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**Re-examining the Urban and Suburban Mythos in America**

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by

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Abstract of the Thesis

**Re-examining the Urban and Suburban Mythos in America**

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This paper is an examination of the ideological and physical reshaping of the urban environment to fit changing models of livable communities. In America, the problem went largely unaddressed for various reasons until the end of the Second World War, at which point the reshaping spread quickly and has had a lasting effect on the urban, social, and political landscape of contemporary society. The urban problem, which includes suburban sprawl, has disproportionately shaped social problems (such as increasing economic disparity) and political concerns (including federal subsidies for the suburban lifestyle) since 1945. Ideological reshaping is an important component because it has largely been unexamined. However, it reveals latent power structures embedded in our built environment. This brings into question the general quality of the environment created for society over the past sixty years – has suburbanization improved the inhabitability of urban spaces?

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## **Introduction:**

The suburban crisis has widely re-entered public consciousness as a result of the recent financial crisis; as people failed to meet payments on home mortgages, reverberations flashed back through the world economy. This recent crisis demonstrates how inextricably linked the two markets are. I initially began to take a different view the urban problem after attending a lecture by David Harvey in the spring of 2008.<sup>1</sup> This lecture, while based on Henri Lefebvre's assertion of a universal right to the city, described how a capitalist economy, necessitates a financial 'sink' (a subsidiary economy capable of absorbing the surplus capitol produced). If the surplus could not be re-invested in a different economy, then over-production of goods and services would quickly force down the value of those items in the economy. Thus, when surplus is converted to a different medium and extracted from the primary market, that market is capable of a larger and more predictable profit and growth margins.

For the last six decades, this sink has taken the form of constant and perpetual infrastructure development – in the form of public works (such as the interstate highway system, public utilities, municipalities, etc), industrial growth (as well as relocation), and domestic housing re-development. More than any other, the suburbs have become the

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the 'urban problem' includes suburbanization; for the latter is an attempt to resolve the housing situation in urban cores. Moreover, suburbs are still very much a part of the 'urban fabric' that connects all built environments.

primary sink for an economy that successfully poured its surpluses year after year into the suburbs. By investing its surplus in the suburban development, the primary economy exchanged the value added surplus product to consumers and the government, for liquid assets, which were then invested back into the primary economy. Domestic housing re-development has become an ideal form of surplus diversion because it is an unlimited sphere of investment – once the infrastructure has been completed, there are endless rounds of suburban expansion and re-development; even 'renewal' of run-down (now valuable) central space by a process of accumulation through dispossession (gentrification). Underlying all of this is the assumption that there would continue to be a need for infrastructure improvements and re-developments once such a large network began. Sixty years later, we are seeing precisely what happens when the surplus is devalued and deflected back toward the central economy – the central economy simply cannot handle such a large glut of devalued and worthless investments. This lecture made evident how most narratives of suburban growth do not grasp the power structures and ideological underpinnings of the environment we create for ourselves to inhabit – both urban and suburban.

What was the condition of the built environment prior to this recent phase of rapid suburbanization, and what can be learned from it? The built environment was, as both Lefebvre and Harvey argue; interactive, permeable, transformable, a place of social relationships, and a place of relationships to nature. Moreover, as the creators of this environment, there is a right to participate, interact, and live in such an environment that has almost been forgotten. Narratives that speak of isolation, alienation, or an improved

quality of life in the suburb make little sense without acknowledging and tacitly re-asserting this right to the city.

Prior to capitalist suburban development, the built human environment was referred to as 'alive' – or as possessing an aura about it. This is an indication of the fact that the human environment, fashioned from nature by humans and for humans, allowed its inhabitants to interact with and change it. The human environment was formed as a result of the creative energies of its inhabitants. The human environment is authentic when the creative energy and interactions of its inhabitants successfully shape the environment – it both reacts to and responds to the actions of those who dwell in it (in a way that most of suburbia does not).

The human environment is intended to be shaped directly by its inhabitants, and the extent that mankind succeeds in this matches the extent to which their environment is a work of art – an *oeuvre*. The urban problem is an issue of aesthetics insofar as the built human environment we choose for ourselves is intended to be a creative and changing 'work' in the same way that art which engages its audiences is at 'work'. Moreover, the space we create for dwelling reflects our perceptions of ourselves and the world around us.

In this paper, I will address the urban crisis by focusing in the first chapter on the ideology that led the entire middle class to seek relief from the ills of the city – very little deception was required to convince suburbanites of the merits of a new model community. The focus shifts in the second chapter to the post WWII housing crisis, because it is a unique event in modern history, the ramifications of which have not yet

entirely played themselves out. This chapter also examines specifically how the use of space and the design of the suburban setting attempt to resolve the perceived ills of the city itself. The suburb is an attempt to create something new and authentic; however this model of the built environment still leaves much to be desired.

## Chapter 1: Nature in the myths of Modernism

"If we want to understand our era," argues Henri Lefebvre, "it is absolutely vital that we construct a set of conceptual tools."<sup>2</sup> But what defines our era, and what tools is he referring to? Our era is largely defined by the project of modernism, which as been in progress for centuries and the essential tools are critical reflection and auto-critique that Modernity sets forth.<sup>3</sup> One specific problem of modernism has become humankind's relationship to the physical space surrounding us and our mythical connection to nature (or lack thereof) through our physical space. The Fourth Prelude of the *Introduction to Modernity* introduces the "myth of the new life" and begins by describing the elements of this myth and the significance of this myth today.<sup>4</sup> Nature is initially described as a romanticized yearning for the past as a time free from alienation – a fall from grace or a paradise lost.

Having just given a cursory definition, it is important to acknowledge that the concept of nature has not remained static, and Lefebvre identifies several distinct changes. First, Lefebvre attributes Rousseau for giving "us a certain naive and profound

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<sup>2</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *Introduction to Modernity*. Trans. John Moore. (New York: Verso Press, 1995), 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid*, 1-2. Lefebvre argues that while modernism and modernity are distinct, they are both inseparable facts of the modern world. Modernism is the compilation of myths, images, and illusions that define a certain generation, period of society, or culture. Modernity is the reflective process upon the sociological and ideological facts of modernism. Modernism is formed in our modern society, while modernity is a reflection upon this society generally in the form of critique. My use of modernism and modernity in this essay will follow Lefebvre's model.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid*, 65.

image of the new life – the return to the earth, to communion and community, to spontaneity and nature."<sup>5</sup> Rousseau's 'profound' image stems from the spontaneous element that nature entails; a fundamental element in his conception of nature that resists logic and reason. As can be seen in *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau's concept of nature was that of a world inhabited by 'noble savages' almost entirely devoid of even the most primitive social functions. While this account of nature is undoubtedly affected by reports of 'savages' living among nature that came back from the Americas during his life, he is also writing a different story about the origin of organized human society than that given by Locke or other Enlightenment thinkers. Rousseau argues that "the philosophers who have inquired into the foundations of society, have all felt the necessity of going back to a state of nature; but not one of them has got there."<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, when Marx argues that all history hitherto is the history of communism, we are given an image of nature quite different than that ascribed to Rousseau. Nature is no longer framed as a place of return, but the place future societies will look forward to. Specifically, Lefebvre argues that Marx's vision of the future "was a sort of return to natural primitive spontaneity, rendered greater and more magnificent by mastery over the world (by means new and by old)".<sup>7</sup> Thus, the relationship between the new life and nature, for Marx, is more than an impossible return to utopia – it becomes a forward-looking spontaneous goal. Significant in the story of communist history are the local

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<sup>5</sup>*Ibid*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *The Social Contract and Discourses*. Trans. G. D. H. Cole. (Vermont: Everyman, 1999), 50.

<sup>7</sup>*Introduction to Modernity*, 69.

rural communities of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Century Europe, where there was very little class distinction and most property, space, and surplus food was collectively constituted. This aspect of history also demonstrates rootedness in the land, in nature and the small community.

