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Subversion in Suburbia? Presentations and Practices of Living in Suburban Homes at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

As the twentieth century came to a close, the housing market in the United States was growing at a steady rate. Housing starts were rising and trade literature was filled with optimistic predictions of a lucrative future. The majority of new homes being built were speculative, single-family dwellings built in suburban subdivisions with a target market of middle-class buyers in the “moving-up” category – those that are not first time buyers. These houses are the focus of this paper.

The first portion of my work is based on an ethnographic study of developer’s furnished model homes and marketing materials, conducted between 1998 and 2004, in which I studied the relationship between middle-class housing and cultural concepts of home. My focus was on the ideological nature of artifacts (buildings, furnishings, decorative elements, and marketing brochures) as agents of social value and how a particular social identity was packaged and presented to the public. I looked primarily at newly constructed housing in the Northeast United States; however, housing in other areas of the country was included for comparative purposes.

In 2009 and 2012 I revisited several subdivisions, interviewing homeowners and documenting how they negotiated the spaces of their homes. My goal was to determine if, and the extent to which, the realities of domestic life correlated with or moved away from the ideals staged in the model home and reinforced in house merchandising literature. I

explored the relationship between a house and its occupants, how residents follow or subvert prescribed ways of living in the middle-class domestic sphere. My interest in this second portion of my work is the house as a contested and mediated space.

The Developer's Model Home

The developer's merchandised model home is prescriptive. It narrates potential lifestyles that revolve around fantasies of family, leisure and community. The purpose is to sell an idea of home based upon socially constructed dialectics of private/public, work/leisure, self/other and to create expectations of ways of living that reinforce conformity to a dominant social norm. What is crucial to understanding its purpose is the realization that meaning is determined in the house as commodity, not in the house as lived experience. The lived-in home is a dynamic environment, one that is shaped by its inhabitants. Conversely, the model home establishes a predetermined, static archetype of cultural ideals regarding family.

In subdivisions of homes targeting the move-up buyer, speculative builders at the turn of the century were spending on average \$25.50 per square foot furnishing and decorating the model home, approximately twenty-seven percent of the retail price of the house. The furnishings and decorative artifacts placed inside model homes are pieces of a carefully selected identity based on extensive psychographic and demographic market research. Carefully selected artifacts articulate carefully chosen values. Through them an identity is created; a story is told that resonates within the target market as representative of the future self. A 1999 trade publication, *Marketing New Homes*, advised builders; "A model home should enable prospective purchasers to...visualize how their happiness will

be increased by living in the home.”¹ Selling new houses in late twentieth and early twenty-first century was in large part dependent on creating an idealized vision of what an American home should and could be, based on images supplied by popular media that shape ideas of “correct” living.

Once ownership is achieved, what then? Do homebuyers attempt to follow the prescriptive of the furnished model? Do they succeed? The answers to these questions offer insight into how suburban home dwellers utilize space and negotiate relationships, both familial and community.

A Case Study: The Lived-in Home

Hills of Sullivan is a rural fringe development located near Avondale, Pennsylvania, thirty-five miles west of Philadelphia. It contains sixty-two homes built between 1998 and 2004, initially ranging in price from \$219,000.00 to \$273,000.00. Lots in the subdivision are, on average, just under one acre. The furnished model for phase 1 of the development contained 3,490 square feet of living space and was priced at \$254,000.00. The three families I spoke with in Hills of Sullivan (who I will refer to as families One, Two, and Three) purchased their homes between 2002 and 2005. All live in homes with identical floor plans, the same plan as the developer’s model. Family compositions are remarkably similar; a married, heterosexual couple with two to three children between the ages of seven and fifteen at the time of our 2012 conversations. All six adults have undergraduate degrees or higher and self-describe as middle-class. All six are employed, though Mrs. One works outside the home only one day a week and couple Three

currently telecommute, though they both worked outside the home when they first moved to the subdivision.

All three families selected the subdivision for the same reasons: large lots with houses of ample square footage, a superior school district and an acceptable commuting distance. They also chose these homes for what they are not: urban housing. Living outside of the city on a large lot remained their dream, as it does for many homebuyers. As Mrs. One stated, “I will always drive everywhere. I would *never* be one to walk to the dry cleaners.”² However, she did lament that certain conveniences had not reached the area as quickly as they had been led to believe they would: “They kept telling us it’s coming our way, civilization was coming. I think it got stalled. It’s still an hour’s drive to get Indian food.”

