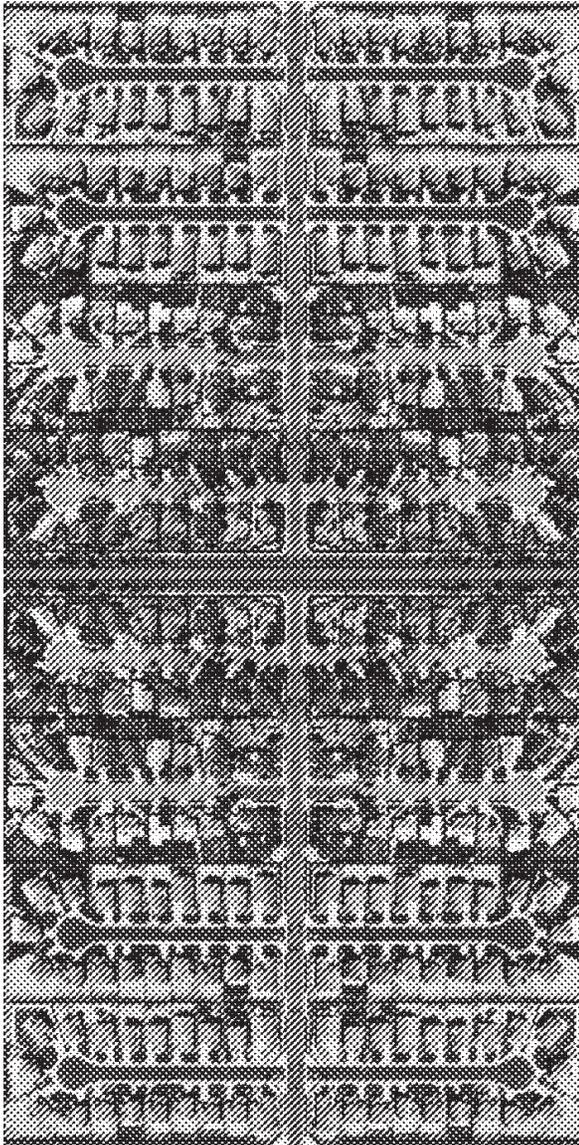# Discussion

Are suburbs the demise of democracy and public reason - or should we just relax and let them be already?

Michael J. Thompson & Alex Schafran

Democracy, Public Reason, and Suburban Life

by Michael J. Thompson:

The importance of studying the spatial forms within which humans live their lives is not only the purview of planners, architectural historians and urban sociologists. Those concerned with the nature of political life, of political culture and political behavior and ideology can also find an important domain of inquiry in the spatial context of social life. Political scientists have generally ignored this dimension of society, preferring instead to see individuals as spaceless beings, dis-embedded from their everyday spatial context. But this is done, I think, at the peril of those who want to understand the nature of democratic life, especially in advanced, post-industrial societies. The emergence of suburbs and the transformation of urban centers has had a deep impact on the ways that individuals think and behave politically. In this respect, it is important for social scientists and policy makers to pay attention to the ways in which space—the spatial design of cities and suburbs, of its aesthetic design, and so on—shape and impact consciousness and have consequent effects on social, cultural and political life.

In several previous articles and technical papers, I have put forward what seems to many to be a controversial thesis.[1] Simply stated, it is that suburban life erodes democratic culture by shaping political consciousness in specific ways. More specifically, I argue that the spatial design of suburban life shapes certain forms of consciousness by enforcing forms of distanciation and

a lack of public life which have negative impacts upon the individual's capacities to serve as a political subject within a democratic society. To make this more coherent on a theoretical level, I refer to the domain of spatial constraints upon interaction and intersubjectivity as "public reasoning contexts." People are individuated within these contexts, and they form their moral self within them based on the kinds of interaction which they experience. The less "publicness" that exists, the more conservative people tend to become because they seek to protect forms of self and the world-views which support it. Difference, reasonable revision of self and opinions become less likely the less one is exposed to interpersonal conflict and is forced to examine his or her reasons for holding certain opinions or the world-views which shape their subjective sense of the world. Suburbs are not alone in generating these forms of self, but their predominance and the spatio-structural characteristics they possess make them, in my view, hotbeds for either political apathy or for varying degrees of conservative ideology.

If not controversial, this thesis is also seen as harking back to the large literature critical of suburban life which goes back to the 1950s and 1960s in the social sciences. But I think that this is not the case: what I would like to do in this article is show that there is a very coherent set of ideas which make my case persuasive and, in addition, fit much of the empirical data on voting patterns. I emphasize, as my title suggests, the concept of "public reason" as a means to discussing democratic sensibilities. Public reason is a seemingly nebulous concept: it connotes many things, but it denotes a capacity which individuals possess to think, argue, and form concepts in a particular ways. Public reason is a form of cognition which is developed through certain practices such as social interaction, conflict, exposure to alternative points of view, forms of life, and so on. These are practices which are nourished within certain contexts and not in others. Those contexts which present the individual with the need to rationalize his world-view, to expand it, to make interests known, all in a way which allows the individual to be a full participant in civic life.

In this sense, I will proceed in the order which my title presents: from a discussion of what democracy is, to why public reason is important, and how it is formed and used, and finally, how suburbs erode and, indeed, can destroy this capacity and negatively impact democracy. Suburbs are central to the story of shaping democratic culture in America, I contend, because of the ways that they impose spatio-structural constraints upon consciousness formation. Once we are able to see that democracy relies upon capacities of deliberation, argument, social psychological relations to self and others, then we can see that a real relation begins to emerge between spatial relations, social relations, and forms of self. What also emerges from this story is, paradoxically, that the style of the old argument where suburbs alone are demonized for the destruction of public life is itself passé. Contemporary urban life has also become infected by similar processes through the proliferation of "suburbanizing" tendencies within cities. Although I still believe that urbanism is the best place for democratic forms of life to be nourished, this does not mean that the way most major cities are designed

and the life of most modern cities are simple alternatives to suburbs. I will discuss this further in the final section of this article, but before this, democracy and public reason need to be defined within the context of the questions I am posing.

