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# LIVING IN THE SPRAWL

IDEAS FOR A SUBURBIA THAT GETS BETTER WITH AGE



GRACEN JOHNSON

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ideas for a suburbia that gets better with age

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*Suburbia is not 'culture-less' as the critique often goes. The cultures of suburbia have footprints all over our media and artscape, even if lacking the worldliness so many cul-de-sac teens aspire to. I think the Arcade Fire perfectly captured the sound, the angst, and the culture of at least one facet of sprawl with their album, *The Suburbs*. Lyrics from *The Suburbs* are embedded throughout (including the title) because I found the work both an inspiration and a perfect soundtrack. I hope you do too.*



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## Preface

There have been suburb critics since suburbs have been around to critique. However, for a long time it seemed the feud was a perceived culture and equality war - the worldly, diverse, impoverished urban *versus* the sterile, conformist, white suburban. A nuanced historical analysis can dispute such a dichotomy, yet that stereotypical perspective still flavours our pop culture and everyday discourse.

I think that caricature of urban vs. suburban is defunct and unhelpful, especially after the surge of home foreclosures in 2008 effectively peeled the lid off suburbia. We saw definitively in 2008 that suburbanites are not just white, middle-class families; they are an increasingly diverse array of households, ethnically and socioeconomically. A majority of Canadians and Americans are suburbanites and they're hurting. We've undertaken a wholesale transition to a style of development that is bankrupting us - financially, environmentally, civically - and suburbanites know it. They feel the drain of auto-dependence, the loss of civility, the remorse over more farmland being converted to asphalt and subdivisions. They rely on the inefficient, under-serviced infrastructure and the menu of big-box brands that ebb away at sense of place.

Yet, with this lid blown off, so much of our dialogue surrounding suburbs is still not inclusive or empowering to suburbanites who are at once most vulnerable to neighbourhood decline and the greatest hope we have to make things better. There is a depth of amazing research, writing, investment, and design that can inform and inspire us to make changes in our own communities. This short, introductory volume is an attempt to make that accessible and meaningful to the average suburbanite without any planning expertise. If you covet a tad more expertise, the endnote section is quite expansive to allow for a more thorough read.

Where useful, I've written in a Canadian context; however much of the history and references are US-centric because they better illustrate the extent of suburban design problems and the potential of the solutions. I should note that when I refer to suburbia, I am referring to a style of development that favours single-family dwellings, automobile dependency, and a distinct separation of uses (residential, commercial, civic, etc.). This style is ubiquitous in our many common conceptions of a suburb, like bedroom communities, edge cities, and "cookie-cutter" subdivisions.

My goal with this work is to start conversations in kitchens and backyards across North America that are the seeds for local transformation. It takes the leadership of relatively few people to spur a transformation where communities actually improve in livability and value over time. You can be one of those people. Thank you for reading, and please do contact me with your questions and comments at [www.gracenjohnson.com](http://www.gracenjohnson.com).

## Part i. What makes the suburbs so interesting?

*Oh, this city's changed so much  
Since I was a little child.  
Pray to god I won't live to see  
The death of everything that's wild.*  
--The Arcade Fire (Half Light II)

I grew up on a cul-de-sac at the edge of town, in a sprawling neighbourhood with big garages and backyard swimming pools. Over the years, the woods and wetlands on the periphery of our community started sprouting signs; tall, broad, handsome wooden placards with beautiful homes printed on them and occasionally a happy man and woman with a couple toothy kids. “Starting at \$200,000. Coming soon.” I wondered who those signs would import. Young families? Retired grandparents? The entire model crew of a Sears catalogue? I knew that everyone had to live somewhere, but please not here. Not in the forest where I built my first tree-fort. Not on the very best hide-and-seek territory. Not on the creek where we’d splash in rubber boots on rainy days. Not in my backyard.

Antisprawl may seem like a rather odd phenomenon coming from suburbia but it’s not uncommon. My childhood is just one of many defined by a losing battle between community NIMBYism<sup>1</sup> (combined with sincere environmental concern) and inflexible housing developers backed by a sympathetic city council. We live in sprawl, yet we protest sprawl. And then we lose and get more sprawl. This is one of the reasons I think we can all share an interest in suburbia, and why I was motivated to write about my research as a young kipper investigating suburban redesign. It’s a fascinating world we’ve built for over half the population of North America. Let’s consider it.

Suburbia is born in a flame. There is always someone outraged that tacky houses or McMansions are consuming greenfield (i.e. ‘undeveloped’ land) somewhere near the outskirts of town. Forests are uprooted, wetlands drained, heritage homesteads demolished - another one bites the dust. More often than not, the opposition is from suburbanites themselves, like my well-meaning community that wanted to put a full stop on sprawl beyond our borders. Indeed, it was largely support from suburban constituents that fueled the antisprawl movement which launched Ontario’s once groundbreaking policy on Smart Growth and the Greenbelt.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, vast swaths of farmland are punctured with those promising signs I mentioned, and out of the dusty years of noise and construction emerges the dream of thousands of young families who save up to afford the fully-loaded model with granite countertops, heated floors, and Jacuzzi ensembles.

