Diversifying Suburbia: Bungalow Courts as Spaces of Social Transformation

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INTRODUCTION

Recent urban literature emphasizes the dynamics of division and loss: gated communities which exclude minorities and the poor, political and economic segregation, the disappearance of public space. After years of photographing the process of decline in American inner cities, Camilo José Vergara concluded that cities are being pulled apart into isolated fragments. (Vergara p. 3) Peter Marcuse describes the new socio-economic boroughs of New York, a gentrified city of professional, managerial and technical workers; a suburbanized city of the middle class; a tenement city of the working class; and an abandoned city of the indigent, the underpaid, the unemployed. (Marcuse p. 81)

Other authors identify divisions within the American city produced by the emergence of restricted communities: condominiums, co-ops, planned-unit developments of single family homes, and the tendency of the wealthy to secede from cities to set up their own enclaves, leaving the less fortunate to fend for themselves. By adopting covenants, codes and restrictions that regulate every aspect of community life, homeowners associations exclude activities and preferences considered a threat to property values and civic order. (McKenzie p.9) Given the disparity of income levels among blacks, Latinos and other ethnic groups, these exclusionary initiatives can also have racial implications.

By focusing exclusively on the negative aspects of some developments, these authors overlook interesting developments in the ongoing effort by humans to redefine their relationships with the physical world. The complex environmental forms that sometimes result are compromising the traditional opposition between suburbs and city centers. Certain of these forms of settlement have emphasized distance and divisions among people, but also allowed them to look at the world and their lives in a new way. Contradictions abound; technologies which have encouraged urban dispersal also bring people together. The same industries that are gradually reducing the need for personal contact in many areas of life thrive on it themselves; recent surveys have revealed that some employees will commute from as far away as London to be physically present at work in Silicon Valley.

Denise Scott Brown (Venturi p.11) has suggested that cities be viewed as complex organisms containing a multiplicity of housing forms: "high-rise housing, Levittowns, Seasides, garden apartments, all manner of townhouses, old houses, public housing and housing for all income groups and many different demographic categories and family types." New intellectual approaches must be devised to interpret assorted settlement patterns: suburban, exurban, urban, high and low density, and their many variations.

REVILING SUBURBIA

Many urban critics believed the city to be the repository of richness and diversity in human life. When the suburbs began to emerge, they were reviled as cultural wastelands which nurtured a socially and economically homogeneous society: "... a multitude of houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, inhabited by people eating the same tasteless prefabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis." (Mumford The City in History, p. 553)

Lewis Mumford's critique of suburban fabric and mores was based on the Levittown type; he admired garden city developments such as Radburn, New Jersey, designed in 1928 by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, which featured schools, playgrounds and swimming pools. (Mumford The Culture of Cities p.437). A distinctive feature of Radburn was its continuous green belt, uninterrupted by automobile traffic, which linked its residential neighborhoods together.

Because his disdain for suburbs was based on a particular type and a limited geographical area, Mumford overlooked some interesting developments. By the 1920s, suburbs of many western cities included bungalow courts, a suburban typology which housed a population consisting mostly of single people in all age groups and recent immigrants. The cultural diversity and higher densities of the bungalow courts did not conform to the prevailing stereotype of the suburb as a collection of identical single-family houses, inhabited by racially and economically uniform nuclear families who consumed previously frozen packaged foods.

In the pre-modern city, people of different social classes tended to share the same territory. The wealthy occupied large townhouses fronting the main streets while the poor were crowded into narrow alleyways behind them. (Fishman, p. 8) By arranging small houses around narrow courtyards, bungalow courts integrated people of modest means and their more affluent neighbors dwelling in single family houses on the same suburban streets. Individual units created the illusion of ownership and their appearance conformed to the suburban ideal of houses surrounded by greenery and lawns. The courtyards contributed to the continuity of the suburban landscape where connected segments of front lawn sustained the illusion of living in a large park.