On these first two counts, David Harvey has a similar, but different opinion of how the concept of nature functioned for the Enlightenment and for Marx. According to Harvey, we must critically examine the notion that the *domination of nature* begins with the Enlightenment. There are two enlightenment ideals; human emancipation and self-realization, and these two ideals "were inseparable but frequently contradictory. Since the thesis of domination of nature attached to both, it too internalized contradictions."<sup>8</sup> Emancipation through the domination of nature implies that man can fulfill his material, social, and even cultural needs through the resources nature provides, but man must take possession over these resources and alter nature to suit his needs. Self-realization, on the other hand, is an internalized ideal – one that focused upon creativity and imagination of individual subjects and reflects the recognition of human nature as distinct, but originating from, nature out there. The concept of nature during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries was thus both internalized and externalized through these two ideals. However, "Marx's nineteenth-century version of the Enlightenment project is in polar opposition to that of liberal theory" according to Harvey, but Marx "was, of course, just as deeply interested in questions of emancipation and self-realization as his opponents

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<sup>8</sup> David Harvey. *Justice, Nature, & the Geography of Difference*. (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 122.

and in this sense fully subscribed to Enlightenment aims."<sup>9</sup> Harvey's analysis illuminates two things. First that Marx, though at odds with the liberal economic theory that came from the Enlightenment, pursued *the same project* in relation to the ideals of emancipation and self-realization – the twin ideals grounded in nature. Second, Marx and Enlightenment thinkers (including John Lock, Adam Smith, and David Hume)<sup>10</sup> agree about the domination of nature, while they fundamentally differ in their views of liberal economic theory and the accumulation of property and wealth this theory rationalizes. Harvey argues:

For the moment I simply want to establish that Marx in no way objected to overall Enlightenment aims, including a particular version of the domination of nature thesis, but that he did have wide-ranging and strong objections to the way in which the liberal and communitarian theorists of the day interpreted those aims and by what means.<sup>11</sup>

Marx believed that through the domination of nature class privilege and scarcity could be eliminated through more efficient means of production, whereas liberal economic theory argued that the only motivation for efficiency in production is the increased accumulation of wealth. Marx departs from Enlightenment thought in many ways but most important here is that his rationale for the domination of nature was not driven by the logic of the market.

Harvey classifies Rousseau as an enlightenment thinker seeking "re-enchantment" of nature during the 18<sup>th</sup> Century when alienation from nature appeared to be growing due

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> It is worth mentioning that Harvey identifies Enlightenment thinkers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries, but names those thinkers who arrive on the scene prior to Rousseau. The background that Harvey gives is far more comprehensive than that of Lefebvre, and helps to explain what Marxism is responding to.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid*, 126.

to liberal economic theory of the prior century.<sup>12</sup> Re-enchantment suggests already that 17<sup>th</sup> Century Enlightenment thinkers had misunderstood what constituted nature and thus disenchanting and alienating humankind from an authentic experience of nature. Rousseau is the figurehead who represents the "subjective turn" in our treatment and perception of nature. Rousseau sought to reclaim authority from the intellectualist liberal theory to facilitate a return to nature, and thus reveal a more authentic nature of humankind as well. The subjective turn relocated access to nature, or more precisely understanding of nature "within us".<sup>13</sup>

Given the unique relationship between Lefebvre and the Frankfurt School, it is also important to mention that according to Harvey, Adorno and Horkheimer contextualized the enlightenment project as part of a historical dialectic of materialism. Specifically, he argues, "while there are plenty of currents of thought... opposed to the core ideas of the Enlightenment we owe the frontal assault upon the ideology of domination of nature to the Marxists of the Frankfurt School."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, humankind's domination of nature has affected the nature of humankind itself – as a result of mankind's relationship to nature man has come to define himself as the being that subjugates "others". Harvey writes that "domination of the external "other" could and would become internalized," creating "a dialectical reversal of the principle of domination by which man makes himself a tool of that same nature which he

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, 127.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid*, 127.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid*, 133.

subjugates."<sup>15</sup> Harvey identifies one key question asked by Adorno and Horkheimer: how have the goals of emancipation and self-realization been frustrated by the very philosophical and economic theories intended to actualize them? The Enlightenment was not betrayed, nor was Marx; rather the goals were "a distinctive product of the contradictions implicit in Enlightenment thoughts and practices".<sup>16</sup> How does Lefebvre view the goals of the Enlightenment and of Marx?

With the Popular Front in France (1936), the concept of nature is transformed for the third time; now it is presented as an escape from the alienation of modernism to something completely untransformed by man. Nature is celebrated because it has resisted the problems of social organization and can purify those who have the opportunity to experience it. "The masses of the Popular Front revitalized and lived out a myth of nature, while combining it with the myth of a life renewed. It was no longer just nature-as-simplicity, nature-as-health, nature-as-beauty, the nature of Rousseau," argues Lefebvre; it was "nature away from the city, away from labour and the division of labour, nature untransformed by man".<sup>17</sup> The Popular Front witnessed a shift in access to nature by the working class; prior to this movement, nature as resort was a leisure activity accessible exclusively by the wealthy. At this pivotal moment in history, the Popular Front movement (in addition to other movements of the era) began to acknowledge that city life has already begun to fail those who reside in the city; and more and more

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid*, 134.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> *Introduction to Modernity*, 73.

working class people sought fulfillment outside of the city. Moreover, the Popular Front movement in France corresponds to a point in history when travel was no longer an activity of the leisure class alone. Similar events occurred in Germany and in the United States (prior to the depression).

In 1950's Russia, the myth of the new man arose as a direct affront to the myth of the new life. Inspired by communist ideals; the good father, worker, and citizen, the new man, "the so-called Communist man, has only one failing: he is a bore".<sup>18</sup> Despite the evident shortcomings of the new man, he provoked a backlash within the ideology of the new life, and the working class sought to redefine the myth of the new life once again. The renewed myth became many things, and one interpretation was the new life as "comfort, well-being, fitted kitchens, [and] leisure activities".<sup>19</sup> It is precisely this interpretation that resonates in the emergence of American and French suburbs during this period in history. This interpretation of the new life certainly has its supporters, for it has indeed made life more pleasant for some. However, this interpretation of the new life did not address the original problem that prompted the myth originally: the desire for every "object in the world around us to become a work of art," the desire for the reconstitution of the *oeuvre*, which has disappeared from the society and environs of the working class.<sup>20</sup> The myth of the new life sought to reclaim the elements of the world as a work; as *oeuvre* in the traditional sense. This argument is evident in Lefebvre's

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<sup>18</sup>*Ibid*, 85.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid*, 88.,

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid*, 88.

*Writings on Cities*, where the *oeuvre* of the city (as a social work in progress) has systematically been converted into capitalist space.

The final interpretation of the new life described by Lefebvre is a life that embraces technology and longs "for what technicity makes possible: in a word, the cosmic adventure."<sup>21</sup> The cosmic adventure is a reference to sporadic and spontaneous nature sought throughout the different incarnations of the myth of the new life. For technology to bring us to the cosmic adventure, it must recreate mankind's relationship to nature by re-creating the world around us as a "work of art," (*oeuvre*) – the external and internal modes of domination combined.<sup>22</sup> The technological sensibility resolves the opposition between nature and culture," and allows for a second nature to emerge.<sup>23</sup> The nature of humankind is precisely this second nature, but it is grounded in a cultural perception of the functioning of nature. Humankind's self-realization (second nature) is the product of a specific ideological model of nature. However, as technicity exhausts its ability to fulfill the promise of the new life, we find the unusual intersection between technology and nature; the second nature of humankind borne by technology becomes inimical to nature itself.

