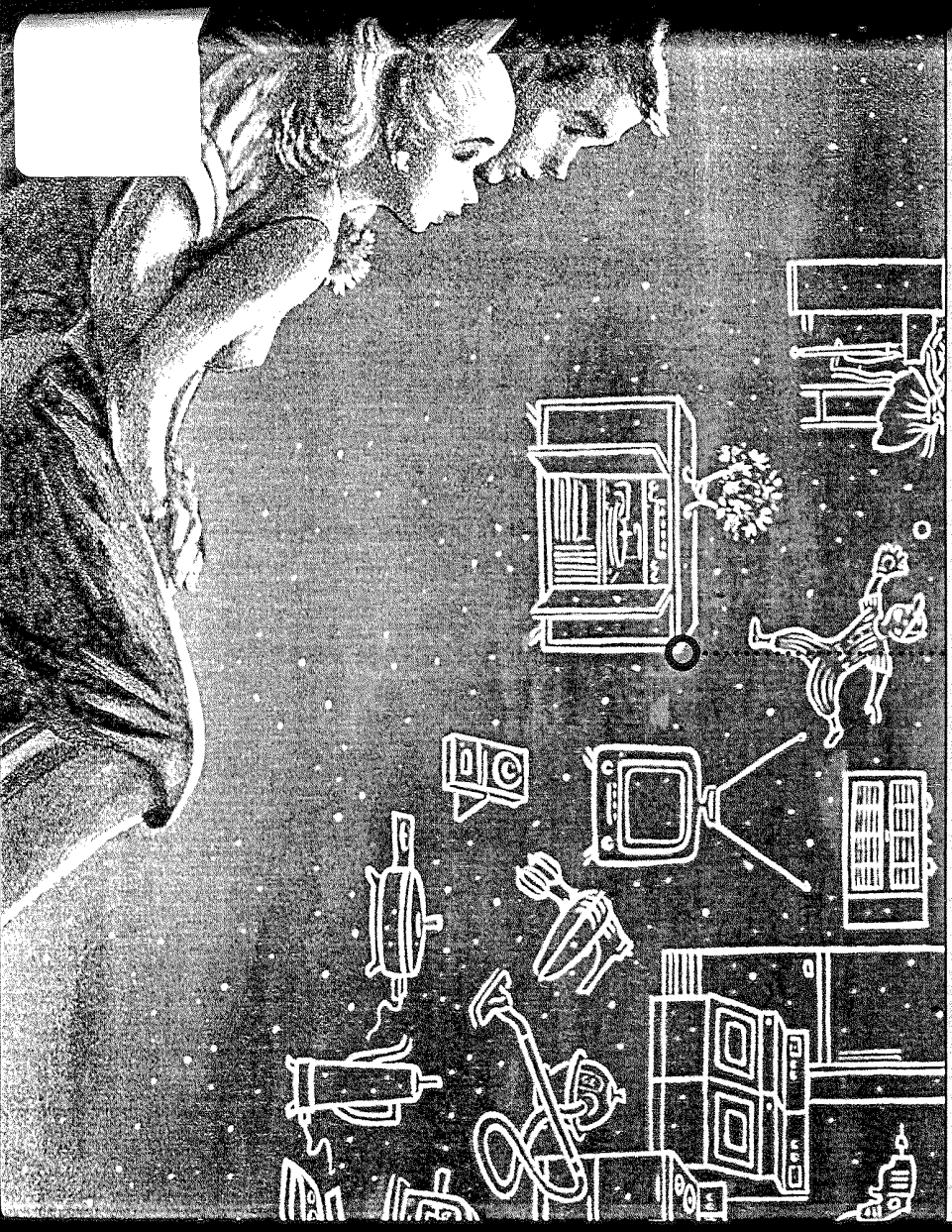


ROSALYN BAXANDALL and ELIZABETH EWEN

*Picture
Windows*

HOW THE
SUBURBS
HAPPENED



minished the postwar dream, yet people still yearn for affordable housing in a quiet, safe community. Private enterprise will never solve these problems; outdated municipal structures turn a deaf ear. Updating the suburban dream to meet these challenges requires visionaries such as those in the 1920s and 1930s, who saw social problems as questions demanding democratic, utopian answers. Reinventing suburbia for the working and middle classes remains a challenge for the new millennium.

