

Tract Homes Project

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Tract-home communities are largely ignored by architects, spurned by educated urbanites, and overlooked and taken for granted in general. Yet, while the official tastemakers have been averting their eyes from the suburban mess, new tract communities have proliferated and morphed into fantastic forms. In fact, they now dominate the suburban landscapes of most major metropolitan areas from San Diego to Boston.

In the summer of 2002, supported by a Dorothea Lange Fellowship, I started from San Diego and went on to the Phoenix-Scottsdale-Tempe metropolitan area in Arizona; Denver, Colorado; Cleveland, Ohio; New Jersey and New York; Boston, Massachusetts; and Atlanta, Georgia. Traveling mostly by car, I found recently built and in-progress communities through official means (websites, new homes brochures, and advertisements), word of mouth (recommendations by locals), common sense (poking around freeway exits), and chance (just driving around). Visually and mentally, I compared flashy Tuscan-style “McMansions” in San Diego with the quirky, evolved forms of classic post-World War II suburbs like Levittown, New York.

Are the “new” tract-home communities (built in the last ten years) significantly different from the “old” tract-home communities (starting with the post-WWII Levittown- and Lakewood- style suburbs, and up to the ranch-style houses of the 1970s and ‘80s)? After exploring diverse metropolitan areas across the country, I feel the answer is yes. Developers and builders—the majority of whom are not trained architects—are filling the American landscape with mass housing on a larger scale than ever before, at local, regional, and national levels. The styles of the houses refer to a particular regional past—or several pasts at once. Facades mix Mediterranean with Georgian with Colonial Revival. Aluminum siding simulates New England clapboard.

The new suburbs, by their omnipresence and sheer number, offer us a lens into the tastes of middle- and upper-class income lives in America—and by their near complete absence in them, the lives of lower-income Americans. They manifest both racial integration and new forms of segregation, both economic inclusiveness and increasing stratification. Taken as a whole, the new tract homes are populated with a more racially diverse population than ever before—though the most interesting aspect of this is not harmonious integration but the creation of well-to-do ethnic suburbs. Similarly, tract homes are built for a wider range of incomes, from simple townhomes pitched to young couples to “luxury estate” enclaves that sell units for upwards of \$1 million. But for the most part, each community is planned and pitched for only one income level, fostering increasing economic spatial stratification.

One glaring consistency with the “old” suburbs remains: the new ones are ridden with contradiction, bolstered by the rhetoric of democracy but weighted down with inherently exclusive impulses, representing both the achievement of the individualistic, utopian suburban dream and the ultimate commodification of the landscape.