BETWEEN URBAN AND RURAL
public art & suburbia
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Public art and the suburbs is not the non sequitur it at first might seem. Nor is all of suburbia the aesthetic wasteland about which finger-wagging cultural critics pontificate. With more than half the population of the United States living in the suburbs in the twenty-first century—a numbing thought to many urbanites—there must be more to suburbia’s gravitational pull than cul-de-sac roadways, indistinctively designed homes, metastasizing retail centers corralled by asphalt, gas- and time-sucking commutes, and the occasional agricultural or pastoral remnant in the form of nursery property or groomed trails.

But what is it?

As suburbs mature—communities like Shaker Heights, Ohio, are more than a century old—and begin to amass their own history and as new ones burst frantically into existence in the form of sprawl, the precise nature and culture of suburbia is increasingly the focus of critical discussion by academics, urban planners, and environmentalists. Conspicuously lacking from the debate, excepting relatively few examples, are public artists and their art. If public artists, traditionally, make work that “decorates” a site, evokes the cultural history of a community, or memorializes a particular event or activity, why are public artists so seldom working in suburbia? Is it because the context does not have sufficient panache to attract the artist? Or is it because there is neither an organized process nor the money to develop public art programs? Or, further still, is it because suburbanites simply are disinterested in aesthetic enhancements to their environment and uninformed about the cultural benefits that public art can infuse into their communities? Or, at the most fundamental level, is there no history, no sense of place on which to build?

These are the issues and questions that the contributing writers to Public Art Review issue 39, “Between Urban and Rural,” have attempted to flesh out and answer. Addressing the topic from a range of viewpoints, these writers have given this little-explored frontier a framework, ways of addressing the subject.

Todd Bressi and Meridith McKinley articulate the changing profile of the American suburb, and the rise of public art within it, as designers and developers increasingly embrace New Urbanism.

Ronald Lee Fleming addresses the notion of placemaking and asks if it is possible for public art to infuse meaning into the auto-oriented strip development of the suburbs; he includes an informed set of questions that can guide suburban dwellers and officials to find meaning in their communities.

Taking a more visceral approach, Cynthia Nikitin argues that placeliness, a bedrock notion in much public art, is seldom a suburban value, in part because in most suburbs, the "fact of living is cleaved from the act of living."

Noted architect and former artist James Wines explores the concept of mediated space through a description of Beijing’s New World Plaza, a project led by his studio, SITE. His provocative conclusion: “A truly public presence is best achieved when it becomes difficult to discern where one art form begins and the other ends.”

With a fresh eye, Walker Art Center curator and design director Andrew Blauvelt explores the importance of SITE’s 1970s public art projects: interventions that manipulated the facades of BEST Products catalogue showrooms to an extreme and serve as a different paradigm for public art.

My own essay explores the impact of Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes, an exhibition curated by Blauvelt, as a call to arms for public artists to work in the suburbs. It might again be time for artists to don the mantle of the avant-garde and provoke and define new approaches and ways of thinking that can translate to and elevate the cultural vitality of the suburbs.

Bruce N. Wright provides poetic context in an essay that invokes the nineteenth-century Parisian suburb of Montmartre as proof that art and suburbs can co-exist.

And in my interview with Richard Florida, the reader will learn about this urban theorist’s new book, Who’s Your City?, and what he believes to be the main challenges facing suburbs. Will a developing “creative class” embrace ideas of public art?

The health of the world seems to be precarious if not abysmal shape, whether we look at it economically, politically, or environmentally. In the face of these global conditions, the issue of the importance of public art in the suburbs perhaps seems shallow if not inconsequential. On the contrary, art heals wounds, fosters understanding, and propels humanity into the future. This is why the loss of art, whether the museum treasures stolen in the fall of Baghdad or the paintings and sculpture stolen by the Nazis in World War II or the looting of Greek temples, is tragic and enervating.

The world outlook is indeed grim, but with the election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States, there is a glimmer, if not an explosion, of hope in the hearts and minds of people not only in this country but around the world. If history is indeed a guide, artists have promoted and participated actively in change. There is no reason why public art cannot be a growing, meaningful force in promoting future cultural understanding. And the suburbs should be part of this.

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“...Gone now were the old neighborhoods, small towns, farms; now they were citizens of the suburbs, the sprawls of homes that told them nothing about who they were, what they were expected to do... When they grew up there would be hell to pay.”