It is not surprising that Hills of Sullivan attracted families such as these. What is surprising is the commonality of practices of living and engagement with their domestic space in similar patterns that indicate home dweller’s agency in subverting idealized visions of home in strikingly parallel ways. Yet, in that wonderful contradictory way typical of human activity, they bought into the rhetoric of the merchandised house. Mr. One admitted he was swayed by the model. Mrs. One described the sitting room off the master bedroom as “a little weird” but Mr. One chimed in, “When we looked at the model I saw the sitting room and thought, great, I can put my sitting chair there, but no, it serves no purpose.” Family Two also mentioned this sitting room; as Mr. Two asked, “What does that get used for? If I need to iron a shirt?” Indeed, the Master suite, a name with problematic connotations, was by this period a luxurious, private retreat taking up, on average, fifty percent of the private zone of the house. It is, however, one of the least

used spaces. Mrs. Two stated, “We have a sitting room, we don’t use that at all, it has no furniture in it, and then the sunroom, which is fully furnished, we barely use. I’ve often thought it would be nice to have coffee there but it’s all the way over there and everybody else is here.” Family One uses the sunroom as a playroom for the children, even though there is a large play space in the finished basement. Family Three has a ping pong table in the sunroom; a large dog crate and stored children’s games occupy their master bedroom sitting area. They plan to convert it into a children’s art room.

Family One purchased in Hills of Sullivan because they liked the “neighborhood feel” of it. They wanted to be part of a community. Are they? They have met a few families while waiting with the kids for the school bus, but they do not socialize with them. Due to the size of the lots, houses are fairly far apart, which dissuades neighborly interaction. Both Families One and Two stated that they preferred this buffer between them and their neighbors. Family Two knows some of their neighbors but rarely has them over. When they do entertain, all three families use the kitchen/breakfast/family room area. None of them entertain in the formal living room – ever, and rarely in the formal dining room. All three families repurposed the formal spaces of the house in ways that preference children and family above presentation. Spaces privileged in the marketing of the house and assumed to contain signifiers of the desired status of the homeowner were appropriated as informal living space. Family Two uses the formal living room as a recreation room, complete with a piano, numerous large screens, a computer and gaming chairs. Family One has no furniture in the formal living room even though they have lived in their house for nine years. It is an extension of the playroom, the original sunroom. They plan to eventually turn the playroom into a study for their children, but

they were adamant that they are not going to furnish the formal living space; “If we have the money, why would we spend it on furniture that we will never use?” They have, however, finished and furnished the basement as a high-end entertainment center, which includes a large, flat screen television, comfortable furniture, a pool table, a full gym, and a children’s play area. Interior recreation is highly valued in the lived-in house.

All three families furnished the formal dining room with prescribed formal table, chairs and china cabinet or sideboard, though all confessed that the space is rarely used for dining. Family One uses the formal dining room for dining twice a year, Christmas and Thanksgiving. Most often it is a place to spread out school projects. Family Two never uses their formal dining room for dining. When I visited, the table and chairs of family Two’s formal dining room were covered in sheets and the space was in use as a crafts room. For holidays they moved the formal dining table into the family room where there is more space and they feel more comfortable. For all three families the kitchen/breakfast/family room is the hub of the house. Most activities take place here – homework, family meals, which take place an average of three nights a week, and some interior recreation.

All three families avoid the front of the house; the front door and foyer is rarely used. A staircase remains in the foyer, a symbol of an outmoded, ceremonial approach to receiving guests. It splits at a landing, providing stair access from the informal zone or the front, formal entry. In the nineteenth century this form was used so that servants could move between floors without disturbing the homeowner. The form has been retained but the front stair abandoned. Mr. One remarked that he forgets that it and the front door are there.

Single-family suburban housing has been both praised as a remedy to societal failings and criticized as the reason for such failings, yet the majority of middle-class homebuyers continue to choose suburban housing, a fact suggesting passive acceptance of the rhetoric of home and family presented in developers' merchandising materials. However, evidence indicates that homebuyers are not passive consumers. Rather than conform to the prescribed ways of living, homeowners reassigned meaning to select spaces of their homes in ways that democratized familial relationships and privileged relationships between family members, and especially privilege children and their desires. There was a conscious and active choice; one that challenges the hierarchical, gendered spaces found in the stage set of the model home and indicates a lack of propriety of place that is central to prescribed ways of experiencing domestic space.

My findings confirm what many of us have long believed. The dominant form of domestic architecture at the turn of the century reinforced outmoded ways of living. My conversations with homeowners suggest that home shoppers believe that the model represents the ideal and that home ownership will result in conformity to this ideal. But then, without actually reconfiguring the spatial layout of the house, they reassigned purpose and meaning to spaces in ways that align more closely with their true selves.

¹David F. Parker and Charles R. Clark, *Marketing New Homes*, Washington DC: Homes Builders Press, 1999, p. 132.

² All quotes of homeowners used in this paper are from interviews conducted by the author in September of 2012.

Works Cited

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