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Some Perched in Ivory Tower Gain Rosier View of Suburbs

By IVER PETERSON

Everyone loves to hate the **suburbs**.

Sociologists say they are deadening, a prison for women and a desert for children. Environmentalists call them empires of excess that eat open space and worship the automobile. Novelists and filmmakers assume that behind every picket fence lurks misery, isolation and alcoholism.

Everyone loves to hate the **suburbs** except for the people who live there, people who, sometime in the last few years, became a majority of all Americans, or 138,231,000 people, according to the Census Bureau.

And now those suburbanites are beginning to hear a faint but growing chorus of support from the very camp that has so long disdained the thought of life on a subdivision lot.

In a handful of new books and studies, academic revisionists are reporting that suburbia, far from crushing lives, has had a liberating effect on residents, particularly many women. They have found that the sense of community can be as strong on a suburban block as it is in a small town. And they record how homeownership produced a significant increase in the standards of living and personal wealth for generations of former urban renters.

"The **suburbs** are starting to get some respect in academia because people want to know what the science is behind these claims that **suburbs** are cold and friendless places that don't work ecologically," said Jack Nasar, a professor of city and regional planning at Ohio State University, who has conducted studies comparing the sense of community in **suburbs** and in small towns.

Prof. Robert Thompson, who teaches American popular culture at Syracuse University, said, "There is a sense among some academics now that the **suburbs** have developed their own culture and that it's time to move past the clichés that were formed after World War II.

"Colleges are moving to suburban campuses, there is art and employment and crime and museums and both the good and the bad of the cities in the **suburbs**" as they have become a much more diverse environment, he said.

Sometimes, the revisionists had to overcome the old prejudice themselves.

"I went to Levittown expecting to find that people who lived in cookie cutter houses lived cookie cutter lives," said Barbara Kelly, the rare books curator at Hofstra University and a historian whose book, "Expanding the American Dream: Building and Rebuilding Levittown," was published by the State University of New York Press in 1993.

"I went to find women who were full of angst and children who were stunted and men who were emasculated," Dr. Kelly went on, "and instead I found people who were extremely grateful to be where they were, who took their homes and expanded them as they moved into the middle class, and along the way their lives expanded with them."

Next month, Basic Books is scheduled to publish "Picture Windows: How the **Suburbs** Happened," by Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen, professors of American studies at the State University of New York's Old Westbury campus, on Long Island. They, too, had to adjust their analytical compass.

"I was snobbish toward the **suburbs**," Professor Baxandall said. "I expected people here to be bored and unhappy. I thought they would miss the cosmopolitan life of the city. I thought the kids would be in a hurry to move to the city."

Once they started interviewing, the two professors found a different story. "Instead of being placid, conformist, keeping-up-with-the-Joneses, we found that suburbanites were dealing with important civil rights issues and that there were important struggles for women's rights going on," Professor Ewan said. "In Levittown, the people who built the institutions of the community were not your tired, bored housewife."

This is hardly the mainstream academic take on the **suburbs**.

Influential critiques like Kenneth T. Jackson's "Crabgrass Frontier," James Howard Kunstler's "The Geography of Nowhere," Robert Fishman's "Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia" and Donna Gaines's "Teenage Wasteland" are part of a literature of disdain for suburban life so ingrained in the culture that it has become a kind of accepted wisdom.

After all, Hollywood hasn't made the **suburbs** look healthy since "Leave It to Beaver" was on television. Now Todd Solondz, a New Jerseyan whose production

company is called Suburban Films, makes movies like "Welcome to the Dollhouse," about alienated children and vacuous adults, and "Happiness," about alienated children and one vacuous adult who is also a child rapist. Ang Lee's "Ice Storm," set in New Canaan, Conn., said that no grown-up tells the truth in suburbia. In "American Beauty," this year's acclaimed suburban-life-is-hell movie, the only normal, well-adjusted people are gay. Or dead.

Yet some academicians and planners are insisting that the **suburbs** are far more layered and complex than they have been portrayed. In fact, the white-bread, Ozzie and Harriet **suburbs** did not last past about 1965, said James W. Hughes, dean of the school of planning and public policy at Rutgers University.

"From '65 on, we really had the urbanization of the **suburbs**, to the point where the **suburbs** today are really cities in horizontal form," Dr. Hughes said. "You don't have the density of the city, but all the economic functions that were once in cities are now in **suburbs**. There are hospitals, universities, cultural facilities and a wide variety of housing choices and therefore a multiplicity of household types -- not just one-family, but single-person households and specialty retirement communities and divorced households."

