THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME: SUBURBAN RHETORIC AND REALITY AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

ELLEN AVITTS

PhD, Associate Professor of Art History, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington, USA

ABSTRACT

My study is about presentations of lifestyle in house merchandising and the extent of human agency in shaping home. It seeks to answer a significant, but not often addressed, question: To what degree and in what ways does the home-dweller conform to or move away from prescribed ways of living? My focus is late twentieth and early twenty-first century middle-class, single-family housing built by speculative developers, the most common form of dwelling in the United States.

Between 1998 and 2004 I conducted field-work analysis of the walk-through model home and its accompanying literature. I explored house marketing techniques to clarify how these spaces and the objects placed in them are used as symbols of social identity and the ways in which artifacts shape, and are shaped by, communally driven perceptions of middle-class values. I also examined the hierarchical division of domestic space and the gendering of spaces in the constructed spectacle of the walk-through furnished model home. My study was also a consideration of ways in which these staged spaces support culturally perceived norms while denying actual social, cultural, and economic realities.

This paper builds on my earlier work by considering the ways families negotiate the space in which they live. Based on ethnographic field-work and oral histories of persons now living in the homes analyzed in my initial research, I have constructed a comparative analysis of the house as commodity and the house as lived experience that reveals how home-dwellers utilize space in their practices of everyday living and how these practices ascribe to or challenge overarching ideas of domesticity and ideas of life in the home as presented in house merchandising material. Through case studies, this paper explores the relationship between ideal and real lives as articulated in middle-class, single-family dwellings of the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Architecture, housing, suburbs, merchandising, domestic space

word count - 7985

1. INTRODUCTION

As the twentieth century came to a close the housing market in the United States was growing at a steady rate; housing starts had risen from 894,800 in 1990 to 1,230,900 by 2000. Trade literature heralded a lucrative future; *Sales & Marketing Ideas*, published by the National Building Association, is filled with optimistic predictions. The majority of new home starts were speculative, mass-produced, single-family dwellings built in suburban subdivisions with a target market of middle-class homebuyers in the moving-up category of the housing market, those that are not first time buyers. These houses are the subject of this paper.

The first portion of this study is based on an ethnographic study of newly constructed single-family housing conducted between 1998 and 2004 that looks at the developer's marketing literature and the furnished, walk-through model home as interrelated forms of prescriptive literature. Analysis of spatial layout, items placed in the model and accompanying merchandising literature provide insight into the relationship between middle-class housing and cultural concepts of home. Focus is on the ideological nature of artifacts (buildings, furnishings, decorative detail and marketing literature) as agents of social value and how a particular social identity is packaged and presented to the public.

Developer's marketing material and the walk-through model home provide insight regarding cultural ideals that revolve around practices of living, but they fail to clarify how home dwellers ultimately assign meaning to domestic space. For an understanding of how middle-class families at the turn of the twenty-first century establish values and negotiate relationships in their living spaces we must turn from the home as commodity to the house as lived space.

In 2009 and 2012 I revisited several subdivisions of my initial study, interviewing homeowners and documenting how they utilized the spaces of their homes. My goal was to determine if, and the extent to which, the realities of domestic life correlated with or moved away from the ideals staged in the model home and reinforced in house merchandising material. The second portion of this paper, based on data collected during these visits, focuses on the house as a contested and mediated space. Comparative analysis of the single-family suburban house as a mass-produced, merchandised commodity with the house as a familial space reveals the developer's furnished model as a paradigm of middle-class lifestyle and explores the relationship between a house and its occupants, how residents follow or subvert prescribed ways of living.

The home is a very ordinary yet complex thing. It is the location of mundane, daily activities and our most intimate passions. It is where where social norms are established, taught, and reinforced through stratification inherent in house geography. It is the location of hope and disappointment, joys and sadness, delight and fear. It is a construction that presents a familial identity to the public at the same time that it creates a barrier to separate family activities from that public. It both presents and conceals lives lived within it.

2. THE MODEL HOME

The on-site, furnished, walk-through model has been a primary selling tool of developer housing since the late 1940s. In a subdivision of new homes targeting the move-up buyer, speculative builders at the end of the twentieth century were spending, on average, $24.00 per square foot furnishing and decorating each model home, roughly twenty-five to thirty percent of the retail price of the house. By 2004 it was common for $37.00 per square foot to be allocated to model home merchandising; a cost of approximately $157,250 per model. The artifacts placed inside model homes are pieces of a carefully selected identity based on extensive psychographic and demographic market research. Carefully selected objects articulate carefully chosen values. Through them an identity and a lifestyle is created; a story is told that resonates within the target market as representative of the desired self, creating a sense of longing. As Pierre Bourdieu made clear, the classification system embodied in the geography of the house extends to the world of objects as they support and reinforce the narratives of the space (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 91). A 1999 trade publication, *Marketing New Homes*, advised builders; ""*A model home should enable prospective purchasers to . . . visualize how their happiness will be increased by living in the home*"" (Parker & Clark, 1999, p. 132). Status merchants, as decorators of model homes are known, construct elaborate narratives to which the viewers feel they belong, or deserve to belong, utilizing selected artifacts to suggest particular ways of living. Selling new houses is in large part dependent on creating an idealized vision of what an American home should, and could, be.

