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4/23/2010

The McMansionization of Suburbia: Size, Status, and the American Dream of  
Homeownership

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An abstract of  
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## Abstract

### The McMansionization of Suburbia: Size, Status, and the American Dream of Homeownership

By Jacqueline Black

The American Dream is exemplified by the dream of homeownership. To own a home in America means the homeowner has achieved a certain economic and social standing. Suburbanization contributed to this dream, and a home in the suburbs signified the suburbanite was truly wealthy. Exclusive enclaves represented this wealth in the mid-nineteenth century. As more Americans moved to the suburbs after World War II, however, residents looked for new ways to demonstrate status. The development of Levittown and other communities like it brought about a newly emerged middle-class who felt successful solely on the basis of owning a home. Today, with more than half of the country living in the suburbs, the affluent are looking for new means to demonstrate their wealth, class, and status. The McMansion has permeated the American suburban landscape.

In this thesis, I look at how this history has led to the McMansion phenomenon and how square footage has become the primary indicator of an affluent suburbanite's wealth.

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## Introduction

*The first time I was in my neighbor's house, I was struck by how much it looked like my own. The spacious foyer, the geometric switch-back staircase, the outdated eighties wood trim, even the tone on tone square patterned carpet was identical. As an eight-year-old, I was blissfully unaware that someone else could be living in a space just like mine. Yet the homes in my Reagan era subdivision are not tract homes. My neighbor's house and mine were just built by the same architect who perhaps pulled the house plan from a set of pre-drawn designs in 1981. This would be nothing spectacular. While all the homes in my neighborhood did not look identical, suburban housing since World War II has been dominated by tract homes built with little consumer input or individuality. Architects have been endangered in the housing market for years—mostly by their own choice as they pursued European modernism and dismissed the “Dream House” coveted by most of America. As the dream house became the golden standard, it became mundane, the same. The same mass-produced box could fulfill the “dream” for most of America. So while I believed at eight years old that my home was special and unique, others in my neighborhood, let alone across the country, looked just like it.*

### “American Dream Extreme”

To “make it” in America is intrinsically linked with owning a home. This dream is also closely connected to the idea of upward mobility. In *The American Dream*, Jim Cullen claims Americans generally understand the dream “to mean that in the United States anything is possible if you want it badly enough” (5). There is also an understood ambiguity to the dream. It is not something that can be proven, and no *one* dream exists (Cullen 7). The primary dream for many Americans, however, is to be upwardly mobile, “a dream typically understood in terms of economic and/or social advancement” (Cullen 8). For the focus of this thesis, social and economic advancement is demonstrated through the American home.

Buying a dream house shows American success, and to many Americans, the size of the home signifies how much success. The American dream of homeownership has enormously wide appeal and is often realized. The overall homeownership rate in the United States in 2008 was 67.8 percent (Hoover Institution). Those married with families

had a homeownership rate of 82.6 percent (Callis). The increased prevalence of homeownership among married families exemplifies the ideal of owning a home once one has a family. The dream of homeownership is unique in America because, as author Dolores Hayden describes, “for the first time in history, a civilization has created a utopian ideal based on the house rather than the city or the nation” (*Redesigning the American Dream*, 18).

The dream house is often justified by parents wanting to give their children “all the things [they] didn’t have” (Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream*, 8). As Hayden further explains:

It may mean a chance to surmount one’s class and ethnic background. In this sense, single-family suburban domestic architecture is an architecture of Americanization in a nation of immigrants, and it implies a complete social planning strategy. “The things we didn’t have” is also a euphemism for a private life without urban problems such as unemployment, poverty, hunger, racial prejudice, pollution, and violent crime. (*Redesigning the American Dream*, 18)

The home carries a great deal of meaning to American suburbanites. The American dream of homeownership has been closely connected to a certain “domestic architecture” that signifies a place in culture, that one has “made it.” In this sense, place is defined as a “cultural or social location” (Staeheli 159). As Lynn Staeheli explains, “people are located within webs of cultural, social, economic, and political relationships that shape their identities, or positionalities” (160). Americans are very conscious of their social place, and thus view the home as a strong outward marker of place within society.

Just as the United States was unique in the way Americans placed value on the home, it was unique in the way class and status were assessed. In Europe, wealth followed privilege in social classes. In the New World, however, Americans defined class by wealth which then brought privilege (Martinson 3). The home has become a primary vehicle in demonstrating wealth. Throughout suburban history the home has

changed shape for the middle and upper class, and so has the land which the home sits on. Early estate homes sat on lots up to ten acres. Many American fortunes were based in the abundance of real estate which existed, and owning a large home implied owning a large lot. As suburbia transformed after WWII, lot sizes drastically decreased to build as many homes as possible in one area. Today, we still see land as an expensive commodity. If so much money is being invested into a site, many homeowners and builders want to build the biggest homes they can on the lots to maximize their use. A combination of expensive land and the desire to own a large home has led to cheaper construction practices as seen in McMansions.

In 2008, the StarTribune.com, a Minneapolis paper, asked its website readers “How do you define ‘McMansion?’” Without any feature story to base their answers upon, readers responded with descriptions of “blandness,” “predictability,” and “poor taste.” Others described them as being “created more for the purpose of making an impression than for making a home” (“How do you define ‘McMansion?’”) All answers emphasized the size of the homes, and many were quite critical, signaling resentment towards their construction. One reader replied:

McMansions are mass-produced, oversized homes, where often the only difference between neighboring McMansions is the shade of beige or gray on the trim. They’re most often in new development tracts in outer-tier suburbs, and it’s essential that they have a multicar garage that invokes visitors to say ‘nice garage,’ instead of ‘nice house.’

For the purposes of this thesis, I have defined McMansion as a home over 4,000 square feet on a small lot. The homes have at least three bedrooms, often a bathroom for each, a large two-story entryway, an enormous great room, and bonus spaces like a home office, exercise room, or hobby room. Most often, McMansions are made up of pre-fabricated parts and lack unique details in its design. They are reminiscent of older



housing styles, but do not have the details or proportions that constitute historical styles. Most have brick fronts with vinyl sides, and even sides with no windows since the homes sit so close to each other.

Frequently, McMansions are viewed in a negative light, especially in areas where they have been built in place of a teardown. These are usually in older neighborhoods, where the new buyer tears down an old house to build a new McMansion on the lot. These new homes are then viewed as ruining the integrity of the neighborhood because they do not fit in with the historical style of architecture.

The United States is criticized by journalists and scholars for the “supersizing” of homes, cars, and even people. The obesity rates in 1995 were under twenty percent in every state, with almost half the country under ten percent. In 2008, Colorado was the only state with obesity rates under twenty percent, and six states had rates over thirty percent. The automobile market now includes the Hummer and roads have become clogged with soccer moms in SUVs large enough to transport the whole team. And then there are homes, which have increased 150 percent in the past fifty years and now average over 2,400 square feet (Mims). While obesity can be criticized for its health risks, Hummers debated on issues such as traffic safety and fossil fuel dependence, can McMansions be criticized for their aesthetics? They are a matter of taste rather than a public health or environmental issue (The McMansion Wars). While McMansions could be targeted for not being environmentally friendly, they are being attacked based on appearance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> More recently, the focus has begun to shift to the lack of sustainability of McMansions. Yet in the midst of the housing boom and McMansion criticism, this was not an issue.

What is it that is fundamentally wrong with McMansions? Critics like Dolores Hayden say that exurban communities contribute to sprawl; directing government money toward infinite highway construction rather than “direct federal, state, and local subsidies toward the less affluent, provide public transit, and require more environmental accountability” (“Building Suburbia” 246). In older neighborhoods residents say McMansions jeopardize the integrity of the neighborhood, ruining the historical style and character. But these arguments focus on how McMansions offend those not purchasing them. What are the repercussions for those who live in these cavernous spaces? McMansion homeowners may be attempting to own a home which they believe is the best version of the American Dream of homeownership. These homes are seen as the ultimate end in the search for success, status, and happiness. In the process, they are costing the homeowners money, time, and disappointment. The enchantment in the idea of owning such a home is quickly overridden by the reality of the irrational systems they exist in. McMansions then often fail to fulfill the needs the homeowner is seeking.

The American Dream of homeownership has changed. In the 1950s the American middle class wanted a home to fulfill the need for shelter. Hopefully it would also be a nice place to raise a family, a comfortable and livable environment. Now homes need to impress. They need to include extra spaces for any possible activity homeowners may want to partake in. They need to show success, upward mobility, and are built for more than pure shelter. McMansions are being built for others; for what American homeowners think others would covet, and for what doesn't work for the owners themselves.

Homes are getting bigger as it becomes increasingly more difficult to demonstrate wealth, class, and status through homes. In homeowners' attempts to

demonstrate social and economic standing, they are fighting an irrational system of disenchantment. To see how these processes transpire, I will begin with a brief history of upper class suburbs. Homeowners in these early neighborhoods knew their homes outwardly spoke to their social and economic status. They built large homes on large lots, yet the homes were uniquely designed and individualized.

