

The American Suburbs

History (HI) 450
Mondays 2:30-5:15
HIS 504
Professor Robichaud

Professor Robichaud's Office:

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Office Hours:

Wednesdays 11-12

Fridays 10-11

And by appointment

Overview

In the battle for American life, the suburbs seem to be winning. Perhaps they've already won. A recent poll found that 53 percent of Americans described where they lived as "suburban." But it wasn't always so. Suburban life is a relatively recent development in history. In the late nineteenth century, suburbs were often thought of as just that—*sub*-urban. The term might have described any number of spaces on the edges of cities—from farms, to borderlands, to undesirable wastelands, to emerging wealthy country estates for urban elites. The evolution of streetcar and automobile suburbs into the twentieth century showed just how pliable the term suburb could be. As the twentieth century wore on, most Americans put their stock in the suburbs, but their "choices"—for better or worse—were highly influenced by public policies and social and cultural pressures.

Since the rise of suburbia in the twentieth century, there have been no shortage of critics of suburban life. As an object of cultural fascination, the suburbs have given rise to countless novels, films, and songs. They are at once ordinary, scary, placid, sinister, dull, and dangerous. We might say that suburban sprawl is both a landscape and a state of mind.

This course seeks answers to a few big questions. What is a "suburb" and how has the idea and ideal of "suburban" changed over time? How did Americans understand their suburban lives in the moments they lived them, and in retrospect? What are the consequences of suburban choices and structures?

In this seminar, we will address these questions (and more) through a deliberate study of suburbs in American history. Students will develop a critical assessment of the term

“suburb,” and come to understand the origins and development of American suburbs and how their characteristics and meaning have changed over time.

This class is a seminar, which means that students will generate a large portion of the content and conversation in our weekly meetings. For this class to succeed (and for you to succeed in the class) you will need to come prepared by doing the readings and assignments, and making thoughtful contributions to class discussion.

Students with Disabilities and Special Needs

Students with special needs will receive appropriate accommodations. Please speak with me and submit your accommodation letters as soon as possible. Students may also wish to contact the Office of Disability Services at (617) 353-3658. All discussions will be confidential.

Evaluation

- 25% Class Attendance and Active, Thoughtful Participation**
- 10% Site Observation, Walking Tour Presentation, and Write-up (Due Feb. 12)**
- 5% Paper Checkpoint 1 (Due Monday, February 26)**
- 5% Paper Checkpoint 2 (Due March 26)**
- 10% Song Review and in-class presentation (Due April 2)**
- 15% Film Review (Due Wednesday, April 18)**
- 5% Final Presentation (April 23 or 30)**
- 15% Final Paper (8-10 pages) (Due Friday, May 4)**
- 10% Reflection Essay and Discussion Questions for your assigned week**

Letter Grades

If letter grades are given, their numerical equivalents are as follows: A+=100, A=95, A-=91.5, B+=88.5, B=85, B-=81.5, C+=78.5, C=75, and so on.

Academic Conduct

Your work for this course must be your own. Quoting or using another person’s ideas without attribution, or presenting another person’s work as your own, are forms of plagiarism. If you are found plagiarizing, you will receive a failing grade for the assignment, and possibly the course, with possible further sanctions by the University Academic Conduct Committee. Students should consult the Boston University Academic Conduct Code: <http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>. It is your responsibility to read these policies carefully and to know exactly what constitutes plagiarism.

Late Work

Written work is to be handed in on the dates listed, at the very start of class or by the specific time assigned. Your paper will be marked down 1/3 of a grade for each day it is late (an A will become an A-, a B+ will become a B, etc.). Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted. I will consider extensions when there is a compelling

reason and sufficient notice. If you need an extension, let me know well in advance (at least a full week).

