom" (95).

The city of Zenith, it seems, standardises all the beauty out of life, and generally speaking, the novel certainly does not make a case for standardisation. However, according to the character of Seneca Doane, a radical lawyer, much of Europe is equally standardised as the United States, and there is nothing wrong with some aspects of standardisation, as long as it does not affect thought and opinion. Especially the architectural standardisation of suburbia can trigger feelings of home, of homesickness and nostalgia, and it is thus to be welcomed to some extent. Doane remembers once being in London and seeing an image of an American suburb, a toothpaste advertisement in the *Sunday Evening Post* depicting "an elm-lined snowy street of these new houses, Georgian some of 'em, or with low raking roofs and – The kind of street you'd find here in Zenith, say in Floral Heights. Open. Trees. Grass." He reminisces about how seeing this image made him homesick back then, and he insists that "[t]here's no other country in the world that has such pleasant houses. And I don't care if they *are* standardized. It's a corking standard!" (100-101). Standardisation, after all, means recognisability and identifiability. It makes people feel at home in foreign places, and it enables them to bond beyond their social set and geographical location. American suburbia is a place that is particularly prone to being the subject of sentimental associations of this kind. This is not only due to the standardisation of this environment, but also to the type of standard achieved, as well as to the distinctive suburban character that emerges from this process. What is at stake is a certain sentimentality for the past, a sentimentality for the idea of home, and a sentimentality for the notion of familiarity.

Despite the people of Zenith being aware of the fact that they live in a standardised environment, and that they are standardised individuals themselves, they take pride in this, mostly because they perceive their standard to be in a state of perfection. Giving the annual address at the Zenith Real Estate Board, Babbitt talks about how "the fellow with four to ten thousand a year […] and an automobile and a nice little family and a bungalow on the edge of town […] makes the wheels of progress go round." He is the "Ideal Citizen" (181); in other words, he is the average suburbanite. Babbitt is convinced that this idealised man rules America, and that he should stand as an example to the rest of the world.

In his speech, what Babbitt calls the "Ideal Citizen" he later calls the "Sane Citizen," and then the "Standardized Citizen" (182); the citizen that saves America from going down the same path as the decayed nations of the Old

World. Most importantly, Babbitt is convinced that Zenith is the place in the United States where this citizen is produced. He argues that "Zenith and her sister-cities are producing a new type of civilization. […] The extraordinary, growing, and sane standardization of stores, offices, streets, hotels, clothes, and newspapers throughout the United States shows how strong and enduring a type is ours" (184). Babbitt does not see the standardised citizen as a highly dignified character. The standardised citizen is a regular man who excels in being exactly that. This homogenised regularity in people then finds its reflection in the built environment, as seen in the quotation above. The standardisation of built spaces is perceived as sane; it is a sign of strength and endurance, a belief in a defining ideal. As a consequence, the desired and thus fully intentional monotony of architecture and urban planning is a side effect of the social standardisation of the United States, but at the same time, it reinforces this process and has tremendous repercussions on the homogenisation of the public.

Given the emphasis on the male citizen above, it needs pointing out that the standardisation encountered in the urban environment of Zenith and the suburban environment of Floral Heights is concerned predominantly with the male perspective. In *Babbitt*, the standardisation of the built and the material environment results from the amount of money the industrious suburban male earns, that is, it results from the standard that can be afforded. The more money a woman's husband earns, the less reputable it is for her to work outside the house, and the more she is subjected to the standard offered by her husband in the domestic sphere. Women are forced into domesticity, with the suburban house being their "proper sphere," and are charged with the task of maintaining and furnishing the house according to the suburban standard.[6] The process of being pushed into the house by conventions and by their husbands to such an extent even results in Babbitt accepting his wife as "a comparatively movable part of the furniture" (351).

Architecture, Place and Social Belonging

Escaping architectural conventions and standardisation, as well as the social circle that defines them, is not an easy feat, especially in a novel in which architecture and location are such strong reflections of belonging. As a case in point, Babbitt is a member of the upper-middle-class Athletic Club, and due to his social rank, he is denied access to the upper-class Union Club. Similarly, despite his social rise as an orator, he is never a guest at the extravagant dances

6 The concept of the woman's "proper sphere" is part of the ideology of separate spheres, also known as the domestic-public dichotomy, which emerged in North America and Europe during the Industrial Revolution.

at the houses in Royal Ridge; the residents of Royal Ridge do not want to see the residents of Floral Heights in their houses, and they do not want to be seen in the houses of Floral Heights. Babbitt's Royal Ridge acquaintances, the McKelveys, only reluctantly accept his dinner invitation because they see a commercial opportunity in it, and unsurprisingly, it is with the same hesitation that Babbitt accepts a dinner invitation from the Overbrooks in the less classy suburb of Dorchester. Ed Overbrook is a failed former classmate of Babbitt's and lives far below the standards of Floral Heights. The Overbrook house is described as a depressing sight, a wooden, not very orderly two-family dwelling that smells of cabbage, the poor man's food. The Babbitts leave the dinner at the first opportunity, and in the same manner that they failed to receive a return invitation from the high society in Royal Ridge, they deny this opportunity to the Overbrooks. These two examples demonstrate to what extent not only social standing, but also geographical location, architecture and interior design separate people from one another. Being invited into a house above one's standards is a sign of being accepted into a higher social circle, and both the Babbitts and the Overbrooks fail at their attempts.

It is perhaps this painful experience that prompts Babbitt to try his luck within the boundaries of Floral Heights and be accepted into one of the majestic houses of the old aristocracy, as this would allow him to disregard the problem of crossing geographical or topographical boundaries. The person Babbitt hopes will help him climb the social ladder is William Washington Eathorne, a banker and member of Zenith's oldest and richest family who lives in the largest of the four old houses in Floral Heights – with "old" meaning built before 1880. His mansion is allotted a lengthy description, pointing towards its aesthetic and symbolic importance within the suburban neighbourhood.

The Eathorne Mansion is described as a remnant of the beautiful parts of Zenith, and it preserves the aesthetic memory of the suburb of Floral Heights between 1860 and 1900. Architecturally, the mansion is an immensity of red brick with grey sandstone lintels; it has a roof of slate in sequences of red, green and dyspeptic yellow; it features two towers, one with a roof of copper, and the other topped with cast-iron ferns; the porch is described as resembling an open tomb supported by short and thick granite columns, with brick hanging above them in frozen cascades; and one side of the mansion displays an enormous stained-glass window shaped like a keyhole. Despite its impressive architecture, however, the overall effect of the mansion is rather stern, as it embodies the dignity of the previously ruling Victorian financiers who created an oligarchy through being in control of, for instance, banks, mines and railroads. As a result, out of the numerous contradictory Zeniths which come together to

shape the actual and complete Zenith, there is none so influential, controlling and enduring, but also so unfamiliar as the small, polite and cruel version of Zenith as represented by the William Eathornes, "and for that tiny hierarchy the other Zeniths unwittingly labor and insignificantly die" (213). The narrator observes that the majority of the castles owned by the Victorian tetrarchs have disappeared or have been downgraded to boarding houses, yet the Eathorne Mansion still stands virtuous and aloof, with its marble steps and brass plate meticulously maintained.

As for Babbitt, the historical value and architectural condition of the Eathorne Mansion are awe-inspiring to him. He realises that his present self and his present life situation are insufficient, and that he must aspire to something higher and become more rigorous, cold and powerful. Through being granted access to the Eathorne Mansion, with its European sense of aristocratic architecture and design, Babbitt is reassured in his endeavour. He adorns himself with the architectural symbolism of the mansion, and he lets the architecture enhance him and transform him into the person he is actively striving to become.

In terms of architectural influence, the same holds true when Babbitt denounces and rebels against his life as a middle-class suburban husband. By switching locations and spending time in the bohemian abode of his mistress Tanis Judique, he more and more transforms into a socialist, fighting social conventions. From the point of view of his former self, there is a social as well as a geographical and architectural downward movement as he sneaks "from Floral Heights *down* to the Bunch" (342, my emphasis). However, upon realising that the "Bunch's" social rebellion is similarly pathetic and desperate as his own, Babbitt sneaks back up into the security and conformity of Floral Heights. He returns to conventional suburbia geographically, socially and ideologically speaking, feeling as though he were "swinging from bleak uplands down into the rich warm air of a valley pleasant with cottages" (389). The idyllic image of a valley with cottages, as well as the transition from bleakness to warmth, underlines his newfound or (temporarily) re-found appreciation of the suburban standard, even though this standard is likely to exert its influence and turn him back into his old conventional self.

Babbitt therefore returns to where the story began; his attempted escape from the mediocrity and monotony that is American suburbia was a failure, and he returns to safety and conformity without much resistance. Floral Heights and all it represents has its firm grip on him, and, it seems, it is too late for him to make significant changes in his life and escape standardisation. Despite the fact that the novel suggests that not all standardisation is inherently negative, Lewis' criticism outweighs the positive aspects of this process in

the end. Even though in the case of the built environment and commodities, standardisation enables people to recognise themselves in other places, and to identify with others, it fails to give them the opportunity to express themselves individually, and it makes them disappear in the masses. It turns them into blind sheep mechanically aspiring to a dictated material standard and mechanically following the prevailing ideology. Furthermore, the analysis of the relation between the built environment and the individual in *Babbitt* – encompassing architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture and interior design – demonstrates how much these realms reinforce and intersect one another, and that they are in a continuous dialogic relationship. The individual rises and falls not only with its social but also with its architectural environment, and the architectural environment rises and falls with it. Architecture and design are much more than a representation of culture, as they are themselves capable of shaping those who engage with them.

The 1920s – a decade of unprecedented economic prosperity in the United States – were a time when the American citizen was moulded through design and material possessions more than ever before. *Babbitt* is certainly the most iconic novel of the Jazz Age when it comes to materialism and consumerism within the context of mass culture in America. However, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* continues this dialogue in many respects. While both the setting and social background of the novel differ, and while it is certainly far from being a satire on the conformity encountered in American culture, Fitzgerald develops further some of the same cultural issues criticised in *Babbitt*, and their repercussions on the (fictional) built environment are equally pronounced.

1.2. Architectural Decadence between Rural Pasts and (Sub)Urban Futures: The Built Environment of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

In contrast to *Babbitt*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby* is not concerned with social conformity, but rather with the growing individualism in the modern age. While the novel is as much about personal and economic success as Lewis' work, it reaches further and investigates how success is achieved not through adhering to norms, but through going one's own path, through expressing oneself in one's own way, and through following the American Dream. Similar to *Babbitt*, this expression of the self is fostered by and mirrored in architecture and design, as well as material possessions. It is not least due to Fitzgerald powerfully expressing his characters through the

built and material environment that the novel turned into one of the most outstanding literary examples of decadence in a suburban context. *The Great Gatsby* is a tale of social decay and the emptiness of wealth, and of the failure of the American Dream. Fitzgerald uses his protagonist as a token of the decline of an entire nation, a modern nation founded on ideals of materialism and consumerism.

In the context of its criticism of consumerism, it is interesting to note that *The Great Gatsby* was not always the intended title for the novel. Fitzgerald only reluctantly chose it after toying with several other ideas, including *Trimalchio in West Egg*. Trimalchio is a character in the *Satyricon* of Petronius, "a master of sexual and gastronomic revels who gives a banquet of unimaginable luxury in which, unlike Gatsby who is a non-drinking, self-isolating spectator at his own parties, he most decidedly participates. He is a most literal glutton, while Gatsby stands at a curious distance from all he owns and displays […]" (Tanner 166). Even though Tanner emphasises the difference between Gatsby and Trimalchio, the vulgarity and decadence of the former's parties and the latter's banquets create an obvious parallel. Therefore, while Gatsby is not a literal Trimalchio, he is a downsized version of him, displaying his inconceivable luxuries and consumerist tendencies in his extravagant suburban mansion on Long Island rather than at a Roman banquet.

The Transformation of Long Island and Its Architecture

Long Island – the primary setting of *The Great Gatsby* – was one of the most rapidly developing suburban areas of the United States in the 1920s. Geographically, the island is divided between the New York City boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens, as well as the counties of Nassau and Suffolk, with the latter two being among the richest counties in the entire United States. Even though suburbanisation had reached the western fringe of Long Island a few decades earlier, it was only in the 1920s that this process began to reach further and drastically transform the heretofore predominantly rural landscape. Whereas large estates were built in the area between 1880 and World War I, the 1920s saw the development of smaller suburban homes on downscaled parcels of land (Weigold and Pillsbury 17), and, as a result, the population of Nassau County nearly tripled in that decade. Long Island, and its Gold Coast in particular, turned into a paradigm of the American suburban landscape, and became a favoured retreat for New Yorkers. Ever since, this large, elongated island to the east of central New York City has played an important role in the suburban development of the United States. After World War II, for instance, it became the geographical backdrop for the construction

of Levittown, the country's first artificially planned suburb. Long Island is thus a significant locale in terms of the history of American suburbia, and as for the 1920s, *The Great Gatsby* is certainly the most outstanding literary work when it comes to catching the zeitgeist of life in New York City's eastern fringes at the time.

Fitzgerald's novel is set in the egg-shaped territories of the aristocratic East Egg and the newly rich West Egg, both of which are fictional suburbs in the wealthy Nassau County – according to the narrator, Nick Carraway, "one of the strangest communities in North America" (10). Both suburbs serve as a retreat for the upper class and have many other similarities, but East Egg is more distinguished and sophisticated than West Egg, a fact which, given that the houses of East Egg are referred to as glittering white palaces, is translated into the built environment. Despite their being fictional, it is widely assumed that Fitzgerald's West Egg was inspired by the Great Neck peninsula, or more precisely by the village of King's Point, while Port Washington on the Cow Neck Peninsula, or more specifically Sands Point at its northernmost tip, is thought to have been the author's inspiration for East Egg.

At the time of the composition of the novel, the Great Neck and Port Washington were transforming from semi-remote suburban territories into an extension of the urban decadence of the Roaring Twenties when contemporary show business personalities, whom the emerging mass consumer society regarded as their role models, bought new homes in the area. This circumstance represents the development of the American suburb of the 1920s extraordinarily well, since during that time, urban flight was not a mass phenomenon yet, but primarily involved the socially upper segment of white-collar workers who were able to afford a respectable home in the close vicinity of the city, as well as transportation for the daily commute. In fact, the Roaring Twenties were far from characterised by a particularly pronounced urban exodus. On the contrary, even though the suburbs experienced a considerable boom back then, so did the cities, as the work opportunities they offered in this time of prosperity led to immense growth in both social and architectural terms.

For those New Yorkers who were able to afford it, however, owning a house in suburban Long Island became part of the American Dream, so that "without using this exact expression, F. Scott Fitzgerald had already published a novel commenting on the myth of American ascendancy in 1925 […]" (Tunc 67). Fitzgerald pursued this suburban dream himself and moved to the Great Neck peninsula in 1922, encountering a social and architectural environment that unsurprisingly resembled that depicted in *The Great Gatsby*. Like Gatsby himself, his neighbours were newly rich residents such as writer Ring Lardner,

actor Lew Fields and comedian Ed Wynn. In contrast to this new-money social circle, the inhabitants of the Cow Neck Peninsula, which is represented by East Egg in the novel, were of an old-money background and included some of New York's wealthiest families, among them the Guggenheims, the Astors and the Pulitzers.

As far as architecture in *The Great Gatsby* is concerned, literary scholars widely assume that the now-demolished Beacon Towers in Sands Point, built for Alva Smith Vanderbilt Belmont, were part of Fitzgerald's inspiration for the Gatsby mansion. "[A] factual imitation of some Hôtel de Ville in Normandy" is how Fitzgerald describes the impressive residence of his title character – a châteauesque mansion. Châteauesque is an architectural style that combines French Gothic with details of Italian Renaissance, and it became particularly popular among the wealthy segment of American society starting from the 1880s. The actual Belmont residence, however, was a Gilded Age mansion and is described as a Gothic fantasy by architectural historians. Some of its design elements were reminiscent of the alcázars of Spain and the depictions of castles in medieval manuscripts, but generally speaking, there was a highly unreal feel to it, since like the Gatsby mansion, the building "did not pretend to be rational; it existed as in a world of make-believe" (MacKay, Baker and Traynor 231). Even though Gothic architecture flourished in the high and late medieval period, revivals occurred in the eighteenth and lasted until well into the twentieth century. Gothic is typically the architectural style of cathedrals, abbeys, churches, castles, town halls and universities, and was rarely encountered in private estates. The common association of Gothic architecture with buildings of worship, royalty, administration and learning might be one of the reasons that in private dwellings, this particular style is often considered boastful and decadent.

Apart from the Beacon Towers, Oheka Castle in Cold Spring Harbor is commonly considered to have served as an additional inspiration for the Gatsby mansion. Oheka Castle, too, is a Gilded Age estate, and 127 rooms and a floor area of more than 100,000 square feet make it the second-largest private home in the United States. When compared to the Beacon Towers, the former residence of investment banker and philanthropist Otto Kahn is less extravagant as far as architectural style is concerned, but the estate has more impressive spatial dimensions as well as more elaborate gardens. The Gatsby mansion as imagined by Fitzgerald is therefore likely to be an amalgam of the two residences, and their respective characteristics relating to fantasy and sheer size are echoed in equal measure in the narrative.

Architectures of Luxury and Illusion

When considering that Fitzgerald drew inspiration from such mighty presences in the built environment of Long Island, it becomes evident that architecture, and architectural contrasts in particular, have a significant weight in *The Great Gatsby*. Architecture reflects the author's characters, as well as his themes and various facets of social criticism:

> The specific style of [Fitzgerald's] buildings, both individually and in their carefully developed counterpoint, embody basic aspects of his characters, reinforce his social analysis and help develop the characteristically American Europe-East-West tensions that are central to the novel. Architectural style rises from mere local color to become a highly effective connotative language through which Fitzgerald can not only set his scene but also tell his story and represent his themes. (Dahl 91)

The most detailed architectural delineations, and the most obvious architecture-character parallels, are found in Gatsby's residence and Gatsby himself, and these parallels can be explained in terms of social and architectural history. Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, nouveau-riche industrialists began to build themselves suburban retreats that were rooted in a rejection of the plain, repetitive and rectilinear architecture of urban factories, office buildings and tenements. As a result, these new homes in rural surroundings embraced historical styles relating to pre-industrial craftwork, which underlines Bourdieu's argument that tastefully restrained and decorative styles are the socially determined taste of the high bourgeoisie (Gartman 29-30). Furthermore, as Bourdieu observes, "[t]he true basis of the differences found in the area of consumption, and far beyond it, is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity." The tastes of luxury are the tastes of individuals who are defined by their "material conditions of existence," conditions which translate as capital and are thus far removed from necessity, whereas the tastes of necessity are the product of necessities and become necessity themselves (Bourdieu 177). With the character of Gatsby being above high bourgeoisie, his residence – defined by the tastes of luxury – is not restrained, but, in contrast, is a strong exaggeration of decorative styles removed from any notion of necessity.

The narrator recounts the historical background of the ostentatious mansion when he finds himself staring at the building, adequately comparing himself to Immanuel Kant staring at a church steeple through his window when developing his theories concerning reality and morality. The home is said to have been built by a brewer "early in the 'period' craze," a decade before the

present of the narration, and legend has it that said brewer "agreed to pay five years' taxes on all the neighbouring cottages if the owners would have their roofs thatched with straw" (85). However, the owners of the cottages refused to do so, and the brewer's children subsequently sold the mansion "with the black wreath still on the door. Americans, while willing, even eager, to be serfs, have always been obstinate about being peasantry" (86). The building process of the pompous residence was therefore met with considerable resistance from the local population, and the mansion stands as an early example of the gentrification of the formerly rural West Egg. Within the context of gentrification, the first owner attempted to manipulate the surrounding rural architecture in order for his home to create an even more noticeable contrast, even though the building already was the architectural embodiment of make-believe and decadence, and had a considerable impact on the landscape on its own.

The act of manipulating the built environment also serves Gatsby himself to reflect his rise in status, and to signal to his unattained love Daisy that he is worthy of her, that he is her equal in terms of social rank. Several years after first meeting her, he now has the financial and material means to impress her through his earthly possessions, leaving her in admiration and awe during a carefully structured and staged tour of his premises. While guiding her through his decadent mansion and proudly presenting his interior décor, fine wardrobe, as well as his gardens, he ensures that she sees the architecture and his possessions in their best light and from their most impressive and flattering angles:

> Instead of taking the short cut along the Sound we went down to the road and entered by the big postern. With enchanting murmurs Daisy admired this aspect or that of the feudal silhouette against the sky, admired the gardens, the sparkling odour of jonquils and the frothy odour of hawthorn and plum blossoms and the pale gold odour of kiss-me-at-the-gate. […] And inside […] we wandered through Marie Antoinette music-rooms and Restoration Salons […]. We went upstairs, through period bedrooms swathed in rose and lavender silk and vivid with new flowers, through dressing-rooms and poolrooms, and bath-rooms with sunken baths […]. He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many coloured disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher – shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of indian [sic] blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. 'They're such beautiful shirts,' she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. 'It makes me sad because I've never seen such – such beautiful shirts before.' (88-89)

The architectural incoherence and pastiche of the mansion presented here are striking.[7] The interior is an anachronistic blend of different styles and fabrics, and it is proof of "the essential vulgarity and tasteless extravagance of the new wealth of the period" (Dahl 93). The aristocratic feel of the house – with aristocracy being an essentially European concept – seems thoroughly misplaced within the context of an American suburb. Furthermore, the eclectic copying of styles, it can be argued, reflects the deceitfulness with which Gatsby managed to climb the social ladder and move to Long Island, and in the end, the architecture of the mansion "is a false simulacrum and fated to fall" (Dahl 94). Nonetheless, the mansion achieves the desired effect, and Gatsby attains his goal of making Daisy perceive his worthiness through architectural and design-related associations. She sees Gatsby as a physical presence in his architecture, and, through association, she sees what the architecture and the commodities represent in him.

Daisy is not only amazed by the design-related and architectural aspects of the house, however, but also by its abundance of space, as well as by the discrepancy between its size and the number of occupants. Gatsby lives in this immense mansion on his own, but he needs the space in order to accommodate his guests, and he insists that the building is always filled with interesting, celebrated people. From this justification for owning a disproportionally spacious home, it could be concluded that great or interesting people require great dwellings. After all, it is the bourgeois suburban ideal that "a house should suit its inhabitant" (Archer 1). However, the premises must also be vast enough to host large crowds at Gatsby's society parties, at which the abundance of alcohol and fine dining goes hand in hand with the boastful and decadent dimensions of the house.

The following description of one of Gatsby's gatherings underlines the parallels between architecture and societal excess, or the material plenty, and it is certainly the most straightforward Trimalchio reference in the novel. At the event in question, Fitzgerald paints a picture of an abundance of oranges and lemons arranged in pyramids; a corps of catering personnel brings canvas and coloured lights in order to turn Gatsby's enormous garden into a Christmas tree; a variety of buffet tables are "garnished with glistening hors-d'oeuvre, spiced baked hams crowded against salads of harlequin designs and pastry pigs and turkeys bewitched to a dark gold" (41); a bar featuring a genuine brass rail is "stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from another" (41-42);

7 The term pastiche refers to its usage in architectural studies in this context, that is, the reproduction of styles of the past.

an orchestra provides musical entertainment – "no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums" (42). Furthermore, the halls, verandas and salons of the mansion shine in gaudy primary colours, reflecting the joyfulness of the occasion. In order to restore the immaculate appearance of the property the next day, eight servants and an additional gardener, equipped "with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammers and garden-shears, [repair] the ravages of the night before" (41).

The first and only time Daisy attends one of Gatsby's social gatherings, she is appalled and offended by all the decadence and licentiousness she encounters. Gatsby's parties attract a large number of young, artistic and entrepreneurial characters from a generous geographical radius, but this crowd consists of representatives of new money primarily, whereas the aristocratic old-money circles in East Egg, to which Daisy and her husband belong, tend to stay away from these social events. Daisy fails to understand the simplicity and moral emptiness of West Egg as both a place and a concept. She fails to understand "this unprecedented 'place' that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village" (103), with the quotation marks underlining the fact that in her eyes, West Egg is an embodiment of meaninglessness and thus unworthy of being considered a place.

Following Daisy's expression of disapproval, the regularly hosted parties come to an end, and the corporal emptiness of the mansion comes to represent the hollowness and emptiness of the decadent upper-class lifestyle. This literal and symbolic emptiness is also reinforced by the lack of attendance at Gatsby's funeral. The crowds that would formerly visit his mansion by the hundreds, for the most part, had "conducted themselves according to the rules of behaviour associated with an amusement park" (43), that is, without showing much interest in him. The image of the amusement park is particularly fitting in this context. In many ways, the architecture of Gatsby's mansion is reminiscent of a fairy-tale castle, and his society parties are the decadent version of an amusement park for adults. Similar to an amusement park, the mansion reproduces a fantasy and is, to compare it to Baudrillard's conception of hyperreality, "a play of illusions and phantasms" (Baudrillard 12), as well as "the quintessence of consumer ideology" (Eco 43). After Gatsby's death, the abandoned house rapidly becomes derelict, and it meets the same fate as America's numerous real defunct amusement parks. The former image of joy is replaced with an image of dreariness, tristesse and haunting, and Gatsby's death mirrors the failure of the architectural illusion.

The abandonment and disintegration of the empty mansion and its landscaping is an unmistakable metaphor for the demise of the American Dream.

Gatsby's lawn ceases to be groomed, his swimming pool becomes infested with leaves, and what is left in the end is a "huge incoherent failure of a house" (171). Only his father still makes a connection between the grandeur of the house and the grandeur of his son's character. When he sees "the height and splendour of the hall and the great rooms opening out from it into other rooms" (159), he is convinced that Gatsby would have lived to be a great man building up the country. Carraway, however, realises that the American Dream as pursued by Gatsby is not represented in this house, nor in Long Island as a geographical and social environment. Even though Gatsby had travelled far to arrive on Long Island, both literally and figuratively speaking, his dream remained "somewhere back in the vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (171). Like the dreams dreamt by the first people arriving in America from the Old World, the dreams are dreamt at home, and the reality of place, as well as the reality of architecture, more often than not destroys them.

Architectures of Necessity and the Vernacular

For Carraway, the reality of place is precisely what leaves him disillusioned and repulsed by the suburban environment of West Egg. Lacking the social standing and the financial means to truly be part of the Long Island he encounters, he remains an observer rather than an active participant throughout most of the novel, and his passive role is mirrored in his humble abode. Considering his rural upbringing in the Midwest, in "the country of wide lawns and friendly trees" (9), he decided against moving to the vibrant city of New York in order to live in less urban and less overpowering surroundings, in a "weather-beaten cardboard bungalow [...]" (9) on Long Island. Yet despite his choice of architecture and geographical environment, the depicted clash between East and West, between sub-urbanity and rurality, as well as between decadence and morality illustrates his being out of place in West Egg.

Even though the Gold Coast of Long Island was in the firm grip of the upper class in the 1920s, the arrival of Carraway marks an early turning point in the history of this landscape, as common workers commuting to and from the city began to arrive in increasing numbers. Despite this development constituting the beginning of a paradigm shift for the Gold Coast, however, it by no means implies that there were no working-class suburbs at the time. In fact, the majority of American suburbs were far more diverse before World War II than is commonly believed:

> Throughout the twentieth century, North American suburbs have always been socially diverse. Those who studied them in the first quarter of the century were well aware of

> this diversity […]. Despite this fact, the popular and academic stereotype was implied in the work of the Chicago sociologists in the 1920s and 1930s, and was perpetuated by the numerous critics of suburbia in the 1950s and 1960s. It was then applied retrospectively by suburban historians in the 1970s and 1980s. Selective historical studies of early, affluent suburbs then confirmed what everyone 'knew': that pre-war suburbs were for the affluent, and that it was only after the war that better-paid workers […] were able to buy into the suburban dream. This has been a powerful myth. (Harris and Larkham 6-7)

There is no denying that Long Island has long been an exceptional case in terms of affluence, but also in this landscape, the social atmosphere began to change in its upper-class communities – and its architectural and environmental appearance changed with it. The presence of very basic dwellings next to mansions was not an uncommon sight on the island owing to the rural history of the area, and Kunstler (97) describes how one year before the publication of *The Great Gatsby*, Long Island was "rural and lovely, the abode of farmers, fishermen, and also dozens of industrial millionaires, whose estates made a broad patchwork along the island's north shore." Nonetheless, the arrival of the "common worker" in previously almost homogeneously upper-class suburbs undoubtedly had architecturally defining effects that reshaped the landscape lastingly.

Although vernacular buildings were common on Long Island at the time, when it comes to architecture and aesthetics, Carraway describes his abode as a blemish in the built environment, and it is completely dwarfed by the visually and conceptually overwhelming mansion of his next-door neighbour. His rented West Egg home is located at the tip of the "egg," "squeezed between two huge places that rented for twelve or fifteen thousand a season." The Gatsby mansion, which is situated to the right of the property, creates a stark architectural and socio-economic contrast, being "a colossal affair by any standard […], with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden." In comparison, the narrator deems his own house "an eyesore, but it was a small eyesore, and it had been overlooked, so [he] had a view of the water, a partial view of [his] neighbour's lawn, and the consoling proximity of millionaires – all for eighty dollars a month" (11).

Carraway undoubtedly perceives a certain inadequacy in his bungalow, but in contrast to the opulent and rather cold architecture of the mansions in its vicinity, it transmits a strong sense of home. Even though the bungalow is an Indian building type and therefore neither more nor less representative of American architecture than Gatsby's European "castle," the bungalow was a

popular building style for suburban homes in the nineteenth century. In the context of the United States, a typical architectural representative of this style is a small low-rise, normally detached building with a wide, low-pitched roof and a veranda. In contrast to the suburban architectural ideal preceding it, the bungalow is considered "the antithesis of the Victorian home, simple, informal, and efficient" (Clark 169). Its features "create a feeling of coziness and comfort," and its roofline transmits "a snug appearance and symbolize[s] shelter and safety" (Clark 173). Hence, as opposed to the mansions surrounding Carraway on the Great Neck peninsula, which have a more regal or aristocratic, and a less inviting feel to them, his bungalow is an embodiment of a truly simple residential, homely, warm and welcoming architecture.

Paralleling the perceived architectural inadequacy of the bungalow and the striking contrast it creates with its neighbouring architecture, Carraway is misplaced in his new East Coast surroundings defined by distinguished people like Gatsby and the Buchanans, as well as by the upper-class hedonists who are regularly invited to his neighbour's social gatherings. His misplacement shines through not only in his humble abode, but also in his humble income and possessions, as well as in his humble personality. Like his bungalow, Carraway is "[u]nassuming, middle-class, comfortable, democratic" (Dahl 98). He is a reflective and rather reserved observer from the Midwest who is uncomfortably confronted with the lurid, decadent, loud and shrill East, and he is both "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (37). The Italian Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti – "the prophet of the garden suburb" (Grafton 292) – once perceived the "vast deal of satisfaction in a convenient retreat near the town, where a man is at liberty to do just what he pleases" (qtd. in Mumford, *City in History* 552), but this liberty of action is taken to extremes in Fitzgerald's Long Island. Even though Carraway is initially both attracted to and repulsed by the fast-paced and pleasure-seeking lifestyle he encounters in New York City and its Gold Coast suburbs, he eventually returns to the Midwest in order to devote himself to his old life characterised by a quieter existence, purer moral values, and a built environment that is more representative of him.

Architectures of Nobility and Tradition

Similar to the Gatsby residence in West Egg, the houses of East Egg, too, stand in sharp contrast to Carraway's bungalow, but the contrast they create is of a different nature, architecturally speaking. The Buchanan residence, for instance, is less ostentatious and fairy-tale-like than that of Gatsby, and it is therefore situated in a more traditional line of domestic architecture. It is a representative

of the Georgian Colonial Revival style, and, according to Dahl (96), it stands as "an ideal example of a seaside mansion of the era, designed both to fit into its natural setting and to recall American tradition." Due to its rootedness in history and tradition, the mansion is characterised by the same architectural symbolism as that of Gatsby, mirroring the inhabitants' character traits and affluent lifestyle. The Buchanans are a dignified couple of social rank, and, trapped between Bohemia and American "aristocracy," they have lived in France for no reason whatsoever, and spend their time playing polo and socialising with other rich people. Resonant of Gatsby's châteauesque architecture, their house, too, is a disproportionate physical and spatial manifestation of social rank, and, as a status symbol, it serves far more than its primary purpose of giving shelter and providing a home.

Carraway's first impression of the Buchanan mansion, similar to his reaction when first confronted with that of Gatsby, is one of awe towards this pretentious exhibition of affluence:

> Their house was even more elaborate than I expected, a cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay. The lawn started at the beach and ran towards the front door for a quarter of a mile, jumping over sundials and brick walks and burning gardens – finally when it reached the house drifting up the side in bright vines as though from the momentum of its run. The front was broken by a line of french [sic] windows, glowing now with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon, and Tom Buchanan in riding clothes was standing with his legs apart on the front porch. (12)

Much of this description of the Buchanan residence is an echo of old-money values. What is depicted is a large and sophisticated mansion, yet it is not as large as that of Gatsby, and it is thus a less preposterous spatial display of wealth. However, the colour gold in the above description underlines and reinforces the image of monetary affluence, and even this distinguished house thus contains the notion of decadence, since gold is traditionally the colour of nobility.

Moving from the exterior to the interior, what is interesting about the interior design of the Buchanan mansion is the atmosphere of idleness created by furniture, especially by the couch:

> The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back in after a short flight around the house. […] The younger of the two was a stranger to me. She was extended full length at her end of the divan, completely motionless, and with her chin raised a little, as if she were balancing something on

> it which was quite likely to fall. If she saw me out of the corner of her eyes she gave no hint of it – indeed, I was almost surprised into murmuring an apology for having disturbed her by coming in. (13-14)

When Jordan Baker, an amateur golfer and friend of the Buchanans, finally manages to rise, she complains about feeling stiff, confessing that she has been lying on the couch forever. The picture of upper-class women portrayed here is not necessarily one of boredom or ennui, however, as the two women on the couch have no real urge to find a productive occupation in the first place. Rather, the picture of white dresses fluttering in the wind is one of serenity, but also of pure idleness. The decadent image of the two women on the couch represents a kind of leisure that only the rich can afford – the leisure and pleasure of doing nothing –, and it is thus a suitable representation of a contemporary domestic scene in affluent East Egg.

In addition to representing the domestic life of the affluent, the picture of idleness in interior domestic spaces is representative of the fact that upper-class women were less occupied with their traditional gender role in the 1920s. In fact, both Daisy Buchanan and her friend Jordan Baker can be classified as Roaring Twenties flappers. This becomes apparent in a variety of details, such as in Jordan's profession as a golfer, in Daisy's habit of smoking and drinking – "I'll be the man smoking two cigarettes" (119) –, in the fact that they drive cars, in their sexual liberty, as well as in their wardrobe. Furthermore, with the loosening of traditional gender roles, Daisy does not appear to be involved much in raising her daughter, and the girl is largely absent in the novel. This upheaval or redefinition of domestic circumstances within the context of the 1920s certainly had its effect on architecture and the sense of home it transmits. Without claiming that Fitzgerald criticises the redefinition of traditional gender roles, it cannot be denied that this paradigm shift affects the sense of home in *The Great Gatsby*. Adultery and the absence of the child turn the suburban mansion of the Buchanans into an architecturally functional but emotionless place, it loses its sense of home to a large extent, and the changing social circumstances, as well as the ensuing marital tensions, reinforce the sense of coldness that is often inherent to architectures of nobility.

Urban Planning and City-Suburb Dynamics

What is interesting to note within the context of changing gender roles, flappers and other modes of fashioning the self in the novel is that the various newly shaped suburban identities are essentially rooted in urbanity. The fashionable clothes of the flappers, Gatsby's expensive taste in fabrics, as well as his decadent yet simultaneously sophisticated parties are typically bohemian traits

and phenomena, but bohemianism is a necessarily urban concept. It seems as though in the Long Island landscape of the 1920s, urban values were transferred into suburbia. People did not escape the city to find a new living environment and new lifestyles. Long Island, at least within the context of the novel, serves as a geographical escape from the city much more than an ideological one. The suburbs offer more space and opportunities for the display of wealth, but their residents have remained essentially urban in character, arguably not least due to the strong physical presence and immediate proximity of New York City.

Due to the social similarity or even inseparability of the urban and the suburban in *The Great Gatsby*, a geographical and ideological breach in terms of urban planning has to be established, a breach which is reiterated in the separation between East and West Egg, that is, between old and new money. The author defines this urban/suburban breach by means of the "valley of ashes." The valley of ashes is a stretch of decrepit land between the suburban and the urban setting of the novel, and it lacks an official name, which turns it into an anonymous no-man's-land. It is "a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of ash-grey men, who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air" (26). Socially, architecturally, as well as environmentally, the valley is inferior to both the city and the suburb, and even though it serves as a connection between the two spheres, it also separates them dramatically, not least in aesthetic terms. Therefore, even though the Long Island Gold Coast appears to be a simple extension of the urban decadence of New York City, the two locales are separated on the map by a clear-cut ash-grey line drawn with the symbolic and literal ashes of this space in-between; a space of poverty, betrayal and death. This separation undoubtedly enables Fitzgerald's main characters to distinguish themselves from the people of the city, and it helps them form their own suburban identity by means of urban planning.

The breach between New York City and the Long Island Gold Coast that the valley of ashes represents is striking insofar as it is usually the suburbs that are considered a grey area, a twilight zone that separates the urban from the rural, or that stands as a geographical and ideological transition from one sphere into the other. Fitzgerald, however, draws a clear line between the urban and the suburban, making sure that as far as urban planning is concerned, the two spheres do not overlap. As pointed out above, it can be argued that the author sought to underline the process of suburban identity formation through this breach, but at the same time, he appears to make a case for the uniqueness of the suburban landscape of Long Island. When comparing the Great Neck

or Cow Neck peninsula to *Babbitt*'s Floral Heights, the reader is confronted with two very different suburban concepts, as well as with different historical suburbanisation processes. Even today, the specific suburban area of Long Island in question remains one of the richest in the United States, whereas the outer reaches of other cities have undergone a significant social transformation and have indeed become twilight zones in which a clear-cut line between city and suburb is impossible to draw.

In spite of the fact that it separates Long Island and Manhattan on several levels, however, the valley of ashes plays an important role in upholding the physical connection between the two locales, as noted earlier. Manhattan serves as a playground for the Long Island hedonists, and it provides the infrastructure for culture and entertainment, which are features of modern life that are completely lacking in East and West Egg, and in the American suburbs of the 1920s at large. Therefore, the city is indispensable when it comes to providing the cultural stimulation without which the suburban self as portrayed in the novel could not be sustained. Furthermore, the architectural city compensates for the lack of privacy in the suburbs, as observed in the fact that Tom Buchanan's secret affair unfolds in an anonymous apartment in New York City.

In fact, Tom Buchanan's urban apartment is a crucial part of his secret identity. It is an almost obscenely small place for his standards in the Upper West Side, and it stands in sharp contrast to his mansion in East Egg, where space is more than abundant: "The living-room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles" (31). Apart from the spatial dimensions, what is also striking in this quotation are the scenes depicting women in the gardens of Versailles, which draw a parallel to Long Island due to their evocation of a pastoral and aristocratic, yet decadent landscape. However, due to the fact that these scenes portray jovial ladies in a lush garden, they are also reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, which would then represent the notion of sin that the apartment embodies.

The New York City apartment that contrasts so strongly with his Georgian Colonial Revival mansion on Long Island not only provides Tom Buchanan with a secret identity, turning him from a suburban husband into an urban adulterer, but it also transforms the identity of his mistress Myrtle Wilson, who comes from a very humble background in the valley of ashes. The built environment and fashion are part of literary characters to such an extent that a change of surroundings or clothes can have a thoroughly transforming effect. This circumstance is illustrated in the passage in which Myrtle changes into new clothes in the apartment and is "attired in an elaborate afternoon dress of

cream-coloured chiffon, which gave out a continual rustle as she swept about the room." Influenced by the dress on her body, her personality, too, undergoes a significant change: "The intense vitality that had been so remarkable in the garage was converted into impressive *hauteur*. Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air" (33). As seen in this quotation, not only can the environment and fashion transform a character, but during this transformation, the built environment can be morphed and transformed itself; as Myrtle's personality becomes inflated, the room, on a symbolic level, grows smaller in proportion. Bearing in mind John Archer's proposition that a house should suit its inhabitant, an indirect explanation is therefore offered by Fitzgerald for the disproportionate size of the Long Island mansions. In the novel, the physical architecture needs to provide enough symbolic space for inflated personalities, and urban architecture, being considerably more compressed and oriented towards functionalism, cannot provide this kind of space.

As New York City is crowded and constricting in terms of architecture, and as American suburbia began to be marketed as a modern Arcadia in the 1920s, it certainly comes as a surprise that the image of the pastoral is attributed to the urban much more than to the suburban sphere in *The Great Gatsby*. The narrator remembers how they "drove over to Fifth Avenue, warm and soft, almost pastoral, on [a] summer Sunday afternoon […]," and he insists that he "wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner" (30). In a different passage, Jordan Baker mentions how she loves "New York on summer afternoons when everyone's away. There's something very sensuous about it – overripe, as all sorts of funny fruits were going to fall into your hands" (119). The city is linked to the Arcadian landscape, to the notion of the pastoral, as well as to the Garden of Eden and the fall of man. While this makes sense when considering the image of the city as an adult playground, the idyll described does not match the dominant concrete architecture and architectural crowdedness of Manhattan, and it is interesting to note that the comparatively peaceful Long Island landscape is not spoken of in these terms. Therefore, when it comes to city-suburb dynamics, it can be argued that the city feeds off the (pastoral) energy of the suburbs, too, and that the exchange is by no means one-directional.

A Built Environment Should Suit Its Inhabitants

Despite the image of the pastoral and the Biblical paradise attributed to New York City, the East largely remains a scene of debauchery for the Midwestern

narrator. Having been shaped by a different value system, as well as by a different built environment, he eventually admits to being unable to adapt to life in the East:

> I see [West Egg] as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque, crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lustreless moon. In the foreground four solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a drunken woman in a white dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house – the wrong house. But no one knows the woman's name, and no one cares. (167)

There is no reference to a specific El Greco painting in this passage, but critics commonly link the atmosphere described to his "View of Toledo," which is one of the painter's two surviving landscapes and depicts an urban scene that is simultaneously idyllic and threatening, and that is strongly imbued with mysticism. According to Patterson Miller (200), it seems as though Fitzgerald had been influenced by the "ghostly vision of disembodied houses that both tumble and slide down the mountainside." This scene of predominantly active architectural disintegration and decay in the painting is what the narrator observes in figurative terms in the novel. Architecture, in this instance, embodies social decline, and the Gatsby mansion represents this idea through kitsch, pastiche and ludicrousness. It is thus partly due to his failure to identify with the built environment that Carraway is unsuccessful in his attempts to adapt to life in the East. The architecture of the Long Island suburbs, as well as that of New York City, fails to reshape and transform his identity, so that the East defeats him in the end.

