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American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Levittown's Suburbia

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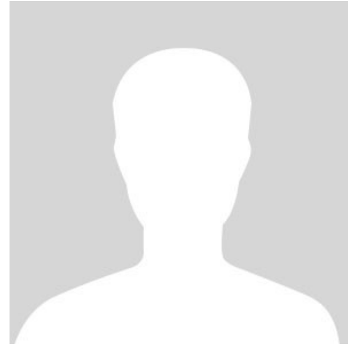
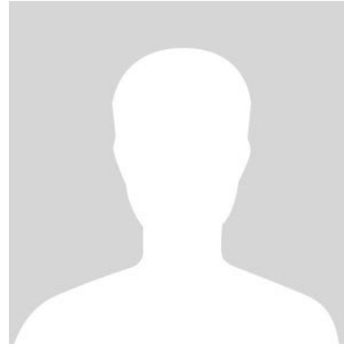


Host
Ellen Harris

Student at Princeton



Host
Dillon Horwitz

Student at Princeton

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"Fences are as American as Tom Sawyer, who spent a legendary Missouri day whitewashing one, and Robert Frost, who recommended good ones between neighbors. American politicians are said to spend a lot of time mending them, while people who are noncommittal sit on them. Quiet, often recessive elements in American yards and fields, fences have entered both the dictionary, as idiomatic expressions, and the culture, as lore" (C1)

"The farmers and cattlemen who originally built fences did so with the materials at hand and their own labor, at little or no cost, because they had to. The new generation of fences, however, is sophisticated and considerably more expensive" (C1)

"The changes in the fence market are due, on the one hand, to the increased security consciousness of homeowners and to their greater interest in gardens. Designers, on the other hand, have become more interested in traditional designs" (C1)

"'We live in a culture of fences'" ("Jaquelin Robertson, an architect in New York and Charlottesville, Va., and the dean of the University of Virginia architecture school") (C1)

"'Fences are no longer only functional, but symbolic and expressive. We found houses with three pieces of split rail, a wagon wheel and a milk can dropped like a piece of stage scenery on lawns'" ("Steven Izenour, a design partner of Venturi Rauch & Scott Brown") (C6)

"Over the decades many towns and regions developed characteristic fences, but seldom was there a single interpretation of any traditional fence – each type bred varieties" (C6)

"The architects drew their inspiration from the Victorian details on a barn on the property and from precedents in landscaped English gardens" (C6)

"Traditionally a fence kept people or animals in or out, and it marked boundaries and established territory" (C6)
Grier, Peter, "Why suburbs are a supermarket of housing styles," The Christian Science Monitor, October 28, 1980, p. 2.

"Deep in the heart of the suburbs, on a winding curbless street, is an ersatz Colonial home with a two-foot plastic eagle over the door. Next door, a fine example of Tudor Revival displays fake exposed beams and a turret (minus the cannon)" (2)

"'Are Colonial homes more formal, an evidence of some sort of permanent nostalgia?' asks Kinzy. 'Are Colonial homeowners all bankers? Were homes with roughsawn siding built because contractors thought consumers were hungering for some sort of rural image?'" ("Scott A. Kinzy…an assistant professor of design at the State University of New York at Buffalo") (2)

"Mr. Izenour claims traditional styles such as Colonial and Spanish Mission Revival are popular because American culture is so image-conscious. 'They appeal historically. People feel comfortable with them because they're part of our upbringing.' But the Cape Cods and Colonials scattered through suburbia like prosperous citizens are more than mere replicas. 'They reflect people's lives and priorities,' says Chester Liebs, an architectural historian at the University of Vermont" (2)

Harris, Cheryl, "Whiteness as Property," Harvard Law Review, vol. 106, no. 8, June, 1993, pp. 1707-1791.

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"Those big front yards nobody uses. The side yards that don't provide any privacy"

"That front yard may have more to do with images of Mount Vernon or Monticello (check out the nickel) than it does with the need for family recreation space"

"people like lawns. They are associated with gracious living"

"If you believe people's houses, most people want to be in the countryside. … As you move into lower middle class suburbs, some lawn appears. This immediately means that there will be a little bit of fence that doesn't keep anyone from going anywhere"

"People go to the hardware store to pick up other items. A coach lamp adds a vaguely rustic touch. An iron lawn jockey is redolent of large Southern plantation houses and gracious living"

