

CHAPTER 1 — OVERVIEW

*The aim should not be more goods for people to buy,
but more opportunities for them to live.*

—Lewis Mumford

Despite the current economic volatility, the majority of Americans are better off financially than much of the rest of the world. Most of us have everything we could ever want or need—nice homes, cars, televisions, stereos, computers, closets bursting with clothes, sporting equipment, major appliances, garages filled with tools, good jobs, paid vacations, health insurance, and well-stocked refrigerators. However, even with all of this wealth and opportunity, something fundamental to human happiness is missing from our lives. In spite of all our possessions, entertainment options, and economic opportunities, many Americans still feel alienated, isolated, and alone. What is missing is that which suburban sprawl has eliminated: the safety, sense of belonging, and quality of life that comes from living in genuine communities.

After living in Europe for over twelve years, I am well aware of how vibrant small towns or city neighborhoods can enhance one's quality of life. For example, one of the places my family lived was the typical British small town of Northwood outside of London. I can still remember times when my Mom would send me to go pick up a forgotten food item from one of the small stores lining the main street. Along the way I would exchange greetings with people I knew and smile at those I did not. I'd window shop at the toy store, mess around with friends I ran into, barely remember to get the item requested, and much to my mother's chagrin, get home well past the time she had designated.

This could not happen in American suburban sprawl. Most small towns near major U.S. cities no longer exist in a form that allows such freedom; everything is now so spread out that a

car is required to get anywhere. And when we arrive at our destination, after having passed thousands of people, we are still surrounded by strangers. Unlike life in the small towns and suburban villages of Europe, living in suburban sprawl is an oppressively anonymous existence.

The United States used to be a nation of small towns, but since the end of World War II our towns have been torn down, paved over, or killed by a nearby Wal-Mart. What remains is considered “progress.” Because of sprawl, towns such as Northwood, and the commensurate quality of life they embody, are extremely rare in America.

SUBURBAN SPRAWL, ISOLATION AND VIOLENCE

A field of study called Environmental Psychology has determined a clear link between the places where people live and how they behave. The findings from this academic discipline that clearly show an interrelationship between environments and human behavior, bolster the understanding that in the short period of time since its emergence in 1945, suburban sprawl has transformed America from “one nation, indivisible” into a polarized and fragmented society.

Secluded in our suburban homes, we now live in a society of strangers.

Communities once held our nation together, both physically and spiritually, helped keep our children safe and offered us a sense of belonging rooted in a sense of place. Communities used to be the catalyst for people to be tolerant of others, their views, beliefs, hopes and dreams. However, in the sixty years since suburban sprawl became the dominant urban setting, American society has not only mutated into something alienating and uncivil, but has become oppressively violent as well.

This has resulted in an environment of fear that reduces everyone’s sense of well being and safety. Contrary to popular mythology, violence in America is not limited to inner cities. This

reality was exposed by the series of tragic school shootings that have occurred in Littleton, Colorado; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Conyers, Georgia and other suburbs across America.*

These events are only the tip of the iceberg. As reported in *The Washington Post*, violence in all its forms has become so omnipresent that Americans no longer feel that they can escape its threat by moving to the suburbs.¹ Commenting on the gunman who killed two people in Seattle on November 3, 1999, the day after a similar tragic event occurred in Hawaii, President Clinton summed up the situation by saying, “I don’t think we understand just how much more violent the United States is than other countries.”²

Statistics clearly show that more murders, rapes, and serial killings are committed in the U.S. per capita, by a wide margin, than anywhere else in the world. One example of this disparity in levels of violence was reported by *The Washington Post*: “In 1995, handguns were used to kill 2 people in New Zealand, 15 in Japan, 30 in Great Britain, 106 in Canada, 213 in Germany, and **9,390** in the United States.”³ With statistics like these, it’s surprising that Kevlar, the fabric that bulletproof vests are made from, is not woven into everyday clothing in America.

America’s oppressive levels of violent behavior create a pervasive sense of foreboding that permeates the very essence of everyday life. Women are afraid to take walks at night, even in their own neighborhoods. Parents no longer let their kids go to the park or playground alone. Most of us consciously or unconsciously alter what we do, or what we allow our children to do, to protect ourselves from the society in which we live.

This situation emerged so slowly that most of us are not even aware of its existence. We are all like the proverbial frog in the pot of water that is gradually being brought to a boil. If you drop a frog into hot water, it instantly leaps out. But if the water is slowly heated, the frog remains unaware, unconcerned until it is too late.

