

## Surveying the Suburbs: Back to the Future?

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At the conclusion of the architectural inventory of Durham, North Carolina, for which I was the principal investigator, I presented slides to the state's National Register Advisory Committee of all of the properties I had identified as potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. This meeting occurred in 1981, when I was a graduate student in my late twenties, but I have never forgotten the reaction of one of the middle-aged committee members when I showed a slide of a house in a proposed district, a 1920s bungalow with a flared roof and a small balcony that looked like a cross between a Swiss chalet and a Japanese tea house. He laughed and exclaimed, "I grew up in a house like that. That can't be historic!" I was surprised. Clearly the house was old, built almost sixty years earlier, and certainly more architecturally distinctive than anything I had ever seen erected in the middle class neighborhoods of my childhood. How could he not appreciate this well-preserved early twentieth-century neighborhood?

Now that the end of the century is upon us, those of us for whom surveying historic resources is a profession face the daunting task of recording the post-World War II building boom, characterized by an explosion of suburbs. For several years, the survey programs of state historic preservation offices, charged with documenting historic properties and identifying those that are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, have inventoried historic suburban neighborhoods. With the passage of time and the rapidly increasing number of surviving suburban resources that are more than fifty years old, this mission is becoming more formidable. As we develop strategies for surveying historic resources just passing the fifty-year mark, it is useful to look back to the turn of the 1980s when we began to wrestle with the task of recording the suburbs of the early twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

Nationally, the recording of historic properties was fueled by the celebration of our nation's Bicentennial in 1976 and the accompanying surge in interest in preserving our heritage. Many states had begun to record their historic properties following passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. As state historic preservation offices were established under the Act and staffs expanded with a combination of federal and state money, survey programs grew and developed. In the beginning the focus naturally was on the oldest and most architecturally distinctive properties. As federal funding increased, surveys became more sophisticated and comprehensive.

In North Carolina, state-sponsored survey of historic resources pre-dated the establishment of our State Historic Preservation Office. In the mid-1960s, the Department of Archives and History used a grant from the Richardson Foundation to hire two people who spent several days at a time in targeted counties with local historians recording the area's outstanding buildings. This program set the initial pattern for the State Historic Preservation Office that was created a few years later. Staff of the new office continued to make field trips to record the "best and the brightest," but now had the additional purpose of identifying properties to nominate to the National Register. The emphasis remained on those sites that individually were the most significant, but the approach was not particularly systematic. Set by the local contacts who made the arrangements, the pace varied with the town or county and usually was unhurried. Photos were taken and written records made on simple forms consisting of a few printed blocks for basic information such as property name, location, and date; most of the forms were blank pages for the surveyor to write a description and whatever history could be gathered on-site and from archival sources.

In the late 1970s, North Carolina's State Historic Preservation Officer decided to expand the survey program by awarding a portion of the annual federal appropriation as matching grants to local governments and other non-profit agencies to hire professional consultants, or "principal investigators," to work in the field, while State Historic Preservation Office staff spent more time at their desks, managing the principal investigators.<sup>2</sup> Healthy competition for the grants among local co-sponsors indicated a growing appreciation for the early suburbs, originally outside city limits but now often part of the inner city. Young families were moving back into these areas and neighborhood associations were demanding renewed attention from local planning departments for revitalization assistance. Increased funding from the federal

government and local sponsors resulted in a larger number of survey projects with each successive year, as well as more comprehensive coverage of each target area. Instead of focusing on late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century properties and recording only the most imposing of the early twentieth-century buildings, now full ranges of historic properties were recorded on complex forms. Thus, in North Carolina and across the country, early twentieth-century suburbs began to receive greater attention.

With close to seven million citizens, North Carolina is the tenth most populous state in the Union, yet our demographics set us apart from other heavily populated states. Almost half of our population is in urban areas, but most of our cities are small to moderate in size; our largest city, Charlotte, has less than a half-million people. They are composed of neighborhoods of freestanding, single-family houses closely spaced in city centers and occupying generous lots in the surrounding expansive, heavily landscaped suburbs interspersed with occasional two- and three-story apartment complexes. The multi-storied apartment buildings that characterize Richmond, the District of Columbia, and other metropolitan areas on the Eastern Seaboard occasionally punctuate North Carolina's major cities, where fewer than a dozen small blocks of row houses are known to have been built. In short, our urban areas are almost entirely suburban.<sup>3</sup>