Modernity signifies "the beginnings of a reflective process, a more-or-less advanced attempt at critique and autocritique".<sup>24</sup> Modernity resides at the intersection of

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*, 88. See also p.67 and p.73 in the *Introduction to Modernity* for references to cosmology in relation to Rousseau and the Romanticist's view of nature. The appearance of cosmology in relation to technology cannot be understood otherwise than to suggest that the supporters of technology believed it would re-appropriate nature in some form.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid*, 88.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid*, 89.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid*, 1.

myth and ideology recognized as ideology, but modernity too has a view of and place for nature. Modernity does not attempt to produce a style, it unearths old myths and examines them; modernity undertakes an archeologist's task – a necessary task if we desire to know what fundamentally altered our relationship to nature and the *oeuvre* of the environment we reside in. Yet, modernity can only ask the question of our relationship to nature, it cannot provide an answer with any more proficiency than Marx or Rousseau. Through the critique of modernity emerges the question: what happened in the "old (spontaneous, historical) cities," and what is happening in "the new towns," and suburbs where modernism appears to be in open conflict with everyday life?<sup>25</sup>

In *Writings on Cities*, Lefebvre draws a distinction between the notion of inhabiting a space and the concept of habitat. The full sense of inhabiting a space includes the opportunity "to take part in social life, [as] a community, village or city," and in this regard, one cannot inhabit a space unless there is a presence of the city or community that is a work of art, or an *oeuvre*.<sup>26</sup> If the social life and *oeuvre* are removed from a living space, what remains is the habitat. The removal of the *oeuvre* and resignation to habitat happens in the suburb because the space for social life is fragmented – there is no longer centrally located space for the work of decision making readily accessible to all. With the expansion of the suburb follows a heightened sense of isolation.

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<sup>25</sup>*Ibid*, 94.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *Writings on Cities*. Trans. Eleonore Kofman & Elisabeth Lebas. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 76.

With 'suburbanization' a process is set into motion which decenters the city. Isolated from the city, the proletariat will end its sense of the *oeuvre*. Isolated from places of production, available from a sector of habitation for scattered firms, the proletariat will allow its creative capacity to diminish in its conscience. Urban conscience will vanish.<sup>27</sup>

Lefebvre argues that there is a seldom realized side to the working class's perceived right to nature. As the working class can increasingly afford leisure pursuits and desires a reprieve from the alienated urban life, the lure of nature and the countryside have grown in the collective consciousness of the working class. As a result of this emergence, nature has increasingly become a commodified consumption of space. Yet the nostalgia for the experience of nature is indicative of something deeper in the consciousness of the working class – the overlooked and often denied right to *inhabit* space, which has disappeared over the last 150 years.

Lefebvre views the lure of leisure as a distraction leading away from the revitalization of urban life; “we must avoid those myths which threaten this will [of urban society], destroy those ideologies which hinder this project”. Creating anew the city as work, as *oeuvre*, is an infinitely more difficult way to overcome the myths that lead us astray than the attempts to make leisure available to the masses. However, we must first pause and examine these myths through the autocritique modernity offers us.<sup>28</sup>

In the essay, *Perspectives on Rural Sociology*, Lefebvre argues that the approach used in the United States to understand rural sociological problems is different precisely because it does not consider the history that has led to the current state of affairs. For this

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<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, 77.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid*, 149-50.

reason, there is much that Lefebvre articulates about space and the city as *oeuvre* that cannot be found in an American counterpart. Lefebvre makes use of cultural sociology in an attempt to describe how such fundamentally different structures of the rural emerged in France. Rural sociology originated in the United States because the rural problem first came into focus there. The rural problem cannot be accurately understood without observing the effect world markets, politics, and industrialization have had in the transformation of agrarian life.<sup>29</sup> Because of the unique colonial history of the United States, where land was literally given away to white European settlers, American rural sociology does not comprehend problems that arise from the feudal or serf systems of agriculture – problems that appear to be distinctly European. Moreover, peasant traditions in Europe preceded the culture of the city historically, thus peasant traditions are still unique in comparison to urban culture and tension between the two traditions remains evident. In the United States, people first colonized in settlements and later dispersed into the country. Thus, 'rural culture' in America originates *from* the urban, and opposition between rural and urban lifestyles, customs, and morals are not (strictly speaking) opposed – differences that exist have emerged over time.

Mechanization and industrial processes have fundamentally changed the nature of agricultural production on a global scale. In the rural regions, low tech traditional subsistence agricultural methods precariously exist side by side with modern, large-scale, techniques designed for profit maximization. There is thus a two fold complexity – one that is both horizontal and vertical. Horizontal complexity represents the unique ways

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<sup>29</sup> Henri Lefebvre. *Key Writings*. Ed. Stuart Elden, Lebas, & Kofman. (New York: Continuum, 2003), 112.

distinct rural societies have incorporated new technology into the yearly operations of agriculture, such as air conditioned tractors designed specifically for harvesting instead of manual labor. Vertical complexity represents the relative age of different methods of agriculture from the most archaic to the most advanced (when the hoe and \$100,000 John Deere tractor exist side by side). The field of rural sociology emerges precisely as a result of the interaction of these two distinct complexities of mechanization and industrialization.

Sociology, which Lefebvre credits as an American innovation, does not employ the appropriate method in its studies, but *what is* the appropriate socio-historical method? First, it should be descriptive; informed by a general theory; it should attempt to define the rural lifestyle as it currently exists. Next, an attempt should be made to find a date which marks the beginning of the present lifestyle. Finally, dating allows for a historical account of things leading up to the present situation, and thus begins to explain how the current situation was arrived at.<sup>30</sup> This essay marks the moment that Lefebvre lays out the historical-material method vital to the analysis of social situations, in particular an accurate account of the suburbs.

In "Preface to the Study of the Habitat of the 'Pavillon'," published in 1966, Lefebvre critiques the trend towards sub-urban private housing.<sup>31</sup> Lefebvre observes from Bachelard and Heidegger not only that "dwelling, in its essence, is poetic," but also

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<sup>30</sup>*Ibid*, 117.

<sup>31</sup>The French word *Pavillon* described Parisian suburban detached (as opposed to attached apartments) houses, where each dwelling is designed to be occupied privately by the owner. While the French post WWII suburbs may not be identical to American post WWII suburbs, their planning and construction was the result of similar social forces. Though there is much that distinguishes the French suburb from the American, in my analysis I will refer to the *Pavillon* as suburb.

that the modernism of Le Corbusier and his colleagues eliminates the *oeuvre* of the "traditional house".<sup>32</sup> Thus, an impasse emerges between building the cheapest, most efficient houses to meet demands of a changing population (one that is becoming more urban, and sub-urban) and the demands of the total human being – who's essence is as a dwelling, inhabiting, being.<sup>33</sup> Lefebvre outlines two key points to resolve the impasse that appears between habitation and modernist efficiency in habitat.

Before discussing these two points, it is important to investigate who the Preface is in dialogue with. Lefebvre writes, "We are indebted to Gaston Bachelard, in his 'poetics of space', for some memorable pages on the house. And habitation or dwelling plays an essential part in Martin Heidegger's teaching."<sup>34</sup> There is a quote from the German poet Hölderlin which reads; "poetically man dwells." Both Bachelard and Heidegger employ this notion in their understanding of what it means to inhabit a place, but there is something fundamentally different about how the two approach dwelling (there is also something fundamentally the same).

In the wake of the Second World War, Heidegger addresses a unique problem that emerges with the housing shortage in Germany – the problem of producing shelter which does not allow for the possibility of truly dwelling there. Heidegger argues that there is a difference between inhabiting a building and dwelling in it. Housing and shelter are

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, 122.

<sup>33</sup>Peter Galison. "Aufbau/Bauhaus: Logical Positivism and Architectural Modernism." *Critical Inquiry* 16 (1990), 716. The total human being is a specific concept developed by Lefebvre in this essay and is distinct from the 'new man' frequently invoked in the modernist project of architecture. One can see the concept of the new man clearly in Gropius and Neurath of the Bauhaus, though it certainly appears elsewhere also.

<sup>34</sup>*Key Writings*, 122.

necessary, but *not sufficient* descriptions of dwelling; dwelling requires a particular comportment to the world.<sup>35</sup> As Heidegger demonstrates, the etymology of the German word for Building (*bauen*) is related to the etymology of the conjugate of being (*sein* means 'to be' and *ich bin, du bist* means 'I am, you are'), thus "the way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Bauen*, dwelling."<sup>36</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Lefebvre's use of the word *Habitat* is the French translation of *wohnen* from Heidegger's essay, which is translated in English as dwelling. *Habitation* is the French translation for *das Wohnung*, which means 'the dwelling place' in English. Thus, it is clear that as much as Lefebvre is doing something different than Heidegger, he is very much indebted to him for his vocabulary. It is important to acknowledge that Heidegger is also making a distinction between the meager place of dwelling and the activity of dwelling that is important in the context of both philosophers.