In the minds of many, suburbia has come to epitomize and proclaim the virtues of placelessness—where one can comfortably exist without the baggage either of history or context. By default, context, or placefulness, is not often considered a suburban value. Carved out of prime agricultural lands and greenfields, suburban residential communities were conceived of as a thing apart—apart from the city, from people of differing socioeconomic classes, and from the eyes of prying neighbors. The suburbs, built originally and continually by private interests, were designed primarily as a place to sleep. Art, culture, work, and fine dining—that’s what cities are for. The only references made to what existed before their colonization of the countryside resides in the names bestowed by developers to the one-way arterials (Spring Bottom Way), cul-de-sacs (Piney Grove Court), and subdivisions (Adams Mill Apartments, The Residences at Steven’s Valley) that proliferate in places like Baltimore County, Maryland.

The commissioning of public art is often a quest for and an act of creating placefulness by a community. Much of the public art created today relies on a sense of placefulness, history, and context to guarantee its relevance. Not only site-specific work, but also work commissioned for placement in a wide range of public settings, relies to a large extent upon on the interpretation, celebration, beautification, or remediation of its surroundings. Public art often strives to express or reflect what we value as a community. It often raises the questions of what we want to communicate about ourselves to others, and who “we” are anyway. The suburbs (at least post–World War II), in contrast, are more about “what’s good for me and my kids.” People move to the suburbs because the schools are supposedly better, the air is supposedly cleaner, and the property taxes are often lower than in nearby urban centers. Given such a self-serving and arguably mundane agenda, acts of group self-reflection and exploration, presumably, are rare occurrences. Lacking these prime motivational causes, public art has little if any place in suburban life.

In traditional suburbs, where zoning and land use regulations effectively cleaved the fact of living (sleeping, eating, mowing) from anything remotely related to the act of living (shopping, volunteering, voting, going to school or church), another question arises: How could public art have a relevant role to play? In these sidewalk-less, cul-de-sac asphalt seas, where the only communal activity takes place in the mall or in a strip commercial shopping center located along a six-lane arterial, and where no one in their right mind would venture to go on foot, when is there a time or place for meaningful interaction or shared cultural expression?

It wasn’t always this way. The first garden and streetcar suburbs built before the war, like Shaker Heights, Ohio, often employed iconic symbols—art in public places, if you will—in the forms of statuary in the center of gateway roundabouts, stately stone gatehouses, clock towers, fences, and architecture.
Many also were built around the notion of shared public space. The organizing feature of Radburn, a garden suburb in the borough of Fairlawn, New Jersey, is a huge linear park, with bike routes, walking paths, a swimming pool, and barbeque and picnic areas. Its planners, Clarence Stein, Henry Wright, and landscape architect Marjorie Sewell Cautley, designed Radburn so that every home borders, or is less than a one-block walk from, a beautiful park where children may play unsupervised.

The resultant blurring of boundaries and even of property lines continues to instill a true activist sense of community in many of its residents.

Conversely, most modern-day suburbs are conceived of and, accordingly, built as single-purpose residential enclaves surrounded or linked by sports fields and “open” space—most of which are accessible only by car due to the discontinuous street network and designed for the sole purpose of funneling cut-through traffic by commuters seeking relief from congested arterials that girdle these communities. For example, many children who live in a typical contemporary South Florida gated subdivision play in their own backyards, primarily to keep away from their neighbors’ cars, but also because there is no shared public realm and no communal space save for a clubhouse or recreation center. The streets themselves remain wholly the domain of the automobile.

As public space is lost in the suburbs, so too is the notion of a shared public realm. And without a shared public realm, public art cannot exist. New trends in suburban greenfield development, however, are in evidence. First, there is the urbanizing suburban town center. Private developers, often in cooperation with a transit agency (as in transit-oriented development) or the mayor’s office, are promoting mixed-use residential and commercial development as infill along arterial roadways. Likewise, aging, vacant 1960s shopping centers are being redeveloped with apartments and civic buildings/entities (branch libraries, mini city halls, etc.).