And there are jobs. According to Dr. Hughes, virtually all of the jobs created in New Jersey during the current economic expansion have been in the **suburbs**. Among other things, those jobs created a new life for suburban women.

"The early idea of the **suburbs** had been to isolate women and children from the evil world of work and the city," said Dr. Fishman, a professor of history at Rutgers University's Camden campus. "Now the explosion of office jobs in suburbia has been the way married and middle-class women get back into the work force."

It was precisely the lives of suburban women that most interested Professors Baxandall and Ewen in their research for "Picture Windows" on Long Island.

They found Barbara Ware of Levittown and Patricia Sullivan of Roosevelt, two middle-class stay-at-home moms who met at a 1970's job fair organized by the National Organization for Women, started a weather-stripping business and now run a job-training project called Jobs for Women.

"There is a **view** that nothing ever happens in the **suburbs**, that women, especially, are stuck in a situation that never changes," Professor Ewen said in an interview. "And yet Barbara Ware and Patricia Sullivan experienced a major change in their lives, and now are changing the lives of other women."

Herbert L. Gans, the Columbia University sociologist who became the father of suburbanology with his sympathetic 1967 study, "The Levittowners," said disdain for the **suburbs** among the elite in the arts and academia was tinged with snobbism.

"This attitude started with the urban upper middle class who said, 'Look at those dumb ones who have moved out to the **suburbs** where they are conformists and being homogenous and being unfaithful to each other,' " Mr. Gans said. "But if you look at it, the attack was always against the middle class," he went on. "The upper middle class has been living in the **suburbs** since the 1880's, when the railroad communities started outside of Philadelphia and Westchester and on the North Shore of Long Island, and nobody wrote ticky-tacky songs about them."

Dr. Kelly of Hofstra University, writing about homeowners of Levittown, makes a similar point: "I think one of the things the critics of the **suburbs** overlook is that the alternative for these people was not Garden City or the Main Line outside Philadelphia. The alternative was the Brooklyn tenements or two-family houses in Queens," she said. "These people were renters before World War II, and after the war they were homeowners, so you should not compare them to the upper middle class and say, 'Gee, their lives are really empty!' You have to compare them to what their lives would have been, and as far as I could see, they were happier after they moved to the **suburbs**."

The new defenders of the **suburbs** concede that there are environmental problems with suburban development, which the spread of housing eats up land and energy and contributes to air and water pollution. Their interest, however, is in the people and their lives.

"There are these other problems," Professor Nasar said, "but the question of whether the **suburbs** suit the people who live there is settled, and the answer is yes."

Professor Nasar's study compared the views of residents of the prosperous and traditional village of Westerville, Ohio, which lies about 15 miles from downtown Columbus, with those of people who lived in the new, low-density **suburbs** outside Westerville.

"We created an 11-point instrument to compare responses," he said, "and what we found was that the traditional high-density, mixed-use settlement had only slightly less auto usage and did not have a higher sense of community than in conventional low-density **suburbs**."

Professor Jackson, the author of "Crabgrass Frontier" and a Columbia University historian, argued that the sense of community that suburban revisionists are reporting could be a fragile one.

"I do think the sense of community these people are finding is probably there, but I think it's age-skewed," he said. "When people have children, they have a much greater sense of community because the schools foster it. But once the kids have left, you have people moving out and going to Florida because the community bonds were not strong enough to hold them."

Still, even Professor Jackson finds himself a part-time suburbanite. He thinks of his apartment at 86th Street and Columbus Avenue as his main home, but he also has a house in suburban Chappaqua, N.Y., where his wife teaches school.

Professor Baxandall concedes she and Professor Ewen began their research completely out of touch with suburban life. The two expected to find a particular animus toward the **suburbs** among their college students, since it has been axiomatic for years that the **suburbs** cause youthful alienation.

"We did not find that the kids thought of it as a wasteland," Professor Baxandall went on. "They enjoyed themselves, they drove around, they went to clubs, they hung out together. A lot of them talked about boredom, but so do city kids."

Suburbanites might be amused at the ignorance of academicians and city residents so out of touch with the way most Americans live. But Professor Ewen said a change in the conventional wisdom can come slowly.

"I can't say there are too many of us yet," she said. "But there are people who are beginning to think of the **suburbs** as a place, as opposed to no place."

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