From picturesque enclaves and pattern book homes, I will look at how the architect was phased out of American domestic architecture. Swept up by European modernism, American architects were barely a part of the post World War II housing boom. Lot size no longer factored into developing the neighborhood, since as many homes as possible needed to be constructed. Homeowners after the war were not as concerned with demonstrating status, as with conforming to what a middle class American was expected to be. Yet as this mood faded, the new middle class was left unfulfilled and still reaching for the dream.

This leads us to McMansions today. Homeowners and builders attempt to make most of smaller expensive lots by building larger homes. Affluent suburbanites bought these monster homes to show their increasing class status. The past two decades have made the middle class richer, and left them as a rather undefined upper-middle class. Not secure with their wealth, newly upper-, and upper-middle class Americans use the McMansion to demonstrate their wealth to themselves and others.

This thesis is not a social history. Rather, the research is based on looking at suburbia as a cultural construction. Thus, works ranging from Dolores Hayden to New York Times writers have been used. Throughout the thesis I have also included aspects from my own life growing up in suburbia. While not a tract neighborhood, my experiences with my home reflect many of the processes explored in my research. My

own obsession with homes and design is what inspired this work, and my hope is that these accounts will provide a bit more firsthand insight into American suburbia.

### Upper class Enclaves

#### “Bourgeois Utopia”

The American suburb is not wholly unique. Early American suburbs were certainly influenced by precedents in England. Ideas of a “bourgeois utopia” and asserting class values through the home were ideas established by the English (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 69). While architecture in England inspired American design, specific American tastes were incorporated in future development. Since the early suburbs, there has been an ideal dream home which developers have tried to encompass in their neighborhoods.

Early images of America are closely connected to nature and interpret the “American ideal as transcending society and its material culture” (Martinson 15). On the other hand, to many Americans, the typical European city was “artificial because of its deliberate disconnection from nature” (Martinson 17). The early suburban homes of the wealthy were built in neighborhoods designed to connect with nature to achieve this ideal. They often sat on large lots with manicured lawns and covered front porches.

Early American domestic architecture was intended to outwardly speak to its residents' social and economic class. By the late 1830s, homes could be categorized by class. The “nobility” lived in Estate homes, the upper class, villas, and the middle class, the cottage (Martinson 24). Literal architectural imagery was not a new idea. Most famously, Thomas Jefferson looked to the architectural imagery of the Romans to draw obvious “parallels between the cultural achievements of ancient Rome and the potential

of the new American republic” (Martinson 25). His villa Monticello included a columned portico with a pediment, and a full rotunda at the center of the home.

Two recognized historical upper class suburbs are Llewellyn Park in West Orange New Jersey, and Riverside, Illinois built in 1852 and 1869, respectively. These neighborhoods are picturesque enclaves. The communities use curving roads which fit naturally with the topography, large landscaped lots, shared parks, and aim to create a sense of community for the affluent suburbanites. Picturesque enclaves created what Dolores Hayden calls the “triple dream.” The triple dream combined home, nature, and community. Sometimes these facets were organic to the space, and sometimes they were created artificially. For example, many of the new picturesque enclaves included “the word ‘park’ in its name, whether it had a park or not” (Hayden, “Building Suburbia” 66). Many times, shared public parks began to be replaced by country clubs and a more exclusive community. Developers also achieved exclusivity by restricting buyers based on race, religion, and class. Hayden explains “on the residents’ side, the quest for spirituality and new forms of community were replaced by the routines of buying into a leafy place with big houses and affluent neighbors” (Hayden, “Building Suburbia” 69). Thus, residents began buying into a “dream,” and believed these neighborhoods exemplified that dream.

Llewellyn Haskell was a successful pharmaceuticals merchant. He suffered from rheumatism and “sought out a healthful site for a country residence” (Archer 222). Llewellyn Park was an hour from New York City, and as the first planned community, it was designed for “like minded individuals [to] be surround by nature yet have convenient access to the City” (“History of Llewellyn Park”). The neighborhood, comprised of five to ten acre “villa sites,” was advertised as “Country Homes for City People” (Archer 222;

Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 54). Designed by Alexander Jackson Davis, Llewellyn Park was the first residential suburb designed around shared parks and private homes. Thus the community centered on the shared space, not solely single families. The whole community, however, was fenced in with a gate-keeper.



**Figure 1-Thomas Edison in front of his home in Llewellyn Park**

Riverside, Illinois was a railroad suburb inspired by the success of Llewellyn Park. Picturesque enclaves had been “promoted in newspapers, popular magazines, novels, and plays as models for American Life” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 61). Riverside was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux. While Llewellyn Park was designed to fit in with the existing nature, Riverside was built more to a formula. The homes were set back from the street at least thirty feet, and were “separated from the road by the required trees” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 64). Olmsted believed that Americans tried too hard to make the suburbs function like cities, rather than just connect with nature. He called small lots “artificial conditions,” and criticized Americans for looking at landscapes rather than living in them (qtd. in Isenstadt 128). Olmsted tried to create a landscape which would compel the residents to enjoy the natural surroundings.

“Catalog Castles”

While Sears Roebuck and Co. gets most of the credit for mail order homes, pattern and plan books for homes have existed since the nineteenth century. An example is the Gray family of Grayville, Illinois, who purchased their “catalog castle” in 1895 (Alcorn 1). The Gray’s wished to build a home which reflected their economic status and yet they were not specifically motivated by the architectural style. Rather than showing status through a uniquely built home, cutting edge technology was the mass-production of these prefabricated homes which could be shipped. Geo. F. Barber & Co. was one of the most productive house plan catalog firms in the 1890s (Alcorn 1). Barber showed over 6,000 different house plans in their catalogs and stood out based on the high-quality of their marketing materials including “elegantly drawn line or watercolor perspectives, engraved photographs or... montages of interior and exterior views” (Alcorn 1). The Gray house was an archetypal Queen Anne design, complete with detailed ornament—made by machine. Many of the factors behind the consumption of these “catalog castles” are antecedents of consumer motivations in buying McMansions.

A big change came in the mid-nineteenth century when A.J. Downing published the first “prose on taste and style addressed to the owners of modest gardens and houses, not to builders or architects” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 101). Mail-order homes quickly became a much more popular choice for many Americans, as architectural detail became simplified for the average homeowner. As one plan book architect claimed, “older romantic house styles—Classic, Mansard, Gothic, and Italianate—were just boxes with different roofs and thus easy to build” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 101). The same basic home could be slightly altered to portray a different style.

In 1908, Sears, Roebuck and Co. published the *Book of Modern Homes and Building Plans*. These homes generally were more affordable for the working class

seeking the American Dream of homeownership. The homes helped give the feeling of achievement by taking on upper class white Anglo-Saxon protestant names like “The Yale,” “The Franklin,” “The Portsmouth,” “The Hamilton,” and “The Atterbury” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 101-106). While the homes did not necessarily fit a certain architectural style, one homeowner claimed, “My Sears Modern Home No. 167 [the Maytown] is the kind of house you see in movies about the good old days when virtue triumphed and the nice guy won the girl, usually while sitting in the front porch swing” (Hayden, “Building Suburbia” 113-114). This statement is testament to the vitality of the American Dream. This homeowner has seen a house like his or hers in the movies, and to them, this symbolizes that the homeowner is on his or her way up in society, and achieving this part of the dream.

**\$753<sup>00</sup>**

For \$753.00 we will furnish all the material to build this Eight-Room House, consisting of Mill Work, Flooring, Ceiling, Siding, Finishing Lumber, Building Paper, Pipe, Gutter, Sash Weights, Hardware, Painting Material, Lumber, Lath and Shingles. NO EXTRAS, as we guarantee enough material at the above price to build this house according to our plans.

By allowing a fair price for labor, cement, brick and plaster, which we do not furnish, this house can be built for about \$1,573.00, including all material and labor.

For Our Offer of Free Plans See Page 3.

**A** WELL proportioned house which affords a great deal of room at a low cost. Large front porch, 21 feet 6 inches long by 8 feet wide, with Colonial columns, bay window in the dining room and parlor. An octagon tower on the second floor, making it suitable for a corner lot. Crystal lined front window in the parlor. Colored stained art glass sash for the hall, with marginal light over each. Every room in the house is perfectly lighted and well ventilated by large windows. The reception hall contains an open staircase with chest opening between it and the parlor, and another chest opening leading to the dining room. A door also opens from the reception hall directly into the kitchen. Inside cellar stairs directly under the main stairs and also an outside stairway under the rear porch. When reaching the second floor landing you are within a very few feet of the ice so waste space whatever.

Public front door, 3x7 feet, glazed with bevel plate glass. Interior yellow pine doors for both first and second floor, with clear yellow pine trim, such as casing, baseboard and molding. Clear yellow pine flooring for both floors and porches.

