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Trying to understand the land of Cheever and Updike

Books

Architecture and Suburbia: From English Villa to American Dream House, 1690–2000, by John Archer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 496 pages, \$28.

Sprawling Places, by David Kolb. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2008, 267 pages, \$23.

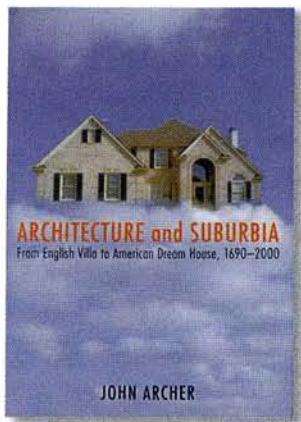
Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn, by Fritz Haeg. New York: Metropolis Books, 2008, 128 pages, \$25.

Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes, edited by Andrew Blauvelt. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2008, 336 pages, \$35.

A brilliant scene in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* finds a crowd chanting, in complete unison, "We are all individuals! We are all individuals!" One man, standing slightly aside, says, as if perplexed, "I'm not."

Scholars, writers, artists, architects, urbanists, and now, a subset of thinkers we could just as well call suburbanists, seem to be in the same situation. Entranced by the idea that citizens – suburban, rural, and urban alike – are all convinced that the suburbs are all the same, they shout, together, "The suburbs are all individuals!"

Four recent books – two by academics, two not – address that individuality of sameness of the



suburb: how it came to be, what it can be, what it could be, and how we can (and should) look at it. Three of the books address the suburbs as fact and seem to say, "History happened, we're here, now let's play with it." But what is that history?

Read John Archer's book *Architecture and Suburbia* to find out. Really. Read it. Ignore the standard-sounding title, its bland cover, its academic origins, the fact that it has footnotes. It is quietly fascinating, engagingly thorough, and completely riveting. Archer's narrative takes social history and renders it architectural, explaining how a 17th-century interest in notions of selfhood turns into an 18th-century obsession with privies, and then transforms, centuries later, into that developed, same old suburb.

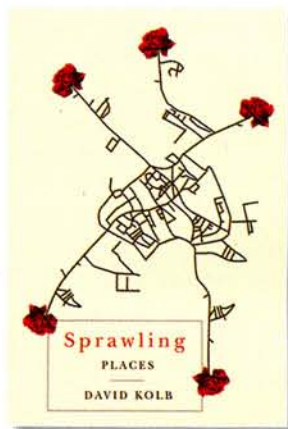
Ideas we take for granted – the family that eats dinner together stays together, separate bathrooms save a marriage – are traced back here, not only philosophically and historically, but visually, as the

book is full of plans and sections and illustrations that show exactly how Enlightenment philosophy translated into a room for the resident male, or how General Electric's need to sell more stoves turned into the American obsession with "the dream house."

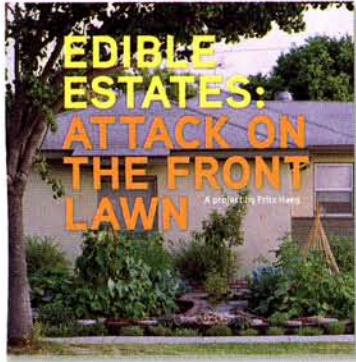
Architecture and Suburbia is not only about architecture and suburbia. It is about how we think, how we live, and how we want to live. It is about how architecture – even when it might not look like much – is the outward articulation of our deepest questions, a physical sign of our search for answers, and, in the end, a symbol of it all.

The philosopher David Kolb is entranced by the symbol. "Suburbs are not monolithic," he writes in his new book *Sprawling Places*. This tract-tome, though, sure is. Kolb's main point – that suburbs are much more complex than we think, and should not be so easily dismissed (although who, exactly, is dismissing them is never thoroughly explained) – is a good one, and worthwhile, but he takes far too much (sprawling) time to get there. Early chapters discuss place as opposed to location as opposed to locale, complexity as opposed to complication, thickness versus thinness, nonplace versus space. Kolb describes the social construction of place – to paraphrase, you can take your shirt off in the park, but not in the courtroom, and therefore place is a condition! – but then goes off on a tangent to Disneyland and how Paris, while themed, is different.

Kolb loosely offers suggestions for how to improve our understanding of the suburbs. And somewhere in this book he delineates, though not very clearly, three misinterpretations of suburban life and five "tactics" (such as, "increase the nonlinearity of a place") for how to fix these places. But more to the point, *Sprawling Places* offers a snapshot of the way things are, or can be read to be, or could be. "Just as we need to live themed places more broadly than



their themes define, so we need to live suburban communities in a more porous and connected way than standard images of suburbia suggest," Kolb writes, in what is, really, an extremely porous sentence. *Sprawling Places* is meant to be a celebration of large-scale complexity, of the hidden interpretability of places that scholars – such as Saskia Sassen and Stan Allen, both cited here – tend to be fascinated with yet unable to define. Kolb's points, when findable,



are interesting; his arguments, when unpacked, are relevant. Unfortunately, the book itself is all just a little too needlessly and impenetrably complicated.

