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Colorado Springs Suburban Residential Landscapes as Cultural Historic Resources.

The suburban residential lawn and landscape is a complex landform that incorporates cultural history, social ideals, aesthetics, and urban design into a carefully planned space that is often a reflection of a community's values. The purpose of this project is to further understand what suburban lawns/landscapes can tell us about the social histories of the communities in which they exist, the ways in which those communities continue to evolve, and the society that is fostered by the individualistic nature of suburban landscape design. For the purpose of place, the focus of this analysis is on suburban neighborhoods located in Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA.

By analyzing the history of the American suburb as well as expectations that grew out of New *Deal*-era ideologies, it becomes clear that residential lawn and landscape design has taken a primary place within the lawn-care industry, an industry which has aggressively sought to ensure residents that a pedagogical vision of suburban utopia can be continuously fulfilled with the right amounts of fertilizer, pesticides and water. Additionally, the moral order of suburban neighborhoods is questioned, and it is argued that suburban morality has been directly affected by the individualistic nature of our homes and the privacy-driven landscapes surrounding them. One should consider the following question: if a public landscape is a reflection of a community's values, then what does private (residential) landscaping say about an individual's values?

Suburban landscapes are part of the “everyday” for most of us, whether we inhabit them or not. They are invisible entities, which we may not often consider as being valid historical resources, but I suggest that suburban landscapes can reveal much about their communities and that their historical significance should not be over-looked.

The first lawns in Europe were very different from the usually small patches of turfgrass we call lawns today. The purpose of the lawn in Europe was ornamental, found only on estates, and clearly for the social élite, which in eighteenth-century England meant that it was reserved for noble citizens, not the common ones (Mosser 55). In America, as early as the 1820s, in large cities such as Boston and New York, affluent families were moving increasingly to the edge of the cities rather than remain in the center where pollution, vagrants, prostitution, and general filth co-existed. They sought pure air, pure water, and access to fields and gardens (Hayden 21-22). Often referred to by historians as “Borderlands”, these places were on the periphery of the city and formed a distinctive gateway between city and country.

Between 1840 and 1875, two authors emerged as important voices in shaping the American attitude towards housing and residential spaces (Fishman 121-122): Catherine Esther Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing. Beecher’s Evangelical beliefs guided her assertion that the individual home was the best source of Christian morality, and as such, should be separated from the temptations of urban life. Downing, having been influenced by the Romantic Movement as evidenced in literature and art of the time, promoted the Beautiful and Picturesque (Schuyler 96-100), which, along with the Evangelical piety of Beecher, combined to produce an American suburban synthesis of residential landscape design and moralism.

By the 1930s, President Roosevelt's *New Deal* had already implemented the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), which regulated and guaranteed mortgages by the federal government, so that by the end of World War II, returning soldiers and others who qualified for an FHA loan could purchase a home, which was regarded as the best defense against communism. By the late 1940s, common workers had become consumers-haves, rather than have-nots, with houses, cars, appliances, and even money in the bank. The message was clear: American workers were part of the dream, and the dream included home ownership,

The suburbs that were built after World War II are some of the most significant historical resources of the twentieth century. One of the first large assembly-line produced suburbs, Levittown, quickly became a symbol of postwar suburbia. It provided affordable houses in what many residents felt to be a congenial community. The domesticity that came with home ownership meant being a good citizen, and being a good citizen meant being involved with and responsible to the local community. Therefore, the physical arrangement of outdoor space became as important as the arrangement of the interior of the Levitt homes. Nature had to be maintained, and appearances kept up. In short, the arrangement of outdoor space reflected a perceived ideal of individual values and morals.

General William J. Palmer, founder of Colorado Springs, Colorado, imagined building a city of tranquil beauty and refinement. As the city expanded, the architectural design of homes for the regular citizen would also include planned lawns and landscapes. Towards the end of the 1940s, Colorado Springs' population was growing exponentially, and, much like Levittown in the East, for a small down payment of \$285.00 and a

monthly payment of \$50.00, a family could move into a new, two-story suburban bungalow complete with a brand new lawn as well as trees and shrubs.

By the mid-1970s Colorado Springs saw the emergence of lawn-care companies which offered fertilizing services, as well as a resurgence of new home construction which offered built-in watering systems, all of which allowed for little or no hands-on lawn maintenance. The lawn-care industry heavily promoted the “grass culture”, and residents routinely thought it normal to spend copious amounts of money for help with maintaining a perfect lawn and to remain hands-off when it came to its care. It is plausible that the loss of simple human interaction through something as trivial as lawn care aesthetics is partially responsible for the social disconnection from our neighbors, which of course extends outward to the greater community.

The aesthetic of the American lawn has been influenced by a variety of social and cultural impacts, with the local community and neighborhood often having a significant influence on how an individual decides to take care of their lawn. The lawn is clearly an important part of the home and its value in a community cannot go unnoticed. It is believed that maintenance of a home’s landscape can add as much as 15% to the property value, so this makes it a viable component to resale values, and perhaps helps to explain why we spend billions of dollars per year on non-native grass species, fertilizers, pesticides and other forms of nature control (Bormann 62-63).

In the ongoing effort to retain green lawns as well as the American ideal of individual land ownership, we have become a homogenized society that values our property and its re-sale value over community and genuine neighborly interaction.

We have become masters at avoiding suburban conflict by avoiding our neighbors. Our only interaction seems to come from the dedication and upkeep of our lawns, which communicates respectability, responsible citizenship, and perceived good character. A well-kept green lawn says that we are capable of community involvement even if we have never spoken to our neighbor who lives 20 feet away. It is also our lawns and landscaping through which we may outwardly display our level of financial security and economic success, which, by most accounts, drives property values within specific neighborhoods and enforces continuing economic stratification of Colorado Spring's suburbs.

So what, exactly, do suburban landscapes tell us about our city and its local history? They tell us that we value nature and yet we have a need to control it. We value our privacy and the idea of owning property. We value what our neighbors and community think of us, even if we rarely speak to them or do not know their names. We value the noble idea of being a good, responsible American citizen, and we display these attributes outwardly through lawn care and landscaping. The lawns and landscaped areas of residential suburbs speak volumes about our social fabric, and yet they remain quite invisible to most of us who inhabit them. However, like so many invisible elements that surround us, these areas should be acknowledged as a direct reflection of all that our society holds dear, and perhaps what the future holds for us as a whole.

Author's note on environmental considerations and suburban sustainability:

In an environment increasingly threatened from overuse of pesticides and fertilizers, we must seek alternatives to traditional lawn care. As we move into a future with fewer natural resources to spare on luxuries such as decorative lawns, landscape design will need to embrace sustainable gardening and xeriscaping rather than turf grass and non-native species. Looking at the early homes of Colorado Springs and comparing them to the homes of today, one can clearly see cultural shifts; we have moved from a society which valued large homes on a vast expanse of lush greenery (and limited technology), to one that depends on technology and convenience, at the expense of valuable natural resources and community. Our landscaped residences have become and will remain a part of our historical legacies whether we ultimately embrace communal sustainability in suburban areas or not.

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