DEPLOYING THE DISURSIVE SUBURBIA: THE CHICAGO EXPERIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

Many people think of the term suburbia in a conventional way: as a concrete, material landscape that has distinctive physical, social and economic properties. Yet, less recognized is that many also intellectually engage "suburbia" as a kind of dream, a meaning-infused spatiality. This dream haunts many as the pervasive trace of an idealized milieu, always beckoning as an aspiration. Here is a semiotically filled assemblage of signifiers that connotes serenity, harmony, and a milieu embodying a perfect balance of nature, social control, and physical development. Even while the western conception of suburbia was battered with it widely being identified as sterile, monotonous, and bland, it never stopped representing the idyllic, family-stable and bourgeois class "zone of comfy" (Muller, 1999; Anderson, 2010). Suburbia, in this sense, continues to haunt contemporary America as an ideal that few can achieve and few communities can become. In the ever-enveloping existential crisis that people and their governances across American and beyond never escape, suburbia is the imagined, elusive dream – out there as something tantalizing, teasing, provocative, and demanding.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that this haunt has recently been mobilized to systematically discipline and regulate a population in urban America traditionally targeted for such treatment: the racialized poor. In this paper, I chronicle the recent systematic deployment of this imaginary in urban physical form. A view across the massive inner city of Chicago shows ongoing attempts to embed this idealized icon in current urban form as a kind of human disciplining device. I chronicle this incorporating as part of an ongoing complex political-cultural urban economy. Builders, developers, planners, and architects continue to hunt-out investment opportunities that will generate maximum profitability, robust tax revenues for the city, and promote state iconic status. In so doing, many of these projects also symbolically reinforce and bolster the isolating and marginalizing of low-income racialized populations and communities. Here a discursive tactic seamlessly embeds in these developments which simultaneously privileges an aesthetics and purveys judgments about the character of communities and their populations.

There is an irony in this process. These developments typically take place because of a perception of developer profitability or a supposed need for a public works building to be sited. In both cases, these represent benevolent attempts to impose a social stability or a needed architectural-aesthetic infusion in an area. Yet, these aesthetics are seldom innocent. In the process, attempts at aesthetic upgrade and compatibility are also frequently symbolically disciplining, i.e., communicative of what an area supposedly should be socially and aesthetically, what it currently is not socially and aesthetically, and what it socially and aesthetically needs to be. That many of these developments, architecturally, seem to turn inward, and separate themselves to stand off from the rest of the community, is not surprising. Here I follow the recent calling by Loretta Lees (2010) to focus on the current convergence of key forces in the Western city – architectural styles, the production of built environments, and the morphing reality of urban political economy -- as they unleash assemblages of potent signifiers to help shape socio-spatial realities.

THE NEW GO-GLOBAL CHICAGO

At the core of this post 1990 development form, I posit, is a compulsion and expedient opportunity structure of redevelopment governances in cities like Chicago to pursue a "go-global" restructuring. Such governances now push for a dramatic upgrading of their downtowns and their ring of gentrifying neighborhoods, declaring this a necessity in contemporary global times. In the process, an established uneven development – of shiny glistening downtowns and nearby upscaled neighborhoods set against disinvested, impoverished terrains – gets strikingly exacerbated and deepened. Here is an uneven development that is presented as unmistakably functional and utilitarian; zones of cultural development and upper income residency purportedly need protecting and buffering from supposed land-devalorizing, land-use contaminating populations and land uses. In practice, then, spaces of gentrification require contained and controlled "ghettos. " To accomplish this, poor, racialized people need to be not merely physically isolated, but also socially constituted and imagined (by themselves, others) as being at variance with timeless social and cultural norms. Here is a kind of human management that meticulously controls stocks of knowledge and understanding in a political-economizing of a contested and contentious political turf, human comprehension.