Chapter Seventeen

New Immigrants

Beginning in the 1980s many older white residents began leaving Long Island suburbs for more rural places or warmer climes. At the same time, a mosaic of immigrants, mainly from Central America but also from South America, the subcontinent of India, Asia, and the Middle East, were moving to Long Island. Japanese, Iranians, Koreans, Cubans, Haitians, and Vietnamese, as well as Indians, Pakistanis, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans, were part of a national trend in immigration. No one knows exactly how many new immigrants live on Long Island. Even the Immigration and Naturalization Service cannot estimate the number. Some experts point to the growth of the Salvadoran population as an indication of the extent of the surge: "In 1979 before civil war broke out in El Salvador, there were as few as 5,000 Salvadorans living on the island. Today according to immigrant groups and outreach workers, the number is well over 100,000."¹

Unlike their turn-of-the-century predecessors, these immigrants were not of one class. They were wealthy, educated, middle class, working class, uneducated, and poor. Traditionally families moved to suburbs to escape metropolitan exigencies and acquire a private house, with a car in the garage and a yard on a quiet, uncluttered street where children can roam freely. For poor immigrants this is not the case; they live and work in situations that rival the worst turn-of-the-century sweatshops and tenements, exposed by muckrakers like Jacob Riis and Lewis Hines. Few muckrakers today expose the suburban underbelly. Omar Enriquez, organizer for the Workplace Project, suggested, "The problem is

much bigger on Long Island than most people will admit. We have a dirty secret here."²

Generally poor and unacculturated, the new immigrants challenge the suburban image while their labor helps to preserve and enhance it.³ "With unemployment at 2.8 percent in Nassau and 3.7 percent in Suffolk, experts and local officials say many of these [low-paying] jobs would not get done without immigrant labor."⁴ Nonetheless, some older residents—especially those who live near the immigrants—just don't want them in their backyards. As Vincent Bullock, seventy-five, of Farmingdale, Long Island, said, "[The] long and short of it [is], they're knocking down my property values and I'll be damned if I'm paying a dime to help them do it."⁵

Part of the problem is that many suburbanites and public officials see the issue as cultural rather than economic. Older residents, white and black, complain about men hanging out in groups on suburban street corners, talking and listening to loud music until late at night; yet none of them bother to ask why these new residents are out on the street.

One of the factors that had always differentiated suburbs from cities is the absence of street culture. Front porches and stoops rarely were found. Street life for new suburban immigrants, however, is a result of cultural traditions and overcrowding. As one longtime Freeport resident explains, "Suburbia does not like the idea of people congregating fifteen to twenty of them on suburban street corners, sitting on top of their cars blaring their big radios."⁶

Long Island villages need to both familiarize immigrants with the tacit customs of the suburbs and get longtime residents to accept the different mores of their new neighbors. The village of Glen Cove issued a short flier explaining what is and is not considered acceptable: public drinking is against the law, but outdoor gatherings are not illegal, unless they block the street.⁷

Another striking difference is that most newer immigrants bypass the city and go directly from the airport to the suburbs, a pattern that had begun in the late 1950s, when the majority of suburban immigrants were Puerto Ricans. Cubans joined them in the 1960s and 1970s; in the 1980s Dominicans, Haitians, Jamaicans, Salvadorans, and others arrived from the Caribbean. Jennifer Gordon, organizer of the Workplace Project in Hempstead, makes the point that,

"Long Island has become a center for Central Americans in the New York Metropolitan area and is home to more of them than New York City or any other urban area."⁸