Democratic Capacities and Public Life

Democracy is variously defined. But there are some common features which can describe and define what is needed for a democratic polity to survive. There are institutions such as voting, systems of representation, and separation of powers. But the cohesive glue which holds democracy together is a set of capacities possessed by its members which allow them to govern themselves and call into question unequal relations of social power. The institutional manifestations of a democratic polity therefore require what we could broadly term "democratic capacities" which allow citizens to think and act in ways which enable to them to participate more fully in the collective self-organization of his community. This interpretation of democracy differs sharply from those which emphasize the mere presence of democratic institutions. These institutions alone are necessary but insufficient for the actualization of democracy because democratic institutions can lose their democratic character once citizen involvement weakens. This republican-inspired conception of democracy is one with a long lineage going back to Aristotle and also the Italian city-states and the early English commonwealth tradition of the seventeenth century.[2] What this tradition emphasizes is that an ideal form of civic participation is crucial because without it, the public has no means by which it can check the unequal accumulation of power in the hands of the few. The city was seen as a central place for this kind of political culture since it was within the city that individuals could come together and rule their collective fate together rather than serve under the despotic rule of one or the few.[3] It was also distinct from non-urban life since individuals would be more free to participate in civic life only when there was a sufficient division of labor, leisure, and social space requisite for actual civic life and participation.

This republican tradition therefore assumed—and in contemporary theory still assumes—that individuals will be in possession of political capacities which will allow them to enter into public discussion and public life. They termed this idea "civic virtue" and argued that a republic can only be maintained when individuals place a deep emphasis on the importance of their public life and their public institutions.[4] Only in this way could any political community stave off oligarchy and despotism. Active citizenship was a key to understanding democracy, and in many ways, this remains the case. Of course, the modern world is a very different place from the Athenian pnyx or the Italian city-republics of the Renaissance. But in one sense, there is a crucial sociological insight here which bears heavily on the political reality of our time: that individuals should possess the capacities that enable them collectively to maintain a state of political liberty. It means that certain capacities are necessary for this collective political self-maintenance, and that, even more, the production of more inclusive, more egalitarian, more democratic social institutions cannot be grounded or

maintained without these capacities.

But what could these capacities actually be? And how do they shape our understanding of democratic life? I think that there are two central ways we can understand these capacities. The first is the ability to conceive of public life as something distinct from personal and private life; and the second is the ability to overcome personal biases, views and interests in light of more reasonable, more public interests. This requires a deeper way of understanding one of the most important among these capacities is the ability to call the ingrained, fundamental world-views which we possess from our earliest experiences, into question. Public forms of reasoning are the result of the cognitive capacities that individuals acquire through civic life and through diverse forms of intersubjective experience. These could include ways of recognizing the interests of others; to be able to justify publicly one's interests and opinions; the capacity to comprehend and respect the interests of others; as well as the more explicitly cognitive capacities to listen critically, to comprehend the rationalizations of other social participants, and be able to see oneself more objectively as a third-person in social relations. In this sense, the importance of intersubjective forms of communication, as George Herbert Mead points out, is that they provide "form[s] of behavior in which the organism or the individual may become an object to himself."[5] This happens as a result of particular forms of intersubjective experience. As a capacity to call one's own values into question or the values of others through reasonable debate, there must be a capacity to interact reasonably and rationally with others. This capacity is crucial, and it is shaped by the ways we interact and with whom we interact. The limitation of either of these—i.e., amount of interaction and the heterogeneity of those one interacts with—are crucial to the formation of democratic ways of thinking and acting.

The result of the act of "self-objectification" is the capacity to deal with others in a more "democratic" way since they must be able to call into question certain forms of behavior, values, norms, institutions, cultural patterns of life, and so on which predominate in their community. Lack of this self-objectifying capacity leaves the individual with cognitive frames of consciousness which limit this capacity for democratic deliberation and thinking; instead of calling into question certain opinions, they may be more likely to rely on their basic feelings about what is right and wrong.[6] As Iris Marion Young has pointed out, "[t]o be reasonable is to be willing to change our opinions or preferences because others persuade us that our initial opinions or predispositions are incorrect."[7] These cognitive capacities for democratic thinking are, in my interpretation, deeply hampered by the spatio-structural context of suburbia. This impact of space upon consciousness is the crucial nexus which supports my central thesis that suburbs destroy democracy.

Theorizing Public Reason: A Social Psychological Approach

From this discussion of the substantive nature of democracy we can begin to see the importance for what is ambiguously called "public reason." Public reason has been variously defined, but we can say that it is that which we require to hold certain political conceptions in common. Public reason is an activity as well as cognitive capacity: it conjoins certain psychological and mental forms of reflection and thought with the practice of justifying one's views and arguments concerning the affairs of public life.[8] It also allows for the formation of a kind of self which does not seek privacy as an exclusive domain of protection and safety. Instead, public consciousness allows for a broader conception of self which is more likely to lead to forms of social solidarity rather than forms of atomism or anomie. This is an important point since the way we think about ourselves and about others are deeply connected. Public consciousness and public reason is therefore a deeply sociological rather than simply psychological concept. In this way, we can differentiate between three difference "frames," or forms of consciousness affected by the structure of social space: interpersonal, reflexive, and public.

Interpersonal consciousness reflects the ways that individuals relate to others and the way they think of themselves in relation to others. Ways of talking, arguing, coming to some sort of mutual understanding between individuals requires, at its base, the interaction between individuals in a rational form. This is contrasted to more intimate forms of interpersonal interaction such as between family members which are structured and circumscribed by custom and emotive forms of relations.[9] Going back to the categories of distanciation and homogeneity, we see that this frame becomes accustomed to limited forms of interaction due to the dominance of the private sphere over the public realm and its forms of diversity and "thickness" of association and interaction. An excessive lack of association can lead to distorted forms of interpersonal consciousness where the individual's conception of self is defined only in relation to what he or she is exposed to in terms of the most immediate social contexts: such as the family, certain communal belief systems, and institutional forms of authority such as the workplace or school. More exposure to association can force the individual to test belief systems and closely-held opinions and therefore encourage a more rational and less purely subjective orientation of belief and thought.