Most of us never realize how dangerous America is until we remove ourselves from the heat of this society and visit another first-world nation. A common theme that runs through many of the stories women relate to me concerning their experiences in Europe is that they feel safe there. No matter where they traveled, whether it was Italy, or France, or Denmark, or Switzerland, American women generally described their experiences in those countries as powerfully liberating in terms of their feelings of safety. One person said, “I felt as if a weight, that I did not even know was there, had been lifted off of my shoulders.” That weight is the burden of potential victimization that women in America carry with them everyday.

Living or traveling in the safe, community-oriented environs of Europe alleviated their fear, because in general, in those countries there is little to fear. European societies are incredibly safe in comparison to ours. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Prevention found that violence in America is at epidemic proportions, while in other first-world nations it is not.⁴ Being able to live without having to constantly look over our shoulder helps to make life much more fulfilling and enjoyable. Regrettably, America, which was once the land of the free, because of the alienation of sprawl, has now become the land of the frightened. Sprawl has turned neighbors into strangers, and strangers into threats.

EARLY SUBURBAN COMMUNITIES

America was not always like this. Before 1945, people lived in safe city neighborhoods that had not yet been bulldozed to make room for highways, or in small towns that had not yet been turned into strip malls. People felt connected to their towns and urban neighborhoods because those places still existed in a coherent, community-oriented form.

Suburban development prior to WW II, in contrast to the formless sprawled wasteland of today, was patterned after the successful and popular Garden City model (see Figures 1-3). This

development philosophy created small towns that combined all the functions of life—schools, banks, stores, offices, restaurants, public transport, libraries, etc.—with housing for a variety of income levels and easily accessible public transportation. Garden City-style developments continue to serve as the basis for urban planning in most of the world.⁵ Through the end of WWII in America, Garden City developments were the norm, allowing for a sense of community to exist in these newly built suburbs.



Figure 1. Forest Hills, New York - Illustration circa 1915
(Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Design School)
The Forest Hills Garden City-style suburban development combined stores, apartments, and homes, bringing people together to create a small town community.

Started in England by Ebenezer Howard, Garden City suburban small towns resembled the designs of English villages. The layout of these places encouraged multiuse development patterns, with light industry, stores, and public buildings located alongside housing and green space. Garden City suburbs provided each family with its own house and garden, and offered all the functions of life within easy walking distance of home. These well-designed suburban towns were connected to the city core, and to each other, by a variety of public transportation options that included rail as well as roads.

Garden City suburbs flourished all over America, creating places to live for all classes of society, and were developed as purposeful efforts to achieve a supportive and complete community.⁶

These early American suburbs were well planned and wonderfully livable, and they remain as some of America's last surviving communities today.

Whereas people today equate suburban development with negligent planning and incompetent design, the Garden City suburbs had sophisticated layouts and distinguished designs. Good planning made them popular with the buying public, and also ensured their longevity. Many of these early suburbs have become synonymous today with livability, charm, and quality of life. They include Chestnut Hill in Philadelphia, Mariemont outside Cincinnati, River Oaks in Houston, Beverly Hills and Palos Verdes near Los Angeles, Coral Gables near Miami, and Forest Hills outside New York City (see Figures 1 & 2).



Figure 2. Forest Hills , New York – Bird's Eye View Illustration circa 1915

(Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Design School)

The Forest Hills suburban development created a small town by combining stores, public buildings and residences, all within walking distance; and connected it to the surrounding area by public transport. Prior to WW II, this was how the majority of American suburbs were built.

Garden City suburbs were by no means elitist, nor were they even exclusively middle class. In fact, many Garden City developments started off as public housing funded by the government. A fine example of this is Seaside Village in Bridgeport, Connecticut, constructed in 1918 with 257 dwellings in a village design. To this day it remains a quality, community-oriented place to live.⁷ Another working-class development, Yorkshp Village (see Figure 3), now known as Fairview, began in 1918 as a thriving neighborhood of a thousand dwellings near Camden, New Jersey. Today it still exists as a solid, mixed-use, mixed-income community, not far from its blue-collar roots.



Figure 3. Yorkshp Village Plan, Camden, New Jersey
(Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard Design School)
A successful example of Garden City suburban development
that integrates all the functions of life around a central village green.
This town was designed and built for shipyard workers.

The suburbs developed before World War II were not only built as investment opportunities, but were also created to enhance people's quality of life and sense of community. In contrast, the unplanned sprawl that exists today, where the functions of life are scattered all over the landscape, promotes little but alienation and isolation. I challenge you to find a sense of

community in a strip mall, shopping center, or suburban office park. Even suburban subdivisions, places where people live, are generally devoid of genuine communities. I have interviewed a number of suburban residents from all over the country who lament not knowing their neighbors despite living among them for years. Even if people do know one another, and a semblance of a community does exist, that sense of connection is dependent on those who instill it, rather than the place where the people live. Once the individuals who act as the community catalysts move away, the sense of community they instilled leaves with them.