Class Participation

Please come prepared for class. Do the reading and take notes. Prior to class, I would recommend spending at least 30 minutes writing out your thoughts to some of the following questions, which we will draw upon for class discussion:

1. What is one surprising or interesting thing you learned from this reading?
2. What do you see as some of the main arguments and takeaways from this reading?
3. What additional questions does it raise for you?
4. What is one thing you think the author did well?
5. What is one thing the author did not do well?
6. What, if anything, do you see as least convincing?
7. What did this reading make you wish you could learn more about?

Attendance

As a seminar, this course relies on your preparation, attendance, and active participation to work. Attendance is mandatory and essential. For every absence, students will be marked down 5 points in their attendance/participation grade (out of 100 points). Everyone is allowed one absence without penalty, no questions asked. Up to one additional absence can be made up by submitting a 2-3 page reflection essay on the readings for the class you missed. Additional absences may be made up at the discretion of the professor.

Discussion Questions and Reflection

Each week 1-2 students will be assigned to write a reflection essay (2-3 pages) on the readings for that week. In addition to submitting a reflection essay, students will prepare a set of discussion questions for the class and may be called on to share their questions and facilitate discussion. Dates will be assigned early in the semester. When it is your day, please come to class prepared with several questions and ideas about what important issues and questions these readings raise. Your reflection essay and questions must be submitted by email to andrewr1@bu.edu by midnight before class.

Song Analysis (2-3 Pages of Analysis plus song transcripton)

For all the talk of the suburbs as culturally vacuous, they sure have inspired people to sing. For this assignment you will pick a song from a list provided (or talk with the professor to propose your own song at least a week before the assignment is due). Please write up a transcription of the lyrics and write a 2-3 page analysis of the song. What does it have to say about the suburbs? What is the relevant historical context of the songwriter and the song? What is the depiction of suburban life? Do you agree or disagree with the “argument”?

Film Review (3-4 pages of analysis)

Although cities were once the cinematic centers of American life, the suburban multiplex ultimately emerged. Similarly, films about the suburbs seem to have boomed in the last

half-century. There are countless films that take place in the suburbs—and many that are explicitly critiques of suburban life in America. For this assignment you will watch a film from a list provided (or propose your own to the professor at least two weeks before the due date). Watch the film at least twice, and see what other critics have said about the film. (If you use someone else’s words or ideas, be sure to cite them.) What is the filmmaker saying about suburban life? When was the film created and what era does it intend to depict? Do you see any significance in these dates? Provide some historical context about the film, and assess the film’s “argument” about the suburbs.

Final Paper (8-10 pages)

Students will become experts on the history and development of a particular suburb in the United States. A separate description of the assignment will be distributed early in the semester.

Checkpoint Drafts (approximately 3-4 pages each)

In preparation for their final papers and presentations, students will submit two checkpoint drafts. These drafts will be graded and returned, and students should incorporate feedback into their final submission. Each checkpoint will be 3-4 pages in length and the focus of the checkpoint will be discussed and outlined during the semester.

Presentation

Students will present a 10-12 minute (depending on class size) presentation about their findings for their final project. These presentations will take up part of each of the last two classes in the semester (April 23 and 30). Students are not required to have a PowerPoint presentation or slideshow, though it is highly encouraged.

Books for Purchase:

These books are not available in digital format and should be purchased. Copies will also be available on reserve at Mugar Library.

- Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1987) (ISBN: 978-0195049831)
- Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth: 1820-2000* (2003) (ISBN: 978-0375727214)
- Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961) (ISBN: 978-0375708442)

Other readings –marked with an asterisk (*) will be posted or linked within Blackboard, or provided in class.

SCHEDULED MEETINGS

1. January 22

Overview, Syllabus, and Introductions

Big Questions to Consider

- Jed Kolko, “How Suburban Are Big American Cities?” *FiveThirtyEight*, May 21, 2015.

2. January 29

What are “the suburbs?”