By combining two adjacent residential lots, the bungalow court was an exceptional but unobtrusive element in an otherwise homogeneous fabric. This capacity to unite seamlessly with the surroundings was distinguished them from larger apartment buildings whose bulk disrupted the texture of single-family neighborhoods and eventually made all multifamily complexes unwelcome. The bungalow court's integration into suburbia may also have been eased by prevailing deed restrictions which prohibited blacks, Mexicans, Asians and Jews from buying or renting property in most suburban neighborhoods. These exclusionary zoning laws guaranteed that minority populations would not outnumber the dominant white majority (Fogelson p. 145) but the bungalow courts did manage to introduce a more diverse population of single people and immigrant families, a diversity overlooked by critics such as Mumford.

THE BUNGALOW COURTS

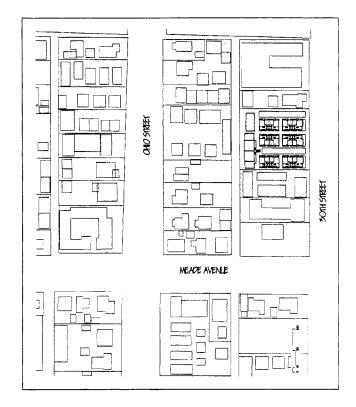
Bungalow courts were comprised of small bungalows, a house type popular at the turn of the century, characterized by eclectic design idioms, horizontal lines, deep eaves and porch piers. The interpenetration of indoor and outdoor spaces conveyed an image of openness and freedom, unlike the social stasis and political repression symbolized by the typical nineteenth century house. (Parker p. 13) The bungalow's immediate relationship to the outdoors and nature was emphasized by eclectic design imagery borrowed from Tyrolean cottages, Chinese pagodas and the Japanese house. Bungalows substituted porches for traditional entry halls, combined living and dining rooms, and featured kitchens outfitted with the latest equipment. Individual units in bungalow courts were also characterized by the same flowing space and compact efficiency that distinguished bungalows from the dark, claustrophobic houses of the Victorian era.

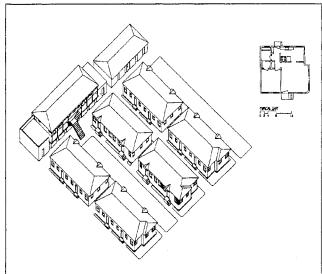
The relationship of the bungalow court to its immediate surroundings, however, was based on principles of urban design uncommon in neighborhoods of single family houses of any type. Despite the similar design features, materials and prominent eaves, which assured compatibility when groups of bungalows were arranged in close proximity, the strong individual identity and isolated, often irregular siting of each house underscored its independence. Bungalow courts, however, were designed as harmonious arrangements which emphasized the collective identity of the whole rather than the articulation of the individual unit. By grouping the cottages around the perimeter of a court, the central space rather than the isolated house became the dominant figure in the composition. The regular arrangement also made the most efficient use of available land, allowing many people to live comfortably on a parcel intended for a single family, or two at the most, if situated on a double lot.

Related Courtyard Housing Types

In the period just before World War I, architects designed many new building types for multi-family living: model apartments and tenements, row houses and entire village developments. (Wright p. 277) In southern and central California, the Mediterranean tradition of courtyard buildings was particularly strong, inspired by the surviving colonial missions and reinterpreted in the *cholo* courts of Los Angeles. (Matthews p.465). The latter were communal dwellings surrounding an open space and inhabited mostly by recent Mexican immigrants. Other influential building types were tent villages, religious campgrounds, and groups of vacation cottages for wealthy retirees in resort areas such as Pasadena and Santa Monica. (King p.140).

The new popularity of the car at the turn of the century increased personal mobility and new cities like Los Angeles, Pasadena and San Diego became major destinations for a population in search of warmer climates and better opportunities. (Gregory p. 44) The first bungalow courts were vacation cottages for the wealthy, often including servants quarters and a space to park the automobile. While generally modest in character, these units featured alternative floor plans and varied layouts. Analysis of Sylvanus Marston's Saint Francis Court (1909) in Pasadena (see Fig. 7) reveals a careful

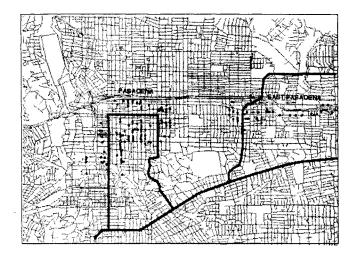




Figs. 1-2. Bungalow Court at 4355-4367 Thirtieth Street, San Diego, CA. (Courtesy of the author).

composition with the usual amenities, landscaped grounds and a centrally located summer house. (King p.60). As land prices rose, bungalow courts built on smaller sites without servants quarters and luxurious landscaping became affordable accommodation for the growing westward migration.