Considering American's adoration of small towns, the way our country has turned out is rather odd. Talk to anyone about what is quintessentially American, and more often than not, small towns feature prominently in peoples' hearts and minds. It is no accident, for example, that Walt Disney creates classic, picturesque Main Streets in the hearts of its amusement parks. However, in the majority of places where we actually live, small town main streets have almost completely disappeared.

AUTOMOBILES

Despite American's veneration of small towns, without coherent national, regional, or even local urban development plans, our country has ended up as a sprawling mess. The functions of American life are zoned far away from one another, forcing people to live, work, and shop in widely dispersed locations; all of which necessitates them spending inordinate amounts of time in their cars. The automobile was once was a symbol of freedom. Now it has become a prison.

A study conducted by the Sierra Club concluded that many Americans spend almost fifteen hours per week in their automobiles.⁸ Another study shows that the average American driver spends 443 hours each year behind the wheel; the equivalent of 55 eight-hour days or 11

work weeks.⁹ Whatever the numbers, whether it is commuting to work, making a run to the grocery store, drugstore, mall or church, or ferrying kids to parties, movies, soccer practice, cheerleading sessions, or friends' houses, we have become slaves to our automobiles.

How can we spend quality time with our family, or have a meaningful relationship with our significant other if we spend more time in our car than at home? When can we pursue those activities that would make our life fulfilling if our time is wasted commuting or doing errands?

While automobiles are stealing our time, they are also monopolizing our space. In many of our cities, infrastructure to accommodate cars consumes between sixty to seventy percent of the landscape in the form of streets, parking space, and highways.¹⁰ Maryland, no more automobile-dependent than any other state in the nation, has ten parking spaces for every car. All over the country, in cities where beautiful old buildings used to stand and neighborhood communities once thrived, parking complexes have sprouted. In suburbia, where bucolic small towns once flourished, oceans of parking lots surround ugly neon strips of commercial architecture.

While Americans continue to cede urban space to the automobile, Europeans have taken back large portions of their cities from cars, creating extensive pedestrian zones. They have also expanded already diversified transportation systems, reducing the need for automobiles, helping to retain attractive, livable cities and small towns. Anyone who has ever visited the Piazza Signoria in Florence, or shared the festive atmosphere of Str̄get in Copenhagen, or strolled along the Corso Vanucci in Perugia knows something of the beauty of European urban communities.

Municipalities such as Paris, London, Amsterdam, Madrid, and Stockholm are all examples of beautiful and habitable European cities. Each has a different layout and design, but all are configured to benefit people and to enhance community. And each of these cities has well-

preserved small towns on their outskirts connected to the city by extensive public transportation options. This is the norm in Europe.

However, European towns and cities have not always been paragons of urban planning. From the end of WW II until the mid-1960s, many European nations acted very much in the same manner as America continues to, and allowed private interests to triumph over public good. In many cases, open collusion existed between municipal authorities and real estate developers. This resulted in huge swaths of land outside of many large cities being given over to unplanned tracts of apartment buildings, such as those surrounding Naples and Palermo. Fortunately, most European nations quickly learned from their mistakes, cracked down on the corruption in real estate speculation, and began to plan their urban spaces more intelligently. Haphazard suburban development screeched to a halt, and extensive auto-free enclaves where people could gather and children could play without worrying about getting run over were implemented in virtually every European city and town. In downtown Rome alone, almost five hundred acres have been turned into pedestrian areas.¹¹ In Venice, cars are completely banned.

As a result, simply walking down the street in nearly any European city or town is a safe and pleasant experience filled with the joy of community life. You see people arriving informally, greeting friends, doing their daily chores, going back to work, or just continuing to stroll. It is like watching a free-form community dance, filled with smiles, hugs, pleasant greetings, laughter, conversation, and pecks on the cheek. I travel to Italy frequently and spend much of my time sitting in piazzas or wandering streets, reveling in the embrace of being in a place where people know one another, and are friendly to strangers.

One community activity I particularly enjoy in Italy is the evening *Passeggiatta*, the nightly stroll. In every Italian city and town, big or small, there is a place, and in larger cities, a

number of different places, where residents go before and after dinner to commune with one another. In European cities and towns, people know one another; they are a part of each other's lives.

WHAT HAPPENED TO AMERICA?