From Borderlands and Slums to Home Sweet Home

- Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-70).
- Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, Introduction, and chapters 1, 3, and 4 (pp. 3-19, 45-86).
- Andrew Jackson Downing, selections*
- Plans for Llewellyn Park, New Jersey and Riverside, Illinois*

In Class Question: How do we define “suburban,” and can we sketch out the historical dimensions of the term? What do you think of as the social, cultural, environmental, spatial, and landscape features of suburbia? What are the features of early suburbs?

In Class Lab:

Site Selection for Brookline Walking Tour

How To Read a Built Landscape

3. February 5

“Streetcar Suburbs”

- Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, chapters 5-6 (pp. 87-115).
- Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, chapter 5 (pp. 71-96).
- “The Doleful History of the Omnibus Horse,” *Harper’s* (August, 1860).*
- William Dean Howells, “Suburban Sketches” (1871) (selections).*

In-Class Lab:

Brookline Walking Tour Research Check-In

Final Project – Initial Brainstorm and In Class Research Lab

4. February 12

*****In Class: Student-led Walking Tour of Early Suburban Brookline*****

“Beautiful Brookline”

- Michael Rawson, “Inventing the Suburbs,” *Eden on the Charles* (pp.129-179).*
- William Dean Howells, “Suburban Sketches” (1871) (selections)*

5. TUESDAY, February 20 (Monday Schedule)

Human and Animal Suburbs

- Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, chapter 8 (pp. 138-156)
- Adna Weber, “Suburban Annexations,” *North American Review* (May 1898), (pp.612-617).*
- Additional Brighton Reading, TBA*

In Class: Walking Lecture, beginning in Brighton Center (Weather permitting and details TBA.)

6. February 26

*****Paper Checkpoint Part I Due in Class*****

Designing the Suburbs

The City in the the Suburbs and the Suburbs in the City

- Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* (1902), selections*
- Richmond Court Brochure*
- Daniel Bluestone, “Chicago's Mecca Flat Blues,” in *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* (Dec., 1998), pp. 382-403.*
- Daniel Bluestone, “Curves on the Fringe: Meadowbrook Hills and the Rise of Charlottesville’s Picturesque Suburbs,” in *Magazine of Albermarle County History*.*

Special Guest: Professor Daniel Bluestone

March 5 – NO CLASS – Spring Break

7. March 12

Structures of Suburbia, Part I: Cars, Roads, and Mass Production

- Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, chapter 9 and 14 (pp.157-171, 246-271).
- Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, chapter 8 (pp.154-180).
- Wells, *Car Country*, part IV (pp. 253-287).*
- “Do We Look Fat in These Suburbs?” *The Atlantic*, August 13, 2014.*

In Class Lab:

Selections from the films “The City” (1939) and “The End of Suburbia” (2004)

8. March 19

Structures of Suburbia, Part II: The Race for Loans

Red Lines and Green Grass

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014).*
- Crabgrass Frontier, chapters 11-12 (pp. 190-230).
- Andrew Wiese, “The House I Live In”* (~20pp.)
- *The Suburbs Reader*, selections*

In Class Lab:

Final Project Check-In and Resource Sharing

Mapping the Geography of Home Loans

What sources have been helpful to you in researching your suburb?

9. March 26

*****Paper Checkpoint Part II*****

Levittown and “Sitcom Suburbs”

- Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, chapter 7 (pp. 128-153)
- Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, chapter 13 (pp. 231-245)
- “Up From the Potato Fields,” *Time*, July 3, 1950, pp.67-70*

- Herbert Gans, *The Levittowners* (1967) (selections)*
- June Williamson, "Retrofitting Levittown," *Places* (2005), pp.46-51.*

In Class Lab:

Picturing Levittown: Films and Images of the Instant Suburbs

Footnotes and Citations

10. April 2

*****Song Review and Mini Presentation Due in Class*****

The Suburban Experience at Home: Mothers, and Children

- Phyllis McGinley, "Suburbia: Of Thee I sing," *Harper's Magazine* (December 1, 1949), pp.78-82*
- Elizabeth Herbert, "This is How I Keep House," *McCall's* (April, 1949)*
- Merrill Folsom, "Suburbia on Wheels," *New York Times*, May 2, 1955, p.23*
- Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (selections)*
- "Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped," *Reader's Digest*, (January, 1961)*
- D.J. Waldie, *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (selections)*
- Frank DeCaro, *A Boy Named Phyllis: A Suburban Memoir* (selections)*
- Joanne Jacobson, *Hunger Artist: A Suburban Childhood* (selections)*
- Richard Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Part I (to page 116)