Second, there are the highly touted New Urbanist communities like the Flats in Memphis; Abacoa, Seaside, and Celebration, all in Florida; and Stapleton outside of Denver. Even New Urbanist communities, however, are privately developed, as are the latest efforts at re-creating a more sanitary version of an urban core in new town centers. While these communities advertise housing built in close proximity to a walkable commercial center, the center is walkable but little else is. The economics of these developments tend to dictate social and economic homogeneity among residents, and only those who are able to pay market rate for a home are accommodated. In these scenarios, a developer might commission a work of public art as a selling point, to appeal to a culturally astute clientele, or to distinguish their project from the one going up across the street.

Given the lack of a shared public realm and publicly owned space in many suburban developments, the traditional
funding triggers for public art are completely lacking in most suburbs. There are few municipally owned facilities that could provide for a percent-for-art project, nor would most residents permit such a thing (suburbanites are known for their "not in my backyard" stands, or NIMBYism). Schools, which are often the only publicly funded institutions to be found in the 'burbs, rarely have a percent-for-art program in place. Consequently, private funding for public art is perhaps the only viable alternative. Fountains at the guardhouse or in front of the Town Center shops, clock towers, or a privately sited and commissioned work, are all that might win approval from a homeowners association, and then only if the residents don't have to pay for it.

Another consideration, even a red flag, to a private developer or homeowners association is content. Whole genres of public art are immediately off the table, if not completely out of the question. For example, works that explore gender or identity politics probably have no place in the suburbs; nor does art that challenges corporate America, American foreign policy, or that exposes the fact of displacement or exclusion of underserved populations.

A case in point is the South Suburban (Colorado) Public Art Committee (SSPAC). The SSPAC recommends and selects artists for playgrounds, nature centers, swimming pools, recreation centers, and other types of park facilities across six towns and three counties in the lands south of Denver, including Littleton, Centennial, Columbine Valley, Castlewood, Lone Tree, and Sheridan. The SSPAC states that it "assures reflection of community values and culture to residents and visitors" and seeks to "protect the public's health, safety, and welfare in regards to placed art." Furthermore, "the materials displayed in the recreation facilities must be suitable for viewing by District patrons of all ages. Therefore, the SSPAC and the South Suburban Board of Directors reserves the right to ensure that art displays are balanced and appropriate." Safety, appropriateness, and community values—the suburban ideals—are what guide the art selection process. However, Teresa Cope, the communications director of the region's recreation district, points out that "public art has created a different kind of conversation inside of recreation centers and it brings out the community." Exhibiting the works of Colorado artists in gallery spaces built inside of recreation centers is one way of bringing artists and their suburban audiences together.

Another challenge facing public art in suburban environments is the question of when and how public processes, consensus building, and community building play out in the suburbs. Other than social events, amateur theatrical productions, or school-centered activities, consensus only seems to matter when it comes to ensuring the safety and security of residents: Creating drug-free zone initiatives, neighborhood watch groups, security patrols, paying for a staffed gatehouse, or initiating a safe routes to school plan—it's all for the greater good for my kids and me. The notion of collective expression and action for political or social reasons is, arguably, anathema to the typical stranger/danger-fearing soccer mom.

In spite of these perceived challenges, public processes, consensus building, and the meaningful and purposely integration of public art into suburbia are quite possible and fairly easy to achieve in a suburban context. It starts at the very early stages of the planning process, when the developer, city staff, elected officials, and representatives from existing civic and cultural organizations work together to generate a shared vision for what this New Urbanist/new town center can be—not only to people who live there, but to the larger city/ community/region. Such a process should aim to build consensus around a shared vision of the future of a place and the people who will inhabit it, as well as an exploration of how public art can contribute to this vision.

In considering how to engage suburban developers vis-a-vis public art, a public art committee might begin by seeking precedents—such as reaching out to developers who have previously commissioned works of public art in urban settings—to encourage these developers to continue the practice in their suburban projects. Another avenue to explore is to convince developers to incorporate public art as part of their package of offerings to a market segment making the new town center/leisure center lifestyle choice, who might be looking to relocate to a place with amenities that are above and beyond the typical spa, fitness club, and on-site conference center.

But what can public art actually do for a suburban community? Public art can begin to create a mental shift. It can help a community begin to redefine and reimagine the notion of shared space, shared values, and collective common interests. It can be a means for reclaiming and regaining a stake in a shared public realm. Most importantly, public art can encourage shared responsibility and stewardship within a community and help its members connect to a larger shared history and to each other.

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