This situation is rooted in nineteenth-century development. Urbanization occurred in a series of small cities along the rail lines connecting Wilmington on the coast with Raleigh, Greensboro, Winston, and Charlotte in the Piedmont and Asheville in the western mountains, yet by 1900 the state remained predominantly rural, with only ten percent of the population in urban areas. North Carolina soon joined the mainstream as multitudes moved from the countryside to towns and cities in search of employment. The boom stamped most of our urban fabric with an early twentieth-century look as earlier buildings were replaced in the city centers and developers rushed to accommodate the influx of people with suburban neighborhoods reflecting the increasing nationwide popularity of the streetcar and the automobile.

Despite the growth of most state historic preservation offices in the late 1970s, the task of surveying the early suburbs was enormous and time remained at a premium. With each passing year, the number of extant historic resources fifty years old and older was increasingly greater. Surveyors had to reconcile tight schedules and the growing number of sites to be recorded with the desire to gather as much information as possible on each property. Principal investigators for urban surveys no longer could spend an hour or more at each site; survey techniques had to be refined. Instead of devoting one survey form to each property, now multiple structures in units were treated on a single form. Cross-referenced from these "multiple structures forms," the more architecturally and historically distinctive properties, as well as representatives of each type, received additional documentation. This adjustment in methodology was just one step in a necessary and ongoing standardization and codifying of survey techniques that yielded gratifying results. By the early 1980s, all of North Carolina's major cities and many of the smaller ones had been surveyed to some degree, with the more recent projects embracing most if not all of the locales' early twentieth-century neighborhoods.

As surveys were conducted in Raleigh, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Asheville, Durham, Wilson, Morganton, and elsewhere, and many of the early twentieth-century neighborhoods in these cities were nominated to the National Register of Historic Places, questions arose connecting the specifics of these neighborhoods to broader historical issues. Who were the developers and how did their other business interests tie into their residential projects? What was the effect of the development of electric power? What attracted home buyers to the suburbs? How did changing views of the family, the home, and the social roles of men and women shape these neighborhoods? How did the new suburbs reflect--and enforce--racial segregation patterns? What factors affected the selection and adaptation of national architectural models? What were the roles of the emerging urban planning movement and the planning profession in shaping the new suburbs as part of the larger city? Although these questions were just beginning to be asked, it was evident that important aspects of our urban growth were formed early in this century when clear-cut racial divisions of residential areas emerged; residential, business, and industrial uses became geographically separated; large, planned developments of similar houses in unified groups emphasized similar economic and social goals of the residents; and local governments strived to modernize utilities and transportation systems.<sup>4</sup>

The Survey and Planning Branch of the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office knew that the principal investigators were beginning to find the answers to these questions. In 1983, we organized a conference that brought together historians and planners involved in studying and enhancing urban

neighborhoods for a two-day symposium in Greensboro, North Carolina. Necessarily limited in scope, it focused on middle-class, chiefly white suburban developments of a few Piedmont cities. Principal investigators and professors of urban and architectural history began pointing to answers to many of the questions we had all been asking. For example, it became clear that traditional involvement in numerous inter-related schemes such as trolley lines and development of the neighborhoods they serve, the waning attraction of city centers as places to live due to such factors as congestion and expanded commercial uses, shifting political forces associated with the expanding middle class, and the desire to publicly display their fortunes all contributed to southern entrepreneurs' strong interest in creating suburbs.<sup>5</sup> Participants left the sessions with both a better understanding of early twentieth-century suburbs and recognition of the need to examine the working class, African American, and planned industrial neighborhoods of the period. Fortunately, the conference has continued to provide a useful reference for preservationists and scholars alike with the publication of all of the papers in 1985 as *Early Twentieth-Century Suburbs in North Carolina*.

The themes examined in the 1983 symposium, the associated questions, and the answers that began to be formulated remained relevant to the survey of suburbs for more than a decade. Throughout the rest of the 1980s, we continued to survey early twentieth-century suburbs, expanding the scope toward the eve of World War II with each passing year, although effects of the Great Depression slowed the rate of expansion somewhat. The methodology remained fairly consistent, with a continued reliance on multiple structures forms and the research guided by the questions posed in the early 1980s. While many of the target neighborhoods were those of the white middle class, important projects also were undertaken in African-American and industrial suburbs, which raised additional research questions. Not until the late 1980s was the applicability of the survey techniques and research questions developed almost a decade earlier tested in newer suburbs in the context of a comprehensive survey. In 1989 the governments of Greensboro and Raleigh applied for matching grants to conduct comprehensive surveys. Both cities had been selectively surveyed in the mid-1970s and had experienced notable growth in population and area since then.

