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Bourgeois Nightmares

Suburbia, 1870–1930

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Frontispiece: Subdivision plan, Palos Verdes Estates, California,
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“Suppose I [meaning a man of means and refinement] come here [from the city to one of its suburbs], what grounds of confidence can I have that I shall not by-and-by find a dram-shop on my right, or a beer-garden on my left, or a factory chimney or warehouse cutting off this view of the water? Is this charming road sure not to be turned also into a common town street, strewn with garbage, and in place of these lovely woods, can I be certain that here also there will not soon be a field of stumps with shanties and goats and heaps of cinders?”

Frederick Law Olmsted et al.

“Report to the Staten Island Improvement Commission of a Preliminary Scheme of Improvements,” 1871

Introduction

Early in the 1950s, a couple of years before I finished high school, my parents made a down payment on a house to be built in Bayberry, a residential development in New Rochelle, one of New York City's rapidly growing suburbs. Like many of their neighbors, most of whom were second-generation immigrants, professionals, and small-business men who had prospered after World War II, they were unhappy with the apartment house in the West Bronx into which they had moved during the Great Depression. Although they did not tell me (or my two younger brothers) why, I later learned that they found their two-bedroom apartment too small to raise three boys—though it was much bigger than the Manhattan tenements in which their parents had raised even larger families. They were also fed up with paying rent and tired of fighting with the landlord. They wanted to be homeowners, not tenants, to live in a single-family house on a good-sized lot, with a well-tended lawn and plenty of shade trees, surrounded by other single-family houses. Now that many of their neighbors were on the move, they saw no reason to stay put. A few of the neighbors moved east, to Queens and Long Island. But just as they had once headed north from Manhattan to the Bronx, so most now moved north from the Bronx to Westchester County, to New Rochelle, Mount Vernon, and, if they could afford it, Scarsdale. My parents followed suit, confident that in a year or so we too would be living happily in suburbia.

Their confidence, it turned out, was misplaced. They soon dis-

covered that houses were going up everywhere in Bayberry—everywhere, that is, but on their lot. When my father complained about the lack of progress, the developer gave him one excuse after another, none of which made much sense. More than a little suspicious, he asked a friend who was in the construction business to look into the situation. He found our property was at the spot in the first tier of lots through which the developer was moving his materials and workers to the second tier. Our house would eventually be built, but not until all the others were done. When the developer admitted as much, my father took back his down payment. A few years later my parents did move—but to another apartment in the Bronx, not to a house in suburbia; and in time they returned to Manhattan, first as tenants and then as owners of a cooperative apartment. Although I did not know it at the time, Bayberry would be as close to living in suburbia as I ever came. After spending four years in dormitories at Columbia College and five in Cambridge apartments and Harvard's Winthrop House, I returned to New York, where I taught at Columbia for four years and rented an apartment in a townhouse on the Upper East Side. When I went to MIT in 1968, I moved into an apartment house on the fringe of one of Cambridge's suburban neighborhoods. I still live there. I have also spent the past thirty summers on a farm in a part of Martha's Vineyard that has thus far pretty much withstood the pressures of suburbanization.

Although I have never lived in suburbia, I have spent a good deal of time there. I have visited my brothers, both of whom live in the suburbs—one in Scarsdale, the other in Hermosa Beach, a suburb of Los Angeles. Most of my relatives also live in the suburbs, as do many of my friends and colleagues. I have gone to sub-

urban restaurants, movie theaters, and shopping centers. I have read about the suburbs in novels and short stories and seen them portrayed in movies and on television. As a historian of urban America, I have also taught about suburbia, its past and present, its politics, society, and culture. And though I cannot claim to have succeeded, I have tried to keep up with the vast outpouring of books, articles, and theses about the history of suburbia: about the history of suburbs in general, of which the best known are Kenneth T. Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, John R. Stilgoe's *Borderlands*, and Robert Fishman's *Bourgeois Utopias*, the inspiration for the title of this book; about the history of types of suburbs, including the streetcar suburbs of Boston, the lakeshore suburbs of Chicago, and the working-class suburbs of Los Angeles; about the history of individual suburbs, of Baltimore's Roland Park, Houston's River Oaks, and Kansas City's Country Club District; and about the history of suburbia and mass transit, suburbia and city planning, suburbia and domestic architecture.

