Suburbanization of Long Island

Geog 202
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Suburb: an area, usually residential, outside and peripheral to a city.

Suburbanization: the process whereby areas beyond the city develop urban-like characteristics, and are linked by transportation which allows people to move between it and the city.

Suburbia: the social and cultural world of people living in the suburbs.

With the bridges, subways, tunnels, railroads and roads connecting Long Island in place – suburbanization occurs quickly

Earliest Suburbanization of LI

- Began in 1823 – Hezekiah Pierport bought land in Brooklyn Heights
  - Advertised as “a place of residence providing all the advantages of the country with most of the conveniences of the city.”
- In 1869 Alexander Stewart bought 7,000 acres in Nassau and built a rental community: Garden City.
  - Houses were sold in 1876

The Fourth Migration

1st Migration: Westward movement when the pioneers settled the American West.

2nd Migration: Industrialization when the farm population moved to factory towns.

3rd Migration: Urbanization when small town populations moved to the large industrial and financial centers.

4th Migration: Suburbanization when city people moved to areas outside of the city.

Long Island Settlement

- Long Island has a long history of settlement.
  - Originally it housed numerous small villages, many going back to the 1700s.
  - late 1800’s – wealthy NYC industrialists began building estates and manors along the North Shore.
  - 1920’s upper middle class urbanites moved to South Shore areas
    - avoiding congestion from the city and to live in private homes.

Long Island Settlement

- After WWII – mainly white, urban working class families moved to Nassau County
  - LI Suburbia in the late 1940s – The Perfect Setting
  - Unused land (potato worm blight).
  - Farmers ready to sell (low cost land).
  - Proximity to NYC and the defense industry (jobs).
  - Pools of experienced construction workers (labor).
  - New highways and the LIRR (access).
  - Families with wartime savings ready to buy (customers).
  - Newlyweds seeking their first home (customers).
**Long Island Settlement**

- 1960’s/70’s – black families seeking peaceful, integrated communities moved from NYC.
- 1970’s/80’s – the traditional bedroom community begins to disappear.
  - Sleep there – but work elsewhere → self sufficient
- 1990’s – new immigrants moved directly into Nassau and Suffolk towns without acculturating in NYC.

**Fathers of LI Suburbia**

- William Levitt, master builder of affordable, assembly-line housing: Levittown.

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**Suburbanization**

- Robert Moses, visionary, planner and road builder but did not support mass transit: LI parks and parkways. He
  - Encountered opposition from the wealthy when he proposed opening Long Island to all the people.
  - He proposed the parallel west-east running Northern State and Southern State parkways.
  - The route of the Southern State was not contested and was linked to Jones Beach and Fire Island.
  - The route of the Northern State, which would have passed through estates, was bitterly fought.

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**Fathers of LI Suburbia**

- Robert Moses:
  - Often called the father of the New York State Parkway System
  - the Northern State Parkway, the Southern State Parkway and the Wantagh State Parkway
  - Responsible for the building of the Triborough Bridge, the Brooklyn Battery Bridge, the Throgs Neck, the Bronx-Whitestone, the Henry Hudson, and the Verrazano Narrows bridges.
  - 1970’s – one last bridge – connecting Rye with Oyster Bay
    - “leaving densely-populated Long Island completely dependent on access through New York City may not have been an optimal policy decision” (Steve Anderson)
  - Also the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, the Staten Island Expressway, the Cross-Bronx Expressway, the Belt Parkway and the Laurelton Parkway.
Why the “levittownization” of American cities?

1. Pent-up demand for housing
2. returning vets
3. economic boom
4. new building technologies
5. much higher rates of automobile ownership
6. building of the freeway network (the I-system, after 1946)
7. the role of the federal government
   • VA/FHA loans
   • Freeway construction

Fathers of LI Suburbia

William Zeckendorf, master real estate developer: developed Roosevelt Air Field into Roosevelt Field Mall, the first and largest indoor shopping space in America at its opening.

- he developed a significant portion of the New York City urban landscape.
- Rockefeller Center, Chrysler Building, what is now the U.N.

The North Shore Versus South Shore

- The scenic North Shore was the land of the rich and they used their power and money to prevent the “common folk” from living among them.
- The estate staff was housed in South Shore towns and were picked up each morning by a truck or car.
- Areas were zoned to prevent unsightly, noisy or malodorous use, especially along the shore.
- Road improvements were stalled or blocked to prevent access to North Shore communities.
Suburbia

- Product of free time, steady income, the automobile and electrification.
- The simple bungalow later the ranch
- Suburban life was played up in the movies and the media.
- The simple bungalow, later the ranch, replaces the Victorian house.
- Standardization of construction and mass production allows for growth.
- Federal dollars: Title VI under FHA allowed builders to borrow money.

Face of Suburbia

- The Long Island suburbs have evolved into independent municipal entities where people not only live, but work and play.
- Technology-oriented industrial parks, office complexes, malls, shopping centers, medical centers and institutions of learning provide for the daily needs of people.
- Residents look local for jobs and life’s necessities.

Face of Suburbia Today

- The “non-urban” ideal of the 1950s (open space, low density housing, retail stores out of sight and private cars) comes back to haunt an evolving, aging suburban setting.
  - Suburban sprawl becomes suburban crawl.
  - Creeping congestion (steady population growth, narrow curved roads, limited carrying capacity, few things are within walking distance).
  - Lack of mass transit leads to clogged roads at all times of day.

The New Immigrants

- Starting in the 1980s Nassau and Suffolk counties began to experience a wave of immigrants from non-European areas of the world especially Central and South America.
  - Many were not here legally.
  - Many were lured by the hope of cheap property, and jobs in agriculture, factories and domestic services.
  - They were willing to work for low wages in non-union jobs.

Face of Suburbia

- Does LI suburbia have community? (A lattice of human networks and social institutions.)
  - Has the suburban mall killed “Main Street” as the focus of residents?
  - Malls have become the new meeting area, the new village green and the new town square.
  - BUT malls are private property. They have hours of operation and are closed at night.

- They became the invisible neglected segment of society who existed under the worst conditions:
  - have little or no money (highest poverty rates)
  - most students in NYS with limited English language
  - Speak limited English - Nassau/Suffolk has the most students in NYS with limited English language ability
  - have not acclimated
  - wait on street corners seeking to be hired
  - give towns a different night-time persona from the day-time look.
Issues Confronting Suburbia

- Traffic problems and lack of mass transit
- Congestion and overcrowding
- Need to drive
- Unemployment
- Crime
- Sense of community has declined
- Infrastructure in decay
- Health issues including an aging population
- Homelessness
- Decentralized government

Catalysts for Development: Reassessment

- Quality of life issues
- Changing demographics
- Aging infrastructure
- Preserving open space
- Dealing with urbanization and everything that goes with it.