
Keller Easterling
AMERICAN TOWN PLANS
A COMPARATIVE TIME LINE
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Keller Easterling

AMERICAN TOWN PLANS

A COMPARATIVE TIME LINE

with a chronology by Keller Easterling and Richard Prelinger

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For Vincent, Kate, and Liza

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AMERICAN TOWN PLANS: A COMPARATIVE TIME LINE

America is shaped by private property. Sometimes we respect its boundary lines even more than we respect the natural features of the land. The acquisition of land as private property for residential or agricultural purposes fueled the earliest waves of settlement as well as the subsequent waves of exploration and expansion that produced America's basic territorial outline. The public activity of making towns and cities was part of that development. Over the last 150 years, another almost exclusively commercial version of homesteading has paralleled and overtaken the direction of that development. We typically call the product of this commercial activity "suburbia," and it is this activity which is now instrumental in shaping the American landscape and establishing its political divisions. Suburbia now makes America.

Our towns and suburbs have, at times, reflected the most segregated, uniform and bureaucratically directed forces in society. At other times they have facilitated the most anarchical interplay between society's diverse pieces. They have been tools of land abuse, and tools of land preservation. Whether the future determinants will be property lines, air waves, electronic networks, or the mineral features of the land, town and suburban formations are artifacts or matrices which give shape to these visible and invisible landscapes and provide a geographical analysis of American culture.

AMNESIA

Somewhere in the history of suburbia, we stopped making towns and began making "pre-improved" subdivisions, in which all the houses were built before the residents arrived. We do not really remember how this brand of suburbia took hold of our landscape or why it looks the way it does. We look at the land to either side of the interstate or at the edge of the suburban lot and we have no clear sense of its ownership or jurisdiction. We see the houses and the buildings and the interstates, but we no longer read the shape of the land in between them.

Suburban development is occasionally regulated, but rarely directed, by public activity. Now, rather than making towns, we annex small isolated parcels of land into the inchoate bureaucracies of outlying municipalities. As a result, homes associations and other private residential governments far outnumber towns and municipalities in the United States today. (See Richard Louv, *America II* [New York: Penguin Books, 1983], xx.)

Over the last few decades, sociologists and journalists have ventured out to "discover" suburbia. From *The Organization Man* to *Edge City*, the reports are largely sociological. Some are in-depth studies; some are popular potboilers. They provide us with the latest tough commentary or the latest exasperated stance. We speculate about the fictions, tinker with the words and labels, and inevitably discuss things like the "American Dream."

A persistent amnesia for suburbia's broader history prevails, however, and its changing morphology seems to be outside of our visible spectrum. Suburbia makes America, but since we have little practical experience in its making, we have relinquished responsibility for its history and its physical presence.

Amnesia facilitates sales. As is typical with many commercial products, suburbia does not want to have a history. With each new wave of suburban growth (and there have been many in the last century and a half), the same components of community are rearranged or simply rechristened so that they can be accompanied by a fresh, new, and usually somewhat fictitious story concerning life outside the big city.

Our mid-century suburb has perhaps been self-reinforcing. Having lived within this landscape for several decades, it is not surprising that the idea of making towns has become increasingly distant. The critics and sociologists have often made an implicit comparison to some generalized vision of "Elm Street" or the pre-war town. But the town is a generic idea, caught in an indeterminate "old-timey" period, perhaps colored by Hollywood movies or the Disney Victorian representations. There are certainly rich and poor

examples of the town, the poorest being driven by almost unalloyed speculative motives which are attended by their own fictions. One need only think of the late nineteenth-century panoramic views of expansionist grid-iron towns, designed to entice new settlers, sporting various indications of civilization and development which did not yet exist; or of the various notions surrounding the mid-nineteenth century romantic suburbs. But taken together, these forms nevertheless provide the stock for our garden-variety American town and they comprise a much more varied catalogue of residential arrangements than we seem to possess today.

The town and the suburb are too important not to have a history. For almost one hundred years, the history of towns and suburbs overlapped in America. The history is not just one story of millionaire enclaves and political docility. In fact, a large part of suburban and town history has been occupied with remarkably progressive town planning movements that recognized the power of a practical knowledge of platting residential land, and its surrounding landscape. Some of the most innovative traditions of town planning reached a significant level of maturity in the 1930s. Though supported by conventional methods of commerce, the town or satellite suburb was regarded as an important instrument of change with political ramifications on the scale of the lot and the scale of the nation. By the thirties, the idea of the garden city or satellite town sometimes bore the name "regional city," and was proposed as a tool not of land abuse but land preservation—a tool to reorganize America's entire physical and political landscape. This practical town science valued, not uniformity, but rather a proliferation of ideas designed to respond to a variety of particular conditions.