Painted two coats outside; color to suit. Varnish and wood filler for two coats of interior finish.

Built on a concrete block foundation, frame construction, sided with narrow bevelypress edge siding and has a cedar shingle roof.

Excavated basement under the entire house, 7 feet from floor to joists, with cement floor. First floor, 9 feet from floor to ceiling; second floor, 8 feet from floor to ceiling.

**This house can be built on a lot 28 feet wide.**

Complete Warm Air Heating Plant, for soft coal, extra.....	\$ 26.00
Complete Warm Air Heating Plant, for hard coal, extra.....	30.00
Complete Hot Water Heating Plant, extra.....	25.00
Complete Plumbing, extra, extra.....	119.27

**SEARS, ROEBUCK AND CO. CHICAGO, ILLINOIS**

QUALITY GUARANTEED

Figure 2-Sears Modern Home No. 167

Modernism

“It never occurred to modernists that there was any reason to connect with the average person” (Martinson 41)



Domestic architecture after World War Two is notoriously criticized for its lack of design, if even considered architecture at all. What happened that American architects did not participate in one of the largest developing projects in American history? Mail order homes set an example for postwar suburban development. The American home had become completely disconnected from site and place. Rather than building homes based on site and residents, homes were being built the same across the country, setting the precedence for the way we see McMansions built today. As one architect claimed, “I see Colonial, English, Spanish built in New York, Florida, Los Angeles, Minnesota and I wonder” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 117).

In the mid-1930s, European modernism swept through the United States, capturing its architects along the way. Its cult figures included Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Walter Gropius. Architecture schools began to drop their traditional curriculums in favor of the Bauhaus method—an abstract and socially based architecture. To be socially responsible in design meant that society was most important, not the individual, and certainly “not comfortable, American single-family houses for the ‘bourgeoisie’” (Martinson 170). American architects were captivated by the European vision, and abandoned American design and client preferences. Thus, in the immediate postwar housing market, there were few architects who built traditional style homes. Only the wealthy could hire one of the few architects and build a home to any particular style. But for the majority of Americans “architectural choices for single-family housing and imaginative professional leadership in subdivision development diminished to practically nil—from most postwar American architects, you got modernism or you got nothing” (Martinson 171).



**Figure 3-Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois (1951)**

Modernism and social architecture did not have wide appeal in postwar America. Additionally, the modernist architects believed “that very few people were their artistic intellectual equals” (Martinson 28). Modernist architects, Americans as well as Europeans, did not seem to care if the public understood their approach, or even expected them to understand it. As a result, architects were minimally involved in postwar home design.

Rather, their efforts were turned to postwar commercial architecture. Here, modernism could be expressed without trying to fit into the American ideal of a “home.” Furthermore, American architects were more drawn to the greater commissions of commercial projects after the profession had been destroyed during the depression. After the war, there was a great need for offices, colleges, hospitals, shopping centers, and so much more with greater commissions than suburban homes (Martinson 169).

The long term effect of this process was a resulting dismissal of domestic architecture by architects. Opinion leaders did not look fondly upon postwar domestic architecture and to design homes was no longer an “honorable and important undertaking” (Martinson 169). Rather, it was seen as trivial and did not advance the

architectural profession or benefit society as a whole. Just like homeowners show they've "made it" through the size of their home, architects demonstrated success through commercial building commissions. As a result, the majority of postwar suburban housing developments were taken over by developers and builders' plan services. The prime, and first, example of this is in Levittown, New York.

### Levittown

"A fine place to raise a family" (Wonderland)

When World War II ended in 1945, American veterans returned to a United States that was very different from the one they left. In the absence of the men at war, women took on a strong role as factory workers, exemplified by Rosie the Riveter. Post WWII America became "the time for a return to traditional values" (Kelly 59). With the American desire to regain security, these values centered around conformity and privatization. There was a great desire for women to return to their domestic role, and to live in separate spheres from their working husbands.

A major factor in this equation was the home. An enormous housing shortage was left in the wake of WWII. With families living in small urban apartments holding three generations, a development plan was needed fast. Rescue came in the form of the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans' Emergency Housing Program which provided construction loans for ten million homes between 1946 and 1953 (Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 132).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> FHA programs at this time disproportionately helped white American's, while hurting or ignoring minorities. Post WWII suburbanization drastically increased segregation. Levittown itself specifically did not allow blacks to buy homes in the neighborhood.

Three aligning circumstances created an ideal time for the development of a large scale housing project. These were the post war housing shortage, the building technology, and the available land (Kelly 22). William Levitt, a builder of middle class suburban communities before WWII, saw the opportunity. Furthermore, Levitt was strongly supported by Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy who saw public, multi-family housing as ““a breeding ground for communists”” (qtd. in Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 131). On some potato fields in Long Island, Levitt & Sons built the largest mass-housing development ever constructed. Levitt used assembly line tactics perfected by Ford to produce homes fast. Rather than a car moving down the line from worker to worker, the home builders moved down the street from house to house. Workers hours were also changed to maximize the use of their time. If a day of work was missed due to inclement weather, it was made up on weekends and holidays. Construction began in 1947, and in just a few months the building process had been perfected to building 150 houses per week (Kelly 26).



**Figure 4-Levittown in 1948**

The design of the homes spoke to what was expected of the postwar American family. The homes were more than what they looked like, they were about “domestic

space—machines for living” (Kelly 39). Levittown homeowners may have been attracted to the look of the home, but they were more attracted to what it meant to own a home. Domestic space is what interacts with the home’s residents, most often young families in Levittown, and determines a specific way of life. This includes everything from the floor plans to the appliances. Postwar Americans “wanted to concentrate on the intimate details of living...and went in quest of the prosaic—small, domestic, personal daily events” (Baritz 183).

Many agencies together shaped the design of the homes. Local boards regulated the housing types and construction through building and zoning codes. The FHA set the “minimum standards for cost, structure, and design, insuring the risk for the banks which underwrote the construction of the development,” and the developer who “selected materials, colors, design and location” (Kelly 40-42). A combination of these regulations resulted in an “official code for what the life of that ‘typical’ buyer was, or was supposed to be, in the 1940s” (Kelly 49-50). For example, one regulation in Levittown was that laundry could not be hung to dry outside on the weekend. This rule assumed the woman would not be working during the week, and thus would have time to do laundry then.

Despite five different exterior choices, the floor plans of the small Cape Cods were identical consisting of four rooms: living, kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bath. There was no basement, a huge factor in cutting costs, and the attic space could be finished by the homeowner if they so desired. By the fall of 1948, 6,000 Cape Cods had been constructed, but the FHA became concerned about “market saturation” (Kelly 77). Thus, in 1949, Levitt introduced a new model.

The Ranch style house had become popular on the west coast as a one level, spread out plan. But in Levittown, the Ranch did not differ much from the Cape Cod.

“The concept of a ranch house—traditionally, a long, low building—was reflected in the exterior design and trim, rather than in the substance of the house plan” (Kelly 82). The first level included the same four rooms, and the attic remained unfinished. The front door was moved to the left corner of the house rather than centered, and the floor plan was as if the Cape Cod had been rotated ninety degrees (Kelly 83). Whereas in the Cape Cod the public spaces faced the street and the private bedrooms faced the back, the Ranch model turned so that the living room and one bedroom faced the back and the kitchen and the other bedroom faced the street. The bedroom that faced the street had raised windows to maintain privacy. While the Ranch was the same height as the Cape Cod, “architectural design elements had been used to reduce the impression of verticality” (Kelly 82).

The houses began as rental units, targeting the prewar tenant class. Their appeal grew quickly, however, as the American dream of homeownership permeated American society. Furthermore, due to low mortgage payments, it became more affordable to buy the home than to rent. Levittown’s “typical” market then was “blue-collar workers in the main, but also a number of those in recently emerged white-collar middle class, wage-earning people whose work was clean, but not well-remunerated, and whose prewar status would not typically have included homeownership” (Kelly 45).<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, Levittown did not attract the most affluent. Due to its low-cost reputation, neighboring areas feared Levittown would eventually become a slum, filled with residents who could not be bothered by caring for their homes. Contrary to this prediction, Levittown

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<sup>3</sup> The working class became very successful in the postwar years, often due to “mostly white workers” unionizing to negotiate “contract provisions giving private medical insurance pensions, and job security” (Lipsitz 372). These efforts along with government policies worked to create “a new ‘white’ identity in the suburbs” (Lipsitz 373).

homeowners took a great deal of pride in their homes, maintaining and investing in them for many years.

Though intended for working class residents, the design of Levitt homes reflected middle class ideals. Prewar Levitt homes were designed for the middle class.

