About the exhibition

*Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes* is the first major museum exhibition to examine both the art and architecture of the contemporary American suburb. Organized with the curatorial assistance of the Carnegie Museum of Art, *Worlds Away* occupies 5,000–6,000 square feet of gallery space and features a diverse range of media—paintings, photographs, prints, architectural models, sculptures, and video—that explores a variety of suburban conditions. Included among these works are projects from leading architects who address specific conditions and typologies associated with the contemporary suburb such as the reuse of abandoned retail spaces; the desire for structures that mix retail, office, and residential spaces; and the adaptability and the new programmatic demands of the traditional house.

Because suburbia occupies a dominant presence in so many lives—a place of not only residence but also of work, commerce, worship, education, and leisure—it has become a focal point for competing interests and viewpoints. The suburbs have always been a fertile space for imagining both the best and the worst of modern social life. On the one hand, the suburbs are portrayed as a middle-class domestic utopia and on the other as a dystopic world of homogeneity and conformity. Both of these stereotypes belie a more realistic understanding of contemporary suburbia and its dynamic transformations, and how these representations and realities shape our society, influence our culture, and impact our lives.

The intention of the exhibition is to demonstrate how the American suburb has played a catalytic role in the creation of new art. Challenging preconceived ideas and expectations about suburbia (either pro or con), the exhibition hopes to impart a better understanding of how those ideas were formed and how they are challenged by contemporary realities. By integrating architectural explorations with artworks, the show illuminates both types of practice, and through the introduction of supplementary materials such as video and informational didactics, the exhibition provides a richer context for audience interpretation.
Background

In the last half-century the United States became a predominately suburban nation. By 2000, more Americans lived in suburbs than in central cities and rural areas combined. As Americans have drifted ever farther from the urban core that historically was the site of the country’s economic, social, and cultural dynamism and evolution, the nation’s landscape, economy, and demography have been radically altered. Despite its sheer ubiquity and influence, the American suburb remains a critically underexamined force in shaping American cultural life. The reasons for this oversight are undoubtedly tied to perceptions of suburbia’s supposed cultural inferiority and persistent mythologies that reinforce partial, outdated, or stereotypical ideas that often present suburbia in static, monolithic terms. The subject itself, however, has been in a state of perpetual change: from early streetcar suburbs and postwar, sitcom-style “bedroom communities” to the more self-contained citylike suburbs of the late-twentieth century, such as the postindustrial “technoburb” with its new office parks and high-tech research campuses or “boomburbs,” whose explosive growth rivals the size of adjacent cities. As the suburban landscape evolved over the last century, its demographic composition has also changed. The mid-twentieth-century image of largely white, middle-class, two-parent families as the predominant household of suburbia has been transformed as contemporary statistics reveal that an increasing number of ethnic minorities and new immigrants make their homes in the suburbs and that households without children now comprise a plurality of suburbia.

In recent years, a growing body of academic research in the humanities and social sciences has coalesced around the moniker of suburban studies and spans diverse fields of inquiry such as history, literature, media studies, cultural studies, ethnography, social geography, urban planning, economics, political economy, etc. Many of these new approaches attempt to examine suburbia’s true texture and intrinsic diversity, as well as its own historiography. In the mainstream press, suburban issues predominate the discourse, whether debates about the environmental consequences of sprawl, conflicts about road-building versus mass-transit funding, distribution of revenues between cities and suburbs, and so on. Despite this pervasive topicality, scholarship on the cultural production associated with suburbia has been relatively scarce despite the fact that there have been numerous works to consider. As Robert Beuka, one of the few scholars to venture into this uncharted territory, relates: “Given the density of suburbia’s symbolic ecology, it remains surprising that, until quite recently, cultural and literary critics have paid very little attention to this landscape.”
Suburbia in art and architecture

Despite its ubiquity, the American suburb has remained, until fairly recently, an elided subject in the work of artists, architects, and designers. For those artists who have addressed the suburbs in their practice, it has ranged from a subject of distanced critique to a more intimately familiar environment. Worlds Away presents artwork from a range of media produced between the late 1960s and the present. The disposition of the artist to the suburban environment has shifted over this period of time. Once viewed almost exclusively from the outside, suburbia was often depicted as a reflection of the prevailing critiques emanating from the cultural vanguard; an alien and alienating landscape. As more and more artists themselves were born and raised in suburbia, a more complicated—even conflicted—relationship has emerged.