Reflexive consciousness refers to the relation an individual has toward himself as a member of a community. Interpersonal frames have the capacity to overlap with and structure personal frames in the sense that interpersonal relations have an effect on the ways that individuals organize their experiences and therefore form notions of the self. These include their self-perceived obligations in terms of politics but they also concern certain moral conceptions which refer to the relations individuals deem to have toward one another. In this sense, individuals with certain values or points of view can be seen as operating outside a pre-defined communal value or belief system. Reflexively, the individual situates himself within a group but it also makes it possible for him to adopt the perspective of others within himself, "to turn an experience back on himself."[10] In this sense, the form of reflexive consciousness enables a capacity within individual consciousness to "take the attitude of the other in our various life-processes."[11]

Finally, public consciousness can be defined as the ways in which

individuals approach their political world, whether at the local level or at the more "abstract" or macro level. It denotes a frame of consciousness which enables the individual to organize an interpretation of the political world and the way he fits into it. It refers to the way one perceives their relation with other members not only of his immediate community, but more importantly as an abstract member of society in general. Within this frame, the individual is aware of effects of certain realities on other people outside of himself, he is able to make judgments about the organization of political society as a whole. Public frames therefore give shape to the ways that individuals see themselves as part of a broader community. Individuals with more developed frames of public consciousness will be more likely to participate in public life rather than avoid it. They will be more likely to be aware of the broader issues and political realities which affect the community as a whole rather than view it more narrowly through self-interest or in individualistic terms and they will be more likely to revise their moral categories about right/wrongness because they are able to redefine their moral-political values (or to reassure themselves through more rational means) based upon the genuine consideration of others. The frame of public consciousness is therefore a crucial layer in democratic forms of life. It requires that the previous two frames also be well-developed since an individual must also have the cognitive capacity: (i) to interact with others and be able to exchange and process the information derived from interpersonal encounters (interpersonal frame); and (ii) to distance oneself from one's own closely-held views and attitudes and be able to see his own ideological views from a third-person perspective and examine them critically from that vantage point (reflexive frame).

The figure below shows the way in which the three spheres of social consciousness relate to one another. These three are interdependent in the
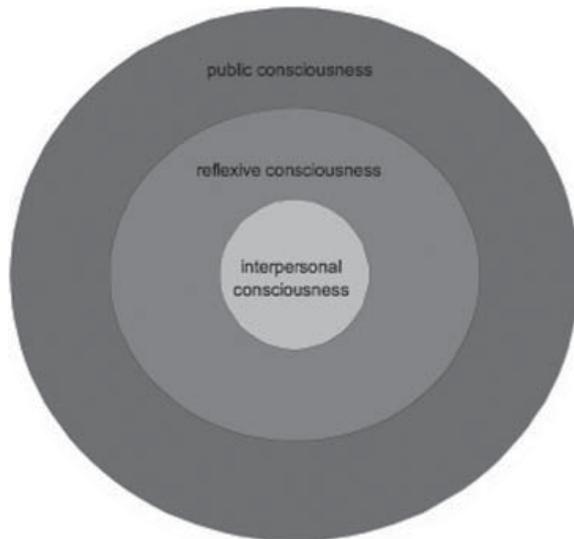

sense that the outer spheres depend upon the robustness of the inner ones. And this makes sense, since, in the way I have presented it here, what I want to do is try to give a model of the way in which public reason operates. It is not something which is an innate capacity, it is something shaped and developed by the forms of interaction which the subject experiences. The frame of public consciousness is crucial since it is here that individuals are able to situate their ideas or sensibilities concerning different political issues and interests. Public reason is only possible once public consciousness is developed to a mature degree, i.e., once the individual is nurtured and has had experience with and developed the previous frames of social consciousness. This is an important point since much of democratic theory presumes that political agents possess this capacity. It also assumes that much of what passes for social interaction will be done by "reasonable" means, or that reasonable discussion will be the best way for a community of individuals to deliberate about the public welfare. But this assumption and the conclusions about liberal democracy which are supported by it, cannot hold and I think that one primary reason is the way that spatial structures shape the spheres of social consciousness I posited above. The reproduction of certain value and belief systems concerning race, ethnicity, class, gender, and so on are facilitated once we see that there becomes less and less opportunity for individuals to interact with "others" and have exposure to other forms of life and ways of thinking about, or framing, the world. What is crucial is to see how constraints are placed upon individuals and their ability to interact and develop public consciousness and public reason. This can only be done by investigating what I term the spatio-structural domain and the ways it shapes intersubjectivity and, in turn, subjectivity.

Open and Closed Spatial Structures
Now we are in a position to discuss the importance of suburban life—or of what I call more generally the spatio-structural realm more generally—on the realm of experience and consciousness. My basic thesis that suburbs erode democratic life needs to be seen within the context of the above discussion. More specifically, I think that the relation between suburban life and the erosion of democratic life comes from the ability for spatial form to shape the subjective realm of individuals, most importantly the moral self which develops as a result of the spheres of social consciousness presented above.[12] In brief, suburban life deprives individuals—by the mere fact of its spatial-structural design—of certain forms of interaction which undersocializes them and fails to provide them with an environment sufficient to develop fully the spheres of social consciousness and, as a result, the public reason necessary to think and act democratically. Although the critical literature on suburbs has always emphasized the cultural and spatial banality of suburban life, it needs to also embrace the ways in which modern forms of suburbanization are tied to new forms of social interaction and everyday life.[13] The relationship between the level of urbanism and political voting patterns has been demonstrated empirically and there is reason to believe that the level of apathy or even of political conservatism can be attributed to the ways that spatial
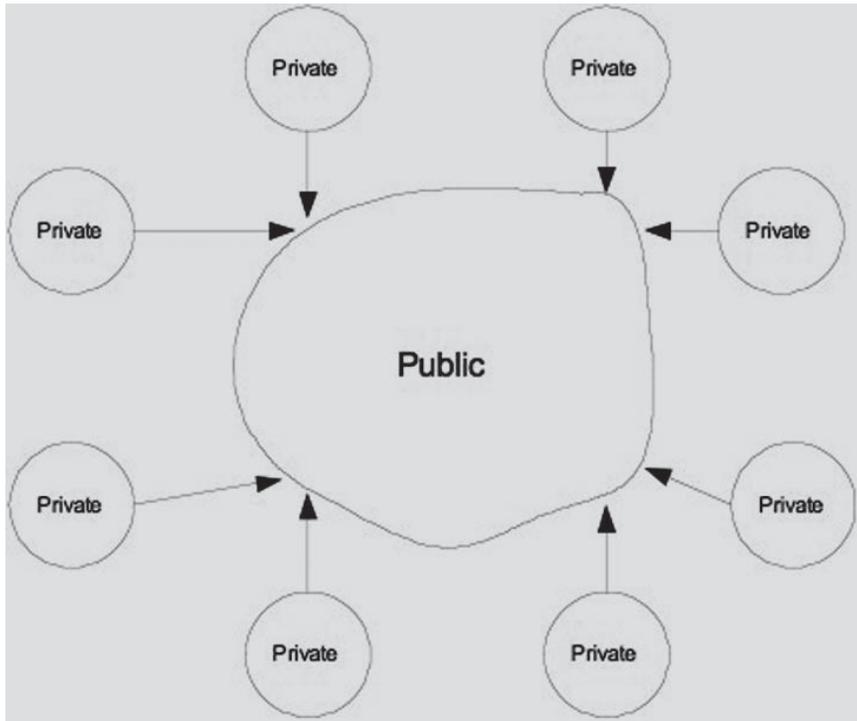
Open spatial structure
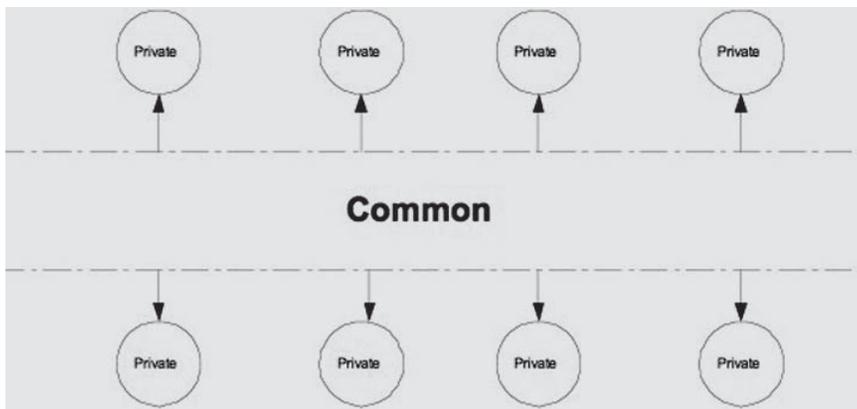
Closed spatial structure

