SUBURBAN WORLD

by David Hoppe

When people asked me where I grew up, I used to answer: "Chicago." This seemed a simple, resonant response; I hoped it might encourage people to take me seriously. But my answer was disingenuous. For while I was born and christened in Chicago, the son of parents and grandparents who were raised and made their livelihoods there, I actually grew up in a northwest suburb.

Mt. Prospect is a town named more for its founders' aspirations than for its topography. There are no mountains in Mt. Prospect. Indeed, part of the problem of identifying oneself with this place is that there is nothing about it - houses, schools, retail sprawl - that is not generic. White bread. Telling people I came from Chicago was a way to avoid admitting that my background was the social equivalent of bleached flour.

Like a lot of my peers, I spent the better part of my teenage years - the storied 1960s - planning to ditch Mt. Prospect for places that were, in the parlance of the time, more "real." For most of us, this meant college and then, possibly, graduate school, then work. Reality, it turned out, was a slippery concept.

Just how slippery, though, didn't fully register until I found myself lost at a red light somewhere northwest of Chicago, searching for a wedding party being held in honor of an old high school friend. It was a Saturday afternoon, a hot summer day. Cars and trucks, smell of exhaust and heat shimmer dominated the landscape in all directions. I was in the suburbs, it was the weekend, but this might have been rush hour in the Loop. The congestion was suffocating. Only when I commanded myself to sit back and take stock of my surroundings, did I realize where I was: this intersection was less than half a mile from the house where I grew up.

In the almost 30 years since I left home, Mt. Prospect had grown beyond recognition. The suburbs, rather than abandoned, were booming all over again. Instead of heading for the cities or homesteading in the country, my generation had finally defined ourselves: suburbia made us. Back in the city the following night, standing with my wife in the bar atop the John Hancock building , I looked out at the lights of what has always been called "Chicagoland." They covered the skin of the old prairie like a great illuminated blanket for as far as I could see.

When I was born my family's house stood at the farthest edge of its suburban development. Looking westward from the curb, I saw a cornfield tassling the setting sun. The realtor who sold my parents on this place told them it would always be this way; after all, who in their right mind would want to drive more than 35 miles - the distance to Chicago's Loop from our front door - to get to work?

35 miles seemed a long distance in those pre-expressway days. My parents must have felt a little like pioneers. A Kodachrome snapshot shows our house, a Cape Cod style built of brick and boards, standing in the middle of a prairie nowhere, Maple saplings wired into a nascent lawn, the pale sky overhead reflecting the infinite flatness of the earth beneath it.

It wouldn't be this way for long. Imperial America, in postwar rut, lacked the patience to let this landscape be. Children, like me, were being born and our parents sought safe places where we might grow, be educated and succeed them. Big as they were, these were modest dreams, the dreams of enlisted men. Life in the city had been claimed by others - the captains of industry or else those who had no other choice. My parents, and thousands like them, opted for a new frontier.

I played in the foundations of new houses. The smell of fresh-cut lumber was as familiar as the black dirt that was bulldozed for one new subdivision after another. When my Dad brought home my first bike, a little yellow speedster emblazoned with tapered red accents to suggest the hot breeze I'd leave in my wake, I took to riding circuit around the new blocks of our expanding neighborhood.

The houses, while not all alike, were similar enough to create an almost immediate aura of familiarity. None were more than ten years old; all lot sizes were comparable. Styles evolved in rapid,

rudimentary succession - the one and a half to two-storey brick houses were the first built, followed quickly by a scattering of lowslung ranch houses, and then, in large numbers, bi-levels built with unattached garages. Older frame houses, left over from farming days, were practically nonexistent. The few still standing were deserted. One was on Memory Lane, a street named with inadvertent irony, about four blocks from where we lived. As far as we kids were concerned, it had to be haunted. We scurried past it, the more bellicose among us stopping sometimes to throw a rock or two at the jagged remnants of glass in its rotted windows.

Since this part of town had recently been farmed, there were few old-growth trees. Maple saplings were planted along the streets; our house was on a corner lot, my parents had room for a flowering crab. People made flower beds around their foundations and planted tulip bulbs and iris. My parents, greener than most, put in evergreens to soften the house's corners and bordered our backyard with lilac bushes.

The streets themselves were wide enough to easily accomodate a pair of brawny Buicks going in opposite directions with plenty of room for parking by either curb. Once, while riding my red and yellow bike, not paying attention to where I was going, I crashed into the rear of one such car, taking off over my handlebars and belly-sliding across its roof until my chin rested on the windshield's chromium upper lip. I was humiliated but all right; the car, solid as a robber baron, didn't suffer so much as a scratch.

