

Baxandall, Rosalyn, and Elizabeth Ewen. *Picture Windows: How the Suburbs Happened*. New York: Basic Books, 2000. Pp.xxii, 298. Black-and-white illustrations, index. US\$27.50, Can\$41.50 (cloth)

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treatments of architectural design to explorations of the socio-economic dimensions of mass consumption. Overall, what the contributions share is a vision of department stores as symbols rather than as business enterprises. This book looks through the plate glass and imagines the people surging along the streets outside. Two of the articles—those by Tim Coles on department store locations in Germany and Gábor Gyáni on class and consumption in Budapest—are contributions to debates about the extent and speed of economic modernization. Others, such as Erika Rappaport's on the image of shop girls on London stages and Christopher Hosgood's on the feminization of shopping, assess the impact of occupational and consumer mobility on Victorian and Edwardian women. Articles like these do not tell us much about department stores, but they do represent the breadth of information that might be gleaned from trade sources and from contemporary discussions of marketing.

Cathedrals of Consumption begins well, with a fine synthetic article by Crossick and Jaumain. Displaying Europe's goods, departmentalizing the scholarship, and tantalizing with unfulfilled suggestions, Crossick and Jaumain's contribution is not unlike the stores they study: big, all-encompassing, and strangely out of step with the times. They offer us a reassuringly familiar social history of the departmentals, their primary concerns being the class basis of consumerism and the politics of opposition to the great stores. They seem uncomfortable with the cultural deconstruction of retailing and with the feminism that informs many of the contributions to the volume. Still, it is an auspicious beginning.

Things quickly unravel. Clare Walsh spends too many pages telling us about eighteenth-century retailing and why what we take as department store innovations were nothing new—an exercise not unlike comparing apples and oranges and concluding that both are fruit. Then Tim Coles tells us that department store chains in Germany migrated from small places to large, and he makes assertions based on an assumption that one can accurately profile the classes of consumers by assessing store attributes (defining stores as serving the upper, middle, or working class on the basis of their location and aesthetic characteristics). Hosgood and Rappaport, who both focus on London, and Lisa Tiersten, who writes on Paris, then offer articles about the impact of department store shopping and selling on women's roles. Hosgood sees shopping as empowering, Tiersten does not, and Rappaport is not sure. Uwe Spiekermann follows with a discussion of attitudes to shoplifting that tells us how medical and legal perceptions changed but not why. In a chapter on Ghent, Donald Weber then reveals that department store advertising sold “the genteel classes” what they wanted (it commercialized bourgeois culture) and so manifested the “dream marriage” between the middle class and the great stores. Although, in passing, Weber offers interesting insights into retail developments in a small city, his main point provides nothing new in a way not easily understood.

And so it goes. There are bright spots—Hosgood's and Rappaport's articles are fine enough—and I liked Kathleen

James's comparison of the design of the Wertheim store in Berlin to the Schocken store in Stuttgart, which, while saying nothing new about Wilhelmine or Weimar culture, does make one more aware of the sheer beauty of some of these stores. But there is also much here that is very weak indeed.

Most surprising is the absence, once one moves past Crossick and Jaumain's article, of a comparative approach. There is a defiant nationalism to the collection: Gábor Gyáni cites nothing but Hungarian works, Uwe Spiekermann has eyes only for the German, Hosgood refers only to the British. Surely in a book about *Europe*, a book that grew, after all, out of an international conference, one might expect people to at least try to think comparatively. In fact, though the North American scholarship is largely ignored, the United States gets more references in most of these articles than other European countries. The result, unfortunately, is that contributors end up providing complex national justifications for developments that are common to many countries.

Readers of this journal will be similarly disappointed to find little attention given to the interplay of local, regional, and national agents. Department stores are fascinating because they are both highly localized enterprises and purveyors of national and international product cultures. They develop in and because of local markets, but they do not necessarily reflect, in their architecture or in their advertising, regional tastes or ideals. The tension here is especially intriguing for urban historians, but it is largely absent from this collection.

Cathedrals of Consumption is an unexpectedly disappointing book. While it does fairly reflect the range of scholarship department stores are attracting, it adds little that is new or challenging. Some of the articles are certainly worth reading—most notably the introduction—but given the high cost of the volume, one must conclude, *Caveat emptor*.

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The strength of the economic boom of the 1990s has been likened to that of the 1950s. It has spawned a new wave of suburban development, together with a renewed interest in the subject by academics, planners, and the public. Those who wrote about suburbs in the 1950s marvelled at the novelty of what was happening, and sought no precedents. Today, many writers look backwards, some nostalgically, others from a desire to trace how we arrived at our present state, and a few to draw lessons. With all three purposes in mind, Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen claim to tell us “how the suburbs happened.” Addressing a broad audience, they speak of a suburban history

in the United States that spans, and indeed lies at the heart of, the twentieth century (xxi). The result is an engaging account, but one that is unfocussed and flawed.