contexts shape the political ideology of individuals.[14] I think that this is the case and that it occurs as a result of a causal connection between the types of spatial structures and the ways they constrain/enable certain forms of interaction and, as a result, shape the spheres of social consciousness discussed above.

The spatio-structural realm can affect subjective forms of consciousness by providing individuals with either open or closed structures for interaction. An "open structure" is one which permits a fluid interaction between individuals; it is a kind of structure which enables social interaction to have a wider field of action. A "closed structure" frustrates social interaction limiting it to more intimate forms of relation. In therefore places greater emphasis on the personal rather than the private. In an "open structure" spatial design and culture is one which relates the private realm to the public in gravitational relation: the private sphere is pulled, almost by necessity, into the public realm. Interaction is varied, and there is a more shared environment with high degrees of interaction and intersubjective relations. An example of an open structure is given in the figure on page 82. The arrows represent tendencies in movement. In an open structure, the private realm is pulled into the more interactive, public realm. This can be for all sorts of reasons: whether commuting to and from place of work, or for shopping, or other forms of everyday life. We can properly call the public space "public" only when it has this characteristic of openness and of diverse forms of interaction. If it is purely functional—as in roadways or shopping malls—then it is insufficiently public because those spaces are used for narrow, instrumental purposes or ends. Open structures provide public space with a special level of interaction because of its manifold character.

A closed structure, on the other hand, does not have a properly "public" space in relation to the private sphere. Instead, it tends to have what we could call more functionally "common" space: roads on which to drive, shopping centers which are themselves functionally designed only for commerce, and separate dwelling space. The second figure on page 82 shows an example of a closed spatial structure. Here, the gravitational pull is away from common space—which tends to be either merely functional in nature or banal—and toward the private sphere. The home becomes one of the primary centers of suburban life for a reason: it is not only a psychological need, it is also in this sense a structurally pre-defined necessity.[15] With the shrinking or total lack of public space an emphasis on the private sphere is made necessary and the non-private sphere tends to be reduced to its functional characteristics: one goes out to shop, to drive to work, to go to school—but these are done for their own sake. Common space is the place shared to perform or get to those activities as opposed to public space which is a place where public interaction cannot be avoided or, more importantly, has publicness as its own end. It is therefore in the nature of the spatio-structural constraints upon human activity and interaction which shapes the orientations of individuals.

This therefore leads us to the sociological and social psychological consequences of these spatial forms of life. Once we see the ways that these spatial structures shape action and consciousness can we fully speak of them

as "spatio-structural forms." There are four key categories, in addition to that of public space, toward which I would like to direct attention: diversity, conflict, anomie, and type of group-affiliation. Diversity of interaction means the extent to which individuals are capable of interacting with those different from oneself. It means interacting with an "other." Closed spatial structures are able to prevent this kind of diversity in interaction not only from the relative (or complete) lack of public space for interaction, but also from the segregated nature of urban versus suburban housing.[16] This lack of interpersonal interaction contexts of difference can promote racial categories and stereotypes, but it can also secure provincial forms of thinking preventing broader forms of recognition and inclusion.

Conflict is an even more important category. The importance of conflict in social as well as individual ego-development cannot be overstated. When I use the term conflict I do not mean violent or in some way threatening forms of confrontation but forms of sociation where individual interests and world-views confront one another. Conflict is generally seen as dividing segments of any population, but this is actually generally not the case. More likely, as Georg Simmel pointed out in his analysis of the phenomenon, "[c]onflict (Kampf) itself resolves the tension between contrasts. The fact that it aims at peace is only one, as especially obvious, expression of its nature: the synthesis of elements that work both against and for one another."[17] Conflict in this sense gives to the individual a stronger sense of self in the sense that it develops in tandem with different challenges to the way one thinks, reflects, and forms ones identity. Lacking conflict, one seeks privacy more in order to avoid the public realm which can be a place of conflict. Conflict therefore performs an integrating task: the individual becomes more integrated into social life through certain forms of conflict and antagonism. In avoiding these forms of conflict, the individual becomes detached from the pulse of public life.[18] He does not wish to engage it, to enter into it, but rather to shun it creating a more atomized society as well as a deeper sense of anomie within the subject himself.[19]

Anomie is generated from forms of life which prevent social interaction—at least meaningful social interaction. Although it was traditionally aimed at urban life and the modern division of labor found there, it has become more likely a suburban phenomenon where people live, but generally work far from home. The separation of work from home is an important attribute of anomie.[20] The combined negative effects on public life from segregation, work-home dichotomization, and the lack of public space and public life means that individuals necessarily recede into the realm of privacy. Political concerns within closed structures also tend to focus on more narrow interests such as personal property concerns which gives the social and cultural characteristics of closed structures a hook in material interests.[21] This detachment from others is not absolute; rather, what happens is that individuals form narcissistic senses of self whereby their social relations also become linked by what is familiar to them; closed structures lead us not only to avoid public life, but also lead to forms of self which are alienated from public life: undersocialized, lacking the capacities needed for public life.[22] What takes the place of public life and a self which is socially integrated is what Christopher Lasch correctly called "strategies of narcissistic survival."[23]