Accordingly, the same needs and assumptions were considered when constructing the Levittown homes. The postwar middle class “wanted their lives to be organized around the small details of domestic life” (Baritz 171). To reduce cost, Levitt “divested the house of all that was deemed unnecessary—dining rooms, porches, pantries, libraries, solariums, foyers, and extra bathrooms and bedrooms” (Kelly 44). The dimensions of the rooms were also decreased, but what was key was the resulting ratio of public and private space.

In prewar middle class housing, status was shown through a larger formal public space, the parlor, while the private kitchen space reflected “servants’ quarters [which] were intended for production and were rarely seen by guests” (Kelly 44). Public space was a luxury. Thus while the Levitt living room was 193 square feet, the kitchen was just over half the size at 100 square feet (Kelly 44). As Barbara Kelly concludes in *Expanding the American Dream: The Building and Rebuilding of Levittown*, “in essence, the Levitt Cape Cods and Ranches were symbolic, if reductionist, middleclass houses” (44). The Levittown home may not have initially had every room in a prewar middle class home, but postwar middle class Americans were attracted by the “newness” of the homes, the new communities, and the new families living there. “Freed of the anchors of the past, the suburbanites created a claustal world in their own image” (Baritz 197).

Levittown homeowners also showed much pride in their homes. This was demonstrated by the remodeling efforts of homeowners in the first decade of Levittown.

Early Levittown homeowners did not have a lot of money, but they did have “energy and ingenuity” (Kelly 47). The Levittown homeowners were also “relatively young and willing to wait for the fulfillment of their housing dream” (Kelly 47). Starting with the basic Levitt homes, homeowners could create their dream home.

The remodeling efforts were so widespread that the community created its own journal in 1954: *Thousand Lanes: Ideas for the Levitt Home*. The usual Cape Cod remodel consisted of finishing the attic. A couple of bedrooms could be added on that floor with minimal construction knowledge since the frame was already in place. The Ranch models were designed, however, to allow for more renovations without much structural damage on the ground floor. In designing the Ranch model the Levitts were particularly inspired by Frank Lloyd Wright’s use of transformable space. The new Levitt homes “included a swinging bookcase/partition between living room and kitchen, which could also serve to screen the kitchen from the front entry” (Kelly 47). The rear living room window was removable to easily allow an addition to be built on the back of the house and to reuse the window. Carports built in the 1950 and 1951 models could also easily be transformed to garages or more living space. One of the most common remodeling efforts was called “squaring the kitchen” by Levittown homeowners. The front door of the Ranch home was set into the home, taking up about 9 square feet of kitchen space. By reframing the door to complete the “square” on the front of the house, the square footage could be gained inside the home. After all of the remodeling, the original four-bedroom suburb was transformed into a more unique environment where the average house had seven rooms (Kelly 51). The Cape Cod often added two rooms to the back as bedrooms or den, and one on the side connecting to the kitchen to often serve as a dining room. The Ranch model renovations could include two rooms on the front as



living rooms and bedrooms, and the carport to the side was often converted into a garage or covered for a dining room or den.



**Figure 5-Ranch Model with a "Squared" Kitchen**

The remodeling movement said a lot about how Levittowners viewed themselves socioeconomically. As Kelly noted, “as they reshaped their built environment they also raised it to a new socio-economic level” (44). Rather than middle classness being based on income or occupation, Levittowners were middle class based on home ownership, the quintessential American Dream. The remodeling efforts also speak to the emerging importance of a large home. Levittown suburbanites illustrate reemerging notions of using the home as an indicator of wealth. The middle class family values that existed in the design of the homes were accepted by Levittown residents and the renovations reflected middle class ideals presented in the media and in television shows like *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show*, and *Father Knows Best*. These shows reflected white middle class Americans and centered on the ideal nuclear family in their Levittown like

home.<sup>4</sup> They also portrayed an accurate example of husband and wife dynamics in the home.

While women had been viewed as strong workers during the depression and the war, their postwar image centered on the home and on being a “good wife” while the men returned to the workforce. In terms of assessing success through one’s home, the man of the house would most likely be judged by the exterior of the home—its “public image”—the women were judged by its interior: “its cleanliness and its decorative appeal” (Kelly 75). An important interior space was the kitchen, which often became the center of the public space in the home. Retailers soon realized that women would be the main consumers of home products, and appealed to them in marketing strategies. Kitchen appliances became a marker of status since the homes themselves were so small. With such a lack of space, the homes had to offer replacements. Thus, “instead of rooms, the houses offered efficiency; instead of workspace, they offered appliances” (Kelly 46). This process can be seen in the marketing of refrigerators.

In the postwar consumer market, manufacturers had to negotiate the needs of their upper class clientele with the emerging working-class masses. While the upper class preferred simplicity and quality in design, the consumer survey data discovered three designed features that working- and middle class buyers considered to determine worth. These were: “bulk and size,” “embellishment and visual flash,” and color (Nickles 588). Manufacturers were torn between which markets to appeal to. Would the working class consumer “be uplifted by their new prosperity...to accept designers’ upper-middle class standards [?]” (Nickles 589). Or would they single handedly change the way

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<sup>4</sup> The homes represented in these shows appear to be considerably larger than the typical Levittown home before renovations. They do, however, exist in suburban tract housing neighborhoods of the postwar middle-class.

manufactures marketed their products and design? The answer turned out to be the latter. Those who appreciated simple design and quality were a limited segment of the market. If companies wanted to be most profitable, they had to appeal to the working class housewife who believed that “more is better” rather than “less is more” (Nickles 591). Thus appliances were produced in pink and gold. They had sparkling logos, oversized handles, and ornamentation. They were designed to show those who walked into a woman’s kitchen that she was modern, not necessarily to show “glamour” (Nickles 601). Finally, consumer studies found these appliances were “symbols of security” (Nickles 601). They symbolized modernity and the success of owning a home after the turbulent depression and war years.

While Levittown homes were nothing like those in the picturesque enclaves of Alexander Jackson Davis and Frederick Law Olmsted, the neighborhoods were built to evoke the same feeling of building with nature. Levitt used the same winding street pattern of his prewar developments to add “an upscale illusion to a low-cost development” as seen in Figure 4 (Kelly 78). And as mentioned previously, the interiors of the later ranch models were inspired by architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright. Despite these efforts to resemble older suburban communities, Levittown was still designed in a very contrived way—down to the order families were housed. When a homeowner purchased a Levittown home, they were housed on the streets in alphabetical order. For example, in the 1997 documentary *Wonderland*, current residents point out neighboring homes where the Fox’s lived, then the Francis’s, and then the Friedman’s. Levitt also wanted to create smaller communities within the larger Levittown community. Thus, one could say they lived in the Magnolia section, and not become lost within the larger neighborhood.

Despite the redundancy of Levittown homes, its residents tried to create a unique and individualized space. Not only did remodeling projects update and change the original boxes, but the residents themselves became a wide range of characters, straying from the representation of the nuclear family. One resident called the town a “unique utopia,” while another lamented that there was a “deep sense of absurdity” to the place (Wonderland). They complain of the pressure to be the perfect nuclear family, to be ideal, to dress the same, to talk to same—pressures which combined to take away the “dream.”

The remodeling efforts and increasing social status reflected the enchantment that existed within Levittown. Residents were happily enchanted by the newness of the development, by the prosperous postwar period, by television, and by “the comfort of being alone together with like-minded people” (Baritz 196). As Loren Baritz explained in *The Good Life*, “the new suburbanites viewed their new, clean, green communities as the best of all possible worlds” (196). On the other side of this process were those who did feel pressured to live the dream and were not achieving what they thought it should be. Those parodied in *Wonderland* had become disenchanting and were struggling with the sameness and routine of their lives.

Levittown and other communities like it across the country changed the suburban landscape drastically. Picturesque enclaves were replaced by contrived, orderly neighborhoods where the homes were indistinguishable. In the postwar period, the American middle class was happy with these neighborhoods. They represented security and a return to normalcy which was desired after the war. Families during this time did not want to stand out, and the “need for the community’s approval inevitably made the young suburban families conformist, outgoing, friendly and warmly cooperative” (Baritz

198-199). The postwar working-class Americans were also happy with their new class status as middle class. Middle class at this time had more to do with a “state of mind” than something that could be measured, like income (Baritz xii). Yet the newly middle class realized this economic line was being blurred “by reason of their hopes” rather than incomes, and saw that their newly owned home was at the center of their new social class. As Paul Knox explains in *Metroburbia, USA*, ““once the ideal had been established, and once the family had been remade to fit the landscape, even as the landscape was remade to fit the family, suburbia exploded, becoming, as it were, the only option for respectable middle-class life”” (Knox 20).

The renovations of the Levittown homes demonstrated the investment and pride seen in the home. The homes were designed to be expanded and this expansion began a pattern of increasing home sizes up to today. In 1950 the average house was 983 square feet. As of 2005 the average house was 2,434 square feet (McGinn 16). The middle class is no longer happy to blend into their community and not place emphasis on wealth. Throughout the past fifty years, homes have been getting larger as the middle class attempts to demonstrate wealth, class and status through their homes. In more recent years, as it has become harder to show social and economic standing through aspects like jobs, the McMansion has become the outward symbol.