In this respect, *The Great Gatsby* is as much a story about the failure of suburbia to shape the suburban self through its architecture, design, commodities and fashion as it is a story about its triumph in doing so. In the area depicted in the novel, it is not only the case that suburbia shapes or fails to shape the identities of its residents, however. Indeed, due to the specific nature of the social segment that colonised Long Island, it is also the residents themselves who shape this unique suburban landscape to the east of New York City. With the exception of the narrator, the characters of East and West Egg are of an old- or new-money background, with their social and professional lives strongly oriented towards the urban sphere, and this translates into their clothes and other material possessions. Nonetheless, as opposed to *Babbitt*, in which certain suburban standards in terms of ideology and materialism become almost compulsory and turn the individual into a mass product, individuality is

expressed to a much larger extent in *The Great Gatsby*, not least in the various architectures encountered in the novel.

Even though only a few years and less than a thousand miles separate *Babbitt* and *The Great Gatsby*, it becomes apparent that the suburbanisation of their respective core cities took different courses and manifested itself in different ways socially. Although both suburbs depicted are predominantly inhabited by the upper middle or upper class, respectively, the fact that Long Island is considerably more dominated by money than the typical suburb of the Midwest can already be observed in these two classic literary works of the 1920s. Granted, comparability is somewhat limited due to the fact that Fitzgerald used an existing location as his backdrop, whereas Lewis' Floral Heights is a cross-section of the aggregated suburbs of an area most famous for its industrial mass production, but nonetheless, both examples are equally representative of their time and geographical location.

Despite their differences in terms of suburbanisation, there are also unmistakable parallels between Lewis' Midwest and Fitzgerald's Long Island. Both East and West Egg and Floral Heights serve as a retreat, or as an escape from the city; both are early representatives of bedroom communities. The peace and quiet of the suburbs is enjoyed after a day of work in the city and at the weekends – with this being true of seemingly every working male in *Babbitt*, and in *The Great Gatsby* of the narrator in particular –, whereas the city serves as a source for the money, as well as for the entertainment and cultural stimulation that sustains the outskirts. In this respect, not much has changed conceptually to this day, with the exception that a large number of suburbs have become considerably more self-sustaining over the course of time. However, Floral Heights, with its archetypal characters and unassuming architecture, is far more recognisable as a typical suburban environment from a present-day point of view, which is certainly one of the reasons that *The Great Gatsby* has remained surprisingly neglected in the suburban discourse.

For reasons to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, during the second leap in suburban development starting in the mid-1940s, the outskirts of the United States predominantly developed following the example of Floral Heights rather than suburban Long Island. In the period from Black Tuesday in 1929 until the end of World War II, building activities stalled, which resulted in a deficit in housing that needed fixing quickly and cost-effectively. Due to its unprecedented subsequent growth, suburbia developed into a far more strongly noticeable cultural phenomenon, and its postwar implications have remained surprisingly stable to this day. With its cultural impact rising steeply, authors and screenwriters were quick to embrace the topic of suburbia, and criticism

towards this landscape began to be voiced more loudly in the arts, as the selected literary examples demonstrate.

2 From House in the Country to Box on a Slab: The Rampant Suburban Expansion After World War II

The end of World War II marked an endpoint in the history of the United States on more than one level, as it was the conclusion of a difficult era that had begun not with the country's involvement in the war, but more than a decade earlier. The period of wealth and excess in the Roaring Twenties ended abruptly with the October 1929 Stock Market Crash that led into the ten-year Great Depression of the 1930s. The Great Depression, the largest worldwide financial crisis of the twentieth century, was then followed by World War II – a war which proved to be beneficial for terminating the financial crisis in the United States, but which caused a crisis of its own. When the war ended in 1945, people were desperate for a change, and for a new beginning.

The glorious rise of suburbia promised one such change. In fact, even during the depression of the 1930s, the idea of suburbia had gained utopian momentum. Highly symbolic of the utopian suburban as well as urban vision of the time was the 1939 World's Fair in New York, at which the General Motors pavilion, with its exhibition and ride "Futurama," promoted a consumerist and corporate utopia in which "work could be forgotten in homes that aesthetically reconciled the machine with nature" (Gartman 185-186). The exhibition showed a futuristic yet plausible version of the United States in the year 1960, a country connected by interstate highways. General Motors suggested that automobiles would become affordable for the average citizen, and by displaying the vast large-plot suburbs that the new highway system would make possible, the suburban lifestyle was made palatable to the large number of visitors to the pavilion. However, not only the American people, but even avant-garde architects like Le Corbusier, who spread the message of his concept of "La Ville Radieuse" (French for "The Radiant City") throughout the 1930s, seemed to embrace the process of suburbanisation: "The cities will be part of the country; I shall live 30 miles from my office in one direction, under a pine tree; my secretary will live 30 miles away from it too, in the other direction, under another pine tree. We shall both have our own car" (qtd. in Mehaffy 193).

The suburban utopia of the 1930s had considerable effects on demographics in the United States after the war. Even though the first burst of suburban growth took place in the 1920s, the developments following the end of the war were unprecedented and their scale barely imaginable. The percentage of people living in metropolitan areas rose from roughly 48 in 1940 to 63

in 1960, meaning that the heretofore predominantly rural country rapidly morphed into an urbanised one. What is particularly interesting in this respect is that the population of the central cities remained stable at 33 and 32 per cent, respectively. In other words, the suburbs alone were responsible for this shift from rural to metropolitan, with the percentage of suburbanites rising from 15 to 31 during these twenty years; within this short time, the suburban population of the United States had doubled. The architectural expansion of the suburbs after World War II is a material manifestation of general trends in American society and culture, that is, "a massive expansion of the middle class, a heightened valorization of the nuclear family and consequent reification of gender identities, a trend – both utopian and exclusionary in nature – toward cultural homogenization, and a collapsing of the distinction between public and private spaces" (Beuka 2).

The Selling and (Architectural) Mass Production of the Suburban Dream

With these figures and social trends in mind, it is indisputable that people were looking for a change, and that they were hoping to find this change in the American suburb, in their own dream house built in a modernised Eden. This dream, already fostered by the Industrial Revolution and the ensuing degeneration of living conditions in central cities, was within reach for the middle class for the first time in the postwar years:

> In America, with its superabundance of cheap land, simple property laws, social mobility, mania for profit, zest for practical invention, and Bible-drunk sense of history, the yearning to escape industrialism expressed itself as a renewed search for Eden. America reinvented that paradise, described so briefly and vaguely in the book of Genesis, called it Suburbia, and put it up for sale. (Kunstler 37)

The rising popularity of this living environment was partly due to advertising and propaganda, or the selling process of suburbia. The 1950s are frequently referred to as the golden age of advertising, and the effects of this medium on the public were tremendous. In fact, suburbs were often advertised as a product themselves, which goes hand in hand with Kunstler's observation that "[a]s Americans in the twentieth century thought less in terms of building towns – in the sense of creating coherent communities – they thought more and more about acquiring a product called 'home'" (Kunstler 165). The mass marketing of the suburbs started as early as the 1940s, when the future did not look bright for America, when the morale was low, and when people were in need of new hope. Therefore, a pamphlet published by Revere Copper and Brass Inc. was encouragingly titled "After Total War Can Come Total Living." The pamphlet

pictured a couple looking over a then futuristic suburban landscape, and it was part of a series that was meant to serve as a reminder that, given the country would keep producing consumer goods, there would be a glorious future for America after the war (Upton 234).

Apart from being explicitly sold as a product, a striking amount of advertising in the postwar years also used American suburbia as a backdrop to sell products of a diverse range. There were images of happy families, couples, housewives and husbands in front of or in their suburban houses, on their lawns or in the streets advertising goods such as cars, lawnmowers, detergent, beer or charcoal grills, to name only a few examples. As diverse as these products may have been, the image of suburbia brought across in the messages was invariably one of idyllic harmony and happiness, as well as of positively connotated materialism. Moreover, the colours in suburban advertising were warm and welcoming, with pastel hues predominating in the displayed scenes. The colour tones linked the products and the suburbs to nature, and they thus struck a chord with people's yearning for an idyllic or even quasi-Arcadian living environment. As a consequence, the companies selling their products also sold a misleading image of suburbia that burned itself into the public's collective conscious.

Despite the power of mass communication and advertising, however, the most decisive factors in the rise of mass suburbanisation and architectural mass production were of a political nature. As a case in point, veterans returning from the war were offered special deals on outskirt housing in the so-called "G.I. Bill." Furthermore, the United States government emphasised the idea of single-family homeownership, and real estate lobbyists as well as a number of high-ranking politicians saw public housing as a communist endeavour (Nicolaides and Wiese 257). Regardless of the efforts and promises on the part of politicians, however, what the majority of suburbanites ended up with was mass-produced architecture and an unsatisfactory quality of construction in a predominantly inhospitable environment; a "transformed landscape on the outskirts of American cities – tract after tract of similar homes, amid infant trees and shrubs, on freshly bulldozed land. The barrenness of the landscape contributed to a popular sense that these communities were, truly, the product of an assembly line" (Nicolaides and Wiese 258).

The assembly line analogy seems appropriate, not least due to the fact that it was Fordism that first introduced mass production to architecture, and it began to shape certain suburban developments even before the postwar period. Furthermore, architecturally speaking, suburbs were springing up like mushrooms due to an increased demand for housing after the lack of building activities during the war, as well as due to rising birth rates and new production

methods. The shortage of housing at the end of the war turned into a crisis when "[m]illions of families were forced to double up, while others found makeshift shelter in automobiles, grain bins, and converted chicken coops" (Nicolaides and Wiese 257). Cheap architectural mass production in the suburban environment appeared to be the answer to the rising demand for housing, but it also led to the search for a postwar Arcadia quickly turning into a nightmare. Nonetheless, mass production in architecture was even encouraged by architectural movements like the German Bauhaus with its uniform worker housing, or by modernist architects embracing the machine aesthetic. One of these architects was Le Corbusier, who generally saw "architecture and urban design as a means of organizing society" (Smith 275):

> Building should be the concern of heavy industry, and the component parts of houses should be mass-produced.
> A mass-production mentality must be created:
> a frame of mind for building mass-produced houses,
> a frame of mind for living in mass-produced houses,
> a frame of mind for imagining mass-produced houses.
>
> (Le Corbusier, *Modulor* 34)

Reflecting architectural mass production and expansion in suburbia, there were similar trends in the social realm. As a case in point, the American middle class expanded rapidly after the war, not least due to a redefinition of what middle class meant. According to Nicolaides and Wiese, the term middle class less and less referred to occupation, but rather to material possessions as well as to a specific way of life, and suburban homeownership played a crucial part in this. The authors claim that "[i]f you lived in a particular place, owned a home, and fit in, you were considered middle class" (Nicolaides and Wiese 258). Furthermore, there was a growing tolerance of religion and ethnicity, if not yet race, and thus the dream of suburban life became attainable for a wider range of people.

As for gender roles, it comes as no surprise that stereotypes were reinforced in the process of suburbanisation, not least due to corresponding depictions in advertising. These gendered images of suburban living showed the female as the "homemaker achieving fulfilment in the confines of her well-run, well-stocked suburban home" (Nicolaides and Wiese 258). Even though many suburban women worked outside the home, Murphy, for instance, argues that suburbia was commonly considered "a feminist's worst nightmare" ("Identical Boxes" 323). As portrayed in John Cheever's short story "An Educated American Woman" (1963), for instance, suburban husbands were often unsupportive of their wives' aspirations, so that women became trapped inside their architec-

tural home – a circumstance taken to extremes in Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972), and also strongly present in Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). What is more, as observed by Williams (149), "[t]he suburban house […] told women what they were and were not supposed to feel, and how they were to look and behave." As a consequence, the architectural suburban house increasingly turned into a prison-like trap for many female homemakers, and it dictated their personalities. The average housewife was thus far from finding the fulfilment so commonly advertised, but the stereotype of the happy suburban female homemaker was popularised so extensively that it has lasted until the present and has found its modern equivalent in the "soccer mom."

Despite the reality of personal non-fulfilment, as well as the poor and tasteless design of architecture, suburbia continued to be advertised and marketed as a modern utopia, essentially. However, as the definition of the term utopia suggests, it is a place that does not, and cannot exist. Etymologically, utopia is either a non-existent (Greek: οὐ-ηόπος) or a beautiful (Greek: εὖ-ηόπος) place. It used to be defined as "[a]ny imaginary or mythical place […] imagined as existing in some remote location on earth," but now refers to "[a]n imagined or hypothetical place, system, or state of existence in which everything is perfect […]" (*OED*). In the suburban utopia, it is especially the idea of beauty, perfection and remoteness, in combination with the idea of the Arcadian idyll promoted in advertising, that people were drawn to when they envisioned themselves living in this environment. After the chaotic times of the 1930s and the first half of the 1940s, the utopian ideal of perfect order was what Americans were looking for, and many aspects of the design of the suburbs promised to fulfil this dream of well-defined structures and rationality.

In fact, the parallels between suburban and utopian architectural order are striking. According to Borsi (7), "[w]hen utopians design a perfect social and political structure, their spatial formulation of it remains elementary, being based on geometrical figures like the circle and square, on regular alignments, and on repetitive symmetry." These geometrical characteristics are reflected in social patterns and modes of behaviour or thinking. They include regularity, order and rationality, and it is especially in the emerging mass-produced suburb of the postwar years that they are also spatially reflected in the built environment in terms of both architecture and urban planning. In fact, it appears as though in the mass production of the suburban environment, planners took their inspiration from Thomas More's description of the island of Utopia itself:

> The island contains fifty-four city-states, all spacious and magnificent, identical in language, traditions, customs, and laws. They are similar also in layout and everywhere, as far as the nature of the ground permits, similar even in appearance. […]

> The streets are well laid out both for traffic and for protection against the winds. The buildings, which are far from mean, are set together in a long row, continuous through the block and faced by a corresponding one. The house fronts of the respective blocks are divided by an avenue twenty feet broad. […] [A]t first the houses were low, mere cabins and huts, haphazardly made with any wood at hand, with mud-plastered walls. They had thatched the steeply sloping roofs with straw. But now all the homes are of handsome appearance with three stories. (61-66)

In the same way that Utopus transformed the island into an architectural landscape defined by a rigid order, by symmetry and equality, architects and planners transformed the American urban fringes into a built and social environment reminiscent of More's imaginary community. Repetition in architecture and social uniformity became key components of the suburban developments of the postwar period, as underlined in Lewis Mumford's *The City in History*. The author considers the suburbs to be "a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses," with these houses being "lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold […]" (*City in History* 553). Mumford thus makes a clear reference to More when he describes the shape and appearance of the suburbs, and he disputes their utopianism in the same way that Utopia's own utopianism has been disputed.

Learning from Levittown?

Despite suburbanisation having gained significant momentum, the mass production of the monotonous suburban landscape was still in its infancy in the mid-1940s. While suburbanisation as such was in full swing, the large-scale mass production of identical houses and their replication in countless localities was a new concept that was primarily promoted by the building firm Levitt and Sons. Abraham Levitt and his sons William and Alfred were the founders and planners of Levittown, New York, the first mass-produced suburb of the United States. The impact of the Levittown model was so vast that William Levitt, who took over the company in 1954, is now commonly referred to as the father of modern suburbia.

The first Levittown, originally named Island Trees, was built between 1947 and 1951.[1] It was in 1946 that Abraham Levitt, together with his sons, began to acquire land on the former agrarian fields of Long Island in order to realise his vision of a thoroughly planned suburban community. 17,447 homes ended up being built for 65,000 residents, and the Levitts "planned every foot of it […]. Every store, filling station, school, house, apartment, church, color, tree, and shrub" (qtd. in G. S. Thomas 135). Levittown was the first suburban community that was artificially planned and built from scratch, both architecturally and socially. Houses were mass-produced with an emphasis on fast building and cost efficiency, and the residents of Levittown had to be white – for commercial reasons, according to the founder of the suburb. The contract signed by every homeowner stated that the dwelling must be occupied by members of the Caucasian race. As Levitt explains, "[w]e can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two" (qtd. in K. Jackson 241). In spite of – or possibly even because of – the uniformity and monotonousness of architecture, as well as the social homogeneity of the community, Levittown quickly turned into a symbol of postwar America and became the architectural incarnation of the American Dream. It offered affordable housing and perceived safety on one's own little plot of land, and it thus "fostered an exodus of white homeowner wannabes from New York […] seeking to fulfil the American dream of an affordable home with a meticulously mowed front lawn and a backyard" (Roberts 191).

Levittown was, so to speak, the birth of the dream of the white-picket-fence neighbourhood that is still engraved into the American collective conscious despite the fact that, for the most part, this dream has little to do with the present reality. The houses in Levittown have been altered and customised, the population has aged, the properties are considerably more expensive, and even though racial minorities are still vastly underrepresented, Levittown is no longer merely a community for white people. However, owing to its planning principles and building practices, Levittown has had a lasting impact on the history of American suburbia, and has become deeply ingrained into American culture, both aesthetically and conceptually. It has served as a model for uncountable other suburban developments in the United States since the 1950s. Furthermore, the significance of Levittown for American culture is reflected in numerous case studies, books and documentary films, and this historically important suburb

1 Levitt and Sons went on to build three other Levittowns in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Puerto Rico.

remains an object of research interest, as well as a source of inspiration for architectural developers and critics from various academic backgrounds.

Despite Levittown's popularity among prospective residents and its significance for the history of American suburbia, criticism towards this particular suburb, and towards architectural mass production at large, was loud. Modernist architects, for instance, rejected mass-produced suburbs despite their positive attitude towards mass production in other domains, possibly because they were unable to participate in the design process. Working Americans "demanded two criteria that effectively eliminated modernists from the market – single-family, detached houses and decorative insulation from reminders of rationalized work" (Gartman 216).

What the Long Island suburb was most criticised for, apart from its racial exclusiveness, was its architectural monotony consisting of Cape Cod and ranch-style houses. In the first stage of development, the Cape Cod cottage was even the sole building style in Levittown, conveying "the individualism of agrarian life, while simultaneously asserting a community through conformity to established aesthetic standards" (Gartman 223). The ranch house, or Forty-Niner, as it was called in Levittown, was introduced in the second stage of development, as were strongly curved streets that deviated from the original urban-style grid pattern (Gartman 224-225). Originally, each house was equipped with a picture window, lacked a basement, had radiant floor heating, a tiled bath and a kitchen, two ground-floor bedrooms, a standard-sized living room with a built-in standard-sized television set, and an expansion attic (Clark 221). Houses were thus strongly standardised except for the incorporation of minor consumer demands and a number of differing floor plans. This monotony was rooted in matters of cost- and time-effectiveness, but also in the fact that the Levitts built for a specific type of customer, which raises the issue of the relationship between architecture and mass culture once again. While in the 1920s – as seen in *Babbitt* – social standardisation was architecturally and materially mirrored in the interior of suburban homes, the 1940s increasingly extended this standardisation to the exterior. Standardisation thus began to affect suburban architecture on a much larger and more publicly accessible scale.

In the case of Levittown, it is a matter of debate whether the suburb was standardised according to the needs and wishes of prospective buyers, or whether these needs and wishes were merely projected onto them, resulting in social standardisation. Taking into account the marketing practices of Levitt and Sons, it appears as though much of the planning and design of the suburb and its homes was indeed a reaction to changing tastes. William and Alfred Levitt produced their houses at a never-before-seen scale, employing assembly

line techniques and highly aggressive marketing to sell their products to the consumer. However, similar to common practices in the automobile industry, the Levitts made modifications to their standard architectural features on a yearly basis, replacing unpopular elements and redesigning exteriors in order to conform to or even be ahead of the tastes of the market (Berke and Harris 182).

Regardless of the direction of standardisation, it cannot be denied that the narrowing of consumer choice finds its reverberation in society. People are told what their demands should be, what their houses should look like and with what appliances these houses should be fitted. A socially standardising effect is invariably the outcome. This issue goes back to the argument between Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on mass culture, and on whether mass production of consumer goods helps to develop individuality by enabling the consumer to make certain choices – as argued by Benjamin –, or whether mass production merely gives the consumer pseudo-choices, and thus leads to standardised individuals – as argued by Adorno (Archer 13-14). However, since architectural choice in Levittown was limited to such an extent that there was virtually no choice, expressing individuality through the built environment was a fundamentally impossible endeavour.

In terms of mass culture, mass production or an overarching homogeneity, the case of Levittown illustrates the course of development of the American postwar suburb and highlights its potential downsides and detriments. Nonetheless, considering the rising demand for housing in the suburbs, mass production seemed to be an adequate and logical solution. The social and environmental consequences of this process could hardly be foreseen when the first houses were built in Levittown, nor could the immense replication rate of this suburb.

The problems that accompanied the suburbanisation of the United States were soon commented on and satirised by various American writers. Similar to Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald catching the zeitgeist of the suburban 1920s within the context of mass culture, wealth and decadence, a number of exemplary narratives that portray the grievances of the emerging suburban lifestyle after the war were published between 1945 and 1960. Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* is the commonly cited literary example of this period, and to this day, it remains one of the most referenced books when it comes to depictions of American suburbanism. The book, in certain ways similar to *Babbitt*, famously deals with the collision of collectivism and individuality, the need to fit into an organised corporate society, and the malaise of the commuting businessman. The protagonist, Tom Rath, is trapped between two versions of the American Dream, that is, between professional success in the city and family life in the suburb. As Archer (256) points out, "a

fine house and family in a suburb are not simply trappings of the entrepreneurial dream but rather a distinct goal in themselves – and quite possibly at odds with the conditions of career advancement." However, in order to focus on the conflicting ideas of Arcadia-like utopia and suburban nightmare, as well as on architectural mass production and the planning mistakes that were made in the artificial creation of the suburban landscape, this chapter deals with two lesser-known comical and satirical publications of the 1940s and 1950s. The works discussed are Eric Hodgins' comedy novel *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, which was adapted into the eponymous film starring Cary Grant, and the often-mentioned but little-analysed satirical novel-cum-fictional-report *The Crack in the Picture Window* by John Keats, a broadside at the suburban sprawl of the postwar period. *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* and *The Crack in the Picture Window* were selected due to the fact that these books have been vastly neglected in the suburban literary discourse. Suburbia became a truly major topic in literature in the 1960s with authors such as John Updike and John Cheever, and this is mirrored in the academic output on the suburban imagination. Moreover, from an architectural point of view, the two selected novels are extraordinarily humorous, satirical and critical accounts of the creation of the suburban landscape, and, above all, of its misplanning. Although they are written in a report-like style, and although their narratives leave little room for literary analysis, their representations of historical and architectural developments and processes in the creation of the American suburb are outstanding. Juxtaposing expectations and reality, the respective narratives of the novels take the reader from the characters' hopes of finding a new Arcadia to the reality of the often-depicted architectural suburban nightmare.

2.1. Eric Hodgins' *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, or the Search for an Exurban Arcadia

When it comes to the search for a suburban Arcadia in the New York City metropolitan area after World War II, the nostalgia associated with New England made this core region of American history the ideal getaway from the ills of urbanity. Concrete and steel were gradually traded in for pastures and trees, dense high-rise architecture for vast open spaces, and man-made urban parks for pristine landscapes. Similar to the English Puritans in the seventeenth century, who fled religious persecution and found their "promised land" in New England, New Yorkers, too, left the city in increasing numbers after the war in search

of new beginnings, finding their "promised land" outside the crowded island of Manhattan in aptly named places like New Canaan or New Haven, Connecticut.

Eric Hodgins' 1946 novel *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* is a humorous account of the desire felt by many in the mid-1940s to leave New York City for the hills of Connecticut. The home built by the Blandings is consistently referred to as a country house in the narrative, but it is unmistakable from a present-day point of view that what is portrayed by the author is the early suburbanisation of a specific imaginary geographical area to the north of New York City.[2] The house may be located in an idyllic landscape with hills, orchards and brooks at the beginning of the story, but it is mentioned early on that a considerable amount of real estate activity is expected in the area, meaning that the city is in the process of reaching out further beyond its limits and shaping a newly emerging suburban environment. Frequent allusions to more and more city dwellers moving to the area, as well as the Blandings' own worries regarding the suburbanisation of their newfound paradise, emphasise this historic stage in the development of the Connecticut suburbs.

Both the story and the writing style of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* are unique when considering the time in which the book was written. In a short note about the author printed in the edition used here, the experimental value of the book becomes apparent in the claim that it is entirely "unlike anything [Hodgins] has done before. Or, you might say, unlike anything anyone has ever done before." The novel evolved out of a short story titled "Mr. Blandings Builds His Castle," published in the American business magazine *Fortune* in April 1946 and illustrated by the prolific cartoonist William Steig. Admittedly, there is little story to the book, as it mainly deals with the vicissitudes experienced by the Blandings in purchasing land outside the city, and in designing and building their dream house. Rather than on action, the primary focus is on design and building details, monetary expenses, legal problems and, arguably above all, emotional struggles. Despite the fact that the narrative is limited as far as events are concerned, however, Hodgins manages to absorb the reader extraordinarily well by making his characters relatable, congenial and sympathy-arousing, as well as by making use of his sharp wit and exceptional sense of irony.

The reading experience becomes even more engaging in view of the fact that Hodgins drew his inspiration for the story from his own struggles with buying land and building a house. In a 1992 *New York Times* article titled "From Mr. Blandings' Nightmare, a Couple's Dream House Stirs," Patricia Grandjean

2 The terms "suburban" and "exurban" will therefore be used rather interchangeably in this chapter.

recounts the story of the actual house built by Hodgins in New Milford in the Berkshire Mountains, Connecticut. The article goes into detail on how the author ended up spending five times more than originally budgeted, on how he had to sell the house and unsuccessfully tried to buy it back after receiving money for the film rights to *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, and on how it has changed ownership over the decades. The building still exists today, and what proved to be an architectural nightmare for Hodgins at least provided abundant humorous material for the novel, and was turned into a film starring some of the biggest names in Hollywood at the time.

Et in Exurbia Ego

The novel begins with Mr. and Mrs. Blandings' first visit to the estate they later end up purchasing, and with their instant infatuation with the peaceful landscape far away from the bustle of New York City. The narrator emphasises that the Blandings had always been city people, and that it is only recently that they have begun to feel an urge to leave their apartment and tie the family of four together more closely in their own house, which they hoped would serve as a foundation for many generations to come. At the time *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* was published, suburban architecture was supposed to create a contrast to or even reject the city within the context of a semi-rural retreat, and when it comes to the suburban house itself, "its evolution was reflected less in trends in architectural styles than in how changing house types and floor plans reflected changing concepts of the ideal family that the house was designed to support" (Ames 234). The idea of the idealised nuclear family is given a strong presence in the novel, and suburbia was advertised as the perfect environment for this social unit at the time. It was thought that "[a] detached single-family home catered best to the needs of the nuclear family," and that suburbia "reinforce[d] a narrow vision of normative family life" (Nicolaides and Wiese 258). Architecture and geographical location were therefore considered crucial factors in shaping and mirroring the core family. The detached house was considered the architectural embodiment and shell of this social unit, and the outskirts of American cities, where space for building was ample, were the ideal place for the materialisation of this kind of architecture. Moreover, suburbia, due to its status as a grey area between the urban and the rural, appeared to offer the ideal compromise between family, recreational and professional life.

For the Blandings, moving to the suburbs was a slowly progressing process over the years. Their apartments became bigger according to Mr. Blandings' income, and the family slowly made their way northwards towards more wealthy areas within the bounds of the borough of Manhattan. Fresh out of Yale,

Mr. Blandings landed his first job in an advertising agency in the immediate proximity of Grand Central and moved into a one-room-and-bath apartment in the East Thirties. Upon being promoted and increasing his social and thus architectural mobility after a few years, he was able to afford an extra room in the East Forties. When he got married shortly thereafter, the newlywed couple moved another ten streets to the north, to the East Fifties, and then later, when their first baby was born, they skipped fifteen blocks and leapt to the East Seventies, where they ended up staying until they built their house on Bald Mountain.

The reason that the family remained in the city for so long is that the children seemed in no immediate need of a natural environment, but as soon as Mr. Blandings' income was adequately comfortable, their living situation began to feel unsatisfactory. The couple realised that money would allow them to expand their modest architectural horizon, and that in fact, they felt the pressure of others to do so. As a consequence, they half-heartedly began searching for a piece of land with an old house in the countryside, driven by other people's expectations rather than by their own inner urge. Their attitude changed rather quickly, however, as their instincts relating to "nest-building" – a primal image that brings out the primitiveness in us, and a symbol of the physical pleasure people experience when withdrawing into their corner (Bachelard 91) – became more dominant. As Schittich (9) observes, "[e]ver since the primitive hut – the Ur-form of man-made shelter – the private house has symbolized a roof over the head, the desire for privacy, for a piece of land we can call our own." The Blandings, having become increasingly possessed by such primordial values, were seized by the land fever, and soon realised that they had been missing something all along, namely "the peace and security that only the fair land itself could provide […]" (16). The Old Hackett Property on Bald Mountain appears to provide precisely that. Having found the place of their dreams, the Blandings decide to leave the city behind and put an offer on this country house located a hundred miles from Manhattan. The dream of the house in the countryside, and of the peacefulness and idyll of its immediate surroundings, begins to almost possess them. The farm dwelling, the apple orchard, oak grove, trout stream, the hayfields and barns, the spatial seclusion, the incredible view, the original beams, the acreage and the paved highway promised in the advertisement seem to be the physical manifestation of their dream, and all of a sudden, life on the crowded island of Manhattan becomes unbearable in comparison.

The oppressive nature of Manhattan, which is due to the island's crowdedness as well as its intimidating architecture, is emphasised at the beginning of the film adaptation, when the narrator equates the borough with a "drifting modern

giant of concrete and steel, reaching to the heavens" (Potter, *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*). The mise-en-scène visually emphasises this statement, and it is highly reminiscent of the heavy and overwhelming architectural feel of the upper city in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, as well as of the crowdedness of the lower city of the film. The Blandings' aspirations towards exurban abundance of space and beautiful architecture are therefore rooted in the architectural and social ills, as well as in the oppressiveness of the urban built environment in the film, which is less the case in the book version. In the novel, the Blandings' sudden urge to move to the countryside is an almost stereotypical depiction of the need of a particular social stratum for a de-urbanised, or a quieter, more peaceful, architecturally less oppressive and more orderly life after the war. The Blandings represent the average middle- to upper-middle-class family of the mid-1940s suddenly developing a desire to de-urbanise for no immediately accessible reason other than it simply being the zeitgeist.

As noted earlier, the Blandings' desire to de-urbanise may be rooted in primordial instincts, but advertising and the Arcadian or even paradisiac picture it painted of suburban living was certainly a factor, too. Suburbia and the image of the dream house were heavily marketed in the 1950s, and their romanticisation and idyllic representation at the time strongly corresponds to the Blandings' own musings regarding their life in the country. In fact, the mental visualisation of life in their dream house and the feelings evoked through this are more important to them than the material house itself – which points towards the strong emphasis on mental images within the framework of the suburban dream. The actual architecture they encounter on Bald Mountain is certainly not the driving factor in their decision to purchase this piece of land, since the architectural part of the property is in a rather decrepit state, or, as Mrs. Blandings observes, "it all seems rather terribly ramshackle" (19). Their desire for a life in the country and owning their private house is largely rooted in mental visualisations and daydreams about their future in this environment, with these visualisations bearing strong resemblance to the Biblical story of creation, but also to the story of the expulsion from paradise.

The Blandings certainly have a premonition about their move when daydreaming about their expulsion from Bald Mountain. What seems to be an Edenic landscape, an Arcadian idyll, can quickly turn into a site of erosion and decay; order is followed by chaos, dreams by disillusion, entering paradise by expulsion therefrom. The image of various insects chewing on leaves and fruits represents the destructive forces of nature, the beginning of the end of the Edenic exurban dream, and it is reminiscent of the Biblical locust plague. It also echoes Mrs. Blandings' plan to renovate the snake fence, which symbolically

and linguistically implies an effort to keep the creature away, and to keep the rural paradise intact.[3] In the end, flooding leaves Bald Mountain eroded; the Blandings are expelled from the Garden of Eden by natural forces, and resonant of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Biblical paradise, they end up "naked, starving, and alone" (38).

On the author's part, all these Biblical references are certainly an anticipation or premonition of the course that the American suburb was taking even in this early stage of urban exodus, and they must thus be read allegorically. For instance, the Blandings are heavily worried about their idyll being destroyed through the suburbanisation of the area, that is, through the arrival of human "locusts" from the city. Bald Mountain is a two-and-a-half-hour journey from New York City, but they fear that there will be a considerable contraction of time and space due to improvements in modes of transport, and that the city will infest Lansdale, the fictional Connecticut community to which the Old Hackett Property belongs, before long. As Mr. Blandings phrases it, "I don't want to see Lansdale become a suburb, but I'll bet it will" (43). However, suburbanisation and the ensuing fight for the best piece of land is obviously underway already, and the image of the Blandings standing naked and starving on barren land must be read in the context of the built environment depriving people of nature.

A straightforward indication that suburbanisation is impacting the area already is that Hodgins explicitly mentions that Lansdale is located in the vicinity of two arterial highways, and that the Old Hackett Property finds itself in the middle of two railroad systems, with two train stations nearby. In terms of traffic infrastructure, Lansdale is thus an ideal rural retreat for commuters, even though the distance to New York City is considerable for the 1940s. The Blandings' fear of the death of the exurban dream is thus not rooted in paranoia, but in logical conclusions about how their own desire for a peaceful life may also be that of other city dwellers, and about how the infrastructure in Lansdale is an enabling factor in this. Once the exurban dream is dreamt and turned into a reality by too many people, the dream dies in the suburbanisation that is made possible on account of the existing infrastructure.

The "Lamps" of Exurban Architecture

Apart from underlining their fear of an imminent suburbanisation of Lansdale, the Blandings' worries about the death of their rural paradise, or about the demise of their Garden of Eden, also foreshadow the turmoil the family have to endure in order to fulfil their dream of ownership. The purchasing process

3 In reality, the term "snake fence" refers to the style of the fence rather than to its purpose.

is draining both mentally and financially speaking, and it later turns out that the buildings that are included in the price are thoroughly worthless. Mr. Funkhauser, the first architect they hire to remodel the house, is enchanted by it and becomes overly enthusiastic, pronouncing the run-down building "one of the truest gems of Revolutionary architecture" (58).[4] However, upon learning from an engineer that tearing down the building is advisable, the tension between the Blandings' love for this plot of land and the ever-increasing expenses increases, especially given that the architectural value of the property seems to have made up more than three-quarters of the eventual selling price.

Interestingly, Hodgins named the chapter in which the architectural non-value of the house becomes evident the "First Lamp of Architecture." He borrows this title from an 1849 extended essay by British art critic John Ruskin titled *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in which the author lays out his seven principles concerning the art of building. Ruskin's first "lamp" of architecture is sacrifice, meaning that architecture is dedication to God, a translation of man's love and obedience into the built environment.

> [The Spirit of Sacrifice] prompts us to the offering of precious things, merely because they are precious, not because they are useful or necessary. It is a spirit, for instance, which of two marbles, equally beautiful, applicable and durable, would choose the more costly, because it was so, and of two kinds of decoration, equally effective, would choose the more elaborate because it was so, in order that it might in the same compass present more cost and more thought. It is therefore most unreasoning and enthusiastic, and perhaps less negatively defined, as the opposite of the prevalent feeling of modern times, which desires to produce the largest results at the least cost. (Ruskin 30-31)

Ruskin's first lamp of architecture ties in with the Blandings' situation regarding their house. Its location at the top of Bald Mountain is likened to an altar, and the site therefore has a natural sacral property. Although the decision to tear down the old house and build a new one is certainly a question of necessity given its state of decay, it cannot be denied that on this naturally formed altar,

4 The involvement of an architect is an interesting detail within the historical context of the suburbanisation of the United States, as suburbia was primarily shaped by general contractors after the war. It also points towards the size of the project, as observed in the differentiation that Harris and Larkham (99) make between the three ways of building houses in the suburbs: architects are employed for more substantial buildings, while the other two options involve paying a general contractor or custom builder, or, for more modest projects, providing one's own plans from plan books or magazines.

a more cost-intensive new house is a better architectural sacrifice to God due to the enhanced value that ensues.

The next chapter, also consistent with Ruskin's extended essay, is titled "The Second Lamp of Architecture," referring to the principle of truth. Truth to materials and to the display of construction is Ruskin's second principle that architecture should follow, and it is worked into the context of the novel slightly more elusively than his first "lamp." This chapter is the point in time when the Blandings once and for all abandon the idea of restoring the old house, even though it turns out later that "[t]he error of buying the house was not corrected by the error of tearing it down" (82-83). It would simply not be worth the labour to renovate the building considering the poor state of materials and construction. Even though their new architect, Mr. Simms, assures them that any standing structure can be repaired in theory, he advises them to start anew, since restoring the house would be as expensive as building a new one. The Blandings are at ease with this solution, and acknowledging the problem has given them a new sense of direction. They wipe the slate clean and are pleased with Mr. Simms' honesty that stands in stark contrast to the architectural visions of Mr. Funkhauser, "an overeducated Brooklyn boy trying to create a phony château out of an old drover's home" (73); an architect "doodling happily on his sketch tissue, dreaming towers and battlements, spires and turrets, onto a lousy old wreck of a farmhouse that had neither sills nor chimney to support its own crumbling weight" (68). It is likely to be this honesty displayed by Mr. Simms, in combination with his straightforward approach to architectural construction, in which the parallel to Ruskin can be drawn.

When looking at the differences between Mr. Funkhauser and Mr. Simms, it is undeniable that Hodgins underlines the conflicting approaches to design and the constrictions within the architectural profession in the postwar years. Whereas the former is more of a visionary artist, the latter has a more down-to-earth approach with cleaner and more practical designs. In the context of the suburban expansion of the time, it comes as no surprise that the author mocks Mr. Funkhauser, as vision and imagination were out of place in an environment in which uniformity and simplicity were to become the rule. This dominance of uniformity and simplicity, it can be argued, was not primarily rooted in specific cultural trends or tastes, but in the difficult situation of the architect during World War II, which, according to Nobel (58), made architects favour a technical image. When it comes to style, they favoured modern architecture, with two of the leading principles being "form follows function" – a phrase coined by American architect Louis Sullivan –, and the rejection of ornamentation as promoted by Austrian architect Adolf Loos, who thought that "[t]he evolution

of culture [was] synonymous with the removal of ornamentation from objects of everyday use" (qtd. in F. Scott 136). The predominantly uniform suburban settlements that came into being at the time were also reminiscent of Bauhaus worker housing, although the Bauhaus promoted the tenement block rather than the single-family house:

> The aesthetic-social dogmas of the Bauhaus were wildly reductive. Anything but a flat roof was *verboten*, because towers, cupolas, et cetera, symbolized the crowns worn by monarchs. Anything but an absolutely plain sheer facade was show-offy and, worse, dishonest, because it disguised a building's true structure. Ornament was a voluptuary indulgence only the rich could afford, and in the coming utopia there would be no rich people, or everybody would be equally rich, or equally poor, or something like that, so ornament was out. Color was banned. The postwar avant-garde scaled new heights of puritanism. (Kunstler 71)

Nobel states that in the case of the United States, "[b]y making other types of architecture impossible, the war effectively enforced a *de facto* modernism in all construction: buildings were built without ornament, simple volumes and finishes were favoured, and inventive structural systems were explored." There was a general atmosphere of impossible schedules, tight budgets and limited resources, and "[t]his privileged the habits of thought and methods of modern architecture, and it virtually mandated functional design" (Nobel 58). This circumstance is mirrored in Mr. Simms' portfolio, which consists of clean and simple buildings. Despite their simplicity, however, his houses seem infinitely restful, and they breathe peace, ease, security, taste, charm, serenity and comfort. In other words, they are a rejection of contemporary urban design and contemporary urban values, and they represent the architectural suburban ideal then and now.

Mr. Simms' portfolio of simple buildings also perfectly matches the Blandings' expectations towards their house, as what they want is comfort in terms of space, design and appliances. The house envisioned by the couple specifically has the following characteristics: it needs to be simple, "a two-story house in quiet, modern, good taste; frame and brick-veneer construction; something to blend with the older architectural examples [...]" dotting the landscape, but it must not be a mindless imitation of past times. What they want is to retrofit the old house with the modifications determined by the obvious difference between the architecture of the eighteenth and the twentieth century, as well as by the purpose the house needs to fulfil construction-wise in the context of Mr. Blandings' background in advertising, "which should somehow be exemplified in the New" (75), as opposed to the purpose the house needed to fulfil in the

context of farming. Architecturally speaking, what the Blandings want is not a country house, but a typical suburban home; something simple but reasonably tasteful, something that blends in; no exact imitation of a historical architectural exemplar, but a modern interpretation thereof – as is commonly the case with the mock Tudor or Colonial houses encountered in suburbia; four walls that are fully adapted to their progressive lifestyle, yet that do not compromise the family's search for a modern Arcadia. In a nutshell, they are looking for what have become standard suburban values in the built environment.

Suburbanising the Exurban

In addition to finding suburban values in architecture, the primary objective of the Blandings' move to the country is to be away from crowds, away from neighbours, and thus to avoid feeling cramped for space. After living in a series of New York City apartment buildings, they crave space and privacy in both architectural and social terms. Their desire is what Mumford, in *The City in History* (553), describes as the main purpose of the creators of American suburbia, namely "[t]o be your own unique self; to build your unique house, mid a unique landscape: to live in this Domain of Arnheim a self-centred life, in which private fantasy and caprice would have license to express themselves openly, in short, to withdraw like a monk and live like a prince […]."[5]

In fact, many aspects of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, with its focus on the fully intentional isolation of the formerly urban individual and the nuclear family, go hand in hand with what Mumford criticised about suburban life in the 1960s. The planners and builders of the American suburb, he argues, proposed to create an asylum in which individuals could overcome the chronic deficiencies encountered in civilisation, yet still command the privileges and benefits of a typical urban society. According to the critic, this vision was not out of reach entirely. The quasi-utopia of the suburban haven seemed attainable, but once the dream of an idyllic and sheltered life is dreamt by too many people at the same time, the idyll becomes populated and, in the case of American suburbia, downright colonised. It thus comes as no surprise that the suburban utopia turned into a vision "so enchanting that those who contrived it failed to see the fatal penalty attached to it – the penalty of popularity, the fatal inundation of a mass movement whose very numbers would wipe out the goods each individual sought for his own domestic circle, and, worse, replace them with a life that was

5 "The Domain of Arnheim" is an 1847 short story by Edgar Allan Poe, and Hodgins makes reference to the magnificent castle and landscape garden featured therein. The story also served as inspiration for a painting by René Magritte.

not even a cheap counterfeit, but rather the grim antithesis" (Mumford, *City in History* 553).

