**Architecture** Does Suburbia Breed Violence?

Urban Designers Seek Solutions Teen Shootings

By Jackie Craven, About.com Guide

Town planners are seeking ways to prevent the shooting rampages and other acts of teen violence in schools and neighborhoods. While designers work to install better security in school buildings, many are also asking whether America's towns and neighborhoods have become breeding grounds for violence.

Violence can break out anywhere, any time. Yet, over the past two decades, some of the most shocking and most deadly attacks have occurred in insulated, suburban settings.

To say that the suburbs make kids go crazy would be far-fetched. However, a large and widely respected group of architects and city planners believe that there is a profound connection between the environments we build and the ways we feel and behave. These urban designers claim that America's tract style homes and sprawling suburban neighborhoods lead to social isolation and a failure to communicate.

**The New Urbanism**

Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk pioneered an approach to urban design known as New Urbanism. In their writings, the design team warn that suburbia "spells the end of authentic civic life." According to Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and other New Urbanists, suburban neighborhoods are dangerous because they don't foster a sense of community. New Urbanists believe that the ideal community will be easily walkable. Instead of driving cars, people will stroll through the town to reach buildings and businesses.

Perhaps one of the most disturbing visions of suburbia is painted by Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder, professors of Regional Planning in California. Their book, *Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States*, describes what happens when affluent Americans barricade themselves inside exclusive, enclosed neighborhoods.

"In an open city," Blakely and Snyder write, "people of different colors and incomes must negotiate their mutual fate together. In some respects, they learn to value one another more highly, and social networks are expanded." Exclusive gated communities, the authors say, lead to misunderstanding, stereotyping, and fear.

**The History Of Suburbia**

Suburbia has roots in the past. Some historians say that suburban neighborhoods existed in ancient times. The authors of *Fortress America* say that secluded suburban neighborhoods developed in nineteenth century England, when businessmen built small country estates just outside their villages.

But suburbia as we know it is an American idea. Suburban neighborhoods evolved when the streetcar, or electric trolley, allowed people to live easily outside the cities. Designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted and Frank Lloyd Wright created self-contained model communities along curving roads. The single-story, servantless houses designed by Frank Lloyd Wright became the archetype for the middle-class suburban home.

**Is Suburbia Evil?**

Critics of New Urbanism scoff at the notion that neighborhood patterns Wright pioneered can lead to social breakdown. They argue that Americans enjoy living in single-family homes with large, private yards. Their view: more sprawl means less crowding, and an improved quality of life.

For New Urbanists, however, sprawl not merely unattractive. New Urbanists believe that neighborhoods surrounded by sprawl are dehumanizing. The New Urbanist view: suburban neighborhoods foster a sense of isolation and can breed discontent.

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