In Chicago, a go-global redevelopment has emerged circa 1990 that has painstakingly disciplined populations and communities on the predominantly black, poor South Side (Figure 1). Here the City of Chicago and business community talk about something ominous and threatening: a supposed new hyper-competitive global reality. It serves up Chicago as easily discardable as a place of investment and business. In proclamation, this once enclosed and confident container of the economy has recently become porous and leaky landscape rife with a potential for dramatic economic hemorrhaging. The city is now on the verge of a kind of accumulation disorder with uncertainty hanging over it. Yet, it is asserted, the city is always a place of becoming, and has been a historically resilient locale that one more time must act ingeniously to survive. The luminously portrayed signs of this ominous potentiality – municipal fiscal depletion, an aging physical infrastructure, the "reality" of vast de-commodified residential, commercial, and production spaces dotting the city – are deployed as disciplining signifiers of what the future might be. Through this rhetoric, a proposed shock treatment of re-commodification, re-regulation, and privatization is ground and rationalized.

It follows that city survival now supposedly depends upon following a conscious strategy: strengthening the city as a taut entrepreneurial space. Since 1990, this assertion has become more forceful. Thus, Chicago must push to build attractive cultural spaces, efficient labor pools, healthy business climates, and buffer undesirable land zones. This rhetoric has been at the heart of what some have called the supplanting of a "politics of redistribution" by a "politics of resource attraction." Entertainment, culture, sports, and leisure for middle- and upper-income populations now become civic business. To fail to commodify these, borrowing from Mayor Daley (2002), is to miss the reality of a stepped-up inter-city competition. In this way, an intensified fragmenting and commodifying of city space by class and race is not merely normalized, it becomes celebrated as utilitarian and in the service of Chicago's survivability.

These subaltern terrains in South Chicago today thus feel the wrath of a political governance mobilizing its economic and rhetorical resources to drive a global city restructuring. This has meant promoting a refurbished, glistening downtown and the gentrification of Loop and nearby neighborhoods to achieve and maintain a global status. Even as the northern section of the South Side (i.e., North Bronzeville) now experiences a middle-class upscaling (being proximate to the rapidly redeveloping South Loop), much of this massive terrain languishes in political and economic isolation. Off the city's and real-estate capital's radar for "proper and city-serving redevelopment places," builders, developers, and planners have steered investment and reinvestment elsewhere. Yet, this amalgam now intervenes in these communities in another way: to discipline them into accepting a subaltern status. Part of this, I shortly chronicle, is the deploying of the suburban imaginary in the social fabric of these communities.

THE DISCIPLINING GENERAL PATTERN

Since 1990, Chicago's South Side has become more marginalized and maligned in a growing disciplining of its population and land uses. On the one hand, we now know that ascendant postindustrialism has dramatically reduced Chicago's manufacturing base that has hit the South Side particularly hard. Thus, between 1990 and 2010, 233,873 manufacturing jobs disappeared in Chicago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). But equally important has been the current "go-global" project that diverts public and private investment from these communities to be used in "key, civic-nurturing "enclaves. Mayors Daley and Emmanuel now supposedly fight gallantly to mediate a new civic menace -- irrepressible globalization -- that situates him and others to unabashedly and performatively speak "truths" about city needs (re-entrepreneurialize city form, identify and re-engineer the city's unproductive, upscale city culture). City survival, now, supposedly requires something fundamental: unleashing an enhanced, updated city form that could liberate private enterprise and entrepreneurialism.

In this context, poverty intensifies in three of the city's most impoverished black communities, Fairlawn, Englewood, and Wentworth. To one local resident we talked to, who told us that statistics in these communities frequently lie, more than 70 percent of households live below the poverty level. These neighborhoods today have infant mortality rates above 15 per 1,000, a figure that rivals Uruguay's 17 per 1,000 and Mexico's 20 per 1,000 (Family and Health Services, 2004). On 90th Street in Greater Grand Crossing, only 15 minutes from Chicago's vibrant downtown, almost every storefront is boarded up. In Wentworth, beggars and the homeless multiply across its main thoroughfare, 60th Street, in a desperate fight to survive. Fairlawn, one of the ten poorest urban neighborhoods in America, had more than one in three of its residential parcels tax delinquent in 2008, compared to the city's less than one in seven.