The housing industry's marketing techniques for single-family, speculative housing promote house ownership as attainment of a lifestyle revolving around values of family cohesiveness, self-fulfillment, comfort, safety and privacy. These staged spaces negate the present and create what Susan Stewart has termed a future-past as mythological, nostalgic narratives combine with the promise of a better future, made possible through an amalgam of high-end amenities and artifacts that signify an idealized past and better future (Stewart, 1993, pp. x-xi). The furnished model home is a repository of unfulfilled dreams and nostalgic longing.

Viewing the model is an interactive performance of house and visitor, as the prospective buyer tries on the particular identity of the house. One of the most effective elements in the creation of these experiential spaces are story-telling accessories. Referred to in trade literature as memory points, they are symbolically charged objects placed strategically throughout the house. Often eighteen percent of the merchandising budget is spent on story-telling accessories. They include objects of daily living, or plastic replicas of such objects, that offer a narrative description of the owner of the home. As one merchandiser states, ""*accessories are like adjectives to describe the ideal lifestyle that can be enjoyed in a room or house . . . though we tend to think of accessories as "thing", I believe it is also important to think of them in terms of "feeling", special feelings they suggest to, and elicit from, your target market*"" (Trupp, 1981, p. 94) Story-telling accessories serve to assist visitor projection into the narrative.

2.1 Judd Builders/Developers

Judd Builders/Developers began as a builder of custom homes in the late 1950s. The company, typical of regional homebuilders in the United States, constructs subdivisions of townhouses, twin houses and single-family houses in New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania. One of them, Hills of Sullivan, is a rural fringe, suburban subdivision located southwest of Avondale, Pennsylvania, approximately thirty-five miles west of Philadelphia. The subdivision contains sixty-two homes built between 1998 and 2004, initially ranging in price from $218,950 to $272,950. Lots in the subdivision are, on average, just under one acre. The furnished model, the Williamsburg Grand (Figure 1), was the model home built for Phase I of the subdivision. It contains 3,490 square feet of living space and was priced at $253,950.

The literature provided to those who visit the Williamsburg Grand consists of a folder containing general information about the company and detailed specifications about the subdivision. Inserted in the folder are floor plans, site maps and a list of standard features for the development. The text focuses on quality of construction and Judd's ability to create a strong sense of community. The brochure for the Hills of Sullivan informs the potential homeowner that a Judd development

""is a tight-knit community, with neighbors who share your goals and standards. Neighbors who become friends. Developments that become communities. That's what we build"" (Judd, 1998).

The folder also contains numerous images of families involved in activities: mothers simultaneously cook and care for children, fathers read to young children in an overstuffed chair in front of the fireplace after returning home from work, children play happily with friends (Figure 2). These scenes are juxtaposed with images of Judd houses. Interdependent forms of literacy, image and text together present a specific lifestyle in a literature that does two things: instructs one in idealized forms of behavior that support a national character and serves as a device that instills desire leading to acquisition of the domestic structure as symbol. These strategies continue the tradition of prescriptive literature of the 19th century exemplified in the writings of Alexander Jackson Downing and many others. It reinforces messages of community, family companionship and security, made physical in the experience of the model home. It also reinforces outmoded gender roles.

2.2 Spatial Layout

The spatial configuration of the turn-of-the-century single-family house contains three dominant zones: the formal zone (front yard, entry, formal living area, formal dining area, study/office), the informal zone (kitchen, breakfast nook, family room, sun room, back yard) and the private zone (bedrooms, private baths, utility areas) (Figure 3). The location of each zone within the parameters of the house is remarkably consistent. Most formal spaces are located at the front of the ground floor of the house, which protects less-formal spaces from outsiders. Informal spaces are located at the rear of the ground floor while private spaces are most often on the upper level of the house or located behind informal spaces, as in utility rooms off of the kitchen.

This configuration is the result of an amalgam of ideologies inherent in earlier house forms. The division of public and private space and the numerous specialized rooms reflect the value of privacy and segregation by gender and generation valued in the late nineteenth century. However, the late-twentieth century house also attempts to reinforce the conflicting values of gender and generational integration that began to be promoted in the early twentieth century, evidenced in open, multi-purpose spaces and the demise of the formal parlor. To do so, houses at the turn of the twenty-first century provided spaces for formal and informal social contact, multiple spaces for family interaction and more space allocated as private retreat for each family member. As Yi-Fu Tuan has pointed out, this spatial arrangement, which he terms the *""equivocation of the modern American house,""* mirrors the conflicting values of privacy and familial companionship (Tuan, 1982, p. 186). In attempt to achieve this dual and contradictory goal, the average square footage of homes marketed to second-time buyers between 1998 and 2004 ballooned to 4,250 square feet.

2.3 Presentations of Formailty

Middle-class domestic architecture at the turn of the twenty-first century retains continuity with spatial values worked out by eighteenth-century elites. The foyer continues as the space within the structure where control is implemented. Acting as connector and as separator between the public and private spaces of the home, it is intended as the place of first and last impressions. In the model home it continues to define the relationship between guest and homeowner and initiate a culture of formality. The foyer of Judd's Williamsburg Grand model follows this template. It is analogous to, though smaller than, the Hall of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. A small table is located in the foyer, the remaining vestige of the Victorian hallstand. No longer functioning in a utilitarian capacity, it is a symbol of connectedness with the past. The staircase continues to be placed in the foyer, a symbol of an outmoded, ceremonial approach to the receiving of guests. The rug placed in the foyer is of high quality, even though it will certainly be soiled. Such casual use of valuable objects speaks to the status of those who would reside here.