The built environment of suburbia has been the subject of numerous architectural critiques over the past fifty to sixty years. Mostly dismissive, these criticisms have been framed within the prevailing image of suburbia as a space of relentless homogeneity. Thus, for architecture, suburbia has too often been reduced to a simple gestalt of sprawl and its debilitating effects: congestion, environmental pollution, and various health problems, among numerous others. In turn, the general absence of design professionals—whether by choice or circumstance—from the development equation has resulted in the continued proliferation of unimaginative buildings and landscapes that typically have no relation to each other or their contexts. At the same time, public acknowledgment of and debate about suburban growth and its broad consequences have expanded greatly in the past decade, and advocacy of such ameliorative strategies as environmental sustainability, nonexclusionary zoning practices, and mixed-use development has moved architecture and planning issues to a higher level of general recognition in this country than ever before.

Matthew Moore
from the Rotations: Moore Estates series, 2006

Michael Varenwald
from the Universal Default series, 2006
Participants in the exhibition
The checklist for the exhibition is in development. Please contact the Walker for the most current list.

Christopher Ballantyne
Andrew Bush
Center for Land Use Interpretation
Julia Christensen
Coen+Partners
Gregory Crewdson
Adam Cvijanovic
Benjamin Edwards
Estudio Teddy Cruz
Fashion,Architecture,Taste.
Christopher Faust
Jeremy Floto and Cassandra Warner
Dan Graham
Jeffrey Inaba
Interboro
Lateral Architecture
Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis
Paho Mann
Sarah McKenzie
Laura Migliorino
Matthew Moore
MVRDV
Stephanie Nagorka
Catherine Opie
Edward Ruscha
Joel Sanders
SITE
Jessica Smith
Greg Stimac
Lee Stoetzel
Angela Strassheim
Larry Sultan
Brian Ulrich
Michael Vahrenwald

and others to be announced.
The residential tract home

Suburbia has been traditionally viewed as a place of domestic life. The first modern suburbs were in fact an outgrowth of city housing plans, often oriented along railway and streetcar lines. The detached single-family house is the dominant residential form of suburbia and remains so today. Subdivision tract homes promulgated by realtors, developers, and government programs embodied the nuclear family as its ideal occupants. Today’s suburban family can no longer be prescribed with such precision. Not only has the incidence of single head of households increased, but also the composition of residents now embodies multigenerational families living under one roof, multifamily housing, gay and lesbian households and families, and so-called “empty-nesters” and retirees without families. In fact, by 2000 the largest household type in suburbia was non-families (29%)—young singles and elderly persons living alone—followed closely by conventional married couples with children. In popular culture the single-family detached home epitomizes the suburban ideal of the nuclear family and embodies the promise of the American dream.

Architectural works for this section of the exhibition will focus on emergent forms of residential suburban settlement with an eye toward redefining the detached single-family house in terms more closely aligned with the new demographics of suburbia. Existing architectural projects would include, for instance, architect Joel Sanders’ suburban House for a Bachelor (1999), which presciently challenges the conventional expectation of a suburban nuclear family as the home’s primary occupants. Coen+Partners Mayo Woodlands project (2003–) in suburban Rochester, Minnesota, inherits an existing but aborted development and interjects into it new landscape and housing strategies that erase the impression of its original conventional cul-de-sac layout.

Documenting the residential landscape has become a genre of its own in the realm of photography. In the 1960s artists began using photography to explore the evolving landscape of suburbia in a more analytical fashion—artists such as Dan Graham, whose Homes for America series (1966-1967) depicted the repetitiveness of the single-family tract house, or Ed Ruscha, whose documentation of Los Angeles revealed a landscape of swimming pools, parking lots, and the commercial strip. This depopulated depiction of suburbia extended to the so-called New Topographics photography of the mid-1970s, which by focusing on landscapes altered by man naturally led to a consideration of suburban spaces.
More recently, a new generation of artists has taken as its subject not the built environment of suburbia but rather the lived experience, whether real or imagined, of its inhabitants. Although picturing the lives of suburban residents was taken up by many photographers since Bill Owens’ landmark project of the 1970s, more recent explorations have sought to depict the more anxious and contradictory aspects of suburban lifestyles. For instance, Joel Sternfield in his *American Prospects* series of the 1980s often depicts the “missing elements” of the suburban tableaux—a single-parent family or an empty playground; or Larry Sultan’s series *The Valley*, begun in the late 1990s, documents the use of suburban homes as settings for the adult entertainment industry of southern California. The photographs of Gregory Crewdson in such series as *Dream House* (2002) use the setting of suburbia to expose the darker side of its dreamlike order.

### The strip, mall, and big box

Coinciding with the introduction of housing developments was the advent of new forms of suburban retail. Chief among the typologies were the strip mall and the shopping mall. The strip mall is a byproduct of zoning codes that encourage businesses to cluster along busy thoroughfares and an evolution of small town main streets and business districts. Fostered by favorable changes to tax codes and other financial incentives, shopping malls began accelerating in the 1950s and 1960s with the introduction of fully enclosed climate-controlled environments and carefully planned circulation routes. The widespread introduction of “big box” stores—a single business entity containing large volumes of various product lines and occupying an extremely large footprint—soon followed. In the 1990s a new category, the mega mall—epitomized by the Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota—was an inevitable extension of the growing scale of retail business.

