Rethinking American Suburbs

• How do “urbanism” and “suburbanism” differ as “ways of life”?
• What are the social consequences of sprawl?
• What are new ideas for suburban living (or not)?
Urbanism vs. Suburbanism

• Critiques of suburban life by intellectuals in 1950s and ever since:
  – Waste of land
  – Increased commute time
  – Higher service costs
  – Mis-use of government subsidies
  – Lack of form
  – Boring homogeneity
  – Lack of “civicness”
  – Environmentally irresponsible
  – Destruction of cities
Urbanism vs. Suburbanism

• Louis Wirth: “Urbanism as a Way of Life” (1939)
  – Loss of primary group relationships inevitable
    – these replaced by secondary contacts and “representative” society that was often superficial, transitory and isolated
  – “A relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals”
Urbanism vs. Suburbanism

- Herbert Gans: Urbanism and Suburbanism as Ways of Life (after Levittown, NJ research 1958-60)
  - Planners overemphasize influence of physical community on behavior (environmental determinism). People live according to class status, not environment.
  - Can’t view city through “Folk Society” lens of Wirth
What is distinctly urban?

• Size of population
• Density of population
• Occupations
• Existence of certain facilities, institutions
• Types of political organization

All within context of social and cultural conditions
What are the social consequences of suburban sprawl?

- Suburb as dormitory
- Distance from work/leisure of CBD
- Design for auto vs. public transit
- Less dense
- Homogeneous (same as most of outer city)
- Younger, more married, higher incomes, more white collar
- Homogeneity tied to high price and newness, not house type, density, or relation to city limits
Gans Critique

• Not true that lower middle class people, when living in city “behaved like upper middle class cosmopolites and that suburban living has mysteriously transformed them.”
Designing Small Town Life

• Traditional Neighborhood Design (TND) or New Urbanism
  – Andres Duyany/Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk
    • Seaside, FL (1981)
    • Kentlands, MD (1987)
    • Mashpee Commons, MA (1986)
    • Celebration, FL (1994)
  – Leon Krier’s Critique of Zoning
    • Poundbury, England (1990s)

• Transit-oriented development (TOD)
  • Peter Calthorpe, Laguna West, CA (1990)
IT IS A VIOLATION OF FLORIDA LAW TO FEED OR HARASS ALLIGATORS.
Shantytowns as A New Suburban Ideal (NY Times 3/12/06)

• A new vision for communities that is tied to cultural expectations and ethnic expression

• Casa Familiar in San Diego
  – 12 units of housing as prototype
  – Public loggia below
  – Housing units above
  – Interlocking rooms/units that can be broken down or massed to accommodate various family units