Advertisements promising cheap property, jobs in farms, greenhouses, nurseries, factories, and domestic service brought many rural Central Americans to the United States. Others, mainly from El Salvador and Guatemala, came because of political oppression and violent civil wars. Rural families tended to be attracted to Suffolk, while those from cities came to work in the non-unionized light industries of the South Shore of Nassau County, to towns such as Freeport, Rockville Center, Westbury, Glen Cove, and Hempstead.⁹

By the late 1980s pressures began to mount over issues related to the new immigrant presence in schools, housing, jobs, and suburban culture. Long Island, like other suburban areas, had little experience in dealing with newly arrived, diverse immigrant populations. Recession, budget cuts, a skyrocketing real estate market, and anti-immigrant sentiment all conspired against integration into the existing culture. Unlike large cities, suburbs have few local governmental agencies, social services, or homeless shelters to accommodate immigrants. Since many are not eligible to vote, politicians have no motivation to help these groups. Nonprofit advocacy organizations such as the Community Advocates in Nassau, the Central American Refugee Center, and the Workplace Project in Hempstead—an impressive center that assists immigrants with legal problems, holds classes in English and legal rights, and helps Hispanic residents in organizing labor co-ops—along with many churches have attempted, sometimes successfully, to fill the void. Like other pioneers to suburbia, immigrants rely on each other, their extended families, and informal networks.

Central American immigrants depend on an unconventional, illegal, and mostly informal economy—so hidden and secret that "Salvadorans call it by the Spanish phrase, *baja del agua* [underwater]... In this economic underwater of Long Island there is nothing extraordinary about a suburban home doubling as a dental office or a restaurant, or a makeshift pharmacy in a bodega."¹⁰ Most immigrants have to make use of this underwater economy. Sara Mahler, anthropologist, describes why: "You cannot survive on Long Island with the wages they are earning. In El Salvador, they hear they can make six dollars an hour and

translate the worth to their home country. When they get here, they are shocked by the cost of living." In Hempstead, Westbury, and Brentwood,

a licensed dentist charges about \$55 dollars for tooth extraction, in the underwater, the bill comes to \$25 dollars. A Main Street restaurant asks \$1.25 for Salvadoran pupusas [made of thick tortillas and meat] but underwater cooks charge 75 cents. You can get your laundry done for two dollars and pharmaceuticals for about a dollar a pill.¹¹

Although such networks offer the advantages of familiarity, language, and costs, they have disadvantages, too. Consumers have no legal recourse if service is shoddy or deleterious. Sometimes you get what you pay for, sometimes you don't.

The only work available to recent immigrants, who speak little English and sometimes are undocumented, is badly paid and erratic, with long hours and poor conditions. Immigrants often work as day workers doing landscaping or construction for local contractors. Some have more regular jobs in light manufacturing, building, cleaning, maintenance, and restaurants, or work as cashiers, stockroom clerks, gas station attendants, and domestics. Most of these jobs place immigrants at a disadvantage, because "They often take place outside the realm of the law. Employers are rarely registered with the appropriate authorities; many of them neither comply with labor laws nor pay taxes to the government and often, they fail to participate in mandatory insurance programs such as workers compensation or disability."¹²

Maria Luisa Paz (who used a pseudonym because she feared giving her own name) was undocumented and worked in a commercial laundry with 300 other Central American workers. Their work consisted of disinfecting, washing, pressing, and folding mounds of hospital linen. Her job was to fold the sheets that came off the presses. The damp sheets were scalding hot and seldom was she given anything to protect her hands. After a recent Occupational Health and Safety Organization (OSHA) inspection, the company was forced to hand out a few pairs of thin uninsulated gloves.