### The McMansion

“Levittown on steroids” (Galant)

*The standard American floor plan has become notorious for its use of non-used space. My house was no exception. Our two-story living room was filled with pale pink and off-white furniture, too clean and crisp to ever do any “living” in. It was passed by everyday on the path from the front door to the kitchen, and while the living room was at the center of the home, it was completely ignored—*

*along with the dining room across from it. Rather, the majority of our time was spent in the smaller, darker den next to the kitchen. The den had a cozy feeling with a fireplace and low ceilings. The dark brown leather couch just begged to be lounged on. In 1997, when the house was sixteen years old, it underwent a major living space renovation. First step: use the living room. We removed the pale pink and off-white furniture, and replaced it with a soft burgundy couch, filled with giant throw pillows. The glass coffee table was replaced by one that looked like giant stacked books, and opened up to store board games. We built a large entertainment center to hold the new television and showcase my brothers' athletic trophies. Finally, we arranged four large recliners to create an inclusive seating area around the room. Instead of wasting the space which was the den, we tore down the wall separating it from the kitchen. Our kitchen was now double the size, and perfect for entertaining since everyone always gathers in the kitchen anyway. We added an arc shaped island, a bar, and a large round table that could seat up to ten. These changes made all the living space in my home livable. Rooms are no longer being wasted based on archaic perceptions of formal floor plans. While including new luxury features, the house feels comfortable and welcoming, not impersonal and cold like many McMansion interiors.*

Homes sizes have increased by almost 250 percent in the past fifty years while families and lot sizes have decreased. Since 1971 the average family has decreased from 3.1 persons to 2.6 persons (Knack). Lot sizes have gotten smaller and are often in great disproportion to the McMansions being built. This is especially true in cases where the McMansion has been built to replace a teardown rather than in a new development. In these tear-down cases, the McMansions often encroach too close to the surrounding, older homes.

Like Levittown, McMansions have a stark uniformity and general lack of design. The difference is that the size of the Levittown homes forced their owners to be creative by remodeling the structures and creatively utilizing the space. McMansions, on the other hand, are often left looking empty. When McMansion owners buy their house, they are going along with a standard process that occurs when working with a builder rather than an architect and choosing a pre-set house plan. "They [are] not offered an opportunity for input into the design. And they [don't] know how to ask for or give the

feedback necessary to make it an expression of their lifestyle and their values” (Susanka 10). Rather, the focus is placed on square-footage. This measurement can be quite misleading in assessing the size and value of a home. Pricing homes in such a way, “makes about as much sense as if car dealers sold automobiles by the pound, or if booksellers priced books based on the number of words” (McGinn 42). Square footage does not assess *quality*. It does not take into account ceiling heights, hardwood floors, or a number of other factors that create a space.

McMansions are often criticized for their lack of design, but Tom Martinson argues that this criticism is not warranted. The problem is that the criticism is “based on a fundamental presumption that design is important...But look around you: unless you live in a design preserve...it is surely clear that design occupies a pretty low level of importance to most Americans” (Martinson 126). As discussed previously, Martinson blames the lack of design in the suburbs on the idea that “our twentieth-century post-war American intellectual leadership has been condescending and unhelpful to the suburbs” (Martinson 31). Therefore, many architects and planners may feel like their time should not be spent creating projects and solutions in the suburbs because they are “currently unfashionable among the intelligentsia” (Martinson 31). Even more, if architects and planners do work in the suburbs, many feel the projects should be “gratuitously urban” and not speak to the standard look of suburbia (Martinson 31).

Architect Sarah Susanka resists this perception. She has built her business on the idea of the Not So Big House; the idea that a suburban home can have quality design while being built much smaller and focus on the rooms that are really used and the way people really live. The formal rooms are outdated to most families. Those plans are based on “the way our grandparents lived” (Susanka 5). Americans today live a much

more informal lifestyle. The home should be uniquely created for the family living in it. Rather than spending money on square footage, money should be spent on individual details and expressing the personality of the homeowner. She criticizes McMansions, or “starter castles” as perpetuating the “notion that houses should be designed to impress rather than nurture” (Susanka 3). McMansions fundamentally don’t “work” for the buyer “when the impulse for big spaces is combined with outdated patterns of home design and building” (Susanka 3). McMansions are “boxes meant for each family to conform to” (Susanka 5).

In Alexis de Tocqueville’s writings of America in just the 1830s, he aptly noted American’s low priority of design. He wrote that Americans will “habitually prefer the useful to the beautiful, and will require that the beautiful should be useful” (qtd. in Martinson 127). He also believed that the United States would “cultivate the arts which serve to render life easy, in preference to those whose object is to adorn it” (qtd. in Martinson 127). Thus the ideas criticized by Le Corbusier, Susanka, and many more, are not new to Americans. For at least over two hundred years it has been clear to outsiders that on the whole Americans do not prioritize design.

Unlike the Levittown homebuilders, McMansion builders now try to include prospective buyers in the design process. While the floor plans are almost identical, buyers have many choices in façades and interior finishes. This wasn’t always this case. Builders used to construct spec houses. These were completed newly built homes, sometimes furnished, and put on the market before there was a buyer. But after the decline of the housing market in the early 1990s, builders were left with too many empty homes that could not sell. This loss of money and resources led many builders to only start construction once there was a buyer, and this process allows buyers to customize



their homes as they are built. This customization, however, is rather limited. Unless the builder offers the option in their plans, walls can't be moved, ceiling heights changed, or room size altered. Rather, buyers can go to their builder's design showroom, where all customization is in the finishing: countertops, cabinets, carpets, wallpaper, storage systems, and light fixtures—all of the interior design, wrapped up into the home mortgage.

Architecturally, these homes are not the “masterpiece” their price tag may suggest (Martinson 172). The McMansion may bear some resemblance to traditional mansions of the past, yet they lack the proportion, and subtle details that really “characterized the real eighteenth-century Georgian Tidewater estate house in Virginia” per say (Martinson 172). There is nothing new or inventive in their design, and often many architectural styles are combined to attempt to be aesthetically pleasing.



**Figure 6-Toll Brothers home Chelsea: The Georgian is 4,900 square-feet with four bedrooms, five baths, one half bath, and a three-car garage.**

The irony of this design process is that the builders are fully aware of the so-called “ugliness” of their product (McGinn 34). The founder of Toll Brothers, Robert Toll “lives in a 1750 farmhouse with bedrooms that are smaller than the master bathroom

of the homes his company builds” (McGinn 34). Even the company’s architect knows the design isn’t considered up to par. Yet they believe “that beauty is in the eye of the customer,” and if the home is selling and keeping the customer happy, “So what?” (McGinn 34). The company knows it’s selling to a specific market, and not selling “shelter” or a home anybody “needs.” Toll explains, “None of us need the square footage that we use, but none of us need the jewelry we wear either...If we lived only by common sense and logic with respect to our need, there’d be no Tiffany and no Toll Brothers” (McGinn 34).

If Levittown homes were the reductionist versions of middle class homes, McMansions are the blown up and exaggerated versions. The term for McMansion is made up of two terms, “Mc” and mansion. Are McMansions really even mansions at all? It is getting harder and harder to define mansion. As Daniel McGinn notes in *House Lust*, mansion is “an old-school descriptor that conjures images of Beverly Hills movie-star homes or places where Hugh Hefner frolics with his Bunnies” (25). McGinn spoke to a family in Potomac, Maryland who lived in a 9,000-square-foot home but did not believe their home was a mansion because of its small, one-acre, non-gated lot. The reason mansions have become harder to define is that many of the amenities previously only found in such homes now exists in more middle class homes as well (McGinn 25). Exercise rooms, Jacuzzis, home theaters, and other opulent conveniences used to only be seen on *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Yet today they bear no awe factor, and are quite easy to find. McGinn even came across an article in the *New York Times* about mudrooms and describes his own fascination with them:

The first mudroom was in a mansion built in the 1920s by automotive heir Edsel Ford...but the story cites many examples of middle-class homeowners who covet the clutter-busting storage benches, shelving, and book-bag hangers. Just how mainstream could the mudroom go? In fact, I have architectural drawings...to

add one to my own home. And mudroom by mudroom, the line between mansions and everyday homes will become a bit blurrier. (McGinn 26-27)

“Mc” derives from George Ritzer’s book, *The McDonaldization of Society*.