The foyer opens to the ceremonial spaces of the formal dining and formal living room. Such access began in the early twentieth century when pocket doors and curtains, which had previously separated the hall from other areas of the house, were often eliminated. It was also at this time that the formal space of the parlor was itself supplanted by the less formal living room. In the middle-class house at the turn of the twenty-first century, the formal living space returned. This spatial arrangement is typical of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century housing, one that reinforces a hierarchical approach to social relationships. These spaces articulate values of formality and self-presentation and are given priority through placement, space allocation and through furnishing and decoration. In the Williamsburg Grand, 716 square feet, forty-eight percent of the first floor, is devoted to formal space. The investment of space, furniture, and decorative detailing in these spaces speaks to the high level of symbolic value accorded these sites of social ritual.

Formal living rooms are the location of *""taste exchanging""*: social ritual through which homeowners and guests determine if they are socially compatible (Kron, 1983, p. 93). Such purpose requires that the constellation of objects placed within this space communicate clear, precise narratives. The décor of the model home living room is based on nostalgic concepts of gentility, derived from the nineteenth century's interest in eighteenth-century European cultural ideals (Figure 4). Furnishings that emulate these ideals and loosely emulate historic styles are now mass-produced for the middle-class. Accessories located in these spaces are costly, fragile items; often antiques. Fragility and age of objects add to perceived value. Their existence represents accomplishments

of the possessor.

Exclusion of certain objects from the formal living area is as significant as inclusion. Telephones, televisions, recliners, and most souvenirs are never found in the formal living room of the model home. These single-function rooms remain emblems of a public identity, a repository of meanings of higher style where one must comport oneself to a higher standard. As such they remain important in house merchandising as communicators of status and ideas of gentility.

The idea that move-up buyers entertain a great deal is prevalent in housing literature and shelter magazines; narratives of such events and spatial allocation for them remain within the formal dining room of the model home, which is located across the foyer from the formal living room (Figure 5). In model homes the dining table is always set for a formal meal. It informs the visitor that this is the locus of a complex social ritual, which will be honored by those living in the home. The dining table serves as display for fine china and crystal and identifies the possessor of the home as formal host with the necessary knowledge and skills symbolized in the formal table setting. Using fragile objects for this social activity, risking the costly for display and use, is a strong statement of status.

The use of a faux-antique dining table combined with formal, upholstered chairs in the Williamsburg Grand exemplifies the use of objects to create associations. *Builder* magazine states that through eclectic combinations, objects will ""*look as though they'd been passed down from relatives over many generations*"" (Hanley, 1977). It creates a sense of familial history. The use of antiques also contributes to nostalgia driven desires; they market the myth of old values. Invoking the power of nostalgia, objects become emblems of communal identity, continuity, and aspiration for a carefree future (Lowenthal, 1985, p. xvi, 8).

The home office in model homes is a problematic space. In the nineteenth century the underlying strategy of the home was to eliminate association with the workplace, but by the late twentieth century work was often brought into the home. Indeed, it is central to self-definition. As such the home office serves as a space of presentation of self, making a public statement of power and prestige. Perhaps this is why the model home office is most often located so that there is visual access to it from the foyer. Photographs, trophies, leisure paraphernalia usually related to sports, and other symbols of accomplishment are placed here. As in all model home offices, the Williamsburg Grand's office shelves are filled with books - signifiers of goals, achievements and intellectual pursuit. These spaces are presented as havens where intellectual curiosities can be pursued. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century middle-class home, it was the man who typically devoted time to such leisurely intellectual pursuits. In the model home at the turn of the twenty-first century, story-telling accessories and furnishings reflect this masculine tradition. As a 1999 trade journal article states, ""*A father expresses delight in discovering a special room identified as his personal retreat because of the well-appointed executive desk*"" (Graham, 1999, p. 50).

2.4 Presentations of Informality

On average, forty-three percent of the first floor space of the model home is devoted to less ceremonial use. This area is located in the back portion of the house and contains a spacious kitchen, breakfast nook and a family room that is often separated from the kitchen by a half wall (Figure 6). In this informal zone values of compainionate family life are strongly articulated. In addition to, the informal zone embodies ideas of intimate social relationships with friends. These spaces are presented as the heart of the home where families and close friends spend time together.

The most prominent change in housing in the last forty years is seen in the kitchen's increased size and its integration into living spaces of the house. In 1999 *The Best of Sales & Marketing Ideas*, published by The Homebuilder's Press, listed the top ten merchandising trends. Second on the list was convergence of the kitchen with the family room (Mitchell and Buzby 1999: 45). The kitchen at the turn of the twenty-first century is presented as a space of socialization; its form signifies a collapse between domestic work and a performative mode of sociability. Meal preparation is now on display and the correct appliances, countertops, floor covering, lighting, and food brands speak to the status of the homeowner and their culinary sophistication. Model kitchens filled with top-of-the-line appliances and overflowing with labor-saving devices display status and promise ease of workload. Yet advertising literature directed at the pubic often contains photographs of mothers working in the kitchen, as children look on or help with kitchen related tasks, perpetuating an outdated gender ideology.