But in the 1930s America also made a clear decision to enhance the commercial aspects of residential development over the public activity of town making. In fact, suburbia became not just a commercial activity, but a major United States industry critically tied to our economic recovery during the depression and the post-World War II reconversion. Henceforth, the housing industry, like the automobile industry, would be inextricably involved in the nation's economic machine. Even while being sold under fictions associated with individualism and patriotism, suburban living during mid-century became one of the most bureaucratically controlled and uniform types of development in American history. Suburbia became a kind of currency.

Perhaps obstructed by the last few chapters of suburban history, a legacy of planning ideas has been forgotten as easily as the fictions of sales promotion.

SUBURBIA AS CURRENCY

When standing in the middle of a typical mid-century suburban street, it is difficult to bring the picture into focus. The street's potential volume of enclosure is stretched and flattened as if seen through a wide-angle lens, and the roadway is so wide as to make not a single corridor of space, but two spaces comprised of the two sides of the street. Each side contains separate houses and lots. The composition seems to derive from a formula which neutralizes attractions between the various parts. All the imported pieces are kept floating in a disconnected proximity that resists relationships.

The physical shape of this kind of community defies our understanding perhaps because it has very little to do with community and more to do with the methods and valuations of home building trades, real estate agents, mortgage bankers, and government agencies. Beginning in 1934, the design guidelines set by the Federal Housing Administration had the effect of standardizing certain solutions to residential housing. The housing programs of the FHA were not design projects, but rather projects to provide mortgage insurance. The more they approached a single standard, the easier they were to value consistently against the risk of mortgage default.

The most pervasive influence of the FHA resulted from a consistent policy of favoring insurance for single-family detached dwellings in suburban areas. The FHA also began to discourage lot sales and the building of individual homes to particular conditions of site. In some cases they favored large pre-built subdivisions as a means of streamlining multiple mortgage packages, but they also encouraged developing smaller parcels of land, which promised a quicker recovery from debt. To insure their consistent valuation, the FHA encouraged developers to insulate those smaller parcels from any connection with adjacent neighborhoods, consequently resisting identity as a town or a neighborhood within a town.

The home building industries were already developing prefabricated housing as an expedient during severe shortages. Merchant builders like William Levitt took the assembly-line house one step further. These builders turned the entire site into an assembly line. Streets and infrastructure were laid out all at once. A kickline of specialized vehicles dug basements and poured slabs in unison. Crews of men framed and finished forty houses a day, including the delivery of household appliances and television sets. Even the landscaping was standardized to provide equal numbers of plantings.

Traffic engineering was favored over space making. Streets were designed with a limited and generalized hierarchy to control the flow of large phantom vehicles moving at top speeds. With

some encouragement from the FHA, wider lots became institutionalized in residential development to accommodate the presence of the garage on the street. From the size of the interstate highway to the turning radius of the driveway, the shape of the suburban landscape is calibrated by traffic engineering.

Houses were sold with names and mortgage packages, and the names did not necessarily reflect the actual physical make-up of the house and its neighborhood. A relationship with the bank or the purchase of a "Victory Home" was an extra acknowledgment of citizenship and patriotism. Salesmen used a code word like "Cape Cod" and thrust forward a square footage as the desirable label and size. The FHA version of suburbia in some cases even stretched the limits of the words "house" and "street." The layout and size of the houses and their cheaper-than-rent means of financing made them little more than evenly dispersed apartments.

When the post-war selling boom began to subside in the fifties, salesmen directed the home-buying couple to "move up" from the Cape Cod to the split-level. In the "new town" movement of the sixties and seventies, the federal government sponsored larger and larger parcels of land development. These new developments were sometimes tens of thousands of acres large. Many were several times the size of Levittown—curious then that in this "new town" movement few developments became legal municipalities or distinct political units. A cousin of these large developments was the golf-course subdivision that first appeared during the fifties and became more prevalent during the seventies and eighties.

The marketing world has taken up where the FHA left off in sanctioning these new types of development. Some of the more aggressive sales tactics of marketing rely on an amnesia that is truly profound. Names and fictions are invented to suit various target markets and we simply change the names of those parts of the suburban landscape that receive criticism. The golf-course subdivision, for instance, got a fresh new spin by calling itself a "planned community."