In Bachelard's book, dwelling is very much a place, but frequently an abstract place the space of poetry. Any space can hold the potential to become the ideal dwelling (real or imagined) if it is properly furnished by poetry. One of the ways that dwelling is essentially poetic is its reflection of the home; the place we associate with daydreams, "if I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the daydreams we have in childhood, we take with us and replant in new

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<sup>35</sup>Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), 144.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid*, 145.

<sup>37</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. Maria Jolas. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 6.

places we live, and the test of inhabiting a comfortable place is that it allows us to daydream again and the dwelling implants itself in a certain number of new daydreams. Dwellings also function as a sort of protection against the world out there; the places we inhabit promote a sense of protection from the relentless elements of the world around us. At times, the house acts as a "coat of armor, then it extends *ad infinitum*, which amounts to saying that we live in it in alternate security and adventure."<sup>38</sup>

Returning to Lefebvre, the first argument he makes about habitation is that it is an essential attribute of every human being. Habitation is one of the inexhaustible attributes of man as a species. However, we cannot assume that man's history of habitation is timeless, immutable, or impervious to change. Civilization, society, and modes of production have all transformed the modes of how people habitate. For Lefebvre, contrary to Heidegger, the essential being of man as a habitating being *is not* necessarily rooted in an immutable nature of 'human'. The fact that man was once a dwelling being ought not be construed to imply that dwelling is a timeless part of his being. Lefebvre's concept of habitation includes, but moves beyond Heidegger's concept of man as a dwelling being to a concept of habitation where dwelling is *one among many* attributes that constitute man as a habitating being!<sup>39</sup> Lefebvre writes:

...let no one assume the right to determine the fate of society by setting for its members rules for their habitations, or modes of habitation. Invention and discovery must remain possible. The dwelling is an open place. In a mode of habitation preferable to others, the human being must be able to

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 51

<sup>39</sup> Key Writings, 124.

affirm himself and call himself *faber, sapiens, ludens, ridens, amans, creator*, etc., in turn.<sup>40</sup>

Lefebvre differs from Heidegger insofar as Heidegger argues that there is something fundamental and therefore unchanging about man – as a dwelling being.

Secondly, inhabiting is expressed in language, but his language is neither a complete nor closed system. This is a clear departure in Lefebvre's thinking from that of Heidegger in *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, where he argues that man is a dwelling being and thinking is an attribute of dwelling, thus man thinks only as he dwells.<sup>41</sup> Habitation is essential, yet subordinate to a larger system of the social text of language. Habitation is a composite of the things that make up the *partial* system of the home, city, or urban area, but habitation *does not* constitute a *complete* system by itself. Habitation cannot constitute a singular social text with the objects it signifies; the objects of habitation exist outside of the social text of habitation (such as the texts of economy and politics). Thus, "in an ensemble of that kind, both 'objectal' and subjective, habitation by individuals and families represents only one element: the house. It inserts itself and is articulated with broader levels. It is essential, but at the same time, subordinate".<sup>42</sup>

Given the complex nature and rich history of habitation, the sociological method previously described is an essential element in understanding the crisis in the suburbs. Lefebvre, as both sociologist and philosopher, attempts to ascertain *how* and *why* the suburbs have exploded in size. To answer these questions, the use of both quantitative

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<sup>40</sup>*Ibid*, 124.

<sup>41</sup>Poetry, Language, Thought, 158.

<sup>42</sup>Key Writings, 127.

(questionnaire) and qualitative (direct interview) methods are essential. Alone, neither method is sufficient; for the questionnaire is too narrow, while direct interviews make an impossible task of collecting and compiling data. The method set forth in *Rural Sociology* (the method of socio-historical investigation) prescribes an essential element that the structure of the investigation into the suburban environment must follow.<sup>43</sup>

Why is the suburb an important example; what about it poses a unique question? The suburb represents an essentially modern trend, which a simple census questionnaire is incapable of providing answers to; it represents a trend that can only be explained if an informed approach is used. Asking people through a survey if they prefer the city or the suburb will not ascertain *why* space or privacy became valuable. Asking selected audiences where they would prefer to live does not address the question of *why* they would prefer to live there. To understand the phenomenon of the suburb, we must be willing to ask *why* people have come to prefer it, and *what* that preference says about the changing essence of inhabiting a space. Lefebvre asks about the recent emergence of the suburbs in France;

How are we to explain this phenomenon? Is it really nothing but a myth? An ideology? A recrudescence of individualism? A revival of myth? If there is a myth, are we talking about an old reality become mythic, like the patriarchal and predominantly rural house described by Bachelard? If it's an ideology, how and why has it become so widespread? Where does it come from?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> It is possible to read Lefebvre's method as an attempt to mediate between Heidegger's persistent return to metaphysics on the one hand (represented by an overemphasis on the history of the problem) and the complete absence of metaphysics involved in logical positivism on the other hand. This argument is evident in the text between pages (Key Writings, 127 & 8).

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid*, 129.

At least in part, the lure of suburban dwelling is that it is owned by its occupants, allowing it to be modified or tailored to suit ones tastes, whereas rented space is generally rigid and modification prohibited. One becomes vested in the design and features of their house and the absolute authority on what changes to make, to the extent that even with the aging of the suburban housing stock, custom renovations, custom kitchens, and master suites (even entirely new custom homes) have become extremely fashionable. Moreover, this fashion cannot be said to have a direct relation to exchange value of the property because many suburban homes sell for less than the investment in the property despite 'recent remodel and upgrades'.

All these details suggest the extent to which suburbanites can "to some extent" appropriate "the conditions of their own existence," while quickly forgetting the conditions in the working class from which they have arisen.<sup>45</sup> In the suburbs, the myth of the new life has been realized as a utopia defined by homogeneity; a place where one forgets the struggles of racism, sexism, and class oppression outside of their own suburb.

However, all is not well with the ideological shift to suburban infrastructure; while something appears to be gained which is lost the urban centers – the appropriation of nature – something else is lost in the shift to the suburb – the social growth or production of an *oeuvre*. Lefebvre argues that:

The concept of *appropriation* is one of the most important handed down to us by the centuries of philosophical discussion. The action of human groups on the physical and natural environments has two modes, two attributes: domination and appropriation. They ought to go together, but are often separated.... Appropriation does not ravage nature, but transforms it – the body and biological life provided, and the time and

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid*, 130.

space – into human property. Appropriation is the goal, the direction, the purpose of social life. Without appropriation, technical domination over nature tends towards absurdity as it increases. Without appropriation, there can be economic and technical growth, but social development, properly speaking, remains nil. *Appropriation of nature* is responsible for social growth; and appropriation is lacking in the major urban centers.<sup>46</sup>

This argument is essential to understand the fundamental ideological grounding and also the fundamental problem inherent in the growing shift to suburban living. Ideologically, the suburbs fulfill a need no longer met by urban centers – spontaneous interaction with, and appropriation of, nature. However, in the attempt to fill the void left by the urban center, another unique problem emerges – the problem of social growth. Social growth cannot occur without a central focal point, and suburbs present a permanently shifting center (strip malls, for example, are constantly usurped by centers of commerce further away from the center of a suburb), and frequently no center at all for social and political gathering. Hillary Putnam in *Bowling Alone* mentions a substantial and constant decline of participation in civic groups and newspaper readership (suggesting a decline in the interest in news) since the 1950's. Could this be a sign of the decay of social growth and the *oeuvre*?

As the urban center and suburb dichotomy demonstrate, the two complementary actions of domination and appropriation have begun to appear isolated from one another. Domination has become the almost exclusive domain of high density city infrastructure, which takes nothing of its form from nature and creates its own logic of efficiency with physical space. Moreover, aided largely by the heights of technology, the act of domination ravages nature and substitutes man made products to fill the void left behind

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid*, 130.

(e.g. as opportunities for recreation in nature recede, gyms, pools, tracks, and day spas emerge). In recent times, as urban centers have suffered from overwhelming growth, domination has far surpassed appropriation of nature. This is largely due to the fact that public planning becomes necessary to orchestrate the increasing complexity that comes with density. A system of logic must be imposed to create order; as a city grows, order becomes essential to make the city 'work'.