"The same fantasies are obvious in the names of development. A name like Sweetbriar Meadows might well have been accurate before they came in with bulldozers and built all these houses. Ironically, the countryside is destroyed in order to present a few more people with an approximation of country living. Everyone knows that they are not living in the country when they move into such a development, just as the residents of Levittown, Pa., or Willingboro, N.J. know that the houses they are living in are not really Early American,
even though they have names that conjure up such associations, and maybe a couple of dormers besides. Everyone knows it's not real. But the developers know that they have to find some attractive theme, or fantasy, on which to build their sales campaign. The 'colonial' houses in Heritage Heights may have French-style mansard roofs, but they will still be called 'The best in country living with an Early American flair'"

"The sprawl is where a great many of us live and where many more of us would like to live. It gives us the opportunity to say a lot about ourselves. It is as much an outgrowth of our needs, practical, and psychological, as the clothes we wear"
Kelly, Barbara M., "Learning from Levittown," The Long Island Historical Journal, vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 1988, pp. 39-54.

"The patterns of the basic houses built under the terms of FHA/GI Bill reveal a code of what family life was, or was supposed to be" (39)

"In essence, the Levitt house was the reduction of the American Dream to an affordable reality, made possible in large part by the cooperative efforts of the government, the builders, and the banks" (39)

Race & Podcast Shownotes

American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Levittown's Suburbia

"In the four years between the occupation of the first house in 1947 and the completion of the final unit in 1951, Levittown assumed a national identity as the quintessential postwar American suburb. As early as January of 1948, the local newspapers had caught onto the widespread interest in Levittown as the symbolic suburb and were advising the residents of their importance as models of American democratic behavior" (40)

"'Levittown' became the code word for the new suburban subdivision" (40)

"The suburb that resulted is composed of houses…designed with a picturesque harmony in the tradition of such advocates of the rural ideal as John Ruskin, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Frederick Law Olmsted" (51)

"Along with this transition in the houses, they created of themselves a self-identified middle-class, regardless of income or occupation, based on home ownership. In so doing, they became part of the ever-growing expansion of the middle class that has been part of the American Dream since the Pilgrims landed in 1620" (52)

"The Levittowners outlast their critics," The Philadelphia Inquirer, June 26, 1977, Section 13-A.

"For the Doughertys and the 17,310 other families who eventually moved into Levittown, it was the American dream come true—a house in the country—or, as Mrs. Dougherty said, 'country living with city conveniences'" (13-A)

"Variations on a Simple Theme Is the Thing These Days at Levittown: Levittown Homes Less Uniform As Owners Make Alterations," New York Times, March 31, 1957, p. 1, 10.
--- Music Credit
Song: "A Road Less Travelled"
Album: Melanchonique
Artist: Ketsa
located on the Free Music Archive:
https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Ketsa/Melanchonique/A_Road_Less_Traveled_

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Race & Podcast Shownotes

American Architecture as a Settler Colonial Project: Levittown's Suburbia

Transcript

[news clip]

[transition]

[Ellen]
Hi, I'm Ellen Harris.

[Dillon]
And I'm Dillon Horwitz. We're graduate students at the Princeton University School of Architecture, and this podcast is part of a series that aims to construct a settler colonial history of American architecture through an investigation of canonical works.

[Ellen]
In this episode, we'll be exploring Levittown – and post-war suburbia at large – through a framework driven by settler colonial theories. Before we begin, we want to point out that "Levittown" may refer to any of the seven separate developments built by William Levitt between 1947 and 1970 in New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Puerto Rico, and Maryland, and we'll use the name as a general term for these experiments in post-war suburban housing, unless otherwise noted. As Barbara Kelly notes, "Levittown assumed a national identity as the quintessential postwar American suburb. As early as January of 1948, the local newspapers had caught onto the widespread interest in Levittown as the symbolic suburb and were advising the residents of their importance as models of American democratic behavior." (40) In other words, she writes, "'Levittown' became the code word for the new suburban subdivision" (40).

[Dillon]
Levittown is often thought of as a paragon of mass-housing efficiency, and as an influential model of how to execute suburban sprawl. It is also a primary spatiotemporal incidence – and general representation – of a settler colonial disposition toward occupying land in the United States.

[Ellen]
We propose that by acknowledging a culture in which segregation, discrimination, and other white supremacist values and acts were codified in laws and customs, we are also able to see the instantiation of these systems and beliefs "on the ground," in the form of pastoral, quaint imagery and objects on a typical suburban street. It is, then, possible to see how Levittown, and the broader suburban landscape, used traditional settler visual cues to both soften the insidious nature of the discriminatory policies underlying its organization, as well as to signal to prospective and current homeowners that this form of community was an extension – a direct descendant – of the centuries-old practice of white folk settling in the countryside.