When I returned to the United States after living for twelve years overseas, I expected to find the same types of community-oriented towns and city neighborhoods I knew in Europe. I was saddened and shocked to discover that in the majority of cases my native land lacked such places. Much of what I had come to appreciate about life in other first-world societies simply does not exist in America.*

In an attempt to disprove this negative impression of my native land, I began a two-decade long cross-country search for genuine communities. I went from one coast to the other, visiting streetcar, railroad, and garden suburbs. I explored college towns, urban neighborhoods, rural hamlets, old company towns, greenbelt villages, suburban developments, strip malls, office parks, and every place in between. Although I found a few locations that had a semblance of what exists in Europe, my search confirmed that in the majority of cases the United States does indeed lack genuine communities—the necessary foundation for a safe and healthy society.

Jane Jacobs, renowned urban visionary, in her landmark book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, observed before the advent of sprawl that daily interaction on the sidewalks of cities and towns is the glue that holds society together. But today in America, sidewalks are empty, and in many places, they don't exist at all. In fact, most municipalities no longer have the central cores where sidewalks would even be useful. American "towns" today are gruesome boulevards of commerce, with garish fast-food outlets, huge big-box stores, monotonous office parks, cookie-cutter housing clusters, screaming neon signs, contrived themed

restaurants, and roads choked with cars. Our urban spaces today are the direct opposite of what our society needs to be safe, livable and community-oriented. In our frantic pursuit of progress, we have paved over the American dream.

As a nation we have achieved extraordinary technological, scientific, and economic gains, yet we are deficient in so many areas that would make life fulfilling and meaningful. We can explore outer space, yet we cannot build safe and livable communities. We have linked two oceans with the Panama Canal, but we have the least-developed passenger rail and public transportation systems in the first-world. We can map the human genome, yet our nation is a sprawled mess.

We have supermarkets and shopping centers filled with an endless array of products, but the people who wander in these places do not know one another. Our public existence is one anonymous moment after another. Despite all of America's advances, we have created an urban environment filled with lonely people. We have developed an economy that fulfills most of our material needs, but we live in a society where people lock themselves in their homes afraid of the strangers that surround them.

Hundreds of millions of Americans, over 70% of the population, reside in sprawl, unaware of the subtle and not-so-subtle ramifications of its presence in their lives. Most of us do not associate our feelings of loneliness, depression, and fear with our physical landscape. Being so ubiquitous, sprawl avoids detection by the general public as the root cause of many of our personal and societal woes. However, to many experts it is becoming clear that our physical landscape has an irrefutably negative impact on human and societal development, health, and

behavior. If we continue to ignore sprawl's influence, and neglect intelligent urban planning, every American's safety and quality of life will remain threatened.

As Americans, we deserve to live in places where we can let our children explore the world around them without being afraid some sicko might snatch them. We deserve to be able to walk our streets without worrying about being assaulted. We deserve small towns where we are recognized and feel a sense of belonging. We deserve well-designed communities that are more than just places on a map, but are also, more importantly, places in our hearts.

Read on and find out how you can locate communities around where you live, or how you can create your own; how you can keep your family safe; and how you can fulfill the promise of the American Dream in the alienating expanses of sprawl. Join the millions of people taking charge of their lives and who are finding ways to counteract the human costs associated with living in suburbia.

(Footnotes)

* Including Springfield, Oregon; Carrolton, Georgia; Paducah, Kentucky; Santee, California; Philadelphia and Hattiesburg, Mississippi; and Red Lion, Pennsylvania.

* The use of first-world nations in most of my comparisons is in no way indicative that developing countries are insignificant. All I am attempting to do is compare apples with apples by lining up America with its first-world peers; nations that have similar economic, political, and legal systems.

(Endnotes)

Chapter One

¹ Michael A. Fletcher, "The Crime Conundrum," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2000, p. F1.

² Khiota Therrien, "Gunman Kills 2 at Office in Seattle: Manhunt On," *The Washington Post*, November 4, 1999, p. A1.

³ Michael A. Fletcher, "The Crime Conundrum," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2000, p. F1.

⁴ Judith Havemann, "For Children, An Epidemic of Homicide" *The Washington Post*, February 7, 1997, p. A1.

⁵ Wolf Von Eckardt, *Back to the Drawing Board*, 1978, p. 99.

⁶ Stanley Buder, "The Future of the American Suburb," *Suburbia*, Philip C. Dolce, 1976, p.199, 200.

⁷ Witold Rybczynski, *City Life*, 1995, p. 190-192.

⁸ "The Costs of Sprawl," *The National Sprawl Fact Sheet*, Sierra Club, 1998.

⁹ "Solving Sprawl," Carl Pope, Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/report99/index.asp), August 6, 2001.

¹⁰ Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, 1999, p. 175.

¹¹ Frank J. Coppa, "Cities and Suburbs in Europe and the United States," *Suburbia*, Philip C Dolce, 1976, p. 188.