In this context, the sudden appearance of a new neighbour on Bald Mountain is a humorous literary illustration of the threatened exurban idyll and the inevitable outcome of suburbanisation: the death of the exurban or suburban dream, and the unstoppable triumph of the omnipresent "horrid, beastly little bungalow" (95). Even though the Blandings perceive their neighbour as an intruder, he is in fact a local and, ironically, perceives the Blandings as an urban foreign body in his turn. Consequently, their status as intruders in an organically formed community is underlined, and so is the fact that they are by no means the defenders of their land that they consider themselves to be. In fact, it is the Blandings who bring suburbia into this formerly peaceful, vastly untouched rural area, and there is an expression of strong disapproval in the community towards people "buying old houses of literally priceless antique value and then tearing them down like old sheds to make way for tennis courts and swimming pools and fancy new houses better adapted to Long Island and Newport than to this part of the countryside" (101).

The phenomenon of city-dwellers taking over the countryside was a serious social concern at the time, and was also thematised by *The New Yorker* on the cover of the May 15, 1954 issue of the magazine. The cover depicts a well-dressed urban couple in the country, standing in front of a wooden fence that separates them from a herd of cows, and looking at a beautiful, elevated piece of land framed by trees and surrounding hills. A mental picture, a basic draft of a modern single-family house with a patio is superimposed upon the idyllic scene, bringing across the way that urbanites perceive the potential of the countryside in the light of their own values and lifestyles. This cover is highly reminiscent of the events and sentiments in the novel, since, as pointed out above, the people of Lansdale are highly resentful at city people for claiming entire mountaintops, as well as for their intrusion into a rural community that had been undisturbed for two hundred years.

It becomes apparent that the Blandings, like most people leaving the cities in the 1940s, are unaware of the consequences of their move for nature and the built environment, as well as for the social landscape of rural America. As observed by Kunstler, "[o]n every country road, every unpaved lane, every former cowpath, stand new houses, and each one is somebody's version of the American Dream." Furthermore, "[t]he places they stand are just different versions of nowhere, because these houses exist in no specific relation to anything except the road and the power cable" (Kunstler 166). With an increasing number of people intruding on geographical areas like the one imagined in the novel, the rural – or the

exurban – becomes the disjointed peri-urban and the suburban, and, depending on the extent of sprawl, sometimes even the urban. Whereas in their own eyes, the Blandings consider themselves willing to fully adapt in order to be immersed in rural serenity, they cannot avoid bringing a considerable part of their urban lifestyle with them and leaving a tremendous footprint. As a consequence, locals feel threatened and fear for their rural idyll, while newcomers from the city fear the arrival of further newcomers who threaten their newfound quiet and solitude in their turn. In this process of bringing the city into the country, parcels of land become more and more divided and scaled down, and the suburban landscape begins to be shaped.

Materialising the Dream House

Despite their rural idyll becoming crowded, the Blandings refrain from abandoning the process of designing their dream house on Bald Mountain. On the contrary, as the humour of the novel foreshadows, the humble and simple house they first envisaged becomes larger and more elaborate – at one point the draft even includes servants' quarters – and begins to resemble the literal embodiment of a dream house. As exemplified in the case of Mr. Blandings' study on the ground floor, what at first exists only in dreams turns into luxury and then into plain necessity within a few days, and the upgrading of architecture continues until the word mansion is dropped in conversation. The couple preoccupy themselves decreasingly with the rising costs, as they are blinded by the circumstance that the house has evolved into the realisation of an architectural dream. "The Blandings had *the* house of all the houses in the world they wanted […]" (116), and they endorse John Ruskin's view that "'[w]hen we build, let us think that we build forever'" (120). In light of the rampant suburban expansion after World War II and the ensuing building practices, Mr. Blandings points out that the curse of American architecture is "jerry-building" (120), that is, thoughtless and hasty construction that is neither aesthetically pleasing nor sustainable, and ensuring that their new dwelling affirms the philosophy of quality is thus indispensable.

The dream house soon materialises into architectural flesh and blood, and the humanisation encountered in the description of the framing, or the "nakedness of muscle, minus skin and fat" (169), is proof of the Blandings' emotional investment in and their attachment to the project. The house begins to acquire a unique smell, a blend of odours both delightful and revolting, which blends in nicely and adds character to the construction. The children, previously influenced by their teachers' views on sustainability within the context of the built environment, abandon their wish to live in a Dymaxion House that

revolves with the sun on a mast – a utopian concept by Buckminster Fuller –, or in a foldable and transportable Stout Mobile Home. The entire family are now invested in the materialisation of their dream house, and it is increasingly referred to as that into which it has morphed, that is, "a gentleman's estate, […] and a very fine ornament to this modest community" (131), a "Masterpiece" (148) with a capital M, or a "castle" (179). Owing to their attachment to the project, even the occasional situational call of the metropolis is invariably muted.

When it comes to materialising the interior of the house, the character of Mrs. Blandings, who had been acting in the background until this point, becomes more prominent, since decorating an entire house is a considerable part of the dream of ownership for her. She shows little interest in the exterior of the house, but the interior colours and furnishings, which she would like to be timeless and far removed from the contemporary functionalism, require careful selection. Mrs. Blandings' investment in the interior, as well as her husband's predominant involvement with structural and exterior aspects of the house, places architecture in the spotlight when it comes to gender roles and the domestication of the female. While the divisions depicted here certainly represent the average family of the 1940s, the manner in which gender roles are translated into architectural interest is nonetheless noteworthy. In fact, both Mr. and Mrs. Blandings' mental visualisations of their house are heavily rooted in stereotypes relating to gender, with him picturing himself sitting in front of the fireplace or doing physical work on the house, and with her picturing herself arranging flowers in a designated room. The same holds true for their visions relating to exterior spheres of creation, that is, for the male interest in landscape architecture and the female interest in garden work, respectively. However, their common interest finds its abstract manifestation in the building plans. These drawings symbolise the potential of the house for both of them in their respective spheres, as "the plans, with their thick black lines and their crisp lettering, had aroused in them an instinct that obviously was something deeper and finer than mere cupidity. It was the nest-building instinct […]" (184).

Both Mr. and Mrs. Blandings are certainly perfectionists in creating their architectural sphere, and even though the finished house displays a variety of imperfections, it leaves them reasonably content. This, it can be argued, is a common outcome of moving to an American suburb: even though the reality of living outside the urban sphere and thus closer to nature bears little resemblance to the former romantic and idyllic vision – with this vision being centred around the dream house in the case of the Blandings –, the reality is by no means a thorough disappointment. On the surface, the family deal considerably well with the fact that the house is unlikely to ever be finished, and that perfection in

building does not exist. Consistent with the idea of bliss in architectural gloom, promoted by John Ruskin in his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* and quoted at the beginning of Book II of *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, the Blandings recognise their sorrows and their "shadows" in the finished construction and identify with it through this translation of emotion into architecture:

> [A]fter size and weight, the Power of architecture may be said to depend on the quantity (whether measured in space or intenseness) of its shadow; and it seems to me, that the reality of its works, and the use and influence they have in the daily life of men, (as opposed to those works of art with which we have nothing to do but in times of rest or of pleasure,) require of it that it should express a kind of human sympathy, by a measure of darkness as great as there is in human life: and that as the great poem and great fiction generally affect us most by the majesty of their masses of shade, and cannot take hold upon us if they affect a continuance of lyric sprightliness, but must be often serious, and sometimes melancholy, else they do not express the truth of this wild world of ours; so there must be, in this magnificently human art of architecture, some equivalent expression for the trouble and wrath of life, for its sorrow and its mystery: and this it can only give by depth or diffusion of gloom, by the frown upon its front, and the shadow of its recess. (Ruskin 121)

There certainly is much "sympathy" towards human feelings and emotions in the house, that is, there are many architectural expressions of the "wrath of life" that characterised the building process. The imagery used in the novel in this respect relates to a metamorphosis, or to an adult form bearing no resemblance to its embryonic state. The Blandings' aspirations towards architectural perfection in the embryonic state of the house turn into an acceptance of architectural imperfection in its adult form. Many details are left unfinished, are dysfunctional, unpractical or below their standards of perfection, but it is their house, it is "that *sine qua non* of all normal couples' ideals and ambitions, the Home of One's Own" (235). However, in order to thwart their seeming acceptance of the imperfections of the house, Hodgins closes the novel with a depiction of Mr. Blandings dreaming about the house being in flames with a smile on his face.

A Critique of Emerging Social and Architectural Ideals in the American Suburb

Given this ending, the contemporary reader was left with a sense of ambiguity regarding homeownership – as well as regarding the hunt for the American Dream in the exurban sphere – within the context of the vastly expanding suburban landscape after World War II. The urban sphere certainly had its

detriments, but the newly suburbanising or suburbanised areas were not the answer to these, and Hodgins portrays the idealisation and romanticisation of the ex- or suburban environment as highly deceptive. Archer (255) points out that Mr. Blandings eventually comes to the realisation that the countryside, in the process of suburbanisation, is in no way a social or political tabula rasa, and that like the urban environment, it has its own shortcomings.

When it comes to suburban shortcomings, one of the core ideals outlined in the book, the urbanised individual's desire for seclusion, has always been one of the most heavily criticised aspects of suburbia. It was particularly in the 1950s that the social consequences of suburbanisation began to be under heightened scrutiny, and, writing in the 1940s, Hodgins mocks and rejects as futile the individual's desire for detachment much more than he criticises it in social terms. The Blandings actively strive for seclusion and dread the presence of other signs of civilisation in their rural paradise, but Mumford emphasises the fact that spatial separation from others has more costs than benefits, and that the inevitable result is a life lived in encapsulation (*City in History* 582-583). *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* ends before the effects of seclusion become a concern, but the author raises the question as to whether this kind of isolation is to be desired in the first place. The rural seclusion as depicted in the novel is certainly radical, as the striven-for isolation of the Blandings family on Bald Mountain is of both a geographical and social nature. In the densely populated suburbia that began to emerge at the time the novel was written, in contrast, the seclusion experienced was of a social rather than a geographical nature, and the picket fence took over the isolating role of the mountaintop. The concept of isolation or seclusion as such, however, remained the same, and encapsulation continues to be a common social phenomenon in the American suburb.

A further crucial constituent of the suburban dream that is somewhat undermined in Hodgins' work is the notion of the dream house. The importance of this notion is already present in the title of the novel, and the entire story revolves around its materialisation. The dream house, however, is utopian in nature, and is thus impossible to materialise. Certain characteristics are invariably lost in the translation from mental image to material manifestation. As Bachelard (61) points out, "it is a good thing for us to keep a few dreams of a house that we shall live in later, always later, so much later, in fact, that we shall not have time to achieve it. […] It is better to live in a state of impermanence than in one of finality," and materialising the dream house might therefore be downright undesirable. While the dream is characterised by perfection, the reality is, for the most part, a diminished version of this dream, with the result being restricted by cost and feasibility, as well as by the means of construction.

In fact, when equating the notion of the dream house with a utopian vision, the house must not be built, or else the dream dies. Theodor Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, describes how the fulfilment of an artistic – in this case an architectural – utopia would entail the inevitable demise of art:

> What takes itself to be utopia remains the negation of what exists and is obedient to it. At the center of contemporary antinomies is that art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true; yet at the same time art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation. If the utopia of art were fulfilled, it would be art's temporal end. (Adorno 44)

Architecture is an art that has always had utopian connotations. Uncountable architectural visions have never been built, would never have been possible to build, and were never designed with a view to being built in the first place. Within a far smaller framework, this also holds true for the Blandings' dream house. Although the utopianism of their house is rooted less in practicability than in affordability, the utopian notion remains stable. If their dream house had been built, it would have ceased to be a dream house; it would simply be a house – and this is, essentially, the ironic outcome of the building process. Therefore, it can be argued that similar to a utopia, a dream can never be realised to match the mental image completely, and the suburban dream house is thus turned into a myth within the overarching myth of the American Dream.

When it comes to unfulfilled dreams, and in spite of the fact that Bald Mountain seemed to provide what the city was lacking, moving to Lansdale did not turn out to be the fulfilment of the Blandings' vision of freedom, seclusion, creation and ownership. Furthermore, neither did suburbia as a concept turn out to be the fulfilment of a dream – often the American Dream per se – for the vast number of people moving to the urban periphery in the suburbanisation of the United States. Given that *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* was published shortly after World War II, the protagonists are portrayed as early adopters of this dream in a time when the mass production of suburbia was still in its embryonic state, and when comparatively remote and untouched areas like the fictional Lansdale in the novel were still categorised as predominantly rural, or exurban. This had changed dramatically by the time the next work under discussion, John Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window*, was published. By the mid-1950s, suburban developments like Levittown had already had a tremendous impact on the development of suburban America, and architectural mass production was considered the ideal solution to housing problems. Furthermore, when compared to Hodgins' novel, certain characteristics of the dream of homeownership had

evolved considerably due to social as well as architectural developments. The essence of the dream, however, remained unchanged, and so did the eventual disillusion with the suburban utopia.

2.2. "Little Boxes Made of Ticky-Tacky": Architectural Mass Production in John Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window*

While in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, the protagonists fear the imminent suburbanisation of their rural retreat, by the mid-1950s, suburbanisation had become a reality for many formerly unspoilt areas surrounding the United States' urban centres. In fact, the rapid expansion and mass production of suburbia was the most defining force transforming the architectural and social landscape of the country at the time. In both social and architectural terms, the development of Levittown on Long Island had set an example that was being replicated, and that was being used as a template and model, throughout the entire nation in the unstoppable triumph of suburbia.

A book that stands out in the context of architectural mass production is John Keats' 1956 broadside at the contemporary suburban sprawl, *The Crack in the Picture Window*. Disguised as fiction, the book is a humorous report on suburban developments springing up like mushrooms in the postwar period, and on the lack of planning that has defined the history of this built environment ever since. As the title suggests with its imagery, Keats accentuates the imperfections of life and architecture in American suburbia during a time in which people were looking for literal and symbolic picture windows, and in which they were looking for their own aesthetically pleasing dream house in a scenic environment but often found a cracked and incomplete version of this house. *The Crack in the Picture Window* is by no means the only novel published in the 1950s that criticises the accelerating suburbanisation of the United States in this way. However, in contrast to Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* – which is arguably the most influential suburban novel of the decade, and which criticises the emerging bedroom communities in more serious terms –, Keats, similar to Hodgins in *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, uses humour as a vehicle to bring across his message. Furthermore, *The Crack in the Picture Window* is a rather unique work in the suburban canon in that it mixes non-fiction with fiction, and it continuously moves back and forth between the two categories.

Keats begins his introduction to *The Crack in the Picture Window* with the following sarcastic remarks regarding the suburban developments that rampantly spread and expanded throughout the United States in the 1950s:

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

The author then goes on to tell the story of the fictional couple of John and Mary Drone, who live in a "set of jerry-built barracks" (1) in a swamp-like landscape at the fringes of Alexandria, Virginia. Even though Mary tries her best to make a home out of their house, the family suffer from various nuisances such as traffic noise, loud neighbours, and cockroaches grazing on the face of their baby.

Even though the Drones, strictly speaking, lack the financial means to change their housing situation, they are able to profit from the so-called G.I. Bill, formally known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act. The G.I. Bill was a law that granted a wide range of benefits to World War II veterans, one of them being low-cost mortgages, and it turned out to be a driving factor in the suburbanisation of the United States and the formation of the country's middle class. What is more, the real-estate business benefitted greatly from it, too. Amidst the increased demand for housing after the war, those in charge of developing the suburban landscape maximised their profits through economy of space, which proved to shape the face of American suburbia lastingly:

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

The rambler, or ranch house, was the dominant building style for tract housing back then, and it became somewhat of an emblem for the booming postwar middle class, reflecting the circumstance that "[m]ost of the everyday fabric of America's suburbs was constructed with very little thought to design except in the most superficial ways" (Walters and Brown 44). This particular house style is typically one-floored, very casual and simple with strong horizontal lines, and features little exterior or interior decoration. Its popularity with tract housing thus comes as no surprise: it is cost-effective because it is simple and small in size, and it materially fulfils people's dream of owning a house in spite of the fact that it offers little more comfort than a medium-sized urban apartment.

Although there were obvious deficiencies inherent to the rambler, the Drones, similar to other people their age in the 1950s, had no choice when it came to the design of their house. The rambler was the architecture they could afford, even though the ready-made house and the neighbourhood it created was far removed from the one featured in their dreams. Suburban housing developments like Rolling Knolls – as Keats named his fictional community – are nothing more than an aggregation of houses lacking any sense of home or character, and the author argues that the housing developments of the 1950s differ from those of the 1940s only in that the materials have become better and the building process more professional. Suburban communities have not become more attractive per se, since "the basic living problems are […] built right in" (xvi). The term "community" implies a state of balance, and this is something that

a mass-produced suburb cannot offer. Be it Keats' tellingly named Voters, Faints, Fecunds, Wilds, Amiables or Spleens, suburbanites were united by distinctive demographic characteristics, and the Federal Housing Administration even openly encouraged using restrictive covenants as "a basis for the development of harmonious, attractive neighbourhoods" (qtd. in G. Wright 247). Keats maintains that housing developments like Rolling Knolls create stratified and exceptionally monotonous societies, and that the architectural construction of the houses contained in a specific neighbourhood facilitates an immediate deciphering of the social stratum predominating in the area.

"Communist" Tract Housing and the Childhood Home on Elm Street

Despite the manifold and blatant suburban shortcomings, and given the decrepit state of their cockroach-infested apartment, as well as the tempting housing deals offered to veterans, the Drones eventually purchase a property in the newly built Rolling Knolls Estates, Virginia. Considering its imagery, Rolling Knolls is unquestionably a highly sarcastic name, and the author suggests that only a visionary would be able to see promise in such a bleak stretch of landscape in Fairfax County. The house the Drones purchase in this suburban area is what the author calls a California Cape Cod Rambler, alluding to the random blend of styles that characterises it. Essentially a rectangular, maritime Cape Cod design with a steep-to roof, the house also features a picture window and a one-floor plan, two concepts borrowed from Californian ranch homes. The questionable taste of the design is also mirrored in the landscaping of the development, which is created by "bulldozers squirming over the landscape, battering down the pines, leveling the knolls, churning the area into a level red-clay sea, out of which [rise] skeletal houses […]" (7).

Regardless of the questionable aesthetic of the development, however, the Drones' decision to move to suburbia appears reasonable when considering their previous housing situation. Furthermore, as Henderson observes in his 1953 study on mass-produced suburbs in the United States, new suburban housing developments, such as those depicted in Keats' book, can have social benefits. For instance, the standardisation of architecture results in a social levelling-out, as "no one can acquire prestige through an imposing house" (Henderson 26). Moreover, postwar developments, which are typically built on cheap land at the outermost edge of the reasonable commuting radius, are devoid of many problems commonly encountered in older neighbourhoods, "such as slums, crowded streets, vacant lots that are both neighborhood dumps and playgrounds, or sagging, neon-fronted business districts that sprawl in all directions. Everything is new" (Henderson 25).

While the architectural concept of suburbia may have had certain social advantages, when it comes to building practices, the production of postwar housing was more often than not hasty and cheap, and thus superseded said advantages. In the case of the Drones, this becomes apparent on settlement day, when they find the building and construction situation to have advanced in quantity but not improved in quality since their first visit to Rolling Knolls. The vast sea of mud from which one sample house previously rose, for instance, is now dotted with hundreds of identical houses: "Squads and platoons of these little boxes marched in close order beside what seemed to be red-clay canals. Each house was surrounded by a patch of bilious sod, and two rusty dwarf cedars struggled for life beside each identical doorstep" (18). The depicted landscape in this passage – the red-clay canals, bilious sod and rusty dwarf cedars – implies that the (architectural) suburb, which seems to have been built virtually overnight, is devoid of a sense of place, that the place where the suburban house is built is "noplace," and that nature only exists in the form of "some totemic trees and shrubs […]" (Kunstler 105).

The cheap production standards are unsurprising when considering the speed and the economic means with which postwar suburbia was built in many parts of the United States, and when considering that the real estate business ruthlessly took advantage of young people's inexperience and naïveté. Keats observes that as early as 1948, an overwhelming eighty-five per cent of inspected suburban houses were already infested with decay organisms, and that in the following years, the poor state of suburban architecture caused increasing resentment among young homeowners. They complained about lacking insulation, missing streets, driveways and sideways, and sometimes even missing rooms in their houses. Where there were supposed to be three coats of paint there was only one, tin or lead was used instead of copper for flashing and pipes; oak was replaced with pine, and pine with plywood; and concrete slabs, instead of twelve inches, were poured merely two inches thick.

The architectural deficiencies of suburban houses even lead Keats to liken the Rolling Knolls development to communist barracks, and he blames architecture for the creation of mass-produced individuals. The author maintains that "[i]t is true that the dwelling shapes the dweller. When all dwellings are the same shape, all dwellers are squeezed into the same shape." The type of communism that emerges from this process owes its existence to the destruction of individuality. The destruction of individuality begins with the "obliteration of the individualistic house and self-sufficient neighborhood, and from there on, the creation of mass-produced human beings […]" (61) is inevitable.

The comparison between postwar suburbia and communist architecture or urban planning is certainly not far-fetched. Analogous to the mass production that defined the rebuilding of destroyed cities after World War II in Eastern Europe, for instance, where housing had to be built within the context of limited financial means and a shortage of time – and where careful planning was therefore not a priority –, housing developments like Rolling Knolls came into being following the same basic principles. The shortage of houses after the war asked for quick and cheap building, and mass production made sense in this context. While the United States might not have had the same underlying social programme in mind as the countries of Eastern Europe, where communist architecture was intentionally used to force people into uniformity, the impact of standardised suburban developments is certainly comparable.

Similar to the uncountable contemporary young families that Keats' fictional couple represent, the Drones are increasingly disappointed with standardised, or even "communist," suburban tract house living, as Rolling Knolls turns out to be nothing more than a plethora of houses, from Kasserine Pass to Midway, Salerno, Iwo Jima and back to Bataan.[6] They have seemingly climbed the social ladder and now live in a new house cramped with new furniture, but they are confronted with serious safety hazards and an overall lack of space. As a consequence, it does not take long for Mary, who spends most of her time in and around the family home, to become anxious and exasperated, and she knows perfectly well that it is the physical house that is responsible for her mental state. She has to stay "in this horrid little house" (93) until it is Tuesday night and thus time to go to the shopping centre – according to Kunstler (119) the only place where people have a chance to interact in the public realm of suburbia. The house is damaging her marriage, it is corroding her life, and the relationship between house and owner bears out the full reality of Winston Churchill's dictum that "[w]e shape our dwellings, and then our dwellings shape us" (43).

What causes Mary's increasingly negative emotional response towards the house in Rolling Knolls is certainly the architectural contrast she is experiencing, that is, her response is rooted in her memory of growing up in a three-floor family home with ample space on Elm Street, which is now a stereotypical suburban street name with unmistakable associations. While the house of her youth certainly had its shortcomings and "seemed a somewhat inefficient machine for living, nevertheless *living* is what happened within its comfortable walls. Compared to the big houses on Elm Street, the California Cape Cod

6 All street names in Rolling Knolls have a World War II reference, which points towards the architectural and social shape and condition of the development.

Ramblers of Rolling Knolls were so many ill-made, insufficient machines for insufficient existence" (49-50).[7] Although Bachelard's belief that "the image of *the dream house* is opposed to that of the childhood home" (Bachelard 61), and that the dream house is always situated in the future, is not disproved by Keats, there is nonetheless an architectural and nostalgic longing for the past in the novel. There is a longing for architectural differentiation and independence, or for an architecture that stands in opposition to the quasi-communist tract housing that defined the suburban history of the 1950s.

Suburban Totems I: The Picture Window

When it comes to the growing resentment towards tract housing, not even the popular archetypal features of suburban architecture manage to counterbalance the overall negativity felt by postwar suburbanites. One such archetypal feature is the iconic picture window, which became somewhat of a suburban "totem" in the postwar period, and which is the feature the Drones are immediately confronted with upon first entering their house. The picture window is a large window typically lacking glazing bars, or with only a few perfunctory glazing bars, so that the view remains as unobstructed as possible and a picture of the neat surroundings is framed. It is arguably the architectural detail that is most commonly associated with suburban housing in the postwar period, and it is a frequently encountered symbol in fictional representations of contemporary life in suburbia. This heavy emphasis on the picture window points towards the growing importance of the visual, of (negative) aesthetics, of standardised stereotypes, as well as of the idea of transparency in suburbia and its fiction.

Literary works that feature picture windows, as listed by Gill (132), include Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961), John Cheever's short story "The Cure" (1952) and John Updike's poem "Suburban Madrigal" (1959). In all these texts, the picture window stands as a material sign for various suburban ills. In *Revolutionary Road*, it is a metaphor for the power of the suburbs to change people, in this case forcing conformism onto a bohemian couple. Since "space articulates many of the parameters according to which personal identity is established," and since built spaces define how people live and what they do in very specific ways – and since they thus "necessarily shape who those people are" (Archer 5) –, the picture window, too, has the power to transform the people who engage with it. Even though Yates' protagonists look at this window as a harmless architectural feature – "[…] I don't suppose one picture

7 The house as a machine metaphor is borrowed from Le Corbusier's utopianism relating to housing in his work *Toward an Architecture*.

window is necessarily going to destroy our personalities" (29) –, it stands as a metaphor for the power of houses, in this case suburban houses, to shape their inhabitants.[8] Similarly using the picture window as a metaphor, in "Suburban Madrigal," John Updike draws attention to the treacherousness and deceptiveness of appearances in suburbia when the narrator sees his own property in the reflection of his neighbour's window, while his neighbour's intention was to display his domestic interior. Apart from the treacherousness of appearances, this reflection of personal property in other people's houses adverts to the uniformity and interchangeable nature of suburban architecture and its owners. In John Cheever's "The Cure," in contrast, the picture window does not serve as a reflection, but rather stands for the exposedness of the people in the house: "I knew not only that I was being watched but that I was being watched from the picture window at the end of the living room, by someone whose intent was to watch me and violate my privacy" (207).

Despite the ambivalent symbolism concerning power, treacherousness, reflection and transparency that is inherent to it, and despite its omnipresence in the suburbs, in the 1950s, the picture window undeniably was a status symbol. Gill (132) even calls the picture window "the dominant metonym for suburban living" within the context of the period. As observed in Updike's poem, however, the popularity of the picture window was not only an aesthetic architectural phenomenon, but it also had serious social ramifications. While homeowners are concerned primarily with their ability to capture the putatively idyllic suburban surroundings by means of the picture that the window is meant to frame – and must certainly be aware that passers-by can see their proudly presented interior –, they are less aware of the fact that the larger and less obstructed the window, the more they expose themselves. Glass, while being beneficial for the individual in terms of opening up space and illuminating interiors, also makes the individual more transparent and more vulnerable, and the popularity of the picture window thus robbed suburbanites of their privacy to an extent.

Regardless of its implications concerning privacy, glass as a building material had a strongly utopian connotation in the first half of the twentieth century, with architects such as Bruno Taut promoting it in the "Gläserne Kette" – in English commonly known as the "Glass Chain" or "Utopian Correspondence" –, a chain letter involving such iconic architects as Walter Gropius, the founder of the Bauhaus. Furthermore, major contemporary architects such as Le Corbusier were outspoken advocates for the use of glass in architecture, too. Following

8 This architectural authority is also accentuated in the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard, that is, in his *Poetics of Space*, a work focusing on our strong responses to the lived experience of architecture.

this design aesthetic, developers subsequently adopted some aspects of glass architecture, translated them into the suburban framework, and presented "the modern, glass-walled, outward looking and open plan-home as everything that the old, small, dark, crowded urban apartment was not" (Gill 133). However, Gill also emphasises the difference between avant-garde and suburban uses of glass. Whereas avant-garde architects sought to eradicate the boundaries between interior and exterior, that is, whereas they treated glass as a means of communication, the use of glass in suburban houses was often coupled with a refusal of this communication. By means of the picture window, a deceptive openness was created, with both inside and outside being reluctant to enter into any kind of exchange (Gill 134).

While the picture window eradicates visual boundaries, it becomes apparent that it simultaneously creates other types of boundaries by evoking "concerns about the relationship between self and other, family and *polis*, here and there, subject and viewer or voyeur. It signifies the liminality of the suburbs and offers a sublime and highly charged site for the testing and transgression of these binaries" (Gill 134). Furthermore, for suburban developers, the picture window served to create an illusion of spaciousness, so that buyers were tricked into believing that they received more for their money. However, the view from these picture windows was unspectacular, as they opened onto a monotonous landscape of mostly identical houses and lawns. In this context – and with regard to Keats' book –, it can be argued that the suburban picture window is invariably cracked on a symbolic level. It makes false promises and creates illusions, and the idyll it is supposed to frame and the communication it could enable fail to come into being.

Meanwhile, it did not take long for the picture window to fall from grace, and in the 1950s, critical voices began to be heard. Architectural and social critics "demonized the picture window as emblematic of pretty much everything wrong with architecture, America, or both," and soon this architectural feature, "from its development during the heroic age of early Modernism, […] had devolved to become just another object of mass consumption. Cheapened not only in cost but in character as well, the picture window was the utopian manifesto of transparency writ small" (Isenstadt 303). Furthermore, the picture window was considered a manifestation of "suburbia's confining openness, the sense in which it was an unwitting prison of perpetual disclosure" (Isenstadt 304).

Keats, certainly familiar with the symbolism the picture window had acquired in the 1950s, used it as a metaphor for suburbia at large, and made it represent everything that is deceptive, conformist, repetitive and voyeuristic about this environment. As a case in point, upon discovering the window – which the

author likens to a vast, empty eye –, the Drones are confronted with their view, "a house like theirs across a muddy street, its vacant picture eye staring into theirs" (21). By means of this architectural feature, Keats therefore immediately draws attention to the nature of the suburban community – a homogeneous, bland and repetitive community in which everyone is under constant watch and scrutiny. Furthermore, the passage quoted above brings the Lacanian perception of the gaze into suburbia, that is, the awareness that one can be viewed, and that one is looked at from everywhere constantly. In fact, given that the Drones liken the window of their neighbours to a human eye staring back at them, the picture windows of Keats' book can even be considered the material suburban embodiment of the Lacanian gaze.

One avenue of escape from other people's scrutiny is to lower the blinds and thus to obstruct the picture window, an act which for Mary simultaneously serves to "shut out the ghastly view of the mirror of her empty life staring at her across the treeless, unpaved street" (59). The picture window is the part of the architectural shell through which her neighbours have the easiest access to the interior of her house, and shutting the blinds is a necessary measure to re-establish boundaries between self and other, as well as to re-evaluate one's position within the suburban framework. By blocking the view of the monotonous suburban landscape, Mary ceases to be reminded of the fact that she herself is a cog in the suburban machinery, and that through her physical presence in Rolling Knolls, she is part of an emerging unfortunate and unhappy social landscape – a social landscape that had been sold to her as a utopia. The suburban utopia, however, was never concerned with people's happiness:

> Utopias may be concerned with the happiness of the individuals in society, or with their ideal organization, and the two concerns don't always fit together very well. They are frequently associated with periods of great social upheaval, and so are concerned with the security of the body politic – the state – rather than individual happiness. Thus utopia, curiously, is rarely a very pleasant place to live. (Tod and Wheeler 7)

Keats' fictional suburban subdivision is certainly not a pleasant place to live, and it is arguably predominantly concerned with the ideal organisation of individuals after the war. Mary realises that her house will never become a home, and that her neighbourhood will never become a community. She has moved into a new and strange way of life never before seen in America, and the symbolic act of obstructing her picture window is no remedy in this context.

Apart from blocking one's view, a further avenue of escape from other people's scrutiny in suburbia is to turn to modern mass media. Interestingly, Keats uses the term "picture window" to refer to the television screen – a

linguistic detail that brings the voyeuristic features as well as the monotony of suburban architecture into modern appliances, and again into the living room, which now has two picture windows, so to speak. The television set serves as an escapist replacement for the key architectural feature of the house, and suburban life now happens as an interaction between individual and medium through the television screen, rather than as an interaction between individual and outside world through the architectural picture window. The result is what Lewis Mumford predicted in the early 1960s, namely that the end product of mass suburbia would be "an encapsulated life, spent more and more either in a motor car or within the cabin of darkness before a television set" (*City in History* 583). Both the televisual and the architectural picture window thus detract from the social interaction needed for community creation, and the growing encapsulation corroborates the suburban alienation that begins to emerge in Keats' Rolling Knolls.

Suburban Totems II: The Front Lawn and Backyard

In addition to the picture window as part of suburban architecture, Keats draws the reader's attention to the peculiarities of suburban landscape architecture, one of them being the front lawn. As Robert Fishman remarks, "[t]he lawn is the owner's principal contribution to the suburban landscape – the piece of the 'park' he keeps up himself" (qtd. in Teyssot 13), and within the context of *The Crack in the Picture Window*, failing to contribute one's part to the pleasantness of the suburban landscape is considered a crime towards the community. In fact, the front lawn, rising steeply in significance in the postwar period, has become one of the most iconic features of suburbia, and even as early as the nineteenth century, American architect Frank Jesup Scott emphasised the importance of this artificial landscape feature in his 1870 book *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds of Small Extent*. He states that "[a] smooth, closely shaven surface of grass is by far the most essential element of beauty on the grounds of a suburban home. […] Neatness and order are as essential to the pleasing effect of ground furniture as of house furniture" (F. J. Scott 107-108).

Apart from its contribution to the overall appearance of the neighbourhood, a neatly trimmed and cultured lawn is considered a benchmark for social status and the well-being of the family. According to Gill, "[i]f women are under scrutiny through the picture window, then that other iconic feature of postwar suburban design, the carefully maintained lawn, is a site of surveillance and testing ground for men." What is more, "[l]ike the picture window, the lawn features in the discourses of the suburbs as a metonym for a particular, uniform and coercive set of standards and obligations; suburban gardens are material

signifiers used to ideological effect" (Gill 147). Thus, whereas women were judged against the interior state and condition of the house in the postwar suburbs, men were typically in charge of maintaining the lawn and were judged accordingly.

In Keats' Rolling Knolls, the neatly maintained front lawns play a considerable part in community life, especially in terms of social interaction. The development lacks a park, as well as educational institutions or a community centre, and women thus take their children out to play on their front lawns. At the beginning of community formation, this is a behaviour displayed in every household independently, but it does not take long for groups of housewives to gather on the private green spaces of the neighbourhood. This is how the Rolling Knolls front lawns become a place for children to play and cause aesthetic destruction, and for mothers to chatter and gossip on neutral territory. Keats observes that "[a]nother woman's lawn was something like the neutral corner of a prize ring," and that suburban housewives "used it as a kind of combination psychiatric couch, confessional, Oxford Movement, and Alcoholics Anonymous. Unlike these estimable institutions, however, the neutral lawn failed to give relief, for like everything else about Rolling Knolls, it was steeped in stifling monotony" (57). In terms of neutrality, the suburban lawn is certainly more suited as a public meeting place than a private house, as the architectural interior of a property is a considerably more personal and intimate space. Furthermore, with the lawns of the neighbourhood being similarly monotonous as the tract-house architecture they front, their neutrality and suitability for social interaction are reinforced.

Despite the fact that the Rolling Knolls housewives transform their front lawns into quasi-neutral territory, it is undeniable that no truly neutral space was created in the planning of this suburb. What is more, given the fact that properties are built so close together that the lack of space in the interior finds its echo in the exterior, the logical consequence is that people do not have enough distance and privacy from one another. Keats emphasises that proximity breeds serious illnesses, but it also breeds familiarity and, as a result, contempt. He mentions South African sociologist Leo Kuper's selection of research papers called *Living in Towns* in this context, a British study of postwar housing in Coventry. Due to physical proximity, Kuper suggests, the neighbour turns into a presence within one's home. "The adage that an Englishman's home is his castle, suggests a home fortified against neighbours and the world at large," but this is not representative of contemporary housing in England; more often than not, residential units and their design "introduce an awareness of neighbours even within the inner sanctum" (Kuper 11).

Physical proximity is also an issue when it comes to invading other people's space through the design of one's property, be it the front lawn or the backyard. Mrs. Voter, for instance, is outraged when she learns that Mr. Faint intends to erect a clothes tree which would obstruct her view from her kitchen window, and she exclaims that "if we're going to make these yards a big, landscaped play area for everyone we can't put up things like that why don't you put it around on the side of your house where it will be out of the way?" (69). This perceived invasion of personal space underscores the fact that within the context of *The Crack in the Picture Window*, the suburban property cannot display individual taste or need. Although properties are essentially adaptable – as their owners have the option to individualise them according to their needs (see also Bervoets and Heynen 27) –, the residents of Keats' postwar suburb are denied the right to do what they please with their humble green spaces. Due to the severe physical proximity depicted in the book, any building or landscaping activity invariably affects neighbours, the aesthetic of the suburban landscape, and thus the community at large.

Suburban Totems III: The Picket Fence

The architectural consequence of the proximity of properties, buildings and people in suburban postwar housing developments is the erection of fences, and it does not take long for the residents of Rolling Knolls to begin building physical barriers on their lots. Particularly striking is "the Voters' prim, white picket fence. Next to it was a heavy fence of criss-crossed, whitewashed planks – a charming arrangement of elongated X's. And then came that fence of whitewashed half-cartwheels, then an iron-wire fence warranted against cyclones, and last, again in white, one that was more a palisade than a row of pickets" (73). In *The Crack in the Picture Window*, the now stereotypical suburban picket fence, or fences in general, are employed to preserve the reality of non-community that defines the American postwar suburb. The fence is built as a means to introduce visual and reiterate symbolic demarcations between people who live together out of necessity, to maintain a sense of order through physical manifestations of boundaries, distance and privacy, as well as to turn the family home into a quasi-microcosm.

Although the picket fence makes the suburban property appear less spacious and more self-contained, it has an aesthetic appeal and transmits a sense of order, as noted above. Apart from being a marker of territory, it conveniently contains the house, the garden, children and pets, and tidies up the architectural and social landscape. It thus comes as no surprise that the picket fence remains particularly popular in middle-class suburbia, and that it has even become one

of its most iconic symbols. However, the picket fence has been a prominent architectural feature in America since the earliest colonial era and has long been considered an ornamental detail enhancing the beauty of properties. Frank Jesup Scott, for instance, emphasises the benefits of this architectural boundary, as well as its ornamental qualities. He considers the plain picket fence to be the most suitable for large suburban grounds, as it is best seen and seen through, and it only offers a view of the enclosed property once the spectator stands very close to the pickets (F. J. Scott 51-52). Hence, the picket fence is rather subtle in appearance in comparison with other types of fences, and it guarantees a certain sense of privacy, aesthetic beauty and order while simultaneously obstructing the view as little as possible.

Despite its obvious benefits for the house within the context of its surroundings, however, the picket fence has also become a symbol of narrow-mindedness and the stereotypical suburban mindset. Furthermore, in fiction, it often stands for the dark underbelly of suburbia that lies beneath the shiny and orderly exterior, and it is thus an object to which especially directors like to draw the audience's attention. Numerous films and television shows spring to mind, but one of the most memorable mise-en-scènes of this cultural symbol is certainly the opening shot of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). The camera moves from a blue sky down to a picket fence fronted by a number of red, carefully spaced roses, and there follow typical scenes one would encounter in a suburban street. The camera then focuses on the picket fence once more, and the viewer beholds the house that is surrounded by it. A man waters the front lawn, and a woman watches a crime thriller on television. "Danger is only a fantasy" (Wigley 155), but the peacefulness portrayed in this mise-en-scène is short-lived. *Blue Velvet* is only one example of how the symbolism of the picket fence is translated into the visual arts, however. Most films or television shows set in an American suburb portray the fence with varying degrees of emphasis, and also in suburban literature, it is a popular feature used to symbolically underline the specific mindset associated with this environment.

In terms of suburban history, it can be argued that the picket fence was the precursor to the idea of the gated community, which began to gain momentum in American residential planning in the 1960s and 1970s. With regard to both the ornamental fence and the gated community, building fences, gates or walls is an act of creating physical barriers to mark social boundaries, to distinguish inside from outside, as well as inclusion from exclusion. In the case of Keats' fictional community, the residents primarily seek to keep other people's children off their grounds, and the same is achieved through the gated community, if on a socially more impactful scale. "Using physical space to create social place is a long and

deep American tradition," and the steep rise of the gated community since the 1980s is merely a further manifestation of the country's "fortress mentality" (Blakely and Snyder 1). The perceived need for fences and walls, it seems, stems from the fact that Americans expected to find safety and security, as well as peace and quiet on a variety of levels in suburbia. Expectations and reality failed to meet, however, so that physical boundaries separating geographical spaces were employed to compensate for this discrepancy.

The Rise of the Split-Level

With the emergence of architectural defence mechanisms like picket fences, space became increasingly constricted in postwar suburban tract housing developments. Even though fences allow people to regain a sense of privacy and order, the drawbacks of further constricting the space around the house are straightforward. With the Drones' children on the brink of puberty, their California Cape Cod Rambler in Rolling Knolls simply does not suffice anymore; as Keats phrases it, it is unreasonable to pen a teenager "into a fenced back yard the size of a cemetery plot […]" (104). As upgrading their house with a third bedroom is not feasible, their only option is to move and buy a more spacious house, a fashionable split-level.

The split-level emerged as a highly popular building type at the time *The Crack in the Picture Window* was published. Even though the first houses displaying characteristics of this architectural style date back to the 1930s, the actual split-level boom did not begin until the 1950s, and by 1953, the split-level was the most popular house type on Long Island and in the New Jersey suburbs of New York City. The popularity of this new suburban home, which earned the scorn of architects for its appearance and its layout, was due to the space gained when compared to the typical two-bedroom box on a slab. The split-level was affordable and had everything the growing suburban community longed for: six or seven rooms, two or more bathrooms, a built-in convertible garage, as well as utility or laundry rooms. What is more, the lot on which the split-level was built was standardised and had extra space for a green yard. Therefore, these new homes were stylishly novel and perfectly suited to the postwar family (Massey and Maxwell 79-80).