In the room where Paz worked the temperature was often 100 degrees. After

a few weeks Paz's gloves had holes burned in every finger and her fingers were covered with large, watery blisters. Her shirt was splattered with blood from frequent heat-related nosebleeds, and her arms and legs were flecked with white chemical stains. She was not alone. Other workers had been injured as well: one man lost half a finger, another was severely burned on the chest by chemical water that had boiled over, and a woman fainted on the job from heat and fumes. When Paz complained, the owners responded, "We didn't do anything wrong; those health problems are your fault." She then was asked to produce work authorization and was fired when she couldn't. Pax then contacted OSHA about filing a discrimination complaint, but was discouraged because the OSHA investigator told her he couldn't do much for illegals like her.¹³

Suburbia would like simply to ignore these new faces, but often they become all too visible. One way they obtain work is by lining up along major thoroughfares in the morning so that work trucks can fetch them. This creates a problem for local residents, who resent this unsightly practice and gripe to the police, who then try to enforce local ordinances against loitering. In Glen Cove one policeman warned a group of men who had strayed into the street, "It's against the law to hang out in the street in groups, that's from the Mayor himself. We'll have to give you an appearance ticket or jail at worst, if we see you hanging around." When this message had been translated into Spanish, the full meaning sank in. Francisco Martinez, a Hempstead resident from El Salvador, "raised his hand and spoke, 'One question! We don't have the right to buy a coffee? If we go to buy a coffee, they are going to think we are hanging around'."¹⁴ After much ruckus Glen Cove resolved the visibility issue by creating an unobtrusive location for the shape-up (work truck pickup). There are at least five other similar shape-up stops scattered throughout Nassau and Suffolk counties.

In another Long Island town, Inwood, residents in 1994 attempted to remove workers from the corner where they were lined up waiting for employment. The residents complained that the workers were disrupting the neighborhood. Workers were videotaped, verbally harassed, and physically threatened by townspeople who eventually had the police blockade the street. With the help of the Workplace Project, the workers negotiated a settlement for a better place to wait. If towns see these gatherings as disruptive, organizers find

them useful for making workers aware of their rights and helping them set new wage standards.¹⁵

Another hazard immigrant workers face is being cheated out of their wages by fly-by-night companies. Raoul Melendez (a pseudonym) waited on a street corner in the town of Franklin Square with sixty other Latino men at six in the morning. Melendez thought himself lucky to find a job with a landscape company that employed him at first for a few days, then for two weeks. He began to relax waiting for his first paycheck.

Unfortunately, his hand was badly cut by a lawn mower. His employer drove him to the hospital promising to return, but never did. Melendez was not paid for any of his work and was sorely in need of Worker's Compensation—but the company that hired him was not listed in the phone book and not registered with the Chamber of Commerce. Melendez was never paid.¹⁶

One of Raoul's friends at the Franklin Square street corner, Miguel Gueverra (also an assumed name) was not paid for nine days of work with another landscape company. He tried to confront the boss, who told him that the owner of the house didn't pay him and "when I don't get paid, you don't get paid." Gueverra, along with other workers and the Workplace Project, devised a strategy. They figured out where the landscape boss was working and went to the job site to confront him. Disturbed by the noise, the owner of the house came out and witnessed the confrontation. The home owner was horrified and the landscaper embarrassed by being caught. The boss agreed to pay the money because the home owner said to Gueverra, "If he doesn't pay you the rest like he promised, I won't be paying him what I promised either." The next week the debt was paid in full.¹⁷

In order to circumvent these irresponsible employment practices, the Workplace Project has set up a landscaping cooperative. The Cooperative Landscaping Innovation Project (CLIP) serves over fifty private clients and a church. Workers are responsible for both the administration of the business and the landscaping itself. Everyone votes on the issues and owns a part of everything. They make \$12 an hour, far more than the going wage. As Jose Martinez, who fled the war in El Salvador, where he worked as an electrician, exclaimed, "The miracle is happening. After nine years as a day laborer, I have become my own

boss."¹⁸ Another sign of the Workplace Project's success is the passage of the Unpaid Wages Prohibition Act in New York State. This bill creates penalties for nonpayment or payment under the minimum wage. Enforcement remains spotty.¹⁹