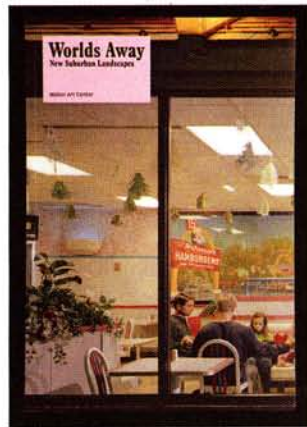
A palate cleanser, the artist Fritz Haeg's book *Edible Estates* is nominally a straightforward account of Haeg's turn-the-American-front-lawn-into-a-small-farm project, and practically a deeply polemical reminder of the individuality that flourishes in what we like to imagine as a cookie-cutter suburban world. The second section of the book – a close look at four Regional Prototype Gardens – is most enthralling. Here we see what goes on in front of closed doors in towns like Salina, Kansas, and Lakewood, California, and Kolb would be shocked. It turns out that people, even those who live in developments, are adventurous, and that front lawns are very easily turned into edible gardens; all it takes is a little time, a few machines, plants, some dirt, a commitment to watering, and the support of a local arts institution.

Edible Estates blends art and community activism, architecture and social change. It is a profoundly American project in its dreaminess and ambition and, most of all, in its individuality. It is not an attack on the front lawn. It is an attack on our sanctification of the idea of sameness.

Further attacks, interventions, approaches, and pictures are col-

lected in *Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes*, a book that accompanies an exhibition of the same name that originated at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis earlier this year (and makes its way to the very livable – and urban! – Pittsburgh in October). Essays by John Archer, Malcolm Gladwell, and Virginia Postrel – on, respectively, the nonoxymoronity of suburban aesthetics, the Viennese inventor of the American mall, and why chain stores are good – share space with glossy pages of art projects and interviews with artists.

Julia Christensen, in her conversation with editor Andrew Blauvelt about her Big Box Afterlife project, describes the freedom that identifying herself as an artist gives her, both in executing the project



and in her exchanges with the local communities. It is a microcosm of the divide that appears throughout this book – between artistic interpretations of the suburbs and architectural representations of they it could be.

The artists win; their freedom to photograph what they want, to write about what they want, and in a way, to argue what they want, shows that they are the unhampered individuals. The architects here have some great ideas – Interboro's proposal for embracing the grassroots operations of an abandoned mall parking lot is one;

Lewis Tsurumaki Lewis's adaptive reinterpretation of the big box landscape into a suburban layout is another. But it is the art – Gregory Crewdson's intricately staged photographs, Stephanie Nagorka's Home Depot aisle project, and Matthew Moore's organic rearticulations of tract developments – that cuts much more viscerally into an entrenched sense of oppressive malaise.

Each of these projects was done individually, the contributor operating on his or her own (with, one assumes, some curatorial input). In a sense, though, reading the book from front to back can feel like listening to a crowd shouting about its individuality. Here and there, though, if we look and read the suburbs – and the books about them – carefully enough, we will hear that small voice that says "I'm not like them!" becoming louder and louder. Soon, we might even want to listen. *Eva Hagberg*

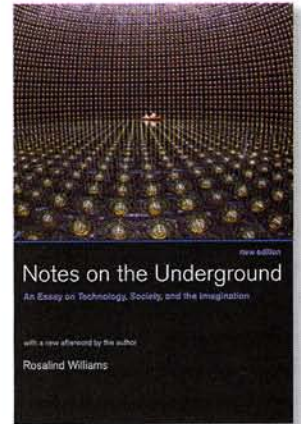
Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination, by Rosalind Williams.

Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008, 283 pages, \$20.

What does life in an increasingly manufactured and technology-dependent environment do to our psyches and the way we relate to each other, and what might be the political implications? These are the main questions Rosalind Williams asks in *Notes on the Underground*. For answers, she looks to subterranean worlds, man-made environments in which technology has replaced nature and life is reduced through radical abstraction and simplification.

Williams posits that since the 19th century, narratives about sealed and finite underground worlds – real or imagined – have provided a prophetic view into our environmental future. In fluid, straightforward prose, she explores the subterranean stories

of Jules Verne's *Les Indes Noires* (1877), in which miners build a subterranean utopian Coal Town, H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895); and writings about the underground by Poe, E.M. Forster, Bulwer-Lytton, and others.



The author concludes not so much with answers about where we are and where we're going as with an awareness of contradictions ("while we grieve for a lost way of life, we rejoice in a new one") and anxious forebodings. The sense of reality suffers in subterranean settings where things seem to be done by magic; communal bonds weaken as ties between classes and individuals take second place to technological connections; personal autonomy lessens as technology encroaches on privacy; and glitches in complex technologies can create interruptions in all kinds of vital services that eventually threaten the social structure. Williams points out, however, that most often it is social malfunctions – war, revolution, terrorism – that prove fatal to subterranean societies such as the one Verne imagined.

In the afterword to this new edition (the first came out in 1992), Williams writes that our environment will inevitably become less natural; the question is whether it will also become less human. "The goal of environmental politics," she writes, "is not saving the planet, but creating (and constantly recreating) a human world." *Andrea Oppenheimer Dean*