Storytelling accessories placed in kitchens, such as baskets of bread or homemade cakes, create a sense of homeyness, a highly valued ambiance according to trade literature. In the Williamsburg Grand, as in most model homes, the breakfast nook table is set. It offers a more casual display than that in the formal dining room and references an invitational tea. It presents a narrative of leisure; the owner of this home has time and skills to host lavish teas.

The family room is a post-World War II phenomenon. This new locus of domestic life was initially marketed as a multi-purpose space for a wide range of family activities. It soon, however, settled into its role as a secondary, less formal, living room. In single-family houses of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, family rooms are standard features of houses for move-up buyers. While objects in the formal areas of the house signify presentation of the ideal self, objects in the family room speak to a more personal, though still ideal, image of homeowner and family. Many items not deemed appropriate for the formal areas are found here. This is the locus of collections (suggesting tradition and heritage), baskets of potpourri (creating a sense of homeyness),

potted plants (symbols of nurture) and needlepoint pillows and crocheted throw blankets (suggestive of feminine handiwork). The family room is the locale for socially interactive activities signified by storytelling accessories such as pitchers of lemonade and game boards, which further suggest gatherings of friends and family. The family room always contains a fireplace, a potent symbol of the home. It carries meanings of protection, warmth, family, and homeyness. Here is a presentation of a more personal self, designed for a second, more intimate circle of friends.

Self-oriented and family leisure pursuits, those ""*messy men and children activities*,"" as they were described by a salesperson, that involve active games, eating snacks, or watching television, have been removed from the model family room and relegated to a third level in the hierarchy of domestic space and social interaction – the finished basement (Anonymous Salesperson, 1998). It is designated as a getaway for men and children, so that the housewife can easily keep the first floor presentable, a statement that speaks to the symbolic value of both formal and informal spaces and to the entrenched concept of the wife's responsibility for cleanliness of the house. Status merchants emphatically state that the decorating of model homes does not make gender distinctions; however, evidence proves otherwise. As the merchandising guidebook *Color it Home* states; ""*What today's man is looking for are special little retreats and hideaways for mellowing out after a hard day's work and earning the mortgage payment*"" (Trupp, 1981, pp. 105-106). Gendered role differentiation is strongly maintained in the model where the home is considered, though perhaps not consciously, the man's domain and the woman's responsibility. Gender-based division of space is an ingrained cultural idea reinforced in the spatial experience of the home. Its replication within the model home exemplifies what Bourdieu refers to as the ""*structuring structure*"" of the house, by which the divisions and hierarchies embodied in the structure establish and reinforce their manifestation in relationships of people and things, others, and practices (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 89).

The designated female location of retreat and relaxation in the late twentieth-century model home is the sunroom, a descendent of both the Victorian conservatory, transformed in the 1920s into a sun parlor and porches, popular until the mid-twentieth century. These rooms are most often accessible from the formal living room and offer a glimpse of conspicuous leisure to visitors. Here the merchandiser seeks to fabricate homeyness through the use of controlled clutter; these rooms are busy, but never messy. The Williamsburg Grand sunroom contains a wicker chaise with a tray holding two coffee mugs. It is surrounded by an abundance of potted greenery. A small table with wicker chairs is set and offers pastries for two (Figure 7). *Builder* magazine tells us that ""*Builders are using nostalgia to charm buyers with idealized pictures of simpler times. The use of wicker gives a room "old world character"….it takes on the flavor of Grandma's house*"" (Hanley, 1997). Through the use of effective story-telling accessories that often reference gardening, reading popular magazines and drinking coffee, the nostalgia-driven sunroom is a successful marketer of values of comfortable opulence and conspicuous leisure.

2.5 Presentations of Privacy

Cultural focus on cultivation of the self and the value of privacy is strongly articulated in the model home through the growing opulence and spatial allowance of the most private space of the home – the bedroom. The private zone of the house creates personal narratives revolving around ideas of self-fulfillment and romance. Master bedrooms are referred to as master suites or owner's retreats, naming that emphasizes their size and self-contained livability. The continuation of the use of the term "master" supposes a patriarchal family structure that is reinforced throughout the house and supported in the merchandising literature. Guides to model home merchandising instruct in methods to *create ""lavish master suites and well-appointed dressing areas with plenty of room for a man and man-sized needs""* (Trupp, 1981, p. 111). Story-telling accessories placed in Master Suites symbolize fulfillment of the most personal needs and desires. Romantic allusions abound; they symbolize a happy marriage and by extension a happy home.

In the Williamsburg Grand the master bedroom is a luxurious oasis of 304 square feet. Add to this the lavish bathroom (156 square feet), sitting room (204 square feet), and walk-in closet (55 square feet) and this space swells to fifty percent of the private zone of the house. Yet their existence as self-sufficient, private retreats where couples can get away from the children for extended periods of time conflicts with the value of family cohesiveness articulated in the informal zone of the house.

Adults find privacy from children in the master suite, and children are allowed privacy from parents in their own, individualized bedrooms. Two smaller bedrooms in the model were always merchandised for children, one for a boy and the other for a girl. The idea that each child has a right to a private room into which others enter only by invitation was established by the second half of the nineteenth century as etiquette books began to advocate separate rooms, and a room of one's own began to be considered a right of adolescence. In this space and through objects placed in it, parents attempt the task of protecting their children from contact with certain aspects of the world and preparing them to be part of that world; home is both haven and place of socialization. The difficult, complex, and at times contradictory nature of this task is evidence of the ambiguous status of childhood in America at the turn of the twenty-first century, an ambiguity expressed in the model home.