In Keats' book, the Drones are misled by advertisements promising them four bedrooms and a maid's room, two baths and a maid's bath, cathedral ceilings, a study, a modern kitchen, a spacious dining area and no less than two living rooms – all for no money down, in a place called Hardwood Forest. It turns out, though, that most of the rooms described in the advertisement simply double up as an additional room, and that much of Hardwood Forest is identical to

Rolling Knolls, despite there being more architectural choice in the form of the Riviera, the Acapulco, the Monte Carlo and the Beachcomber. This superficial architectural variety does not necessarily make the suburban landscape less monotonous, as it is studded with sample houses and rows upon rows of their replicas, and bulldozers are busily at work in the once-forested landscape in order to make room for even more of them. However, in the course of the Drones' many years spent in Rolling Knolls, the aesthetic of this environment has become the norm to them, and the permeating monotony of the suburban landscape is drowned out by their desire for extra bedroom space.

Even though the Drones cannot afford to purchase a split-level house in upmarket Hardwood Forest – since they are preoccupied with paying off not only their old house, but also their car and various household appliances –, they manage to escape Rolling Knolls in the end. With their move, they contribute to the downgrading of the typical postwar two-bedroom tract house that occurred due to everybody being keen on purchasing the three-bedroom homes in production. According to Keats, "[it] is a fundamental rule of real estate that there is no way for a neighborhood to go but down. Its best days are its infancy. […] In the case of the nation's jerry-built postwar developments, this process merely began sooner than in any other kind of community, including hobo jungles" (125). Second-hand houses in suburban developments were sold to people who would generally buy second-hand, that is, to people of limited financial means, and this circumstance accelerated Rolling Knolls' plunge into slumhood.

Regardless of the fact that they manage to leave their first tract house behind them, the Drones fail to see the wider picture of life in a postwar suburban environment, the ills of which remain unchanged throughout all price classes. To them, a bigger house is a better house, and "better houses cost more; better people had more money – ergo, a larger house necessarily stood in a better community" (128). Even the street names in Maryland Dell – the development in which they end up purchasing their new house – suggest so: the World War II references have been replaced with flower names, and Iris Street, Gardenia, Rosebud and Daffodil certainly promise better living conditions than Kasserine Pass, Bataan or Iwo Jima. There is indeed the initial joy and excitement of living in a fashionable split-level house built in a new neighbourhood, but it only takes a few weeks for Mary to realise that this new suburban environment is nothing more than a copy of the previous one. As she looks out through her picture window, she notices the same picture window across the monotonous, treeless street, and she spots rows upon rows of the same houses. Except for the higher price level, there is virtually no difference between Maryland Dell and Rolling

Knolls; there is the same lack of a sense of community, there are no recreational areas, and the fences already begin to appear around people's yards.

Learning from Rolling Knolls?

The last chapter of *The Crack in the Picture Window* consists of a lengthy piece of advice on how American suburbia can be improved and turned into an agreeable living environment. Keats proposes to take Japanese residential architecture as a paragon, as it is defined by extraordinary solutions for living in small spaces, and he applauds the Japanese cultural custom of honouring and respecting each other's privacy. The suburbs should accent discrepancies instead of levelling them out, and creating a community through architecture and architectural use is certainly possible in this environment. Architects should be involved in the further growth of suburbia, as they understand the inhabitants' needs; designing the suburbs should not be left to builders who until then "simply followed a general floor plan snipped out of a magazine" (180). Houses should be rentable, so that young families feel less trapped in them and are able to move once they outgrow their first home. The author even concedes, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner, that the typical postwar two-bedroom tract house has its benefits, since it is "more healthful than New York City's rabbit warrens" and "more waterproof than a colony of tents" (172). Furthermore, growth should be carefully planned, as otherwise, suburbs will grow into infinity according to a repetitive pattern that includes several drifts of workers, industry and businesses from city to suburb, drifts that go "on and on and on in concentric circles until you wind up with something that looks and smells like Chicago, rotten at the core" (178). Keats underlines that the immediate postwar urgency to build housing as fast as possible no longer exists, and that there should be enough time to think and plan first. As becomes obvious from a present-day point of view, however, imprudent growth is exactly what continued to happen in vast parts of the United States, and it appears as though urban planners keep making the same suggestions for improvement to little avail.

From a historical perspective, the views and opinions on the development of American suburbia expressed by Keats are not necessarily ground-breaking, but they certainly stand in sharp contrast to people's perception of this landscape a century earlier. Frank Jesup Scott, for instance, viewed the suburbs as a highly dignified environment in the mid-nineteenth century:

> We believe this half-country, half-town life, is the happy medium, and the realizable ideal for the great majority of well-to-do Americans. […] Very poetical or reflective minds, or persons absorbed in mutual domestic loves, find some of their deepest pleasure in the seclusion with Nature. But the zest even of their calm pleasures in

> the country is greatly heightened by frequent contrasts with city excitements, and by the company of sympathetic minds, who enjoy what they enjoy. A philosophic Frenchman, who lived much alone, was once asked by a lady if he did not find solitude very sweet. He replied, "Indeed, madam, when you have some pleasant friend to whom you can say, 'Oh, how sweet is solitude.'" A *suburban* home, therefore, meets the wants of refined and cultivated people more than any other. (F. J. Scott 31)

By the time Keats wrote *The Crack in the Picture Window*, however, the suburban idyll as experienced by Scott had long ceased to exist. Disliking its contemporary aesthetic and social landscape, the author made serious accusations against American suburbia, and numerous contemporary social critics, architects, writers and artists echoed these. Yet despite the severity of the accusations, the typical middle-class suburb has by no means changed its face drastically since the publication of the book, and despite Keats' warnings and apocalyptic tone, suburbia is still thriving. The book thus remains exemplary in its semi-fictional portrayal of architecture, design and urban planning in a suburban context, and has undoubtedly paved the way for a variety of literary, televisual and cinematic works set in the same environment. The author plays with what have become stereotypes of suburban building and living, and it is interesting and astounding to observe that these stereotypes have remained virtually unchanged to this day.

Although many of the architectural and urban planning characteristics Keats focuses on had appeared in fiction before, the author offers a convenient summary of the most stereotypical building-related features that make up the average American postwar suburb, and that represent its various ills. On the level of urban planning, for instance, he focuses on the misplanning or even the inexistence of infrastructure, the repetitiveness and bleakness of the suburban landscape, as well as the destruction of nature through deforestation and levelling of the soil. On the level of architecture and landscape architecture, the author focuses on the uniformity and unimaginativeness of the suburban postwar tract house, the cheap building materials used and the poor quality of construction, the shortage of interior and exterior space, as well as a number of iconic features such as the picture window, the front lawn, the backyard and the picket fence. Furthermore, on the level of interior design, Keats emphasises the monotony of furniture and décor, the clutter that results from shortage of space, as well as the ubiquitousness and perceived indispensability of modern appliances. The force that overarches all these levels of planning, construction and decoration is mass production – or, more precisely, poor-quality mass production. All the characteristics outlined above turned the average middle-class suburb in the United States into a place of loathing for its critics, and they

illustrate how suburbia, conceptually, developed from an imagined Arcadia into an almost nightmarish environment within a matter of years.

The next chapter moves on from the immediate postwar period and its rising criticism against American suburbia, and, in terms of fictional examples, fast-forwards to the late 1970s. There would be a plethora of publications from the 1960s – the heyday of suburban literature – which target conformity and mediocrity, and which thus have a subtext that is based on a similar criticism as Keats' narrative. However, for obvious reasons, the suburban classics of this decade are the texts that have been discussed the most comprehensively in literary criticism. Therefore, in order to provide new perspectives on the suburb and its discontents, the next chapter deals with two of the most important suburban developments of the second half of the twentieth century: the move towards a more architecturally diverse or even eclectic landscape, and the rise of the gated community. The literary examples discussed mirror these developments and portray the (failed) introduction of Architecture with a capital A into the suburban environment, as well as the social and architectural dynamics of a gated community, respectively.

3 Suburbia After Levittown: Architectural Diversification and the Rise of the Gated Community

In the decades succeeding the immediate postwar years, American suburbia continued its triumph that had begun with the onset of architectural mass production. In 1960, the country's population was divided nearly equally between city, suburb and the rural – with the rural still prevailing by a few per cent. As far as inner cities are concerned, the urban population had been fluctuating only marginally since the urban growth spurt in the Roaring Twenties, with the number consistently hovering around the 30 per cent mark. In other words, the rural population was shrinking at the same rate that the suburbs were growing.

Regardless of the circumstance that an increasing number of Americans actively chose the suburbs as their home, and regardless of the demographic thriving of this landscape, suburban problems and shortcomings of a social and an architectural nature were becoming increasingly obvious. It thus comes as no surprise that critical voices became louder, among them the prolific writer and activist Jane Jacobs, one of the most outspoken contemporary critics of suburbia. In her 1961 classic work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, she expresses her disapproval of this landscape and what it stands for:

> [E]ach day, several thousand more acres of our countryside are eaten by the bulldozers, covered by pavement, dotted with suburbanites who have killed the thing they thought they came to find. Our irreplaceable heritage of Grade I agricultural land […] is sacrificed for highways or supermarket parking lots as ruthlessly and unthinkingly as the trees in the woodlands are uprooted, the streams and rivers polluted and the air itself filled with the gasoline exhausts […] required in this great national effort to cozy up with a fictionalized nature and flee the "unnaturalness" of the city.
>
> The semi-suburbanized and suburbanized messes we create in this way become despised by their own inhabitants tomorrow. These thin dispersions lack any reasonable degree of innate vitality, staying power, or inherent usefulness as settlements. Few of them, and these only the most expensive as a rule, hold their attraction much longer than a generation; then they begin to decay in the pattern of city grey areas. […] Thirty years from now, we shall have accumulated new problems of blight and decay over acreages so immense that in comparison the present problems of the great cities' grey belts will look piddling. (Jacobs 459)

Jacobs (460) suggests that the people who create suburbia mistake the unique and elaborate order of urban street life for disorder, and that they itch "to

erase it, standardize it, suburbanize it." She concedes that it may certainly be romantic to move to rustic surroundings and search for the remedies for the ills of society among innocent provincials, but she simultaneously wonders if anyone supposes that contemporary questions and problems can be answered by means of homogeneous settlements (Jacobs 461-462). Due to her shrewd observations, Jacobs has remained a crucial figure in the suburban discourse. Her social commentary proved to be highly insightful, and her prophecies, as observed in her predictions regarding the suburban landscape at the end of the twentieth century, turned out to be surprisingly accurate.

A similar criticism targeted at the suburban built environment and its effects on natural and architectural aesthetics can be found in Peter Blake's 1964 publication *God's Own Junkyard: The Planned Deterioration of America's Landscape*. In his book, Blake deplores the sad look of the country's built environment – "the biggest slum on the face of the earth" –, calling it a "mess" and a "disgrace of such vast proportions that only a concerted national effort can […] hope to return physical America to the community of civilized nations" (Blake 8). He sees mass-produced suburbia as a "massive, monotonous ugliness," and blames the Federal Housing Administration for dictating the design of houses, the landscaping and street planning, and other features that give the suburbs a wasteland appearance, reaching from the curvature of streets to the placement of telephone poles (Blake 17). According to the author, the monotonous wasteland appearance of suburbia is enhanced through the absence of symbolic buildings that would give it character. In his eyes, when it comes to symbolic architecture, the suburbs have little more to offer than the shopping centre (Blake 20). In order to amend the miserable scenery that is created through standardisation, Blake calls for a mix of building types consisting of row houses, garden apartments and tall apartment buildings, since these structures "would create a vastly more interesting skyline than the present one of telephone poles and TV aerials" (Blake 21).

Despite the criticism voiced from a variety of fields and angles, it cannot be denied that any emerging development, be it social, architectural or both, has a certain room to grow and improve, and over the decades, there was certainly progress in suburban architecture as far as monotony, inexpensive materials and style are concerned. According to Gwendolyn Wright, in the ten years between 1963 and 1973, more new dwellings were built than in any preceding decade. There was a decline in the construction of single-family houses and an enthusiasm for developments of a denser variety, such as cluster housing, so that "new kinds of communities provided alternatives to the high-rise and the detached suburban house" (G. Wright 260). These developments were

considered "a threat to the postwar suburban ideal," as they competed with old housing styles and standards (G. Wright 261). However, notwithstanding the architectural potential of suburbia, academically trained architects rarely took an interest in the suburban environment, and the mentioned architectural progress added little to the artistic quality of constructions.

Architectural Neo-Eclecticism and Social Diversification

In the second half of the twentieth century, American suburbs began to be dominated by neo-eclectic building, a type of architecture that was often similarly inexpensive as postwar tract housing, but superficially looked classier and more polished. In the context of neo-eclectic architecture, prospective buyers were given the opportunity to randomly select styles, details and features from a catalogue, so that various traditional architectural styles were combined in new and unique ways (Ciment 675). Hence, there was a decided step forward from architectural mass production and paralysis on part of the buyer towards consumer choice and consumer involvement, even though the resulting aesthetic was and continues to be questionable.

Although this trend of mixing styles has lasted until today, and although it makes the suburban environment more architecturally diverse and detaches it from communist references found in tract housing, neo-eclecticism in suburban building has been met with sharp criticism. Due to its drawing inspiration from and combining a variety of classic building styles that emerged from a truly artistic background, neo-eclectic architecture is a form of pseudo-postmodern design as interpreted and appropriated by suburban contractors. Suburban houses in the late 1960s and 1970s "were not designed with intentional humor, irony, or a rebuke to modernism" (Ciment 675), as is the case with actual postmodern architecture. Therefore, neo-eclectic architecture misses the point of postmodernism; it is little more than a mutilation of styles that are patched together meaninglessly:

> [Suburban] homes could be Neo-French, […] or Neo-Colonial, Neo-Tudor, Neo-Mediterranean, Neoclassical Revival, or Neo-Victorian. Regardless of genre, the builder or developer would select a few carefully chosen, historically relevant features to add style and character to the homes. Houses such as these were built in suburbs throughout the country […]. Architects were not significantly involved in designing these developments as builders chose basic building designs and then added appropriate details to create the look that he or she desired. (Boyer Sagert 91)

The fact that architects were largely left out of the picture in the design process detracts even more from the artistic aspect of neo-eclecticism in suburbia and adds to the sense of consumerism, or the meaningless consumption of art.

In addition to them being a symbol of consumerism, given that suburban homes built in the neo-eclectic style – which includes the vast majority of homes built in the last few decades – are considerably more spacious than the typical postwar tract houses, they play an important part in suburban sprawl and excessive land use. Especially since the 1980s, suburbia has been accused of being particularly wasteful in terms of space and materials due to the rising number of large neo-eclectic McMansions. Even though the term "McMansion," a pejorative name for a new kind of suburban luxury residence, was only coined in the early 1980s, the concept, in its essence, already existed two decades earlier, when neo-eclectic architecture began to spatially inflate the suburban landscape.

With the exception of its increasingly diverse architecture, however, the average suburb of the 1960s and 1970s resembled that of the immediate postwar period in many respects. The defining path for the development of American suburbia had been paved in the mass production after the war, and the typical postwar suburb was replicated unthinkingly in vast stretches of the country. Nonetheless, in comparison with the monotonous suburban tract housing developments of the 1950s, progress had been made in terms of demographics and suburban planning in certain types of communities. A large number of suburbs that deviated from the average had become more socially varied and were more than a collection of houses devoid of a sense of community, and there were considerable improvements as far as infrastructure is concerned.

This progress was not least due to the racial divide that the suburbs were responsible for in the period of urban or "white flight." In the wake of a series of riots in the mid- to late 1960s, racial tensions escalated, and "*inner city* became a shorthand expression that meant poor, black and dangerous" (Ross 55). As a consequence, an increasing number of white people moved away from mixed-race inner-city neighbourhoods and sought refuge in suburbia, so that a large-scale migration resulted. Within the context of this migration, the suburbs encouraged racial division, split the country, and were detrimental to the urban economy. Inner-city businesses, schools and theatres collapsed, while new businesses, schools and theatres were built in the suburbs (Maga xv). Therefore, the development of infrastructure in the suburbs was fostered by and simultaneously caused the demise of inner cities, so that in the 1960s, more and more urban ghettos came into existence. This segregation process lasted for several decades, and for many urban areas, it still continues:

> By 1990, the flight of the residential middle class from the city center was all but complete, and many suburbanites, too busy congratulating themselves on their realization of the American Dream, had excised the problems of the deserted downtowns from their minds. A single-family, detached house on the family's own property, even if the land measured less than half an acre, was an acceptable substitute for the American pioneer's dream of a "little house on the prairie." (Walters and Brown 45-46)

Despite this trend towards urban ghettoisation and increasing racial segregation, the suburbs, too, experienced a growing influx of people of other races and colour, and the perceived utopia of the white suburb thus came under considerable threat during the social transition of the 1960s and 1970s. For the first time, serious shifts in the composition of the suburban population began to emerge, with these shifts being dreaded by the overwhelming majority of white suburbanites.

In Jeffrey Eugenides' 1993 novel *The Virgin Suicides*, to cite a fictional example, the influx of African Americans into the Detroit suburb of Grosse Pointe in the 1970s is a source of serious concern among the white population. In the story, this influx occurred due to the depreciation of urban living conditions, as well as due to the demise of architecture and infrastructure: "[t]he city downtown had deteriorated to such a degree that most blacks had no other place to go" (95). Outside the realm of fiction, too, the white population, as well as contractors, undoubtedly saw the arrival of people of different colour in the suburbs as a form of depreciation of their living or commercial environment, respectively. With African Americans leaving the derelict city centres in large numbers, the clear-cut social demarcation between the suburban and the urban became progressively blurred. Furthermore, in architectural terms, the neat white-picket-fence suburb was perceived to be under threat of ghettoisation due to the increasing elusiveness of social and racial boundaries. The growing racial diversification was therefore viewed as a foreboding of the approaching end of the imagined safety, as well as of the homogeneity and profitableness of the suburbs.

Fortifying the Suburban Dream

As far as the delimitation of social and architectural space is concerned, the weakening racial divisions and the corresponding blurring of boundaries in the built environment caused a rethinking among suburban planners. As a measure to re-establish clear-cut divisions, the late 1960s and 1970s saw the first architectural manifestations of residential gated communities in the United States. Gated communities are housing estates that have controlled, and in most cases even guarded and monitored entrances. These estates, which are predom-

inantly privately developed, come in various dimensions: while some consist of housing only, others are close to being self-sustaining quasi-microcosms, but gated communities of all shapes and sizes have become preferred locations on the real estate market. It is a well-known fact, for instance, that the majority of new homes built in the state of California – which has a disproportionally large share of the country's gated communities – are behind walls or fences.

As pointed out above, gated communities in suburbia are a comparatively recent phenomenon. In suburban fiction, too, this type of setting only gained momentum in the late 1980s with works such as J. G. Ballard's *Running Wild* (1988) in the United Kingdom, and then in the United States with T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* (1995), as well as the immensely popular television series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012).[1] Outside the suburban sphere, however, gated communities have had a long-standing tradition, also in other parts of the world. They appear in history as imperial palaces – such as the Forbidden City in Beijing –, medieval European towns and Spanish forts. Later, at the turn of the twentieth century, they were built to protect the estates of wealthy families, and in the late 1960s, gated communities became widely accessible to the white American middle class in the form of architecturally protected retirement developments. Subsequently, the concept of the gated community was adopted by resorts and country clubs, and eventually, by middle-class suburban housing estates (Low 46).

Although it may appear as though gated communities in suburbia came into being due to safety and security concerns, the reasons for their development reach further. It is certainly true that many of these communities can be found in the vicinity of particularly dangerous inner cities such as Los Angeles, where fear of breaking and entering, or personal violent assault, is high. Even though this fear is often evoked by the practices of the mass media, it nonetheless increases the demand for gated communities, and, as a result, America's already existing fortress mentality becomes even more pronounced. The desire for safety and security from real or imagined threats and dangers is therefore certainly one of the most important reasons that gated communities in both urban and suburban areas have been enjoying increasing popularity throughout the decades. However, the perceived need for fenced- or walled-in neighbourhoods is doubtlessly also rooted in questions of setting boundaries in terms of broader social and architectural concerns. Within the context of the gated community, existing social boundaries are translated into the built environment, and "[t]he

1 Before finding its way into suburban fiction, however, the gated community was used as a setting in dystopian literature and science fiction, such as in Robert A. Heinlein's novel *I Will Fear No Evil* (1970).

walls are making visible the systems of exclusion that are already there, now constructed in concrete" (Low 55). Many people feel more comfortable when surrounded by their own kind, be it in terms of ethnicity or social rank, and gated communities are among the most rigorous material manifestations of this desire for social homogeneity. According to Low (48), "[g]ated communities respond to middle-class and upper-middle-class individuals' desire for community and intimacy and facilitate avoidance, separation, and surveillance. They bring individual preferences, social forces, and the physical environment together in an architectural reality and cultural metaphor."

The effects of gated communities on social interaction and community life are rarely taken into account in the planning process. They also do not appear to affect the decisions made by buyers when moving to these neighbourhoods, but it is plain to see that gated communities play a part in people's declining ability to interact with one another. Low, for instance, sees basic moral values under threat in the fact that urban fear has become an accepted discourse about social or racial exclusion. The author observes that the "retreat to secured enclaves with walls, gates, and guards materially and symbolically contradicts American ethos and values, threatens public access to open space, and creates yet another barrier to social interaction, building of social networks, as well as increased tolerance of diverse cultural/racial/social groups" (Low 45). People consider physical barriers helpful in avoiding social issues, but the social separation that the barriers provoke only aggravates communication problems. Nevertheless, despite their negative consequences for communities, the built environment of the "Land of the Free" is continually being divided into uncountable gated- and walled-off fortresses.

Gated or walled-in communities are certainly the most extreme incarnation of the often-criticised hostile suburban environment, but the outskirts have been concerned with the idea of limits and barriers since their earliest history – gated communities are merely the material architectural manifestation of the underlying principle of inclusion and exclusion. Suburbia has always been concerned with a sense of escape into safety, as well as with a sense of social exclusiveness, homogeneity of class and lifestyles, and racial segregation. Hence, the suburbs have long been accused of creating an unnatural social environment that does more harm than good. Gated communities simply turn symbolic barriers into physical ones, and they are an attempt to counteract the growing porosity of the once-homogeneous suburban bubble.

When it comes to literature, the texts discussed in this chapter illustrate the main architectural concerns and developments of the post-Levittown suburb outlined above. Anne Rivers Siddons' novel *The House Next Door*, a representative of

the Suburban Gothic, deals with the role of architecture and the architect in the outskirts, an environment that has been defined by non-architecture since World War II, or mock styles and neo-eclecticism since the mid-1960s. The text demonstrates that architecture as an art and suburbia are largely incompatible, that this relationship even results in the uncanny, and that artistic aspirations are ultimately misplaced in this landscape. As far as the development of the gated community is concerned, T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* sheds light on people's reasoning behind erecting walls around their suburbs, on what this architectural barrier is supposed to protect, and on whom it is meant to keep out. With both the introduction of architecture as a form of art into suburbia and the development of the gated community, there appears to be an attempt to create a distinctive place out of an environment that lacks character and definition, as well as to (re-)introduce utopian aspects into a failed utopia.

3.1. Contemporary Architecture and the Suburban Gothic in Anne Rivers Siddons' *The House Next Door*

Having thus far covered the first regions affected by suburbanisation in the United States – the Midwest around Chicago and Detroit, and Long Island, New York –, as well as Connecticut and the area around Washington, D.C., in the postwar period, this chapter focuses on the South and on the city of Atlanta, the setting of Anne Rivers Siddons' 1978 novel *The House Next Door*. Atlanta, too, was heavily affected by suburban mass production after World War II and has since turned into one of the most sprawling cities, if not the single most sprawling city, of the United States. As pointed out by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas, Atlanta is defined by a basic formlessness, and "the center/periphery opposition is no longer the point. There *is* no center, therefore no periphery" (qtd. in De Meyer et al. 32). According to Zimmermann, Morçöl and Stich (275), the Atlanta metropolitan area doubled in size in terms of both population and built-over space between 1980 and 2000, and by the turn of the millennium, Atlanta was thought to be "the most rapidly expanding and largest human settlement ever constructed." In terms of demographics, as is the case with many American metropolitan areas, the suburbs of Atlanta continue to thrive, while the city core has lost a large percentage especially of its white population.

Contrary to the current phenomenon of increasing poverty in Atlanta's suburbs, the architectural picture painted by Rivers Siddons is one of prosperity, and of hauntingly beautiful innovation. The eponymous house of her narrative, despite its stunning modern architecture and lack of history, can be classified as

a haunted house, even though the term "haunted" does not precisely fit into the context of the novel and its setting. As also pointed out by Bailey (6), the haunted house tale is deeply rooted in the tradition of the European Gothic, and authors of the American Gothic tradition have always been faced with problems of place, considering that the absence of monasteries or ruined castles forced writers like Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne to transform "the gothic castle into a mere house […]" (Bailey 7).[2] Nonetheless, given that the house is one of the most important codes in American culture, being a "primary marker of class and [a] central symbol of domesticity" (Bailey 8), it is a suitable contextual substitute for the oppressively aristocratic or occultly religious architecture encountered on the European continent.

Although American authors need to adapt to the architectural history of their country, choosing a stereotypical suburb as the backdrop for a haunted house was a novelty, however. In Stephen King's *Danse Macabre*, a non-fiction book about horror narratives, Rivers Siddons explains her decision to embed the house in an ordinary residential street. She states that she had asked herself what the consequences would be if in lieu of an ancient priory in Cornwall, or in lieu of a pre-revolutionary farmhouse somewhere in Bucks County in Pennsylvania, or even a ruined antebellum plantation house, she were to build a brand-new contemporary house in a prosperous suburb of a major city. She thought that the haunting of a house of this kind – a house less than a year old – would be thoroughly unexpected, and that the impact of her story would become even stronger through this unusual choice of setting (King 287-288). As Bailey argues, the setting, with its atmosphere of decay as embodied in a crumbling abbey or a ruined castle, is central to Gothic literature, and it is one of the most significant features of the genre: "Try and imagine Jonathan Harker imprisoned in Count Dracula's suburban Cape Cod, or Frankenstein raising his jerry-built demon from the dead in a sun-drenched south Florida condo […]" (Bailey 4). Yet Rivers Siddons choosing a suburban contemporary house instead of a remote abbey or a decrepit castle succeeds unexpectedly well and provides an innovative twist on Gothic narratives. Furthermore, the residential street is closer to the experience of the average reader than any of the archetypal Gothic examples mentioned above, and therefore, the ordinary becomes disrupted, and the suburban world transformed and re-evaluated. In a genre in which the setting is of utmost importance, and in which architecture is often treated as a character, the consequences for the perception of the suburban

2 The haunted house found its way into the American Gothic tradition through Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" in 1839.

landscape are immense. The literary Gothic traditionally implies a sense of decay of a once-thriving world, and although Rivers Siddons' modern contemporary house, lacking any kind of past, is the polar opposite of a ruined castle, the Gothic sense of degeneration is highly present in the author's suburban backdrop, and must be read allegorically when it comes to the historical rise and fall of American suburbia.

Introducing Architecture to Suburbia

In terms of suburban history, *The House Next Door* is indeed an interesting contemporary witness, as its literary architecture adds diversity and artistry to the typically uniform and bland built environment. After the widespread mass production that had been practised all over the United States, the novel presents to the reader a sense of architectural progress in the suburban landscape in the last quarter of the twentieth century. While a house that, artistically and aesthetically speaking, has a strong claim to architecture may have been an uncommon sight in this environment, architectural diversification certainly occurred. However, in addition to simply representing architectural history in the suburban sphere, the house in Rivers Siddons' novel demonstrates how architecture in its artistic form is born out of and converses with its environment, and it is an appalling testimony to the power and control that architecture can have over its owners. Therefore, considering this unusual focus on design and building as an art in a suburban context, the book allows for a reading that draws more heavily on architectural theory than was the case for the texts discussed in the previous chapters.

According to Spurr (4), one approach used in architectural theory to understand a building is to read it in terms of site, type and architectonics, with architectonics being concerned with the specifics of construction. These three factors feature prominently in *The House Next Door*, and they are crucial for gaining an understanding of the architectural dimension of the novel. Given that the house is not only built on a unique site that previously had been considered unfit for architectural use but is also built in an unusual style and with unusual materials for a 1970s suburb, its specific architecture is symbolic of the destructive role it plays in the story. In fact, the construction is unusual within the context of the American suburb to such an extent that it evokes the uncanny, or a cognitive dissonance relating to its familiar yet incongruous architectural nature. Even though the fictional architecture created by the author is not uncommon per se, it does not fit seamlessly into the context of suburbia. Therefore, architecture as an art, and as translated into the fictional

contemporary house – into its site, type and architectonics –, is uncannily out of place in this environment and becomes a space of impossibility.

Understanding the House Next Door Through Site

The most interesting aspect of the outlined theoretical approach to understanding the suburban house of the novel is, arguably, site. The term site relates to the spatial position of a given building, as well as to the "space of ground occupied or to be occupied by a building; more generally, it describes the place or scene of something […] [and] results from human agency" (Burns 351). Even though architecture is often thought of in terms of buildings exclusively, site is a major factor when it comes to shaping the perception of a specific building. What is more, the two elements are necessarily dialogic in character. Burns (345) suggests that "architecture is not constructed of buildings or sites but arises from the studied relationship of the two and from an awareness that site is received as an architectural construct."

In the novel, the site is initially devoid of the building aspect, however. The heretofore empty lot has a number of peculiar characteristics that make it unfit for building on, which is why it had long remained unsold, and architect after architect thought that fitting a house onto it would be an impossible endeavour.[3] This piece of land is described by the narrator, Colquitt Kennedy, as "shaped like a narrow wedge of pie" (20), with the tip pointing towards the street. It features a steep ridge that runs "like a spine" (20) down its length, thick with hardwoods, flowers and shrubs. Furthermore, it is shallow and neatly cut into two halves by a creek that runs parallel to the street. Due to the lack of depth and the narrowness of the lot, as well as due to the ridge and the two halves created by the creek, the Kennedys had always been convinced that no architect would be able to figure out how to build on it. The lot is, it seems, a space of impossibility as far as its architectural potential is concerned, and it is, in essence, a piece of nature that cannot be tamed or subdued to the manmade, artificial suburban landscape.

Due to the imagery of wilderness it evokes, the lot feels not unlike an oasis amidst the suburban neighbourhood. As the narrator enthuses, it appears to be "an oasis of wild, dark greenness, luminous in the spring with white dogwood and honeysuckle and rhododendron blooms, giving one the feeling of being cloistered away in a mountain retreat" (21), in spite of the fact that one of the main thoroughfares of Atlanta is merely one block away. From the perspective

3 In architectural studies, the term "lot" refers to "a measured parcel of land with fixed boundaries as designated on a plot or survey" (Burns 351).

of the Kennedys, the lot separates their house from the Guthries' to the left, and can be overlooked from their bedroom window, from the upstairs bedroom – later to be turned into a home office –, as well as from the kitchen and the breakfast room through the old French doors. In short, as the narrator maintains, it can be overlooked from the places where they spend the majority of their time – the places they live. The narrator has always been enamoured with this lot, not only because of its natural beauty and serenity embodied in the flora and fauna that has unfolded itself there, but also because it allows her to move around the house freely, without feeling watched and observed. The Kennedys value space, greenery and privacy, and the lot serves as a buffer zone; any house built on it, "no matter how well done, would stare directly into the core of [their] living" (21).

As the rooms in which the Kennedys spend the majority of their time face this peaceful neighbouring terrain, the ambience of their own interior space is highly impacted by its natural presence. The bathroom that connects the bedroom with the future office, for instance, is transformed by the trees next door into a sphere flushed with a greenish, undulating underwater light, and it makes the narrator feel like a mermaid in her element. She imagines her future home office and is excited by the prospect of working in front of the greenery outside, which she thinks would make her feel as though she were in a treehouse. The feelings evoked by the natural sphere adjacent to the Kennedy house underline the soothing effect of vegetation on the surrounding architecture and its inhabitants, and it becomes apparent that the original sub- or exurban dream as dreamt by many Americans after World War II is still alive.

In terms of the natural sphere, what is striking in the descriptions of the empty lot and the narrator's associations with it are the various images and symbols of life. Apart from the trees, flowers and shrubs that turn it into a natural green spectacle of untouched wilderness among the manmade landscape of a suburban residential zone, there is a considerable range of fauna in this pie-shaped micro-kingdom of living things, and the creek that runs through it is the source of life that makes this oasis possible. However, it is not only the organic world, but also the inorganic world contained in this space that appears to be animated. The ridge that runs through the length of the lot is likened to a spine and is thus assigned human properties. In the same vein, the fear that a house could be built and "stare" into the core of the Kennedys' living also imbues the potential architecture on the lot with animate qualities.

The apparent aliveness of the inorganic lot in its geology and topography primarily comes to the surface during the onset of building activities. Like birds of prey and maggots feasting on a carcass or a dying creature, "yellow

insect machinery" continuously crawls "back and forth across the ridge, buzzing and gnawing implacably at the curve of it" (37), and after working hours, the abandoned equipment reminds the narrator of "the discarded carapaces of megalithic insects" (38). The creek, as though it had a human will, "docilely accepted" (37) a culvert forced onto it. Furthermore, the building activity both metaphorically and visually causes the earth to bleed and stain the water of the creek "blood-red" (37), which adds to the perception of the lot as a body in the process of being murdered, mutilated and eventually decomposed.[4] The aliveness of the lot, with its raw earth resembling bleeding flesh, reflects the fact that building activities necessarily entail the destruction of nature. According to Glassie (22), "[t]he decision to create a building is the decision to destroy some part of the material universe. Things are wrecked – trees are toppled, stone is broken, old houses are razed – to make life better. The desire is for improvement. The process of the desire is technological."

The imagery used within the context of the destruction of nature and the alteration of the earth's crust goes hand in hand with the theory of the Anthropocene – a chronotope that is "specific to the moment when the human species begins to recognize its impact not only on spaces of settlement and habitation, but also on the scale of geological time […]" (Turpin 10). Furthermore, the perception of the heretofore natural lot as a mutilated, dying body must be read in the tradition of Ecocriticism, which studies the link between literature and the physical or natural environment. Ecocriticism takes its bearings from nineteenth-century transcendentalist authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller and Henry David Thoreau, whose writings celebrate nature, the wilderness and life force as exhibited in America (Barry 249). What ecocritics commonly propagate is the view that "for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists on the planet" (Barry 257), and they contend that no place on earth is spared from the impact of environmental and thus anthropogenic issues. Ecocriticism remains a fairly marginal academic discipline, but within the context of *The House Next Door*, it is strongly present in the depicted disappearance of the natural world, or in the idea of nature turning itself against mankind in revenge for the mutilation it has suffered.

In fact, Ecocriticism is a rather commonly encountered aspect in the Suburban Gothic. In Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* (1972), for instance, there is strong concern over industrial plants releasing toxic waste into the drinking water, a process through which women are believed to be turned into submissive

4 The blood-red earth is mirrored in the hair colour of the architect of the house (see also Bailey 87), a detail which directly links him to the metaphorical slaughtering of the lot.

and characterless housewives. A further example is Todd Haynes' film *Safe* (1995) – often stylised as *[safe]* or *[SAFE]* –, in which the female protagonist, also a suburban housewife, develops multiple chemical sensitivity due to the devastating impact of the built environment that surrounds her. Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist* (1982), too, deals with a slightly different version of Ecocriticism, playing with the trope of the ancient Indian burial ground, or the revenge of the dead for having had their cemetery built over with characterless suburban housing.

The ecocritical aspect in *The House Next Door* is seemingly relativised when, despite the warning signs of bleeding earth and blood-stained water, the site is not altered and mutilated to the extent that the Kennedys had feared. The narrator is relieved when she realises that the architect, Kim Dougherty, has not marked quite as many trees "for death" (38) as it had first appeared, and she is hopeful that "the lovely woman-curves of the land" (38) will not be quite so drastically altered after all. As her friend Claire Swanson suggests, it is unlikely that the narrator will be able to remember the appearance of the lot in its natural state once the house has been built, once the lawn has been sown and the landscaping has been completed. However, regardless of whether the alteration to the landscape is accepted or not, in the context of Ecocriticism, what matters is the fact that there is an alteration in the first place, that mankind tames and subdues nature for its own benefit. *The House Next Door* is a testimony to how the suburbs, even after the main wave of mass production in the previous decades, continue to devour the natural landscape of America in the 1970s, not least due to people's urge to divide and structure their space in an attempt to make sense of it:

> Architecture works in space as history works in time. History interrupts time's ceaseless flow, segmenting and reordering it on behalf of the human need for meaning. Architecture intrudes in the limitless expanse of space, dividing it into useful, comprehensible pieces. Converting space into places through disruption, architecture brings meaning to the spatial dimension. (Glassie 21)

In the novel, this making sense of space occurs less in terms of urban or suburban expansion, but rather in terms of architectural densification, in the context of which no site is left unused and neighbourhoods are robbed of their last pockets of greenery.

Understanding the House Next Door Through Type

When considering the architectural construction independently of the site, the second aspect of the outlined theoretical approach to reading a building, type, comes into play. In terms of architectural type, the construction in focus in *The House Next Door* is a modernist exemplar that conceptually and aesthetically clashes with the neighbouring houses; it is a highly individualistic or even egotistic structure, as the architect designed it intending to fulfil his own creative vision. A clash of this kind was an unusual occurrence in the suburbs of the 1970s. In that decade, there was a strong trend towards uniformly neo-eclectic aesthetics, and the architect thus drafted this modern house without taking its conservative surroundings into consideration.

The fact that an academically trained architect is involved in the construction of a suburban house is equally unusual as the clash his building causes. In the 1970s, suburban housing was rarely designed by architects, "or if the definition of 'architect' is less regulated in some countries than others, it [was] undertaken by architects who [were] far from the reflexive modernist mainstream" (Adam 135). However, Rivers Siddons' architect is by no means one of the many young geniuses who "starve in a garret and refuse to accept commissions that [are not] true to their art and suffer in big firms till they [can] go out on their own" (44). He has no desire to design prestigious buildings, and he claims that all he has ever wanted to do is build residential architecture.

The building ultimately created by the architect in River Siddons' novel is described as "very contemporary" (22). This strikes as an unfitting historical reference for suburban architecture, given that the typical suburban landscape was and continues to be defined by architectural allusions to the past, often in combination with distant geographical locations. Since the mass production of residential "boxes" in the postwar years, there has been a shift towards building in mock styles such as Colonial, Tudor, Tuscan, or, in particularly affluent suburbs, Faux Château – styles that are, in essence, cost-effective materialisations of nostalgia rather than products of solid building traditions. As Harris and Larkham (2) observe, the "fashion for 'historic' architectural styles, sometimes drawing upon local or regional building idioms, has introduced superficial variety, but in the hands of most builders and developers even this new localism can appear somehow generic."

An example of this generic "historic" suburban building tradition is found in the Kennedy residence, which is a representative of the Dutch Colonial style. The Dutch Colonial, or rather, the Dutch Colonial Revival style in suburban residential architecture emerged in the late nineteenth century and was initially

limited to New England, where, in its original form, Dutch settlers had introduced it along the Hudson River valley in the early seventeenth century. Its architecture is characterised by gambrel roofs and curved, flaring eaves, making residential houses resemble barns as far as construction is concerned. This residential architectural style was particularly prevalent in the northeastern United States until the end of the 1930s, before the expansion of suburbia in the postwar years introduced it to other parts of the country. However, even though the Dutch Colonial only became one of the most popular suburban house types in the second half of the twentieth century, it was as early as 1910 that residential houses of this style began to appear in pre-cut-home catalogues (Schweitzer and Davis 135).

Within the context of *The House Next Door*, there is a strongly perceptible down-to-earthness to the Dutch Colonial Revival home, which becomes apparent at the beginning of the novel, when a lasting contrast between the architecture of the Kennedys' house and that of the future house next door is established. Colquitt Kennedy humbly states that she and her husband "have a good house, but not a grand one, in a better neighbourhood than [they] can really afford […]" (9). Furthermore, in order to underline their mediocrity and their status as members of the middle class, she discloses a number of details about herself and her husband, as well as about their uneventful suburban life in a Dutch Colonial. For instance, her husband drives "the obligatory tobacco-brown Mercedes sedan [sic] […]," while she drives "the obligatory compact station wagon […]" (10). She is an avid collector of antiques dating back to the Georgia Federal period – although these antiques "do not at all fit the mood of [her] old, square, two-story brick house" (10) –, as well as of plants and stones for her rock garden. The couple often sit outside on the patio fronting their Dutch Colonial, on their wrought-iron chairs, "looking just like what [they] are – mildly affluent people in their middle thirties, well and casually dressed, tanned from a summer of not-so-good tennis at the club […]" (11).

There are houses in the neighbourhood which surpass the Kennedys' Dutch Colonial by far in terms of architectural impact, and which are substantially more impressive, but nonetheless, a rootedness in tradition and history is invariably perceptible. Virginia Guthrie's house, for instance, has a highly sophisticated feel to it, and it is a straightforward reflection of her personality: "cool and elegant and yet somehow warming and soothing" (133). In terms of interior design, it has a distinguished European character owing to the graceful

Hepplewhite furniture.[5] The most striking architectural example in the novel, however, is the Parson residence. The house is described as "one of the city's real showplaces, built in the closing days of the last century by an architect of great local renown who had spent much time abroad and favored the Italians" (237). Set back behind a lawn and a circular drive, the architecture of the old white stucco villa is rooted in a European sense of aristocracy, with two identical stone urns framing the door, and with the interior boasting with rich old tapestries, great chandeliers and large black Mediterranean pieces that are balanced out with colour and space where needed.