[Dillon]
Levittown is known among planners, designers, and architects for its role in ushering in a new mode of living that is highly dependent on the petrol economy, and it is also, more or less, already recognized as being a prime example of racist housing policies. In this podcast, we seek to more explicitly show how images embody and convey meaning, and to assert, via the example of Levittown, that innocuous, even decorative objects and architectural constructs and expressions, may symbolize far more sinister machinations.

[transition]

[Ellen]
Before we go any further, we'd like to more clearly establish what we mean when we say that we'll be looking at this topic through a settler colonial lens. To do this, we'll use a definition of the theory from Alicia Cox, who writes that "Settler colonialism is an ongoing system of power that perpetuates the genocide and repression of indigenous peoples and cultures. Essentially hegemonic in scope, settler colonialism normalizes the continuous settler occupation, exploiting lands and resources to which indigenous peoples have genealogical relationships. Settler colonialism includes interlocking forms of oppression, including racism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. This is because settler colonizers are Eurocentric and assume that European values with respect to ethnic, and therefore moral, superiority are inevitable and natural. However, these intersecting dimensions of settler colonialism coalesce around the dispossession of indigenous peoples' lands, resources, and cultures. ...settler colonizers destroy indigenous peoples and cultures in order to replace them and establish themselves as the new rightful inhabitants. In other words, settler colonizers do not merely exploit indigenous peoples and lands for labor and economic interests; they displace them through settlements."

[Dillon]
As we'll see, the construction of massive suburban developments is an indisputable component of the settler colonial exercise of oppression in the United States. The time periods and spaces that we discuss in this podcast are part of a larger historical and cultural assertion of dominance, and are therefore still actively operating in today's world.

[transition]

[Ellen]
The postwar period, marked by economic growth and new mortgage insurance and financing programs through the Federal Housing Administration,

allowed millions of young Americans to purchase single-family homes for the first time. Many of these families were also supported by the G.I. Bill, granting further access to home-ownership
for veterans. This created an unprecedented demand for housing developments, encouraging real estate developers like Levitt & Sons to construct suburban communities throughout the country at a rapid pace. However, the inclusion of racially restrictive covenants, which prevented any non-white people from purchasing homes in these developments, denied black veterans the same economic opportunities as their white counterparts. Although two landmark supreme court decisions, Shelley v. Kramer and Barrows v. Jackson, the latter taking effect in 1953, deemed it unconstitutional for the government to enforce property restrictions on the basis of race, the federal government did little to prevent private developers from doing just that. Therefore, Levitt & Sons was effectively supported in its refusal to sell homes to black families. Many residents took this as a sign that the community would and should continue to be an exclusively white one. However, there was no legal basis for preventing a white family from reselling their home to a black family, and in 1957, William and Daisy Myers became the first black family to move into Levittown.

[news clip]

[transition]

[Dillon]
Now that we have a sense of the climate in which these towns were built, let's take some time to look at a few of the common elements that comprise a typical suburban street. We should point out that in this podcast, we're only going to focus on objects that are visible on the exterior of a house. There is a rich body of literature on the symbolism of interior plans and styles, but for our purposes, we will only be addressing elements that are visible from the street. In order to situate ourselves in this space, we'll turn to contemporary media accounts and stories about these exciting new developments. We should also note that many of the things we'll be talking about are ubiquitous and ordinary, and they may therefore seem trite to the point of meaninglessness. It is, however, because of the omnipresence of these artifacts that we can see how the physical environment both subliminally and overtly signals to white people that "this land is your land."

Peter Grier situates us, on October 28, 1980, in a typical suburban landscape; "Deep in the heart of the suburbs, on a winding curbless street, is an ersatz Colonial home with a two foot plastic eagle over the door. Next door, a fine example of Tudor Revival displays fake exposed beams and a turret (minus the cannon)" (2). Scott A. Kinzy, an assistant professor of design at SUNY Buffalo, wonders if "Colonial homes [are] more formal, an evidence of some sort of permanent nostalgia?' ... 'Are Colonial homeowners all bankers? Were homes with roughsawn siding built because contractors thought consumers were hungering for some sort of rural image?'" (2). Responding to Grier's descriptions, Steven Izenour, a
design partner at Venturi Rauch & Scott Brown, "claims traditional styles such as Colonial and Spanish Mission Revival are popular because American culture is so image-conscious. 'They appeal historically,' [he explains, adding that] 'People feel comfortable with them because they're part of our upbringing,'" (2). Grier adds that "the Cape Cods and Colonials scattered through suburbia like prosperous citizens are more than mere replicas," and he quotes Chester Liebs, an architectural historian at the University of Vermont, who says that "'They reflect people's lives and priorities'" (2).
In front of these houses are, in the words of Thomas Hine, "Those big front yards nobody uses. [And next to them, are] The side yards that don't provide any privacy." He goes on to explain, in an article published on February 17, 1974, that, even if they don't necessarily use them, "people like lawns. They are associated with gracious living." In fact, "That front yard may have more to do with images of Mount Vernon or Monticello (check out the nickel) than it does with the need for family recreation space." Following on these observations, Hine concludes that "If you believe people's houses, most people want to be in the countryside. ... As you move into lower middle class suburbs, some lawn appears. This immediately means that there will be a little bit of fence that doesn't keep anyone from going anywhere."