Appropriation, on the other hand, has been relegated to the few small pocket parks of cities and suburban infrastructure. The curving narrow alleys of pre-modern cities, which are incompatible with the logic of density, have found their resurgence in the non-linear lanes, ways, and roads of suburban developments. There is a correlation between the inefficiency in suburban design that tends to appropriate its form from nature. As the result of both irregular development projects and an emphasis on space for separation suburbs have become inherently inefficient in human terms. Precisely because this inefficiency emphasizes space, it attracts those from the city who seek mimesis of nature.<sup>47</sup>

The suburb as 'utopia' consists of happiness and contentment.<sup>48</sup> This utopia is based on appropriation insofar as the inhabitants believe they have found their individual and personal niche, though they have merely succeeded in attaining a sense of ownership over something so common that it fills vast tracts of land. Even the furnishings and trinkets inside the suburban house are mass produced commodities. Appropriation, as it

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<sup>47</sup>*Ibid*, 130.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid*, 132-33.

fuels this sense of utopia, is "half imaginary, half real," and the residents of suburban life ultimately succeed only in consuming significations – those things which stand for the appropriation of nature, but fail to reach the immediate 'objects' of natural appropriation.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, the happiness attained is still half real, real insofar as the people living in this condition do so willingly and attain the happiness they have set out for themselves.<sup>50</sup>

What is the ideology behind the suburban house? In part, it involves consciousness of private property that conflicts to varying degree with the class consciousness of the proletariat by allowing an economic situation where the worker can become a lower landed class. Thus, the ideology of the suburb implies an explicit degree of alienation from the species being. Moreover, suburbanites buy lawn furniture, fertilizer, lawn mowers, etc. with the sense that they have appropriated nature successfully (as if their back yard and its decorations and furnishings were the missing *oeuvre* of the city itself). However, they have succeeded only in appropriating a new market of commodities exclusively for the lower class homeowner.

This chapter has covered essentially two related topics. First, the domination of nature and its myth – especially as laid out in the Fourth Prelude and by David Harvey. Second, the essential role inhabiting plays in the production of an *oeuvre*. What these two parts have in common is how they function in the city. Specifically as discussed earlier, that as "growing cities exceeded their original 'scale', this spontaneous appropriation disappeared."<sup>51</sup> Appropriation of nature must be spontaneous, it is a vital

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid*, 132-33.

<sup>50</sup> Of course, the other half is false; perhaps alienated because they seek a false happiness.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid*, 130.

part of the production of an *oeuvre*, and it is what the alienation from the production of *oeuvre* has driven the exodus into the suburbs.

Perhaps the problem of modernism and humankind's relationship to nature has only begun to be addressed here, and perhaps this essay has become too entangled in the socio-historical method set forth by Lefebvre. Nevertheless, understanding the basis of the ideology which informs humankind's perceived relationship to nature precedes the question: *why* is nature important and what creates the sense of alienation from nature when one's 'habitat' is devoid of it? Why is appropriation vital to a sense of societal well being and social growth? To be clear, appropriation is important because it represents the realm of possibility and creativity through the *oeuvre*. As opposed to the realm of Domination (described by order and logic), which demands reason and leaves no room for creativity. The problem should perhaps be re-inscribed in the question: what is the mythical origin of creativity in everyday life?

## Chapter Two: Isolation and Surveillance in the Suburb

In many regards, the new model a particular culture creates indicates the perceived problem previous human environments created, while also embedding different problems in the new human environment. In America, the model of the new human environment after WWII was epitomized by the full-scale construction of American suburbs. However, these new suburbs reinforced both the isolated nature of these communities away from the city, and their lack of diversity – what they positively advertised as their homogenous and safe environment. A brief description of post WWII suburbs will explain how they structured human activities and interactions in a precedent setting way among American suburbs.<sup>52</sup> There are five characteristics common to all post World War II suburbs which are worth examining in greater detail. First, all suburbs are located in the periphery of large cities (suggesting that they have an essential and vital connection to the industry, commerce, and culture of the large cities). Second, modern suburbs have a density lower than those suburbs built even a half century prior (10,500 people per square mile in Levittown is half the density of 1920's streetcar suburbs, such as Bronxville New York). Third, the extent of architectural similarity within a particular suburb and between all suburbs was unprecedented.<sup>53</sup> Forth, the suburban ideal was

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<sup>52</sup>Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier* (New York: Oxford UP, 1985), 238. Post WWII suburbs are generally considered those built between 1945 and 1973, and these suburbs still constitute very significant portions of the current housing stock in the United States.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 240. Jackson speaks of the "disappearing regionality of style," that occurs in and between suburbs, and this sounds strikingly similar to the goals of European Architectural Modernism – especially that associated with the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier – after WWI. Absence of regionally distinct style, it was

lowered from an upper class ideal to something that could be attained by the middle class. Finally economic and racial homogeneity within the suburban community was perceived as essential for integrity, stability, and safety among the community. This final characteristic of post WWII suburbs is perhaps one of the most significant for Foucault and also Soja (Both *Of Other Spaces* and *Thirdspace* address the spaces of marginalized people and the spaces of minorities).

Descriptions of suburban architecture are not limited to physical and geographical features; elements of the power structure inherent in suburban space are equally important. There are specific aspects of post WWII suburbs (specifically Levittown, New York) that are direct correlates to Bentham's vision of the Panopticon; specifically, "isolation of the suburb from the city" leaving the housewife and children cut off from the city or chance social interactions.<sup>54</sup> Additionally individuals are isolated from one another within the domestic environment (although a neighborhood may be full of women in kitchens, they are too busy with housework to interact with each other at length).<sup>55</sup>

Because post WWII American suburbs began as a homogenous group of owner occupants with common goals, maintaining the integrity, stability, and safety required an

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hoped by European Modernists, would help eliminate the sense of individual identity that lead to the nationalism during the war. The modern style was an attempt to unify Europe after the war as one people, not distinct nations. There may be a similar parallel in 'suburban' America – a place across the country where things and people are the same.

<sup>54</sup> Ellen Feder, *Family Bonds* (New York: Oxford UP, 2007), 35.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

active vigilance among its members. This active vigilance assumed a power structure strikingly similar to the panoptic principles of power described by Foucault.

As Levittown was the first of the new post WWII style to receive significant positive publicity, it became the model many subsequent developers emulated. Thus, to understand the patterns of power that emerged in the suburbs, one must understand this specific model. As Feder notes;

Levittown provides a rich example of the way in which state or regulatory power is deployed to create a new community, what would become the prototypical suburb. Levittown allows us to be eyewitness to the creation of a body of truths about individuals and race.<sup>56</sup>

Both state power and social power in Levittown implicitly created the racial issues now widely associated with suburban America. The state power that created this 'new community' style was not without its own biases. Perhaps most importantly was the belief that the value, desirability, and quality of a racially mixed community would be reflected negatively in property values and instability of federally subsidized loans.

State regulatory power to create new communities took the form of government guaranteed home loans for new single family construction (not rehabilitation, mixed use, or multi-family apartments). This guarantee by the government against loan default made it possible for people who previously could not qualify for private sector loans to buy new suburban houses at lower rates than dilapidated small city apartments rented for. Because state powers sought to ensure that the loans they originated and guaranteed against default would be a reasonable investment at a low risk, the state sought to find substantive means in verifying the long term values of homes. This process started when

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

the Home Owners Loan Corporation (established in 1933 and subsequently taken over by the Federal Housing Authority and the Veterans Administration):

Devised a rating system that undervalued neighborhoods that were dense, mixed, or aging. Four categories of quality – imaginatively entitled First, Second, Third, and Fourth...were established. The First grade areas were described as new, homogeneous, and 'in demand as residential locations in good times and bad.' Homogeneous meant 'American business and professional men.'<sup>57</sup>

One result of ranking home loans for value stability, when combined with developments explicitly prohibiting black ownership, was that though theoretically possible for minorities to qualify for FHA or VA loans, there were in reality few new homes they could actually buy with the loan money. Thus, many minorities of middle class means in 1945 quickly receded to the lower class as home ownership came to define middle class status.

