

A Field Guide to Sprawl **Dolores Hayden**

By Seana Siekman '11

Dolores Hayden is a historian, author and poet focused on the urban environment, the history of cities in the United States, and the character and relationships of these urban areas in respect to the people living in them. She has written a number of award-winning books, the most recent being *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (2003) and *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (2004). The focus of these books, and the center of her recent work are suburbs, the fringe areas that are often overlooked when considering cities. Hayden is an alumna of Mount Holyoke College, Cambridge University, and Harvard University from which she earned her Ph.D. in architecture. Currently she is Professor of Architecture and Urbanism, as well as Professor of American Studies at Yale University.

Hayden's talk at the Smart Growth Conference highlighted the main points of her two recent books, first describing the evolution of suburban growth and design and then delving into the importance of creating a language to describe bad building practices found in suburbia. She discussed the significance of presenting major smart growth issues, such as suburban sprawl, in a manner that can be understood by the sector that is perpetuating the problem: the general public. Hayden set the history of suburbia in the context of the people living in these areas during the different eras and the family structure and lifestyles they led. She stressed the significance of the physical landscape, as well as the cultural landscape, noting that how the built environment has been represented in everyday life is equally as important as considering what has actually been built. An essential aspect is what activities are supported by the landscape, and whether or not the physical landscape fails to support activities in which the population would like to partake. Based on these criteria, Hayden has divided the history of suburban landscapes in seven distinct time periods, which

are discussed in detail in her book *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (2003), and which she described in detail in her talk.

The first of these landscapes is the borderlands, which were around from 1820-1850. Early entrepreneurs turned common farms into picturesque landscapes and sold lots off to families who were looking for a different lifestyle. Many of the men who bought these lots were farmers, or ferryboat owners and the homesteads were maintained by stay at home moms. This started the trend of people wanting to live outside of the city on large plots of land. There were many “how to” books, magazines, and pamphlets during this era, encouraging this new lifestyle.

The next suburban landscape to emerge was the picturesque enclave. These were more upscale, upper class, gated communities. Large, gated houses were designed by professional architects and were located around common land and shared open spaces. This new suburbia was a draw for families who felt isolated in the borderlands and were looking for a compromise between the far outskirts and the busy city center. Picturesque enclaves became a model for wealthy communities and social and racial restrictions in regards to who could live in these neighborhoods were quickly established. However, perhaps the most important concept introduced in these exclusive communities was the idea of open community space, a point that Hayden stressed as important in all well planned towns.

The next stage in the evolution of suburbia came about between 1870-1920 in the form of streetcar buildouts. The extension of central streetcar systems allowed these suburban landscapes to emerge, and many large landowners capitalized on this opportunity to subdivide. Two and three family homes were more common than the standard single-family homes in preceding designs, resulting in many working class families moving into these communities. Many of the women still stayed at home, but took in boarders, laundry, or started raising food to supplement their husbands’

incomes. There was much less consideration put into the scenery and natural environment than there had been in borderlands and picturesque enclaves, and the landscaping was minimal, if it existed at all.

During the mid 1900's the next trend in suburban housing came about which Hayden referred to as mail order and self built suburbs. All of the parts to a house could be ordered from a catalogue and the house would be delivered in many pieces. However, the idea of putting a house together was much simpler than the process itself and the result was "garage suburbs". Families would receive the pieces of their house and only manage to build the garage. Upon realizing how difficult assembling a house actually was, they would move into the garage and never get around to building their actually house.

The fifth type of suburb is the sitcom suburb, which was developed after World War II. Financial risks were lower at this time, leading to the planning of larger and larger subdivisions. Plans often included 50,000 to 80,000 residences, and lacked sewers, school systems, or town centers, all of which contributed to logistical nightmares. In essence, sitcom suburbs were purely a collection of mass produced houses. Mortgage subsidies were also widely available, encouraging people to expand their houses, or build new, larger ones. The average size of houses at this time quickly increased from 800 sq ft to 1,500 sq ft to 2,000 sq ft and beyond. The lack of any shared central space also made establishing a sense of community nearly impossible.

Hayden's next type of suburb is called the edge node. Increasing numbers of large interstates and highways led to consequent commercial growth adjacent to the large roads. Subsidies were given to developments being built in green fields, so malls, fast food restaurants, and office parks quickly sprung up near all major highways. The emergence of edge nodes moved business away from town centers and large, chain conglomerates quickly replaced local hardware stores and

pharmacies. Women were going back to work at this time as well, but they were mostly employed by businesses in the edge nodes, so there was no benefit to downtowns. However, workers did not want to live in these new areas, so in essence, edge nodes were the opposite of sitcom suburbs. The result of these two types of suburbs was separate areas for living and working, and cars were required to get from one to the other, increasing energy use and pollution. Neither of the new development styles fostered community or focused on the needs of the citizens.

The busy, self-centered lives encouraged by sitcom suburb and edge node designs led people to desire a simpler, less commercialized area again. From this desire came the development of rural fringes. This brought the evolution of suburbia full circle back to the initial ideal created by the borderlands. In the hustle and bustle of commuter life, people came to miss open spaces and unspoiled land. Many of the homes in rural fringes are people's second homes, and they often telecommute from home offices. Although a second house in a rural fringe community is a privilege that is not accessible to many, it shows the desire for more parks, natural areas, and vegetation, and that not everyone enjoys living in concrete jungles. The developmental changes in suburban design highlight the contest that exists between people's ideal community designs, and what is tactfully built and marketed by subdividers whose sole concern is turning a large profit.

The complete description of suburban history led Hayden into a discussion of her other recent book, *A Field Guide to Sprawl* (2004). She described this book as "a dictionary of bad building practices" which would help everyone to understand the problems and discuss them as a professional might. The book contains aerial photographs of the poorly designed architectural structures in Hayden's book, making it much easier for everyone to understand than using visuals such as blueprints. In discussing this book with Hayden, she stated that she considered the photographs a critical aspect of her book and felt they greatly enhanced her descriptions of various

suburban patterns. She shared a few of her favorite definitions from this book, including: alligator (a subdivision that never gets built), big box or category killer (with parking lots that span the area of up to 10 football fields), boomburb (a development with more than 100,000 residents of which there are 55 in the United States), and leapfrog (the practice of skipping over land to build more cheaply).

Although these terms were just a taste of what can be found in her book, they shed light on the various structures that are not always viewed as smart growth issues immediately. All of Hayden's terms are the result of unchecked, unplanned, poorly designed developments. Most of them follow the pattern of developing on new land, disregarding older communities and neighborhoods and allowing them to fall apart. These designs also create low density, discontinuous residential areas that can only be navigated by cars. Hayden encouraged citizens to look at the common desire of most people to have a house, land, and community. She suggested that creating residential areas in which all people could achieve those things is the best approach to smart growth. Having neighborhoods with mixed income housing, that are easily walkable, and that have central community spaces will cut down on the unregulated growth and suburban sprawl

Additional Readings

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Dolores Hayden Homepage

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