Many houses today are sold from unscaled drawings in sales and promotional documents. The drawings often represent the site plan with separate colored shapes clinging to a large arterial sized to accommodate peak traffic loads. There may be no detailed information about the actual layout of the houses, but there is almost always a name attached to each separate pod. And when there is a hue and cry over the loss of public space, the shopping mall is simply renamed "Main Street." From patios to picture windows to public plazas, these names are associated with a fluctuating reality. Marketing science has also taught us to limit designs to those which have fared well in

the last successful development—to design by the "numbers." The taxonomy drifts farther away from a physical referent while the pool of useful ideas and precedents becomes increasingly shallow.

TOWN AS SCIENCE

At various points in the history of towns, there has been both a more complex reality and a more complex taxonomy to respond to the vagaries of residential living and its place within a larger political and regional organization of America.

By looking further and further back into history, we can see that the making of residential fabric benefits by being an essential part of this more comprehensive picture of society. America was the locus of many European urban experiments, designed for religious, political, military, and agricultural purposes. Hybrids of these town types were complex instruments of cultural and political organization. The New England colonial town, for instance, organized the outlying agricultural and regional holdings. The Texas central-square/courthouse town derived from the Spanish pueblos and presidios, becoming the unit of political organization for the republic (and later the state) of Texas. Later ideas of the romantic suburb, the industrial community, and the Garden City were imported. As these versions of the town were joined by the expansionists' grid-iron towns, America continued to make inventive hybrids as inspired by European experiments.

By the turn of the century town planning had become a mature science in America, built upon a wide variety of traditions and nurtured by a collegial group of practitioners who valued a cross-pollination of ideas. While they shared information amongst themselves, they also attempted to make new and intelligent hybrids from the whole of American and European urban history. Many worked simultaneously within all three disciplines of landscape architecture, architecture, and planning. The town suburb or regional city was considered to be a unit of land organization. Subdividing and platting were a means of shaping the landscape which involved the careful calculation and comparison of the percentages of open public space, private space, infrastructure, roadway hierarchies, lot sizes, and density. Planners not only designed the physical structure of the town, but also devised innovative means of financial sponsorship.

Though they dealt with contemporary issues, the work of some practitioners still found its primary justification in the American colonial town. In some cases, the town was even associated with visions of America which considered the geological presence of land without the stamp of property lines. For instance, planners like Benton Mackaye and other members of the Regional Planning Association of America devised diagrams on the

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scale of the nation in which towns were used to support interstate landscape preserves like the Appalachian region. Towns were also proposed in conjunction with highway and parkway planning, and both were seen as a means of land conservation rather than land abuse. In addition, planners knew how to influence the political shape of a town and worked as statesmen and advocates for planning in Washington as well. By the 1930s, these practitioners worked on government sponsored projects like the Greenbelt towns that proposed a new prototype for decentralized development. During this period, the federal projects proposed reorganizations of regional and national landscape as well. Some of the early work of the FHA drew upon this intelligence. But by the forties, in the face of economic restraints and a conservative congress, planning left a period rich with ideas and entered a period with perhaps the greatest paucity of ideas.

In the spatially neutralized mid-century suburban neighborhood, a self-contained box sits apart in the center of the lot, and the approach to garage and driveway is similar in every house. The streets of that neighborhood are largely an indistinguishable weave of curvilinear throughways.

Other traditions of town planning present a different picture. The composition of the residential street is potentially very complex. When all the pieces are allowed to interact, each forces a relationship with another in a series of linked actions and gestures. The possible associations between a house and its parts are perhaps born in experience and understood empirically through the act of making. When the streets are coherent volumes contained by the flexible boundaries of the trees, and the ancillary volumes of the sidewalk overlap into this larger volume, visual connections are interlaced between the trees and connect to a layer of houses beyond. When houses are allowed their peculiarities and imbalances as they discover and shape themselves to favor northern, southern, eastern, or western exposure, each house presents different approaches to the car and the garage. With different occupants, the houses grow and change, perhaps becoming misshapen, by containing various experiences or interactions with the landscape.

Neighborhoods more accurately filter traffic when composed of a number of streets with a variety of different volumes. A variety of streets can also accommodate individual houses, densely grouped houses, public buildings, and parkways that lead into park systems within the town or the surrounding landscape. Towns control growth with preserves of land; that land takes its place within a larger regional and national landscape. There is at least one town or region in America's history to demonstrate each one of these qualities and activities.