Ritzer defines McDonaldization as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Ritzer 1). The concepts behind the success of McDonalds also lie behind the success of McMansions. First, they are built efficiently. McMansions are predesigned homes that can be built very quickly as they are all almost the same and comprised of pre-fabricated parts. Calculability is the second concept in which consumers look to get the most for their money and there is an “emphasis on the quantitative aspects of products sold” (Ritzer 13). McMansions are quickly calculable: 5,000 square feet? Check. Six bedrooms, each with their own bath? Check. Three car garage? Check. Calculability also includes time for the consumer as part of the appeal of McMansions is that they will be constructed quickly. According to Ritzer, “a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good” (Ritzer 13). McMansions also employ the third concept, predictability. There is a reassurance in knowing exactly what you will be getting when building a McMansion. The fourth concept is control, an idea behind the production of McMansions. With so many premade parts of the home, humans are being replaced by machines. This technology “increases control over workers...[and] assures customers that their products and service will be consistent” (Ritzer 15).

In more recent years, there has been a vigorous backlash against McMansions. The reactions have come from architects, neighborhood associations, and government

officials. Neighbors have had a particularly hostile response to McMansions in areas where they have replaced historic teardowns.

Examples of teardown backlashes can be seen all over the county. In 2001 Eastchester, New York imposed regulations on the ratios of home to lot size. In 2003 the New Jersey Governor, James McGreevey fought against sprawl by proposing legislation to impose a building moratorium. He warned: “Let me say to those who profit from the strip malls and McMansions...if you reap the benefits, you must now take responsibility for the costs” (Mansnerus). A community in Montgomery County, Maryland objected to the construction of a 5,000 square-foot home in 2005. The home was being built to replace an older, smaller teardown, and the community reacted by putting out lawn signs in protest. County officials then ordered the neighbors to take down the signs for violating zoning laws that lawn signs cannot be out for more than thirty days without paying a fine. There are infinite stories like these in communities across the country.<sup>5</sup> I would explain this backlash by applying what Ritzer calls the “irrationality of rationality”.

At the most general level, the irrationality of rationality is simply a label for many of the negative aspects of McDonaldization. More specifically, irrationality can be seen as the opposite of rationality. That is, McDonaldization can be viewed as leading to inefficiency, unpredictability, incalculability, and loss of control. Irrationality also means that rational systems are disenchanting; they have lost their magic and mystery...rational systems are dehumanizing. (Ritzer 134).

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<sup>5</sup> A USA Today article, “‘Teardowns’ have critics torn up,” details examples of teardowns across the country. Teardowns were occurring in 300 communities in 33 states in 2006, according to The National Trust for Historic Preservation. The president of the trust, Richard Moe launched an anti-teardown campaign in San Francisco. In a Dallas suburb, over 1,000 homes have been demolished and replaced with homes from 6,000 to 10,000 square feet. The National Trust for Historic Preservation placed a Chicago suburb on the list of 11 Most Endangered Historic Places. (“‘Teardowns’ have critics torn up”).

Some of these words directly apply to what has happened with McMansions—inefficiency, loss of control, dehumanization, and disenchantment. Ritzer says that enchantment is more about quality than quantity. So what does it mean to be disenchanting? In a disenchanted system “everything seems clear, cut-and-dried, logical, and routine” (Ritzer 143). The McMansion system has become so efficient that the homes have lost all enchantment. No one wants to live in such a home, and thus, the McMansion system is now seen as inefficient and irrational. This is the same process which I described occurring for the dissatisfied Levittown residents.

#### Representing Social Class

“Saying that you chose a certain neighborhood because it has a ‘certain class of people’ feels less socially acceptable than saying it is safe or has good schools” (Schor 95)

*We were always looking at homes for sale. I, being obsessed with homes since birth, loved the Sunday afternoon outings. Helplessly hopeful, I wished every house could be ours. While the houses varied, not one was a “tract” home. They were all older and felt like they had character. That’s what I like about them—finding quirky storage cabinets or a room tucked away off a bedroom rather than a hallway. None of the homes were newly built; they all felt a bit lived in. The most exciting day came when we met with an architect to custom design a house. I could not wait. We could include anything we wanted! I wanted a loft in my bedroom, an antique library to hold books I’d never read, and a hidden alcove under the stairs. Inspired by my hobby of watching HGTV and reading Architectural Digest, I thought all new homes should be built like this. They’re not. And ours was never built at all.*

It would not be an overstatement to suggest that Americans are flat out obsessed with homes. In *Houset Lust*, Daniel McGinn identifies five primary factors that drive what he calls “House Lust.” The first he calls “the high-five effect.” During the housing boom, Americans liked to “celebrate our sense that our houses were quietly making us rich” (McGinn 9). The perception was that the bigger the house was, the “richer” it made the owner. The second factor is that American’s homes became their retirement plan.

Many Americans were spending more than they earned, and were counting on their homes to support their economic future. Thirdly, Americans became obsessed with homes because during the housing boom, homeowners “played” their homes the way they used to play the stock market (McGinn 9). Refinancing became extremely common during this time, and many people were counting on their homes to be a large portion of their wealth, or invested in other properties and took part in house flipping. In 2004, “65.6% of net wealth of the median household [was] in single-family residential housing” (Benjamin, Chinloy, Jud 329). The fourth factor is the easy accessibility Americans have to other people’s homes and their value. While it’s taboo to ask how much someone earns, public access to home values on websites like Zillow.com and Property Shark have allowed American’s to size up their neighbor’s home in comparison to theirs. The final factor behind house lust is that middle- and upper-middle class Americans view the home as outwardly defining who you are. This final factor will be the primary focus in looking at what homes say about American middle- and upper-middle class status, or what homeowners *want* them to say.

Throughout the “new economy” of the 1990s and early 2000s, the rich quickly got richer, and the middle class and upper-middle class also thrived. How did this happen? There were a variety of factors, the details of which are beyond the scope of this project. However, the convergence of three components, “new technologies, a rise in financial speculation and governments supportive of free markets and the wealthy” worked to create a boom unprecedented in America (Frank 37). These same three factors worked together in “the country’s other two big booms, the Gilded Age and the Roaring Twenties” (Frank 37). This “Third Wave” boom has far surpassed the previous two

booms, however, and “for the first time ever, the United States in 2004 surpassed Europe in the population of millionaires” (Frank 40).

In *Richistan: A Journey Through the American Wealth Boom and the Lives of the New Rich*, Robert Frank defines five categories of the rich that emerged out of these new economic conditions. Most are founders, those who started their own companies and then “sold their shares to investors through an initial public offering” (Frank 43). Stakeholders are those executives who hold shares in a private company, and sell when the company goes public. The Acquired are “entrepreneurs or executive who sell their firms to another company or buyer for stock or cash” (Frank 43). Fourth are Money Movers who solely invest, and finally there are the Salaried Rich, who, like their name describes, have earnings high enough to get rich just through their career. What’s most different about today’s rich versus the wealth of the past is the pace at which American’s are becoming millionaires. Where in the past it could take an entrepreneur a lifetime to build a business, today “Instapreneurs” seek their “exit strategy” in just a couple years or months (Frank 46).

This contrasts greatly to the view of the upper class in post-World War II America. At that time it was the middle class who were most prosperous and “culturally and politically, the rich fell out of favor” (Frank 39). Economists Claudia Goldin and Robert Margo call this period the “Great Compression.” As was shown in Levittown, “the middle class ethos ruled...the rich had become ‘inconspicuous consumers,’ either suffering from a guilt complex or afraid of giving visible offense. Their big houses had been sold off to become orphanages or old-age homes and fewer upper-income families had servants” (qtd. in Frank 39).

This process has led to a rather undefined place for the middle-upper class. Many of those in this class grew up middle class, often baby-boomers in Levittown-type communities, with middle class values, but “have aspired to something more than basic, middle-class lives and careers” (Martinson 5). Once they found economic success, they no longer saw themselves as middle class, but are not truly upper class either. They need to separate themselves by living in gated communities and find substitutes for the “traditional community props of the upper-middle classes: pedigree and family ties; seats on the vestry and the hospital board; inherited wealth and property; and the rituals, like charity balls, silent auctions, and hunting weekends” (Knox 59). One would be hard pressed to find a McMansion owner who fits these descriptions, and thus, cars, clothes, watches, and most conspicuously homes represent status. McMansions are an effort to outwardly show that the upper-middle class has become successful, yet often, the homes do not fulfill a greater yearning. In a sense, the enchantment of a new home and new found wealth dissolves, and homeowners are again left in an irrational system seeking something greater to re-enchant.

A consequence of the upper-middle class lack of a defined space in American society is they feel this void and live with a fear of falling. The upper-middle class has worked hard to achieve their economic success, and does not have the financial security that the upper class may have. Martinson sees the upper-middle class as “a *very* loosely aligned cohort, one without a firm home base in American society...If and when things change for the worse, these are people who are indeed very much on their own” (Martinson 6).

