

Reading Guide – Suburbanization and Urban Crisis

Today we begin the fourth unit of the course, “The Politics of Space and Race.” The primary goal of the unit is to examine the profound transformation of the built environment in the United States after WWII, and the ways in which ideas about space and race helped shape this transformation. Today we focus on the simultaneous and deeply intertwined processes of suburbanization and urban crisis. What was the relationship between these processes?

Assigned Materials

- Kenneth Jackson, “The Baby Boom and the Age of the Subdivision,” from *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (1985) 231-245.
- Thomas Sugrue, “Introduction” from *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (2005) 3-14.
- Malvina Reynolds, Lewis Mumford, and Betty Friedan, “Critiques of Suburbia,” in *The Suburb Reader*, Nicolaides and Wiese, eds. (2006) 294-302.
- WATCH: *Crisis in Levittown* (1957) 31min

Questions to Consider

Kenneth Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier* was the first major study of suburbanization in the United States. The chapter we read this week from that book examines the postwar era’s special role in the history of American suburbs. What, according to Jackson, were some of the most important factors leading to the postwar housing boom? What role did the federal government play in the building of suburbia? What distinguished postwar suburbs from earlier housing patterns and styles? What were some of the benefits and costs of suburbanization?

Thomas Sugrue’s *Origins of the Urban Crisis* is another groundbreaking book – the first to closely examine the complex historical forces that helped contribute to the decline of American city centers during the postwar period. Today we read the introduction to this book. Sugrue’s case study of Detroit plays close attention to the impacts of urban crisis on race and race relations. What does Sugrue mean when he writes, on page 9, that in the postwar US “blackness and whiteness assumed a spatial definition”? What is the “underclass debate,” and why does Sugrue view it with suspicion? What forces caused the urban crisis?

The primary sources assigned this week are from postwar critics of suburbia. What aspects of suburban life do Reynolds, Mumford, and Friedan find most troubling? What kind of society did they think suburbia was creating? What differences do you notice in their approaches to the topic, and do you think these critiques are valid?

The short documentary *Crisis in Levittown* depicts a moment of tension in a community many imagined to be the quintessential suburb and ideal symbol of the postwar American Dream. As you watch, try to put the film in conversation with both Jackson and Sugrue. Keep in mind that both Levittown and Detroit were in the Northern United States, not the Jim Crow South.

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