The constructed narrative of model home children expresses satisfaction in intellectual pursuits and in competitive sports, and the many trophies and certificates that fill these spaces make it clear that model-home children are successful at both. Televisions, stereos, and telephones, all items highly valued by children, are conspicuously absent. They indicate a lack of family companionship and suggest isolation and unsupervised

activities. As such, they are antithetical to the values being expressed. Children's rooms always contained desks with computers and school supplies prominently displayed; however, it must be noted that this was an era prior to the proliferation of social media. Computers were symbols of academic pursuit. These rooms articulate a value of connectedness to the family and to sanctioned extracurricular activities rather than an unsupervised relationship to the outside world. Yet, in the complex crafting of the model home children's room lies an inherent contradiction: these segregated spaces make provision for isolation while the storytelling accessories tell a narrative of family and community involvement.

Model home children are always young, and their rooms are bright, fun, clean, and orderly. There is no family strife here. These children are not troublesome. They participate successfully in extracurricular sports and are actively involved in intellectual pursuits. Children's rooms in model homes are also stereotypically gender specific. Model-home boys show interest in competitive sports, while model-home girls engage with dolls and tea sets.

3. THE LIVED-IN HOUSE: THE HILLS OF SULLIVAN

Do homebuyers attempt to follow the prescriptive of the furnished model? Do they succeed? Or do they find ways to reassign purpose and meaning to the spaces of the house? The answers to these questions offer insight into how suburbanites utilize space and negotiate relationships, both familial and community, in mass-produced suburban subdivisions of the late twentieth and early-twenty first century.

The three families I spoke with in the Hills of Sullivan purchased their homes between 2001 and 2005. All live in homes with identical floor plans, the same plan as the Williamsburg Grand model. Family compositions are remarkably similar; a married, heterosexual couple with two to three children between the ages of seven and fifteen at the time of our conversations in the Fall of 2012. All six adults have undergraduate degrees or higher and self describe as middle-class. All adults are employed.

All three families selected the subdivision for the same reasons: large lots with houses of ample square footage, a superior school district and an acceptable commuting distance. They also chose these homes for what they are not - urban housing. Living outside of the city in a home on a large lot remains the dream for many homebuyers. For family Three, the subdivision's borderland location was an incentive to buy. They feel that they were able to get more house for their money because there were few amenities in the area. For all families, isolation from the urban core is a desirable aspect of the subdivision.

It isn't surprising that the Hills of Sullivan attracted families such as these. They are the target market profiled through psychographic and demographic research conducted by Judd Builders/Developers prior to development of the subdivision. What is surprising is the commonalities of practices of living that deny the prescribed use of the spaces within their homes. Engagement with their domestic space indicates home dweller's agency in subverting idealized visions of home in strikingly parallel ways. These families have reattributed space to foster activities promoting social and familial relationships deemed of primary importance by the home dwellers. Yet, in that contradictory way typical of human decision-making and activity, they literally bought into the fictive rhetoric of the merchandised model home. Mr. One admitted that the model swayed him. When Mrs. One described the sitting room off of the master bedroom as ""*a little weird*"" Mr. One chimed in, ""*when we looked at the model I saw the sitting room and thought, oh, great, I can put my sitting chair there, it will be a great place to relax. But no, it serves no purpose*."" Indeed, the master suite, the luxurious, private refuge of the model, is one of the least used spaces of the lived-in home. A large dog crate and storage containers of childrens' craft paraphanelia occupy the master-bedroom sitting area of Family Three. They use it as an art space for the children. All three families were attracted to the idea of the master suite as a private living space for husband and wife but all three discovered that it is not in keeping with their way of living. They do not want to be isolated in an upstairs bedroom while the children are home. In two of the three homes visited, the space of refuge for husband and wife was reallocated as space for children's activities. In the third, it was not used at all.

Family One purchased in Hills of Sullivan because they liked the ""*neighborhood feel*"" of it. As Mr. One stated, ""*We were young, we were having kids, we wanted to be part of a community*."" Are they? They did say they have met a few families while waiting with the kids for the school bus, but they don't socialize with them. Due to the size of the lots, houses are fairly far apart, which dissuades neighborly interaction. All three families stated that they preferred this buffer between them and their neighbors. They were attracted to the subdivision by the large lots, which provide privacy. Mrs. Three liked the fact that neighbors weren't ""*on top of each other*"" and ""*no one can see in our windows.*"" Though they subscribed to the merchandising rhetoric of community, all three families more highly value privacy.

3.1 Repurposing Formal Spaces

The idea that move-up buyers entertain a great deal, prevalent in housing literature and shelter magazines, does not correlate to realities of American life. Evidence indicates that entertaining in the home has declined since the mid-twentieth century and entertaining that does take place is usually informal. All three families furnished the formal dining room with formal table, chairs and china cabinet, though all confessed that the space is rarely used for dining. Family One uses the formal dining room as a dining room twice a year – Thanksgiving and Christmas. It is usually used as a place to spread out children's school projects. Family Two also does not use their formal dining

room as a dining room. For holidays they moved the formal dining table into the family room. When I visited, the space was in use as a craft room (Figure 8). Family Three's formal dining room has custom curtains, custom wall treatments, and a Queen Anne inspired dining table and china cabinet. Mrs. Three commented on the irony of spending the largest percentage of their decorating budget on the room used the least. It is used a couple of times a year ""*but it really looks nice*."" When they entertain, all three families use the informal kitchen/breakfast/family room area.