TOWN AS VERB

". . . we should say that planning is discovery and not invention. It is a new type of exploration. Its essence is visualization—a charting of the potential now existing in the actual." (Benton Mackaye. *Regional Planning and Ecology*, 1940)

Towns and regions crystallize around the experience of making and inhabiting. Perhaps it is experience—verbs and not nouns, activities and not names—that is, or should be, the force that shapes residential living. The planner does not invent, but rather, discovers an order within a welcome anarchy of activity. The town is itself a verb, or a cultural instrument for visualizing and implementing a new order on the land. A precise practical knowledge of morphological changes and their interdependence with political and environmental changes is extremely powerful and helps to clarify distinctions between the repeating trends in suburban history, real planning innovations, and the sales promotion of commercial products. A new set of hybrids, drawn from a broader pool of ideas, might potentially avoid prevailing market restraints and contend with the politics of land and property in America.

AMERICAN TOWN PLANS

This volume, entitled *American Town Plans*, presents a broad view of the history of towns in America with a varied catalogue of plan types. It is complemented by a comparative time line of over one hundred computer drawings of suburbs, towns, diagrams, details of streets, and other residential formations. The time line attempts to ground discussions of suburban politics, sponsorship, and financing in a study of the morphological changes that those conditions often determine. Scaled comparisons are critical in drawing distinctions—some plans described by the same names or the same rhetoric present very different physical arrangements, whereas some from very different time periods and with different contentions have strikingly similar arrangements. Scaled plans and sections are one way of separating the rhetoric from the product and comparing what precisely, has been "for sale" in these communities.

In the spirit of this practical science, the drawings are presented as working documents of a landscape that we can possess as precedent. The drawings aim to record the ongoing activity or practice of making towns. Each drawing in the time line provides information about the town's relationship to the city, sponsorship, and transportation. Information concerning each plan was collected in a database which, in turn, has served as a basis for the HyperCard application and the chronology that follows the drawings. The chronology includes some additional information about the towns and an outline of some major events in the history of towns and suburbs.

When used in tandem, the time line, the chronology, and the HyperCard stack provide a branching network of comparisons. Some examples follow:

1. Comparison by Type
Any two towns may be compared by type, sponsorship, or acreage. Also, any residential formation or town can be compared with, for instance, a well-known urban feature like Central Park, the Mall in Washington, DC, a typical cloverleaf, or the half- and quarter-mile radius of the neighborhood unit.

2. Comparison between Size and Municipal Classification
Towns that reach a critical mass, or attain enough diversity to contain more than one neighborhood, often become legal towns. These may be compared with the smaller isolated parcels of development encouraged by FHA regulations or the larger new towns of the sixties and seventies which, rather than becoming actual towns, are served and represented by neighboring municipalities.

3. Comparison between Individual Lot Size and Community Acreage
Throughout the history of suburbia, the aesthetic of the detached house and lot on the residential street has often been described by very different spatial conditions. For instance, Llewellyn Park, a community of 750 acres, provided lots of three to ten acres; Riverside, a community of 1600 acres, provided lots of one to three acres; a typical streetcar suburb of less than a thousand acres might have provided lots of 1/2 to 1/4 acre; and finally Levittown, a community of 5000 acres provided lots of 1/4 acre.

4. Evolution of the Cul-de-Sac
The design of the cul-de-sac has changed radically over the course of the century. Its evolution can be traced from its earliest appearance in colonial towns to the regionalist planning versions in Radburn and the Greenbelt towns to FHA misquotations of that immediate predecessor to the cul-de-sac on the golf course as it appears in the developments of the 1980s.

5. Development of the Curvilinear Street
We can attribute the existence of the curvilinear street to a part of the romantic landscape tradition, to a response to topography, to street patterning, or to the need for a visual variant to the monotony of the otherwise uniform suburb. Residential street sections, as well as larger parkway and highway sections, can also be compared from the early nineteenth century to the present.

6. Regionalism/Land Patterns
We can look at larger patterns on the land as well.

The word regionalism describes very different conditions. Various ideas pertaining to the management of the region can be compared using diagrams of city-centered regionalism, regional development on the scale of the state, and decentralized interstate regional development.

These areas of investigation, and the comparisons which are actually designed into the HyperCard stack should serve only as starting points. The form of the disquette itself and the many other sources of information cited encourage an expanding set of investigations.