Lasting two full years, the Raleigh survey was the more thorough of the two, with sufficient scope to adequately document the burst of late 1930s and early 1940s suburban developments. The technique of recording neighborhoods by block faces on multiple structures forms, cross-referenced to files on selected individual properties, remained the most efficient method, but the huge number of properties to be recorded in a relatively brief period--more than 3,000--demanded that cross-referenced files on individual properties be kept to a minimum and that a single entry for the entire group of properties in a multiple structures file be substituted for an entry on each building. Recognizing that it had taken a long time to garner the support for this project and that it probably would be many years before the city would have a comprehensive survey update, the scope of work was expanded to look at the suburbs of the 1940s and early 1950s, if only cursorily. For the newer neighborhoods, the multiple structures forms were utilized even more generally to convey an area's overall character.

The magnitude and limitations of the project required pragmatism. Helen Ross, the principal investigator, was systematically working her way through the city geographically, beginning with the oldest sectors at the center. By the time she was ready to survey the newer suburbs at the fringes of the project area, many did not seem to merit more than the cursory pass she could give them because they already had lost much of their historical integrity due to remodeling, additions, infill construction, and even demolition of houses so that their lots could be subdivided for two or more new "mega-Georgians." This may have been our only opportunity to record many of Raleigh's mid century suburbs, but already a "hot" real estate market and the desire for "bigger and better" were affecting survey methodology. These trends may ultimately render the mid-century suburbs unrecognizable as such by the time they are fifty years old. We cannot help wondering if we can justify stretching the scarce resources of a program devoted to identifying, protecting, and enhancing the state's historic resources for a thorough recording that very possibly may have no utility beyond the identification process.

During the project, the principal investigator was able to focus some attention on obvious architectural highlights of the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. Raleigh is a fairly conservative city, but it is also home to the North Carolina State University School of Design, which recruited young leaders of the Modern Architecture movement for its faculty when it was established in the late 1940s. Between 1949 and the early 1960s, while affiliated with the school, these architect-professors and their associates designed buildings for themselves and their clients. Several of their designs, ranging from a "floating" office

building of steel supports and curtain walls reminiscent of Mies van der Rohe's work to a sweeping wood and glass Usonian-type house inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright, were carefully recorded.

Analysis and evaluation of these later resources in the survey report did not fall within the scope of work for the project, but State Historic Preservation Office staff subsequently reexamined the buildings and developed sufficient context to place them on the state's list of properties that appear to be potentially eligible for listing in the National Register. Almost immediately, owners began to have nominations prepared, and within two years six of these "monuments of modernism," as they came to be known, were listed in the Register. The eagerness with which these owners sought recognition for their buildings told us they already understood how special these places are.

Strangely enough, development of the contexts for these nominations also contributed to our understanding of the far more typical midcentury suburbs of period dwellings and ranch houses because they were the environment in which the modern wonders were designed and constructed. This situation recalls previous initial explorations of "new" periods. Appreciation of Victorian architecture began with the spotlight on the most exuberant Queen Anne extravagancies, and within a few years serious attention was being paid to the neighborhoods of run-of-the-mill Victorian houses. Perhaps our experience with Raleigh's modern masterpieces signals a similar progression.

Evaluation has always been a crucial aspect of an historic resource survey. We are constantly making decisions about what to record and how thoroughly to do it and invariably judging the importance of properties against the National Register criteria. When we record neighborhoods, we are always on the look-out for potential historic districts. The broader scope of the recent Raleigh and Greensboro surveys revealed new difficulties in identifying these special areas. For example, suburbs of the late 1930s through the 1940s can be hard to read, frequently defying easy definition by date and style. Designs published by firms such as the Standard Homes Plans Company in rural Wake County, North Carolina, which has provided scores of designs for thousands of houses across North Carolina and much of the Southeast since the late 1920s, often remained in catalogues for years with few if any revisions. It is relatively easy to judge significance of styles and building forms dating prior to the late 1930s because they were associated with discrete periods and changes between them were distinct. Ten years ago, buildings that had not quite crossed the fifty-year threshold, which is a cardinal National Register standard, rarely got a second look. Little by little, as distinctions have become blurred, the tendency has been to automatically extend the period of significance for districts to the fifty-year cut-off. Perhaps we have been assuming that World War II would be the great divide, but as the recent surveys have proven, this is not the case.