The social and economic changes which occurred after the First World War added to the popularity of bungalow courts and defined their characteristic typological form. Profits from the wartime industries had fueled a spectacular expansion of the domestic economy. Many large corporations located their West Coast plants in Los Angeles, providing an almost instant industrial base to match its the regional strength in agriculture. By war's end the movie industry was well established in Southern California and the oil industry contin-



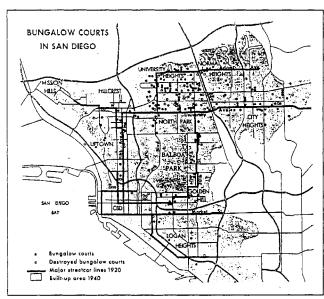


Fig. 3. Illustration of the relationship between streetcar lines and bungalow courts in San Diego, CA from Curtis, James and Ford, Larry, "Bungalow Courts in San Diego: Monitoring a Sense of Place," *The Journal of San Diego History*, Spring 1988.

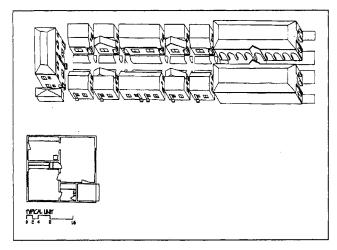


Fig. 4. Paradise Court on Adams Avenue, San Diego, CA. (Courtesy of the author).

ued to expand in response to the accelerating demand for automobiles. (Fishman p. 162) Mass transit produced spectacular suburban growth at more than twice the rate of the central cities. (Tobin p.102) The numbers of immigrants increased steadily both before and after the two world wars and during the Great Depression, as soldiers returned, and more women continued to join the work force. As rapid economic development attracted those in search of housing and job opportunities in Western cities, bungalow courts provided newly arrived immigrants with supportive living environments, gradually easing the transition into their adopted communities.

The proportion of multifamily dwellings to single family houses in Los Angeles rose dramatically, increasing from eight per cent in 1920 to fifty-three per cent in 1928. (Fogelson p. 151) For newcomers alone in an unfamiliar environment, apartment buildings offered few opportunities for social interaction beyond chance encounters in corridors, elevators or lobbies. Bungalow courts, with their units focused around a central space, gave their inhabitants a sense of community and a place to socialize with their neighbors.

Because access to job opportunities was important, another attractive feature of this housing type was close proximity to transportation networks. To make them affordable, bungalow courts were built on cheaper land outside city centers but connected to them by streetcar lines. The most popular bungalow court sites were located along streetcar lines; local entrepreneurs used them as a lure to open up raw land for development. Studies in San Diego and Pasadena show that the interdependent relationship between bungalow courts and transit systems continued even as the streetcars were replaced by buses.

During the period between the two world wars there were changes in both the style and configuration of the bungalow court. Even though it resulted from a typically American synthesis, the Tyrolean chalet imagery of the California bungalow could not withstand the purge of all things Germanic after the First World War (Parker p.15) and the vernacular references most readily available in California's landscapes had been imported from southern Europe and northern Africa, not Austria or Switzerland. By the 1930s, the alpine and oriental detailing characteristic of earlier bungalow courts had been dropped in favor of ersatz Spanish, Mediterranean and Moorish references, as well as the consistently popular Norman French and English cottage vernaculars.

The change of imagery was also accompanied by an increase in density. In some areas, attached units in pairs or rows replaced freestanding units. While these new courts made more efficient use of available land, they also restricted the opportunities for articulation of the individual unit to minor design elements such as porches, stoops, entrance canopies, lights and mailboxes.

Different economic, topographic, architectural or urban factors were responsible for variations in the layout of individual bungalow courts. In poorer neighborhoods, two rows of units were separated by a narrow walkway. More elaborate courts featured carefully landscaped paths and gardens in the central common space. Units in less expensive courts tended to be attached in groups or pairs, while some in more upscale developments remained freestanding. If a particular lot was wide enough, a court could be laid out in a U-shape with the open end facing the street and a one-or two-story building at the opposite end serving as a visual focus. Bungalow courts were often laid out on sloped sites, resulting in terraced houses facing a common stairway. (Chase p.33) Others included commercial elements, such Paradise Court in San Diego where small groups of shops on either side of the court merged with those on the main street.