NOTES ON DRAWINGS

The time line is divided into three sets of drawings. One set makes up a time line of plans at a scale compatible with United States Geological Survey maps and uses the square mile as a unit of measure. A second set of drawings focuses on details such as the public square, the street, and the lot, using one acre as a unit of measure. The third set contains a selection of some of the most provocative comparisons of town structures from the scale of the street to that of the region. These drawings and the chronology suggest only some of the possible connections and comparisons to be made. The book is designed to allow the student to formulate new comparisons and hybrids. The cross-referencing capabilities of the HyperCard application facilitate this process.

As a general rule, the sources for the drawings were plans produced in the year of the town's design. Consequently, the plans may not reflect the way that the town has grown. Towns are prone to change over their lifetime and this often results in conflicting reports of a town's acreage or date of establishment. Further, historical plans are difficult to measure with great precision. The plans reflect these variances and do not attempt to represent a mathematically accurate land survey of each town.

Reproductions of the plans were scanned and redrawn using a computer in a way which, in some cases, simplified or selected detail so that the plans could operate in a comparative framework. The drawings present the basic pattern of the town, valuing the capabilities of the computer to alter sizes and store information, but maintaining a kind of "free hand."

The icons which accompany each plan are not intended to define classifications, but rather to illuminate comparisons. Naturally, some towns fall between the categories and require combinations of icons to approach a more accurate description. Under "Plan Type," towns may be classified as subdivisions within the city, satellites, or autonomous communities. A town may also be classified as a diagram representing a new idea in urbanism which may be scaled or unscaled. Under "Sponsorship," towns may be classified as receiv-

ing sponsorship from a private developer, industry, the federal government, or a partnership. Partnership includes arrangements such as limited dividend corporations, co-partnership agreements, and philanthropic sponsorship. Under "Transportation," the towns are classified as railroad towns, streetcar towns, or automobile towns. The database also indicates which towns are classified as municipalities with a population of over 2,500. Citations for density vary. Where available, average net density figures are provided and unless otherwise noted they refer to units (sometimes cited as families or dwellings) per acre. For towns with dense interiors and large belts of land preserve, the density figure excludes the land area of the greenbelt. The HyperCard database and the chronology may provide additional information about the town's intent. For instance, it may be classified as a resort or an unbuilt project.

The time line does not attempt to be an encyclopedia; it is, rather, a representative sampling which emphasizes the variety in the town form through schematic diagrams.

The time line also attempts to complement existing volumes which are used heavily by students of the town and suburb. Chief among those are Volume II of the *National Resources Committee Supplementary Report*, 1939; *The American Vitruvius: An Architects' Handbook of Civic Art* by Werner Hegemann and Elbert Peets, 1922; John Reps's many valuable volumes of American town plans; and more recently Robert A.M. Stern's *Anglo-American Suburbs*. John Nolen's report to the National Conference on City Planning, "Twenty Years of City Planning Progress in the United States" provides another list of towns and suburbs that were either completed or "in-the-works" during a period of town planning enthusiasm. Some plans were considered valuable because of their inclusion in publications for developers which were produced by organizations like the Urban Land Institute or the National Association of Real Estate Boards (now the National Association of Realtors). The National Resources Committee report provided a thorough survey giving a relative weight to the information gathered and establishing the basis for a set of classifications which would provide common ground amongst most of the publications consulted. These volumes can provide further detail and information about each plan included in this study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

American Town Plans began while I was working with Richard Prelinger on a videodisc entitled *Call it Home: The House that Private Enterprise Built*. The videodisc provides a new kind of documentary history of suburbia from 1934–1960 using archival footage and thousands of still photographs. The plates of this book were also intended to accom-

pany the videodisc and Rick helped early on to facilitate the process. He provided access to computer scanners, and his office, Prelinger Associates, generously afforded me the use of their computer equipment. I am very grateful to Rick, Eileen Clancy, and Ann Mcguire for their support and interest in this project. Rick began working on a chronology for the videodisc to which I added related quotes from historical sources. As this project came to a close, we decided to merge the chronology database with the *American Town Plans* database to form a new version of the chronology. I thank Rick once again for his contribution and for the pleasure of prolonging our partnership for another project.

Diane Bertolo initially introduced me to the computer program which generated these plans and helped to design the graphic layout of the videodisc version of the time line. Two students from Parsons School of Design were also very helpful. Heather Johnston helped early on by fact checking and gathering images to be scanned into the computer. Mike Szabo adjusted sizes in the final fact checking stages, and assisted in the typographic layout. The Environmental Design department generously offered the use of computers on various occasions.

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