Equally devastating, social service agencies that once relied on public funds have severely contracted or disappeared. In Chicago's South and West Sides, many charitable, non-profit organizations have been forced into desperate debt. For example, to Clarence Wood, President of the Jane Addams Hull House Association, "… it's been a challenge to avoid doing too much additional borrowing" in current fiscal realities. The agency, now, carries a debt of 3.8 million amid a total budget of approximately $34 million (Chicago Business, 2005). Cash is needed to cover the most basic operating costs that was once routinely and confidently paid: outstanding utility and food bills, salaries, and maintenance fees. Today, many non-profit providers scattered across the South and West Sides note the same dilemma: Rainbow House, Resurrection Health Care, Bracy Community Services, and Proactive Community Services to name but a few.

The situation is equally grim on the housing front. New funding priorities by the City have recently meant block grant cutbacks for housing and social projects of more than 25 percent (Roe, 2004). Now, more than 20 percent of housing units on the South- Side are unofficially dilapidated or boarded-up, with scant investment addressing this reality (see Street, 2003). The fall-out is commonly noted by community leaders and residents. To one South Side Pastor we talked to, "there's little we can do about this crisis of housing .. the neighborhoods are falling down, physically crumbling .. it's hard to take pride in your community when you see this every day, and we have countless families living in these buildings .. it's enough to make you ill." To this Reverend, "neighborhood decay is not just a symptom .. it's lived in our everyday .. the place where people and mother and fathers and kids call home." "We want to give hope," had adds, "but it's extremely difficult."

Such neighborhoods have subsequently become tougher places to live. In Chicago's Wentworth, a women we talked to describes her everyday as worse than before and an ongoing struggle to hold down work, be safe, and make ends meet. "Life now," she says, is tougher than it's ever been. The area's hurting, and there's no real good jobs around anymore .. I work two jobs, both not great, over on State. I barely make the second one in time, let alone have time to change my clothes. .. But I've gotta do it, keep on keeping on, the kids need to be fed." Another women we talked to, living in Englewood, also notes the recent increase in hardship and declining community times. She said: "this neighborhood has grown worse … more hurting people, more problem kids … [also] my job history is kinda spotty .. I go from one job to the next, but that's because they pay so badly." Her best job in the last two years, at a local drug store, "paid the best [but] was still too low to buy groceries regularly .. and did not provide health benefits."

THE DISCIPLINING ARCHITECTURAL INTERVENTION

The Children's Village Community Center Building, at 7600 South Parnell, in the Auburn-Gresham neighborhood, exemplifies the stepped up implanting of a subtly disciplining suburban iconography in the local physical fabric (Figure 2). Here is a critique of the South Side through an attack on its most luminous afflicting icon: the dysfunctional high-rise. The South Side, until recently, housed the largest concentration of public housing in America, its infamous "State Street public ghetto," which included its symbolic epicenter, the Robert Taylor Homes, home to more than 26,000 people at one point. The seeming intentionality is direct: here is a visible low-rise development that South Side residents are to glimpse and take stock of. This starkly visible "low-riseness" replete with sleekness and maximum window (and surveillance) frontage is a critique and a recommendation of a palliative. The supposed lethargy of an area, replete with physical erosion, social disorganization, and cultural aberrance, is collapsed into one dominant signifier – the high-rise public housing complex – that needs to cease. There is, as shown by this alternative and new kind of building, a seemingly better way to live and a better mode of social organization. An architectural style, in theme, is much more than that: it is a pointer for what supposedly needs to materialize and be done to transform an ostensibly malaised terrain.

At work, I suggest, is a place based, narrative embedded in the offering of this building (i.e. its smuggling of suburban sensibilities into it and becoming a carrier of human disciplining codes). Post-1980, neoliberal era buildings, following Mike Davis (1991), are often about physically and socially critiquing and improving places. To Davis, such architecture and its technical accomplice, urban

planning, offer a stepped-up suggestiveness about proper place-based norms, i.e., signifying to all what are a place's proper aesthetics, what a place could be, and what a place should be. Architecture and planning, in this sense, have increasingly immersed themselves in a paradigm that reflects a hybridity of progressive civic change meeting a new normalcy of providing critique, judgment, and punitive appraisal. In this context, an imagined suburbia, I suggest, undergirds this. The palliative draws on an imagined set of sensibilities that are seen to populate an imagined, idealized suburbia: social serenity, social orderliness, social predictability, and informal human regulatory prominence. These are the unacknowledged, dimly comprehended benchmarks from which the critique is launched, that lies embedded in this singular building.