The modern glass construction of the contemporary building next door, in contrast, breaks with tradition and is a symbol of progress. Due to its appearance, that is, due to its sleek, highly modern exterior that clashes with the conservative aesthetic code of the suburban neighbourhood, it draws all eyes upon itself. In terms of interior, too, the house is highly un-suburban. The interior is dominated by glass and a sense of airiness, as is characteristic of modern architecture. An expanse of glass opens onto a panorama of woods the size of an entire wall. Sliding doors lead from the airy living room onto the deck, and through the glass, the last remnant of the ridge – the broken spine of the lot – can be seen. In terms of décor, the kitchen is fashionably fitted out with warm, waxed birch, as well as with Italian tile bricks. In the course of the novel, and depending on the family inhabiting the house, the interior is either dominated by an abundance of white, chrome and leather, or by an abundance of lavender, white-and-gilt, silver, pink, purple and gold, but regardless of the colour palette, it is invariably described as mesmerising and awe-inspiring:

> There was hardly an inch of floor space that did not house a piece of carved, polished, satined, damasked and gilded French furniture. Mirrors and paintings covered the white walls. The long expanses of glass were draped and tied and swagged with satin. The polished wooded floor lay under thick, pale-blue carpeting. A great log roared in the fireplace, and flowers, mostly white, stood spikily, formally erect on tables and mantelpiece. White candles blazed everywhere. In the dining room dour faces in frames of heavy gilt glared down on the buffet table. (251-252)

Like the exterior, the interior of the house is thus thoroughly sleek and tasteful, carefully thought through and harmonious in style and purpose. The house is a source of wonder and awe in every respect, and all of Rivers Siddons' characters are attracted to its open space and light.

5 George Hepplewhite was one of the most renowned English furniture makers of the eighteenth century and gave his name to a characteristic style of elegant and light furniture.

Given these descriptions relating to aesthetics, it is unmistakable that the style of the house not only breaks with suburban design traditions; it breaks with Gothic traditions, too. The mock-European Parson residence, for instance, would fit far more conveniently into the framework of a haunted house story due to its stylistic and historical rootedness in a past epoch. However, the traditionally Gothic architectural atmospheres in *The House Next Door* are encountered elsewhere. It is in descriptions of vacant houses, in which the atmosphere is one of haunting emptiness and desertion, that the novel is more conventional as far as the built environment of the Gothic is concerned. The narrator believes that "there is about a waiting house a sort of mournful abandonment, a wistful air of 'Why are you leaving me? What went wrong?' Even when the families are still in residence, their possessions still in place, their dishes still in cabinets, their clothes still in closets, there is a melancholy air of finish, a breath of ending" (285).[6] A similarly uncanny air of abandonment and emptiness dominates the narrative when the Swansons abandon their house, which leaves the suburban street drenched in a post-apocalyptic atmosphere: their house stands in complete darkness with the windows shuttered, while the house next door stands still, dark and unlighted on its lot, and looks "blankly and ringingly and irrevocably empty" (293). Peeking through an opening at the back of the Swansons' former home, the narrator is confronted with a ghostly interior. A Gothic feeling of emptiness arises when she notices that the furniture is gone, that dust has gathered on the parquet, and that the walls are naked with the exception of "ghostly" (294) rectangular spots, the remnants of picture frames.

In spite of the fact that the modern house breaks with Gothic traditions in terms of architectural type and residential past, it is unmistakable from the beginning of the story that there is an uncanniness to it. Taking into consideration Freud's idea of the uncanny – in its German original "das Unheimliche" ("the unhomely") –, this is an interesting detail, since the house, as opposed to a ruined abbey or castle, in fact transmits a strong sense of homeliness, of peacefulness and warmth. However, rather than the air of homeliness it transmits, or its aesthetic form considered on its own, it is the context of the house, its breaking with suburban codes, its being out of place in its surroundings, as well as its architectural beauty that evoke the uncanny. As

6 It is an exhilarating game for the narrator to imagine living in these abandoned places and to think about how she would use the architectural space and arrange her furniture, but she states that she is not ready to live within walls that are unfamiliar with her shape – a statement that is suggestive of architecture being capable of cognition, or of architecture being able to remember in the Gothic tradition.

Freud (195) observes, "what is novel can easily become frightening […]," and it is the novelty of the architectural experiment that turns the suburban street as depicted by Rivers Siddons into an unhomely environment.

Even though the sense of uncanniness is perceptible from the outset, the beauty of construction manages to overpower and mute it initially. The stunning modern architecture serves as a mediator between the suburban community and the evil nature of the house, and it is able to soothe tensions and suspicion by means of aesthetics. Even the narrator, who should be utterly disturbed by the new building due to its physical proximity, and who thought that anything contemporary on the next-door lot would be disapproved of, must admit that it is "the greatest house [she has] ever seen" (123). Therefore, the statements claiming that it is "only a house" (23), nothing more than "a pile of boards and stone" (99), or simply "a pile of rocks and boards and masonite" (216), certainly do not reflect the reality of this building. It is an overwhelmingly beautiful construction that raises desire in its beholders, and the initial harmless aesthetic splendour is drowned out by the uncanniness of the house – which is partially caused by its own beauty – before long.

The beauty and the uncanny in this modern contemporary building could even be mistaken for the sublime, as the house evidently evokes more than a sense of beauty in the beholder. Yet finding the sublime in a modern contemporary would be unusual given that when it comes to the sublime in architecture, it is conventionally the Gothic cathedral that is used as a reference. Consistent with the Burkean sublime, Scottish rhetorician Hugh Blair (28) sees the Gothic cathedral as the architectural embodiment of the concept due to its raising "ideas of grandeur in our minds, by its size, its height, its awful obscurity, its strength, its antiquity, and its durability." The house as imagined by Rivers Siddons, in contrast, is deficient in size and height; its glass architecture makes it transparent and fragile rather than obscure, strong or durable, and, as opposed to the antiquity of the cathedral, the newly built contemporary has no history. However, when considering a statement by Coleridge on the Gothic cathedral, in which he maintains that this type of building "impresses the beholder with a sense of self-annihilation," and that the beholder "becomes, as it were, a part of the work contemplated" (qtd. in Davison 29), the quasi-sublime effect of the modern building receives an explanation. The house next door dwarves its beholder and simultaneously attracts them to such an extent that they identify with it. Yet despite the fact that the building annihilates its contemplator to an extent, its lack of material dimensions is insurmountable, and although its impact goes beyond beauty, it is unable to reach the sublime. According to John Ruskin, "[i]n order to produce […] impressions of sublimity on the human mind, certain degrees of this material largeness are absolutely

necessary. No beauty of design in architecture [...] will entirely take the place of what may be called 'brute largeness'" (qtd. in Landow 207). Therefore, the stunning contemporary house is not a manifestation of the sublime itself, but it has a sublime-like effect that is caused by the beauty of its architectural type, as well as by its uncanniness.

The uncanny and unique character of the modern contemporary is highly unusual within the context of suburban fiction, given that in this genre, a far more common trope is the suburban house as a characterless and interchangeable arrangement of physical matter. Nonetheless, with *The House Next Door* being a representative of the Suburban Gothic, the unnerving and destructive role the building plays is in line with traditional Gothic fiction:

> [T]he Gothic has consistently depicted the house not only as a setting for the unspeakable, but, in less clearer terms, as a site that actually invigorates it. Arguably, that many of its narratives identify the house in the title seems to suggest that the architecture's prominence exceeds its function as backdrop but is in fact the very thing that engenders terror. Throughout its tradition, the Gothic has consistently recognized a quality invested in domestic space that has the power to unnerve, fragment, and even destroy its inhabitant [...]. (Hook Soon Ng 1)

In the case of Rivers Siddons' novel, the traditional haunted house located on a hill, in a forest, or in a remote landscape, is translated into the context of the more densely populated American suburb. The suburban haunted house is, however, by no means Rivers Siddons' invention, with earlier examples including Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) or *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (1962), but these two novels portray a different version of suburbia and make the house appear more traditionally Gothic, that is, more remote and less incorporated into the immediate neighbourhood. This becomes apparent when merely considering the titles, as "hill" and "castle" straightforwardly refer to a more traditional sense of Gothic. *The House Next Door*, in contrast, brings the haunted house closer to the typical white-picket-fence narrative and transports it directly into an aesthetically uniform suburban street, where it fills a physical gap within a row of semi-affluent houses. Due to its architectural type, the construction is far from characterless and stands out as if it were in fact prominently located on top of a hill, and there is no need for the author to

physically displace it since the same effect is reached by means of contrasting aesthetics.[7]

Understanding the House Next Door Through Architectonics

When considering that neither the architectural type nor the site of the house is traditionally Gothic or traditionally uncanny, what appears to be at the bottom of the sense of uncanniness that the building transmits is primarily its architectonics. In *The House Next Door*, the architectonics, or the principles and character of the architectural structure, must be considered in conjunction with the aspects of site and type, however, and it is only through tying them together that the house can be fully comprehended. Owing to the three forces working concertedly, an animated architectural entity on an animated lot emerges, which is reflective of the idea of architecture as a character in the haunted house story tradition. Furthermore, the "aliveness" of the building corresponds to the idea of the uncanny as proposed by Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." In his essay, Jentsch suggests that "the effect of the uncanny can easily be achieved when one undertakes to reinterpret some kind of lifeless thing as part of an organic creature, especially in anthropomorphic terms, in a poetic or fantastic way" (Jentsch 224), and this reinterpretation is essentially what the architectural idiosyncrasies of the house are meant to attain.

In terms of architectonics, the building is characterised as "organic" (42), that is, it appears to be a natural consequence of its environment. It is as though the house were destined to be built exactly in this location, and as though it were destined to be built exactly as designed by its architect. The narrator senses the inevitability of the house even before the building process begins, while merely scrutinising the sketches:

> The house-to-be lay in a pool of radiance, as if spotlit. I drew in my breath at it. It was magnificent. I do not as a rule care for contemporary architecture, finding it somehow sharp and intrusive and demanding, in spite of the obvious virtues of air and light and ease of maintenance, of functional living space. This house was different. It commanded you, somehow, yet soothed you. It grew out of the pencilled earth like an

7 This circumstance is striking when considering that even in works of fiction in which the eeriness of the suburb is portrayed through images of uniformity, the haunted or mysterious house is more often than not physically displaced. A physical displacement of the mysterious house within the context of architectural or social uniformity is, for instance, present in Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands* – which creates a stark contrast between the castle on the hill and the pastel retro suburb –, and in Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives* – which physically separates the Men's Association building from the rest of the suburb by means of an intimidating fence and driveway.

> elemental spirit that had lain, locked and yearning for the light, through endless deeps of time, waiting to be released. It soared into the trees and along the deep-breasted slope of the ridge as though it had uncoiled, not as though it would be built, layer by layer and stone by stone. I could hardly imagine the hands and machinery that would form it. I thought of something that had started with a seed, pit down deep roots, grown in the sun and rains of many years into the upper air. In the sketches, at least, the woods pressed untouched around it like companions. The creek enfolded its mass and seemed to nourish its roots. It looked – inevitable. (33)

In keeping with her picturing the house growing out of a seed, the narrator treats the construction as a living organism once it is completed, and considers it an entity that needs to be watered and fed; it must be given nourishment and love in order for it to remain "alive and healthy" (42). The idea of architecture developing a life of its own goes hand in hand with architectural critic Siegfried Giedion's interpretation of a building as a metaphorical organism:

> An architecture may be called into being by all sorts of external conditions, but once it appears it constitutes an organism in itself, with its own character and its own continuing life. Its value cannot be stated in the sociological or economic terms by which we explain its origin, and its influence may continue after its original environment has altered or disappeared. (Giedion 20)

When considering the haunted house tradition, the metaphorical references to architecture as a living organism often become literal. Even though in the case of Rivers Siddons' novel, the building never comes alive in a literal sense, it comes alive in the sense that it has an evident drive or will, which is also a commonly encountered characteristic of architecture in Gothic literature. However, there are specifics to the role of the contemporary building as an active, life-like agent that make *The House Next Door* an unusual representative not only of the Suburban Gothic, but of Gothic literature more broadly speaking. Contrary to the tradition, the building is neither haunted by former residents nor built upon an ancient burial ground, nor does it follow any other formula of this kind. The life that is inherent to the house does not have its roots in the world of the dead; in other words, there are no spiritual forces in the architectural building that imbue it with life – it is the architectonics of the inanimate material construction that are imbued with life. The house has been alive, and has been an intelligent entity, since the day that construction works began.

Literary examples that feature the architectural house as the sole source of the mysterious anomalies characteristic of the Gothic are rare. Hook Soon Ng (2) mentions *The House on the Borderland* (1908) by British fantasist William Hope Hodgson in this context, a story that centres around a remote house in

rural Ireland which is steeped in mystery to such an extent that people murmur that "the devil built the place" (15). Another example is Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves* (2000), a book of unconventional format and structure, which presents an architecture of impossibility in that the measurements of the suburban house depicted are larger on the inside than on the outside, with the building continually re-shaping. What these two novels have in common with *The House Next Door* is a haunting that is intrinsic to the material construction, or, in other words, a haunting that is caused by its architectonics.

The allusions to the idiosyncrasies and anomalies of the quasi-animated architectural construction become more numerous in the novel as the building process progresses. Once the exterior is finished, the narrator observes how the contemporary house looks "more alive and sweetly grown than ever," and she pictures it with the warmth of yellow lights and smoke rising from the chimneys "like the breath of the house" – it is now in need of life, "like a heart" (63). The house comes alive even more when progress is made on its interior construction – on its "organs" consisting of wallpaper, carpeting and paint –, which embellishes it with characteristic features, and which conceals the raw bones and flesh of its structural architecture. Eventually, on the night of the housewarming, the building looks so striking that the narrator likens it to a debutante or a bride about to walk down the aisle, "dressed and combed" (82). It becomes obvious that in the course of construction, the use of metaphors and personifications increases, and that the house is transformed from a basic living organism into a vain being.

In addition to exterior appearances reminiscent of a human being, the house begins to develop strongly perceptible emotions as the narrative progresses. Its humanesque emotions, which, in turn, are also reflected in its physical features, become apparent each time it receives new occupants, and thus each time it wakes up from its dormant and ungroomed state in which it rests while uninhabited. When filled with new life, the lines of the building shrug "more closely into the earth and trees, as if with a sigh of contentment" (114), and the same ease, satisfaction and serenity are present in descriptions of the house as a "sweetly sleeping shape […]" (283).[8]

The image of the house shrugging into the earth and trees is evidence that there is a strong symbiosis between the architectonics and the site of the building. In fact, the architect sees his understanding of design reflected in this

8 Not only the physical house and its emotions are affected by the vicissitudes of occupancy, but also the landscaping, or grooming. Each time the house lies dormant, the landscaping begins to show signs of neglect and of biological decay. Weeds grow around its foundation, and the property begins to resemble "God's Little Acre" (216).

symbiosis: "first you plant something. The site, the ground will tell you what to plant. You plant it, and you raise it [...]" (43). Taking the site into consideration is crucial in creating a genius loci, since "a strong place presupposes that there exists a meaningful correspondence between site, settlement and architectural detail" (Norberg-Schulz 179-180). The architect's design approach is therefore defined by the supremacy of the site, and the necessary submission of architecture and architectonics to the site. As Burns (347) argues, in architecture as well as other planning disciplines, natural features such as wind patterns and drainage systems are often considered secondary to the constructions of human origin, and the space of undeveloped land is thought of as pure and objective, as "a neutral mathematical object." In *The House Next Door*, however, the undeveloped lot is not considered neutral by any means, and the architect submits his building to the authority of the site, and himself to the autonomy and authority of the building. He is convinced that his house is its own master, and that people need to live by the rules it imposes on them rather than vice versa. The authority of the house thus arises out of its having organically grown out of the site, and out of the strong genius loci it transmits.

The Supremacy of Architecture

In the novel, the supremacy of architecture over its inhabitants manifests itself in three separate stories that focus on three different families – the Harralsons, the Sheehans and the Greenes –, and this supremacy additionally extends to neighbours and the architect himself. The Harralsons, the original commissioners of the project, witness the construction of the house, or of their "nest" (48), and see its architecture develop. Their architect has been fully trusted with the design, and the couple only visit the construction site to assure themselves of the progress being made, as well as to "admire the latest bit of structural alchemy the carpenters [have] wrought" (48). They are enamoured with specific details in which architecture and site come together, such as the manner in which the architectonics of the balcony harmonise with the creek, or the beautiful location of the baby's room in the treetops over the small waterfall. However, when the architectural shell is completed and work begins on the interior construction, Pie Harralson falls down a flight of stairs and suffers a miscarriage. This is the first foreboding of the evil nature of the house, and there are first depictions of a slightly uncanny mood, for instance when Walter Kennedy sees the house "darkening against the grape-colored sky" (63). This mood also foreshadows the strange happenings during the housewarming party that cause the Harralsons to abandon their new home instantaneously.

The next family, the Sheehans, are subject to a similar supremacy of architecture over the individual. Anita Sheehan becomes aware of the distinctive nature of the building immediately, and she is thoroughly enamoured with it. She did not expect to feel comfortable with their move from a traditional to a contemporary house, but it was as though this particular house "had been waiting for [her] to come home" (124). She is deeply traumatised from losing her son in the Vietnam War, and is unaware of the fact that their new house and its mind games are responsible for the various resurgences of her catatonia. On the contrary, she believes that the house and her love for something inanimate help her in the healing process:

> "[The house] needs me, sort of, to be at its best. When I walk in from shopping or somewhere, I feel like it almost preens itself, because it knows it's prettier with me in it. I give it something. That's a nice feeling to have about a house. Usually a house gives *you* something – status, security, identity, or whatever. My house needs *me* to give *it* identity. It's a flattering feeling." (147-148)

In this statement, it becomes obvious that the relationship between architecture and inhabitant goes beyond the commonly observed reciprocity in the novel. As has been established earlier, people shape their dwellings to a similar extent that their dwellings shape them, but in this case, this natural reciprocity is elevated to the sphere of the uncanny. Anita Sheehan's observation that the house requires her to give instead of receive goes hand in hand with the narrator's statement that a house of this kind needs to be watered and fed instead of maintained. As it turns out in the course of the novel, what the house requires from the people who dwell in it is their essence, it requires what is closest to them and defines their existence. Instead of enhancing the identity of its owners, as would normally be the case with outstanding residential architecture, the house robs its owners of their identity in order to enhance its own identity and keep its supremacy alive: "It's a greedy house. It takes" (170).

After the Sheehans have been robbed of their essence and have abandoned the house next door, the last family, the Greens, move into the building, attracted by the beauty of its architecture, as well as by the sleekness and simplicity of its design. As Susan Greene enthuses, it seems "such an easy house to keep […]. So functional" (227). It is this simplicity of architecture and design that conceals the complex personality of the house, as well as the depth of its desires, and this misleading simplicity is what attracts people with emotional baggage and difficult pasts – people "wistful and careful-faced with the wanting of the house" (221). Norman Greene, in contrast, is less interested in the simplicity of the house than in what owning this impressive, modern building means for his reputation.

Rather than enhancing his social status, however, the house destroys his family and becomes mighty as never before, as is reflected in its physical dimensions in the passage in which Walter Kennedy stands on the property "with the house towering over him" (263). In this powerful state, the house awaits its final victim, its creator.

When it comes to its architect, the house has taken its toll on him from the beginning of the design process. Its superiority has drained him of his creativity, and he experiences a severe creative block and begins to think that he is "a one-house architect" (65) with an imagined talent. The narrator watches him gaze at the house as though he were memorising it, "stone by stone and board by board" (76), as though he were trying to remember his thoughts and feelings during the design process, and as though he were trying to draw his lost creativity out of the finished construction. His condition deteriorates gradually until he becomes almost delirious, convinced that there is something in the house that he did not plant, something that has developed a life of its own. The architect hears the voice of the house talk to him, but he fails to understand the message. The building has acquired an uncanny, devilish quality, and a history that goes beyond its building and design process.

The superiority of the building over its architect manifests itself when, upon returning revitalised from an extended trip to Italy in which he engaged with architecture that has a true history, Kim Dougherty buys his own creation. He is convinced that only he is worthy of his house, and that only he is able to understand it. It becomes obvious that what the house wanted all along is its architect, a pattern which follows the Gothic trope of creations turning against their creators. It comes to the surface that the architect's history of designing ill-fated buildings goes back to his days in architecture school, a fact which reinforces his role as the devil, or the architect of evil; there will be malevolence "in everything he ever builds for as long as he lives" (340). Therefore, as also observed by Bailey (87), there is a "dislocation of the haunted house history from house to architect." The only way to break the cycle is to burn down the building with the body of its architect in it, but the architectural curse is too strong to break, since plans of a house that he drew whilst in Europe survive. They strongly resemble those of the house next door in terms of their almost magical appeal, and the drafted building "looks like it's growing right up out of the ground […]," as though it were "alive" (346). Rivers Siddons thus proposes an interesting twist to the haunted house formula, which, according to Bailey (6), postulates two different endings: one in which the house is destroyed, and one in which the house survives and awaits new victims. In *The House Next Door*, these two conventional endings are combined to create an atypical plot,

and the superiority of architecture survives both the original construction and its architect.

Death and the Suburb: Nature, the Architect and Architecture

With this vicious circle ending in mind, the narrative contains various messages regarding the built environment of the American suburb. On the level of urban planning, an unmistakable criticism of environmental destruction can be discerned. Rivers Siddons uses the image of bleeding earth twice, first at the beginning of the building process, and then again in relation to the construction of a condominium complex.[9] In both cases, there is a lamentation of dying trees that have to make way for an artificial manmade landscape, be it the one containing the beautiful contemporary building or the one containing the ghastly housing complex. Both are signs of a changing suburban environment that has evolved and expanded remarkably fast since the postwar years, and that will continue to devour natural landscapes for many decades to come.

On the level of architecture – with the exception of the unsightly condominium complex –, it would be going too far to speak of an overt criticism of suburban aesthetics or architectural function on the part of the author. It can be argued that in light of the maliciousness of the contemporary house, Rivers Siddons criticises an aesthetic in residential architecture that breaks with tradition and historical rootedness, but the fact that the architecture of the building is universally admired weakens this argument. In terms of architectural criticism, it is rather the case that the author points out various failures. First, she points out the failure of the architect and his declared interest in suburban residential architecture. American suburbia, as already discussed, has never truly been designed with the involvement of academically trained architects, and the death of Kim Dougherty accentuates the fact that the involvement of an architect in the building of this landscape is doomed to fail. Dougherty is solely concerned with his building on its lot as an isolated artistic entity, and he thoroughly disregards the suburban context in which it is embedded, an aesthetically bland and uniform context that he misreads and fails to understand. Second, Rivers Siddons points out the failure of the introduction of contemporary building styles into the architectural and social context of

9 Contrary to their taste, the Swansons move to a "shoddy, pretentious, cramped and overpriced" (294) condominium development that was built when a developer bought an old estate on the outer edges of the neighbourhood and "carved [it] into a ghastly, rococo parody of a Breton fishing village" (294). It is said to have been an emotional moment "when the great old hardwoods had come down and the red earth had bled through and the sterile, ridiculous town houses had begun to rise" (295).

the suburb. Despite it undoubtedly being a representative of its time, Kim Dougherty's architecture clashes with its surroundings to such an extent that it assumes the role of an uncanny, prominently located haunted castle within the context of the Suburban Gothic. This comes as no surprise when considering that the creative output of an academically trained architect typically has an artistic claim, meaning that buildings designed by serious architects are at odds with the suburban environment that also in the 1970s was characterised by uniformity and an emphasis on functionality, as well as by a translation of historically or geographically rooted building types into the suburban framework. In other words, suburbia was characterised by buildings that did not take the local site into consideration. The organically developed house in Rivers Siddons' novel strongly swims against the stream of conformity and historical or geographical referentiality, and since both the house and its architect are burnt down and die at the end, suburban housing, as a material reflection of the social landscape, can only function if it adheres to the norm. Suburbia as a physical manifestation of conformity cannot be overcome by building-related efforts to disguise its architectural and social history. As Giedion (19) observes, "[h]owever much a period may try to disguise itself, its real nature will still show through in its architecture, whether this uses original forms of expression or attempts to copy bygone epochs." Within the context of *The House Next Door*, the term "period" in the above quotation can be replaced with "suburbia," and neither the architectural contemporary building nor its sense of novelty and artistry can therefore disguise the true nature of the suburbs of the 1970s.

The introduction of new architectural ideas into the suburbs was not the only development in the 1970s and 1980s that followed the mass production of the postwar years, however. One of the most defining inventions of the time was the suburban gated community, which proved to have a tremendous impact not only on the built environment of America's suburbs, but also on the country's social landscape. In order to explore this phenomenon, the next literary example, T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*, focuses on the concept of the gated community and the American fortress mentality in a suburban context. With the discussion of this book, the geographical location shifts from sprawling Atlanta to a suburb of Los Angeles – with Los Angeles, owing to its pioneering role in creating a multi-centred and thus decentralised metropolitan area, often being considered "the first suburban metropolis" (De Meyer et al. 21).

3.2. The Gated Community as a Suburban Fortress in T. Coraghessan Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain*

The border between Mexico and the United States, measuring just under two thousand miles, is not only the busiest border crossing in the entire world, but also a high-profile conflict area. Even though the number of illegal immigrants crossing into the United States via this political, geographical and not least social and cultural boundary is difficult to determine, it is estimated that it hovers around the half a million per annum mark. The Mexican labourer has assumed the role of the prototypical immigrant, and the corresponding stereotyped fictional character is featured prominently in popular culture. However, the southern United States border, especially between the states of California and Baja California, or between the cities of San Diego and Tijuana, is also a gateway to a better life in the North for other Central and South American nations. Measures to make the border less permeable were taken in the 2006 Secure Fence Act under the Bush administration, which aimed to make it more secure in terms of illegal immigration, drug trafficking and related crimes. Donald Trump's infamous 2016 presidential campaign, too, partially succeeded due to a plan to build a physical barrier – a sturdy wall rather than a fence – between the United States and Mexico, which emphasises the perceived importance of the border on the political agenda.

As established in the discussion of decorative and functional suburban picket fences in the context of *The Crack in the Picture Window*, fences are a symbol of inclusion and exclusion, a means to protect and defend private space and property, and they are thus a marker of boundaries that separate the self from the other. By means of the erection of fences at border crossings – as was also observed during the European migrant crisis –, countries make use of physical defence mechanisms to ostensibly protect themselves and their people, to protect their land from invasion or congestion, and to give people a (false) sense of security. With regard to those on the other side of the fence, this physical barrier is a symbol of rejection, and it is an obstacle that separates them from their goals relating to geographical location as well as the fulfilment of the self.

In T. Coraghessan Boyle's 1995 novel *The Tortilla Curtain*, fences and walls of various kinds, both physical and symbolic, play a key role in the narrative. Boyle shifts the narration of his chapters between the story of América and Cándido Rincón, two illegal immigrants camping in Topanga Canyon in the hills between Santa Monica and Malibu – that is, east of downtown Los Angeles –, Kyra and Delaney Mossbacher, a wealthy and educated couple who recently moved into this suburban area, as well as the various intersections of the four protagonists.

The Mossbachers, having found their American suburban dream, live the life that the immigrant couple are hoping to find for themselves. The Rincóns have just arrived from a poor, sparsely populated rural area of Mexico and are now confronted with an overwhelming landscape of hundreds of thousands of houses. They dream of owning one of those homes, "[a] clean white one made out of lumber that smells like the mountains, with a gas range and a refrigerator, and maybe a little yard […]" (28-29), and they are lured by the promise of materialism and appliances, with the North glittering like an Edenic landscape in front of their eyes. However, in the opinion of the white majority, Mexicans are not meant to own the suburban dream themselves; they are simply a means to maintain it for the white population through taking care of houses, as well as through grooming domestic and municipal gardens and landscaping. Unable to achieve the suburban dream, the illegal immigrants camp in the canyon leading up to the walled- or fenced-in residences of the white majority, making the open wilderness of Topanga State Park their home.

Although the canyon is portrayed as white in every respect, and as a place where immigrants are pushed to the margins, historically, this territory once belonged to the Native American Tongva tribe. The name Topanga was given to the area by this indigenous people and is widely assumed to mean "a place above," which, besides its meaning relating to geographical or topographical space, has considerable social implications in the context of *The Tortilla Curtain*. The first European settlers arrived in the canyon as late as 1839, and less than a hundred years later, in the 1920s, it became a weekend retreat for Hollywood stars, with cottages built especially for this purpose. In the 1960s, many artists moved to the area, and it continues to be a bohemian enclave to this day. When it comes to demographics, Topanga is close to ninety per cent white, and the community thus has one of the largest percentages of whites in Los Angeles County. In terms of residential architecture, the vast majority of it consists of suburban single-family homes, making the number of housing units and the number of households almost identical.

Architectural Codes in the White Suburb

In *The Tortilla Curtain*, the suburban single-family homes in Topanga symbolise the American Dream for the illegal immigrant couple. The living environment that the Rincóns aspire to is embodied in the fictional and tellingly named Arroyo Blanco (Spanish for "White Stream") Estates, located high up in Topanga Canyon. Arroyo Blanco Estates is an upmarket private community with ten tennis courts and a golf course, and the exclusivity and whiteness of the suburb

are not only apparent in its name and its amenities, but also in its strict and inviolable architectural code:

> [S]ome two hundred and fifty homes, each set on one-point-five acres and strictly conforming to the covenants, conditions and restrictions set forth in the 1973 articles of incorporation. The houses were all of the Spanish Mission style, painted in one of three prescribed shades of white, with orange tile roofs. If you wanted to paint your house sky-blue or Provonçal-pink with lime-green shutters, you were perfectly welcome to move into the San Fernando Valley or to Santa Monica or anywhere else you chose, but if you bought into Arroyo Blanco Estates, your house would be white and your roof orange. (30)

The architectural code thus serves to add visual boundaries to geographical ones. That is, the code serves to distinguish the settlement aesthetically from the eclecticism of the San Fernando Valley with its "single endless plane of parallel boulevards, houses, mini-malls and streetlights" (63), as well as from the rest of the city of Los Angeles which stretches into infinity to the south. The chosen architectural style of the Mossbacher residence adheres to this code, too – "floor plan #A227C, Rancho White with Navajo trim" (30). In fact, the aesthetic code of the suburb finds its echo in many other aspects of the family's life, reaching from their clean and healthy lifestyle to their interior décor.

This adherence to architectural codes in the suburb was also satirised a few years after the publication of the novel in the highly popular science fiction horror drama series *The X-Files* (1993-2002), with an episode from its fifteenth season dedicated to the topic. The episode titled "Arcadia" is set in a planned gated community named The Falls at Arcadia in California, and the settlement is built up around the rules and regulations that dominate the life of its residents. Those that do not follow the rules – which reach from a six o'clock cut-off for moving activities to the specific colour code for the mailbox – are murdered by a Tulpa creature conjured up by the Homeowner Association president.[10] "Arcadia" therefore criticises in a surprisingly humorous manner the obedience to codes in suburbia, and it draws attention to the ambiguous interpretation of this environment as either a uniform architectural utopia or dystopia resembling the one depicted by Thomas More.

In *The Tortilla Curtain*, the architectural code of the community allows for a minimal display of individual taste on the exterior, and homeowners can choose their exterior wall paint as long as they stay within a specific colour palette. In

10 A Tulpa is a mystical being or object that is created through mental or spiritual discipline.

terms of interior design, however, the houses differ from one another far more extensively than in the stereotypical postwar suburb, as observed in the house of Dominick Flood, a wealthy resident of Arroyo Blanco Estates:

> Same model as [the Mossbachers'] own place, only the garage was reversed, and instead of Rancho White with Navajo trim, the owner had reversed the colors too, going with the lighter shade for the trim and the darker for the stucco. The landscaping was unremarkable, no different from any of the other places on the block: two tongues of lawn on either side of a crushed stone path, shrubs that weren't as drought-tolerant as they should be, a flagpole draped with a limp flag and a single fat starling perched atop it like a clot of something wiped on a sleeve. (186)

> The house was tasteful, nothing splashy or showy, quintessentially Southwestern, with a few really fine details like the Talavera tiles in the kitchen set off by a pair of ancient *retablos* depicting a saint at prayer, and it was interesting to see what he'd done with a floor plan identical to [the Mossbachers'].[11] (267)

The houses of Arroyo Blanco Estates, including the one described in the quotations above, are built uniformly in the Spanish Mission style, which is characterised by a Mediterranean aesthetic, and which reflects and simultaneously revives the historical past of the state of California. As Dickinson (73) observes, the terms "mission" and "colonial" refer to the fact that the United States was colonised by Europeans, pointing towards a white ancestry that is preserved in architecture.[12] In the context of Los Angeles, a city determinately defined by immigration and ethnic diversity, this aesthetic architectural code of European whiteness, which embodies nostalgia, authenticity and stability in Arroyo Blanco Estates, is a crucial means to foster a sense of security. "[B]uilders draw on nostalgic architectural codes, codes that not only embed homeowners into warmly remembered pasts, but also play on the hopes for authentic experiences," and this results in the two broad architectural forms found in most suburban developments nowadays: the architecture of houses typically either refers to styles rooted in American history such as Colonial, Spanish Mission, Shingle or Craftsman, or it makes reference to Europe with

11 Both the Talavera tile, which is colourful and decorative, and the retablo, a devotional painting, are traditional Mexican pieces of art. Their presence in the Flood house is demonstrative of the Mexican influence on interior decoration and fashion in the Southwest, which is ironic considering the social rejection often experienced by Mexicans in this area.

12 According to Kunstler (151), however, suburban colonial houses are not necessarily an articulation of a historical past. Rather, they lend themselves well to mass production due to their simple, box-like shape, and are thus primarily concerned with economy.

Tudor, Normandy, French, or the generic Cottage style (Dickinson 73). In either case, there is a strong reference to a perceived glorious past that is ideologically worth returning to through the means of architectural expression and aesthetics.

Barriers in the Built Environment as Ideological Markers of Boundaries

Once a uniform architectural and social landscape has been created in a contained geographical location, measures can be taken to defend it against external threats. Similar to the walling-in of towns in Europe in the Middle Ages, the United States and other countries have begun to fight crime and preserve homogeneity by means of walls and gates that are supposed to control the flow of people and vehicles into and out of often self-contained settlements. As Blakely and Snyder (152) argue, "[n]o community will ever be an island," but in the United States, there are undeniable social and demographic tendencies towards a spatially segregated and fragmented nation. The narrative of *The Tortilla Curtain*, the title of which already points towards a (permeable) closing-off against the influx of Hispanics from the poorer central and southern parts of the American continent, is centred around the idea of walls, gates and fences in terms of ideology, geographical and social territoriality, as well as around architecture and the built environment on a macro-, meso- and micro-level.

The macro-level refers to the already discussed border between Mexico and the United States, a political and symbolic border that finds its embodiment in elements of the built environment. Boyle's novel had been published more than a decade before the Secure Fence Act was enacted, and therefore before the United States began to turn itself into an immense gated or fenced-in community at least towards its southern neighbour, but the ideology of the "curtain" has existed for much longer; the physical fence is merely the material manifestation of said ideology. Furthermore, despite large-scale political action only having been implemented at a later point, physical barriers around the Tijuana border have been present for a long time, and more than a decade before the Secure Fence Act was enacted, measures to fight illegal immigration and drug trafficking had been taken in 1994 in the so-called Operation Gatekeeper under the Clinton administration. In *The Tortilla Curtain*, América and Cándido think back to the time when they were crouching next to a corrugated iron fence and hustling through one of its gaps, only to be caught and to find themselves back in Mexico soon thereafter. The Tijuana border is difficult to cross on a physical level, and even making it to the other side does not open this border on a symbolic level.

On the micro-level, the border fence between the United States and Mexico is replicated in the built environment in the form of physical barriers that regulate

access to private property. In *The Tortilla Curtain*, the most prominent example on this level is the chain-link fence that separates the Mossbacher property from the wilderness of the canyon. Initially six feet tall, it proves to be too low to effectively keep out wildlife, so that one morning, one of Kyra's terriers is snatched away by a coyote, a key moment in the novel. In the wake of this incident, further fortification measures are added in the form of an extra two feet of fence and plastic strips at its base – with the permission of the strict Arroyo Blanco zoning committee. Yet despite the entire fence being rebuilt in order for it to be aesthetically pleasing and impregnable, the coyote ends up climbing the extra two feet effortlessly, which points towards the general futility of erecting physical barriers. This futility is also discernible in the intrusion of the Da Ros place, a house of which Kyra, in her work as a real estate agent, is particularly protective. In terms of aesthetic, the house makes the rest of her listings look like mundane bungalows, and it thus stands as an architectural symbol of the affluence of the area. The superiority of the house is also translated into the geography and topography of the novel: it sits on a bluff overlooking the canyon, with the orange rooftops of Arroyo Blanco Estates far below it like a "fungus attached to the flank of the mountain" (74). Despite her protectiveness of the house, however, and in reference to the coyote that climbed into her own backyard, Kyra one day finds that the fenced-in property has been invaded by transients.

In both cases, whether the trespassers are animals or people – which largely amounts to the same and is interchangeable on a metaphorical level in the novel –, it becomes obvious that fences around properties are more symbolic than functional. They mark boundaries, divide inside from outside, stand for inclusion versus exclusion, and have legal significance. However, they do not effectively keep out animals or people wanting to cross this boundary, as these will have no problem finding a way in. Fences are nothing more than obstacles that slow down the act of entering without actually preventing it, and this also holds true for the border between the United States and Mexico on the macro-level.

On the meso-level, replicating the barriers encountered on both the macro- and the micro-level, *The Tortilla Curtain* focuses on the gate that the community of Arroyo Blanco intends to build in order to protect its residents from the perceived increase in crime. In their book *Fortress America*, Blakely and Snyder (38-44) distinguish between three kinds of gated communities: the lifestyle community, the prestige community and the security zone community, with the lifestyle community being most commonly associated with retirement or golf. The prestige community, in contrast, is the original gated community, an

enclave for the rich, and the security zone community – built out of fear of crime and violence –, is a defensive fortification. In terms of urban planning, the most important difference between the security zone community and the other two types of gated communities is the fact that both lifestyle and prestige communities are intended to be gated from the outset. That is, the developer is responsible for the gate, while security zone communities are retrofitted with the gate, and are thus aptly titled "enclaves of fear" by Blakely and Snyder (99). Retrofitting Arroyo Blanco Estates with a gate thus primarily turns the settlement into a security zone, but certain traits of a prestige zone can be discerned, too, especially when considering that the development is built in an upmarket location. Kyra is constantly worried about her real estate business, and the gate, in addition to protecting against urban crime, is supposed to help "project an image, protect current investments, and control housing values" (Blakely and Snyder 41).

Apart from fending off crime and protecting the real estate market, the gate is also supposed to safeguard the social homogeneity that is thought to be under threat, and it is a means to regain control over this homogeneity in spatial terms. The already mentioned aesthetic architectural code of the suburban settlement in *The Tortilla Curtain* is merely the visual manifestation of its underlying homogeneity, and in the eyes of its residents, this uniformity needs to be protected and defended. Delaney, as a self-proclaimed liberal humanist, thoroughly opposes this point of view, however. He calls the gate an absurdity, exclusionary, intimidating and anti-democratic, and he fails to understand the community's obsession with it:

> The Salvadorans, the Mexicans, the blacks, the gangbangers and taggers and carjackers they read about in the Metro section over their bran toast and coffee. That's why they'd abandoned the flatlands of the Valley and the hills of the Westside to live up here, outside the city limits, in the midst of all this scenic splendor. […] [A]ll Delaney's neighbors could talk about, back and forth and on and on as if it were the key to all existence, was gates. A gate, specifically. To be erected at the main entrance and manned by a twenty-four-hour guard to keep out those very gangbangers, taggers and carjackers they'd come here to escape. (39)

Given that his opposition to the gate is a minority opinion, however, Delaney has to face the fact that the erection of the physical barrier is a fait accompli, and that he is powerless in his half-hearted fight against it. His neighbours, mainly driven by fearmongering in the media, almost unanimously support the idea of the gate, and he sees no other solution than to get used to the thought of feeling like a criminal when entering Arroyo Blanco Estates, as well as to the uniformed

guard questioning the "suitability of his entering his own community" (109). Being a nature enthusiast and writer, he longs for the development in which he grew up, "the fenceless expanse of lawns, the shared space, […] the whole shining envelope of creation. There was nothing like that anymore. Now there were fences" (41-42), and these physical barriers are supposed to keep out his beloved nature – the literal and symbolic wildlife of the canyon – in favour of safeguarding order and homogeneity.

Fences and gates are built for a variety of reasons and motives, but what everybody hopes to achieve is control – control over neighbourhoods, control over streets, and control over homes (Blakely and Snyder 125). This desire for control is the reason that Delaney changes his mind on the gate issue after an incident that leaves him unsure about his safety in Arroyo Blanco Estates. While returning from a meeting in the community centre to his home in a cul-de-sac, a car with rumbling exhaust and thumping rap music slowly drives up and down his street. Upon entering his home and locking the front door, he realises that he may have just escaped a horrendous crime, and that the presence of the car was due to the absence of a gate. As a result of this incidence, he modifies his opinion "via-à-vis gated communities, public spaces and democratic access" (66).

What is interesting to note regarding the eventual construction process of the gate is that the barrier was somehow always meant to be there, and that its physical presence is merely the long-overdue consequence of natural circumstances; it simply appears one afternoon. With the gate marking another boundary in the built environment of the novel, it becomes increasingly obvious that the various gates and fences on the macro-, meso- and micro-level are interrelated, and that they come into being due to a trickle-down effect. If the border between Mexico and the United States and the various fences along it were less permeable, the gate to Arroyo Blanco Estates would not be necessary, as argued by Jack Jardine, the president of the Property Owner's Association. He maintains that the gate stands for safety and self-protection, and that it is similarly natural or intuitive as the act of locking one's car or front door. The problem, according to him, is "the Tortilla Curtain down there" (101), and he claims that he would certainly be in favour of taking the gate down again if the situation at the border were to change. However, in the context of the novel, the wave of illegal immigration aggravates urban crime in the city of Los Angeles, and this is what the suddenly and almost naturally appearing gate is supposed to keep out.

Urban crime is what drove people out of the city and into the canyon in the first place. What they were looking for was "something out of the way, something rustic, rural, safe – something removed from people of whatever class

and color" (107). This white flight engendered the creation of new places, and, over time, the diminishing of the distance between urb and suburb, with the suburban environment becoming "a burgeoning, bustling, mini-mall-building testimonial to white flight, the megalopolis encroaching on the countryside. Ten years ago this was rural. Ten years before that you couldn't find it on the map" (336). What the people buying into the suburban dream are often unaware of is the fact that cities expand, in some cases rapidly, and in the novel, this physical architectural as well as social expansion brings urban life with all its perceived detriments to the canyon. The gate, therefore, much more than being an immediate response to the loss of control over the border, is only a mediate one, meaning that it is a response to the expanding city that illegal immigration has shaped. It is a desperate and possibly final effort to keep urbanity out of the suburban retreat before the city devours the Spanish Mission style houses of Arroyo Blanco Estates.

