



Indexing the Suburbs **Index Review by Cheryl Lemmens**

Tom Martinson, *American Dreamscape: The Pursuit of Happiness in Postwar Suburbia* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2000)

An interesting addition to the growing number of books on suburban culture, *American Dreamscape* takes a look at the origins, architecture, and culture of the American postwar suburbs – from the suburbanites’ point of view. Tom Martinson, a Minneapolis-based city planning consultant and urban historian, defends the lifestyle of the suburban “yeoman” against the opposing views of the “urbanist” gentry intelligentsia. And, whether they’re criticizing the the wastefulness of urban sprawl, the visual sterility of subdivisions, or the amount of time involved in tending one’s lawn, urbanists certainly have a lot to say about the suburbs – much of it negative. Martinson argues, however, that suburbanites (i.e., those who live in the suburbs) have a rich and fulfilling life exactly where they are – and that they don’t need any lecturing, or “hectoring,” from urbanist critics.

As a lifelong suburbanite who, nevertheless, identifies with the “urbanist” point of view (making me, I suppose, a sort of hybrid, a suburbanite urbanist), I wanted to read *American Dreamscape* because of its sympathetic portrait of the suburbs – particularly after having read two comprehensive histories of suburbia, Kenneth T. Jackson’s *Crabgrass Frontier* and Robert Fishman’s *Bourgeois Utopias*. On taking a first cursory glance through Martinson’s book, I found it to be well designed, with each section visually marked by a photograph of Main Street in Irvine, California – “an archetypal postwar gentry suburb.” The notes are fairly copious for a book that is often highly personal, and on reading through the bibliography, I noted the absence of at least one landmark work on urban planning, Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

The index, however, was a surprise – laid out in a one-column format, with *all entries* flush left. This means, for example, that the entry “suburbs,” which has subentries taking up the better part of pages 288-289, completely loses its impact; there is no way to tell where the subentries end except by trying to figure it out alphabetically.

The beginning of the “suburbs” entry looks like this:

- suburbs
- 1940’s housing explosion, ... 52
- Arcadia, ... 221-222, 235-237
- balanced environments and, ... 239-240
- and bedroom suburbs, ... 185
- Beverly Hills, ... 225
- Blue Collar Suburb, ... 63

Four entries at the bottom of page 289, all starting with the word “suburban,” appear to be subentries of “suburbs,” while “subways,” the last entry on the page, appears to be a new main entry.

Reader Harold M. Morgan, who posted a review of the book on Amazon.com, thought there was an error in this section of the index. He noted that “something strange happens toward [the] end of the index; another index jumps into the middle of the S’s.” In fact, the “other index” in the middle of the S’s represents the continuation of the subentries to “suburbs” at the top of page 289, starting with

the subentry “Ladue, ... 143-144.” Because it is set flush left, it appears to be a new main entry that belongs in the “L” section.

Similar examples of flush-left subentries are found throughout the index. For example:

Gruen, Victor, ... 58
and shopping malls, ... 103
Guggenheim Museum, ... 68, 160

Poor layout is not the only problem with this index. It also appears that there is one significant omission, that of any reference to urbanist critic Jane Holtz Kay, whose book *Asphalt Nation* is discussed at length in a chapter on transportation issues. As Martinson puts it, Kay’s position on the automobile is that it is “a big negative,” and in her view “suburbia is really the underlying culprit.” Now, if you go to the index, there are apparently no entries for either Kay or her book. Upon closer scrutiny, however, an entry does appear: “Holtz, Jane, and negatives of automobiles, ... 105.” Not only is her name given incorrectly, but the locator “105” does not match the lengthy discussion of Kay’s views, which appears on pages 105-107 and 111-118.

Was Jane Holtz Kay given such short shrift in the index because she is an urbanist critic of the suburban lifestyle? In fairness, without knowing how the index was compiled, one hesitates to make this call. However, the presence of some other main entries in this light is interesting, to say the least. For example, in the “K” section from which Kay was omitted, there is an entry for “Knott’s Berry Farm,” which is mentioned on page 187 as an attraction located in Orange County, California. And in the “L” section, the following entry appears: “Lugo, Marisol, on public transportation, ... 119.” Marisol Lugo, as it turns out, is neither an urban planner nor a transportation expert, but “a Miami welfare recipient” whose comment on the limiting nature of public transit is reproduced in the book.

In addition to poor layout and the omission cited above, problems with this index include the following:

- Identification of locations (cities, counties, suburbs, houses, etc.). State names would have helped in most cases; parenthetical references would also have been helpful, particularly since the index was laid out with room to spare. As examples, actual entries from the index are given below in one list, followed by my own version of the list with identifying information added:

Bon Aire
Fairbanks Ranch
Hopkins
Ladue
Montecito
Pullman

Bon Aire (development in Iowa City, Iowa)
Fairbanks Ranch, Ca. (San Diego suburb)
Hopkins, Minn.
Ladue, Mo. (St. Louis suburb)
Montecito, Ca. (Santa Barbara suburb)
Pullman, Ill. (company town)

Similarly, the entry “Arcadia” is never qualified as referring to the concept of the “Arcadian village.” (Given the many examples of California suburbs, one might think the index entry was a reference to the city of Arcadia.) And the entry “Cape Cod” refers to the well-known residential architectural style, not to Cape Cod, Massachusetts.

- Poor grouping of entries and subentries. For example, Frank Lloyd Wright’s entry is loaded with undifferentiated locators; only three subentries appear below his name, just one of which refers to an actual structure. Omitted from the subentries are Wright-designed buildings such as the Guggenheim Museum, Fallingwater, and the Robie House, as well as Wright’s proposed Broadacre City, which are given main entry status elsewhere in the index.
- Confusing or irrelevant entries. Consider, for example, the following:

Big Thoughts, ... 37
Flower Preparation Room, ... 61

It turns out that the first reference is to the life of the farmer, who, living a solitary lifestyle in communion with the land, “is unavoidably drawn into the much larger context of all nature – this is the personal realm of Big Thoughts.” The second reference is to a room in a luxurious suburban house that the author visited as an architectural student. Neither entry should have made it into the index.

- Three entries with dates, such as “1956 Interstate Highways Act,” are grouped together at the beginning of the index under the heading “Symbols.” It seems to me that none of these needed to be indexed under their dates; two refer to presidential elections (of 1828 and 1896), and could have been referenced in other ways, such as under the names of the contestants. The highway legislation probably should have been indexed under “Interstate Highways Act (1956).”
- Finally, some typos create entries that are not immediately recognizable as incorrect – until you look them up in the book. For example:

George Tidewater estate, ... 172
Maison Carr, ... 25

George Tidewater is not a person; the first entry above should actually look like something along the lines of “Georgian Tidewater estate houses (Virginia).” And “Maison Carr” is not the French version of “Carr House” – it is in fact “an ancient [Roman] imperial temple in the south of France known as the Maison Carrée,” which was admired by Thomas Jefferson.

All in all, then, *American Dreamscape* remains an interesting treatise, presenting as it does a vigorous defence of suburbia and the people who choose this lifestyle. Whether one agrees with its premise or not, the book has in any event generated discussion about the ongoing debate over the merits of city and suburb. Its index, however (all 13 pages of which can be viewed online at Amazon.com), leaves much to be desired. In its unusual one-column layout, with generous right-hand margins, it might in fact be said to mimic the typical suburban street of single-story detached houses on comfortable lots. Unfortunately, the reader who uses this index may find that there are a few too many cul-de-sacs in this subdivision.