

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert Fogelson. *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. 264 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10876-7.

Reviewed by Ann Forsyth (Metropolitan Design Center, University of Minnesota)
Published on H-Urban (December, 2005)



Restricting Suburbia

Covering the period of significant suburban development before zoning became commonplace, Robert Fogelson's *Suburban Nightmares* is a book-length treatment of six decades of restrictive covenants. Why, Fogelson asks, did developers come to think that restrictive covenants would make property more appealing and why did Americans, from many income levels, accept them and even seek them out?

The book is organized into two main sections, examining how covenants were developed and then delving into the fears that provoked them. An epilogue connects this historical exploration to more contemporary concerns. To make his argument Fogelson uses a number of extended cases, particularly Palos Verdes Estates in southern California. Designed by the Olmsted Brothers, it was at the time the largest subdivision ever developed in the United States and demonstrated restrictive covenants on a grand scale.

Many of the most significant designed suburban environments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—including Forest Hills Gardens in New York, Roland Park in Baltimore, the Country Club District in Kansas City, St. Francis Wood in San Francisco, and Shaker Heights near Cleveland—were created with restrictive covenants. They were promoted by many key figures in the history of landscape architecture and civic design including both generations of Olmsteds and J.C. Nichols. Not all proponents supported racial covenants, but most clearly advocated economically exclusionary restrictions on property, such as minimum house sizes or

costs, the exclusion of home businesses, and mandatory architectural review.

As Fogelson explains, restrictive covenants were found in many parts of the metropolitan area, “[b]ut these covenants reveal more about the suburbs, where by the 1920s they were the rule, than about the cities, where they were the exception. They tell us not only about the dreams of suburbanites, which have been vividly described by many other historians, but also about their nightmares: not only about their hopes but about their fears. About their fear of others, of racial minorities and poor people, once known as the ‘dangerous classes,’ and their fear of people like themselves. About their fear of change and their fear of the market, of which they were among the chief beneficiaries” (pp. 23-24).

The enormous urban changes of the nineteenth century had brought on rapid changes. Over the course of only a few decades fashionable districts such as Boston's South End became the homes of working-class immigrants and were filled with taverns and factories (p. 30). Repeated nationwide, these shifts were a cause for concern for the development industry and for property owners. Restrictive covenants had been in use in the United States from the eighteenth century in locations such as Louisburg Square and the Back Bay in Boston and Gramercy Park in New York and New Jersey's Llewellyn Park. Fogelson clearly articulates the growing appeal of covenants during the later part of the nineteenth century as a way of managing the increasing pace of urban change. Fogelson also provides a very interesting

description of the evolution of covenants as developers slowly tested both the market and the courts to see what was permissible, marketable, and effective. It was not obvious that covenants would be allowed on a wide scale or that they would appeal to American buyers who in general believed in strong property rights. It also took some years to develop homeowner associations as a mechanism for enforcement. Over time, however, restrictive covenants came to be attractive to a wide range of people although, in general, more expensive areas had more regulations. Working-class areas tended to stress racial covenants alone.

While Fogelson talks compellingly about the fear of difference that motivated use of covenants, what was most striking to me was his argument about the fear buyers had of others like themselves. In homogenous subdivision after homogenous subdivision, covenants restricted people very much like each other in order to create minimum standards of taste and behavior. Some of the more amusing parts of the book discuss the covenants on fences and different kinds of household pets and domestic animals such as chickens and rabbits. Fogel-

son also writes clearly about racial covenants that became quite tortured in their specificity, although African Americans were the most commonly excluded group. As Fogelson describes, the Lake Shore Club District in Erie County, Pennsylvania, excluded anyone “‘of Negro or Mongolian birth or parentage’ | [and] any person of Hungarian, Mexican, Greek, Armenian, Austrian, Italian, Russian [which may have meant Jewish], Polish, Slavish, or Roumanian birth’” (p. 103). Not all racial restrictions were in covenants however; many were more informal arrangements with realtors. For example, after selling to two or three Jewish buyers, the developer of Forests Hills Gardens stopped that practice.

Overall, *Suburban Nightmares* is an important overview of the early history of suburban covenants and of the fears that provoked them. It also provides important context for understanding how public zoning came to be accepted during the twentieth century. I would have liked some more illustrations and subheadings to help me visualize effects and to keep track of the various themes in the book. However, this is a minor quibble in an otherwise very informative and useful volume.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Ann Forsyth. Review of Fogelson, Robert, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11004>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.