Once state power had conceded the primacy of housing over race issues, social powers quickly followed suit. The radical change from 44% to 63% single family home ownership over a corresponding period of 38 years (between 1934 and 1972) fundamentally changed the dynamic of existing city neighborhoods, economically stripping the wealth from within and creating an even greater divide between minorities and the burgeoning middle class.<sup>58</sup> This describes why the middle class individual no longer identifies closely with social problems as with his own home and family life. "No man who owns his own house and lot can be a communist," according to Feder, because

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<sup>57</sup> Jackson, 197.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

he is too busy with do-it-yourself projects.<sup>59</sup> A similar phenomenon occurred in the Paris suburbs of the 1950's and 60's. Lefebvre noted that when working class individuals realize the opportunity to own land, they no longer see themselves as part of the working class. Rather, they began to view themselves as homeowners first and workers second. A similar social hierarchy formed in the post WWII American housing boom. Multiple texts quote William Levitt as arguing, "we can solve a housing problem, or we can try to solve a racial problem. But we cannot combine the two".<sup>60</sup> In America, extending the possibility of home ownership to a new social class allowed this new class to detach itself from larger social concerns. Not only did the new class become almost completely unconcerned with the struggle against social injustice, but more significantly, the new middle class began to complicitly perpetuate these same injustices for their own private gain (stable home values and safe communities). It is still transparent many years later that by isolating the issues of housing and race, the inhabitants of the burgeoning suburbs lacked a critical sense of urgency necessary in addressing race issues. For two decades after the war, the Levitt organization (among others) publicly refused to sell to blacks.<sup>61</sup> One unintended consequence of the post WWII housing boom was not only to halt any progress on race and gender issues, but actually retard the progress that had been made over prior decades. While there were certainly issues concerning race and gender during WWII, the war effort made great strides in unifying all "patriotic" Americans, and looking beyond race and gender.

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<sup>59</sup> Family Bonds, 34.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

<sup>61</sup> Crabgrass Frontier, 241.

Levittown demonstrates how many suburbs strove to maintain their whiteness and homogeneity. While comparing the panoptic model to Levittown may at first appear contrary to the desire for private space, the panoptic structure was instrumental in preserving the normalcy and homogeneity that returning GI's sought. The desires for normalcy and privacy created new truths about the suburban class while concurrently solidifying and normalizing fear and hatred of minorities persistent through this very day.

The arrangement of the kitchen, which ensured that women were always able to closely observe their neighbors' activities, mirrored the model of surveillance in the Panopticon. Feder writes that, "the orderly arrangement of kitchen 'cells' offers itself as an exemplar of disciplinary surveillance, ensuring that each individual woman assumes her proper task in the home."<sup>62</sup> In Jeremy Bentham's panoptic vision, "the supervisor, who...could be 'anyone', enjoys unimpeded powers of surveillance even as he is invisible to his charges" (his wards, or prisoners).<sup>63</sup> Moreover the cells of the Panopticon are designed such that the supervisor can see everything that happens in the cell of every prisoner while the prisoners are isolated from each other. Ultimately, the presence of the warden in the tower becomes unnecessary for the prison to function and for the inmates to reform; "its design produces a relation whereby one, 'subjected to a field of visibility...assumes responsibility for the constraints of power'".<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Family Bonds, 39.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 39.

The excellence of the panoptic design principle "consists in the great strength it is capable of giving to any institution it may be thought proper to apply it to," which in the current investigation includes the self-regulating power inherent in Levittown style suburbs.<sup>65</sup> Lest we overlook the simple fact that the Panopticon is a principle of power derived from design – from architecture – then it should come as no surprise that it eventually shows up in housing and in communities. Moreover, the inability to know what moment someone may be watching invests substantial power in the 'perceived perceiver'. The panoptic principle is "a way of making power relations function in a function, and of making a function function through these power relations."<sup>66</sup> Ironically, the panoptic design is democratically controlled – meaning that the structure is such that anyone can be the eyes watching the inmates, workers, students, etc. and the watchers too can be watched by others who take an interest in the system. Thus, the Panopticon "has become a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole."<sup>67</sup> The Panopticon amplifies the power it arranges, but it does not concentrate power for its own ends, rather it is intended "to strengthen the social forces," and raise public morality.<sup>68</sup> The amplification of power comes precisely from the inability to know when one is being watched or who may be watching. Power can be amplified in the service of democracy and still go astray – consider mob rule as an example. In the case of Levittown and other suburbs, this power was used to strengthen

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<sup>65</sup> Michael Foucault. *Discipline & Punish* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 206.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 207.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 207

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, 208.

the social forces of a white middle class that found security in sameness – as if what GI's saw in the European or Asian theatres of war convinced them of the security in closing one's gates to those unlike yourself – xenophobia.

The panoptic quality of Levittown is clear insofar as its design expected watchful eyes upon neighbors ensuring that the homogeneity sought actively happened. Jackson notes that, "the kitchen moved to the front of the house near the entrance so that mothers could watch their children from kitchen windows and do their washing and cooking with a minimum of movement."<sup>69</sup> Thus, not only were neighborhoods designed to allow neighbors to surveil one another, but the placement of the kitchen overtly encouraged women to use the kitchen window as the eye on the neighborhood. As the kitchens in Levittown were re-designed specifically for women, they began to function as both a tower and also as a cell. Children too were encouraged to report what happened throughout the day (in the house, among the neighbors, any visitors, etc.). Thus mother, father, and children alike were expected to play both the role of watcher and watched. Households with too much privacy were thought suspicious, anti-social, or have secrets to hide. Specific design features of Levittown made this possible; front doors and parking which are broadly visible by all those on the block, a limited number of through streets draws attention to all traffic, and private back yards abutted against other back yards where one family could view the 'private' life of a different neighbor. This self-policing panoptic 'eye in the tower' directly affected the freedom of anyone who spent the majority of their time in the home. Few were the guests who could visit without being

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<sup>69</sup> Crabgrass Frontier, 235.

noticed by neighbors. That it even became a concern to ask 'what will the neighbors think,' demonstrates the panoptic quality of the Levittown suburbs.<sup>70</sup>

Foucault, had he focused on suburban power structures, would have easily seen the connection between the Panopticon and suburban life, for it "was destined to spread throughout the social body; its vocation was to become a generalized function."<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, while Bentham's idea of the Panopticon may have been limited to a "perfect disciplinary institution," Bentham "also set out to show how one may 'unlock' the disciplines and get them to function in a diffused, multiple, polyvalent way throughout the whole social body."<sup>72</sup> When the disciplinary institution is 'unlocked,' it begins to function almost completely of its own accord. It becomes impossible to ignore power structures established around oneself when one is already the object of scrutiny. It is increasingly difficult to deny the impulse to gain power by scrutinizing someone else when the power structure already creates a stressful, tense, and un-relaxed environment. The power structure of the Panopticon is bound up precisely with its adaptability to different situations, and it must be understood as "a generalizable model of functioning; a way of defining power relations in terms of the everyday life of men."<sup>73</sup>

The Festival of Cruelty also has a place in the power structure of suburbia, for the festival is analogous to how suburbia exiles and casts out the economically and racially 'deviant' classes among society. Foucault argues that the tradition of the chain gang is a

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<sup>70</sup> Family Bonds, 41.

<sup>71</sup> Discipline & Punish, 207.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 207-8

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

spectacle of "art mingled with the ceremony of pain."<sup>74</sup> The chain gang in France, which ended in 1837, was a form of punishment through public humiliation followed by incarceration. Historically, this form of punishment was dependent upon the presence of crowds insulting and stoning the prisoners. While the initial spectacle was the chain gang, an equally absurd spectacle to observe was the reaction of overzealous Parisians. On certain occasions, there were reported to be over 100,000 people who gathered to watch the procession as it left Paris. The prisoners were identified as "the race apart that has the privilege of populating the convict-ships and prisons," which demonstrates that the spectacle accomplished a clear division between Parisians and prisoners.<sup>75</sup> The festival of cruelty demonstrates how Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century systematically purged itself of deviancy through a festival and then life would return to 'normal'. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century in America functions differently, for it does not explicitly cast out the deviants, rather it creates new spaces, the criterion for entering established as specific 'normalizing' standards – such as race, age, income, family oriented, etc. The resurgence and renaissance of white segregation during the suburban boom parallels the rise in the perception of blacks as a criminal 'race apart' from white middle class families.