I usually went riding late in the day, just before dinnertime. Moms were getting meals ready or standing by the door, hollering for their kids to come home. A Dad, just back from work, might be cutting the grass in his t-shirt or playing catch with his boy. My Dad often played catch with me, tossing the ball back and forth with our Rambler, parked in the driveway, serving as an unacknowledged backstop. Meanwhile the sun, like a blood orange, set not over rows of standing corn, but the distant rooftops of new houses.

By the time I was ten, the cornfield had been turned into an athletic practice field for the high school where my friends and I would weather our teenage years. Where there had been towering rows of corn, a Midwestern maze for us to run through and get lost in, a pasture where we came face to face with the improbably large muzzles of slow-chewing cattle, we would go out for passes and catch fly balls, take cover beneath portable bleachers and watch ranks of older boys sweat through football calisthenics in August heat. The farmer, a man I never knew, sometimes rode his horse around the borders of his land; before long his route was followed by a marching band, learning steps and blaring Mancini's theme from Peter Gunn.

Who's to say which side of this coin was better? For me these changes seemed more a function of timing than values. When I was a little boy there were marshes to mess in, wild animals on the loose, places to hide and have warlike adventures - not to mention a cadre of other kids to have adventures with. As we graduated from one

level of fantasy to another - from the world inside our heads, a world of landscape animated by our pretending, to the social world, and another order of pretense - the community adapted to suit our needs. The farmer's field was transformed into a place for dances, homecomings, commencements. Our hearts weren't broken by these changes, they grew to fill the space provided.

My suburban generation has been accused of being self-absorbed. Under these circumstances, how could we be otherwise? This world was literally made for us; our parents wanted it that way. Their idea of security revolved around an idea of manageability that, at the time, the suburbs seemed to epitomize. Wide sidewalks, safe streets, green lawns, decent schools. "What makes America different from all the other countries in the world?" asked Mrs. Ryder, my sixth grade teacher. In the back row, Bob Freck, in his black and red argyle sweater, raised his hand: "America has a prosperous middle class," he piped. Mrs. Ryder praised Bob's insight. "More of you will go to college than any generation," she told us. "That's what makes America great."

It's fashionable to call what our parents did for us sacrifice. But in 1960 sacrifice was not the operative word, it was progress. It only looked like sacrifice later, when we kids seemed thankless and sullen. In 1960 the suburbs, these spacious blends of individuality and conformity, with their faith in the nuclear family and transcendental materialism, looked like middleclass victory.

The faces of most of my friends' parents reflected this. In them I found little of the Waspish insularity associated with the restless east coasters of John Cheever or John O'Hara. Chicago's version of Cheever lived on the the north shore, in pre-war bedroom communities like Lake Forest, Winnetka and Kenilworth. But more often than not, the faces in my suburb still bore the ethnic creases of transplanted urbanites. On Saturdays they prowled their houses like bears just roused from hibernation. George's Dad was second generation Greek; Brian's was back o' the yards German; Dennis's was Czech. Or there were those who came to the suburbs from the opposite direction: Bill's folks migrated from the Ozarks, the first of their family to find professional work in a northern city; every vacation was spent driving back to Arkansas. For all of these families the suburbs meant homes of their own, equity in that idea of America that even a sixth grader like Bob Freck could name.

Every morning of the working week, our Dads piled into the cars tucked up in their driveways or garages and pulled out to do the work that made this way of life possible. We were dressed suitably for the weather and sent off to school. Our Moms stayed home. I don't remember any of them looking like Donna Reed, Hollywood's dizzy version of maternal good intentions. A remarkable number of these barely middle-aged women seemed chronically ill. They greeted us in housecoats, fragile as the consumptive heroines in Victorian novels, with exhausted smiles and cigarettes. Aging before their time, these women were like slow-motion storm warnings about what was missing in our suburban way of life.

It was left to children to crack this code. Vietnam, Civil Rights, the Pill, Rock'n'Roll and Counter Culture - all this was so much tinder to set our sheltered hearts ablaze. A world might have been created for us but beyond our single family homes, cars and TV sets, things looked wild and dark. Our intuitive, emotional reactions were like a living litmus test. Although some described what we did and why in political or philosophical language, these terms were as maps to the landscape beneath our feet. We followed our noses down the vocabularies of Marcuse and Sartre, Lennon and McCartney the way our fathers followed the concrete courses of new expressways, Dan Ryan and Kennedy, to their city jobs each morning at dawn.