This residential subdivision, built by South Side Custom Builders, also shows a recently constructed residential complex that subtly but powerfully signals the need for a local population and place to be guided and modified using suburban ideals (Figure 3). Here the assertion of an architectural icon -- a timeless suburbia – projects a supposed best spirit and character for a contemporary community. This project, capturing an archetypal middle-class invention – suburbia –asserts through the signifiers of meticulous prettiness, inward-looking family space, and an ominous glimpsing outward into the community its symbolic message: the primacy of the family, the centrality of domestic life, and the merits of a rigorous surveillance and monitoring of people and family. This projecting is reinforced as the building emanates (via its use of shiny brick and neat-trim suburban touches) a distinctive aesthetics that propels locals to imagine an idealized suburban environment. By insinuation, this is a kind of social form that locals need, and what they currently lack.

This next construction in a local South Side park stands out like a sore thumb in its milieu, raised above the mix of nearby substandard buildings, modest frame homes, and vacant lots, to assume a sense of semiotic calling (Figure 4). Its mixture of glittery, "take me-to-the status and social environment beyond this place" and its deliberate spatial detachedness, calls out to poor South Siders to take heed of the things supposedly most precious in life: family solidity, privatized social relations, and wealth accumulation via property equity that is to be found elsewhere. By insinuation (i.e., being placed in this location), these elements are being marginalized in today's South Side. This building, assuming the posture of a projecting beacon of values across a vastness of blocks, is the exemplar of this deploying of suburbia phenomenon. Built in 2006, its glittery, sensory piercing exterior, set in the devastatingly eroded Grand Crossing neighborhood, illuminates a shocking community imposition. Here, a burst of suburban pomp and celebrating set in a starkly disinvested neighborhood is meant as a kind of shock therapy. Residents are to glimpse this and have their sensory apparatus stunned. Seizing upon the existent areal aesthetics and sensibilities, this construct proceeds to spurn these. It is a deliberately "non-ghetto" edifice, a flagrant transplant onto a physical and social scene that cries out for local people to see another reality.

In the process, moreover, this construction conveys a reality of grandiosity, of audacious beauty. In sub-text, it is the kind of aesthetics that is lacking in the current chilling and eroded social and physical climate. Upon closer inspection, at the same time, one sees regular, predictable, gold-colored columns. Orderliness is the aesthetic infrastructure in this overhang; it is a configuration that communicates the

logic and rationality of predictability, of conformance. Fishman (2005), noting such architectural aesthetics elsewhere in urban America, extracts a suburban social theme from this. Such architecture, to Fishman, serves up the sense of a timeless social supremacy: of the post-factory, orderly, conformative suburban sensibility.

Similar to this is the Chicago Loft Project in the Evergreen Park neighborhood (Figure 5). Built in the middle of this heavily disinvested community in 2007, it has all the suburban architectural touches and values that make it a clear implant of suburban aesthetics into this location (i.e., places like Highland Park, Lakeview, Greenlawn). In flagrant code, this project extols idealized, middle-class suburban locales. In this architecture, first, there is the mimicking of physical suburban architecture, with the offering of massive domestic spaces, flagrant surveillance and monitoring proxemics, and an interplay with a controlled, conquered nature. Thus, immediately observable is the suburbanized, exterior motif, the large front windows centrally located, and the narrow strip of choreographed, tree-lined grass. In the process, there is the celebrating of idealized suburban virtues: the centralizing and privileging of the family unit, the virtues of practicing informal strict controlling and managing of outside-the-house social relations and land-use trends, and the desirability of performing a mastery and disciplining of nature.