Even when there are laws and redress agencies, enormous problems remain. The Hempstead office of the New York State Department of Labor

seems designed to discourage immigrants from filing claims of non-payment of wages. A Spanish speaking interviewer is only available for three hours once every two weeks. Moreover because no one who answers the phone—if it is answered at all—speaks Spanish, it is impossible for Spanish-speaking workers to learn the hours of the Spanish-speaking interviewer.²⁰

Also, many wage claims that are filed are not investigated for long periods of time, sometimes as long as eighteen months.

The New York State Division of Human Rights, charged with enforcing antidiscrimination laws, takes up to five years to investigate and decide discrimination cases. These practices, combined with requests for documentation concerning taxes, witnesses, and authorization of work "effectively turn a blind eye to the entire underground economy, the arena of the greatest labor abuses."²¹

Another often invisible occupation taken by immigrants is domestic work. In the hierarchy of domestic work, living with an employer is considered the lowest rung of the ladder. Women are isolated without transportation and often are compelled to work hours without defined limits. Hidden in the homes of upper-middle-class suburbs are immigrant women who work up to fifteen-hour shifts six days a week for wages amounting to \$2 an hour. The popular Spanish term for this job, *encerrado*, "gets to the heart of the matter—locked up."²²

Some domestics work by the day cleaning, doing laundry, and taking care of children. These female workers face problems similar to those of their male counterparts: working long hours for less than minimum wage, being subjected to the whims of employers, and having little guarantees of payment or benefits. Dina Aguirre worked for three weeks for a family in Garden City without getting paid. "I worked from seven in the morning until 7 at night and sometimes

until 11. I asked the woman to pay me and she said, 'I don't owe you anything, because you ruined my blouse.' She said, 'Give me your address and I will send you a bill for all that you owe me.'" Aguirre was finally paid, but only after suing in small claims court. Even when domestic workers go to court for back wages, often they remain unpaid. Yanira Juarez worked for an employer in Bellport, where she won her claim in court for more than \$2,000 in back wages, but she was never actually paid. "I returned and returned again, with a friend who spoke English to tell her that I needed the money. She took my address and said, I will send it, I'm still waiting."²³ Other employers deny even having employed the worker, or falsely accuse them of stealing.²⁴

The Workplace Project is organizing domestic workers by circulating an advice book about scornful bosses and their overworked maids, as well as forming Justice Committees of domestic workers who will appear at employers' homes to show their court orders and demand back wages. They plan to follow this up with a cooperative for domestic workers.

These low-paid, tenuous employment practices make decent housing for immigrants hard to find, especially in suburbia, where there is little inexpensive housing and a market that favors single-family homes. Most communities have laws limiting the number of unrelated people sharing a home. Town and village officials do not have nearly enough inspectors to handle even a fraction of the hundreds of thousands of illegal apartments believed to exist on Long Island.²⁵

Often then, immigrants are forced to live in substandard, illegal makeshift housing with five or six other families who share a single kitchen and bathroom. The situation is even worse for undocumented immigrants, who have no legal recourse and sometimes are forced into renting beds by the day or night. Often "an extra bed in someone's home is rented in shifts to day and night laborers who pay \$300 dollars a month and call them hot beds because they are rarely without a warm body."²⁶ Landlords frequently let small rooms at inflated rents, from \$250 to \$500 a month; they can get as much as \$5,000 a month leasing a house. In 1988 the Long Island Regional Planning Board estimated that there were at least 90,000 illegal apartments, "which is obviously an underestimation considering the massive new immigration and the difficulty in detection."²⁷

Suburban neighborhoods by day present a tidy picture. By nightfall, when residents come home from work, the streets change to reveal telltale cracks in the suburban facade. Cars on lawns, groups of people walking because they can't speak enough English to get a driver's license, loud music, cookouts on the street, and general noise are signs that homes meant to house a family have now become rental tenements. Only catastrophe makes this situation fully apparent: a fire, a raid, or a fight.