Beginning in the 1920's travelers and migrants on routes to the west found temporary accommodation in motor courts along the way. The overall design of these lodgings was influenced by the bungalow courts, but the garage adjacent to each suite acknowledged the new indispensability of the car. The success of these motor courts offered incentive for builders to use further exploit the form by providing permanent accommodation at higher densities than in the original models for those on tighter budgets. (Chase p.33)

	Gridiron (c. 1900)	Fragmented Parallel (c. 1950)	Warped Parallel (c. 1960)	Loops and Lollipops (c. 1970)	Lollipops on a Stick (c. 1980)
Street Patterns					述上
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Lineal Feet of Streets	20,800	19,000	16,500	15,300	15,600
# of Blocks	28	19	14	12	8
# of Intersections	26	22	14	12	8
# of Access Points	19	10	7	6	4
# of Loops & Cul-de- Sacs	0	1	2	8	24

Fig. 5. Comparative analysis of neighborhood street patterns. from Southworth, Michael and Owens, M. Peter, "The Evolving Metropolis: Studies of Community, Neighborhood and Street Form at the Urban Edge," *APA Journal* 271 (Summer, 1993).

The Present

As the twentieth century progressed, the social and economic circumstances which had allowed the bungalow courts to flourish gradually changed. Escalating land and building costs, movement away from urban centers and demand for more parking and living space halted their construction by the end of the 1930s as denser, more compact building types were devised. First came garden apartments, larger buildings divided into many units surrounding courts or gardens. The apartment buildings which followed these contained many more units in even bulkier volumes and the court was eliminated altogether. As building footprints began to occupy as much of the site as zoning legislation would allow, the social spaces and communal atmosphere of the old courts disappeared.

The surviving bungalow courts are now popular living environments for those seeking affordable housing in a sociable setting. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the courts remain popular among new immigrants, senior citizens, single people and non-traditional families and others, whose enthusiasm for the way of life they offer ensures a continuing vitality.

BUNGALOW COURTS AND LOLLIPOP CUL DE SACS

Because of bungalow courts made the most efficient use of their sites disposed around regular geometric figures, the courts could be most effectively sited in suburban layouts based on gridiron patterns. With cheaper cars resulting in greater mobility for growing numbers of people in the last decades of the twentieth century, suburbs that had been relatively inaccessible were less so and security became a growing concern. Newer suburban subdivisions began to feature winding roads with fewer connections to the main highways.

Michael Southworth and Peter Owens (Southworth and Owens p.286) maintain that residential neighborhoods at the urban fringe have sustained a steady degradation of pedestrian accessibility, civic life and visual coherence as a result of discontinuous street patterns. To prove their case, the authors devised an interesting graphic figure focusing on the amount of crossings observable in variety of urban developments. They use the city of Pleasanton, characterized by winding roads and small cul de sacs (Southworth and Owens p. 280) to illustrate the relative absence of intersections in a configuration they call "loops and lollipops." Formerly a small town located at the intersection of two major highways, Pleasanton began a period of dramatic growth in the late 1960s that is expected to continue well into the next century. Like most other suburbs, Pleasanton experiences traffic congestion on a daily basis.

Southworth's and Owens's diagrams indicate that girdded street layouts present more options for efficient flow of traffic than the dead-end lollipops which structure Pleasanton's residential areas. The authors argue that the arrangement of a few large main streets with cul de sac appendages maximizes privacy but provides few opportunities for social interaction (Southworth and Owens p.281) But a recent visual survey tended to contradict their assertions. On a Sunday afternoon, street life flourished in Pleasanton's loops and lollipops as residents chatted with the neighbors, walked their dogs and worked in open garages. Children were observed playing softball, hopscotch, and basketball and riding bicycles, all in the paved portions of the cul de sacs. (insert Figure 6 here) Fig. 6. Lollipop in Pleasanton. Rather than being inhibited by them, the vitality of street life in Pleasanton's residential areas depends in large part on the presence of its loops and lollipops. They provide not just privacy and safety for children, as Southworth and Owens readily admit, but also spaces for neighborhood social interaction. Also, not all