This has caused widespread status anxiety within the upper-middle class. Not only has it become harder to outwardly show status through the home, there is no



guarantee that those who have reached a higher social class will remain upper-middle class, or that their children will be upper-middle class. The symbolic material items the upper-middle class uses to distinguish themselves “cannot be passed on or inherited by the next generation like wealth or property” (Knox 57). Thus, parents fear and “are all too aware that there is little they can do to guarantee their children a comfortable life beyond encouraging a fierce appetite for success” (Knox 57). This largely explains the lives children live today being shuffled from dance class to piano lessons to SAT tutoring, all in hopes of “making it” as much or more than their parents. Parents want their children to have more than what they had. “Each generation understands that it shall surpass the last, and each generation has a duty to see that the next one can do the same” (Brooks 136). While kids growing up in McMansions are often given as many tools to succeed as possible by their parents, they also have quite a skewed perception of what most homes are like. One mother McGinn spoke to in Potomac, Maryland is left “feeling a little uncomfortable with their abundance” (McGinn 32). She worried when her kids commented on how small a friend’s home was “even though it was probably larger than 90 percent of the homes in America” (McGinn 32).

Those who grew up in upper class families have not lived in a world where they have had to constantly show off how successful they have become—most often people just know. In a sense they are much more secure in their wealth, and their role in American society is often “one of behind-the-scenes stewardship, rather than out-in-front leadership” (Martinson 61). The upper class does not put their possessions on display or make much reference to their wealth. As Martinson has observed, “they truly value their home-estate, but it is really just one of many useful vehicles in their life experiences” (Martinson 62-63).

When someone grows up upper class, “the material trappings of the *good life* have always simply been part of their world, nothing more. They enjoy these trappings as a matter of course while pursuing some life purpose” (Martinson 232). On the other hand, those who achieve upper-middle class status have often defined this status as *the* life purpose. Thus, when they achieve their financial success, something is still missing. Outwardly they present an upper class persona, but also know they are not as financially stable as the truly upper class.

The upper class creates cohesiveness by living in specific neighborhoods as they see fit. In *Privilege, Power, and Place: The Geography of the American Upper Class*, Stephen Higley argues that the upper-middle class tries to be “as physically close to the upper class as possible” (9). Accordingly, the purchase of a McMansion, in what may be considered an upper class neighborhood, is an outward sign that you are part of that class and part of the upper class community. In other words, “The McMansion is not just a place to live, but an assertion of the American sense of identity and space making a clear statement of prosperity” (Nasar 342).

The idea of Keeping up with the Joneses played out in Levittown with the building of home additions and mighty refrigerators. Homeowners looked to their neighbors, those with similar economic means, to show that they were able to “keep up.” But in more recent years, there has been a shift from horizontal to vertical desire. Rather than looking to neighbors, Americans are looking to those of higher economic means, and trying to reach their status as Higley explained.

In *The Overspent American*, Julier Schor points out that American’s “reference group” has changed and “today a person is more likely to be making comparisons with...people whose incomes are three, four, or five times his or her own” (4). Homes,

cars, and clothing are the “visible triad” used to assess one’s status (Schor). As Americans closely tie what they buy to who they are, they attempt to financially “support a particular image of [themselves] to present to the world” (Schor 3). As Schor explains, competitive spending is not a new concept in American culture. The difference now is the way “the culture of spending has changed and intensified” in the shift from horizontal to vertical desire (Schor 3).

Living in the suburbs like Llewellyn Park or Riverside used to say something about one’s wealth. Homes were much more expensive outside of the city, and you needed an automobile to be able to live there. One of the results of sprawl was that almost anyone could live in the suburbs. Thus the suburbs did not say anything about one’s wealth—but the size of one’s home did. More recently, McGinn explains that “addresses have become a substitute for occupation when making status judgment” due to the increase in niche jobs (McGinn 11). These “vague amalgams” like “network interface IT enabler” don’t convey that the person is successful the way doctor or lawyer may (McGinn 11). Accordingly, middle class Americans rely on the visible triad to say something about their success.

This is not a new concept. The term “conspicuous consumption” was coined in 1899 in Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class*. At the time, the theory was used “to explain the excesses of the Gilded Age” when “the wealthy bought expensive goods as a way to identify themselves as members of the nonworking leisure class” (Frank 123). Thus, status was demonstrated through spending. The same truly holds today. The difficulty is now how hard it has become to demonstrate one’s wealth in the new economy. As the rich get richer, a BMW has become common. Granted, this is within the top percent of Americans. Schor has defined the upper-middle class as “roughly the

top 20 percent of households, with the exclusion of the top few percent” (Schor 12). As the middle class now look to the upper-middle class to define “material success, luxury, and comfort,” the upper-middle class attempts to achieve a standard of living of the wealthiest Americans.

Many McMansion inhabitants are truly living beyond their means. In his research, McGinn “met many people who felt no anxiety about taking on variable-rate, interest-only mortgages to stretch to buy the homes of their dreams” (McGinn 8). This process can be described by David Brook’s “Paradise Spell.” In *On Paradise Drive*, Brooks explains how Americans are Americans because of their ability to dream and imagine. They are always fantasizing about the future and what they may be able to achieve. Since colonization, American’s have never felt the need to stop pushing forward. They are never quite content with what is right in front of them; the future must hold something more, and eventually, “there is this spot you can get to where all tensions will melt, all time pressures are relieved, and all contentment can be realized. Prosperity will be joined with virtue, materialism with idealism, achievement with equality, success with love” (Brooks 268). Brooks explains,

I suspect that to really understand America and the American suburb, you have to take seriously that central cliché of American life: the American Dream. You have to see that beneath the seeming flatness of American life, there is an imaginative fire that animates us and propels us to work so hard, move so much, invent so much, and leap into so much that is new and different—not always to our benefit (248).

This “fire” is the desire to be enchanted, and to live in a world where everything is new and possible, not where everything seems old and predictable.

The detriments of the Paradise Spell include warping Americans ideas of “needs” and anxiety about not achieving as much as they believe they should. Tocqueville noticed these feelings when he wrote, “It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the

Americans pursue their own welfare...and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them lest they should not have chosen the shortest path that leads to it” (qtd. in Brooks 272). Brooks’ *Paradise Spell* conflicts with ideas of conspicuous consumption as Brooks believe consumption is more about aspiration than hedonism. I believe it’s a combination of both, as the search for the greatest means and fantasies bring about pleasure.

Brooks’ claims that the imagination “tricks us into doing things that we probably don’t need” (Brooks 200). But in a country of Hollywood, Las Vegas, and Disneyworld, is it any wonder Americans have created “playgrounds in the mind”? (Brooks 247, 200). Americans are always hoping and searching for the next opportunity. In return, they are willing to sacrifice security and have difficulty “living in the present and savoring the moment” (Brooks 273). For many McMansion residents, they may have believed that was their ultimate goal: a big home in a “nice” neighborhood. Yet more success is seen all around, and Americans are often thinking how one day they could have more. After all, the dream is understood as anything being possible.

The playground of “bigness” and “bling” seen in a place like Las Vegas has encouraged what Knox calls “schlock-and-awe urbanism” (156). He describes the wealthier American suburbs as “ostentatious and meretricious” landscapes (156). Developers know this, but also know it is what middle- and upper-middle class Americans are seeking. One of the most basic motivations behind buying a McMansion is the “wow” factor. Rouhi Forghani, a sales manager of a McMansion community in Potomac, Maryland, explains that “In this community, needs are secondary. The first priority is to have a home where everybody opens the door and says, ‘Wow,’ so you can brag to your coworkers and friends, and you can throw a party and impress people”

(McGinn 15). This is also the reason developers name their communities in “attempts to increase the perceived exclusivity of their products” (Knox 78). Names like “The Estates at...” or “The Retreat at...” reflect an Arcadian feel while showing distinction (Knox 79).

The upper-middle class’s attempt to be seen as upper class can also be explained by romantic capitalism theories. Sociologist Colin Campbell explained this through a process that tied happiness to consumption. Campbell argued that “refinement and good character...was initially attributed to people who sought beauty and goodness and derived pleasure from them” (Knox 8). Thus, many Americans find happiness by purchasing these “beautiful luxury goods” and they are also “increasingly free to construct [their] identities and lifestyles through [their] patterns of consumption” (Knox 8).

For many McMansion owners, a generic home that demonstrates wealth is all they want. What they seek more than individualized design is for the neighborhood and home to look nice. As Martinson describes, however, “looking nice to middle America typically means a well-maintained house and yard, flowers, and shade tree” (Martinson 127). As long as the home presents itself in a respectable way, the style of it is not most important. And if the homeowner is looking for a home in the suburbs, they are seeking a natural feel; not an area that looks or feels like a city.

Suburban homeowners are looking for space, good schools, and safety. These factors “are a testament to the power of the American Dream and the ideal of Arcadian settings with a strong sense of community” (Knox 76). Other factors include less traffic, more sidewalks, and parks. While these Arcadian ideals are often achieved, the homes themselves have had to balloon to hold suburbanites’ desires inside their homes.