In Class Lab: Songs of the Suburbs

11. April 9

The Suburban Experience Part II: Fathers and Families

- Yates, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), Part II and III (finish book)
- William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (1956) (selections)*

For Class: Highlight 3 passages from *Revolutionary Road* that say something about the suburbs or suburban life.

In Class Lab:

How to Write a Film Review

Monday, April 16 - NO CLASS - Patriots Day Holiday

12. WEDNESDAY, April 18 - MONDAY SCHEDULE

*****Film Review Due in Class*****

Edges and Sprawl

Suburban Discontent, Backlash, and Revision

- Hayden, chapters 8-9, pp.154-200
- Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck, "What is Sprawl, and Why?" in *Suburban Nation* (chapter 1, pp. 3-20)
- Robert Bruegmann, "The Paradoxes of Anti-Sprawl Reform" (2000)*
- Joel Garreau, "Life on the Edge," *Washington Post*, September 8, 1991*
- James Kuntsler, "The Ghastly Tragedy of the Suburbs," TED Talk. *
- James Kuntsler, "Home From Nowhere," *The Atlantic*, September, 1996.*

- Katz and Bradley, “Divided We Sprawl,” *The Atlantic*, December, 1999.*
- Lewis Mumford on Suburbia, from *The City in History*, (1961)*
- Adam Rome, “Building on the Land: Toward an Environmental History of Residential Development in American Cities and Suburbs, 1870-1990,” *Journal of Urban History* (May 1994): pp. 407-434.
- Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons*, selections.*

In Class Lab: Radiant City and Narratives of Suburbia

13. April 23

*****Student Presentations*****

Changing Suburbs and the New Suburban History

- Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, “Introduction” in *The New Suburban History**
- Margaret, O’Mara, “Suburbia Reconsidered,” *Journal of Social History* (Fall 2005), pp. 229-243.*
- Wendy Cheng, “The Changes Next Door to the Diazes: Suburban Racial Formation in Los Angeles’s San Gabriel Valley,” *Journal of Urban History* (2013).*
- David Dent, “The New Black Suburbs,” *New York Times*, June 14, 1992*
- S. Mitra Kalita, *Suburban Sahibs: Three Immigrant Families and Their Passage from India to America* (selections).*
- Lily Geismer, “Good Neighbors Fair Housing” in *Journal of Urban History* (2012).*
- Suggested podcast: “American Suburb,” KQED (2017)

In Class Lab: Selections from Farmingville, POV

14. April 30

*****Student Presentations*****

Crash, Burn, and Rebirth?

Suburbs in the News

- Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, chapters 15-16, pp.272-305.
- Joel Kotkin, “The Triumph of Suburbia,” *The Daily Beast*, April 29, 2013*
- Alan Berger, “The Suburb of the Future, Almost Here,” *New York Times*, September 15, 2017*
- Samuels, The Unfinished Suburbs of America, *The Atlantic*, 2014*
- Alan Ehrenhalt, “Trading Places,” *The New Republic*, August 13, 2008*
- Elizabeth Kolbert, “Turf War,” *New Yorker*, July 21, 2008*
- S. Mitra Kalita, “The Silent Majority of America Just Roared,” *cnn.com*, December 15, 2017*
- Umair Irfan, “California’s wildfires are not ‘natural’ – humans made them worse at every step,” *Vox*, December 8, 2017.*

In Class Lab:

Reflection Essay on American Suburban History

Conclusions

*****Final Papers Due Friday, May 4 by 11:59pm by email: andrewr1@bu.edu*****