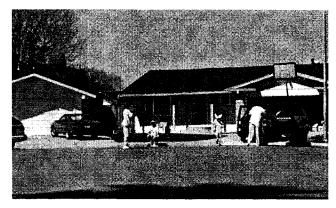


Fig. 6. Lollipop in Pleasanton. (Photo by the author)

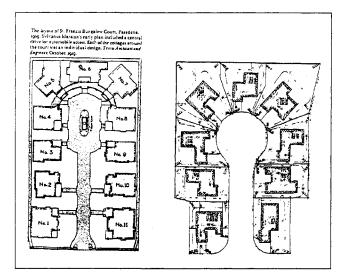


Fig. 7. St. Francis Bungalow Court. From Architect and Engineer, October, 1919 compared with lollipop in Pleasanton. (Courtesy of the author).

lollipops are disconnected from each other; some in Pleasanton's Valley Trails area are linked by a network of pedestrian pathways.

The layout of the ten suburban houses at the end of Corwin Court, a lollipop cul de sac in Pleasanton, is almost identical to that of some early bungalow courts, albeit on a somewhat larger scale. St. Francis Court of 1909 the earliest known bungalow court in Pasadena, featured a central drive for automobile access and eleven small cottages around a common court.

Lollipops feature not smaller versions of neighboring houses, but houses the same size as are found in other lollipops. (insert Figure 8 here) Fig. 8. Lollipops in Pleasanton. This homogeneity of available housing stock ensures a demographically similar, if racially diverse, community. Despite falling short of the socially and economically diversified ideal, the lively lollipops underscore the need for settings that offer opportunities for people to develop what is now almost universally referred to as a "sense of community" in suburban neighborhoods.

CONCLUSION

Critics writing earlier in this century mostly ignored the courtyard buildings that would have challenged their characterizations of suburbia as racially, culturally and economically homogeneous, bereft of any public life. Instead of the homogeneity and blandness Mumford assumed was characteristic of all suburbs, the bungalow court unobtrusively introduced social and economic diversity.

Forty years later a new generation of critics and historians has

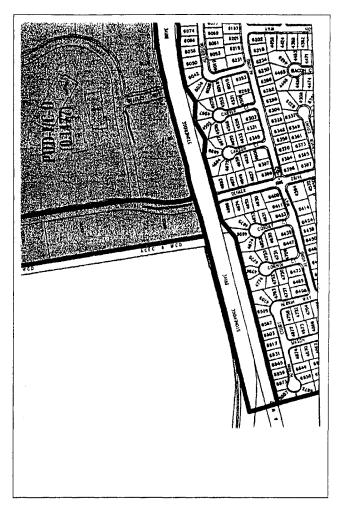


Fig. 8. Lollipops in Pleasanton. (Courtesy of Pleasanton Planning Department).

refocused attention on garden apartments, courtyard housing and bungalow courts to sustain a polemic against suburban sprawl. Influenced by the revival of interest in traditional forms of housing, Stefanos Polyzoides and the other authors of *Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles* admire the picturesque shaded *patios*, higher densities and fine craftsmanship of that city's romantic housing courts. In search of antidotes to suburban sprawl, they celebrate the housing courts as subtractive urban forms, with public and semi-public space carved out of the urban mass, and deplore additive suburban forms, widely scattered objects on mostly empty land.

For Polyzoides et al. (Polyzoides p.57), the higher densities of the urban housing courts offer a clear alternative to suburban sprawl. The hybrid bungalow court, at once additive and subtractive, is a more compromised typology and therefore a less favored alternative. But market forces cannot be ignored and the suburban lifestyle preferred by overwhelming numbers of people can only be improved if the reasons for its success are understood and respected.

The relocation of service, retail, research, technology and manufacturing industries and employment opportunities away from city centers to their peripheries has profoundly diversified the suburbs, yet stereotypes of suburban homogeneity persist. The example of the bungalow court and its latter day descendant, the lollipop, emphasizes the need evaluate built forms and their environments carefully before ideological assumptions are made. If the suburbs are to improve they must first be visited, and all the forces which have created them understood, in order to avoid inappropriate or irrelevant prescriptions.

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