Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000 (review)

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The American dream house has deep roots. John Archer’s book explores the historical origins of suburban domestic architecture to show how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideologies are still at play today. In Architecture and Suburbia, the author builds on his previous book, The Literature of British Domestic Architecture, 1715–1842, but also aims to provide a starting point for future discussions about contentious present-day housing issues such as sprawl, neighborhoods, and gated communities.

The book covers four centuries. Part I focuses on eighteenth-century England and the genesis of the bourgeois dwelling. Part II examines nineteenth-century America, and Part III explores the dream house ideal, the suburban landscape, and the trope of the American Dream.

Archer traces the ideological origins of the American Dream to the early eighteenth century, when the single-family house on its own parcel of private property emerged in response to a new idea of selfhood advanced by John Locke. Embedded in this newly emerging vision were the notions of retirement, meaning a nonproductive landscape intended for the private pursuits of its owner, privacy, and pastoralism. Houses and their social function also changed. The dwelling became more than just a mirror or reflection of society; instead, it began to be viewed as an effective medium for constructing individuality. Thus a new type of dwelling in a new type of locale emerged: the bourgeois compact villa. These dwellings were typically two to three stories high with five windows extending across the façade, often with a pedimented portico framing the center group of windows. As the bourgeoisie began to favor such dwellings as instruments for establishing and expressing themselves, so, too, did architects begin to change the way in which they conceived of and marketed their work. As the eighteenth century wore on, “enclaves of bourgeois villas” such as Twickenham began to emerge around London and other English towns, just as they did outside some American towns such as Philadelphia and Boston (90). These early suburbs with their detached dwellings surrounded by private property emerged largely in opposition to the city, promising a purer and healthier environment that encouraged bourgeois residents to engage in leisure pursuits.

Privacy also became increasingly important. One significant corollary to the developing notion of domestic privacy was the concept of retirement: the chance to develop one’s individuality through solitude, retreat, and isolation. Another was the idea of a dwelling surrounded by a pastoral landscape, one that was preferably detached from the world of the city but also disassociated from land that showed overt evidence of economic productivity. In domestic architecture, privacy began to be articulated by new means of circulation such as staircases and corridors, by limiting the functions of rooms within the dwelling, and by closing off and dedicating other rooms to more private functions. Instead of placing rooms in suites, architects began to arrange rooms as end destinations. They designed bourgeois dwellings to segregate servants and service areas away from public areas, codified room use, and separated the family into its own distinct zone. Archer maintains that while the seventeenth-century house merely provided a static reflection of its owner’s status, the eighteenth-century bourgeois villa had become something more: “an instrument by which the owner might articulate his identity” (170).

Part II shows how transformations in the English bourgeois dwelling set the stage for similar changes in America. The author focuses on upper- and mid-level suburbs to determine how suburbs evolved, grew integral to the American dream, and increasingly became associated with the bourgeois self-made individualist. While the political undertones of suburban home ownership are usually associated with the twentieth century, particularly the Levittown era, Archer notes that aspects of suburban existence began to be associated with patriotism as early as 1845.

In the nineteenth century, entire tracts of land began to be laid out in multiple units, often accompanied by promotional rhetoric. From the beginning, one primary attraction of suburbs was their existence in opposition
to the city. The notion of *rus in urbe*—or the marriage of city and country—undergirded suburban ideology, and the idea that a carefully designed blend of the two poles would produce a new civilization remained important to suburban planning for at least a century. Still, critics of suburbia emerged, arguing that suburbs were too homogeneous, that they needed to serve a broader range of people and maintain a greater diversity of building types, and that they did not live up to their advertised ideals. Some critics even believed that suburbs hurt families because fathers who worked elsewhere could spend little time with their children; others added that suburbs emasculated and feminized the men who lived there, while encouraging women to follow useless pursuits (293). For some late-nineteenth century critics, the term “suburban” became a mark of disdain and contempt, and suburbia began to be seen as “a place of disaffection and estrangement” (241).

The notion of the American Dream, exemplified by the detached single-family house, became the reigning ideal in the twentieth century. In Part III, Archer traces the primary themes that drove the American Dream, exploring how advertisements, films, television, music, and literature linked that idea to the single-family house. In the early 1920s the goal of putting each American family into its own dwelling became a focus of federal policy. Vice-President Calvin Coolidge argued in “A Nation of Home-Owners” that capitalism could not prevail until property ownership was widespread. Accordingly, Herbert Hoover, who as Secretary of Commerce under Harding and Coolidge was especially concerned about the spread of Bolshevism, worked to bolster American home ownership. That goal was soon popularized throughout American culture, becoming a standard against which people could measure themselves. The dream house ideal was communicated through retail marketing, architectural design, radio programming, and many other aspects of American culture, which had the effect of raising expectations for all (250). Archer points out that despite later twentieth-century critiques of suburbia, the Dream still governs corresponding elements of American political and economic policy, and is “a standard that becomes the ‘norm’ to which further generations become habituated as they grow up in such houses” (303).

In a concluding chapter the author restates many of the same points, and ends by introducing his notion of architectural hybridity, drawn from Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of linguistic hybridity. Suburban dwellings have always supported a variety of different lifestyles, and Archer proposes that by “exploring the further incorporation of hybridity in the design, planning, and study of suburbia,” suburban environments can more effectively fulfill the needs and aspirations of their inhabitants (364). A brief coda includes the author’s recommendations for ways in which suburban planners can give residents more of a stake in their neighborhoods by designing houses that can be changed more effectively over time, by unbonding communities and weaving them into their surroundings, and by creating more opportunities for a variety of different suburban identities.

*Architecture and Suburbia* is deeply researched. The author’s extensive knowledge of the literature of British domestic architecture is one of the book’s greatest strengths. His imaginative use of music, films such as *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948), and literature such as the John Keats novel *The Crack in the Picture Window* (1956) to examine the pervasiveness of the American Dream provide texture and resonance to an already powerful argument. The book is also profusely illustrated with some wonderful images, mostly culled from published literature, as terms are occasionally introduced without being identified or explained. Still, on balance, John Archer’s thoroughly researched examination of the roots of the American Dream remains a major contribution to the literature on American suburbs, for the seemingly obsolescent ideologies that allowed that idea to take root still resonate today all over the American landscape.