In May 1999 in Huntington Station a fire engulfed a single-family house crowded with thirty-three Salvadoran immigrants, killing three people and leaving sixteen injured and thirty homeless.²⁸ Jose Santos Fuentes died of exposure in 1997, after falling into a creek next to his bed under a Glen Cove overpass.²⁹ Another fire, in Freeport in 1996, revealed twenty-two people, most of them Central American immigrants, crammed into makeshift cubicles of plywood and cardboard on every floor, from the basement up to the third-floor attic. A raid by police and building inspectors in Hicksville turned up nearly 100 immigrants living in a hodgepodge of one- and two-story buildings. The building's residents all worked, but they were living on the edge. Some, like the Delgado family, had pooled their income to pay \$2,700 a month to house fifteen people in an office suite that had been converted into seven tiny bedrooms, two small kitchens, two bathrooms, and a tattered former reception area that served as a living room. The Delgado family still lives in this office suite, but now their bags are always packed in case of a raid.³⁰

Even when inspections are made, there is no guarantee that living conditions will improve. Huntington's public safety director, Bruce Richards, said that in 1994,

"inspectors found men living in outdoor sheds on property, and more people living in two apartments carved illegally out of the garage. The sheds were removed and the owner, Estrella Martinez, paid \$375 in fines." In 1997 Mr. Richards checked out a report of an overflowing cesspool on the same property and discovered at least 15 people—all of them, apparently undocumented, living on the property: in a camper parked next to the garage; in four rooms in the cellar, two of which he likened to crawl space; and in an upstairs attic.³¹

The house was declared unfit for occupants and Ms. Martinez fined \$1,100, but in January 1998 inspectors returned to investigate another complaint and found people again occupying illegal apartments and the cellar. She was given a summons and told to report to court. This situation is not unusual. Landlords calculate the fines in their cost of doing business.

As Marge Rogatz, president of the nonprofit Community Advocates in Nassau County, explained, "We are turning our backs on the low income people working in our communities. We need them to run all kinds of enterprises, but we are perfectly willing to have them come to work from living in a place we don't want to know about."³²

The black market in housing is a result of the unwillingness to build low-income housing, or to change the zoning regulations that only allow single-family dwellings. The situation persists because of "the extraordinary collusion of landlords, tenants, real estate brokers and contractors tacitly abetted by judges and bureaucrats who are partly unwilling and partly unable to stop it."³³ Without new laws and protections, safety and health conditions cannot be assured.

The integration of this new population into the schools has also been difficult. Since 1990 Long Island has the highest level of students with limited English in New York State. Most of these limited-English districts are on the South Shore of Long Island. Some Long Island districts report that students speak thirty or more languages and dialects.³⁴ Non-English-speaking students are expensive to educate; they need bilingual classes. Some school districts have tried to incorporate bilingual education into their curricula, at least for Hispanic students. The financial strain is greatest in poor districts that already are underfunded.

One solution is to place non-English-speaking students into special education classes, intended officially for the learning disabled. A 1994 special education report on teaching English as a second language noted that "the over representation of minorities and the foreign born in special education classes was not restricted to . . . Long Island. It reflects the failure of suburban school systems nationwide to adapt as their populations have changed." The report indicated that in many schools there is only "forty-five minutes of English instruc-

tion daily for students expected to master high school level mathematics, biology and history."³⁵

One science teacher in Westbury, Long Island, taught twenty Haitian Creole-speaking students with no assistance. Eventually he became so frustrated that he slammed the door on a fourteen-year-old boy's finger, severing the tip. He landed in jail. The Haitian community then pressed school officials for Creole-speaking teachers and aides, but the Westbury school did not respond. Creole-speaking teachers were available, but the Haitian parents hadn't enough clout to ensure that their children's needs were met.³⁶