This has an important impact on group-affiliation. These forms of self seek out protection and also a reflection of themselves in teh company of others like themselves. As a result, group-affiliation becomes tighter, limiting itself to the known. Relations need to be personal, the impersonal (i.e., public) is shunned and feared. When individuals are prevented from diverse forms of interaction, unaccustomed to conflict and challenges to the self and its predispositions, and relate to one another in ways shaped by anomie and alienation, we begin to see a more genuine picture of the self that emerges within suburban space. Closed spatial structures shape consciousness through these various social consequences. I have summarized the difference in social effect of both open and closed spatial structures in figure 4 below. What each of these attributes gives us is a way of connecting the spatio-structural realm with that of the social and psychological. What I want to do with this is see how individuals are affected by the structural environment they inhabit. Suburban life can be seen to erode democratic capacities because they contain, or better yet, are specifically designed around the notion of closed structures. This is very different from mid-nineteenth-century urban planning which placed a primacy on public space. The result of this is a set of spatio-structural constraints upon forms of interaction and intersubjectivity which then lead to a limiting of interpersonal consciousness. The specific character of interpersonal consciousness, as I argued in section three above, therefore leads to an under-developed or mal-developed reflexive consciousness thereby rendering public consciousness either non-existent or so underdeveloped as to be almost practically useless. Lacking these forms of public consciousness, public reason too becomes impossible and, with time, democratic capacities of open discussion, public debate, toleration, and inclusiveness are all undermined.

Summary and Conclusion

In this essay, I have tried to demonstrate in a more rigorous way my thesis that democratic forms of life are negatively impacted by certain spatial structures and that these spatial structures largely proliferate in suburbs. Suburbs erode democracy, I argue, because of the particular spatial forms of life they promote. These spatial forms have the power to shape the kinds of consciousness necessary for building democratic capacities. A lack of these capacities means a lack of democracy since the very means by which democratic self-government is to be maintained is lacking. Rather than collective governance based on participation and informed consent, we see the emergence of organized elites. In addition, cultural apathy toward political life increases as participation withers, and along with it the forms of consciousness necessary to form critical perspectives and rational world-views. The reason for this is a causal chain of institutions and developmental logics connecting a set of spatio-structural constraints and forms of ego development, which then lead to certain forms of social life. The consciousness of individuals is shaped to spatio-structural forms,

Spatio-Structural Category \ Attributes	Public Space	Diversity of interaction	Conflict	Anomie	Type of Group-Affiliation
Open Structure	Accessible	Common	Common	Low	Dispersed: containing both intimate and public
Closed Structure	Inaccessible or non-existent	Uncommon or non-existent	Uncommon	High	Tight: limited to intimate/personal relations

Figure 4: Scheme of Spatio-structural Categories and their Attributes

and it creates certain forms of individuals that are not adequately equipped for public and civic life. Suburbs are essentially based on closed structures and therefore serve as important contexts for shaping non-democratic forms of life.

I would like to add that the theoretical schema I have laid out above is not, or should not be, seen as placing me in a position where I am simplistically promoting cities at the expense of suburbs.[24] This would be too simplistic and it would also not take heed of the theoretical argument I have elaborated here. Indeed, I believe quite strongly that cities themselves can have these characteristics of closed spaces as well. There is not a simple dichotomy as was the case in previous sociological literature where one can simply differentiate suburbs and cities. Cities themselves—even large metropolises—have become partly infected by the proliferation of closed spatial structures. When I walk down Columbus Avenue in New York City, I can walk by endless blocks of chain stores, not seeing a café or other forms of typically urban public space. This constitutes a closed structure in the sense that public activity is prevented—just as it is in suburbia where closed spatial structures are the essence of planning and design. The main reason for this in urban areas such as Manhattan has been the victory of land developers in creating "safe" (can also be read as non-public and non-threatening) places of living in order to promote demand for housing and inflate profits from rents and land development.[25]

It is therefore important, I think, to find ways to protect open spatial structures, promote them, and keep in mind that the spatial forms of life do in fact have deep consequences socially, culturally, as well as politically. It is also important to note the changes within many urban areas as turning toward certain suburban forms of life—as in the suburbanization of places like New York.[26] We need to see the deep ways that space affects consciousness and political life, and for this reason we need to see that the ways in which we are building and reproducing our lived environments in America is playing a critical role in our ability to maintain, let alone expand, democracy.

Michael J. Thompson is assistant professor of Political Science and is also on the faculty of Urban Studies at William Paterson University. His next book, Fleeing the City: Studies in the Culture and Politics of Antiurbanism is forthcoming in the fall of 2009 from Palgrave Macmillan.

NOTES

1 Michael J. Thompson, "How Suburbs Destroy Democracy," Monu: Magazine on Urbanism (winter, 2006); "A Rejoinder to Alex Schafran," Monu: Magazine on Urbanism (summer, 2006); "The Suburban Assault on Democratic Life," The Urban Reinventors (fall, 2007); "Antiurbanism and Conservative Politics: The Spatial Dimensions of Political Consciousness," International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (forthcoming); and "What is Antiurbanism? A Theoretical Perspective," in Michael J. Thompson (ed.) Fleeing the City: Studies in the Culture and Politics of Antiurbanism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, in press, forthcoming 2009).

2 For an important discussion of the theme of republicanism and civic life in this period, see the excellent collection edited by Gisela Bock, et al. Machiavelli and Republicanism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

3 For an important discussion, see Carlo Cattaneo La cittá considerata come principio ideale delle istorie italiane (Turin: Einaudi, 1972).

4 A more contemporary version of this theory is elaborated by Michael J. Sandel, Public Philosophy: Essays in Morality in Politics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) pp. 9-34 and 156-173.

5 George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) p. 138. Also see the more philosophical discussion by John Searl, Mind, Language, and Society (New York: Basic Books, 1998) pp. 111-134.

6 For a more technical discussion of my use of Erving Goffman's device of "frames" in this context of consciousness, see my "Antiurbanism and Conservative Politics: The Spatial Dimensions of Political Consciousness," International Journal of Urban and Regional Research (forthcoming).

7 Iris Marion Young, Democracy and Inclusion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 25.

8 John Rawls has defined public reason as "what the political conception of justice requires of society's basic structure of institutions, and of the purposes and ends they are to serve." Political Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 213. I think Rawls' concept of public reason is too thin since it fails to consider the social psychological foundations which make it possible.

