

dwell

AT HOME IN THE MODERN WORLD

Sustainable in L.A.
A 21st-Century Hacienda

Suburbs With Attitude

Prefab, Renovations, Additions & More



Dec/Jan 2008
\$5.99 U.S. / \$6.99 Canada

dwell.com



Ahead of the Table
7 Dinner-Ready Chairs

41

Editor's Note

Take a trip down memory lane with editor-in-chief Sam Grawe as he recounts how his wonder years led to growing pains, but that in the end, life goes on.

134

Signs of the Times

Ignore signs to the contrary as we show you why the suburbs hold deeper meaning than their banal appellations might imply.

Dwellings

136

**On the Level**

In Vancouver, British Columbia, architect Peter Cardew does his level best to renovate the halves and re-educate the halve-nots. **Story by Carolann Rule / Photos by João Canziani**

146

**Home Schooled**

A brick house in Wyoming, Ohio, doubles as a schoolhouse for teaching a course on the intersecting arts of construction and compromise. **Story by Georgina Gustin / Photos by Chad Holder**

154

**Pastoral Manner**

The prayers of a Greenwich, Connecticut, couple are finally answered when the remodeling stars align to help get them to the church on time. **Story by Jamie Epstein / Photos by Juliana Sohn**

163

**The Adding Machine**

Architect John Nastasi and a growing team of mathletes calculate new ways in which to prefabricate an affordable future.

173

**Suburban Subversions**

Andrew Blauvelt and Tracy Myers curate a sprawling new art exhibition that exposes modern America's suburban underbelly.

dwell

Suburbs with Attitude Dec/Jan 2008

"We want to try to understand and identify qualities in suburbia that have value in their own right." —Tracy Myers

Cover

Cardew Residence, Vancouver, British Columbia, page 136
Photo by João Canziani



Suburban Subversion

For **"Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes"** cocurators Andrew Blauvelt, design director and curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and Tracy Myers, curator of the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, explore the art and architecture of the contemporary American suburb. Opening at the Walker Art Center in February 2008 and at the Carnegie in October 2008, the exhibit encompasses

approximately 5,000 square feet of gallery space and will feature a diverse range of media—paintings, photographs, prints, architectural models, sculptures, and video—that explores a variety of suburban conditions. Dwell sat down with Blauvelt and Myers to discuss the much-maligned 'burbs and the challenge of curating a show dedicated exclusively to their rapidly expanding and infinitely complex fabric. ▶

Leona Miglierino
Dakbrook Way #2
22' x 22', inkjet on canvas,
2007

Perspective

You've characterized "Worlds Away" as having a somewhat revisionist or contrary perspective. Could you elaborate on this?

Andrew Blauvelt (AB): A lot of people's ideas of the suburbs—particularly city dwellers—are from the 1950s, the idea that they are [made up of] white, middle-class families with single detached homes. There's a lot of new demographic data that busts holes in these ideas about suburbia, and we want to begin to impart this information to viewers, so that they leave realizing something they hadn't recognized before.

Tracy Myers (TM): Those of us who continue to think of suburbia as this monolith are not only being kind of elitist but also being very naive. The texture of the exhibition will suggest something about the condition of America today. More than half the population in the United States lives in suburbs; there's a reason for that, and rather than continuing the pattern of maligning that trend, which many urbanites think of as unsavory or unsatisfactory or just plain evil, we want to try to understand and identify qualities in suburbia that have value in their own right and that might dissolve myths about it.

Angela Strassheim
Untitled (McDonald's)
40" x 50", C-print, 2004

Lewis Tsunomaki Lewis
New Suburbanism
sectioned perspective, 2000

Interboro
In the Meantime, Life with
Landbanking (Dutchess County
Mall, Fishkill, New York)
2003



An exhibition like this is bound to draw a lot of parallels between the visual arts and architecture. Can you speak to some of these pairings?

AB: There will be moments where you're connecting a painting or photograph with an architectural project. The hope is that these things will start to resonate with each other. Interboro architects, for example, is a firm that's more interested in process and developing solutions that are much more based in reality. When they look at a "dead mall," they don't think, Oh let's make it a civic center. Instead, they analyze: Why do dead malls exist? With *In the Meantime*, they analyzed a real dead mall. They talked to the property owners to try to figure out why they sit on them—which is called "land banking." Their interventions are more tactical than strategic. They're looking at traditional types of activities that could be slotted in to give life to the mall while it's in this hibernation mode. ►



Perspective

Then you have artists like Julia Christensen, who documents how abandoned big-box stores are being reused by different communities across the country.

AB: Another photographer in that vein is Paho Mann, who has been documenting the redevelopment of Circle Ks. In the '90s Circle K sold off a ton of their properties. Mann locks them up in old Yellow Pages and then [goes to the site] to document them. So some of them are tattoo parlors and others are real estate offices. But they still have the same underlying typology, so you can tell it's the same store, just done 27 different ways. It's a contrast between how people are really using the spaces and how an architect would approach it. Of course, Interboro is not your typical architect.