The Gated-Off Suburban Dream

Apart from the gate serving to keep urbanity out of the suburb, it is also an architectural limit to illegal immigrants wanting to achieve their own American Dream. Interestingly, América's version of this dream is mainly one of architecture and the space she would inhabit in the future.[13] Crossing the macro-boundary, the fence at the Tijuana border, was supposed to bring her closer to her American Dream, which is the dream of suburban living. The American Dream of her husband, in contrast, is characterised by a different architectural space: what he wants is "[s]omething solid and substantial, a place they could call home […]" (87). He dreams of an apartment in a nice neighbourhood, one with trees and a sidewalk, and a parking space for their car outlined with territory-marking yellow paint. It is thus obvious that Cándido's architectural American Dream is considerably muted. The suburban house is downgraded to an apartment, not least because he is aware of the limits he encounters in a foreign country, and because he is aware of the fact that the equality of opportunity as postulated in the ethos of the American Dream is a myth.

What causes América's suburban dream to disintegrate eventually is the sudden appearance of the gate to Arroyo Blanco Estates, and her musings about her architectural future come to an abrupt end when she passes the "two broad pastel-colored steel grids" (95) for the first time. The immediacy with which her

13 When considering that the tellingly named character of América is strongly defined by her unremittingly dreaming the suburban dream, *The Tortilla Curtain* emphasises the deep embeddedness of this dream within the American nation.

awareness of the gate follows her daydreams about suburban housing, as well as the stereotypically suburban pastel colour of the steel grids, points towards the role of the gate in the (temporary) shattering of her suburban dream. As early as the next day, her thoughts relating to the future of their housing gain a more realistic dimension, and she pictures herself and her husband living in a simple but functional city apartment, "nothing fancy, not for now – a single room with a hot shower and a toilet […]" (127). The gate to Arroyo Blanco Estates has been closed, and although her dreams of suburbia were never rooted in any serious misconceptions as to the reality of their situation, the erection and closing of the gate have underlined this reality and given it a physical presence in the built environment.

As for overtly voicing her suburban dream, it is only when their financial situation begins to look more hopeful that América mentions in conversation the beauty she sees in the architecture that surrounds her, which emphasises the perceived increased attainability of her dream of suburban living. As a case in point, when the Rincóns embark on an excursion to the San Fernando Valley and head towards Sherman Way – a string of city lights where the office buildings rise "like stony monoliths to a double band of lights running perpendicular to the great long vertical avenues" (206) –, América peers in through suburban windows as they make their way down the canyon towards the luring lights of the city. She calls the houses they pass "adorable, *linda*, *simpática*, cute. That color was striking, didn't he think so? […] Oh, and look at that one! And that!" (207). Cándido, however, has encountered a new boundary in the meantime, a set of chains and posts denying him access to the now private property of the former labour exchange, and he has been faced with signs warning people against trespassing in vibrant red letters. It is thus his awareness of the objective unattainability of their suburban dream that prevents him from sharing América's enthusiasm regarding residential architecture and landscaping.

Strong feelings of injustice surface in the face of this addition of a new physical barrier in the suburban landscape – injustices that relate to the ideology of inclusion and exclusion, of having and not having; injustices for which fences, gates, chains and posts stand as physical embodiments in the built landscape. After all, setting boundaries is invariably a political act that determines membership, and it is a deep American tradition to create social space through the use of physical space (Blakely and Snyder 1). In *The Tortilla Curtain*, too, it is this creation of physical spaces that causes segregation and social inequality, and in terms of the American Dream, the gated community thus becomes a protected zone on the battlefield of the war over its internal

ideology (Blakely and Snyder 175). While immigrants are excluded, white Americans live in glass palaces, surrounded by security systems, gates and fences. It is the injustice of encountering material and symbolic gates, and of being denied access to the labour market, that removes the Rincóns even further from their suburban dream, and which drives them into the city in search of new opportunities.

The Walled-Off Suburban Dream

With uncountable immigrants like América and Cándido streaming into Los Angeles, an expansion of the city in both architectural and demographic terms is inevitable. As a consequence, the residents of Arroyo Blanco Estates believe that the gate no longer suffices, and that a wall protecting the community from the ever-expanding city needs to be built. Drawing on her personal experience gained when attempting to protect her own property, Kyra is aware of the fact that no wall, no matter how tall, will keep away trespassers. However, the residents act on the assumption that neither people nor animals have any interest in what they cannot see, and that a seven-foot wall – "[c]inder block, with a stucco finish in Navajo White" (218), and thus adhering to the aesthetic code of the community – should be an adequate deterrent.

In the course of the novel, the wall receives increasing justification and support. The losses experienced due to inadequate security measures raise a deep desire in the suburban community to protect Arroyo Blanco, its prime location on the real estate market, as well as individual family homes. For Kyra, this desire for protection even extends beyond the limits of her own community and encompasses her real estate listings. A French Eclectic building she intends to turn into an anchor for a new exclusive private community consisting of high-end houses, for instance, arouses a similar instinct in her, and she aims to protect it with the same architectural means of fortification. Delaney, in contrast, is more reluctant to accept the wall on an ideological level, and he sees the continuously used subterfuge of keeping out coyotes as that for which it truly stands: division, exclusion and hatred. For him, the primary attraction of the community and of his house at the far end of a cul-de-sac was its proximity to nature, and the presence of the wall reminds him of living conditions encountered in a condominium complex. What is more, he finds himself worrying about the flipside of building architectural barriers, as the lack of exchange they cause also means that they keep in what should be excluded. The less porous and the opaquer the architectural barriers are, and the less exchange with the outside occurs, the more breeding ground there is for unjustified fears – fears that are aggravated through the presence of the wall due

to it being a daily reminder of external threats –, and the more deadlock there is in people's ideologies. Barriers create "socially isolated environments, social distance leads to stereotyping and misunderstanding, which in turn leads to fear and even greater distance" (Blakely and Snyder 138), but within the context of *The Tortilla Curtain*, the social impact of the wall is disregarded in view of the perceived loss of safety and security, as well as the perceived loss of spatial definition.

Historically, people have always come together to express their worldviews and beliefs through architectures of seclusion – such as monasteries or temples –, and they aim to keep together what belongs together by means of architecture. People keep their earthly belongings and families together in apartments or houses and create boundaries of inclusion or exclusion, and they do so in even smaller architectural units: rooms divide the space within a house, and doors and locks protect these spatial units. This architectural division stands in sharp contrast to the life the Rincóns lead in the United States; camping in the wilderness of the canyon means that there are no physical boundaries between them and the world.[14] In this sense, the wall around Arroyo Blanco Estates is nothing more than an extension of the concept of in- or exclusion and seclusion from the micro- to the meso-level in the novel. Gated or walled-in communities can be compared to monasteries devoid of the religious aspect, even though they contain more architectural units, and even though they unite people in fear and a false sense of security rather than in religious ideologies. In the case of *The Tortilla Curtain*, the wall safeguards the quasi-religious "sanctity of the community" (242), and the "sacrosanct streets" (316) of the quasi-mythical "Elysian Groves of Arroyo Blanco Estates" (99). In spite of the criticism directed at them, however, walled-in communities may give people a sense of stability and a stronger sense of place in a world that appears increasingly disorienting.

Considering the perceived urgency of the need for protection against the threateningly expanding and disorienting city, the wall around Arroyo Blanco Estates is built without much opposition or hesitation, and it reshapes the suburban space instantaneously. It tightens like a noose around the development, and Delaney, although he realises that the wall may also work in his favour, anxiously watches as it closes in on his property and destroys his view of the canyon. Interestingly, it is the chapter in which the wall closes in on the Mossbacher property – the last chapter of part two of the novel – which does not follow the strict rule of alternation of perspectives. The rest of the novel

14 While in the city, all América dreams about is to "belong in one of those houses, any of them" (233), as she perceives the people who inhabit them to be safe from the world, to be home.

is divided into chapters narrated from either the Mossbachers' or Rincóns' perspective, and they are ordered in strict alternation, with the exception of two interludes of Delaney's "Pilgrim at Topanga Creek" column. This chapter, however, is divided in half, a structural division of perspectives that can be read in two ways in the context of the narrative. Firstly, the division may mirror the architectural wall, a physical presence that creates new spatial units, and that marks a boundary within a whole – with the whole being the non-divided suburban landscape, or, on the level of the narrative, the chapter. Secondly, it may be read as a foreshadowing of the approaching erosion of social boundaries – or the continuing renegotiation and reshaping of social spaces –, which in *The Tortilla Curtain* is the ironic consequence of building an architectural means of separation.

When it comes to renegotiating and reshaping social spaces, it is the wall that enables the increasing intersections of the lives of the Mossbachers and the Rincóns in part three of the novel. Even though the wall is meant to serve as a physical architectural means of division, it plays a crucial part in how the lives of the two families gradually approach one another. As a case in point, having accidentally caused a wildfire, the Mexicans flee the canyon that entraps them with its hundred-foot natural walls, a scenario that reverses the function of the artificial wall around the suburban settlement, which denies access rather than exit. Looking for help as his wife goes into labour, Cándido comes across the white stucco wall of Arroyo Blanco Estates and begins searching for an opening. Contrary to the residents' belief that people are not attracted by what they cannot see, he is convinced that the presence of a wall implies that there is something worth protecting behind it, something valuable. Cándido climbs the wall and trespasses into the sanctity of Arroyo Blanco Estates, finding gardens that resemble the land of plenty, and that contain material for him to build a makeshift hut.[15] Therefore, even though the wall poses an obstacle to him, it by no means prevents him from entering the settlement, especially not while the residents are "outside the walls, forced out of their shells" (289) by the approaching fire. His climbing back and forth for supplies thus turns the wall into a central concern for both the Mossbachers and the Rincóns, and rather than adding to their spatial separation, it detracts from it.

15 Cándido already sees the architecture of the hut in his mind – a makeshift house with a view instead of the apartment that he was denied. Having renegotiated her aspirations with herself, even América ends up coming to terms with this architectural solution, as she now admits to herself that in this country, there will be "no little house" (324) with beautiful décor for her.

In addition to failing to prevent intrusion and trespassing, gates and walls are useless in the face of the mostly metaphorically employed natural forces in *The Tortilla Curtain*. As the narrator sarcastically observes in relation to the fenced-in Da Ros property, which fell victim to the canyon wildfire, the iron spikes and ornamental grillwork of the now skewed gate formerly protecting the property were unable to hold back the flames:

> [Kyra] came over the hill and into the nook where the garage used to be and saw the tall chimneys of the house standing naked against the stark mountains and the crater of the sea: the rest was gone. The leather-bound books, the period furniture, the paintings, the rugs, the marble and the Jacuzzi and the eight and a half bathrooms – gone, all gone. Even the stone walls had crumbled under the weight of the cascading roof, the rubble scattered so far out you would have thought the place had been dynamited. (310)

Architecture, unless specifically designed for this purpose, is hardly ever resilient enough to withstand a fire, and the sarcastic observation that the gate was not strong enough to hold back the flames is also a comment pointing towards the futility of erecting gates and walls at large. Parallels are drawn to the trespassing of the wall in Arroyo Blanco Estates, as well as to the ineffectiveness of the roadblocks that were supposed to protect the community from looting while the residents were waiting to return to their homes. In fact, the uselessness of fences and walls is hinted at even earlier in Delaney's comments on coyotes, which need to be read metaphorically. He writes in his "Pilgrim at Topanga Creek" column that "[w]e cannot eradicate the coyote, nor can we fence him out, not even with eight feet of chain link [...]. Respect him as the wild predator he is, keep your children and pets inside, leave no food source, however negligible, where he can access it" (214). Illegal immigrants, according to Kyra, are "like the barbarians outside the gates of Rome, only they [are] already inside" (311), and any architectural measures to keep them out have considerably more ideological than practical value.

The decisive proof of the inadequacy of walls when it comes to protecting entire settlements or communities is found at the end of the novel, when the heavy rainfalls that follow the wildfire trigger a mudslide that destroys everything in its way. The wave of mud razes walls and roofs to the ground, and even breaches the wall at the far end of the development. The fact that the Rincóns ride on top of this wave strongly adds to the symbolism of the passage, so that the wall not only breaks physically, but also symbolically. With the destruction of the physical wall, the distance between the main characters

– the symbolic wall – is eradicated, too, and Cándido reaches out his hand to Delaney in order to pull him out of the deadly current.

The Gated Community as a Preservation of Illusion

As pointed out, the dramatic ending of *The Tortilla Curtain* peremptorily underscores the futility of erecting physical architectural barriers as a means of fortification; walls, gates and fences will always be surmounted. Nonetheless, due to the fact that they lull people into a false sense of security, gated communities continue to thrive in the United States as well as in other parts of the world, and they continue to have considerable symbolic value. They "are part of a deeper social transformation" (Blakely and Snyder vii), and, as a concept, they can cause serious social problems and tensions:

> Gates and fences around our neighborhoods represent more than simply physical barriers. Gated communities manifest a number of tensions: between exclusionary aspirations rooted in fear and protection of privilege and the values of civic responsibility; between the trend toward privatization of public services and the ideals of the public good and general welfare; and between the need for personal and community control of the environment and the dangers of making outsiders of fellow citizens.
>
> The gated communities phenomenon has enormous policy consequences. It allows some citizens to secede from public contact, excluding others from sharing in their economic and social privilege. This result raises an ideological question that prompts polarized viewpoints. Are gated communities a metaphor of the exclusionary fortress, creating walls between citizens, or are they refuges from the forces that threaten family, economic security, and quality of life? (Blakely and Snyder 3)

A key concept in the above quotation is the refuge. The gated community is a residential development that is supposed to be a safe haven, or a refuge from urban crime and social tensions, which is in line with the historical purpose of suburbia to function "as an asylum for the preservation of illusion" (Mumford, *City in History* 563). In some respects, the gated community is the materialisation of an attempt to save the suburban utopia. After all, people are still in search of a "sociospatial community – the ideal community that Americans have sought since the landing of the Pilgrims" (Blakely and Snyder 2). As is emphasised repeatedly in *The Tortilla Curtain*, people left the inner city of Los Angeles in search of safety and security after the United States had allowed its cities and towns to deteriorate over decades, especially since the racial tensions of the 1960s. However, with the suburbs growing and expanding continuously, urbanity and sub-urbanity merge increasingly. The boundaries between the suburban refuge and the crime-ridden city become blurred, and in an attempt

to save the perceived suburban utopia, gates and walls are employed in order to re-establish these boundaries, a phenomenon which Blakely and Snyder call the "suburban drive":

> The [American] drive for separation, distinction, exclusion, and protection has [...] been fuelled by the dramatic demographic and social changes of the second half of the twentieth century. The original suburban movement was based in nostalgia for peaceful small-town life and separation from the problems of industrialization. In the middle of the century, suburbs expanded with the affluence of a new middle class and their flight from the poor and minorities living in the inner cities.
>
> Today, with that nostalgia as strong as ever and a new set of problems pressing on our metropolitan areas, separation is still the solution that Americans turn to. In the suburbs, gates are the logical extension of the original suburban drive. (Blakely and Snyder 144)

Boyle, however, points out the fallacy in thinking that walls are the solution to re-establishing physical and social urb/suburb boundaries, and to living out the suburban drive that is intrinsic to the American people. Cities are spreading and sprawling, with the consequence that older suburbs are swallowed up and become part of the urban landscape to an increasing degree. In fact, the metropolitan area of Los Angeles is strongly defined by a suburbanising poverty that continues to spread further and further from the urban core (Blakely and Snyder 146). The fire and the mudslide in the novel can certainly be read as metaphors for the threat of urbanity in this context. Arroyo Blanco Estates may have been spared from the inferno that approached from one side and threatened to burn down the residents' livelihood – their homes and their pristine community –, but the all-destroying mudslide robs them of their utopian settlement in the end, approaching from the other side. The threat of urbanity surrounds the community in terms of both social developments and architectural expansion, and constructional fortifications cannot thwart or counteract this threat.

It may be true that architectural fortifications "shield us from a world where we feel vulnerable" (Blakely and Snyder 129), and that they offer a certain peace of mind, but walls and gates do little to improve the reality outside (Blakely and Snyder 128). Urban and non-gated suburban neighbourhoods, as well as exurban settlements, do not profit from them, and since the suburban utopia does not exist in a vacuum, it continues to collapse. The outskirts still cater to a variety of needs and desires, but they increasingly fail to live up to the higher aspirations once associated with them. As pointed out by Blakely and Snyder in *Fortress America*, the suburbs are supposed to offer proximity to

nature; they are supposed to be safe, clean and friendly; they are supposed to offer good education, protect their residents from social deviance, and "keep out anything that varies from their physical form or architecture." However, the authors emphasise that the ideal of uniformity, as well as of racial and ethnic homogeneity, is no longer rooted in reality, as various forces of diversification have been at work. For the white middle class, suburban distance is no longer far enough to find refuge due to the fact that middle-class minorities are on the rise, and, as a consequence, are moving to the suburbs themselves (Blakely and Snyder 15). For those who partook in the white flight from city to suburb, the suburban environment therefore no longer resembles the utopia of uniformity and homogeneity that they were once promised, and people's disillusion with the suburban dream is thus arguably as strong as never before.

This current suburban reality, that is, social and architectural expansion and the possible death of the suburban dream, is the main focus of the next chapter. Given that fear of urban expansion, as well as the sprawl that goes hand in hand with it, is highly prominent in *The Tortilla Curtain*, the novel serves as a fitting transition in this context. It is both a literary and historical transition from the various types of suburbia discussed thus far, although these are not entirely located in the past, and although they do not stand for overhauled concepts. There are a variety of suburbias that presently coexist, depending on geographical location, as well as on social and historical background. Many suburbs of Long Island are still in the firm grip of the upper class, many developments still follow the Levittown model and have unifying architectural codes, and the gated community continues its triumph, but it cannot be denied that the currently most defining characteristics of the suburban landscape are eclecticism and, most importantly, uncontrollable sprawl.

4 The Post-Suburban State: Sprawling Architectural Landscapes

After the continuous expansion of the suburbs since the 1920s, their euphoric reception and rapid development after World War II, as well as the discontent and sense of impasse felt by many in the following decades with regard to the discrepancy between lived and imagined spaces, one would assume a certain backlash entailing a visible effect on the development of the outskirts to have emerged at some point. However, this backlash occurred in theory more than in practice, and it was mirrored in utopian concepts designed by architects rather than in plans of suburban developers. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the effects of the expansion of the built environment became a major concern in urban planning, as demonstrated in Italian architect Paolo Soleri's concept of Arcology, which originated from the fusion of architecture and ecology. Soleri's eponymous work opens with a line on the flyleaf stating that "[t]his book is about miniaturization." Arcology was seen as a solution to ameliorating the vast destruction of the landscape by compressing human life into enormous architectural structures, and thus by making the footprint of the city as small as possible. As stated by White (79), "no longer will separate, often unrelated structures and transportation networks exist to create waste and cause confusion; in their place will stand the megastructure [...]," a cellular unit that encompasses an entire metropolis. Examples of Soleri's thirty arcologies are his Hexahedron – an immense tree-shaped tower house providing room for 170,000 people –, Asteromo – a flying space city in the shape of an artificial asteroid –, and 3D Jersey – a megastructure solution for housing close to Manhattan. His most famous concept, however, is Arcosanti, an experimental town in central Arizona that, according to a 2016 article by architectural critic Oliver Wainwright in *The Guardian*, is currently only three per cent complete. As exemplified in the case of Arcosanti, the architectural concept of the megastructure, also promoted by other notable architects such as Buckminster Fuller or the London Archigram group, succumbed to its utopianism, and thus metropolitan areas continue to devour entire landscapes.

The suburbs contribute to this devouring of landscapes notably. As the present state and appearance of American suburbia demonstrates, not much improvement has been made in terms of economy of space. Mistakes relating to land use have been repeated in planning processes since the steep rise of this architectural environment, but since many believe that it is too late to fix them,

the mistakes are often rebuilt unthinkingly. Urban planners continue to propose possible improvements such as the concepts of Traditional Neighbourhood Development (TND), or Alexander, Ishikawa and Silverstein's Pattern Language, which treats buildings as orders of connecting relationships rather than merely as objects in space. Other important concepts include New Urbanism or the Sustainable Communities Movement. More and more books are being published on the subject – among others Galina Tachieva's *Sprawl Repair Manual* (2010), or Ellen Dunham Jones and June Williamson's *Retrofitting Suburbia* (2011) –, but when considering the sheer dimensions of suburbanisation in America, putting these proposals for a cure into practice is a slow process, the results of which may take decades to become visible. Furthermore, large parts of the built suburban environment are simply beyond redemption:

> Things that were built in absurd locations, like the vast housing tracts outside Los Angeles on the fringe of the Mojave desert, may have to be abandoned. […] Many houses and shopping plazas built in the postwar era were so poorly constructed in the first place that they will reach the end of their "design life" before they might be eligible for reuse. (Kunstler 247)

Despite the deplorable state of many suburban areas, and despite the apparently skewed reality that is continually being sold by advertising as well as by the entertainment industry, people are no less reluctant to move to the outskirts now than they were in the mid-twentieth century. The suburbs have an almost indestructible appeal, and a large number of suburbanites insist that they are happy to live in the periphery despite the stigma that is attached to this sphere. This is the reason that the urban fringes, in all likelihood, will continue to expand, and that architectural measures aimed at retrofitting and densification have a difficult stance.

Once more, the continuing desire for suburban life finds its repercussion in demographic data. At the beginning of the 1990s, more than three out of four Americans were living in one of the country's metropolitan areas, a figure which had risen to four out of five by the turn of the millennium. While in an international comparison, this metropolitanisation rate is in line with global demographic trends, it is atypical that the suburbs alone were responsible for it in the United States: the percentage of people living in inner-city areas had remained virtually unchanged since the 1930s, and the percentage of people living in rural areas had been shrinking incessantly. By the year 2000, exactly fifty per cent of Americans had chosen the suburbs as their home, meaning that the periphery had become as populous as inner cities and rural areas combined.

The Suburban Sprawlscape

The reason that Americans have been clinging to the suburban ideal for nearly a century may be rooted in a cultural impulse to move on and to withdraw from the world – an impulse that is inherent to the American people, as argued by environmentalist John G. Mitchell. Mitchell observes that Americans see the fresh country out there, compare it to the tired city and see "the pastoral Jeffersonian ideal, the sort of place where that fellow Thoreau built a hut and grew beans, far from the townies living lives of quiet desperation. So begins the succession from country to suburb to sprawl" (Mitchell 62).

Sprawl, or "[t]he straggling expansion of an indeterminate urban or industrial environment into the adjoining countryside" (*OED*), is the keyword here. When looking at the number of people moving into suburban areas, and when considering that the suburbs, due to a continuing predominance of low-density developments and detached houses, are considerably more space-consuming than inner cities, suburban sprawl is unavoidable without a serious rethinking of planning and design. A rethinking of this kind is difficult to achieve, however, since the suburbs are particularly known for their "Nimbyism" – that is, the "not in my backyard" mentality that asks for necessary new housing or infrastructure developments to be as remote from one's property as possible. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the seemingly unstoppable sprawl in the outskirts currently poses one of the most prevalent problems to urban planning.

As sprawl is most easily understood when viewed from above, aerial photographs illustrating the horizontal expansion of architecture and infrastructure have become an omnipresent visual trope in the suburban discourse, not least in terms of aesthetics. Despite aerial photographic evidence bearing testimony to the disorienting dimensions of the sprawl phenomenon, photographer Christoph Gielen captured the appeal of geometric patterns and the repetition of residential architecture and infrastructure, and he imparts this aesthetic in his 2013 book *Ciphers*. While the geometric beauty of certain types of sprawl especially in high-end developments is undeniable when looking at Gielen's photographs, much of the uncontrolled suburban growth is considerably less aesthetically appealing, not least due to the thoughtlessness encountered in planning and building, as well as due to the increasing disappearance of natural landscapes.

The opening lines of the first chapter of Dolores Hayden's book *Building Suburbia* also reference the trope of the bird's eye view of suburban sprawl, but her lines take all the beauty out of this sight. The author describes a scene of airline passengers flying across the United States and looking "down on

dazzling, varied topography, yet from Connecticut to California, monotonous tracts of single-family houses stretch for miles outside the 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" (Hayden 3). Hayden perceives the sprawling suburbs as active, crowd-like entities that interrupt nature, flocking up and pushing against the natural topography, and she thus sees them as a disruptive and threatening force rather than as one of aesthetic value.

The rise of the McMansion – due to its sheer size also referred to as "starter castle" – is one architectural phenomenon that is responsible for the often aesthetically displeasing expansion of the suburban landscape. In terms of architecture, a McMansion is "a modern house built on a large and imposing scale, but is regarded as ostentatious and lacking architectural integrity" (*OED*). When looking at the official numbers provided by the United States Census Bureau and the National Association of Home Builders, the average size of a newly built single-family home was a mere 983 square feet in 1950, but this number had risen to 2,080 square feet in 1990, and, after a short-lived downward trend during the 2008 recession, was at 2,661 square feet at the end of 2016. These figures demonstrate rather impressively the development from modest tract housing to McMansion, with the square footage of the average house nearly tripling in the process.

As becomes obvious when looking at these numbers, for those who can afford it, the suburban experience has become one of homogenised and standardised luxury in terms of space, architecture and interior design – a circumstance that has found its way into fictional representations. The McMansion in Bret Easton Ellis' 2005 mock memoir *Lunar Park*, for instance, is described in great detail, with the author emphasising the sheer dimensions of such a home:

> [N]ine thousand square feet and situated in a fast-growing and wealthy suburb, and 307 Elsinore Lane wasn't even the grandest in the community – it merely reflected the routine affluence of the neighborhood. It was, according to a spread in *Elle Decor*, "minimalist global eclectic with an emphasis on Spanish revival" but with "elements of midcentury French chateau and a touch of sixties Palm Springs modernism" (imagine that if you can; it was not a design concept everyone grasped). The interior was done in soothing shades of sandcastle and white corn, lily and bleached flour. Stately and lavish, slick and sparsely furnished, the house had four high-ceilinged bedrooms and a master suite that occupied half of the second story and included a fireplace, a wet bar, a refrigerator, two 165-square-foot walk-in closets and window shades that disappeared into pockets in the ceiling, and each of the two adjoining bathrooms had a giant sunken tub. There was a fully equipped gym […] – and there was a sprawling

> media room with a plasma TV that had a screen the size of a small wall and surround sound and hundreds of DVDs shelved alphabetically on either side of it, as well as a red felt antique pool table. And the house flowed: large, carefully designed empty spaces merged seamlessly into one another to give the illusion that the house was far grander than it actually was.
>
> [T]he kitchen […] really was a marvel – all stainless steel and countertops made from Brazilian concrete, a Thermador range, a Sub-Zero refrigerator, two dishwashers, two stoves with noiseless fans, two sinks, a wine cooler, a drawer freezer and an entire wall of sliding glass that overlooked an Olympic-sized swimming pool […] and a Jacuzzi and a vast, intensely green and lush lawn, which was bordered by a huge and carefully maintained garden blooming with flowers I didn't know the names of […]. (78-79)

With houses as described by Ellis – architecturally eclectic, unnecessarily large and over-equipped – now often being the norm in particularly affluent suburban neighbourhoods, sprawl is the logical result, especially when thinking back to the significantly denser building style encountered in postwar tract housing. What is more, sprawl is virtually impossible to reverse. In his 2014 book on suburban sprawl and the rebirth of urbanism in America, Benjamin Ross likens the phenomenon to a cancerous growth, as it is similarly difficult to contain. As observed by the author, the struggles of the 1970s failed to spare American landscapes from being eaten by the sprawl that took hold of entire territories and mutated into new forms, so that the human eye was often "assaulted by landscapes never seen before. Fields of McMansions sprang up in the countryside, gated communities cowered behind stucco walls, office towers were sprinkled among parking lots." Furthermore, "[d]evelopment was driven out onto the fringe; highways, widened to carry ever more traffic, became unwalkable; sprawl begot more sprawl." More often than not, proposed remedies such as cluster zoning or growth control even aggravated the situation; sprawl appeared to be immune to any type of attack and overcame all obstacles, "swelling even as the city that gave birth to it shrivelled" (Ross 104).

In their 2006 mockumentary *Radiant City*, directors Gary Burns and Jim Brown portray suburban sprawl in a light-hearted yet highly critical manner.[1] The fictional story of the Moss family and their life in one of the sprawling developments that appear to be continuously under construction depicts an unhealthy environment that lacks any sense of community, with the term

1 The title *Radiant City* refers to Le Corbusier's utopian urban concept of "La Ville Radieuse" (French for "The Radiant City"), a well-ordered, linear city whose design the architect abstractly based upon the shape of the human body.

community, in suburbia, being "shorthand for 'cluster of houses with people inside them not talking to each other'" (Burns and Brown, *Radiant City*). The film portrays people's flight into isolation, and it shows them stranded after their search for an impossible ideal. American author, social critic and public speaker James Howard Kunstler, one of the most outspoken and apocalyptic social critics of suburbia, also appears in the film to voice his opinions and concerns, paraphrasing from his book *The Geography of Nowhere*:

> Eighty percent of everything ever built in America has been built in the last fifty years, and most of it is depressing, brutal, ugly, unhealthy, and spiritually degrading – the jive-plastic commuter tract home wastelands, the Potemkin village shopping plazas with their vast parking lagoons, the Lego-block hotel complexes, the "gourmet mansardic" junk-food joints, the Orwellian office "parks" featuring buildings sheathed in the same reflective glass as the sunglasses worn by chain-gang guards, the particle-board garden apartments rising up in every meadow and cornfield, the freeway loops around every big and little city with their clusters of discount merchandise marts, the whole destructive, wasteful, toxic, agoraphobia-inducing spectacle that politicians proudly call "growth." (Kunstler 10)

Through sprawl, suburbs have often turned into a collection of disaggregated monocultures, and into an environment in which a whole world is contained within the single-family home, as opposed to an environment in which the home is connected to the world in an organic manner. In order to counteract sprawl, *Radiant City* calls for new urbanism and smart growth, that is, it calls for a return to the prewar development of the suburban sphere, in the context of which communities grew organically out of and around historical centres. Despite offering a shimmer of hope, the film draws a pessimistic conclusion, emphasising that suburbanisation is unlikely to be influenced by any kind of criticism of suburbia, since this criticism is as old as the suburbs themselves.

Sprawl is only one of the grievances with which suburbia is currently confronted, however, and the criticism targeted at this environment has remained unchanged since the beginning of the mass production of suburban housing. The reason that the focus lies on sprawl in this chapter is that presently, it is the weightiest issue in suburban architecture and planning, and it has serious effects on the way in which communities function. Cars have become more indispensable than ever before, which is ironic given that it was the car itself that allowed the suburbs – which had previously had a specific shape and specific limits due to their proximity to railroad lines – to flourish in the first place. Today, due to the sheer traffic volume, congestion and construction works are tremendous problems in the urban periphery.

Sprawl has also changed the architecture of suburbia, making the formerly advertised Arcadia consisting of single-family homes, lawns and picket fences increasingly resemble a low-density urban environment. Similar to inner cities, suburbs have turned into architecturally heterogeneous places: they contain social housing developments, single-use zones such as shopping malls – which have assumed "the status of an ersatz city" (De Meyer et al. 97) –, entertainment complexes, as well as characterless office parks, with the term "park" being "a semantic gimmick to persuade zoning boards that a bunch of concrete and glass boxes set among parking lots amounts to a rewarding environment" (Kunstler 118). This increasingly heterogeneous architecture leads to an increasingly heterogeneous demographic composition that is far removed from the quasi-utopian social programme described in the Levittown model. It also leads to many suburbs becoming independent of their original core cities, and some of them have even developed their own suburbs of varying socioeconomic dimensions. The newly emerging suburban cores now often face the same problems – including the same architectural dereliction – that their urban cores began to struggle with a few decades prior.

Despite calling sprawl the most serious concern for or threat to suburban environments, it would be wrong to convey the impression that it is a new and necessarily American phenomenon, however. Architectural historian Robert Bruegmann observes that sprawl has also manifested itself in Europe, and that it is "the preferred settlement pattern everywhere in the world where there is a certain measure of affluence and where citizens have some choice in how they live" (Bruegmann 17). Sprawl is an interdisciplinary concept that cannot only be observed in urban planning, but also on a smaller scale in social behaviour, for instance in how people choose their seat in an empty railway carriage. Preferred seats are chosen first, and after a certain density has been reached, interpersonal distance becomes more important, and the undesirable spaces in-between, which stand for increased densification, are occupied last. In a country like the United States, where flat and buildable land around cities is the norm, and where architectural developments can stretch far into the distance without any immediate topographical necessity to fill in the unsatisfactory spaces in-between, sprawl is the inevitable result as long as commuting distances remain reasonable. Hence, sprawl is certainly not a new phenomenon exclusive to the United States, but the characteristics of the country's settlement patterns, as well as its topographical and natural conditions, make it prone for sprawl to flourish.

This unstoppable architectural expansion has a serious impact on the environment, on aesthetics, the community, the individual, and on the relationship

between the urban and the rural. Furthermore, since sprawl never occurs on a social tabula rasa, it contributes to the continuing loss of a sense of place, that is, the idea that objects and people exist in a continuity, that they belong to this world both chronologically and physically, and that people know where they are (Kunstler 118). "Suburbanisation and sprawl have not occurred in a vacuum. Racial segregation, ecological deterioration, the transformation of rural economies, and other factors both impact and influence sprawl" (Lindstrom and Bartling 1), and therefore, this issue becomes multidimensional, interdisciplinary and practically impossible to control.

Visualising Sprawl in Suburban Cinema

When it comes to fictional representations of sprawl, the medium of film is undoubtedly better suited for analysis than the written word due to the phenomenon having a distinctly visual component. Therefore, this chapter deals with suburban cinema rather than literature. In film, it is especially since the 1990s that suburban narratives have become exceptionally popular: *American Beauty*, the film adaptations of *The Ice Storm*, *Little Children* and *The Virgin Suicides*, as well as *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* are only a small selection of critically acclaimed mainstream Hollywood films dealing with suburban angst and anxiety.

The films mentioned above, as well as the majority of other, similar narratives, portray the suburban setting with an underlying fondness and nostalgia that clashes with a primarily critical tone, which is due to the fact that the cinematography often plays against the plot. Pastel or very bright colours, the depiction of a seemingly peaceful environment, or even the soundtrack relativise the underlying suburban malaise of the narrative. However, this particular cinematic and cinematographic style, the dichotomy between visual details and narrative, simultaneously underlines the suburban criticism, drawing attention to the fact that suburbia is often regarded as a world of hypocrisy. Hence, the viewer is torn between fond memories, a sense of warmth, a sense of satire, as well as bleak yet simultaneously idyllic visions of both the built environment and the nuclear family.

As becomes obvious when considering the volume of suburban mainstream films, as well as their financial and critical success, the suburbs sell, not least due to the fact that with the ongoing suburbanisation of the United States, they become relatable to an ever-increasing number of people. Nonetheless, the mainstream success of suburban cinema does not mean that independent directors shun away from this highly commercialised setting. American independent director and playwright Todd Solondz, for instance, examines and portrays the

hidden dark sides of suburban New Jersey – the environment in which he grew up – with elements of fairy tale, anti-realism and magic realism, and his films leave the viewer with a disturbing feeling of unease. The various twisted minds of suburbia featured in his films embody the eclecticism and unwholesomeness of the suburban landscape, and they speak to an audience that see themselves reflected in the narratives and their built and social environments.

The focus of this chapter lies on two of Todd Solondz's films that prominently emphasise the issue of sprawl and its social costs in their narrative and mise-en-scène. *Happiness* is a film which much has been written about within the framework of suburban representation – for instance in Huq (2013) or Vermeulen (2013) –, but through mainly focussing on suburban sprawl in terms of architectural and social eclecticism, an additional dimension is added to the interpretation of the film. *Dark Horse*, in contrast, has been fairly neglected in academic discourse. In comparison to *Happiness*, the impact of the film was considerably less pronounced, and the critical output on it remains almost non-existent. *Dark Horse* certainly failed to receive the attention it deserves, as it is arguably one of the most memorable and original suburban satires of recent years. Furthermore, after the recurring setting of suburban New Jersey had become slightly more marginal in his film *Palindromes* (2004), in *Dark Horse*, Solondz returns to his previous approach of emphasising the importance of the suburban setting for his narratives, including the evolving architecture and infrastructure of this landscape.

4.1. Architectural and Social Patchworks: The Eclecticism of Suburban Sprawl in Todd Solondz's *Happiness*

In a 2010 article in the *New York Times* titled "Going to New Jersey to Find America," Stuart Elliot writes about how the "Garden State" came to represent the American nation in the new millennium. The author observes how popular culture and advertisers embrace the cultural specifics of the state, its couture and characters, and he argues that its people are more average, relatable and outspoken than New Yorkers. As a consequence, Elliott maintains that when it comes to television presence, New Jersey has replaced the previously similarly overrepresented Orange County, and has turned into a metonymy for America at large. However, not least due to the often-portrayed images of vulgarity, delinquency and violence in both fiction and reality television, New Jersey has experienced increasing stigmatisation, and has had to deal with a wide array of prejudice.

Given the public image of the state, it is no coincidence that director Todd Solondz has shown a strong preference for using suburban New Jersey as the primary setting for his works. His 1998 film *Happiness*, for instance, brings to the surface the twisted minds of suburbia and portrays a "dysfunctional American landscape, a suburban world that is at once blandly familiar and almost surreal; a moral darkness or hellfire on the edge of town […]" (Cardullo 145). Considering that the majority of Americans live or have at some point lived in the suburbs, and considering that the people of New Jersey are deemed representative of the American people at large, the characters portrayed in *Happiness* become highly relatable, and viewers recognise themselves in them. As one of the protagonists observes at the end of the film, when she tells her family about the police finding a body in her apartment block, stored chopped-up in food storage bags in a freezer: "Everyone uses baggies, that's why we can all relate to this crime, don't you see?" (Solondz, *Happiness*).

Taking into account the relatability of the characters, as well as the mixed and often clashing emotions evoked by the viewing experience – a viewing experience that reflects the public perception of American suburbia as a place that can evoke similar ambivalent and conflicting emotions –, what springs to mind are concepts like binary oppositions and eclecticism. The idea of binary oppositions is what characterises the current debate on and criticism of suburbia. The suburbs are often localised towards the opposing ends of a spectrum that ranges from utopia to dystopia, with their critics being reluctant to place them in a more neutral position, and contractors being reluctant to abandon the persistent quasi-utopian ideal they advertise. Furthermore, eclecticism has defined suburbia in terms of aesthetic appearance for decades, as observed in neo-eclectic building practices, as well as in the increasingly eclectic architectural diversification of the suburban landscape.

The Single-Family Home, Façadism and the Dark Suburban Underbelly

The binary oppositions and eclecticism of suburbia shine through in *Happiness* in its use of settings, many of which portray opposing suburban worlds and mirror the vast array of life and characters encountered in New Jersey. In terms of architecture and demographics, Solondz thus widens the typical cinematic horizon of suburbia in order to represent this landscape in its true contemporary form. This is rather uncharacteristic of a suburban film, since directors continue to adhere to the stereotypical "tree-lined roads, white picket fences, lawns with concrete paths, wooden frame houses, dens and kitchens with screen doors […] centred around the detached single family house" (Vermeulen 58). Within the context of the film, architectural variety is primarily employed as a means to

visually underline the fact that the lives of the three sister protagonists have developed in thoroughly different directions. The oldest sister, Trish Maplewood (Cynthia Stevenson), is married to a psychiatrist, has three children and lives in a sizeable single-family home; the middle sister, Helen Jordan (Lara Flynn Boyle), is a successful but unfulfilled author living in a dreary sub- or semi-urban apartment complex; and the youngest sister, Joy Jordan (Jane Adams), is a sensitive and directionless call centre employee turned teacher who lives on her own in her suburban childhood home. The differences in their lifestyles and character traits mirror the eclectic demographic composition of contemporary American suburbia, and their physical homes simultaneously stand for the new variety in architecture that this landscape has to offer.

Considering that it is the most iconic building of the suburbs, the detached single-family home, the essence of American suburbia, is featured disproportionally little in the film, even though two of the sisters inhabit this form of residential architecture. Solondz by no means negates the fact that this building is still at the core of the suburban landscape, and he ascribes a dominant role to it in some of his preceding and subsequent films, such as *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1995) or *Palindromes* (2004). In *Happiness*, however, Solondz widens the architectural picture, de-stereotypes the suburban built environment, and draws attention to its increasing versatility, as more often than not, the American suburb of the 1990s was much more than rows upon rows of identical homes lining a network of identical streets. Even though the vast majority of suburban films that were released roughly at the same time – *The Ice Storm*, *The Truman Show* or *American Beauty*, among others – strongly adhere to this picture of uniformity and conformity, Solondz is one of the few directors who seek to portray the multi-faceted architectural reality of contemporary American suburbia, a reality that reaches far beyond the single-family home.

In spite of the increasingly multi-faceted nature of the contemporary suburb, for one of the sisters, the stereotype of the immaculate suburban detached house with neatly trimmed lawns still applies. Trish, who leads a traditional suburban life, lives in a typical single-family Colonial-style home. The house is neat, clean and polished, as is the outward appearance of her family. In one of the opening scenes of the film, the tiled floor is being scrubbed by a domestic aid, and a squeaking sound of cleanliness is heard as one of her children runs across its surface. In spite of the fact that there is much life in the house, the interior leaves an orderly and controlled impression in terms of design and décor, which might lead the viewer to the deceiving conclusion that this order and control must reflect the mental health of the inhabitants. On an aesthetic level, Solondz ensures that nothing in the setting is suggestive of any potential flaws in the

family. However, the scene cuts to a sunny and lusciously green suburban park in which Trish's husband Bill (Dylan Baker), in his dream, runs amok, and a further cut transports the viewer into the office of his therapist. When he subsequently buys a magazine with a school-aged boy on the cover, his paedophilia becomes unmasked, and his character thus increasingly clashes with the architecture he inhabits. A perceived – if stereotypical and outdated – normality only sets in once he enters the neat interior of the family home in the evening, is greeted by his dog and finds his wife preparing dinner in the kitchen.