Contemporary suburban retail has experienced both tremendous growth and new challenges. A major issue is the proliferation of abandoned and dying malls. “Greyfield Regional Mall Study,” a 2001 report, concluded that 7% of the regional malls in the United States were abandoned sites (“greyfields”) and another 12% were in decline, approaching closure. The same situation now faces communities with defunct big box stores. The adaptive reuse of such derelict sites has become an important ameliorative strategy. The recent interest in situating big box stores in urban locations has created an opportunity to rethink the large footprint, horizontal orientation, and parking schemes of such venues for both urban and suburban locations. Another important development within the world of suburban retail is the increasing interest in mixed-use development. In these scenarios, residential living spaces (often multi-residential units) are connected to street-level retail and second-floor office and business spaces.
Artists’ approaches to the spaces of suburban retail range from Ed Ruscha’s cool, straightforward documentation of Los Angeles’ suburban landscape of parking lots and the commercial strip to Benjamin Edwards’ dynamic and colorful collages using the iconography of corporate logos, directional signage, and roadway markings. The lived experience of suburban culture is captured by Julia Christensen, who has been documenting ways that people give new life and purpose to former big box stores, while Brian Ulrich’s photographs offer millennial portraits of the shopper awash in the abundance of consumer culture. For artists such as Stephanie Nagorka, who constructs impromptu sculptures in the aisles of Home Depot stores across the United States, the big box operation becomes both the means and site of artistic production.

Architectural projects that explore the potential transformation of suburban-style retail environments range from Lateral Architecture’s Flatspace, a study of various strategies for addressing the indeterminate spaces around and between stand-alone commercial retail developments, to MVRDV’s research project entitled Vertical IKEA (2001–2002), which takes the program of the Swedish retailer’s typical big box store and its “long and natural way” strategy of shopping circulation and stacks it vertically to reduce the store’s footprint. The integration and coexistence of both residential and retail space can be seen in such works as Lewis.Tsurumaki.Lewis’ New Suburbanism (2002), a speculative work that investigates the possibility of a more vertical and integrated suburban space by combining a big box store with living and recreational spaces above, or in the explorations of San Diego–based Estudio Teddy Cruz, which looks to the mixed-use program of Tijuana’s homes-turned-storefronts as a source of inspiration. These more recent projects will be combined with some retail strategies of the past, such as the work of the architectural group SITE (Sculpture in the Environment), who in the 1970s and 1980s realized a series of surrealist facades for the now-defunct retailer Best Showrooms, a predecessor to the experiential retail environments of today such as Niketown.

Roadways and Car Culture

The advent of suburbia was dependent on the expansion of transportation networks. In the nineteenth century, the extension of railway and streetcar lines fueled growth outside the urban core. The modern suburb’s development has been intimately connected to the expansion of the federal interstate system and the introduction of highways in and around major cities. It is impossible to conceive of suburbia without this network of transportation systems and the automobile culture it serves and encourages. The location of suburban development has always been in close proximity to transportation networks, whether housing developments, office parks, or shopping centers. Not only has transportation defined the patterns of growth, but it has also contributed
to some of the most vexing problems confronting suburbia, including traffic congestion and increased commuting times not to mention the ecological impact of roadway construction and the consumption of fossil fuels.

While the road as a symbol of escape and freedom has been a persistent theme in twentieth-century culture, its specific context as the circulation system for suburban life engenders a different symbolism. Artists such as Catherine Opie have documented the infrastructural beauty of the freeway system itself, while others such as Andrew Bush have used the roadway to capture portraits of passing drivers. The Center for Land Use Interpretation, as part of its ongoing investigations of how we use the landscape, has documented automobile test tracks located on the urban periphery that are part and parcel of automotive industry.

SITE
*Parking Lot showroom proposal, 1976*

Center for Land Use Interpretation
*Toyota Test Track, Phoenix, from the series*  
*Autotechnogeoglyphics: Vehicular Test Tracks in America, 2007*
Related Programs and Events

Gallery Audio Guide Program
Art on Call is the Walker’s model audio guide project that allows visitors to use their own cellphones and MP3 players (e.g., iPods) to access audio and video content about exhibitions. For this show, we will create special programs that might offer visitors, for instance, a choice of musical sound tracks by “garage bands,” audio passages from literature and film about the suburbs, and commentary by the artists, architects, and curators from the exhibition. Another possible installment of Art on Call for the exhibition might include a driving tour of a Minneapolis suburb.