9 For an interesting discussion of this with respect to gender, see Anne Markusen "City, Spatial Structure, Women's Household Work, and National Urban Policy." Signs. Spring, 1981: S23-S43; Melissa Gilbert "'Race,' Space, and Power: The Survival Strategies of Working Poor Women." Annals of the Association of American Geographers. Vol. 88, no. 4, 1998, pp. 595-621; as well as Kenway, Kraack, and Hickey-Moody Masculinity Beyond the

Metropolis. (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2006). With respect to race, see Loic Wacquant "Urban Outcasts: Stigma and Division in the Black American Ghetto and the French Urban Periphery." International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. Vol. 17, no. 3, 1993, pp. 366-383; and Ali Madanipour "Social Exclusion and Space." In Social Exclusion in European Cities. A. Madanipour, G. Cars, and Judith Allen (eds.), pp. 75-94. (New York: Routledge Press, 2005).

10 George Herbert Mead, Mind, Self and Society p. 134.

11 Ibid., p. 272.

12 An interesting, but more general, approach to the connection between space-time and social relations is given by John Urry, "Social Relations, Space and Time," in Derek Gregory and John Urry (eds.) Social Relations and Spatial Structures (New York: St. Martin's, 1985) pp. 20-48. For more on the ways that spatial relations can affect consciousness, see Nigel Thrift, "Flies and Germs: A Geography of Knowledge," in Gregory and Urry (eds.) pp. 366-403.

13 The literature on the banality of suburbs largely comes from critics of their planning and design. See Kenneth Jackson's seminal study Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); as well as Peter Katz, The New Urbanism (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994); Philip Langdon, A Better Place to Live: Reshaping the American Suburb (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994); James Kunstler, The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); Peter Calthorpe, The Next American Metropolis (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1993); and Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Towns and Town-Making Principles (New York: Rizzoli, 1991). For a discussion of the ways suburban space can affect democratic life, see Susan Bickford, "Constructing Inequality: City Spaces and the Architecture of Citizenship," Political Theory. Vol. 28, No. 3, 2000, pp. 355-376; Lizabeth Cohen, A Consumer's Republic (New York: Knopf, 2003); and Margaret Kohn, Brave New Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space (New York: Routledge, 2004).

14 The empirical evidence for this can be seen in voting statistics when broken down by region. See S. McKee and D. Shaw, "Suburban Voting in Presidential Elections." Presidential Studies Quarterly. Vol. 33, no. 1, 2004, pp. 125-144; Lang, R. and T. Sanchez, "The New Metro Politics: Interpreting Recent Presidential Elections Using a County-Based Regional Typology," Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech Election Brief, 2006: http://www.mi.vt.edu/uploads/NationalElectionReport.pdf (accessed: 6/19/2008); and J. Gainsborough, Fenced Off: The Suburbanization of American Politics. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2001).

15 In many ways, I differ here with Richard Sennett's thesis in his book The Fall of Public Man (New York: Knopf, 1974). Sennett stresses certain broad historical changes in western culture which tend toward an emphasis on personal life, whereas I see it more specifically tied to forms of spatial structure.

16 The empirical justification for this is found in Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Also see the more recent discussion by J. Eric Oliver, Democracy in Suburbia (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) pp. 99-132.

17 Georg Simmel, Conflict and the Web of Group-Affiliations (New York: The Free Press, 1955) p. 14.

18 For a discussion of the lack of conflict in suburban life and its consequences, see Carole Greenhouse, "Signs of Quality: Individualism and Hierarchy in American Culture." American Ethnologist. Vol. 19, no. 2, 1999, pp. 233-254; and M. P. Baumgartner, The Moral Order of a Suburb. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

19 Simmel again: "The individual does not attain the unity of his personality exclusively by an exhaustive harmonization, according to logical, objective, religious, or ethical norms, of the contents of his personality. On the contrary, contradiction and conflict not only precede this unity, but are operative in it at every moment of its existence." Op. cit., p. 15.

20 For a discussion, see J. Eric Oliver, op. cit. pp. 134-153.

21 Oliver has an institutional explanation for this: the "land-centered character of local politics derives largely from the subordinate position of municipal government. Local governments are creatures of state government and are thereby limited in the powers they can wield." Ibid., p. 135.

22 For a more precise discussion of the relation between anomie and alienation, see Steven Lukes, "Alienation and Anomie," in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (eds.) Philosophy, Politics and Society third series (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969) pp. 134-156.

23 Christopher Lasch, The Culture of Narcissism (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979) p. xv.

24 This was one of the central critiques of Alex Schafran in his initial response to me. See Alex Schafran, "As a Child of the Suburbs: — A Response to Michael Thompson's 'How Suburbs Destroy Democracy,'" Monu: Magazine on Urbanism (summer, 2006).

25 I see this as a straightforward insight from John Logan and Harvey Molotch and their classic analysis in Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987) specifically pp. 17-62.

26 For an excellent set of essays on this topic, see J. Hammett and K. Hammett (eds.) The Suburbanization of New York (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

La Cosa Nostra: Discourse & Decline in Suburbia

by Alex Schafran:

"Suburbia is the defining landscape in America right now. Whether you like it or not, you have to understand it."
"Suburbs suddenly hot on campus," St. Paul Pioneer Press, November 25, 2005

'Understanding' the suburbs has produced a remarkable amount of scholarship over the past decade, much of it quite powerful and refreshing. We are in the process of rethinking suburban past, present and future, often with an eye towards remedying the injustices that 150 years of suburbanization have wrought on the human, built and natural environments across the United States.

As we renew our commitment to examining this almost mythical space, home to more than 60% of the US population [1], we must simultaneously consider the ways in which the new discourses produced by this examination are shaping our thinking about such a significant slice of American life. How we speak of space and place and city and suburbs affect how we act in them on most importantly on them.

Certain potentially troubling patterns have emerged of late which at the very least are worthy of attention. A backlash against the centrality of the urban over the suburban has the potential for a renewed fetishization of the suburban, or the creation of a "suburban studies" unconnected to "urban studies," as opposed to a more holistic approach to metropolitan space needed to understand the increasing complex American metropolitan realm. A crass populism, which eschews critique at the expense of honoring suburbs simply because 'most people live there,' does little on its own to improve the lives and habitats of suburbanites.

Yet most troubling is the growing wave of scholarship that so intensely focuses on locating problems in the suburb that it toes the line between calling attention to troubling developments and a dangerous elision between suburbs and the problem itself. The "suburb" or "suburbia" becomes the primary site of "decline," of the erosion of democratic values or practices, of social and spatial segregation. This form of discursive violence is particularly troubling as we have seen it happen to both city and suburb in recent memory, often with devastating consequences.