Like the home of the Maplewoods, the outward appearance of the traditional detached house that Joy inhabits subverts her character and mental health. Joy lives on her own in the house that was left behind when her retired parents moved to Florida. It is a presentable but very middle-class suburban house, and it is altogether too spacious for a single occupant. This becomes apparent in the scene in which Joy prepares a meal with a bottle of wine in her hand, asking Helen over the phone if she would like to join her for dinner – an attempt to fill the empty architectural space in her sizeable kitchen that represents the emptiness of her life. In contrast to the inconspicuous kitchen, Joy's bedroom has a highly child-like feel, and features a variety of stuffed animals, dolls, floral wallpaper, as well as floral curtains and bedding. It appears as though she has failed to grow up and find a direction in life, hence the retention of childhood memorabilia and age-inappropriate décor. She has never left home and started a life of her own in architectural terms, and even though she insists that she plans on moving soon, she admits to the advantages of her situation, and it is evident that she is not mentally prepared to leave the safety and comfort of her suburban childhood home.

An aspect that stands out in the film with regard to the suburban single-family home is the notion of the symbolic façade. In fact, the symbolic façade is a recurring motif in suburban narratives, in which the architecture of a respectable and well-kept home often stands as a mere material construction that does not necessarily represent the people who shape and maintain it. On the contrary, the architecture emphasises the deceit with which it was created, in the context of which an outward shell was constructed for the purpose of hiding a dark underbelly. In other words, the outward appearance of immaculate architecture and design is subverted and stands for the opposite, that is, a hidden dark and rotten side that the façade is meant to conceal.

In architecture, the deceptiveness of the façade even finds its expression in its own movement: façadism. In façadism, the façade is either designed separately from the building it represents, or the façade of an old building is preserved, with a new building erected behind it. Considering these practices, façadism

appears to be a purely postmodern concept, but its roots reach far back into the past (Richards 8). The practice of preserving façades, or of building them independently of the rest of the construction, it seems, represents an underlying human need relating to conservation in both architectural and social terms. It can be argued that, conceptually, the literal façades of buildings and the symbolic façades of people are the same, and that they serve the same purpose. Conway and Roenisch, in their book *Understanding Architecture*, provide a definition of the architectural façade that could be applied to human beings in equal measure:

> Although buildings are three-dimensional and may be viewed from four sides, and from above if from an aeroplane, we usually only see one side at a time. Most commonly it is one façade that first confronts us and makes the initial impression on us. Many buildings front onto a street and are designed so that the street façade is more important than the others. […] We call this the main façade. It is often designed to impress visitors and it will perhaps include sculpture or elaborate decoration. The rear and sides of the building which are not seen so often may employ cheaper materials and be relatively plain. (Conway and Roenisch 95-96)

In the case of Bill in *Happiness*, the convention of elaboration before plainness is reversed, since the plain aspects of his character are his main façade, with the more elaborate traits hidden in the background. Nonetheless, his façade follows the rule of sightliness before unsightliness, and it serves to distract from the traits he wishes to hide, which mirrors the purpose of façadism in architecture.

The concept of façadism also lends itself well to a reading of the landscaping of the Maplewood house, since the neatly trimmed hedges and front lawn undoubtedly conceal the disorder beneath the emotional surface. In fact, the neatly trimmed lawn is often used as a symbolic disguise for trouble within the house in fiction. This is, for instance, the case in John Cheever's *Bullet Park* (1969), in which the character of Paul Hammer, a psychotic neighbour of the protagonist, might mistakenly be judged to be a fine man when matched against his neat front lawn. However, Cheever simultaneously emphasises that flawless lawns and flower gardens need not necessarily be interpreted as façades. In the novel, a character indicted for disseminating child pornography lives in a beautiful Tudor house surrounded by flowers and trees, which appears to be part of the "big façade he's constructed" (66), but "[w]hy should a man who deals in filth have to live in a cesspool? He's a bastard for sure but why shouldn't a bastard want to water his grass […]?" (66-67). It can be argued that the same applies to Bill in Solondz's film, but it cannot be denied that in fiction, perfection in architecture and landscaping is commonly employed to insinuate emotional

turmoil in characters, even though this is not a rule to which authors and directors invariably adhere.

Bill's dark and troubled character is echoed not only in the deceptively immaculate appearance of the Maplewood property, however. There are further details in the built environment of the film that are highly symbolic of his hidden perversion, first and foremost the wire mesh fence through which he watches the object of his desire, eleven-year-old Johnny Grasso (Evan Silverberg), at baseball practice. Fences are structures of the built environment that are designed to restrict or prevent movement in certain directions, and they are markers of boundaries. In *Happiness*, the fence thus symbolises the impossibility and illicitness of Bill's desire, and, as a physical obstacle, it initially prevents him from committing a crime. It is another built structure behind which he must hide his true self, and like the symbolic façade he has built around himself, it must not be dismantled.

In spite of the various literal and symbolic structures that keep it intact, however, Bill's façade crumbles eventually when Johnny spends the night at the Maplewood home. Bill drugs and rapes the boy – he breaks through the symbolic fence and risks tearing down his façade of secrecy and deceit. Initially, when the scene cuts from Johnny eating the drugged sandwich to a serene suburban morning shot of the impeccable family home – the familiar two-floor Colonial Revival house fronted by a lush green lawn and neatly trimmed hedges –, the blue sky and the singing birds suggest a sense of harmony. When Bill and Johnny sit next to each other at the breakfast table in front of the generous picture window, however, the boy feels unwell, and Bill drives him home through a repetitive landscape of suburban front lawns. The next shot portrays the Maplewood home from the same perspective as in the morning, but this time shrouded in darkness. The discrepancy between the two shots of the house, that is, the discrepancy between the vibrancy of the morning and the darkness of the night, it can be argued, foreshadows the imminent revelation of Bill's façade, as the dark hues and shadows allude to the deceitfulness of his character.

Consistent with this reading, the Maplewoods soon discover that their house, the architectural representation of their family, has been defaced under the screen of night, and large capital letters spelling the words "serial rapist" and "pervert" extend over two floors on the front façade. Through the visibility of the figurative façade on the architectural one, it becomes apparent that the two types of façades are interrelated to a considerable extent. In terms of their interrelatedness, von Meiss (94) also observes that the architectural shell has an "underlying anthropomorphic significance: the facade, the face, the human face – face of the building, in short, frontality." Due to its status as the face

of a building, the façade is both expression and representation. Similar to a human face standing as a synecdoche for a person in terms of both physique and character, the face of a building stands as a synecdoche for the entire structure and for its essence, that is, for the people inhabiting it. The letters on the façade therefore distort and add meaning to it. They allow the public to see the true essence of the house, and they are an approximation of the hidden reality that lies behind the bricks. The façade of the single-family house thus turns from an architectural element that is supposed to hide the truth through false representation into an element that openly displays the truth and makes it accessible to the suburban community.

The (Sub)Urban New Jersey Apartment Complex

In contrast to the single-family house and its deceiving architectural façade in *Happiness*, the apartment complex that Helen inhabits is significantly more representative of her state of mind. Furthermore, it is representative of the fact that contemporary suburbia has acquired a broad architectural programme and is by no means a monotonous landscape of single-family homes.[2] The apartment complex epitomises the current reality of this architectural landscape, given that since the postwar years, suburban building practices have changed substantially: "The ubiquitous single-family, detached, suburban house for those in the middle-income brackets has given way to semi-detached houses, terrace houses of three or four dwellings, and apartment blocks. More than 40 per cent of the new housing built in North America is now in the form of multiple units" (Moudon 172). Apartment complexes and apartment buildings are far removed from the traditional suburban ideal promoted in the early to mid-twentieth century, but they had certainly become a staple in the reality of American suburbia towards the end of the century. With sprawl continuing to consume space and the outskirts becoming increasingly socially heterogeneous, the built environment must react to this development and, as a mirror of cultural practices and social trends, architecture must cater to a larger variety of needs and demands.

Although there were conceptual predecessors, apartment buildings began to shape urban environments as late as the twentieth century, a process impelled by rapid urban growth and an ensuing housing crisis. Apartment

2 Strictly speaking, Helen's apartment complex is located on the Hudson River across from the island of Manhattan, which is a rather urbanised part of New Jersey. However, considering the history of the area, which postulates Manhattan as the central city and adjoining boroughs like Brooklyn as suburban, the parts of New Jersey across the river still have a suburban or peri-urban feel to them when compared to the urban core.

buildings were introduced due to the need to accommodate large numbers of people in spatially restricted areas, and in what can be described as downsized conventional households. These emerging large-scale architectural structures were, essentially, one-floor single-family homes stacked vertically, lacking an adjoining garage, attic and garden, and often encompassing one room only. In terms of aesthetics, architecturally pleasing apartment buildings and interiors were built for wealthy tenants, while this new type of residential architecture was characterised by strong tensions between economy and design for tenants of limited financial means (Sennott 55).

Despite the fact that in their architectonics, there often was a rather strong emphasis on function without a claim to art, apartment buildings were part of avant-garde thinking for many architects to "explore the potential of modernity" (Sennott 55). The Bauhaus – led by Walter Gropius, Hannes Meyer and Mies van der Rohe –, for instance, embraced the apartment building, and the school was most prominently concerned with building socially progressive worker housing that combined mass production with design and function. Especially Gropius was convinced from a young age, after he had been commissioned to build inexpensive worker housing as a student in 1906, that mass production would become a defining factor in architecture (Forgács 5). However, due to the philosophy of its architecture and design, the Bauhaus was considered a communist intellectual centre, and, after having been active since 1919, the movement succumbed to the Nazi regime in 1933.

While historically an urban phenomenon, functional residential high-rise architecture is not new to the suburbs. In fact, outside the United States, suburban high-rises have been a common sight for a long time: in many parts of Europe, for instance, cost-effective apartment complexes are the most prevalent architecture in the outskirts of major cities. In many cases, the suburbs are predominantly the home of immigrants and people unable to afford inner-city rents, and this circumstance is reflected in the architecture of numerous European metropolitan areas. In the United States, in contrast, the situation is often reversed, and people of humble financial means tend to live in inner-city neighbourhoods. Despite its rootedness in the urban sphere in the United States, however, residential high-rise architecture was introduced to the suburbs in the form of the so-called garden apartment. The garden apartment became popular in the early twentieth century and was characterised by a far lower density than its counterpart in the city (Sennott 55), but suburban apartment buildings have

largely lost the addition of the term "garden" in recent decades – they are now often indistinguishable from their urban form.[3]

As is the case with high-rise architecture in general, apartment buildings and their impact on the built and social environment are highly controversial – in the United States arguably more so than elsewhere, which is not least due to the positioning of the "dream house" within the American Dream at large:

> As a multi-dwelling structure, the apartment building threatens the American ideal of the single-family house. However, economic reality, even in the United States and the prosperous nations of Europe, is that apartments fulfill an important need. The apartment building has transformed the urban and suburban landscape of the 20th-century city and by extension the lived experience of many residents. (Sennott 56)

When it comes to transforming lived experiences, this certainly applies to the character of Helen, as her current spatially constricted housing situation in an apartment complex strongly contrasts with the single-family home of her childhood. Helen enters the film by exiting her mint-green car in front of her apartment complex; she is elegantly dressed and leaves a sophisticated impression. The skyline of New York City is in the background, in the top left-hand corner across the Hudson River, as the camera follows her walking to the right, revealing more and more of the depressing New Jersey residential high-rise architecture. There is a stark contrast between the glamour of Manhattan and the dreary brown apartment block she approaches, the primary appearance of which is determined by rows upon rows of small windows and balconies. Furthermore, there is a strong juxtaposition between family and single life, as well as between traditional suburban households and the new eclecticism in architecture and social composition that the American suburb has acquired over the decades. Postwar tract housing developments have been replaced with apartment complexes, which means that the philosophy of mass production and architectural homogeneity persists also in a spatially more condensed form. The economy in architecture no longer refers only to cost, but given that the suburbs continue to expand and consume more geographical territory, it refers to space, too.

The camera follows Helen into the building, the interior of which is dominated by various washed-out shades of green. The setting is dark, depressing,

3 As becomes obvious when considering the functional, anonymous and placeless nature of the suburban residential high-rise architecture in *Happiness*, it would be impossible to tell whether it is part of New York City or suburban New Jersey were it not for verbal and visual cues that point towards its rough geographical location.

gloomy, oppressive, and it is strongly defined by non-saturated colours. Since people have a tendency to prefer saturated colours to non-saturated colours (Brunick, Cutting and DeLong 144), the colour palette of the interior has straightforward implications for how the viewer perceives this space. Furthermore, there is a severe lack of natural light, so that a certain sense of claustrophobia and suffocation is conveyed. When Helen takes the lift up to her floor together with her obsessive neighbour Allen (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and walks down the dimly lit hallway to her apartment door, one cannot help but be reminded of a prison, with the doors representing individual prison cells.

In a similarly dreary exterior shot of the apartment building, the camera focuses on the dirty brick façade with its dimly lit or opaque windows before joining Helen in her comparatively brightly lit room. In this case, it can be argued that the marked contrast between exterior and interior reflects the irony Helen perceives in her housing situation: "You know, people are always putting New Jersey down. None of my friends can actually believe I live here, but that's just because they don't get it. I'm living in a state of irony" (Solondz, *Happiness*). Helen certainly does not fit into the suburban or New Jersey mould with her creative, artistic mindset and her busy professional life as a celebrated author. Furthermore, she initially does not seem to fit into this depressing apartment complex either, in particular when considering her interior décor, which includes pastel-coloured walls, a painting and bookshelves, all of which point to the fact that she differs substantially from her neighbour Allen both socially and professionally, and very likely also intellectually.

In view of the fact that Helen and Allen not only live in the same sub- or semi-urban environment, but also in the same building, Solondz undoubtedly underlines the eclecticism and complexity of the contemporary suburban landscape. There are several scenes in which this eclecticism is translated into the visuals of the film, such as the one in which Allen talks to Helen over the phone from his apartment. The camera shifts its focus between the two rooms, with the two mise-en-scènes showing the characters in their architectural space – Allen sitting in front of his dismal interior, and Helen lying on purple bedding and lit by warm light –, which draws attention to the different appropriations of basic uniform residential high-rise architecture by characters of different social backgrounds. Furthermore, apart from sharing the same architectural shell, the two also live on the same floor, which is an interesting detail when looking at the floors of a building as a spatial representation of social hierarchies. Given the difference in their social standing, the fact that they share an architectural habitat in terms of both geographical location and verticality proves that American suburbia has detached itself from its former social uniformity. The

suburbs have become more diverse, less artificially planned and constructed, but also more random and eclectic.

An outstanding book depicting the struggles that can be caused by social heterogeneity in an architectural unit is J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* (1975), in which the main architectural focus, the eponymous high-rise, is located in a similar area to the apartment complex in *Happiness*. Ballard's novel is set in the London Docklands, an area that, historically speaking, finds itself on the verge of urbanity and sub-urbanity, and which thus stands in analogy to the part of New Jersey that serves as the backdrop for the apartment complex in the film. In a very bleak and dystopian vision of the Docklands, Ballard depicts a self-contained apartment block in which the inhabitants are strictly categorised according to social rank, and in which this rank is translated into the architectural space through the vertical location of the individual apartments. The least wealthy tenants reside at the bottom of the building, the rich at the top – separated from the bottom by the middle class –, and the architect resides in the penthouse, meaning that the classic division of Western society into three classes finds its representation in a single architectural body. An orgy of violence breaks out when arguments between the tenants and the social strata escalate, and when the lower and the middle classes attempt to claim the higher floors. Thus, the author depicts the mixing of social backgrounds in an enclosed architectural unit as an impossible endeavour. In Solondz's film, in contrast, the same social heterogeneity is a contemporary reality which certainly has its complications, but which in the city and suburb at the turn of the twenty-first century can function nonetheless, not least owing to the low level of interaction between tenants that ensues from the inherent anonymity of the building.

All things considered, Solondz's New Jersey apartment complex is a thoroughly fitting architectural representation of the portrayed tenants, even of Helen, who fits in seamlessly owing to her underlying dissatisfaction with life. The director visually replicates the melancholy and desolation of his suburban characters in the apartment complex, but he also architecturally counteracts this desolation by means of the Colonial Revival house, only to reveal that the material immaculateness of the latter is nothing more than a façade. Thus, the architectural mirroring of characters in the apartment complex stands in contrast to the architectural subversion of characters in the detached single-family house, but each character inhabits an architecture that suits them in their own way. Regardless of the material shape and texture of one's home, it seems, suburbia does not provide happiness, a fact which comes to the surface as the director "peels back the layers of the pristine and nice to reveal an underside of filth" (Richardson 182).

The Architectural and Geographical Fragmentation of the Nuclear Family

What underlines the argument that suburban happiness does not depend on the architecture one inhabits, and what further accentuates the eclecticism of suburbia, of its architecture as well as its spatial and social orientation, is the fact that the sisters' parents live a life of luxury and dissatisfaction in a suburban development in Florida inhabited by well-to-do retirees. By making the parents inhabit this particular space, Solondz reinforces not only the sense of suburban unhappiness and eclecticism, but he simultaneously reinforces the sense of dislocation of family members and the breaking up of the nuclear family. The director breaks up this social unit in spatial geographical terms, separating the three generations by a thousand miles. Moreover, he breaks up the nuclear family in architectural terms: Joy inhabits the space that used to embody the family, and the sisters' mother Mona (Louise Lasser) moves into her own apartment after separating from their father, which results in the architectural space of the film becoming even more fractured and fragmented.

This breaking up of the nuclear family, especially in a country as vast as the United States, is certainly not unusual; families invariably become separated spatially and architecturally when the children grow up and leave the family home. However, the situation of the Jordan family contradicts the suburban tradition when considering the stereotypical notion of suburbia as a place for the nuclear family and its material representation, the single-family home. The tradition would dictate that the children move out, that the parents continue living in the house in which the children grew up, and that this house serve as a space in which the family members reunite on special occasions. With Joy inhabiting this particular architectural space, it is unlikely to play the role traditionally assigned to it, and the family unit thus becomes disrupted. At the end of the film, the family members gather in Florida, which demonstrates that the New Jersey house in which the children were raised has lost its unifying character. This untraditional allotment of residential architecture in *Happiness* certainly amplifies the general eclecticism of the contemporary suburban environment in terms of both built space and social conventions. Furthermore, it emphasises the fact that the somewhat romanticised suburban ideal of the nuclear family has ceased to exist.

As far as the architectural and geographical fragmentation of the family is concerned, Solondz makes use of colours in both the built and the natural environment of Florida in order to draw further attention to it. With the exception of the Maplewood house in certain mise-en-scènes, the New York

City and New Jersey area portrayed lacks colour and vibrancy to a large extent; dark shades and hues dominate the cinematography, and concrete in various shades of grey, brown and olive-green defines the architectural details of the film, especially those unrelated to the single-family home. Florida, in contrast, is soaked in vibrant blues and greens, and the architectural interiors, as well as the clothes of the characters, are dominated by pastel colours reaching from soft yellows and pinks to washed-out greens. As a result, the suburban sphere of the Northeast comes across as harsh, hostile, cold, bleak and depressing, whereas the Southeast is imbued with a sense of welcoming, warmth, softness and soothing in terms of the interior, as well as vibrancy and happiness in terms of the exterior.

A further colour-related detail that intensifies the aesthetic clashes and the sense of both architectural and geographical fragmentation in the film is the frequent replication and darkening of exterior colours in the context of the interior in the northern suburbs, and the same can be observed in the southern built environment: the vibrancy of the exterior is replicated and washed out, or turned into pastel, in the interior. The use of these colour palettes is a play on regional stereotypes and iconography on the director's side, however, and does not necessarily relate to the emotions felt by the characters. In a similar vein, the positive aesthetic of saturated colours in the Florida scenes does not change the manner in which the viewer perceives the suburban environment fundamentally. Underneath it all, the director suggests, Florida is neither a more pleasant nor a more depressing place than New Jersey, and neither the aesthetically agreeable colours of the natural nor those of the anthropogenic environment manage to conceal or soothe the underlying melancholy experienced by the characters.

Despite the portrayal of the sunny Southeast as a similarly despondent place as New Jersey, however, there is a sense of relief and optimism at the end of the film. Instead of the narrative strings coming together in the architectural core unit, the suburban family home, the family members unite in the Florida apartment complex, as noted earlier. The viewer is presented with an exterior shot of the building, which is a straightforward visual and aesthetic parallel to Helen's New Jersey apartment complex. The camera pans the building diagonally, revealing floors upon floors of identical off-white balconies, and then focuses on Trish's son Billy, who disrupts the monotony of architecture with his bodily presence on one of the balconies. Billy is subsequently portrayed from a different angle, which allows the viewer to see past the façade of the building and catch a glimpse of the neighbouring architecture, which essentially looks identical. The complex is broken up by a patch of landscape architecture

at its base, a tropical man-made garden that stands in sharp contrast to the less than paradisiac buildings that frame it. Similar to the lush garden at the base of the buildings representing a certain positivity in midst of all the dreariness and anonymity, the mood at the lunch table that unites the fragmented family is surprisingly optimistic. Despite the sadness and loneliness that affect each family member in their own way, and despite all the growing architectural, geographical and social fragmentation that has occurred over the course of the previous months, spending time together in the same architectural space offers a beacon of hope.

The Placelessness of the New Jersey Sprawlscape

When it comes to the notion of suburban sprawl, the film offers more than the heretofore discussed fragmentation of the family as mirrored in architecture and geography, or the general eclecticism of the built environment that reaches from single-family homes to dreary apartment complexes. A further architectural representation of sprawl is the urbanesque building that houses Joy's employer, a building whose façade has a distinctly factory-like appearance – which is fitting considering that Joy is a call centre agent, a factory worker of the computer age. People work in their office boxes separated by desk dividers, and in spite of their physical proximity to one another, they are unaware of their colleagues working a few desks away from them. As a case in point, Joy's co-workers fail to remember the character of Andy (Jon Lovitz) when the news of his suicide reaches the office, even though he "used to work right over there, in that corner" (Solondz, *Happiness*). The call centre, from both a social and architectural perspective, is therefore highly reminiscent of an apartment complex and can be considered a translation of this architecture from the residential into the work environment. Both buildings, internally and externally, convey a sense of anonymity and repetitiveness, and therefore enable the perception of architectural patterns within the overall sprawl and the eclecticism that characterised many suburbs of the late 1990s.

Further representations of sprawl in the film can be found in the scenes that portray suburban New Jersey on larger scales of the built environment, such as the one in which Russian taxi driver Vlad (Jared Harris) drives Joy out of the city towards her home in New Jersey. The viewer watches the taxi drive away from the Manhattan high-rises towards the much more horizontal suburban landscape. A sign almost sarcastically welcomes them to New Jersey, "The Garden State," as they drive along a road lined with plain and unimaginative suburban architecture, such as unsightly motels, billboards and fast-food restaurants. As Vermeulen (57) observes, the film strongly "juxtaposes the vertical

lines of New York's skyline to the horizontal lines of New Jersey's strip mall of roadside motels and car dealers," which accentuates the visual breach between city and suburb, even though this breach becomes increasingly less pronounced as sprawl continues to pull at the edges of the city.

In the same scene, Joy initially declines Vlad's offer to drive her home because she thinks that he does not understand that "New Jersey is far" (Solondz, *Happiness*). New Jersey begins just across the Hudson River from Manhattan, but considering its immense sprawl, distances are difficult to grasp, not least due to the fact that the film offers no specifics as to the location of Joy's home. New Jersey is in fact the fourth-smallest of the fifty US states by territory, but being the most densely populated one, its ratio of area to population is disproportionate. Another interesting fact is that despite its reputation and representation in popular culture, which often focuses on social decadence and the "white trash" phenomenon, large parts of the state are rather affluent. Furthermore, most of affluent New Jersey is suburban, which is due to the geographical location of the state. During the rapid suburbanisation of the 1950s, its territory was heavily affected by the expansion of the metropolitan centres of New York City and Philadelphia, which are located in immediate proximity to its borders. New Jersey is also located along the axis of the so-called "Northeast megalopolis" – the most urbanised area of the United States –, which stretches from Boston to New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington, D.C. The state lacks any comparably significant urban centres of its own, and therefore, sprawl and ensuing perceptions of distance are mainly caused by its geographical proximity to large-scale urban centres in neighbouring states.

The dimensions of the New Jersey suburbs are undoubtedly considerable, and its proximity to a large number of major cities makes the state appear particularly urbanised and peri-urbanised despite it being predominantly suburban. This circumstance is mirrored in the number and types of settings featured in *Happiness*, which is underlined by Vermeulen when he makes an inventory of them:

> [The map of the film] features, among others, a two-and-a-half star restaurant, a fast food joint, a roadside café, a diner, a bar, a corner shop, an office/call centre, two psychiatric offices, a hospital room, a baseball pitch, two parking lots, an interstate, a few roads, a Path train, numerous car interiors, three houses, an apartment block, two one-bed apartments, a studio apartment, an elevator, a hallway and a lobby. In addition, the film's map includes areas outside New Jersey: interstates, estate agencies, various apartment blocks, retirement homes and swimming pools somewhere in Florida, various roads and streetscapes, a school, a taxi cab, an apartment in New York, and a fictional dreamscape resembling a park. (Vermeulen 56)

Every film creates a map of its own by means of incorporating various shooting locations and settings, of course. Nonetheless, the map created by *Happiness* is rather unusual given that the film hardly ever links its architectural points of reference, be it through horizontal spatial means – such as a car journey –, or through verbal means – such as the incorporation of locations and distances into the dialogue. One exception is the apartment complex that Helen inhabits: the softly focussed skyline of Manhattan can be perceived in the background of the shot of her exiting her car and walking towards her building, which gives the architecture a comparatively clear geographical dimension. The exact location of either Trish's or Joy's house within New Jersey, however, remains unknown; the palm trees and the stereotype of being America's "retirement home" are the only indications that the sisters' parents live in Florida. Furthermore, due to the fact that the suburbs resemble urban spaces increasingly, some of the locations cannot even be assigned to either the urban or the suburban sphere with certainty, for instance the call centre, the bar or the restaurants.

As Vermeulen observes, the scattered and diverse nature of the suburban environment depicted stems from the circumstance that *Happiness* does not focus on a specific suburb, but on an entire suburban area. The author points out that "[t]he film presents the suburb not as a closed, isolated town centred around a town hall, main street or even shopping mall, but rather as a sphere or realm where various suburban settlements coexist and overlap" (Vermeulen 58). This overlapping in fact goes beyond the suburbs and encompasses the metropolis of New York City, which makes drawing a representative mental map nearly impossible. The vagueness of spatial relations and spatial definition in the represented suburban or metropolitan area is also enhanced by the strong tendency of the direction to cut from scene to scene, and this scrambling together of storylines and architectural backgrounds accentuates the eclecticism of the suburban landscape.

The lack of clear-cut definition and suggestive characterisation of Solondz's suburbia, and the diverse yet universal nature of its facets and faces, stem from the insignificance of place in the narrative. The director does not seek to portray one suburb, or one or several types of suburbs, but rather a general emotional and architectural moodscape that is intrinsic to the contemporary reality and experience of this environment. The reality of suburbia is that it has fallen prey to what American futurist Alvin Toffler observed and predicted in his book *Future Shock*, published in 1970:

> Never in history has distance meant less. Never have man's relationships with place been more numerous, fragile and temporary. Throughout the advanced technological societies, and particularly among those I have characterized as "the people of the

> future," commuting, traveling, and regularly relocating one's family have become second nature. Figuratively we "use up" places and dispose of them in much the same way that we dispose of Kleenex or beer cans. We are witnessing a historic decline in the significance of place to human life. We are breeding a new race of nomads, and few suspect quite how massive, widespread and significant their migrations are. (Toffler 69)

When considering Toffler's views on modern lifestyles and people's altered perception of the notions of space, place and distance, it becomes apparent that the suburbs, too, have become defined by nomadism and have turned into places used up like commodities or mass consumer products, and that they begin to resemble spaces – that is, places devoid of meaning – in many respects. A landscape that for many people once showed great promise has turned into a space that has lost its original significance through misplanning and misallocation, but also through a growth pattern that has left it almost unrecognisable in comparison to its former shape and aesthetic.

Despite the insignificance of place characterising the film, Vermeulen (15) observes that "in *Happiness* placelessness functions precisely as a distinct and unmistakable sense of place," and that Solondz uses editing "to maintain narrative coherence and visual consistency while simultaneously creating a sense of geographical dislocation, discontinuity and isolation." The author defines placelessness in the sense of phenomenologist Edward Ralph, that is, as "the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place" (qtd. in Vermeulen 60). Even though the environment created by Solondz indeed eradicates distinctions relating to place and spatial orientation, and even though the director assigns little significance to place as a concept and therefore makes the narrative lack cohesion on many levels, cohesion is created through cinematography and through the act of solving a puzzle, the pieces of which initially seem to have been designed not to match. As is demonstrated in the final scene, however, the family members are united in the same building, in the same apartment, in the same room, around the same piece of furniture, and the different pieces come together despite their superficial incompatibility. What is created is a unifying and all-encompassing incoherence, so to speak, and this imbues the suburban landscape with new meaning, and a new sense of place.

All things considered, American suburbia as represented by Solondz consists of semi-specific places, yet it is placeless; it is simultaneously fragmented and united, confining and sprawling, eclectic and uniform in its eclecticism, and these characteristics turn it into a new kind of place. There is no denying that the suburbs have come a long way since the 1950s, when Mary Drone in *The*

Crack in the Picture Window was suffocated by architectural repetitiveness and was socially and spatially restricted by the lack of infrastructure, and when Levittown was built with a clear social and architectural programme in mind. Many suburban areas now have a similar amount of infrastructure as their urban cores, and architecturally, their composition is similarly diverse. Judging by Solondz's characters, however, life in American suburbia has remained as unfulfilling as in the mid-twentieth century. Monotony has been replaced with eclecticism, exclusivity with sprawl, and it can be argued that this is why the characters lack a sense of direction. The eclecticism of the built environment and its enormous expansion have left them with an overwhelming array of choices, which is as paralysing as the monotony of the suburban environment in the 1950s. It almost appears as though the suburbs cannot win, no matter in which direction they develop. In their brief history, they have been and continue to be represented as an almost placeless landscape when compared to both city and country, and the intensifying suburban sprawl will undoubtedly reinforce this sense of placelessness.

With the discussion of *Happiness* having mainly focused on the architectural characteristics and consequences of sprawl, that is, on the various types of residential houses and buildings that are now part of the expanding and diversifying suburban landscape, the next chapter resumes this topic, but puts more emphasis on suburban infrastructure and on the car dependence that results from spatial expansion. Todd Solondz remains a master of suburban cinema, and his seventh feature film *Dark Horse*, like *Happiness*, portrays the spatial dimensions of suburban sprawl with extraordinary finesse. Even though the film failed to enjoy the same critical acclaim, it provides a similarly striking portrayal of the contemporary New Jersey suburbs – a portrayal that rarely finds positive aspects in this particular built and social space.

4.2. Suburban New Jersey as Junkspace in Todd Solondz's *Dark Horse*

The discussion of *Happiness* exemplified to what extent contemporary suburbia is defined by fragmentation – a fragmentation that leads to a redefinition of meaning, or, in some cases even meaninglessness. In other words, contemporary suburbia is characterised by a fragmentation of space, a fragmentation of architectural coherence, a fragmentation of social units, and a certain insignificance of place. In this sense, the suburban area depicted in the film is a prime example of "post-suburbia." Post-suburbia is defined by fragmentation rather

than heterogeneity, as heterogeneity is a term better suited to describe the modern metropolis (De Meyer et al. 72). As Relph (383-384) observes, we are in the process of creating an architectural landscape "lacking intentional depth and providing possibilities only for commonplace and mediocre experiences. […] The trend is towards an environment of few significant places – towards a placeless geography, a flatscape, a meaningless pattern of buildings."

This fragmentation and lack of meaning in the built environment at the beginning of the twenty-first century culminates in the concept of "Junkspace," propagated by Dutch architect and architectural theorist Rem Koolhaas in his highly influential 2001 essay of the same name. The essay is not only a manifesto or polemic against modern architecture and modern building practices, but also against the spaces that modern architecture creates, and the eponymous Junkspace it defines is concerned with an underlying ideology to the same extent that it is concerned with architectural aesthetics:

> Junkspace is the sum total of our current achievement; we have built more than did all previous generations put together, but somehow we do not register on the same scales. We do not leave pyramids. According to a new gospel of ugliness, there is already more Junkspace under construction in the twenty-first century than has survived from the twentieth[.] It was a mistake to invent modern architecture for the twentieth century. Architecture disappeared in the twentieth century […]. (Koolhaas 175)

According to the author, ugliness is what defines urbanism – and, due to sprawl, also suburbanism – in the new millennium, and architecturally speaking, nothing worth preserving comes into being anymore. What is being built and what remains is Junkspace, "a seamless patchwork of the permanently disjointed" (Koolhaas 176). Junkspace is "a terminal hollowness, a vicious parody of ambition that systematically erodes the credibility of building, possibly forever," and its eclecticism is mirrored in the fact that its "iconography is 13 percent Roman, 8 percent Bauhaus and 7 percent Disney (neck and neck), 3 percent Art Nouveau, followed closely by Mayan" (Koolhaas 176-177).

Even though Koolhaas is primarily a world-renowned urbanist and is unlikely to have written his essay with suburbia in mind, his statements, for the most part, apply to urb and suburb in equal measure, not least due to the continuous blurring of boundaries between the urban, the peri-urban and the suburban. After all, the author writes about the built environment as a whole, including spaces like airports, which are typically located in the peri-urban sphere, that is, in the area outside the urban core proper which typically contains the long-distance transport infrastructure and industrial facilities of a city. Furthermore, Koolhaas explicitly references suburbia in the statement that the

more a city is indeterminate, the more specific is its Junkspace, and that "all Junkspace's prototypes are urban – the Roman Forum, the Metropolis; it is only their reverse synergy that makes them suburban, simultaneously swollen and shrunk" (184). The suburbanism of the concept can also be perceived in Slavoj Žižek's borrowing of the term in his following thoughts on the architecture of performance-art venues, the self-organisation of Junkspace, and the ordinary architecture that lies between the two extremes:

> Performance-art venues are utopian spaces which exclude *Junkspace*: all the foul-smelling "leftovers" of the city space. To use a term coined by Deleuze, a contemporary big city is a space of "disjunctive inclusion": it *has to include* places whose existence is not part of its "ideal-ego," which are *disjoined* from its idealized image of itself. The paradigmatic (but by far not the only) such places are slums [...], places of spatial deregulation and chaotic mixture, of architectural "tinkering/*bricolage*" with ready-made materials. (It would be interesting to study in detail the great suburban slums as an architectural phenomenon with a wild aesthetic of its own.) In between these two extremes – the "self-conscious" architecture meant to be noted and observed as such, as exemplified by performance-art venues, and the spontaneous self-organization of Junkspace – there is the large, mostly invisible domain of "ordinary" architecture, the thousands of "anonymous" buildings, from apartment blocks to garages and shopping malls, which are meant just to function, not to be noted in the press or architectural journals. (Žižek 271)

It can be argued that the American suburb is located between what Žižek classifies as Junkspace and ordinary architecture, or vernacular architecture, and that it comprises considerably more Junkspace than the obvious example of suburban slums. The author uses the term "Junkspace" far more literally in this excerpt than defined by Koolhaas, who would undoubtedly classify as Junkspace a large proportion of buildings categorised as functional and thus ordinary by Žižek.

Despite the term Junkspace being open to interpretation, and despite its perception being in the eye of the beholder – as is the case with most issues relating to aesthetics –, a concept that is crucial to the definition of the term is spatial misguidance. Ironically, within the context of the contemporary suburb, the misguided spaces outlined in "Junkspace" are preserved and rebuilt unremittingly. Koolhaas (179) states that since "it is so intensely consumed, Junkspace is fanatically maintained, the night shift undoing the damage of the dayshift in an endless Sisyphean replay." What is particularly interesting in this statement is the idea of mass consumption. In the United States, suburban spaces are the most consumed, and therefore must be maintained, even though critics

may wish that a visionary architect like Le Corbusier, who once intended to raze Paris' disease-ridden Marais district to the ground in order to build his straight-lined mega-constructions, would attend to the aesthetic problem of American suburbia. This infinite maintenance of the suburban sphere and its misguided Junkspace is practised in the twenty-first century to the same extent as in the twentieth, despite the cries for change that have been heard since the postwar years.

Koolhaas highlights the grievances of twentieth- and twenty-first-century architecture by summarising the developments – or, in the eyes of the author, the non-developments – of modern building. According to Koolhaas, modern architecture is nothing more than a seamless patchwork that results in hollowness, meaninglessness and entropy. He maintains that "[i]f space-junk is the human debris that litters the universe, Junk-Space is the residue mankind leaves on the planet," and that the built "product of modernization is not modern architecture but Junkspace. Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout" (Koolhaas 175). Architecture is no longer memorable; it is nothing more than a material expression of quantity and "replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more" (Koolhaas 176). This continuous accumulation and addition in modern building results in sprawl, which to a large extent is a phenomenon with its own internal dynamics.

In spite of the seemingly unstoppable sprawl of the suburban landscape, a large proportion of the Junkspace that is being built in and around the outskirts is proof of the fact that in terms of innovation and architectural direction, American suburbia finds itself in a state of arrested development. This appears to be a somewhat contradictory statement given that sprawl, or uncontrolled growth, and arrested development, or architectural deadlock, are at opposing ends of a spectrum. However, sprawl is based upon the idea of material accumulation, or, as Koolhaas phrases it, upon the philosophy that more and more, more is more. Accumulation in the built environment by no means necessarily fosters a sense of development, a sense of progress or improvement. While there is considerable physical growth and expansion in the American suburbs, there is a lack of constructive advancement. According to the author, "[c]hange has been divorced from the idea of improvement. There is no progress; like a crab on LSD, culture staggers endlessly sideways" (Koolhaas 178). The suburban landscape is thus simply being copied and recreated without progress, and so is the misplanning that has been inherent to it for decades.

Sprawl, in other words, is the architectural or material manifestation of the consumerist accumulation and conspicuous consumption typical of Junkspace, which becomes apparent in the various definitions of the term. Sprawl can be defined, for instance, as "low-density development on the edges of cities and towns that is poorly planned, land-consumptive, automobile-dependent [and] designed without regard to its surroundings" (qtd. in Freilich, Sitkowski and Mennillo 6), or as "development that is inefficient in its use of lands […]; constructed in a 'leap frog' manner in areas without existing infrastructure, often on prime farmland; auto dependent and consisting of isolated single use neighborhoods requiring excessive transportation" (qtd. in Freilich, Sitkowski and Mennillo 8). With regard to architectural consumerism, the terms and expressions that stand out in these definitions are "land-consumptive," "poorly planned" and "excessive." What is conveyed is a sense of space-related inflation, of cheap and hasty construction, as well as a sense of disorientation. Within the context of growing sprawl, the built environment becomes repetitive and meaningless, and the people living in midst of all this architectural accumulation and lack of direction become directionless themselves.

Characters Lost in Post-Suburban Junkspace

Sprawl and its Junkspace is a concept that is highly visible and perceptible in all its shapes and forms in Todd Solondz's film *Dark Horse*, released in 2012. In particular, the concept is echoed in the characters of the film. Like the American suburb, the protagonist, Abe (Jordan Gelber), is an overweight, balding, overall unattractive man in his mid-thirties, who, for the lack of a more appropriate term, shows severe symptoms of arrested mental development.[4] He is a man who would "explode in misery if he weren't protected by his cluelessness" (Ebert 123). Abe still lives with his parents Phyllis and Jackie (Mia Farrow and Christopher Walken) and is an avid toy collector – character traits which point towards his child-like nature and demeanour. The interior design and décor of his bedroom is that of a pre-teenager, consisting of strikingly colourful, dotted wallpaper, as well as a neatly arranged collection of action figures, the paraphernalia of both his child- and adulthood. Being stuck in this suburban house and in his old room has likely prevented him from going through further developmental stages, and he has remained a child to a large extent, a fact which is also reflected in his verbal capacities and in his facial expressions. After failing to finish his college degree and developing a sense of inferiority towards his brother Richard (Justin

4 A trait which makes him highly reminiscent of the character of Barry (Adam Sandler) in Paul Thomas Anderson's 2002 film *Punch-Drunk Love*.

Bartha), he lacks the motivation to make a life for himself. Nonetheless, he sees himself as a dark horse, as someone who will one day unexpectedly emerge to prominence. Seeing right through Abe's denial of his position in life, the viewer is left with a sad picture of a failed human being, but as opposed to the characters in *Happiness*, the director allows for significantly more sympathy in his case.

In terms of setting, *Dark Horse* is centred around a suburban environment in the state of New Jersey, and similar to *Happiness*, the film portrays the desperation stereotypically associated with the suburban sphere in this state; it is a tale of dead ends, alienation, illness and death. The setting represents this sense of impasse in that the protagonist navigates the landscape of Solondz's New Jersey by relying on a limited number of places of reference: a small number of residential houses, an office building, a toy store and the suburban road system. In contrast to *Happiness*, a film in which the multitude of settings highlights the architectural and social diversity of the New Jersey suburbs, there are few other notable backdrops in *Dark Horse*, such as a wedding party, a diner, a bar, a multiplex cinema, a hospital and a graveyard. This lack of variety stems from the fact that the film heavily focuses on one character, but it can also be argued that this lack of variety parallels the lack of complexity, or the arrested development, of Abe. Generally speaking, the New Jersey setting in Solondz's oeuvre is highly representative of the mental state of his characters, and in *Dark Horse*, the parallels between setting and frame of mind are particularly pronounced.

In order to illustrate the parallels between setting and character, considering Abe within the context of suburban sprawl reveals the extent to which the built environment is replicated in him. He lacks direction, accumulates needless things, exists to consume, is trapped between the dichotomies of architectural taste and Junkspace, and depends on his home-like car to give coherence to both himself and the built suburb. Furthermore, despite his humorous representation, Abe embodies the underlying dejection of the suburb, a dejection that is hidden behind an either nondescript or cheerful exterior appearance. Similar to the American suburb, which for the most part continues to strive to do justice to people's expectations, but which has turned into an unrewarding landscape in both visual and conceptual terms, Abe overcompensates for his inner turmoil and sadness by keeping up a façade of happiness and positivity. Yet this façade begins to crumble as early as the opening scene, which shows him bored and alone at a lively wedding party – a situation that mirrors the alienation that the suburban (built) environment can cause.

The built environment, in addition to being a mirror image of them, also clashes with the characters, however. As a case in point, Abe is completely

incompatible with the suburban mansion he inhabits. His incompatibility shines through not only in his character, but also in his clothing style, which underlines Koolhaas' argument that in Junkspace, "[t]he more we inhabit the palatial, the more we seem to dress down" (Koolhaas 177). The mismatch between architecture and character in *Dark Horse* also becomes evident in the scene in which Abe finds himself at his colleague Marie's sparsely decorated ultra-modern mansion with its impressive selection of modern art and tasteful design – an architectural space which in some respects reflects the fact that in Junkspace, "interiors refer to the Stone and Space age at the same time" (Koolhaas 177). Both houses, that of his parents and that of Marie, are carefully decorated and stylish in appearance, and Abe seems misplaced in an environment in which people superficially have their lives under control, and in which they display this sense of direction through architecture and design.