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<sup>1</sup> NIMBY stands for “Not in my backyard.” It is often used in reference to the difficult task of finding a publicly supported site for projects like landfills, low-income housing, and halfway homes.

<sup>2</sup> Filion (2010) recounts that in 2003, a Conservative provincial government in Ontario responded to environmental and congestion concerns over sprawl by implementing a Smart-Growth development plan. Interestingly, this was politically driven from an outer-suburban electoral base which was counterintuitively opposed to the sprawl in which they resided. When a Liberal government took over in later years, the Greenbelt was formed and infill and transit-oriented development requirements were put in place. Since, there has been noticeably more high density development of condos. However, Filion reveals that much of the middle class still has a preference for dispersed development. - - -

Filion, P. (2010). Reorienting urban development? Structural obstruction to new urban forms. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34, 1, 1-19.

These developments see their prime years - a new school, friendly neighbours, childhood playmates, carpooling to soccer practice, and a general sense of camaraderie. Then all the kids grow up and parents pray for them to steer clear of 'the wrong crowd' - usually those punks from across the boulevard. Then the entire generation graduates high school and gets the heck out of there to find themselves far away from "the big empty," (as author Chris Turner nicknamed suburbia).<sup>3</sup> Slowly but surely, those shiny new homes are eclipsed by newer homes on the periphery and the cycle continues down the long and winding roads. Until no one will buy them.

Imagine you've put in your down payment on a beautiful new home in a tidy neighbourhood outside the city. The developers have been pitching the homes as manageable luxury, with a state-of-the-art kitchen but not too much maintenance. As one of the first buyers on the street, you and your partner move in before the rest of the houses are finished, and watch interestedly as your neighbourhood is assembled around you. Then you notice it's eerily quiet one week - the construction workers are on some sort of hiatus. Months pass and still the house across the street sits empty and unfinished with an unsightly pile of building debris on the laneway. You call the developer to investigate the hold-up, but can't seem to make it past a brigade of excuses related by an impersonal receptionist.

Your life savings are in this house, which might as well be on the moon for all the company and locational benefits it offers. Now you watch in anxiety as looters haunt the unfinished residences around you and run off carrying copper piping and anything of value they can make away with. You cannot sell the place because no one will buy it. You're stranded in the boonies.

In 2008, this was a sad reality for thousands of Irish homeowners. Ireland's economic collapse was matched with a housing bust that left the country with an oversupply of approximately 103,000 homes, tens of thousands of which were 'ghost estates' where over half a newly developed neighbourhood was vacant or unfinished.<sup>4</sup> Unlucky owners across the country were devastated to see their new homes become immediately redundant and value-less. It was a harsh shake to end a fairly long period of prosperity.

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<sup>3</sup> In his book, *The Geography of Hope*, author Chris Turner (2007) returns to the suburban neighbourhood he grew up in and refers to it as "The Big Empty." I especially appreciated this excerpt:

Aurora did evoke a response in me, something all its own. It wasn't indifference - not the absence of emotion - but a sense of feeling and memory being sucked away, vacuum-like, before they could find any purchase. It was profoundly hollow, quiet but not calm. The big empty (p. 240). - - -

Turner, C. (2007). *The Geography of Hope: A Tour of the World We Need*. Calgary, AB: Random House Canada.

<sup>4</sup> I based this story on real accounts of Ireland's ghost estates (Hilliard, 2011; Henley, 2010) and the figures were provided by an academic account of the situation (Kitchin et al., 2010). - - -

Hilliard, M. (2011, September 4). The hangover of Ireland's property boom: Abandoned ghost estates and lifeless houses stripped of their worth. *The Daily Mail*. Retrieved from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2033521/The-hangover-Irelands-property-boom-Abandoned-ghost-estates-lifeless-houses-stripped-worth.html>

Henley, P. (2010, April 30). Ghost estates testify to Irish boom and bust. *BBC News*. Retrieved from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8653949.stm>

Kitchin, R., O'Callaghan, C., Gleeson, J., & Keaveney, K. (2010). A haunted landscape: Housing and ghost estates in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland. *National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis (NIRSA) Working Papers*, 59, 1-66.

I find something viscerally disturbing about Ireland's ghost estates, a discomfort that lingers independent of the economic complexities of the matter. It's the uncertainty about the future of the world we're building as fast as trees can be ripped out of the ground. I do my share of mingling with a pretty diverse crowd, and when new acquaintances small talk me into explaining my research, I say I'm interested in the future of suburbia. That's usually enough - they take it from there with a smorgasbord of concerns and frustrations. I get the distinct impression that people sense something is off-kilter in their very own lifestyles.

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