"The genesis of the discourse is not the entrenchment of poverty, the spreading of blight, the fiscal weakness of city governments, and the ghettoization of African-Americans, but society's deepening contradictions. To this extent, the discourse functions to site decline in the cities. It provides a spatial fix for more generalized insecurities and complaints, thereby minimizing their evolution into a more radical critique of American society."
Robert Beauregard, Voices of Decline

We have a long and fruitful history in the United States of taking out our anger on space and place, and of blaming both for causing our problems in the first place. The city was our primary target from the age of Jefferson through the growth of the industrial city, becoming synonymous in American discourse with decline, decay and disease, serving as an easy chalice for all of our social ills and racial unease [2]. Many of its problems were certainly real – this is no romanticization of an earlier urban, a la Mumford or Weber – but the cumulative effect was to make the urban synonymous with the problem, to make them inseparable. It is from this elision that two destructive sets of policies emerged – the suburb, to replace the place that was supposedly irreparably broken, and urban renewal, to reshape it from the inside. While both were undoubtedly driven by the needs of an American capitalism increasingly addicted to the circulation of the secondary circuit and in need of a new spatial fix, the anti-urban discourse of the 19th and 20th century enabled this creative destruction and renewal to happen, and helped determine its location.

These discourses of decline, as Beauregard describes them, often revolved around terms like ghetto, slum, or blight, the latter being what Rebecca Solnit calls the "magical word of urban renewal"[3]. We allowed discourse not only to close our minds to alternative possibilities but to function as a bulldozer, gathering strange bedfellows together to remake the city, regardless of who lay in its path.

Sadly, we seem not to be paying attention to history. Suburban America has been getting more diverse in terms of race, class and national origin, with African Americans, immigrants, the working class and the poor continuing to grow in numbers and influence across a mix of suburban landscapes. This diversity coincides with the aging of inner ring suburbs, and more recently, with a foreclosure crisis that is impacting subeurban areas with equal if not greater ferocity than cities. What has emerged is a discourse of "suburban decline," scholars who are concerned with rising poverty and ageing infrastructure. It has reached a crescendo of late with two articles in The Atlantic from Christopher Leinberger and Richard Florida, who respectively refer to suburbia as the "next slum" and as a geography that cannot compete in the post-crisis era [4]. This new discourse of decline is so eerily similar to an earlier generation of anti-urban thinking that one could

have ripped it from the pages of Beauregard's Voices of Decline, and like the earlier era of interchangeable urbanism, the language flows freely back and forth between academics cum public urbanists like Leinberger and Florida and journalists writing at the local level. Leinberger's "next slum" quickly becomes one columnist's "slumburbia" or another's attempt to pejoratively comparative one exurban "slum" to another.[5]

The result is that suburbs are discursively constructed as "slums," "blighted," and "ghettoized", or are ranked as declining simply for having seen an increase in the number of poor people. Reversing "decline" can be as simple as removing poor people, a strategy cities have long tried and continue to wield, albeit in more subtle ways than a generation ago. This slippage is even more problematic as it regularly contains a racial component. Poverty has often come hand in hand with diversity, and now with a massive foreclosure crisis. In places like Antioch, California, the numbers of poor people, African Americans and foreclosures has gone up, leading to simplistic correlations and that age-old error of confusing correlation with causation. Much as we did a generation ago, the suburbs are becoming the "spatial fix" for our anxieties and concerns. The true tragedy is that the people caught up in this discursive framing are often the same communities whose lives were impacted by anti-urban discourse – the poor and communities of color. We seem to have an amazing ability to describe as blighted anywhere these communities seek to rest their head.

"To heap abuse upon suburbia (instead of upon the ethos of success and the demanding conditions of social and economic mobility) places him [the critic] comfortably in the great tradition of American social criticism, and at the same time renders him respectable and harmless - because, after all, the critique of suburbia is essentially a "cultural" critique, not a political or economic one rife with agitational implications."

Bennett Berger, Working Class Suburb

This is, of course, not the first time we have shifted our anger from the urban to the suburban. With the onset of Keynesian suburbanization in the United States and the postwar conformity of the Eisenhower era, critics like Williams Whyte, Jane Jacobs and Louis Mumford began to portray the suburb as a place of relentless conformity, as a site of dysfunctional social relations brought on by a problematic physical form. "Hell," as Becky Nicolaides observes, "moved from the city to the suburbs." [6]

Although their critique was partly brought on by their well-placed anger at the simultaneous death of the city (a process either exacerbated or driven by suburbanization, depending on perspective), their dismissal of the suburb in its own right was a powerful critique that resonates to this day. [7]

Perhaps the most famous response to this turn against suburbia came from sociologist Herbert Gans. Gans went to live in one of the Levittowns, the epitome of mass produced suburbia, specifically so that he could test (and counteract) the hypothesis that suburban form bred conformity and destroyed social relations. He inveighed against the environmental determinism and elitism so prevalent in anti-suburban critique. [8]

Yet the most trenchant response for our purposes came much earlier from Bennett Berger. His concern about what he called the "myth of suburbia" stemmed in part from the misrepresentation that he felt was rampant. Suburbia, as Bennett demonstrated and as we have continued to "rediscover" every generation since the 30's, is actually a very diverse place, not simply in terms of built form but economically, industrially, socio-economically and ethno-culturally. Yet talking of suburbs in monolithic terms is not simply inaccurate to Berger, but ineffective. Like the siting of decline in cities (or suburbs), the myth of suburbia is a canard, deflecting our attention from the true problems of our society. Much like Harvey's critique of Rawlsian liberalism for being counter-revolutionary for its failure to address root problems, shitting on suburbs as suburbs does little to counteract the very real problems both caused by suburbanization and faced by suburbanites and urbanites as residents in a segregation metropolis. [9]

A prime example of this can be found in the realm of suburban politics. Despite early efforts by scholars such as Robert Wood to expose the suburbs as highly political in a very reactionary way, I would argue that the myth of suburbia fashioned in our mind an image of suburbia as lacking in "real" politics, at least beyond the PTA. There is some truth to the myth - Wood shows that many suburbanites are expressly fleeing the infamous machine politics of the city, hammering in the reified image of the city as political and the suburbs as apolitical. [10]

It is a myth that caused us to miss one of the most powerful grassroots movements in American history - the rise of the conservative movement in suburban southern California which laid the foundation for the Reagan revolution [11]. In a classic 'hindsight is 20/20 vision' critique, Byron Miller critiques Manuel Castells for missing this grassroots uprisings, an omission brought on by Castells singular focus on both the urban and the left [12]. Castells, of course, was not the only one to miss this important movement that flew in the face of our concept of the apolitical suburbs, and by the time we could have read about it in Castells, the Reagan revolution was not only underway but firmly entrenched. Perhaps this time around, as many of the urban struggles move to the suburbs, we will notice a new form of suburban democratic action that seems to be emerging in places like California and New Jersey in response to the foreclosure crisis, where leadership and even a national presence is coming from churches, Antioch and subdivisions outside Stockton and Fresno, and neighborhoods in Irvington and East Orange. Otherwise, we will leave it to the historians to show us what we have missed.