According to Foucault;

In this festival of the departing convicts there was something of the rites of the scapegoat that is struck as it is chased away, something of the festival of fools, in which the reversal of roles is practiced, something of the old ceremonies of the scaffold... and of course the joyous avowal of crimes.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 258.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

Both societies are similar insofar as they exclude the sick, the mentally ill, the criminal, the poor, and certain minorities. Both are societies that see the send-off of convict ships as cathartic for their own well-being. Yet, the iconography of the ship is "simultaneously the greatest reserve of the imagination" precisely because it is both closed in on itself and because it can sail from port to port and gathers new experiences.<sup>77</sup>

In 1967, Foucault presented a paper to a group of architects that was intended as a "study of space".<sup>78</sup> Foucault opened by commenting that "the nineteenth century found its essential mythological resources in the second principle of thermodynamics. The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space."<sup>79</sup> The second principle states that the universe tends towards a state of equilibrium – a state where energy is no longer concentrated, and systems of energy storage tend to break down or lose their efficiency. I believe Foucault interprets the second principle as suggesting that the universe moves from a state of heterogeneity (difference) toward a state of homogeneity (equilibrium). "The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us is," according to Foucault, "a heterogeneous space."<sup>80</sup> We live in heterogeneous space, but society around us attempts to make things homogeneous. When society attempts to create a utopia (places that literally exist no-where), it succeeds in creating

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Foucault. "Of Other Spaces" *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986): 27.

<sup>78</sup> Thirdspace, 147.

<sup>79</sup> "Of Other Spaces," 22-27.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

something that does not resemble – though it *sembles* and *dissembles* – the imaginary place of perfection. Dissemblances of utopia manifests themselves in heterotopias – places where irregularity is cast off, and a cleansed homogenous community left behind. Thus, while heterotopias are institutions such as prisons, hospitals, nursing homes, schools, factories, slums, and ghettos, what remains is a society of homogeneity.

The etymology of utopia traces back to two Greek roots *ou* and *topos*, which when combined literally mean not-place. Foucault understands Thomas More as he is widely understood; arguing that perfect places do not exist in real spaces, only in the space of imagination. When cultures attempt to create real-unrealizable places modeled on utopic ideologies, they succeed in creating something real. But these places are generally dystopic – much as heterotopias are places of isolation and incarceration. Foucault uses an analogy of a mirror to demonstrate that an attempt to copy a reflection from the mirror will necessarily differ from the reflection itself. When cultures attempt to create utopia by creating spaces of sameness, they do so at the expense of concentrating those differences they seek to eliminate. In constructing areas of sameness, one must clear the ground on which to build, and as a result, the space of this homogenous community stands out from its surroundings. Standing in the middle of a Levittown block, one cannot see the surrounding background, setting, or environment that surrounds the suburb, but from the appropriate perspective, it is easy to understand how different the cleared space is from its surroundings. Ironically, when cultures attempt to isolate the different identities and concentrate similar identities, they make more apparent the margins and borderlands that surround the enclaves of homogeneity.

Utopias, existing without topography, control the background against which they are set, and it is for precisely this reason that utopias do not exist in real space – for real space always contains a background, a setting, and a context. The attempt to mirror a utopia creates a distorted place, a heterotopic space.

In America post World War II, suburbs mark a distinctive end to any cultural trend toward equality and diversity while simultaneously marking a reactionary move back toward homogeneous white male dominated culture. Precisely at the moment when GI's returned and re-entered the workforce and the economy, a new community arose to promote their cultural ideology, which was designed and backed by the force of federal subsidies.

There are several ideological trends of homogenization that are incredibly relevant to the form that American suburbs began to take in the late 1940's; one ideology commonly linked to "slices in time," occurs when a disjunction is reached between things as they are and things as certain people wish they could be again.<sup>81</sup> Chronotopias stop time, and like a museum, they preserve things in a timeless state.<sup>82</sup> Thus, these societal transitions preserve cultural artifacts that are outside of time. Progress on social issues is effectively undone in a single chronotopic movement. From this perspective, the suburbs appear as a conservative reaction to progressive social trends.

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>82</sup> A common trope in science fiction plots occurs when an intrepid crew stumbles upon a human colony or alien race that has selected a 'golden age' of human history to live out in perpetuity.

Heterotopias also create "a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable."<sup>83</sup> This is equally true for ghettos and for suburbs as both maintain the appearance that their residents are completely free to come and go as they wish. Hence, the most important function of heterotopias is the creation of a "space of illusion that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned".<sup>84</sup> The appearance of openness is vital to the perception that no-one is forced to live in a community not of their choosing, and that no-one is compelled beyond their will to stay where they are. It is important that despite heterotopic models of power, the child and worker leave their respective schools and offices at the end of the work day. Even the sick, criminal, and insane are 'free to go' when they have convalesced and recovered from their illnesses, or 'paid their debt to society'.

Jackson acknowledges that the actual architecture of Levittown was not captured in the quaint and *ad nauseam* replication of Cape Cods, but the social structure of the insular and protected family safe in the suburb, while the father navigates the perils and vices of the city to work. Fundamentally, the houses in Levittown "were *social creations* more than architectural ones – they turned the detached, single-family house from a distant dream to a real possibility for thousands of middle-class American families."<sup>85</sup> The no-place – the literal non-topographical location of the distant middle class dream – was turned into a homogeneous community in almost every way.

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<sup>83</sup> "Of Other Spaces," 26.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 27

<sup>85</sup> Crabgrass Frontier, 236. 'Social creations' is my emphasis.

While this chapter began by demonstrating how suburbs successfully isolate all but the male breadwinner of the family from city life, there remains a fundamental and undeniable connection to the city that the suburbs can attempt to undermine, but cannot entirely eradicate. Specifically the city is a center "for aesthetic and intellectual stimulus, the suburb remains dependent upon the big city: the theatre, the opera, the orchestra, the art gallery, the university, the museum are no longer part of the daily environment."<sup>86</sup> There remains an irrefutable fact that even suburban America is connected to the city center for social and political stimulus and interaction. Perhaps the suburban *arrangement* of space never intended to deny this irrefutable fact, but sought only to alter it in specific ways. Regional information and transportation infrastructure in and between suburbs alone cannot replace social and political connections with the city center.<sup>87</sup> The important argument brought forward though Mumford is that social and political interactions do not happen as part of planned Saturday evening trips to the theatre. Political demonstrations in open public spaces, awareness of poverty, awareness of crime, and the experience of diversity happen as part of interactions in 'the daily environment' – they cannot be experienced to the same extent during a five hour

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<sup>86</sup> Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (Harcourt Inc: New York, 1981), 493-4.

<sup>87</sup> Lewis Mumford, Peter Galison, and David Kolb all argue that while older suburbs were dependant on the city center for almost everything, modern suburbs have created an infrastructure that joins them to one another without dependence on the center – thus the nodal connections (or the linkages) of suburbs, that connect each suburb to several surrounding communities in addition to the city center, has granted suburbs a certain independence from the center. While Kolb believes these linkages to be to the benefit of current suburbs, both Mumford and Galison, while acknowledging potential, do not conceive the suburb as self sufficient in all ways. Moreover, if the center imploded politically, economically, or socially, it would still have devastating effect on the outlying communities, no matter what their structure, unless they could find connectivity or linkage with another center (perhaps Philadelphia could draw a certain number of New Jersey commuters away from New York, but there are a limited number of large cities that are less than 3 hours travel from each other.

excursion on Saturday from Southampton to New York City.

There remains the irrefutable fact that part of human interaction in suburban America is tied to the city center. Suburban living has succeeded in its system of isolation insofar as the city center is no longer part of the 'daily routine' that many suburban residents live out. What can be said without hesitation is that women and children who have little functional reason to frequent the city are disproportionately imprisoned in the suburban prison. The perceived benefits of clean air and open space offered by suburban living are "undermined by its psychological and social defects: above all the irreality of its retreats."<sup>88</sup> The privileged, yet imprisoned, women and children of suburbia are isolated from authentic, unscripted, and unplanned social and political interactions with the city as long as they inhabit suburbia.<sup>89</sup> The suburb is the geographical representation of the political and social divide – the suburb becomes a domestic and private family zone while the city remains the space of public openness; the space of politics and work. The split between public and private life is implicit in the suburban design:

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<sup>88</sup> The City in History, 494.