Similar to Solondz's misguided suburban characters clashing with the architectural space of the film, his characters are also often mismatched with the neat appearance of its landscape architecture and gardening. One frame that stands out in this context is that of a neatly pruned bush in front of the house that belongs to the parents of Abe's love interest Miranda (Selma Blair), since this immaculate gardening stands in sharp contrast to the disorderly state of mind of the protagonists. However, the pruned bush as a product of suburban gardening adds to the sense of Junkspace of the film. In Junkspace, "foliage [is] spoilage: Trees are tortured, lawns cover human manipulations like thick pelts, or even toupees, sprinklers water according to mathematical timetables" (Koolhaas 186-187). Culminating in the concept of the golf course for Koolhaas, the tortured natural landscape has been part of the suburban environment since mass production and thus mass expansion began, and in light of the categorisation of the pruned bush as Junkspace, this plant underlines rather than contradicts the tortured mental state of the characters.

The clash between the characters and their residential architecture and environment, their overall directionlessness, as well as the recurring motif of being or feeling alone in the suburb, all point towards the conclusion that the environment depicted by the director finds itself in a post-suburban state. In its post-suburban state, the suburb displays an increasing number of urban or metropolitan traits in terms of both the built and the social environment. As observed by De Meyer et al. (70), suburbs in their post-suburban state have "a polychromic and polyphonic quality that is more reminiscent of the modern metropolis than of 1950s suburbia." As far as aloneness is concerned, when considering the following observations regarding the urban loner, it becomes obvious that this figure is an essential part of post-suburbia, too: "In the modern

metropolis, individuals are made to fall back on themselves, roaming like monads through the anonymous crowds. This image of the urban loner has often been enlisted by artists and writers to figure a condition of metropolitan alienation" (De Meyer et al. 68). Given Abe's role in *Dark Horse*, the image of the urban loner is transferred to post-suburbia, and Solondz thus underlines the fact that this environment is no longer the realm of the nuclear family, but, in the process of metropolitanisation, has become defined by alienated individuals in equal measure.

In addition to being mirrored in its social details, the post-suburban state of the setting portrayed in the film is also mirrored in its built details. One of the most prominent aspects in this respect – an aspect that also finds its metaphorical echo in the protagonists – is suburban sprawl and its effects on infrastructure and spatial distance. With more than half of the American population living in suburbia, this environment has become highly traffic-laden, a circumstance which amplifies its sense of Junkspace. According to Koolhaas (180), "[t]raffic is Junkspace, from airspace to the subway; the entire highway system is Junkspace, a vast potential utopia clogged by its users […]," and considering the congestion of suburban roads, another piece of urban Junkspace is thus transferred to suburbia.

Dark Horse thematises the impact of traffic on infrastructure, and on the suburban aesthetic, subtly yet powerfully. As a case in point, traffic and road distances are the main topic of a dialogue between Abe, his parents, Miranda, and her parents Lori and Arnie (Mary Joy and Peter McRobbie). The camera pans the living room and focuses on the group having a forced conversation on the sofa. The scene is rather uncomfortable to watch, and the following excerpt is interspersed with numerous pauses, awkward silences, and helpless, searching glimpses:

Jackie:	So, how was the traffic?
Arnie:	Well, not so bad, I mean, I'm pretty good at timing things out. Still, I mean, we'd have gotten here sooner, except we missed the exit.
Phyllis:	Oh. [pause]
Jackie:	Coming off of 95?
Arnie:	Yeah.
Phyllis:	It would have been better to take the Parkway, I think.
Lori:	I told him to take the Parkway.
Arnie:	95 is the fastest.
Jackie:	Anyway, there's construction going on. [pause] Now on the Parkway. [pause] Would've had to take a detour. Pain in the ass.

Phyllis: Well, actually, the construction's over. Yeah, I think the Parkway's much better.
Lori: That's what I said. [pause]
Jackie: They're supposed to be building a new throughway. [pause] Off the Turnpike. May simplify things. [pause] Will be rush hour soon. [pause] Terrible. [pause] Don't wanna get stuck in that.

(Solondz, *Dark Horse*)

Figuratively speaking, this conversation is constructed in the same manner as the suburban road system itself, that is, it is extended to a point of insufferableness and potential eventual collapse, but it must be maintained by all means. As Koolhaas (175) observes, "[c]ontinuity is the essence of Junkspace; it exploits any invention that enables expansion, deploys the infrastructure of seamlessness." The above dialogue evokes an image of a sprawling landscape, and, in contrast to the slowly panning camera simulating sprawl through visual means, it does so through verbal means. Through conversation, the viewer is provided with a picture of the road system of the area, and their attention is drawn to the fact that the rush hour, a typically urban phenomenon, has also come to affect the suburban sphere.

In *Dark Horse*, the suburban landscape thus becomes urbanised through the historically urban phenomenon of excessive traffic, and this urbanisation is also apparent in the fact that Abe's daily commute does not lead him to the core city, but to an intra-suburban commercial zone. Abe's office is located in one of the typical characterless commercial developments that have become a common sight in suburbia, and although the atmosphere in the office is far removed from the one that Koolhaas outlines in "Junkspace" – in the context of which the office serves as an ersatz home with sculpture-like desks, monumental partitions, interior plazas and kiosks –, it cannot be denied that the building is an urban presence within the suburban realm. Much more than being bedroom communities, modern American suburbs have added large-scale commercial architecture and zoning to their programme, resulting in a post-suburban aesthetic, as well as in an increase in traffic. What is more, considering that the commercial infrastructure in the suburbs is often devoid of character, it contributes to the disorientation that defines Solondz's film. His characters fail to identify with their characterless surroundings, and thus navigate the urbanised suburban Junkspace without much aim or direction.

Characters Lost in Suburban Zoning

When it comes to sprawl, traffic and the general sense of directionlessness they engender, the root of these problems can often be found in suburban zoning.

Strict zoning divisions make a healthy mix of uses impossible, and, as a result, people are increasingly dependent on their cars. More often than not, navigating a suburb on foot is an impossible endeavour due to the distance between zones, or due to the lack of sidewalks. Newer American suburbs differ drastically from traditional and organically grown neighbourhoods, in which mixed use of land is common and contributes to their sense of place, and in which this sense of place has a strong influence on how people relate not only to their surroundings but also to each other. The new scheme for suburban planning, in contrast, is characterised by single-use zones that divide the suburb into housing subdivisions, shopping centres, office parks, civic institutions and roadways (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 5-7). This scheme for urban planning leads to the often-criticised reality that "[i]n suburbia, there is only one available lifestyle: to own a car and to need it for everything" (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 25). In this respect, inorganically grown suburbs create a stark contrast to traditional, organically grown neighbourhoods, in which the concept of the main street enabled proximity between living, working and commerce.

The most momentous aspect of zonal divisions, however, is that places lose their character and cease to be relatable. The shopping centre has replaced the cosy corner shop, and workers have lunch in their office canteen instead of a social meeting place like a restaurant on Main Street. Furthermore, the suburb is not only divided spatially, but also socially. People are out in the open less and less, as they have no reason to be outside. With the McMansion, suburbanites have a generous private realm, "but [their] public realm is brutal. Confronted by repetitive subdivisions, treeless collector roads, and vast parking lots, the citizen finds few public spaces worth visiting. One's role in this environment is primarily as a motorist competing for asphalt" (Duany, Plater-Zyberk and Speck 41). In *Dark Horse*, Solondz chooses not to make suburban grievances like zoning a weighty part of the dialogue, of the cinematography, or of the narrative itself, but intersperses the film with brief comments and frames instead. By incorporating subtle allusions, the director offers the viewer an interpretation of the mental state of the characters, drawing increasingly more attention to psychological issues that stand in direct relation to the built suburb and its loss of character.

The phenomena of zoning, sprawl and urbanisation in a suburban context are, for instance, subtly and conveniently incorporated into Abe's job in his father's real estate business, which specialises in property management and commercial developments. When Abe answers Arnie's questions about his work, Lori replies: "You mean, like all those strip malls. Where there used to be parks and mom-and-pop stores?" (Solondz, *Dark Horse*). It becomes apparent

that Miranda's parents remember a suburb that had a thoroughly different look and feel. They remember a suburb that still had the qualities of a healthy and organically grown community, a more idyllic environment lacking the visual and social consequences of sprawl and zoning. These consequences have manifested themselves in the form of strip malls, road signs, uninspired commercial developments and traffic, with all these manifestations pointing towards the blatant materialism to which suburban America has fallen prey. However, materialism is not only encountered in the built environment that comes into being as a direct consequence of the industry that employs Abe, but also in his obsessive toy collecting, which, according to Miranda's ex-boyfriend Mahmoud (Aasif Mandvi), stands for "a reflexive textbook pathology of Western consumerist capitalism" (Solondz, *Dark Horse*). This "pathological disease" manifests itself in the entire suburb in the form of materialistic accumulation and sprawl, and it is particularly perceptible in the architectural, planning- and design-related mise-en-scènes of the film.

The consumerism displayed in *Dark Horse*, however, also demonstrates that the portrayed suburb is a self-sustaining centre. Abe's collecting urges, for example, are satisfied in a formerly globally operating chain store, which is recognisable as a Toys"R"Us despite the blurred-out logo. Furthermore, after a fall-out with his father at work, Abe visits the local multiplex for entertainment in the middle of the day – with entertainment being "[t]he chosen theatre of megalomania" (Koolhaas 185) in Junkspace, a fact that finds its spatial echo in both the multiplex and the Toys"R"Us. These two commercial buildings are disproportionally large, and supply and demand fail to meet; the car parks in front of them are virtually empty, as is the interior of the store and the cinema auditorium. In the case of the suburb as imagined and visualised by Solondz in the film, the commercial environment offers more than is needed, which refers back to the idea of materialism and consumerism, and, as a consequence, to the idea of excess, meaninglessness and mental vacuity.

The emptiness and lifelessness of the commercial buildings is resonated in their exterior architectural appearance and aesthetic, too. The lack of windows, the abundance of exposed concrete – the suburban version of Brutalist architecture, so to speak –, their monotonous and characterless shells, as well as their sheer size give the two complexes an oppressive, and an almost architecturally communist or totalitarian feel. Their architectural style is far removed from the idyllic suburban architecture advertised half a century earlier, but it undoubtedly reflects contemporary realities. The outskirts are now associated with commerce and strip malls to the same extent that they were once associated with the picket fence and the picture window. Considering

their aesthetic impact, it is an interesting thought, however, that the rawness and hostility of the above-mentioned architectural structures may in fact lessen the sense of Junkspace in *Dark Horse*: Koolhaas sees the purity and rawness of infrastructure buildings as a compensation for the complexities of Junkspace, even though he observes that "massive injections of lyricism" have now affected these formerly raw structures, "the one domain previously immune to design, taste, or the marketplace" (Koolhaas 187), too. Yet in terms of the dichotomy between architectural and design-related minimum and maximum, Junkspace can also manifest itself in the form of minimalist architecture, as "[m]inimum is the ultimate ornament, a self-righteous crime, the contemporary Baroque. It does not signify beauty, but guilt. Its demonstrative earnestness drives whole civilizations into the welcoming arms of camp and kitsch" (Koolhaas 188). When it comes to architecture and architectural appearance or aesthetics, there is thus a fine line between the aim of modernism and its transition into Junkspace, given that Junkspace, according to Koolhaas, can emerge through both an absence of detail and an overload thereof.

A further striking aspect in the mise-en-scènes involving the empty car parks and the massive, anonymising architecture is the visual and symbolic impact of Abe's Hummer. Its bright yellow colour and distinctiveness in terms of both size and design in fact make it resemble a cartoon vehicle. It contrasts with the grey- and blandness of the suburb, and it makes Abe's character stand out by association, in spite of the fact that his inner self can hardly be considered vibrant. The vehicle is also representative of the car-based lifestyle that has its firm grip on suburbia, and which is still intensifying. America has turned into the epitome of a car-based culture, and the Hummer stands as an embodiment of this culture, representing the notion of consumerism, as well as the notion of national identity and ideology. It has become a cultural metaphor, and Silver even links its impact to Roland Barthes' following thoughts on the Citroën DS:

> I think that cars today are almost the exact equivalent of the great Gothic cathedrals: I mean, the supreme creation of an era, conceived with passion by unknown artists, and consumed in image if not in usage by a whole population which appropriates them as a purely magical object. It is obvious that the new Citroën has fallen from the sky inasmuch as it appears at first sight as a superlative object. We must not forget that an object is the best messenger of a world above that of nature: one can easily see in an object at once a perfection and an absence of origin, a closure and a brilliance, a transformation of life into matter (matter is much more magical than life), and in a word a silence which belongs to the realm of fairy-tales. (qtd. in Silver 181)

What is particularly interesting about Barthes' views on the cultural significance of a specific car is that he links the role it has assumed to architecture, or, specifically, to the Gothic cathedral. Borden (163), too, refers to the car as "the world's most popular architecture" in an essay on the representation of the automobile in film. In *Dark Horse* or the contemporary American suburb, it can be argued, there is a parallel between the car and the suburban architectural equivalent of the cathedral, that is, the large-scale detached single-family home, or the McMansion.

The reasons that America is dominated by car culture to such an extent are manifold, but one of the reasons is that suburbia would be a rather hostile environment if its residents had no access to an automobile, and, as a consequence, car culture grew at the same rate as the suburbs. In contemporary suburbia, sprawl, zoning and misplanning mean that cars are needed for the most insignificant errands and social interactions. As a case in point, as Abe drives around the unnamed suburb in *Dark Horse*, a landscape consisting of unsightly one-dimensional and repetitive buildings and strip malls rushes by. His love interest Miranda lives three hours away, but this considerable distance seems negligible; sprawl is so omnipresent that overcoming large distances has become the norm. The amount of time Abe spends in his car in order to reach places of reference, the visual impact of his vehicle, its size, as well as its role in the probable death of his character, emphasise its meaning and relevance not only for his own life, but also, in a broader sense, for people's lives in the inhospitable sprawl that is American suburbia.

In Solondz's film, suburban car dependence is so severe that Abe's Hummer can even be considered to serve as a mobile ersatz house. His vehicle offers him shelter and, considering that he has no house of his own, it is his mobile retreat and gives him independence from his parents. Its robust appearance certainly allows the viewer to draw parallels between its body and the walls of a house, and like the walls of a house, the car provides Abe with a feeling of safety. Following the same line of thought, the repeated highly audible locking of the vehicle can be read as an analogy to the locking of the front door of a house.

When Abe eventually crashes his Hummer in a presumably self-inflicted and intentional accident, he is robbed of his home and his mobility. Navigating life without a car is impossible in the sprawling suburbs of the twenty-first century, a fact which is metaphorically represented in the scene in which Abe wakes up in a hospital and discovers the loss of his legs. The hospital, according to Koolhaas (185), is a spatially heroic building symbolic of Junkspace, "planned with the last adrenaline of modernism's grand inspiration," and the author laments that hospitals have become almost too human, since "life or death decisions are taken

in spaces that are relentlessly friendly, littered with fading bouquets, empty coffee cups and yesterday's papers. You used to face death in appropriate cells; now your nearest are huddled together in atriums." However, little attention is paid to the friendly aesthetic in Solondz's representation of this architectural space, as the narrative emphasis lies on Abe's crippling loss of mobility. The misery of his loss of mobility becomes apparent when later on, deprived of his car but in possession of his legs, Abe walks to his most crucial and defining places of reference in the suburb, that is, his parents' house and the Toys"R"Us – in one instance exposed to the elements and soaking wet from the rain.[5] When bearing in mind the issue of suburban sprawl, Abe's probable death is not only literally but also figuratively caused by the loss of his mobility. In a literal sense, his probable death is a direct result of the car accident, but in a figurative sense, it is a result of being deprived of his identity-establishing car. Without his car, he finds himself disabled in an environment dominated by zoning and traffic, and he finds himself disabled to such an extent that even his survival is called into question.

"A Seamless Patchwork of the Permanently Disjointed": Suburban Fragmentation, Disorientation and Entropy

An interesting aspect to consider within the context of zoning, car dependence and infrastructure in *Dark Horse* is the fragmentation of the suburb portrayed – a fragmentation of which the director asks the audience to make sense. While *Happiness* is composed of fragments as far as both cinematography and space are concerned, *Dark Horse* initially and superficially appears considerably more coherent in terms of aesthetic and spatial relations. What creates this coherence in the setting of the film is the suburban infrastructure, which ostensibly connects suburban buildings that, in sprawl, typically "exist in physical discontinuities of meaning and context […]" (Kunstler 148). It is the road system and Abe's car dependence that give the viewer a sense of suburban unity. Unlike *Happiness*, in which the director predominantly switches between settings by means of abrupt cuts, in *Dark Horse*, the viewer often follows Abe in his preposterous vehicle, and watches him parking, exiting and locking it in various scenes. Through traffic, lines are drawn between separate and distant locations, and the suburb becomes an interconnected structure, a spatial community, even though the lines represent the suburban network as used by one character only. However, given that Koolhaas considers traffic and infrastructure to be

5 Solondz offers narrative alternatives in the hospital scenes, and Abe only loses his legs in one of them.

part of modern Junkspace, the sense of coherence and community they create is only superficial: "Junkspace pretends to unite, but it actually splinters. It creates communities not out of shared interest or free association, but out of identical statistics and unavoidable demographics, an opportunistic weave of vested interests" (Koolhaas 183). In the same manner that Junkspace splinters communities, the roads that unite the suburban sphere simultaneously splinter it by dividing the landscape, and by making people retreat into the separating shells of their cars in order to make use of this superficial coherence. To an extent, the traffic infrastructure in the film therefore stands for the viewer's narrative reflexes that make them connect the dots and fill in the blanks. As Koolhaas (188) phrases it, "we cannot stop noticing – no sequence is too absurd, trivial, meaningless, insulting" and "we cannot stop making sense of the utterly senseless."

Considering this splintering of the landscape, what remains is a disoriented and disorienting suburban world that, similar to the sprawl from which it suffers, has no aim and direction, and is going nowhere in particular. Sprawl as Junkspace is considered "postexistential; it makes you uncertain where you are, obscures where you go, undoes where you were" (Koolhaas 182). *Happiness* and *Dark Horse* therefore undoubtedly share the notion of Junkspace, with both films portraying post-existential characters in an environment that, to a large extent, is responsible for their state of mind. Any living organism has a "basic need […] to orient itself spatially in relation to its surroundings in order to insure [sic] its own survival" (Pike 120), and in a sprawling suburb, this spatial orientation increasingly becomes an issue on both a physical and ideological level. As also pointed out by Christian Norberg-Schulz (190-191) in his book *Genius Loci*, "the modern environment makes human orientation difficult. […] From psychological literature we know that a general poverty of stimuli may cause passivity and reduced intellectual capacity, and we may also infer that human identity in general depends on growing up in a 'characteristic' environment." Sprawl often lacks identity-establishing characteristics and leads to disorientation – as does architectural repetition and meaninglessness –, since it progresses continuously and prevents a genius loci from coming into being. As noted earlier, continuity is at the core of Junkspace and promotes disorientation (Koolhaas 175), and in the spatial continuity of the New Jersey suburbs portrayed by Solondz, disorientation in relation to the built environment is thus a matter of inevitability.

The true Junkspace of *Dark Horse* thus lies in the network of roads that is created through suburban sprawl, in the disjointed landscape of strip malls, in anonymous and meaningless office and commercial buildings, and in the

enormous and unnecessary consumption of space. As pointed out by Kunstler (250), "[i]gnoring the relationships between things and fetishizing buildings, the cult of Modernism promoted all the discontinuities of the common sprawlscape." If space were used more thoughtfully and coherently within the context of *Dark Horse*, Abe would be less dependent on his car, would not be physically and symbolically crippled after crashing it, and building size and actual use would be more in proportion. Solondz's built environment in the film reflects much of the contemporary reality of American suburbia, however, and is a testimony to the criticism that is currently being directed at it. In the suburbs, there is an overall excess relating to the built environment in terms of both quantity and size, which causes architectural space to remain un- or underused: "Junkspace expands with the economy but its footprint cannot contract – when it is no longer needed, it thins. Because of its tenuous viability, Junkspace has to swallow more and more program to survive; soon, we will be able to do anything anywhere. We will have conquered place. At the end of Junkspace, the Universal?" (Koolhaas 184). Due to the unnecessarily vast consumption of space, buildings and places lose their meaning. Architecture is not experienced properly, fails to acquire significance and purpose, and the people who engage with it lose their direction because they perceive no order and meaning in their surroundings. This loss of order and meaning is strongly perceptible in *Dark Horse*. After all, architecture has a tremendous effect on people's perception of the world, and as Le Corbusier contends in his highly influential book *Toward an Architecture*, clear lines and geometry give us a sense of order. If sprawl causes the built environment to lose these clear lines and the sense of order they convey, and if the suburb becomes lost in notions of infinity, eclecticism and randomness, a Junkspace of unprecedented proportions and dimensions arises.

Koolhaas points out, however, that Junkspace can also be found in sterility and perfection, not only in eclecticism and chaos. The author observes that "[…] Junkspace is beyond measure, beyond code … Because it cannot be grasped, Junkspace cannot be remembered" (Koolhaas 177). Since the sprawling suburb as represented in *Dark Horse* is necessarily a blend of both the sterile and the eclectic – the former primarily in terms of residential architecture, the latter primarily in terms of infrastructure –, the American suburb as portrayed in the film can be considered the epitome of Junkspace. "Junkspace is often described as a space of flows, but that is a misnomer; flows depend on disciplined movement, bodies that cohere. Junkspace is a web without a spider […]" (Koolhaas 179), a metaphor which implies both geometry and chaos. The web represents a sense of spatial order, but since there is no entity in control of the web, it is authorless and grows without direction and limitation. Even though Koolhaas'

metaphor is unlikely to refer to American suburbia specifically, it could hardly be more appropriate. It references uncontrolled and disoriented growth, and it represents the trap that this environment has become, or the impasse towards which it is heading. There is no discernible development, and whether Junkspace is found in sterility, perfection, eclecticism or chaos, it holds true that "[w]hile whole millennia worked in favor of performance, axialities, relationships, and proportion, the program of Junkspace is escalation. Instead of development, it offers entropy" (Koolhaas 178).

The disorientation perceptible in *Dark Horse* culminates towards the end of the narrative. As the film glides into fantasy and the fictional reality of the story becomes blurred, there are several shifts in mood and narrative alternatives. These alternatives leave the viewer confused and disoriented as to how to react to the film as a whole, as well as to the characters and their suburban environment. However, as the late film critic Roger Ebert observes, the overall message becomes more effective through its ambiguity. Abe leaves a strong impression on the viewer, but it remains unclear what this impression should be. According to Ebert (123), the elusiveness of the message makes us "feel contempt. We feel pity. We shudder, and identify. It is a vortex drawing us down into dark defeat and yet admitting glimmers of hope. Abe is as permanently damaged as someone with a serious birth defect, and he is a force of life insisting that he has his rights." Interestingly, this statement not only applies to the character of Abe, but also to the American suburb. Especially members of an American audience are likely to be torn between the rejection of and the identification with suburban architecture and suburbia in broader terms, as the film mirrors the often dull contemporary reality of this environment while simultaneously creating a point of identification through this reality. Solondz portrays a landscape with which Americans have become highly familiar, and even though this landscape often consists of rather disorienting Junkspace(s), it serves as an anchor of cognition for many people.

As far as Ebert's observation that Abe is as damaged as someone with a serious birth defect yet insists that he has his rights is concerned, this could not match the current discourse on the suburbs more appropriately. In the case of American suburbia, its birth defect lies in the misplanning from which it has suffered ever since it began to be popularised and mass-produced, and this birth defect is bound to lead to permanent damage, that is, it is impossible to fix without finding a ground-breaking cure. At the same time, however, the suburbs insist on their rights; they have the right to exist in their present form because this is how they are used and consumed. After all, even though their initial form and appearance was often artificial in the 1950s and 1960s – when the

Levittown model became commercialised –, their growth and development, for the most part, has been more organic since then. The un-stereotypical blend of residential architecture, as well as the coexistence of housing, retail, commerce and entertainment that is portrayed in both *Dark Horse* and *Happiness*, has destroyed the picture-perfect image of the white-picket-fence suburb in many places, but this architectural blend has become indispensable considering that the suburbs have become significantly more heterogeneous and self-sustaining. With Americans leaving the cities in increasing numbers, they were followed by their workplaces, as well as by their leisure and retail infrastructures, with the result that many suburbs have become urbanised themselves; they have turned into commercial centres in their own right, and this is reflected in their architectural appearance. As a consequence, and like Abe, they have the right to exist in their present form, since suburban Junkspace is what people have chosen for themselves.

What Remains of the Suburban Dream

"Strange days are upon the residents of many a suburban cul-de-sac. Once-tidy yards have become overgrown, as the houses they front have gone vacant. Signs of physical and social disorder are spreading," observes metropolitan land use strategist Christopher B. Leinberger in a 2008 *Atlantic Magazine* article. Leinberger writes about a major change happening in American society that affects the manner in which people choose to live – a change which entails that social problems are transferred from downtown areas into the suburbs. There has been a growing trend in many parts of the country for people to prefer urban over suburban living again, meaning that many McMansion subdivisions and low-density suburbs, including the ones that now seem affluent and charming, may soon resemble America's inner cities of the 1960s and 1970s, that is, slums suffering from decay, poverty and crime (Leinberger 71). The metropolitanisation of the suburbs plays a major role in this trend, since the suburban environment offers "few of the benefits of either the urb or suburb, while replicating most of the problems of both" (MacBurnie 136). Fishman, too, sees the main problem of suburbia in its success story and ensuing growth. Suburbia "has become something that it was never designed or intended to be: a new kind of decentralized city. For better or for worse, these seemingly peripheral areas we call suburbs have become the real centers of our civilization" ("Rise and Fall" 13), and they will certainly continue to govern the built and social landscape of the United States. As Kunstler (245) phrases it rather cynically, "[t]he great suburban build-out is over. It was wonderful for business in the short term, and a disaster for our civilization when the short term expired. We shall have to live with its consequences for a long time."

Within the context of the continuing fall from grace of the suburbs, a significant rebirth of urban living is currently happening, a rebirth that is both mirrored in and promoted by fictional representations of the urban and the suburban. Televisual texts, for instance, increasingly portray the city as an appealing environment not exclusively for the younger generation. The suburb, in contrast, has come to serve as an inspiration for portrayals of social degeneration and desperation:

> […] *Seinfeld* – followed by *Friends*, then *Sex and the City* – began advertising the city's renewed urban allure to Gen-Xers and Millennials. Many Americans, meanwhile, became disillusioned with the sprawl and stupor that sometimes characterize suburban life. These days, when Hollywood wants to portray soullessness, despair, or moral

> decay, it often looks to the suburbs – as *The Sopranos* and *Desperate Housewives* attest – for inspiration. (Leinberger 72)

Even though the suburbs undoubtedly continue to govern life and culture in the United States, the undeniable dissatisfaction that this form of living has caused since the end of World War II motivates people to change their situation. Many suburbanites are increasingly aware of the social dysfunction for which the urban periphery, hostile to public life, is responsible, and Millennials are attracted to walkable or transit-connected urban cores like New York City, San Francisco or Portland again. Even though Leinberger (75) emphasises that the suburbs are unlikely to become as deserted as the American cities of the 1960s, he predicts that suburban developments that are not geared towards a more urban lifestyle have no future in the long run.

In a 2004 TED talk, James Howard Kunstler shares his pessimism about the American suburb of the twenty-first century, stating that "[t]he immersive ugliness of our everyday environments in America is entropy made visible." These are the opening words of his twenty-minute talk in which he illustratively describes the visual result of suburban sprawl, calling it "'the national automobile slum.' You can call it suburban sprawl. I think it's appropriate to call it the greatest misallocation of resources in the history of the world." Kunstler briefly outlines the history of the American suburb which, being a response to the trauma of the industrial American city of the nineteenth century, culminated in a blend of urban and rural elements, and an unfavourable blurring of boundaries:

> "[T]here is a general idea in America that the remedy for mutilated urbanism is nature. […] [O]ne of the problems with the fiasco of suburbia is that it destroyed our understanding of the distinction between the country and the town, between the urban and the rural. They are not the same thing. And we are not going to cure the problems of the urban by dragging the country into the city […]." (Kunstler)

According to the speaker, American suburbs have morphed into "places that are not worth caring about," and this is due to architectural misinterpretations regarding the creation of a sense of place. The average American suburb is an architecturally inhospitable environment that lacks public meeting areas; it lacks spaces of social interaction or public exchange as embodied in the marketplaces and public squares of other cultures. Kunstler concludes his talk with an appeal to reason, predicting that with the end of the cheap oil era, people will have to rethink their way of living, and towns will need to be reconstructed in spatial terms.

As far as the end of the cheap oil era is concerned, director Gregory Greene criticises American suburbia for its apparent unsustainability in his

2004 documentary *The End of Suburbia: Oil Depletion and the Collapse of the American Dream*. Greene predicts that with the end of the cheap oil era, the American way of life will come to an abrupt end, and that the consequences for the suburbs will be immense. Cheap oil is the foundation of suburban life and determines personal mobility, the accumulation of consumer goods, as well as the inconsiderate and disproportionate use of space – and once peak oil is reached, the fate of suburbia will be sealed. People will have to use energy more sensibly; they will have to rethink spatial relations or questions of proximity, and this will lead to the decline of the suburbs as well as of the car-dependent lifestyle that is inherent to them. Presently, however, rethinking spatial relations is not yet a necessity, and the land-use patterns of the suburbs thus continue to encourage "hyperconsumption, social stratification, anomie, and automobile dependence […]" (Millard 220).

What becomes apparent in both Kunstler and Greene's observations is that criticism of suburbia is often excessively pessimistic and apocalyptic in tone. It is undeniable that it is highly entertaining to read texts or watch films that ridicule sub-urbanity, and for this reason, it is easy to focus on the negative.[1] In Kunstler's book *The Geography of Nowhere*, too, it is difficult not to agree with the author's entertainingly negative outlook on the future of the American suburb:

> America has now squandered its national wealth erecting a human habitat that, in all likelihood, will not be usable for very much longer, and there are few unspoilt places left to retreat to in the nation's habitable reaches. Aside from its enormous social costs […], the whole system of suburban sprawl is too expensive to operate, too costly to maintain, and a threat to the ecology of living things. To lose it is tragic not because Americans will be deprived of such wonderful conveniences as K Marts and drive-in churches – we can get along happily without them – but because it was a foolish waste of resources in the first place, and it remains to be seen whether its components can be recycled, converted to other uses, or moved, or even whether the land beneath all the asphalt, concrete, and plastic, can be salvaged. In the meantime, Americans are doing almost nothing to prepare for the end of the romantic dream that was the American automobile age. (Kunstler 114)

Despite the pessimism and overall negativity directed at the urban periphery, however, suburbanites often insist that they are more satisfied with their living situation than city dwellers. In the aforementioned mockumentary *Radiant City*,

1 Many critics argue, for instance, that owing to the rise of alternative energy sources, peak oil will not be the end of suburbia.

for instance, this persistent preference of the suburban environment is rooted in questions of housing standards, spatial dimensions and costs. Even though the American Dream of homeownership is becoming less and less attainable for the middle class – given that in the suburbs, too, an increasing number of people rent their houses –, the perceived advantages relating to space and security still outweigh the disadvantages relating to commercial infrastructure and traffic in people's minds.[2] Therefore, despite the focus on predominantly negative perceptions of American suburbia in this book, there is no denying that the suburban form of living continues to thrive, and that to many people, it offers what they see lacking in the urban sphere.

The ongoing discourse on the benefits and shortcomings of suburban housing and living will certainly continue far into the future, and this discourse finds its echo in suburban fiction. In fact, the criticism with which authors of fiction responded to the development of suburbia appears to be older than the corresponding discourse among architectural and social critics. When considering that it was only in the postwar period, when the mass production of housing units accelerated, that critics began to voice their opinion on suburbia more loudly, it is remarkable that Sinclair Lewis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, for instance, drew attention to certain shortcomings of the suburban landscape as early as the 1920s. Even though their social criticism is targeted at contemporary developments in American society at large – such as consumerism in *Babbitt*, or the decadent pleasure society as well as the failure of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* –, these two authors certainly did not choose their suburban settings haphazardly. Considering that the suburbs were experiencing a considerable boom in the 1920s, and considering that they were still predominantly a place for the wealthier segment of society back then, the suburbs were the locale where these social changes were the most noticeable. Furthermore, it can even be argued that the suburbs were the place where these changes originated, and that geographical spaces and architectural styles in both reality and fiction not only mirrored but simultaneously caused or reinforced them.

Leaping from the 1920s to the postwar period, the suburban experience had acquired a considerably more passive connotation. Even though consumerist behaviour and certain standards relating to interior décor were largely dictated by opinion makers before World War II, living in the suburbs and embracing everything they embodied was essentially a question of choice. People moved

2 Even though a large percentage of suburbs have become independent of their core cities, others still function according to the old dependency relationship, in the context of which the city provides most of the commercial infrastructure and the suburb serves as a dormitory.

to the suburbs because they wanted to move to the suburbs, and, above all, because they were able to afford to move to the suburbs. In the years after the war, however, living in the suburbs became a necessity to a considerable extent given the shortage of housing, and young families often turned into passive victims of government actions. The picture of the peaceful and serene house and garden outside the city that was being sold to them bore little resemblance to the suburban reality of the time. As seen in Keats' *The Crack in the Picture Window*, what awaited them in their first family home was poor and thoughtless construction, cheap materials, mass production, a lack of green space and infrastructure, as well as a homogeneous social environment with regressive gender roles. In a nutshell, people were being sold a house on a concrete slab next to an identical house on an identical concrete slab, which created an unwelcoming architectural and social atmosphere that lacked any sense of community. Even though the (architectural) suburban dream is portrayed as more attainable – and, presupposing the corresponding financial means, as more creative and less passive – in Hodgins' *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House*, there is still a vast discrepancy between lived and imagined architectural and, generally speaking, suburban space in this novel, too.

This discrepancy between suburbia as advertised and suburbia as experienced, as well as the corresponding disenchantment felt by a large number of people, is what defined the decades from the 1960s onwards. In the 1960s, the Levittown model celebrated its triumph and shaped the American built landscape lastingly, and along with the built landscape, it shaped the American social landscape lastingly. Drastic changes in the built environment of suburbia would therefore have been necessary in order to counteract its overall monotony. However, as seen in the portrayal of a trained architect engaging with a space that is created predominantly by contractors – and that is commonly characterised by non-architecture – in *The House Next Door*, saving the suburban dream through architectural means proved to be a futile effort. Picket fences and similar suburban "totems" had created a specific kind of mindset, and this mindset is principally based upon the concept of the uniform suburban microcosm. The suburban microcosm engenders isolation in terms of spatial units, both geographical and architectural ones; it seeks to cut itself off ideologically from the urban as well as the rural, but it simultaneously feeds off both of them. In order to protect this microcosm, the gated community came into being, with the fictional example of *The Tortilla Curtain* underlining the fact that walls and gates provide safety more on a psychological than on a practical level. Furthermore, the gated community – a direct result of suburban disenchantment, it can be argued – creates an unhealthy social environment through the presence of

architectural barriers, and it nourishes the fortress mentality that is intrinsic to the American nation.

In addition to the philosophies of uniformity and defensive fortification, numerous other ills of suburban living relating to architecture and the built environment surfaced over the decades, one of them being suburban sprawl. The continuing appeal of suburbia meant that the stream of people moving into the periphery was unbroken, and by the 1980s, sprawl defined the American metropolitan landscape. Similar to the notion of infinity, sprawl is a concept that is difficult to grasp: it encompasses the idea of uncontrolled and unstoppable growth, misplanning, the erosion of boundaries, as well as eclecticism; it manifests itself in both the architectural and the social realm of American suburbia, and engenders a blend of architectural styles, as well as social heterogeneity. The social diversity of suburbia, and the architectural representation of this diversity in domestic spaces, are the most visually striking aspects of Solondz's *Happiness*. The director portrays suburbia in the form in which it existed at the turn of the millennium, rather than in the form in which it would have liked to be seen. In *Dark Horse*, he continues this architectural dialogue, but puts additional emphasis on infrastructure, that is, on road systems, commercial and entertainment facilities, and workspaces. What remains in the end is an endless sprawlscape, or a landscape of Junkspace, to use Rem Koolhaas' term – a landscape that is fragmented, disorienting and isolating.

The literary and cinematic works discussed in this book are only a small selection of the suburban discourse encountered in the arts, and other works are undoubtedly considered more classic representatives of the suburban imagination. However, the narratives discussed are extraordinary representations of the history of the American suburb in terms of geographical and architectural development, as well as in terms of urban planning and its social implications and consequences. Chapter one focused on the suburbanisation of the areas of the United States in which this process was first observed on a larger scale; chapter two juxtaposed the idea of the dream house and the architectural mass production of the postwar years; chapter three demonstrated how people attempted to defend the suburban dream through architectural means; and chapter four focused on the current reality of suburban sprawl and the ensuing architectural and social directionlessness. In addition to representing historical developments, the texts also illuminate how the American suburb developed from a utopia into an atopia, or even into a non-place as defined by Marc Augé, in many respects. They illustrate that the contemporary suburb often has no genius loci, and this lack of genius loci leaves behind a landscape that is difficult to identify with in both reality and fiction.

The issue of reading fictional architecture in the light of architectural realities was discussed in the introduction, with the conclusion that the chasm between literature and architecture can certainly be bridged. Representing the brief history of suburbia, the choice of texts has highlighted the various parallels between the built environment in the real world and in fiction, since after all, writers and directors are inspired by historical developments and the physical built environment that surrounds them. McClung, too, emphasises the importance of the relationship between architecture and literature when he states that "[b]oth literary criticism and urbanism would be well served by a contextualist approach that evaluates the fictional city in the light of the actual one" ("Dialectics" 33). This statement dates back to the 1980s, and not much seems to have changed in this respect. The built environment is a tremendously important aspect of literature, but critical discussions rarely leave the realm of fiction and often are confined therein. However, not only in visual media such as film, but also in literature, analogies to the real suburb and to real architecture are within immediate reach, and the chasm that is often perceived to exist between literature and architecture should by no means be as wide as it is made out to be. Reconciling the two arts is certainly possible, not least because they both have similar processes of formation or creation: both the building and the literary text are products of the mind, and both can be read and interpreted.

An interesting detail with regard to the representation of suburbia in fiction versus suburbia in reality is that in actuality, the American landscape finds itself in a post-suburban state in terms of architecture and urban planning, whereas in fiction, its portrayals remain predominantly traditional. That is, the idyllic single-family home, the white picket fence and the neatly mowed, lush green front lawn still largely dominate suburban fiction. The days of the classic suburb are long gone, however, as Fishman points out when he claims that the suburbs have lost their traditional meaning as well as their traditional function. The outskirts are now the heartland of the American economy, since "both core and periphery are swallowed up in seemingly endless multicentered regions […]" (*Bourgeois Utopias* 16). As a consequence, suburbia becomes increasingly rare in its postwar form; the American landscape is now defined by post-suburbs, or by Fishman's coinage, "technoburbs." Consistent with the thesis of post-suburbia, Hagan (171), too, observes that the flow of people increasingly occurs "between technoburb and technoburb, rather than between technoburb and city, rendering the centre marginal and the margins the new decentred centre."

Fiction does not strive to deny the reality of the American suburb, but given that the utopian notion still prevails over that of the non-place in people's minds,

portraying the stereotypical suburb that has been engraved into the American collective conscious is a more effective means for authors and directors to get across their message. If readers or viewers ceased to perceive settings as straightforwardly suburban, the respective stories would lose their impact to a considerable extent, although a more authentic representation would contribute to reshaping people's perception of architectural realities. The films of Todd Solondz are among a minority of fictional works that portray the outskirts within the context of their contemporary reality, which is defined by eclecticism, sprawl, as well as by the notions of Junkspace and the non-place. When looking at other cinematic examples released around the turn of the millennium, such as *American Beauty*, *Pleasantville*, *The Truman Show* or *Little Children*, the built environment is depicted in its traditional, that is, in its homogeneous and picture-perfect form. Despite these representations being further removed from reality, however, they come across as authentically suburban, whereas Solondz's *Happiness* and *Dark Horse*, for instance, have a more urban feel to them on many levels. Yet it is precisely the director's ability to maintain the predominance of suburban representation in spite of the presence of urban elements that accounts for the narrative success of these two films, and it enhances their underlying criticism. The films preserve their reference to the stereotypical suburb through elements such as the detached single-family house or the clichéd suburban mindset, but they simultaneously convey the visual reality of sprawl that the viewer recognises as the contemporary truth, and the director thus manages to negotiate stereotypes and reshape the viewer's perception of the suburban environment.

When it comes to representing contemporary realities in terms of architecture and the built environment, it remains to be seen how suburban literature and cinema will deal with this issue in the future. The more the picture of sprawl, decentralisation, fragmentation and the idea of the non-place – or, on a more positive note, the picture of diversity – replace the suburban myth of uniform white middle-class houses fronted by neat lawns and picket fences, the more writers and directors might be able to adapt their representations without them losing the suburban connotation. As American author A. M. Homes observed in a *New York Times* article in the year 2000, in "the brand-new suburbs, the ones beyond Bethesda and Scarsdale that unfold into land that 15 years ago was undeveloped, there is enormous diversity. […] In 10 years, when the kids there have grown up, then we'll see this 'new' suburb reflected in art and literature" ("Imagination"). However, as it turned out, the myth of the suburban utopia has been so successful and enduring until now that a significant overarching shift in perception and subsequent representation was impossible, although

suburban diversity and sprawl with its negative aesthetic are certainly not recent phenomena. People continue to flock into the suburbs looking for the American suburban dream that ceased to exist a long time ago, and until they abandon this dream and accept the contemporary architectural reality of this environment, images of tree-lined streets, depictions of people mowing and watering their front lawns or pruning their shrubs, as well as the notion of the dream house are bound to prevail in the suburban imagination.

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Dealing with the representation of architecture and the built environment in suburban literature and film from the 1920s until present, this study demonstrates that in its fictional representations, too, suburbia has largely turned into a place of non-architecture. A lack of architectural ethos and an abundance of "Junkspace" define suburban narratives, causing an increasing sense of disorientation and entropy in fictional characters.

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