

Are Suburbs a Form of Escapism?

Suburban life tends to get a bad rap these days. Some of it is undoubtedly due to a shortsighted failure to take into account deficiencies in modern urban life.

But is some of the criticism of suburbia justified?

In his 20th century classic *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford points out that suburbs are by no means new in history. In fact, they've been around in one form or another as long as cities have, and have served as an important way for people to recover—at least temporarily—some of the benefits that can be lost in cities, such as freedom, hygiene, and contact with nature.

But with the industrialization of modern cities, a mass exodus to the suburbs increasingly took place. And, according to Mumford, many of the benefits previously belonging to suburbs began to disappear with this mass exodus.

In addition, Mumford criticized the modern suburbs as a form of escape from many of the characteristics that make up the human drama:

“Not merely did the suburb keep the busier, dirtier, more productive enterprises at a distance, it likewise pushed away the creative activities of the city. Here life ceased to be a drama, full of unexpected challenges and tensions and dilemmas: it became a bland ritual of competitive spending..

In the suburb one might live and die without marring the image of an innocent world, except when some shadow of its evil fell over a column in the newspaper. Thus the suburb

served as an asylum for the preservation of illusion. Here domesticity could flourish, forgetful of the exploitation on which so much of it was based. Here individuality could prosper, oblivious of the pervasive regimentation beyond. This was not merely a child-center environment: it was based on a childish view of the world, in which reality was sacrificed to the pleasure principle.

As an attempt to recover what was missing in the city, the suburban exodus could be amply justified, for it was concerned with primary human needs. But there was another side: the temptation to retreat from unpleasant realities, to shirk public duties, and to find the whole meaning of life in the most elemental social group, the family, or even in the still more isolated and self-centered individual. What was properly a beginning was treated as an end."

As you can perhaps glean from this last paragraph, Mumford was neither a wholesale critic of the suburbs nor a blind cheerleader for the modern city. What he wanted was not a uniform society, but rather, for cities and suburbs to become less separated from one another—as in the past—and to better learn from each other's advantages and shortcomings.

Not a bad idea.

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