So how do we decide what is significant after we have surveyed these "newly historic" suburbs, now or five or ten years on? Certainly, historic integrity, or degree of preservation, is a crucial determinant, but how do we set thresholds? Until more survey work is conducted, setting standards will be a challenge. It seems safe to say that the sheer magnitude of resources in the post-World War II suburbs demands a very high degree of preservation for consideration as an historic district. It also demands that significance, regardless of integrity, be articulated, so that the charge that preservationists label anything that is fairly intact and more than fifty years old as worthy of preservation is proven untrue.

We do not yet know the best approach to surveying and evaluating the more typical suburban buildings of the mid twentieth century, but we imagine that development of larger contexts will affect the course. Right now, in the North Carolina State Historic Preservation Office, we are feeling our way, proceeding case-by-case and judging significance based upon our knowledge of the subject area and the broader contexts that are being developed. The traditional tension between survey and scholarship is changing with survey, the basis for so much of our understanding of early twentieth-century suburbs, now seemingly more dependent upon scholarship for evaluation of field work in the newer suburbs. Studies by sociologists, authorities on city and regional planning, economists, and political scientists are revising our research questions and providing answers to them. While many of the questions applied to early twentieth-century suburbs remain relevant, additional ones are pertinent: How did the nature of suburbs change? What were the goals of veterans and their young families? What were the effects of new government programs that made low-

interest loans available? How did the new tract houses reflect and shape ideals of family life? What were the impacts of technological developments and highway construction? Did restrictive covenants in middle class subdivisions still forbid people of color from occupying houses except as servants? Did the big developers have the same sorts of varied business interests as their predecessors?

It is too early to predict how our post-World War II heritage will be treated as historic resources. Certainly, their identification and evaluation will require the strong interest of state historic preservation offices, which must strive to resolve numerous troublesome issues associated with these tasks. Many factors will come into play in this tricky business, to which our own sensibilities and those of the general public will be brought to bear. In the constant interplay between the goals of preservationists, academic research, and the desires of the public that directs survey work, it is the third element of this triumvirate, public interest, that may become the most crucial. Charles Lockwood noted in a December, 1994, column on "edge cities" that "most suburban downtowns lack the historical, cultural, educational and sentimental associations that have enabled many of our traditional downtowns to change, survive, even prosper in recent years."<sup>6</sup> How strong are these associations in residential subdivisions? As ever greater budget cuts loom, will there be financial support for recording the newer suburbs except through government mandated environmental impact studies, which themselves may soon be subject to radical modification in the spirit of reinventing government and protecting private property rights?

In any event, it is the responsibility of preservation professionals to foster interest in historic resources, no matter how recent they are. Just as those of us who entered this field twenty years ago view bungalows as marvelous and special, we have to recognize that the 1950s, that golden age of family values, has its own aura. Already I can imagine a presentation to our National Register Advisory Committee in the year 2005 by a young professional for whom the film *American Graffiti* is not a memory but a period piece. As a slide of a pristine one-story ranch with picture windows shaded by metal awnings, imitation wrought iron railings at the front steps, and a jalousie windowed breezeway leading to a one-car garage flashes on the screen, I fully understand those comments made in a similar meeting in 1981 as I bite my tongue to keep from exclaiming, "That looks like the house my parents built. That can't be historic!"

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#### Notes

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2 This practice continued after 1980, in addition to the pass-through of ten percent of the state's annual federal appropriation to local preservation undertakings mandated by the CLG program.

3 Catherine W. Bishir and Lawrence S. Earley, editors, *Early Twentieth-Century Suburbs in North Carolina* (North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1985), 3.

4 Bishir and Earley, 5.

5 David R. Goldfield, "North Carolina's Early Twentieth-Century Suburbs and the Urbanizing South," *Early Twentieth-Century Suburbs in North Carolina*, Catherine W. Bishir and Lawrence S. Earley, editors (North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1985), 14-15.

6 Charles Lockwood, "Edge Cities on the Brink," *Wall Street Journal* (21 December 1994).

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