"Any effort to understand modern America must put suburbs at the center. The two are inseparable."

Kevin Kruse & Thomas Sugrue, The New Suburban History

Equally part real and imagined, suburbia has become the site of so many of our anxieties about the current version of the American modern. Acknowledging this centrality means that the argument that Americans have a conflicted relationship with the suburbs is tantamount to arguing that we have a conflicted relationship with ourselves. I think that the past half century of writing about suburbs certainly justifies this existential leap - espe-

cially when writing from the left, we have no more made peace with the suburbs than we have with any other form of American excess, and we increasingly recognize how deeply intertwined how we live and where we live have become.

The dueling crises of our time – one economic, one environmental, both global – has made this questioning of self and suburb all the more relevant. Climate change has forced us to reconsider the relationship between how we live and where we live, and has provided incredible momentum to smart growth and anti-sprawl advocates who have been questioning the rapid territorial expansion of American metropolis for two generations. A global economic crisis rooted in the processes of American urbanization has forced us to ask once again what price we are paying for the American dream, a dream of homeownership so intertwined with suburbia as to make them virtually inseparable.

This convergence of crisis has given proponents of more urban forms of life - myself included - both renewed ammunition for the pro-city argument, as well as increasing popular support, evidenced by the steadily growing demand for urban space, even in the face of foreclosure. But the urban nature of the economic portion of this crisis should give us pause, and should force us to remember an earlier urban crisis, where the lives of countless low-income communities and communities of color were broken apart during a process of urban restructuring, and how language was a critical factor in enabling and justifying that restructuring.

We gain absolutely nothing continuing down the road of an unfettered critique of suburbia, especially when we fail to recognize some of the elitism that continues to infiltrate thinking about the suburbs. Much as the city was written from the country, we still often write the suburb from the city, wishing it to be not only urban but urbane. Rather than embracing this ontological or existential component of American suburbia - this acknowledgement of suburbs as "we" rather than "it" or "them", an inseparable component of the American metropolis which can be transformed but not excised – we demonize these spaces and places, in turn, the tens of millions of people call them home.

We also gain nothing from running away from the language of suburbia, no matter how fraught with inaccuracy it may be. City and suburb never truly worked, but this does not mean abandoning it for the language of the postmodern metropolis - exopolis, metroburbia, postsuburbia, etc. City and suburb are valuable precisely because they are messy and conflicted, not despite the fact. In the spirit of Abdou-Maliq Simone and Chantal Mouffe, we must continue to use these messy terms to describe a messy place, lest we elide critical tensions in choosing clarity over agonism [13]. The suburbs are contested, confusing and contradictory, and they contain much of what is both brilliant and horrifying about America and the American experience. Surely we could replace these terms with concepts that are more "accurate," but "accuracy" runs the risk of disremembering the past and the reason that the term has so much baggage in the first place. When Edward Banfield's made the naïve and wrongheaded assertion that "talking about race might make it so," he neglected the fact that not talking about something will not make it go away [14]. The conflicted feeling one gets when thinking about the suburbs, the gut-level agony where positive and negative, contemporary and historical mix uncomfortably in one's mind

and stomach, is ultimately productive. If democracy can be seen as relying on the ability to see other sides, this agonism about suburbia is also a sign of critical and democratic thought.

Alex Schafran is a doctoral student in the Department of City and Regional Planning at UC Berkeley, where his primary research focuses on gentrification and the changing geographies of race and class in American cities.

NOTES:

[1] J. R. Short, B. Hanlon, and T. J. Vicino, "The Decline of Inner Suburbs: The New Suburban Gothic in the United States," Geography Compass 1.3 (2007): 641-56,.

[2] R. A. Beauregard, Voices of Decline: The Postwar Fate of US Cities Routledge, 2003)., M. G. White and L. White, The Intellectual Versus the City: From Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright New American Library, 1964).

[3] R. Solnit, Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism Verso, 2002) 43.

[4] CB Leinberger, "The Next Slum? Tomorrow's suburban decay," ATLANTIC MONTHLY 301.2 (2008): 70,., R. Florida, "HOW THE CRASH WILL RESHAPE AMERICA. (Cover story)," Atlantic Monthly (10727825) 303.2 (2009): 44-56,.

[5] Mark Morford, "Tax My Rich White Torturer," San Francisco Chronicle March 26, 2008 2008, ., Carol Lloyd, "Is Suburbia Turning Into Slumburbia?" San Francisco Chronicle March 14, 2008 2008, .

[6] B. M. Nicolaides, "How hell moved from the city to the suburbs," The New Suburban History, ed. K. M. Kruse and T. J. SugrueUniversity Of Chicago Press, 2006) 80.

[7] It resonates particularly in the work of James Howard Kunstler and "new urbanists" such as Andres Duany. J. H. Kunstler, The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-made Landscape Simon & Schuster, 1993)., A. Duany, E. Plater-Zyberk, and J. Speck, Suburban nation: the rise of sprawl and the decline of the American Dream North Point Press, 2000).

[8] H. J. Gans, The Levittowners: Ways of Life and Politics in a New Suburban Community Columbia University Press, 1982).

[9] D. Harvey, Social justice and the city., 1973).

[10] R. C. Wood, Suburbia, Its People and Their Politics Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

[11] LIsa McGirr's brilliant book on the subject should be required reading for all students of modern American history. L. McGirr, Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right Princeton University Press, 2001).

[12] B. Miller, "Castells' The City and the Grassroots: 1983 and Today," International-Journal of Urban and Regional Research 30.1 (2006): 207-11,.

[13] AM Simone, For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities Duke University Press, 2004)., C. Mouffe, The return of the political London: Verso, 1993).

[14] E. C. Banfield, (The) Unheavenly city Boston: Brown and Co., 1970) 67.