The relationship between mass media and postwar suburban lifestyle complicated matters even more. While, on the surface, the media's commercialism appeared to fuel and affirm suburban materialism and conformity, its effects on kids were a source of adult consternation. In the 1950s an entire branch of the nation's entertainment industry was devoted to serving the youth market in ways undreamt of by previous generations. Music, movies and television shows were created with the discretionary dollars of kids, particularly adolescents, in mind. Singing along with Annette and Tommy on the Mickey Mouse Club, to The Beatles' "Hey Jude" chorus on the Smothers' Brothers described this time's trajectory. Thanks to the ubiquity of media, countercultural stars like Timothy Leary and Abbie Hoffman were able to redefine heretofore "adult" subject

matter like the nature of consciousness and radical politics as entertainment.

This welter of subversive information blew the lid off the controlled environment that the suburb was designed to sustain. Television and Top 40 (and then its offspring, "underground") radio reinforced the teenage complaint that, in the suburbs, there was no place to go and nothing to do. The media provided a virtual place where alternative versions of reality abounded. And for the more daring among us, there was yet another kind of reality available, even close at hand: the city.

The same forms of transport that made suburbs possible in the first place - commuter trains and cars - carried kids back to the urban centers that parents worked so hard to escape. Protest rallies, rock concerts and foreign films; pushers, panhandlers and, especially, "colored people" - you bought a ticket at the station and in an hour or so you were there, face to face with a world more vivid, dangerous, and exotic than anything seemed at home. A whiff of Richard Speck, a Muddy Waters rhythm, the nightclub glint off Tony Accardo's tailfin.

At six o'clock, we watched the news from Chicago. The suburbs were rarely mentioned, as if, confirming our suspicions, nothing ever happened there. That they represented an experiment in living that was truly exotic never occurred to us; like citizens of some weird island outpost, we, unlike our parents, had nothing else to compare

ourselves with. So it was not political or philosophical differences that put us increasingly at odds with our parents, making headlines of "the Generation Gap." It was a hunger for experience, an appetite for the world beyond the front lawn.

Raised in a safe place, outfitted with unprecedented mobility, you could say we were bred to be cosmic consumers. To the extent that we effected social change, we did so as consumers demanding greater freedom in the marketplace. Could anyone have really expected that the roles of women would stay the same after virtually every white middleclass female in America was sent away to college? How could an industrial economy survive when a factory was the last place any white suburban kid could imagine himself working? Infatuated with images of rock'n'roll rebellion, we appropriated bohemia and brought the avant-garde home as a fashion statement.

Critics who chide the baby boom for its lack of political fortitude, for turning away from what seemed the idealism and principles of the counterculture and then embracing Reaganism in the '80s, not to mention Clintonian centrism in the '90s, confuse suburban adolescent restlessness with ideas. The fact that our every gesture was taken seriously in those days says more about our parents' insecurities about the world they had created than it does about the depth of our convictions. It's no accident that irony is the trademark of our discourse.

And now our parents should be proud. 30 years after the Summer of Love, the suburbs or, in new, '90s parlance, exurbs or edge cities, are inescapable. People drive from Wisconsin or cross a time zone on their way from Michigan to get to their Chicago jobs. Increasingly, they forget about working in the city and earn their money in an office block in Schaumberg or Palatine or Barrington. It's not just decent schools that are in the suburbs; I can eat sushi and chicken vindaloo in Arlington Heights. The Banana Republic is the same in Hoffman Estates as it is on Michigan Avenue.

After the '70s flirtation with urban gentrification, a deeper homing has prevailed. The call of the driveway, the lawn, the rec room and the den. Like our parents, we are drawn to the suburban promise of decent schools, home equity and relative privacy. And in an era of downsizing and chronic job insecurity, the hunger for unvarnished experience is supplanted by a yen for suburban manageability - no matter how illusory that may be.

Slowly, slowly, I have come to realize that there is no longer any point in obscuring my suburban origins. The place I come from turns out to be as distinctly American as Johnny Carson's accent. Once overlooked, now it is iconic, the heart of an empire of consumption with a global reach and uncanny powers of absorption (on any given night, Memory Lane shakes to the sound of Zulu guitars as another white boy passes with the volume cranked). A certain cache is attached to having come of age amidst muscle cars and Danish Modern livingroom sets; any aversion I still have to Mt. Prospect or

its more recent clones seems a modernist throwback, like cigarettes or unprotected sex. Now if I tell you I'm from Chicago, it's only because I want to talk about the past. The future is what I left behind.