None of the families entertain in the formal living room. Yet, even with the prevalent idea of the decline of formality found in the rhetoric of popular media, these best rooms persist**.** These spaces, privileged in the marketing of the house and assumed to contain signifiers of the desired status of the homeowner, were repurposed by all three families as informal living space. Family Two uses the formal living room as a recreation room, complete with a piano, numerous large screens, gaming chairs, a plastic storage bin containing games and a desk with computer (Figure 9). It is a space most often used by the children and their friends. Family Three furnished the designated formal living space with a piano, sofa, loveseat, coffee table and two end tables, one with a lamp. However, the furnishings are not formal, but a casual style often referred to as "country." Mrs. Three stated that the room was rarely used. No one plays the piano, however, the family occasionally uses the space to play board games because the coffee table is large.

Family One has no furniture in the formal living. The space functions as an extension of the children's playroom, itself an appropriated space – the model home sunroom (Figure 10). The formal living space is usually empty, though on one of my visits it housed a cardboard fort. Family One plans to eventually turn the sunroom-cum-playroom into a study for their children, but they were adamant that they aren't going to furnish the formal living room as a formal space; ""*It's about priorities; if we have the money, do we spend it on furniture that we will never use or are we going on vacation? Vacation wins every time*."" They have chosen to allocate finances to items they privilege. This has included finishing and furnishing the basement as a high-end entertainment center, with a large, flat screen television, comfortable furniture, a pool table, a full gym and a children's play area. Both Mr. and Mrs. One state that this is their favorite area of the house. Family Three has also finished their basement. The large, rectangular space is divided longitudinally into what Mrs. Three refers to as ""*the grown-up side*,"" containing a large bar, comfortable seating, a large, flat-screen television, a gaming console and exercise equipment and ""*the kid's side*"" with a pool table, foosball table, drum set, miniature basketball goal and a great deal of open space. Such arrangements suggest family interaction while in reality providing a place where children can play out of direct oversight of parents, but where parents feel they retain control of children's activities. It also allows a place of leisure for parents, one away, but not too far away, from the children. Mrs. One explained that she and Mr. One often go to the basement for a date night. In this way, the finished basement serves as a place of repose that the merchandising literature had assigned the master suite.

Homebuyers spend an average of $30,000 on upgrades to their new home, most often because they saw them in the model. A trade journal article, *Show and Sell,* stresses that upgrades in model homes are imperative since buyers won't ""*fall in love*"" with and purchase options they cannot see (Weber, 2002). Family Three added a sunroom after seeing one in the model. However, it isn't used as a sunroom. It's current incarnation is as a game space. Only family Two has furnished this space as a sunroom, one very similar to that found in the Williamsburg Grand. However, it is rarely used, a fact about which Mrs. Two expressed frustration; ""*The sunroom, we barely use. I've often thought it would be nice to have coffee there, but it's all the way over there and everyone else is over here*."" Family Three has a ping-pong table in the sunroom.

All three families avoid the front of the house. The staircase splits at a landing, providing stair access from the informal area of the house and from the foyer, however, the front staircase from and to the foyer is never used. Mr. One remarked that he forgets its there. Mrs. Three stated that she really likes the front staircase, not for its use value but because it ""*looks nice*."" The front door is also rarely used. Family members used the side entrance exclusively and only outsiders who don't know better enter through the front door. On my first visit to Family One's home I was invited in the side door before I could make my way to the front door. On subsequent visits I knew to not go to the front entrance. I did enter and exit through the front door of Family Three's home, though she later told me that only strangers come to the front door. The side door by the garage is their primary entrance. Embracing such rejection of the formal entrance reveals a circumvention of prescribed ceremony that is continued throughout the house.

3.2 Informal spaces

For all three families the kitchen/breakfast nook/family room is, as prescribed in the model home, the hub of the house. Most activities take place here – entertaining, homework, family meals and some interior recreational activities. The image of today's kitchen as a location of family togetherness and shared conviviality is generated and reinforced by shelter magazines, furniture catalogues, television, and film, which often present images of family members or small intimate groups of friends sharing moments of laughter around the kitchen island or breakfast table. Realties of living have, to a lesser degree followed suit, though activities in these spaces are much messier and more child-centered than presented in the model home. It was common to find televisions turned on and pillows and toys scattered about. Family One had an impressive, large cardboard robot next to the fireplace (Figure

11).

The kitchen/family room area has become a multipurpose room while other spaces remain unused. Yet none of the families were willing to give up any spaces of the house. They all stated that their houses were much bigger than needed and many spaces weren't utilized but they all liked the layout and said the houses suited their needs. When asked what changes they would make to their homes all families indicated they would like to increase the square footage of their homes; all wanted to enlarge the kitchen/family room. None of the families expressed desire to eliminate the formal space, rather they have all, in individual ways, allocated it as part of the informal zone of the house. As reflected in their repurposing of spaces, these families were child-focused. Their desire to have even more square footage allocated to spaces of informal socialization is an indicator of a growing desire to keep families safe and children near at hand as fear and anxiety regarding potential threats to familial safety has increased.