On fences, reporter Joseph Giovannini has much to say. In a piece dated August 13, 1987, he asserts that "Fences are as American as Tom Sawyer, who spent a legendary Missouri day whitewashing one, and Robert Frost, who recommended good ones between neighbors. American politicians are said to spend a lot of time mending them, while people who are noncommittal sit on them. Quiet, often recessive elements in American yards and fields, fences have entered both the dictionary, as idiomatic expressions, and the culture, as lore" (C1). "Traditionally a fence kept people or animals in or out, and it marked boundaries and established territory" (C6). "The farmers and cattlemen who originally built fences did so with the materials at hand and their own labor, at little or no cost, because they had to. The new generation of fences, however, is sophisticated and considerably more expensive" (C1). "The changes in the fence market are due, on the one hand, to the increased security consciousness of homeowners and to their greater interest in gardens. Designers, on the other hand, have become more interested in traditional designs" (C1). Describing one site, Giovannini writes that "The architects drew their inspiration from the Victorian details on a barn on the property and from precedents in landscaped English gardens" (C6). Speaking about fences broadly, Giovannini quotes Steven Izenour, who says that "'Fences are no longer only functional, but symbolic and expressive'" (C6). In other words, according to Jaquelin Robertson, the late dean of the University of Virginia School of Architecture, "'We live in a culture of fences'" (C1). In addition to fences, Izenour reports that "'We found houses with three pieces of split rail, a wagon wheel and a milk can dropped like a piece of stage scenery on lawns'" (C6). Further decorative accoutrements may appear when "People go to the hardware store to pick up other items. A coach lamp adds a vaguely rustic touch. An iron lawn jockey is redolent of large Southern plantation houses and gracious living."

So far, we've described physical props and styles, but it's also worth taking some time to acknowledge another element common across these developments. As Hine writes, "The same fantasies [embodied by lawn-borne artifice] are obvious in the names of development. A name like Sweetbriar Meadows might well have been accurate before they came in with bulldozers and built all these houses. Ironically, the countryside is destroyed in order to present a few more people with an approximation of country living. Everyone knows that they are not living in the country when they move into such a development, just as the residents of Levittown, Pa., or Willingboro, N.J. know that the houses they are living in are not really Early American, even though they have names that conjure up such associations, and maybe a couple of dormers besides. Everyone knows it's not real. But the developers

know that they have to find some attractive theme, or fantasy, on which to build their sales campaign. The 'colonial' houses in Heritage Heights may have French style mansard roofs, but they will still be called 'The best in country living with an Early American flair.'"

On the whole, in the words of Barbara Kelly, who wrote an analysis of Levittown in the Fall of 1988, "The suburb that resulted is composed of houses... designed with a picturesque harmony in the tradition of such advocates of the rural ideal as John Ruskin, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Frederick Law Olmsted" (51). The physical language of these developments is evidently directly tied to myths about the settling of the continent, and multiple reporters say as much. Kelly writes that "In essence, the Levitt house was the reduction of the American Dream to an affordable reality, made possible in large part by the cooperative efforts of the government, the builders, and the banks" (39). An article in The Philadelphia Inquirer from June 26, 1977, noted that "For the Doughertys and the 17,310 other families who eventually moved into Levittown, it was the American dream come true—a house in the country—or, as Mrs. Dougherty said, 'country living with city conveniences'" (13-A). Thomas Hine opined that "The sprawl is where a great many of us live and where many more of us would like to live. It gives us the opportunity to say a lot about ourselves. It is as much an outgrowth of our needs, practical, and psychological, as the clothes we wear."

One other way in which the physical nature of these suburban developments interfaced with social attitudes and systems is that, as Barbara Kelly describes, "The patterns of the basic houses built under the terms of FHA/GI Bill reveal a code of what family life was,
or was supposed to be" (39). So, continues Kelly, for the people who moved into these communities, "they created of themselves a self-identified middle-class, regardless of income or occupation, based on home ownership. In so doing, they became part of the ever growing expansion of the middle class that has been part of the American Dream since the Pilgrims landed in 1620" (52).

