

Urban History Review Revue d'histoire urbaine

URBAN HISTORY REVIEW
REVUE D'HISTOIRE URBAINE

Forsyth, Ann. *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia and The Woodlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. 370

Kristen O'Hare

Volume 35, Number 1, Fall 2006

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1016008ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016008ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine

ISSN

0703-0428 (print)

1918-5138 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

O'Hare, K. (2006). Review of [Forsyth, Ann. *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia and The Woodlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. 370]. *Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine*, 35(1), 62–62. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1016008ar>

All Rights Reserved © Urban History Review / Revue d'histoire urbaine, 2006

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

facilities, white opposition snowballed eventually to include even the city's putatively progressive business elite once black activism affected their bottom line. Second, he demonstrates the growing sophistication of the politics of white flight, especially in the context of postwar racial liberalism. Atlanta's grassroots anti-desegregationists learned as early as the 1950s to move away from the increasingly disreputable rhetoric of overt racism to a race-neutral language of individual rights, democracy, and Americanism, the power and logic of which ultimately appealed to white suburban interests nationwide. Certainly this strategy obscured the racist origins and ongoing racialized objectives of the politics of suburban secession, but perhaps it is wrong to accuse its architects of duplicity when they wrap their agenda in the flag. After all, as I am sure James Baldwin would ask, what could be a more American story than this one?

Karen Ferguson
Simon Fraser University

Forsyth, Ann. *Reforming Suburbia: The Planned Communities of Irvine, Columbia and The Woodlands*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. Pp. 370.

Urban sprawl. More than ever North Americans have become accustomed to seeing mass subdivisions of nearly identical single family homes being constructed on what was only a few years ago peripheral urban forest, or worse, expropriated farm land. In the suburbs, the home, employment, educational and recreational sites are separated by significant distances that are not conveniently covered by foot or public transportation, seemingly necessitating that every family own at least one car. But what if there was an alternative? What if there were communities that were planned to grow at a sustainable rate while remaining socially balanced, environmentally aware, economically efficient, and dominated by walking or public transportation?

Reforming Suburbia by Ann Forsyth examines the design, development and present outcomes of three such planned communities. Irvine Ranch in Southern California's Orange County, first outlined in 1960, is the earliest and largest planned community under examination. By 2000, the community had grown to over 200,000 people and is recognized for its emphasis on physical planning. The community of Columbia in Maryland, opened in 1967, is considered by Forsyth to be the most well known of her three case studies. Columbia, currently a community of 100,000, has been noted for having made attempts at racial and economic integration early on and for maintaining

this diversity throughout its history. The smallest and newest of the three communities examined, The Woodlands in the suburbs of Houston, Texas opened in 1974 and by 2000 had reached a population of 55,000. The Woodlands emphasized hydrology and unmanicured woodlands to help create an environmentally sensitive plan. This monograph reveals the successes, and failures, of these planned communities and how the new community movement of the 1960's and 1970's can offer today's urban planners a model and possible alternative to urban sprawl. While centrally focused on planning and urban design, Forsyth expertly links two interrelated issues, the history of the individual projects and the larger role that private planning can play in creating a holistic public urban plan.

Using a case study approach, rather than a larger survey method, *Reforming Suburbia* provides readers with an understanding of the new community movement, the three planned communities and alternative urban planning designed to meet sustainable social, environmental and financial goals. Beginning with a worth while review of theory and literature, the first chapter is followed by three consecutive chapters that are individually dedicated to Irvine, Columbia, and The Woodlands respectively, in which Forsyth examines the development and outcomes of the individual planned communities. Chapter 5 discusses the extent to which the projects created new social and physical environments while chapter 6 examines how these same spaces offered an alternative to the problem of urban sprawl. The concluding chapter examines new town planning, including urbanism and smart-growth planning, and the role of private sector planning and development within larger public goals.

Historians and geographers alike should admire Forsyth's ability to combine traditional historical, geographical and planning sources into a comprehensive package that appeals to readers across disciplinary lines. Original documents and pre-existing oral history interviews are combined with census data, surveys, maps, personal observations of the community's physical plan and social life, newspaper accounts and 140 formal interviews personally conducted by the author. *Reforming Suburbia* is of limited use to those desiring an in-depth survey of American urban planning or the new community movement. It is however recommended to those wishing a detailed understanding of the three planned communities and how innovative solutions to larger urban planning problems can be found within the for profit private sector.

Kristen O'Hare
University of Guelph