Americans want walk-in pantries, separate shower stalls, laundry rooms, home offices, exercise rooms, more than three bedrooms, double-story foyers, second staircases, more bathrooms, and every room bigger, bigger, bigger (Knox 77). Knox has labeled these desires as the American Dream Extreme: “an arcadian setting now has to be packaged with a significant degree of suburban bling: bigness, spectacle, and affordable luxury” (Knox 77).

The desire to feel “safe” has led to a sharp increase in gated communities.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the illusion of safety, gated communities show status, amenity, and sense of community—whether or not these aspects actually exist (Martinson 98). While Americans constantly rank safety as a top priority in a neighborhood, no evidence shows that gated communities are safer than a comparable non-gated community (Low 24). Residents even acknowledge their false sense of security as they are “used to giving out their gate codes to plumbers and pizza delivery boys,” and know the gate guards may not be the most vigilant protectors of their streets (Martinson 98-99). Thus the gates have much more to do with the appearance of safety which “confers an aura of status and exclusivity” (Martinson 99). In a vast suburbia without borders or boundaries, gated communities provide these limits. Buyers are also under the impression that by enclosing their community, they will retain higher property values. Again, there is no evidence to support this, though it is marketed by developers along with assurances of status. In *Behind the Gates*, Setha Low also explains that the “false security satisfies their desire for emotional security associated with childhood and neighborhoods where they grew up” (11).

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<sup>6</sup> Many McMansion developments are not gated, but those that are represent a specific subset which prioritizes the exclusivity which gates imply.

Knox calls gated communities an oxymoron, as they are really not believed to foster community at all. American's are becoming more isolated from one another. From 1985 to 2004 "the number of people who said they could count a neighbor as a confidant dropped by more than half, from about 19 percent to about 8 percent" (Knox 151). While it may be true that gated communities do not cultivate much community, the upper-middle and upper class have created a new community geography outside their neighborhoods. These include prep schools, colleges, country clubs, second homes, and retirement spots (Higley 18). Thus while those living in a McMansion neighborhood may not foster their sense of community through block parties, there is a sense of community in that the neighbors feel they share spaces in these other locations.

Many gated communities also include extensive restrictive covenants. Martinson defines three types of neighbor regulations: good neighbor ordinances, planning regulations, and design regulations (145). Good neighbor ordinances may include provisions like not leaving your trash out, keeping your dog leashed, or the example from Levittown of not hanging laundry out to dry on the weekend. But, as Martinson points out, these "basic restrictions can get out of hand pretty easily" to the point where it feels like "*nothing* is allowed" (Martinson 145). Planning regulations control aspects in the neighborhood, outside zoning regulations. Examples include a community in the Sonoran Desert where only indigenous plants are allowed to save water, or "a limited palette of approved exterior colors and other devices intended to achieve visual harmony" (Martinson 145). Design regulations are most often concerned with historic preservation and many regulate the style of homes that are allowed to be built. They may also "be required in new subdivisions to ensure that all construction conforms to a fundamental visual concept" (Martinson 145).



Whether in a gated community or not, these restrictions aim to maintain property values by making sure the neighborhood portrays the proper status and class. “Trucks or campers in the driveway, window air-conditioning units, putting out the laundry, loud noise, TV antennas, and rabbit hutches? Forget it. Outlawed by the association. Why? They reek of the lower classes” (Schor 33). The current Dream is willing to sacrifice “the loss of basic personal freedom” in exchange “for more order in their living environment and possibly more wealth” (Martinson 144). These covenants, controls, and restrictions (CCRs) prevent the neighborhood from becoming what many would consider a normal neighborhood, and dynamics which are organically produced when many people live together. Yet with so many of Americans living under CCRs, it has become the new normal.

What other sacrifices are Americans making for bigger homes? Time. Most McMansions are popping up in exurban areas where the infrastructure is struggling to keep up with the rapid population growth. Market research asks how much longer a commute Americans would be willing to make for a bigger house at a lower price. Suburbanites are leaving their homes as early as six a.m. to beat school traffic on local roads, and may or may not make it back in time for dinner. While homeowners may have saved money on the initial cost of their home by conceding to these commutes, research by the Center for Housing Policy “found that the costs of one-way commutes of as little as twelve to fifteen miles cancel any savings on lower-priced outer-suburban homes” (Knox 53).

With this traffic comes aggressive driving that could be threatening the “safety” of the suburbs. 28,000 deaths a year occur from aggressive driving, and “traffic accidents in general are responsible for twice as many fatalities as violent crime” (Knox 35).

Suburban crime itself is also increasing. The expansion of the suburbs brings similar problems in crime that the cities experience. While the suburbs are no longer the 1950s safe Levittown image, many Americans still believe this will be the case when choosing a sprawling development.

The term Cosmoberbs was coined by Robert Lang and Jennifer LeFurgy to illustrate diversity that now exists in wealthy suburbs. With more than half the American population living in the suburbs, they are no longer indicative of its stereotype: all white, wealthy families. The suburbs have become full of many minorities, and “half of all immigrants move directly to the suburbs.” There is also now much more diversity within the nation’s wealthy. Rather than Old Money being inherited, today’s wealthy “are far more diverse in terms of age, race, gender and geography” (Frank 7). These changes have led to a rather undefined upper-middle class who is seeking to define and demonstrate their social and economic standing within the very diverse suburbs.

### Conclusion

*As I got older, the search for homes focused on “downsizing.” I was almost done high school and my brothers had long graduated from college and not lived at home for years. “We have too much space,” my mom always complained. It was true. With just three at us at home, and me always in my room, the living space of the house was never used. Our Sunday afternoons now took us to condo buildings. Maybe we’d even move to the city where we could walk “places.” (These undefined destinations were few and far between in Baltimore City.) Every new property brought excitement: we could have a beautiful water view, there would be less upkeep, and, of course, we would finally have a reason to clean out the back basement. Yet we’d come back home and think, “How could we have everyone stay for Thanksgiving in a condo!” Or, “We like to entertain; we need space for that!” Naturally, my brother’s wedding was at our house just five years ago. This thinking is what Robert J. Samuelson calls a “maximum-use-imperative.” While we don’t want to have a wedding at our house every day, “we still feel better knowing we can.” (McGinn, 31)*

“Million-dollar fixer-upper for sale: five bedrooms, four baths, three-car garage, cavernous living room. Big hole above fireplace where flat-screen TV used to hang” (Sullivan)

Today, home sizes are no longer increasing. The past few years have seen a steady leveling off of home sizes, which is leading critics, journalists, and architects to claim it is the end of the McMansion. There are many factors that lead to this belief. Mainly, demographic shifts will lessen their demand. The baby boomers are reaching their sixties and are expected to look for smaller homes. Along with this shift comes a decreasing number of the thirty-five to fifty-five age group and an increasing number of the twenty-five to thirty-five age group (Bluestone and Carmen). The younger age group will be buying their first home and most likely will not be able to afford a McMansion.

Washington Post writer Katherine Salant also believes that the “Gen X and Boomers who snapped [McMansions] up have finally concluded that owning all that space that needed to be furnished, heated and maintained but was rarely used was illogical.” McMansions are not energy-efficient considering they are so large, and many homeowners are now prioritizing “price, energy-efficiency, organization and comfort” over size and amenities (Patteson). Sarah Susanka has even found that current McMansion owners “are interested in making modifications, like lowering ceilings, to create more intimacy” (Kiviat). Many McMansion owners may have become disenchanted with the McMansion system, and will move on to the next development. This could be a “green” home, or possibly even a return to modernism.

The collapse of the housing market has also hurt McMansions. Since so many McMansion owners took out high-interest, risky loans to live beyond their means, the market crash has made many of those loans no longer affordable. While most foreclosures are in the poorer areas of the country, they have not escaped the affluent. In

Loudoun County, Virginia, for example, “20 of 25 houses for sale for more than \$850,000...appeared to be foreclosures” in 2007 (Sullivan).

With McMansions sitting on vacant lots across the country, organizations are finding new uses for them. One has been taken over by a film collective in Seattle that is “turning the wine closet into an editing room” (Kiviat). Another McMansion is being turned into a home for autistic adults (Kiviat). An architecture firm in Australia even “has a plan to take a large dwelling apart at the seams and build two new houses with the materials” (Kiviat).

While the baby-boomers are aging, I believe many will fall in the same trap as my parents: they won’t want to give up extra space, just in case it is needed. While I do agree that less McMansions will be built, I do not foresee them being gone anytime soon. While the suburbs have changed in many ways, the same social consciousness has existed since their formation. The middle class and upper-middle class will not stop attempting to demonstrate their wealth, class, and status.

Upper-middle class Americans have shown the sacrifices they are will to make to own a large home, including high mortgages, long commutes, and limiting CCRs. Most Americans are still very much enchanted by the suburban ideal, and builders work to market their new developments as fulfilling these ideals. Thus, in constructing their identity, Americans will continue to live beyond their means while looking to the future towards anything that is possible.

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