[transition]

[Dillon]

Okay, so we have a sense of what elements comprise a typical suburban street, whether it be in Levittown or in another community, and we've also spent some time looking at how these elements embody deeper, clearly settler colonial meanings. Let's dive a bit further into a discussion about how a theoretical framework centered on the notion that images express ideas and signal meaning can elucidate the settler colonial nature of Levittown.
For this, we'll speak with Denise Scott Brown, an internationally-renowned architect, planner, theorist, and all-around brilliant scholar. We should note that in 1970, with her partner Robert Venturi and teaching assistant Peter Schmid, Denise ran a studio at the Yale School of Architecture entitled "Remedial Housing for Architects, or Learning from Levittown." This podcast is not about the Learning from Levittown studio, and the issues we are discussing here were only one area of focus out of many that were considered in the studio. We believe, nonetheless, that because of her pioneering and deeply influential work on content analysis and pedagogical innovation, Denise is uniquely suited to contribute to this narrative. Thanks so much for joining us, Denise!

[Dillon + Denise]

Conversation

[transition]

[Ellen]

As we've previously mentioned, the image of small, tidy houses with pitched roofs separated by picket fences and manicured lawns is so ubiquitous in the collective image of suburbia that it's references almost go unrecognized. However, given the bitter racial tension that is inextricable to our understanding of this time period, it does not seem like a coincidence that these images bear a striking resemblance to the country's first colonial settlements. In an era of rapid technological development, including the ability to construct new types of mass-produced housing, the decision to replicate certain colonial images cannot be considered benign. Instead, the carefully constructed image of Levittown and other communities like it reflect a desire to place themselves within the larger narrative of

America's settler colonial history. In doing so, the residents of these communities are placed within this narrative as well. However, this logic, that of an unbroken visual connection between America's first landowning residents and those purchasing these homes, is imbued with a blatant ignorance towards the reality of the country's history, to the degree that it's mythology ultimately finds itself hard to sustain. At the core of this dissonance is the fact that many residents of Levittown, although white, do not have any legitimate ancestral ties to the country's foundation. Instead, it can be presumed that many of the residents, who were able to purchase their homes largely because of access to recent government programs, are descendants of much more recent immigrants from various ethnic white backgrounds. Their ancestors, unlike the original English settlers who would have owned idyllic houses in the countryside, probably lived in small inner-city apartments that were emblematic of the immigrant working-class. Gaining ownership of a single family home in the suburbs was a way of cementing themselves in an image of whiteness that tied them more closely to the narrative of a settler colonial past than a poor immigrant one.

At least subconsciously, the white residents of Levittown and other suburban communities were aware of this tenuous hold on their chosen narrative, and likewise aware of their need to defend it. Therefore, when a black family moved into the Levittown development in Bucks County, PA, the disruption to their status quo was met with anger and violence. The image of a colonial settlement was incongruous with the image of a black family residing within

it, and white residents were not willing to amend their vision for what a landowning class should look like, despite the fact that in many cases, their own ancestors would not have had access to America's colonial settlements either.

[news clip]

[transition]

[Ellen]
In this podcast, we've argued that by breaking down and analyzing the artifice of suburbia at different scales – from objects to overall house forms to neighborhood plans – it is possible to see how the physical environment of these "new" communities was, in fact, acting on many levels to appear – and be – another link in the myth and narrative of the white occupation of the continent's land.

[Dillon]
There are many other studies that address the topic of race and Levittown in considerable depth. We hope that this podcast contributes to the wider dialogue, by reaffirming the value of using content analysis to reveal how the physical environment embodies meaning. For
those who are interested in further exploring these issues via additional published materials, we suggest reading Herbert Gans' The Levittowners, Cheryl Harris' Whiteness as Property, and Dianne Harris' Little White Houses.

[transition]

[Dillon]
The music that plays between clips is an excerpt from the song "A Road Less Travelled," by the artist Ketsa. This can be found on the Free Music Archive, and Creative Commons information for the song can be found in our show notes.

[Ellen]
The period audio comes from the 1957 documentary "Crisis in Levittown, Pennsylvania," directed by Professor Dan W. Dodson, of the NYU School of Education's Center for Human Relations and Community Studies. The original documentary can be found on YouTube.
The definition of settler colonialism that we use can be found in Oxford Bibliographies, and the full citations for the news articles that we quote can be found in our show notes.

[Dillon]
Once again, we'd like to thank Denise Scott Brown for taking the time to speak with us. I have had the privilege of working with Denise for the past year and a half on research related to this subject, and am grateful for her insight and generosity.

[Ellen]
Thank you for listening.

[transition]