3.3 The Home Office

The home office in a lived-in home has little resemblance to the orderly, masculine spaces of the model. They tend to be messy, cramped spaces utilized by all members of the family. Families One and Two have furnished the home office with desk, chair and computer, which is used by all family members. However, Family One's home office is also used for storage. In addition to the cluttered desk there is camping equipment and other leisure paraphernalia stacked and scattered about, making it difficult to utilize the space (Figure 12). Family Two also has numerous bags of miscellaneous items on the floor of the office. Family Three originally used the home office as a play space for the children. Since Mr. and Mrs. Three now work from home they have had the home office professionally designed for two workstations with built-in desks and shelving. They plan to add a third so that the children can also use it as a space for homework. It is an efficient and functional workspace, one that lacks the masculine narrative of the model home. None of the families I spoke with consider this a space of presentation; its use value exceeds its potential symbolic value. With the growth of social media, the use of computers has changed significantly since the Williamsburg Grand model was staged and parents now feel a greater need to monitor computer use. In none of the lived-in homes I visited were computers placed in the children's bedrooms. Children rooms were instead repositories of toys and games and a place where children were allowed self-expression through room decoration.

4. CONCLUSION

Single-family suburban housing has been both praised as a remedy to societal failings and criticized as the reason for such failings, yet the majority of middle-class homebuyers continue to choose suburban housing, a fact suggesting passive acceptance of the rhetoric of home and family presented in developers' merchandising material, promotional literature and the walk-through model. However, evidence indicates that homebuyers are not passive consumers.

The model home establishes a static archetype regarding family through narratives that both reveal and conceal particular realities of living. The lived-in home is a dynamic environment, one that is shaped by its inhabitants. These case studies should remind us that spatial layout of a house and stage-set presentations of marketed homes are not accurate indicators of how domestic space is experienced and utilized. It is important to recognize that homeowners are active participants in negotiating practices of living, moving beyond the prescribed cultural norms and actual spatial configuration of the house. It should also remind us that practices of living cannot be determined through analysis of the built environment alone. The house can express expectations of living but it is through the study of its adaptation by those that occupy the house, that realities of ways of living are made known.

These families adapted the spatial layout of the house in ways that reject symbolic value and the narrative embedded the merchandising materials. Though they subscribe to the cultural values of family cohesiveness, self-fulfillment, comfort and privacy, they do not follow prescribe ways of upholding these values, nor do they follow imbedded gender roles. All three households created more family space and prioritized children's activities, which in the model home are relegated to the finished basement. And though they purchased their homes with ideas of being part of a homogenous community they all have created ways of living that buffer the family from the neighbors. These homeowners reassign meaning to select spaces of their homes in ways that privileged the relationship between family members over the relationship to outsiders and presentation of status. It appears that the spatial template for the mass-produced suburban home had simply not caught up to late-twentieth century ways of living.

References

Anonymous Families One, Two and Three. (2012). Interviewed by Ellen Avitts. September.
Anonymous Judd Developers Salesperson. (1998). Interviewed by Ellen Avitts. March.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice.* Translated from French by R. Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Original, Bourdieu, P. (1972) *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique.* Paris: Éditions Points.

Downing, A. J. (1850) *The Architecture of Country Houses; including designs for cottages, and farmhouses, and villas, with remarks on interiors, furniture, and the best modes of warming and ventilating.* New York: De. Appleton & Co.

Graham, K. (1999). 'Where Are Your Customers Headed: Merchandising to Trends.' *The Best of Sales & Marketing Ideas.* Washington, DC: The Home Builder Press, pp. 48-50.

Hanley Woodbuilder, Inc. *Builder Online* [online], (January 1997). Available at: http://BUILDEROnline.com.

Kron, J. (1983). *Home-Psych: The Social Psychology of Home and Decoration.* New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc. Judd Builders and Developers. Advertising Packet, 1998.

Lowenthal, D. (1985). *The Past is a Foreign County.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Mitchell, J. and Buzby, B. (1999). 'Top 10 Merchandising Trends.' *The Best of Sales & Marketing Ideas.* Washington DC: The Home Builder Press, pp. 45-47.

Parker, D. and Clark, C. R. (1999). *Marketing New Homes.* Washington, DC: The Home Builders Press.

Stewart, S. (1993). *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Trupp, B. (1981). *Color it Home: A Builder's Guide to Interior Design and Merchandising.* Boston: CBI Publishing Company, Inc.

Tuan, Y. (1982). *Segmented Worlds and Self: Group Life and Individual Consciousness.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Weber, C. (2002). "Show and Sell," *Builder Online* [online], (9 January 2002). Available at: http://BUILDEROnline.com.