The literature is so vast that it is easy to forget that almost all of it has appeared in the past forty-five years. Indeed, it is so vast that historians have already begun writing articles about the historiography of suburbia, the history of its history. This literature is also very rich, so rich that historians now know more about suburbia than about any other part of the American metropolis. We know about the origins of the suburbs in the early and mid nineteenth century and about their growth in the late nineteenth and early twentieth. We know about the subdividers, the businessmen who transformed rural acreage into suburban lots, and their customers, the families that bought the lots and built houses on them. We know how fears of disease, crime, immorality, poverty,

immigration, and public disorder drove many Americans from the center of the city to the periphery. And we know how railroads and streetcars and later elms, subways, and highways facilitated their exodus. We have learned why subdividers gave way after World War II to developers like William J. Levitt, who not only laid out the lots but also put up the houses. We have also learned how the developers, with the help of financial institutions, real estate associations, local zoning boards, and federal housing agencies, built the modern metropolis in which most people now live, work, shop, and amuse themselves on the periphery.

As good as this literature is, it has missed something central not only to the history of suburbia but also to the history of American society. It has overlooked what are known as restrictive covenants, or deed restrictions. Legal devices that were widely used in real estate transactions, contracts that bound the seller and buyer (and, until the restrictions expired, subsequent sellers and buyers), these covenants did more than bar the owners from selling and leasing their property to non-Caucasians. They also imposed a host of highly onerous restrictions on how the owners could use their property. I first came across these restrictions roughly forty years ago while doing research for a book about Los Angeles. I found that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was common for subdividers to impose restrictive covenants on suburban tracts, especially upper-middle-class tracts, and even to use the restrictions as a marketing tool. If real estate was, next to poker, the “great American game,” as Thorstein Veblen once wrote, why, I wondered, were Americans willing to play by such stringent rules? This question, I later realized, led to other questions, the answers to which tell us much about

the history of suburbia and the society of which it was an integral part.

Of the many Los Angeles suburbs, none raised these questions more sharply than Palos Verdes Estates. A subdivision whose restrictions ran thirty pages, it covered thirty-two hundred acres of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, a spectacular site standing high above the Pacific Ocean at the southwestern edge of the metropolis. The modern history of the peninsula began in 1913, when a syndicate of eastern financiers and railroad executives bought most of what had once been El Rancho de Los Palos Verdes from George Bixby for \$1.5 million. The ranch had been carved out of El Rancho San Pedro—one of the immense ranches into which the Spaniards had divided much of southern California—in 1846; in 1882 it was partitioned into seventeen parcels, the largest of which, the Palos Verdes Peninsula, was awarded to Jotham Bixby, from whom his son George inherited it in 1894. Leading the syndicate was Frank A. Vanderlip, whose career reads like a Horatio Alger story. The son of a midwestern farmer whose death forced the sale of the family homestead, Vanderlip worked as a lathe operator and, after a year of college and a job as a financial analyst, turned to journalism. He spent a few years as a reporter and editor and then as private secretary to Lyman Gage, a Chicago banker who had been appointed secretary of the Treasury. Following a stint as assistant secretary, Vanderlip joined the National City Bank of New York, one of the country's largest, as vice president; eight years later he was named president. For what was small change to Vanderlip and his associates, all of whom were millionaires, the syndicate acquired a huge parcel about twenty miles from downtown Los Angeles. Covering sixteen thousand acres, or twenty-

five square miles, it was more than half the size of San Francisco, the largest city on the Pacific Coast, and slightly larger than Manhattan, where Vanderlip and many of the other investors worked.¹