All of this, of course, comes together when it is realized that this meaning-coded architecture is bluntly and brutally imposed on a different kind of neighborhood. To glimpse this project is to know that something outside the neighborhood has come into it rife with new meanings and codes. Here, in symbolism, is a luminous and resonant intrusion. Yet, in the coda of architects and planners, it is something different than this: it is a progressive intervention.

Finally, a new housing project in the South Side's nationally stigmatized Woodlawn neighborhood starkly conveys this theme of the deployed suburban ideal in inner city settings (Figure 6). At the intersection of Kimbark and Marquette Streets, we see a handsome, brick multi-unit conversion.

Here there is a plea for the production of something central to the suburban ethos: a tamed and domesticated civic community. It occurs in two steps. First, the suggestion of a social space here, mimicking suburban ideals, turns inward into a central micro-space that engages and controls nature (reducing it to a set of flower pots and narrow strips of trimmed grass). The call is bring social coherence and orderliness into the immediate community. But second, there is also a communicated ominousness here: in this neighborhood, it is said, social relations and "the street" can not be trusted – they are too uncertain and rife with unpredictability. So, in a disciplining critique, it is conveyed that for now this pitch for civic community must take the form of families living above the ground in surveillance-equipped units. Elaborate, wrought-iron balconies and massive surveillance windows are for now to be the norm. The message is unequivocal: Improve yourself, fix your thorny and unpredictable social relations, and families can come down from the sky, shed their fears, and live the way people were meant to live.

CONCLUSION

Suburbia is conventionally thought of as a concrete material space that exists as a lived world beyond the confines of the city. Suburbia, in short, is widely identified by many, regulated by policy, and treated by scholars as a discrete socio-physical form emblazoned with a distinctive mix of things: parks, people, cars, streets, houses, and schools. But I suggest that suburbia can be seen as something more than this, in particular, it can be fruitfully identified as an elaborate discursive production and a deployed imagining with potentially potent consequences for places and people. With this recognition, we can begin to unearth that this imagining is now being brought into the likes of America's inner cities as a social shaping and disciplining device. In the process, this kind of social engineering, rooted in the mundaneness of the built environment as text, becomes something luminously at work to engage human values, sensibilities, and judgments.

These architectural texts, I believe, need to be flagged as assertively political; these are anything but innocent offerings. As inner city populations and communities in neoliberal times struggle under the onslaught of an emergent "go-global" politics, they become, through one more "technology," strategically marginalized and segregated. This new planting of the suburban ethos in such areas advances this political project. In these urban settings, a class, racialized battle persists, one that is sanitized under the delicate imaginings of architects and urban planners doing the right technical thing: introducing progressive physical forms in these inner cities. Yet, in a now established historical unfolding, one group's sense of reforms is another group's sense of being battered by the cudgels of class and race. As this battle persists, capital's mobilizing of the built environment to help orchestrate its redevelopment agenda will likely continue.

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

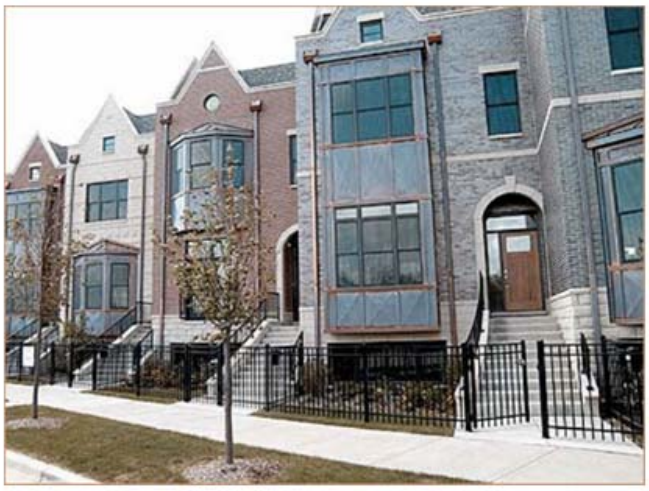

Figure 5

Figure 6