Captions of Visual Material (All photos by author)

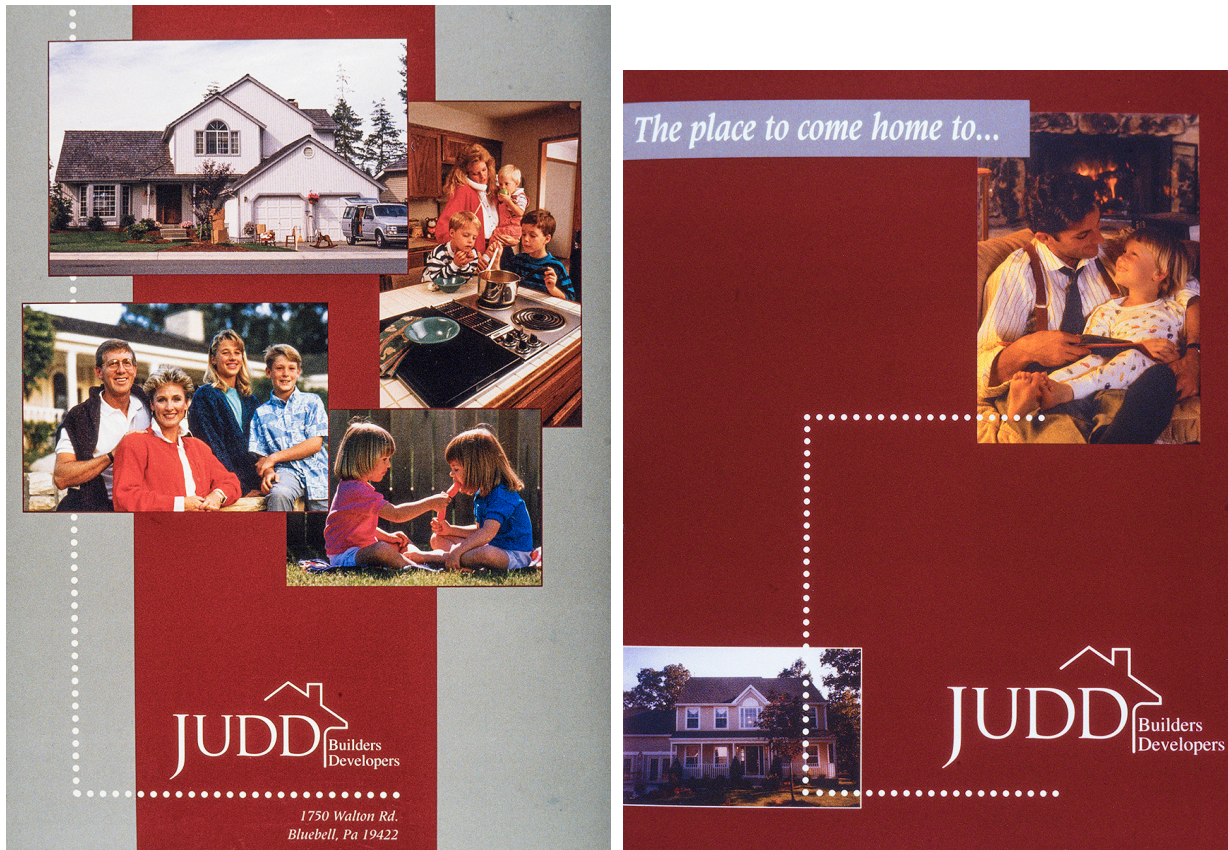Figure 1. Williamsburg Grand Model Home

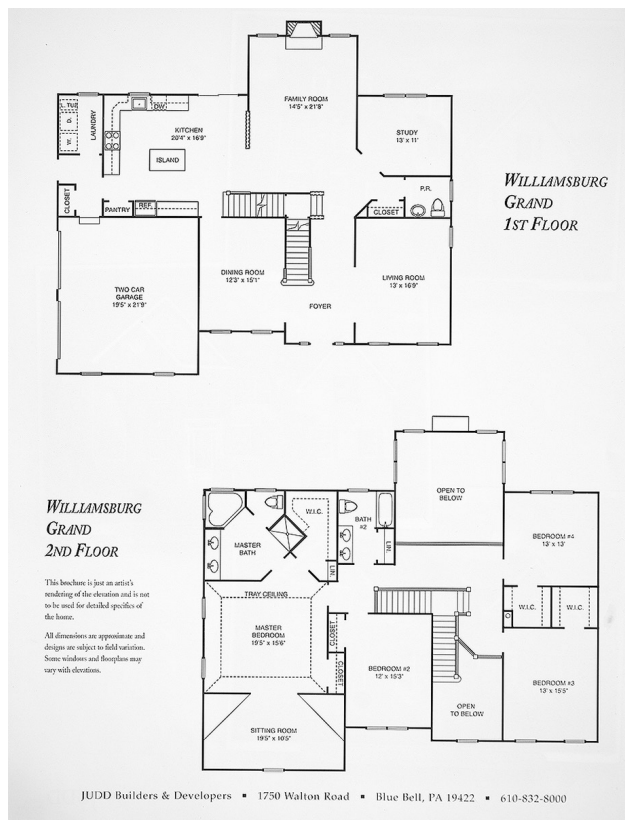Figure 2. Judd Builders/Developers Promotional Brochure (two images)

Figure 3. Floorplan, Williamsburg Grand

Figure 4. Formal Living Room, Williamsburg Grand

Figure 5. Dining Room, Williamsburg Grand, from Formal Living Room (two images)

Figure 6. Informal Spaces, Williamsburg Grand (two images)

Figure 7. Sunroom, Williamsburg Grand (three images)

Figure 8. Formal Dining Room, Family Two

Figure 9. Formal Living Room, Family Two

Figure 10. Formal Living Room, Family One

Figure 11. Family Room, Family One

Figure 12. Home Office, Family One and Model Home Office (two images)