TM: The fact that Interboro is willing to look at their interventions as provisional is a very humble approach, and I think most of the architects we're looking at have an essential humility. It's not about creating big statements; it's about using what's there and improving it, not from the point of view of the architects, but from the point of view of the ultimate user. In a general sense, one trend that's discernible in architecture projects is a kind of incrementalism. Suburbia is not like a greenfield site or a clear site in a city where you can imagine the whole thing. Rather than programming the space to dictate what happens there, it's inverting that process to capitalize on what happens there and make architecture out of it. There's a distinct ecology in that strategy of reusing big boxes. It's an opportunistic approach, and it's a matter of economics, I'm sure. It's easy to renovate a big box—you don't have to do much. The character of the building is such that you're not going to convey to your parishioner some sense of lavishness through a big-box renovation into a church. It is what it is. ▶



Paho Mann

Re-inhabited Circle K:
Carniceria Cuernero, Phoenix,
Arizona
20" x 24", inkjet print, 2006

Re-inhabited Circle K: Days
Dollar Store, Phoenix, Arizona
20" x 24", inkjet print, 2006

Julia Christensen

Snowy Range Academy,
Renovated Wal-Mart Building,
Laramie, Wyoming
27" x 18", digital photograph,
2005

Perspective

Andrew, you suggest that artistic representation of the suburbs has changed considerably since the '60s. Could you elaborate?

AB: Suburban representation in the arts has shifted since the late 1960s, which often documented suburbia's homogeneity, [and lack] of culture—that classic urban-dweller-looking-at-an-alien-land sort of critique—like in the work of Dan Graham. I think you can track [a shift] in architecture as well.

Tracy and I both grew up in the suburbs, and I think a lot of the artists [in the show] also grew up in the suburbs, so they have a slightly different relationship to this landscape—it's not completely foreign. It may be a source of inspiration for them. Of course, there are definitely pro and anti—or ambivalent—camps, but the stance isn't "Oh I hate suburbia; therefore, I'm not going to deal with it." It's more about how to intervene and interpret it knowing that it's a multibillion-dollar industrial complex. It's that kind of shift that we're trying to hint at. It's much more provisional and tactical.



Dan Graham

Homes for America
34.5" x 25", chromogenic
prints mounted to board,
1966-1967

Angela Strassheim

Untitled (Eliak)
30" x 40", C-print, 2003

So would you say that you're endorsing the suburban aesthetic when you talk about the "poetics of the megaspace"?

AB: My other interest, aside from writing about graphic design, is to write spatial critiques. For [the "Worlds Away" catalog], I would focus on this idea of the megaspace and what would constitute a poetics of that space because most spatial poetics are based on intimacy and minimization, not on gigantism and scale-shift. I'm trying to bring in some topical themes, like many of the suburbs around certain cities in the country are trying to restrict the size of McMansions. And there's this whole cottage industry started by Sarah Susanka—[of] the "not-so-big house"—about appropriate lifestyle scaling, and I want to take a sort of contrarian's look at what constitutes place and intimacy and the idea of the megastore, the megamall, the megachurch in the culture of bigness. ▶



Perspective

In general, it seems the visual arts take on a more critical tone, whereas the architectural projects are more positive in their approach or intervention. Are there any artists who you feel present a more positive perspective?

AB: The painter Sarah McKenzie lives in a suburban area, and she basically paints what she sees outside the window. The photographer Laura Miglorino initially set out to document edge development and the spotting of nature in the southern suburbs of Minneapolis, but it became something else when she got there. The people who live there were younger and it was more ethnically diverse than she'd thought and she started taking portraits. You also have the more pro or neutral people like Greg Stimac. His series of people mowing their lawn is more an exercise in documentation and parallels the work of John Divola from the '70s. Brian Ulrich also documents contemporary shoppers. Angela Strassheim documents her own family, which is born-again Christian, and I don't think she's trying to put any particular spin on it—it's more neutral than it is critical.

Do you think the exhibition will be comprehensive enough to change people's perspective on suburbia? Is it your goal to change our minds?

AB: We only have so much square footage to come up with a cohesive argument. A lot of people forget that the Eichler homes and the mid-century style that is so popular today—these were all suburban development typologies. We live in the present so much that we forget that yesterday's suburb is the city fabric.

Sarah McKenzie
Wrap
48" x 72", oil on canvas, 2006

Greg Stimac
Mowing the Lawn (Chandler, Arizona)
30" x 41", archival inkjet prints, 2005–2006

Lewis Tsunemaki Lewis
New Suburbanism
sectioned perspective, 2000

TM: The project that first stimulated my interest in this subject was New Suburbanism by Lewis Tsunemaki Lewis Architects. It basically looks to big boxes for sectional opportunities in an essentially horizontal design strategy. They look at these big boxes and think: Okay, the big boxes are sort of maligned and derided. Is there something else that we can do with them? Is there some other sort of opportunity available to them that isn't being exploited? To oversimplify, they propose building housing on top of them.

All the architecture projects in the show are not judgmental. They're really about maximizing opportunities—implicitly acknowledging that massive suburbanization has negative ramifications for almost all of us. Whether you live in the city or whether you live in the suburbs, you're affected by suburbanization. I think that the architectural projects are critical in the fundamental sense of that word. They are looking critically at the suburban condition and figuring out how to make something of it instead of sort of demonizing it.

TM: One thing that one could hope for in an exhibition like this is that it doesn't seem to be overly ambitious or polemical, and that, as you're going through your world, you'll begin to see it differently or just see it in the first place. Because the kind of suburbanization that happened after World War II is now really an historical phenomenon. And Andrew's observation about the Eichler homes is that what a suburb is is hard to define. It's a moving target, and the criticism hasn't kept up with the movement of the target. For example, [with regard to] suburban families, about one-third are nontraditional nuclear families. And people don't realize that because they don't look around, and they have no reason to think about it. To the extent that it can provoke that kind of thinking, it will at least influence one's perspective on the world that they inhabit. ■

