

CURRENT BOOKS

Design for Living

SUBURBAN NATION:

The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream.

By Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk,
and Jeff Speck. North Point Press. 290 pp. \$30

by *Suzannah Lessard*

Can design affect whether a place develops a spirit of community? No doubt. Can a spirit of community be fostered simply by copying designs that worked well in the past? That seems more problematic, but those who promote such an approach as a solution to the alienating character of much suburban development can hardly be faulted when no one has come up with an alternative.

The architectural establishment has remained largely aloof from the phenomenon, but for several decades sprawl has been one of the most pressing crises of the built world: an aesthetic crisis, an environmental crisis, and, the authors of *Suburban Nation* contend, a societal crisis as well. In their view, suburban development has accelerated, if not caused, the waning of community in American life and, with it, the deterioration of the very fabric of society.

One of the great failings of intellectual elites is an abhorrence of the middle class, and there has probably never been a land-

scape as relentlessly middle class as suburbia. This strange, inverted snobbery that so many thoughtful people share may in part explain why architecture turned its back on this vast area of its professional domain. The typical thinking city dweller's contact with suburban sprawl has been limited to speeding through it as quickly as possible on the way to "country" homes, drives that have gotten longer and longer as the imperial advance of sprawl has moved inexorably outward from the cities.

In recent years, however, the configuration of sprawl has changed, eroding the distinction between city and country. Splotches of sprawl have begun to appear far beyond the expanding metropolis, deep in the erstwhile countryside. It's the information age that makes this possible: There's no need for businesses to cleave to the city anymore. This new pattern reflects the dissolution of geography as the basis of community, probably one of the most radical of the various revolutions that have turned the world inside out in the last 15 years.

The authors of this book are standout exceptions to the habits of denial and aloofness where sprawl is concerned. Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk lead the Miami-based design firm Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co., and Jeff Speck is director of town planning there. As founders of a movement called the New Urbanism, they have plunged into the business of developing work-



A pleasing blend of styles on a street in Annapolis, Maryland.

able alternatives to sprawl, and they have been scorned and berated for it—because of their aesthetic traditionalism and, most vociferously, because they actually build in suburbia, which, critics allege, only adds to sprawl. In fact, their firm has done quite a lot of neighborhood revitalization in cities, but it is their suburban work that has made them famous, in particular their “new towns” such as Seaside, Florida.

Seaside received national exposure in the 1998 film *The Truman Show*. Truman Burbank, played by Jim Carrey, is a young man whose whole life has been a 24-hour-a-day television show watched by the world. Though he doesn’t know it, the people around him are all actors playing parts, and the place where he lives is a stage set. Everything is manipulated; nothing is real. Seaside, a picturesque town of porches and picket fences, served perfectly as the place that was really a set.

The speed with which mass culture grasped what is disturbing about the New Urbanism is a marvel of criticism. However much one admires the initiative behind the New Urbanism, these new yet old-fashioned environments are strange to the point of being seriously disturbing. Indeed, they can make one feel like Truman Burbank, in a place where it is impossible to get to bedrock reality.

Another Duany Plater-Zyberk development, Kentlands, Maryland, looks like a blend of every WASP resort in the East stirred into Georgetown—and what’s most disconcerting is that the designers got it right. It’s very attractive, part of the marketing of WASP good taste. Indeed, you could say the authors are architecture’s Ralph Lauren by way of the Disney school. (Celebration, Florida, the reproduction of an old-fashioned Midwestern town financed by the Walt Disney Company, is not a Duany Plater-Zyberk project, but it is regarded as an exemplar of New Urbanism.) Kentlands’ attractiveness is that of the studied effect. It’s a kind of illusion, so expertly pulled off that one can momentarily lose one’s bearings in both time and place in a way that never happens in ordinary sprawl.

And yet places like Kentlands offer a substantive alternative to sprawl. What is revolutionary about these developments, as *Suburban Nation* explains, is that they are densely built and mix different income levels, anathema in the world of suburban development. In this way they consume far less land and offer environments far more conducive to community than the standard suburban subdivision. The book also explains in detail New Urbanism’s other key practices, such as connecting roads rather than ending them in cul de sacs, building corner stores, and favoring pedestrians through layouts that allow one to walk from the edge of a neighborhood to its center in no more than five minutes.