Stringent residency requirements make it difficult for immigrant students to attend school. In many Long Island schools and other suburban districts in the country, one needs to prove residency by showing "lease contracts, mortgage statements and notarized letters from absentee landlords." Nine-year-old Daniel Amaya, whose family did not have these precious documents because they lived in a doubled-up dwelling, where such documents are difficult to attain, was barred from a Hempstead public school. Mrs. Amaya stated, "I have no idea who the owner is. I live with my two sisters." A meeting was arranged for immigrant women and children to explain the requirements. Unfortunately the Salvadoran group spoke no English and no official came to translate. Daniel Amaya captured the essence of this frustration when he said, "I don't understand anything they are saying, but they are really angry at all of us."³⁷

In spite of these cultural skirmishes, the new immigrants have had an impact on Long Island. Street signs in a town such as Brentwood are in Spanish and English. In a delicatessen in Patchogue, a sign advertises a *cerveza light*. "The nearby mainstreet market sells baccaloo (dried cod fish) as well as t-bone steaks. Across the street at La Vida Christiana children receive religious instruction and adults learn English."³⁸ You can buy *platanos* (bananas used for cooking), Jamaican meat patties, curries of all varieties, and *Kim Chee* (Korean pickled cabbage). Video stores carry films in Indian dialects, Spanish, and Chinese.

In Hicksville, a little India has developed encompassing a five block area offering food markets, restaurants, an Indian-owned hair salon and a duplex movie theatre

showing only Indian films. The two biggest annual events [in Brentwood] . . . are the St. Patrick's Day Parade in March and the Adelante Day Parade, which celebrates Hispanic struggle, in June.³⁹

There is such variety now that ethnic neighbors don't automatically bond. "Twenty years ago, if you saw a Hispanic person, you held him and said, 'I'm Spanish,'" Roberto Portal explained. "Now we are so many that if we see a Hispanic, we go across the street."⁴⁰

Suburbs are now becoming—albeit not always willingly—multiclass, multi-ethnic, and multiracial. This assimilation continues to be knotty and remains in flux. Can older suburbs accommodate these new ethnic groups, or will outmoded decentralized government structures and prejudice keep them hidden *baja del agua*—underwater? Will these new populations revitalize the dream and energize suburbia to change once again?

Conclusion: Crossroads

In a market-driven society the development of new homes is as important to economic health as the Dow Jones: housing is a major indicator of growth or decline. In reality American free enterprise means that good houses are built for those who have the means to purchase entree into safe neighborhoods with decent schools and beautiful surroundings. Yet housing is also a social indicator that measures the extent to which class and racial integration are possible. Housing is the outward, visible sign of whether access to a better life can be gained by all citizens, as a fulfillment of the democratic promise. Although free-market ideas seem to dictate public policy decisions today, there have been moments in U.S. history in which social concerns weighed equally heavily. The tension between these competing philosophies shapes the contours of the modern suburb.

The very idea that gave birth to the mass-produced suburb—decent housing as a right for all—is seldom heard. Instead America is back in the Gilded Age, where market ideology has free rein. The social disparities of the Gold Coast era once again are palpable. A society based on the common good has been replaced by a get-rich-quick mentality that pervades the culture. The belief that long-standing social problems are not solved by government intervention is with us again.

In 1990 the United States became the first nation to have more suburbanites than city and rural dwellers combined. Home ownership has reached its highest level in history, 66.7 percent of America's households. In spite of recent demographics, there is a conspicuous absence of creative thinking or even interest in building large-scale affordable housing in suburbia. In a social and political climate where escape rather than engagement is paramount, the private housing industry turns a deaf ear to social concerns. New developments that appropriate old language take on new meanings: the planned community has become a metaphor for living in a private enclave. Private builders are more interested in