Suburban Lexicon Database
The Walker’s award-winning New Media Initiatives department will build an online text-and-image database around the lexicon of suburbia established for the catalogue. A cross between a photo-sharing site like Flickr and an online encyclopedia such as Wikipedia, the database will be seeded with terms that will be publicly editable and expandable. Users will also be able to upload their own images and entries to the site.

Lecture Series
The Walker’s Education and Community Programs will develop a series of lectures by artists, architects, and public policymakers on themes and issues related to the exhibition.

Screenings
The exhibition will present a rotating selection of mostly short documentary films to help contextualize the subject matter of the exhibition. Inclusions could include such subjects as H. James Gilmore’s *Chronicle of an American Suburb*, a fascinating account of Park Forest, Illinois, one of the first planned suburban communities in the United States that formed the basis of William H. Whyte’s 1956 book *The Organization Man*. The selections will address both historical and contemporary representations, such as *In the Suburbs*, a vintage promotional film depicting an idealized 1950s suburban lifestyle and *One Pair of Eyes: Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles* (1972), a driving tour of the city by the noted architectural critic and historian with appearances and additional commentary by Ed Ruscha.
Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes will be accompanied by a fully illustrated, 320-page catalogue exploring the attendant issues of suburbia raised by the exhibition.

Conceived as a revisionist and even contrarian take on the conventional wisdom surrounding American suburban life, the contributors include:

John Archer, professor of cultural studies at the University of Minnesota and author of Architecture and Suburbia, will explore the issues of taste and suburban culture in his essay “Suburban Aesthetics Is Not an Oxymoron.”

Robert Beuka, author of SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscapes in Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film, will discuss representations of the American suburb, in particular themes of surveillance and entrapment, in American cinema.

Andrew Blauvelt, exhibition curator, will ponder the possibilities of a poetics of suburban megaspace manifest in such typologies as the megamall, megachurch, megaschool, and the McMansion.

Robert Bruegmann, author of Sprawl: A Compact History, arguably the first counter-thesis to the anti-sprawl movement, will examine the aesthetics of suburban sprawl.


Julia Christensen, an artist whose ongoing project documents the diversity of adaptive re-use of abandoned big box stores that populate the suburban landscape, discusses her work and practice.

Beatriz Colonia, noted architectural historian and author of Domesticity at War, will present an interview with architects Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown exploring their pioneering 1970s studio project, Learning from Levittown.

Ellen Dunham Jones, director of the architecture program at Georgia Institute of Technology, proposes a union of the typically oppositional forces of elite contemporary architectural theory with the populist operational realities of suburban development in her essay “New Urbanism’s Subversive Marketing.”

Malcolm Gladwell, best-selling author of such books as Blink and The Tipping Point, juxtaposes the visions of mall designer Victor Gruen and retail developer Alfred Taubman in his essay “The Terazzo Jungle.”

Louise Mozingo, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, looks at the evolution of the corporate landscape in postwar America in her seminal essay “Campus, Estate, and Park: Lawn Culture Comes to the Corporation.”

Tracy Myers and Andrew Blauvelt, exhibition curators, will discuss ways that architects and artists have grappled with their engagement of suburbia.

Virginia Postrel, columnist for the Atlantic and author of The Substance of Style, writes “In Praise of Chain Stores.”

Holley Wlodarczyk, as an extension of her doctoral dissertation, will explore how photographic depictions—both construction documentation and artistic portrayals—of twentieth-century suburbia have altered and reinforced our understanding of this cultural space.

Jayme Yen and Rachel Hooper, fellows in the Walker Art Center design and visual arts departments, will create an extensive lexicon devoted to the ever-growing nomenclature surrounding suburbia, from “anchor store” to “Zillow.com.”

About the curators

Andrew Blauvelt is design director and curator at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. During his tenure he has organized traveling exhibitions such as Strangely Familiar: Design and Everyday Life (2003) and Some Assembly Required: Contemporary Prefabricated Houses (2005).

Tracy Myers is curator of architecture at the Heinz Architectural Center at the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, where she has organized exhibitions such as Lebbeus Woods: Experimental Architecture (2004).
Tour Schedule

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota
February 15–May 18, 2008

Touring Venue
June–September 2008

Heinz Architectural Center, Carnegie Museum of Art,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
October 4, 2008–January 18, 2009

Touring Venue
Spring/Summer 2009

Available for touring through 2009 to other museum venues for three-month segments. Please contact Lynn Dierks at the Walker Art Center for availability, checklist, rates, and conditions.
lynn.dierks@walkerart.org
612-375-7672

Jeremy Floto and Cassandra Warner
Santa Claus and Snowman from the Inflatable series, 2005