The authors, who live in Manhattan and teach American studies at SUNY-Old Westbury, use Long Island as a microcosm of suburban development. In the first half of *Picture Windows* they draw upon architectural journals and previous research to trace the evolution of land development, housebuilding, and housing policy through the first half of the century. Having sketched development of the early, very affluent Long Island suburbs, they examine several attempts to provide well-planned subdivisions and/or affordable homes to a broad middle class. They feature Sunnyside Gardens, New York, in the 1920s, Greenbelt (outside Washington, D.C.) in the 1930s, and finally Levittown, Long Island, in the 1940s and 1950s, interweaving these studies with an account of federal housing initiatives from the 1930s onwards. In the second half of their book they use interviews to reconstruct how the early post-war suburbs were viewed. They emphasize that outsiders and the new suburban residents used different criteria to judge these "mass suburbs." They then trace the failures and successes of attempts to promote racial integration, the changing experience of suburban women, and the impact of a growing numbers of new immigrants. They conclude by contrasting the affordable mass suburbs of the early post-war years with the more class-divided suburbs of today, exemplified by the growth of exclusive, gated enclaves. They suggest that cohousing—a type of cooperative development—is one of the more progressive ways forward.

Picture Windows is fluently written, and deals with several aspects of the post-war suburbs that excite general interest, notably the changing role of women. The authors made significant contribution to a series of articles on Long Island history that were published in *Newsday* (see www.lihistory.com/about.htm). Closer to home, their book was recently reviewed prominently (and favourably) in the *Globe and Mail*. As popular non-fiction the book works well. Unfortunately, it adds little to what urban and social historians already know, while perpetuating some myths. Both problems are implied in the authors' stated goal of examining "the intellectual, economic, and political forces behind the opening of the suburbs to middle- and working-class families." The breadth of their concerns means that they are able to say only a little that is new on any topic. The issue on which they present the most substantial new evidence is the role of suburban women. Here their account is interesting and nuanced, but does not take us far beyond the discussion that the Canadian social historian Nikki Strong-Boag offered a decade ago: the post-war suburbs were better than snobbish outsiders, and the first generation of feminist critics, were prepared to recognize.¹ More original is their account of the activities and significance of the U.S. Senate Joint Committee on Housing of 1947–8. Chaired by Senator McCarthy, the neglected public hearings of this committee helped to put the brakes on public housing and to endorse the sort of suburban development that Levittown came to symbolize.

The larger problem with the book is that it accepts the inaccurate, conventional narrative of American suburbs. The authors assume that suburbs began as upper- and upper-middle-class sorts of places and that it was only after 1945 that "a new class of people" (xx) were able to settle there. They also accept the conventional view that homes could not become affordable until "modern methods" of construction had been adopted by large builder-developers such as the Levitt brothers. As a result, although they do emphasize that the large-scale promotion of homeownership had a downside, they offer slight qualification to the accepted view of the Levitts as folk heroes.

In fact, as recent urban historical scholarship has shown, working-class suburbs were common before World War II.² In comparative, international terms, the American building industry was already very efficient by the 1940s. There was room for improvement but, through the use of subcontracting, the adoption of new materials and methods did not depend on large-scale production. Across the United States, during the early post-war boom, one third of all homes were owner-built and another third were erected by small contractors. Much the same was true in Canada. These amateur and professional builders made other types of suburbs. Until historians pay more attention to such places and builders, popular accounts such as *Picture Windows* will reinforce inaccurate stereotypes of the history of North American suburbs.

Notes

1. Veronica Strong-Boag, "Home Dreams: Women and the Suburban Experiment in Canada, 1945-60," *Canadian Historical Review* 72 (1991), 471–504.
2. For an overview of this literature, see a special upcoming issue of the *Journal of Urban History*.

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Parsons, Kermit Carlyle, ed. *The Writings of Clarence Stein: Architect of the Planned Community*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. Black-and-white illustrations, bibliography, index. US\$59.95 (cloth).

For my doctoral research, I had the pleasure of visiting archives that held the correspondence and other writing of many prominent North American regionalists. As I read through the papers of Lewis Mumford, Catherine Bauer Wurster, Benton MacKaye, and Howard W. Odum, I felt that I was learning about individuals with whom I was already well acquainted. When I visited the architecturally extraordinary Kroch Archives at Cornell University, I was in for more of a surprise. Although I had read Clarence Stein's landmark volume *Toward New Towns for America*, I did not know much about his life. My extended exposure to his papers helped me to achieve a deep admiration for Stein as a man. It is a pleasure to report that Parsons's remarkable book will help to bring this same sense of Stein's