<sup>89</sup> This mirrors the divide between the *Polis* and the *Oikos* that existed in Greek life, which Arendt speaks about in *The Human Condition*, where the domestic realm of the family is the private household (the *Oikos*), and public open space is the space of politics. Private life and private space also convey the meaning of privation; in much the same tenor as isolation of the mother and children from public space. What is public is common to everyone and also political. Thus, considering oneself a worker (or part of the working class) is a political identification, while considering oneself a suburban middle class homeowner is a domestic identification. Moreover, suburbia is organized around domestic obligations: schooling, shopping, chauffeuring.

Arendt's analysis is useful, however the dichotomy leaves certain things unaddressed, such as aesthetic and intellectual stimulation, which are arguably social activities, but do not fall into the category of strictly domestic activities. Arendt's distinction that the social should be private and that the public sphere is the sphere of politics has limitations in this context.

Urban sprawl became materially symbolic of the marginalization, or as it came to be called, the 'Entrapment' of women, their purposefully designed isolation from the workplace and public life in gadgeted homes and modern lifestyles that facilitated subservience to the male breadwinner.<sup>90</sup>

While both isolation and surveillance are aspects of the panoptic model, suburban America's patriarchal treatment of women accentuates the factor of isolation. Moreover, isolation has broad implications toward political and social alienation.

"If we are concerned with human values," then we cannot afford the impacts of suburban sprawl or the overly congested city and some new alternative must be found.<sup>91</sup> Human values of concern include the human scale and livability of the human environment. However, as cities have grown during the last two centuries, the human proportion has inversely disappeared. Moreover, there is something fundamentally inhuman about imprisonment that affects virtually all of society. Moreover, heterotopias (dystopic to their inhabitants) negatively circumscribe the space of a far greater number of people than the resulting homogeneous suburban environment. As more minorities and low income families infiltrate older suburbs, they must also adopt the suburban lifestyle of longer commutes, home repairs, greater time spent 'structuring' child activities, etc. (all the domestic duties of the private sphere of the *Oikos* greatly increase in the suburban setting) while being further removed from cultural centers of exchange and stimulus.

Prior to industrialization, the city – as the environment built by humans for humans – fulfilled a role for man as the social animal on a uniquely human scale. The

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<sup>90</sup> Thirdspace, 110.

<sup>91</sup> The City in History, 511.

significance of the city as an environment, "places more in our hands than any other. It is the pre-eminently human environment, that which is almost entirely the product of human agency."<sup>92</sup> However, as the city changed during two centuries of industrialization, it no longer holds itself to the classic human scale. As the city has lost this scale over time, it has increasingly created a sense of alienation and isolation among its inhabitants. As the city came to be increasingly perceived to have outgrown its capacity to serve human values and also perceived as inherently more alienating, inhabitants began to re-invent their mythos surrounding the ideal human environment.

The city has a 'thick' texture, while suburbs do not have depth to social interactions; suburbs are comprised of private spaces designed for consumerism and activities that are not open to the general public. Thus, suburbs fail to "satisfy our longing for a place for which we are a home and to which we belong."<sup>93</sup> An authentic human environment – a place that one can truly inhabit in Lefebvre's sense of the word – overflows with creative energies. And such environments are authentic when they no longer stand out as distinct from the people inhabiting them. When place recedes into the background, it is authentic; place only rises to the foreground when something about the environment is isolating, alienating, or false.

This increasing mass which sought alternatives to the city center, coincided with the birth and maturation of the suburb (though the final product scarcely resembled the

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<sup>92</sup> Arnold Berleant, "Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic" *Diogenes*, 136 (December 1986): 10.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

first), and what took hold for specific reasons was the post WWII model.<sup>94</sup> Though this new housing model solved one set of problems (overcrowding, overtaxed city infrastructure, lack of affordable middle class housing, etc.), it simultaneously creates another. Though the worker in the family and consumer choices (from food to cars to washing machines) are closely connected with existing city networks, this crudely designed and quickly implemented suburban model left most of its inhabitants isolated from the city center and estranged from the full social potential of man.<sup>95</sup>

Many experts argue that modern housing developments have created human environments that border on unlivable, and if they are compared to over crowded cities of the 1940's, it would scarcely seem like an improved human living environment. It would appear that they have succeeded in supplanting one form of alienation and isolation for another; suburbs have created spaces with the illusion of reality (as demonstrated previously through the notion of heterotopia) instead of places that fulfill human needs. False environments are specifically those spaces of surfaces (not contents), and images (not substances); spaces that we do not feel a sense of belonging to. Suburban development is the expression *par* excellence of the false environment. However, observation of a false environment tells us what a truly humane environment must be. A

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<sup>94</sup> The concept of a suburb was first observed by Mumford and Jackson in the 1840's, and was then more of a series of villas for the wealthy to retreat to on a semi-permanent basis. These were followed by commuter rail suburbs in America – suburbs that could reach the city center with reasonable public transportation and these suburbs were built on a scale that encouraged walking. With the housing shortage after WWII cheap housing became a pressing national need, and what was built followed a certain model of economic viability, which dictated virtually every aspect who could live there and how they would be permitted to live.

<sup>95</sup> Crudeness of design was as much a function of mass production and homogenous layout as it was a lack of investment in public infrastructure (such as rail, busses, libraries, schools, parks, etc) that had lasting impacts on the livability of these communities.

humane environment, above all, encourages creativity and cultivates a sense of fulfillment. A humane environment acknowledges that what is human cannot be separated from the environment we inhabit. What makes the city humane are public spaces, that foster "an aesthetic of engagement;" space designed to foster interaction and continuity and prevent isolation and alienation.<sup>96</sup>

Because we cannot (nor should we want to) create Chronotopias which recreate classical cities of human proportion, we must continue to move forth in our search for human environments, but we should not avoid drawing from these cities to create new spaces or reclaim existing places. In much the same way that Heidegger points out that the world of an ancient Greek temple no longer exists, we cannot attempt to revive a golden age of cities either.

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<sup>96</sup> "Cultivating an Urban Aesthetic," 17.

## **Conclusion:**

Above all, this is a paper about mankind's ideological and mythical understanding of our relationship to our environment (mostly the built environment, but also the natural environment) focusing specifically on the America post WWII. Why this focus? There has been much written about the shortcomings of American use of space since the decline of city centers, and American's ideological (mis)understanding of their relationship to the environment is at the heart of this problem.

Chapter one is stylistically different from the second chapter insofar as it attempts to lay out the theory by which to analyze the suburban problem (while the second focuses specifically on the suburban question). Chapter one starts with a grounding and background to the human relationship to the space around us and our unique 'human' environment - from Rousseau to Marx, and through modern ideological narratives. Two key concepts arise in the first chapter: human emancipation from nature and the realization of man as a 'self' unique amidst nature and the world. The theory brought forth by Lefebvre and Harvey in the first chapter is a refreshing model to view the problem of human emancipation and self-realization through, which illuminates ideological and sociological drives most models overlook.

What becomes apparent in the course of the first chapter is that the ideological problems with the human environment revolve around aesthetic and social concerns – concerns identified by the term *oeuvre*, or the space of inhabiting as a place of social,

political, and aesthetic interaction with other individuals and with the environment. There is something uniquely aesthetic in any myth of a new life and in the desire to modify and remake the human environment as a work of art and as a work of mankind. The *oeuvre* is social work, but the social work is also aesthetic and political. Thus, alienation from the *oeuvre* of man in the suburb is also alienation from the social being. Whatever environment we choose to live in must contain these aesthetic, social, and political elements to overcome alienation from the species being. Those individuals who live in a place that is without social life, political engagement, and aesthetic endeavors live in a dormitory – for sleeping, resting, and eating – and cannot truly inhabit this space. Such spaces are frequently found in suburban America.

What is important is that those who live in these spaces are systematically imprisoned and isolated from the interactions that would alleviate these problems. However, the suburban infrastructure is inherently designed with this goal – the goal of isolation and imprisonment – in mind. Why? The logic of surveillance and isolation inherited from the Panopticon served to protect and preserve the 'utopia' suburban residents and planners attempted to create.

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