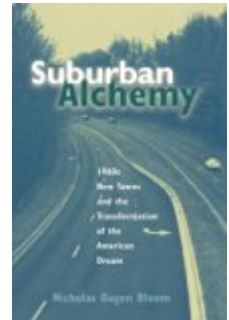


**Nicholas Dagen Bloom.** *Suburban Alchemy: 1960s New Towns and the Transformation of the American Dream.* Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001. 333 pp. \$27.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8142-5075-4.



**Reviewed by** Roger Biles

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As vast suburban tracts spread across the post-World War II American landscape, journalists and academics developed a sharply critical assessment of life in the metropolitan areas surrounding the nation's central cities. Even as urban efforts failed to arrest the flow of businesses and population to the urban periphery, a consensus emerged that derided suburban life as intellectually vacuous, injurious to the American landscape, and conducive to a mind-numbing conformity. According to this analysis, life along the crabgrass frontier muted traditions of civic activism, suffocated creativity, and assured homogeneity by excluding the poor and racial minorities. Thus, in escaping the deterioration of the inner city, suburban developers laid the foundations for an equally oppressive kind of suburban blight replete with cookie-cutter domiciles and tacky strip malls. To be sure, conceded the critics, a few reform-minded developers in the 1960s sought to create innovatively planned communities as an antidote to chaotic suburban sprawl, but such new towns as Park Forest, Illinois; Clear Lake, City, Texas; and Mission Viejo, California ended up being overgrown subdivisions that

strikingly resembled the countless other suburbs that surrounded them. In most urban history texts, the new towns movement of the 1960s has been consigned to a footnote or, at best, a brief paragraph.

In *Suburban Alchemy*, Nicholas Dagen Bloom recounts the histories of three new towns--Reston, Virginia; Columbia, Maryland; and Irvine, California--that succeeded to a remarkable degree in offering a vital form of community to its residents. Bloom acknowledges that these suburbs frequently deviated from the blueprints drafted by their idealistic developers and that conditions sometimes fell short of the goals set by community leaders. Idealistic "pioneers" who comprised the first wave of residents faced repeated disappointments and found themselves forced to compromise in the face of implacable opposition. Despite concerted efforts to provide recreational outlets for young people, for example, teenagers loitered, rebelled against authority, and developed a drug culture. Residents ignored a generous network of bicycle paths and remained in their automobiles so that traffic congestion became an increasingly

nettlesome problem. Yet despite these and other setbacks, Bloom argues, new town ideas have remained vibrant for over four decades. Mixed land uses and housing types, innovative landscape design, and the provision of cultural amenities have enriched the lives of new town residents in Reston, Columbia, and Irvine.

The author tells the stories of these three new towns by dividing his book into four sections. Part One provides a succinct discussion of the suburban critique that predominated in America after the Second World War. Part Two ("Planning and Designing the New Suburb") describes the historical development of these new towns. In three largely expository chapters, Bloom notes the importance of the developers (Robert Simon in Reston, James Rouse in Columbia, and Raymond Watson in Irvine) in establishing an ethos that lasted long after changes in leadership. In Part Three ("Civic Renewal in Suburbia"), the author discusses the extraordinary amount of civic activism and the special sense of community that developed in the new towns. Part Four, which contains some of the book's most original and fascinating material, considers the new towns' efforts to foster cultural innovation and social heterogeneity. These chapters deal with race relations, patronage of the arts, feminism, and "teenage angst." The book's conclusion provides a thorough summary and advances the author's arguments for the importance of Reston, Columbia, and Irvine.

*Suburban Alchemy* is an extensively researched and persuasively argued contribution to the growing literature on suburban history. Even if readers are not entirely persuaded by arguments extolling the successes of these three communities, they will be impressed with Bloom's diligent work in the new towns' archives. I was a bit disappointed with the brief mention afforded the new towns underwritten by the federal government in the 1970s--the book refers to these generally unsuccessful experimental communities

only in two paragraphs in the conclusion--and felt that an opportunity for comparison had been missed. Consideration of conditions in federal new towns built under the auspices of the Title VII program, as well as descriptions of life in other privately-funded new towns such as Park Forest, Illinois, would have developed a fuller context for understanding the three new towns featured in this case study. This is a minor blemish, however, and urban historians can be thankful for the rich portrait Bloom offers of three new towns whose stories make us reconsider our view of suburban development and give us hope that suburban life need not be a stultifying experience defined by rootlessness and ennui.

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