Hard as it is to believe, Vanderlip bought the Palos Verdes Peninsula, in his words, “sight unseen”—although he did send two of “his trusted younger men” to look at it beforehand, his son later recalled. He may have thought that the deal was too good to pass on, that at less than a hundred dollars an acre the property “certainly could be sold for more.” But not long after, he was overcome by “an unusual lassitude and an occasional dizziness” that kept him in bed for a month. When he recovered, he followed his doctor’s advice to take a break from the bank and went to California to visit Palos Verdes. What he saw bowled him over. Palos Verdes, he wrote, was like a “beautiful empire,” with “miles of seacoast,” “gleaming crescent beaches,” “picturesque rolling hills and occasionally more picturesque canyons.” It reminded him of “the Sorrentine Peninsula and the Amalfi Drive.” But Palos Verdes had no whitewashed houses and medieval churches, only herds of sheep and cattle, fields of grain, and rows of peas, beans, and tomatoes, cultivated by Japanese-American truck farmers. All this was “here in America,” Vanderlip wrote, “an unspoiled sheet of paper to be written on with loving care.” To help figure out what to write on it, to make sure that it would not be spoiled “by greedy real estate operations and crowded architectural horrors,” as much of the Los Angeles coast had been, he called on Olmsted Brothers, a firm of planners, designers, and landscape architects in Brookline, Massachusetts.²

Olmsted Brothers was the foremost firm of its kind in the country. Its principals were John Charles Olmsted and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., the stepson and son, respectively, of the late Fred-

erick Law Olmsted, the dean of American landscape architects. As well as being the designer, with Calvert Vaux, of Central Park, Olmsted, Sr., was the founder of the New York firm that moved to Brookline in 1884 and changed its name to Olmsted Brothers in 1898. Although best known for its design of parks, parkways, private estates, and public institutions, the firm was well regarded for its work on several of the country's most admired suburban subdivisions. It was this work that brought the firm to Vanderlip's attention. A year or so before he bought Palos Verdes, Vanderlip had hired the Olmsteds to lay out the grounds for an eighteen-acre subdivision adjacent to Beechwood, his large country estate in Scarborough-on-the-Hudson, a small village in northern Westchester County. Although the Olmsteds had never worked on a subdivision as large as Palos Verdes—indeed, there had never been a subdivision as large to work on—Vanderlip turned to them again. Before long they came up with a plan for what the *Boston Evening Transcript* called “the country's most fashionable and exclusive residence colony,” designed for a select group of the country's richest people. A California version of Tuxedo Park—a residential retreat for wealthy New Yorkers that had been developed by Pierre Lorillard IV, heir to a great tobacco fortune, in the mid-1880s—the plan featured large estates for the fortunate few (as well as a country club, golf clubs, yacht club, tennis courts, swimming pools, and polo grounds) and three “model villages,” wrote the *Transcript*, to house the mechanics, gardeners, and laborers who worked for them.³

Work got under way in 1914. Under Olmsted Brothers' supervision, Koebig & Koebig, a Los Angeles engineering firm, made an extensive survey of the property. Plans were also drawn for more than one hundred miles of roads and a fourteen-mile high-

way along the bluffs. And architects Howard Shaw of Chicago and Myron Hunt of Los Angeles did the preliminary drawings for a magnificent clubhouse. But work came to a halt when war broke out in Europe. It started again in 1916, only to be put on hold a year later when the United States entered the war and the project's leaders joined the war effort. Taking leave from the bank, Vanderlip went to Washington, D.C., where, as one of the many "Dollar-a-Year" men, he chaired the Treasury Department's War Savings Committee. Frederick Law Olmsted served as a member of the Commission on Emergency Construction of the War Industries Board and as the manager of the Town Planning Division of the United States Housing Corporation, which had been set up to build low-cost housing for defense workers. His brother John, who had been in charge of the firm's work in Palos Verdes, was not involved in the war effort because he was seriously ill—and, it turned out, had only a few years to live.⁴ By the time the war was over, it was clear that the original plan was deeply flawed. For all the many virtues of Palos Verdes—its spectacular scenery, breathtaking views, and balmy climate—it was too far from the East Coast. Few New Yorkers or Bostonians who could afford a second (or third) home were going to take a three-day train ride to Palos Verdes when in a matter of hours (or at most a day) they could travel to Bar Harbor, Cape Cod, Newport, the Hamptons, and other fashionable resorts.