

*Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith*, and T. J. Gorringer's *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*—these and many others examine the built-in assumptions of our ways of life and their often unintended and unexplored consequences. Add Goetz and Hsu to that growing stack.

Neither of these books pretends to offer the last word on the subject of suburban Christianity. They raise more questions than they answer—questions, for example, about the

effects of suburban development on the landscape that may have attracted us to the suburbs in the first place. It would be salutary to consider suburban gender narratives, the ways that suburban living shapes our understandings of masculinity and femininity, and to probe the deep economic structures that make suburbia not only possible but seemingly necessary. What about the labor relations we practice in our suburban homes, homes so often kept clean by someone who can't afford to live in the suburbs? What vision of

redeemed creation do we encode when we build houses that aren't designed to last more than 75 or 100 years—or tear down 30-year-old homes to build bigger ones?

Still, Hsu and Goetz have offered a welcome alternative to tiresome and self-righteous preaching about the spiritual superiority of agrarian or urban life. For Christians living in suburbia—and for those of us who share in the sins of suburbanism from our perches in the country or the city—these provocative yet loving books may prove invaluable. **B&C**

## Ambiguous Utopias

JULIA VITULLO-MARTIN

**A**t a reunion held a few years ago by my husband's family outside Baltimore, my brother-in-law, an architect, suggested we explore Guilford, a section of Northeast Baltimore where their Italian immigrant grandfather had done stonework which he regarded as the finest of his career. An elderly relative wanted no part of the expedition. Yes, grandpa had been very proud of his stone houses, walks, walls, and porter lodges, she recalled. But Guilford prohibited any Italian from moving in. It was "restricted." No Italian, Jewish, or black families need apply. My young, well-educated Italian American in-laws—bankers, professors, lawyers—pondered the unwelcome idea that their hard-working grandfather had treasured having built houses that he himself had been forbidden to buy.

Yet for the decades between the Civil War and the Great Depression—the first heyday of suburban development in America—most upper- and upper-middle-class prime residential developments routinely discriminated in a fashion we now regard as reprehensible. A family's having the money to buy a house wasn't sufficient. It also had to be the right color and ethnicity, and attend the correct church. Deeds carried restrictive covenants that set forth a series of proscriptions that bound both buyer and seller, as well as subsequent owners. In addition to Guilford, Maryland, restrictive covenants governed such famous developments as Forest Hill Gardens and Great Neck Hills in New York, Colony Hills in Massachusetts, Park Ridge in Illinois, Country Club District in Kansas, Palos Verdes in California, and hundreds of others across the country.

Some of the restrictions, particularly in the days before zoning, made eminent sense: no slaughterhouses, for example. No oil refineries, iron foundries, coal yards, hen houses, or reform schools. Some restrictions were a matter of taste, but surely enhanced property values, such as landscaping and set-back requirements. Other restrictions doubtless contributed to the deadening of suburbia that is so much criticized today: no stores, no theaters, no restaurants. But these are really policy considerations, having to do with personal preferences. Do you want to live in a quiet, serene, fairly uniform haven, or do you want to live in a lively, dense, urbane neighborhood? People of good will can and do disagree, and make different choices.

The pernicious restrictive covenants—not struck down by the Supreme Court as unconstitutional until 1948—had to do with race and religion. The most desirable developments were confined to white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants, preferably Episcopalian, with an understood hierarchy for everybody else—which meant that upwardly mobile Americans seeking the most desirable housing as a reward for their newfound wealth, education, and success were usually blocked if they were anything but white Protestants.

Now this little-remembered but immensely important practice has been given its own history by Robert M. Fogelson, a professor of urban studies and history at the

Massachusetts Institute of Technology. To drive home just how extensive the practice was, Fogelson tells the story of an incident that occurred in Los Angeles in 1948. Singer Nat King Cole, one of the most successful entertainers of the 20th century, bought a 12-room house for \$85,000 in Hancock Park, a restricted area. Hancock Park's wealthy doctors, lawyers, and businessmen organized to keep Cole out. When the Supreme Court struck down restrictive covenants as unenforceable by the state, they decided to buy him out, telling him they did not want any undesirables moving in. "Neither do I," said Cole. "And if I see anybody undesirable coming in here, I'll be the first to complain."

One of the most important intellectuals setting the stage for restrictive covenants, writes Fogelson, was Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr., long renowned as this country's greatest landscape architect, designer of the finest American parks, most famously Central Park in New York City. Esteemed as a liberal who opened public spaces to the masses and as an innovator who devised transverses to separate traffic from pedestrians, Olmsted was also a class-conscious aristocrat who saw degradation and deterioration all around him in the 1860s—"the unmistakable signs of the advance guard of squalor."