By not only embracing but executing these ideas, Duany Plater-Zyberk has crossed the Rubicon that has long separated suburban developers from establishment architects. The authors accept the realities of the American real estate market, and they look for ways to make it work to their ends. They scorn the scorn that the elite heaps on developers and market values. Of the accusation that their projects only add to the problem, they retort that suburban development is inevitable; better to influence it in benign ways than to hold oneself apart. This last point is incontrovertible. Even if our cities were completely restored to health, they would not provide nearly enough room for a burgeoning, prospering population, which in any event shows little inclination toward traditional urban settings.

Suburban Nation is a little like a New Urbanist town: smooth, adept, controlling in the way that tacitly excludes alternative views of reality. Written in a lucid style, the book implies that these are simple problems with solutions so obvious that only stupidity would resist them. It avoids coming to grips with the deeper paradoxes of the ever-changing world, whether it be the dissolution of geography as the basis of community or the fact that only the unemployed have time to sit on porches chatting with passersby nowadays. (In Kentlands last fall, the town was empty on weekdays—no matter how traditional the architecture, in most families both parents work—but the

displays of Indian corn and pumpkins on those empty porches were Martha Stewart-impeccable.)

One of the most chilling passages reveals the depth of manipulation that New Urbanism entails. A development in downtown Providence, Rhode Island, had flopped because the apartments came with dishwashers and frilly curtains, while “urban pioneers . . . cherish their edgy self-image and eschew iconography that smacks of middle-class contentment. Their taste for roughness cannot be overestimated. If the walls of the ele-

vator are covered with Formica paneling, better to rip it off and just leave the glue.” And, in the suburban development pretending to be an old-fashioned country town, make sure the corner store has sleeping dogs.

Read here of the first full-scale, reality-tested program for bringing sanity to the landscape of sprawl. If it disturbs our deepest beliefs about place and authenticity, then it’s up to us to invent something better. Any ideas?

>SUZANNAH LESSARD, *the author of The Architect of Desire: Beauty and Danger in the Stanford White Family* (1996), is writing a book about sprawl.

Grammar with Style

WORD COURT:

Wherein Verbal Virtue Is Rewarded, Crimes against the Language Are Punished, and Poetic Justice Is Done.

By Barbara Wallraff. Harcourt. 368 pp. \$23

THE ELEMENTS OF STYLE

(4th ed.).

By William Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White.

Allyn & Bacon. 105 pp.

\$14.95 hardcover, \$6.95 paper

by John Simon

Writers, readers, and reviewers of books about the English language must bear three things in mind. First, English has as many mystery-shrouded sources as the Nile, has felt as many influences as much-conquered Sicily, and has endured enough legislators for a combined Areopagus and Sanhedrin. From this it follows that, second, no grammar, dictionary, or other language book will go uncontested and become the sole and absolute authority on its subject. Third, no one owning all the books, including a dictionary occupying an entire shelf, can claim to have and know it all. Trying to navigate among these clashing tomes is as arduous as sailing between Scylla and Charybdis, though slightly less perilous. Skin and reputation may be saved, but the certainty of being right remains elusive.

From among a handful—more properly, an armload—of recent publications, I pick as deserving of prompt attention Barbara

Wallraff’s *Word Court* and the fourth edition of Strunk and White’s renowned *Elements of Style*. Wallraff is a senior editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and the author of its popular “Word Court” column. E. B. White (1899–1985), a *New Yorker* mainstay and the author of *Charlotte’s Web* (1952), revised the notes for students’ use by his Cornell University professor William Strunk, Jr. (1869–1946), and first published them as *The Elements of Style* in 1959. The new edition, Roger Angell explains in the foreword, “has been modestly updated, with word processors and air conditioners making their first appearance among White’s references, and with a light redistribution of genders to permit a feminine pronoun or female farmer to take their places among the males.” *Word Court* is aimed at the desk in your study; *Elements* should companion you and settle arguments that arise along your peregrinations.

For arguments there will be. The lion’s