His solution was separation—to be applied to people in suburbs much as he had applied it to traffic in Central Park. Separate the bad from the good, the noxious from the clean, the tasteless from the tasteful. (This he called the "law of progress," which would enhance the "cleanliness and purity of domestic life.") In addition, ensure that the separation becomes permanent via agreements among property owners. "Suppose I come here," he asked, writing about a suburban tract, "what grounds of confidence can I have that I shall not by-and-by find a dram-shop on my right, or a beer-garden on my left, or a factory chimney or warehouse cutting off this view of the water? If so, what is likely to be the future average value of land in this vicinity?" To emphasize its importance, he italicized his final sentence: "*What improvements have you here that tend to insure permanent healthfulness and permanent rural beauty?*"

In fearing change, 19th-century Americans were hardly being frivolous. As Fogelson points out, the late 19th century was a time of widespread civil disorder, brutal industrialization, financial panics, and unpredictable real estate markets. Elegant buildings were demolished and replaced by taller, uglier ones. He quotes a Unitarian minister in Cambridge, lamenting that "the want of permanence is one of the crying sins of the age," and that Americans "are always getting ready to live in a new place, never living."

As Olmsted noted, the point of his ideas was to ensure "tranquility and seclusion" and to prevent the "desolation which thus far has invariably advanced before the progress of the town." On these matters he was a man of genius who set out the principles that still guide the best develop-

ment: roads should be curvilinear, fitting into rather than destroying natural surroundings; a very few should handle through traffic, the others should be local; they should be beautifully landscaped, as should the front of all homes; the entrances to property should be distinctive, set off by wooden gates or stone lodges—stone being a crucial element used in all Olmsted designs.

Indeed, Guilford, Maryland, was a preeminent Olmstedian development, designed by the Olmsted Brothers, a Boston firm set up by the revered man's sons. Laid out in 1903, Guilford was more stringently restricted than almost any predecessor development. A separate document of 23 pages banned nuisances on all lots, and banned businesses and multi-family housing on all but a few. Setbacks were required at the rear and sides of the houses as well as the front. A design review process allowed the Guilford Park Land Company to reject plans for "aesthetic or other reasons," and to consider whether the house was in "harmony" with its neighbors. No house or lot could be occupied "by any negro or person of negro extraction," nor did the company sell to Jews "of any character whatever." In other words, ethnicity trumped class. A distinguished Jewish scholar, for example, at nearby Johns Hopkins University would be blocked from purchasing. These exclusions became part of the marketing campaign.

What Fogelson thinks of all this he pretty much keeps to himself, which is a disappointment. As a historian accustomed to casting a cold eye on the human condition, Fogelson in his younger years wrote on race, violence, riots, crime, and the disintegration of cities. His book of 2001, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950*, treats the destructiveness of the American pattern of separating business from residences. He concludes that the fall of downtown in the mid-20th century was due to the American development of itself as a nation of suburbs—a bourgeois utopia defined (so he suggests in his new book) as much by what it excluded as by what it included.

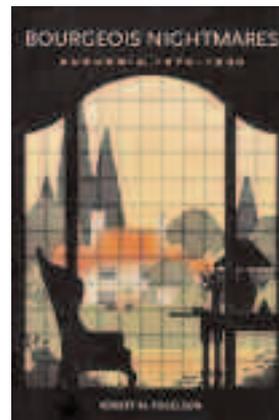
So how are our once-restricted bourgeois utopias doing today? Pretty well, actually. Guilford is still gorgeous, as are Forest Hills, Great Neck, and Bel-Air, to name just a few. For some reason, Fogelson doesn't mention what is obvious to anyone walking through these neighborhoods: the restrictive covenants governing physical amenities like landscaping remain. But the neighborhoods are now a vibrant mixture of ethnicities and probably religions. He does target Palos Verdes Estates, which is only one percent African-American and two percent Hispanic, even though its mother city of Los Angeles hasn't had a white majority since at least 1990.

What does this mean? Have we really not made progress, even though the Italians and Jews who were closed out in the 20th century now own many of the most beautiful suburban houses in America? Does the paucity of blacks and Hispanics in Palos Verdes reflect intractable injustice and discrimination? Or will they be following the groups ahead of them, much as the Italians followed the Irish, and the Irish followed the Germans, who followed the English? Fogelson doesn't tell us, leaving us to draw our own conclusions about the meaning of it all. **B&C**

### Bourgeois Nightmares

Suburbia, 1870-1930

ROBERT M. FOGELSON • YALE UNIV. PRESS, 2005 • 264 PP. • \$30



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