



Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States

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This first full-scale history of the development of the American suburb examines how -the good life- in America came to be equated with the a home of one's own surrounded by a grassy yard and located far from the urban workplace. Integrating social history with economic and architectural analysis, and taking into account such factors as the availability of cheap land, inexpensive building methods, and rapid transportation, Kenneth Jackson chronicles the phenomenal growth of the American suburb from the middle of the 19th century to the present day. He treats communities in every section of the U.S. and compares American residential patterns with those of Japan and Europe. In conclusion, Jackson offers a controversial prediction: that the future of residential deconcentration will be very different from its past in both the U.S. and Europe.

Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States Details

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From Reader Review Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States for online ebook

Nathan Albright says

There is a deep problem with an author who can have nice things to say about the atrocious mass public housing efforts during the Great Depression and afterward but has little or nothing nice to say about the suburbs of the United Kingdom, United States, and other settler colonies. One of the problems one encounters when one wishes to read about suburbs and their developments is that those who are engaged in the process of building homes for others are too busy engaged in the work, so that those who write about this process by which people are able to get detached houses with a bit of grass and garden around their single-family dwellings are written about by those who hate the process and who wish that the United States would be like corrupt big government European nations and those that have imitated that malign example around the world, where the city is chosen because of the power it brings, rather than people preferring to be free on the peripheries [1]. This gap in worldview between writer and reader makes this book, and others like it, of interest mainly to fellow bitter Marxist travelers whose advice is not worth taking anyway.

This book of about three hundred pages is organized in a largely chronological fashion as the author wishes to tell the narrative of America's suburbanization from a predictably and lamentably negative perspective. After a short introduction in which the author laments the death of his son shortly before the book was finished, the author discusses that in most of the world, suburbs are synonymous with slums (1) and people seek to live in the city because that is where the power is. After that the author talks about the transportation revolution and the erosion of the walking city of high densities (2), and the vision of house and yard that encouraged early developers of the peripheries of cities (3). The author spends some time talking about romantic suburbs (4) as well as the main line and the elite suburbs that were served by expensive commuter railroads (5). After that comes an examination of the time of the trolley (6) as well as the dream of affordable houses for the common man (7), and the rise and fall of municipal annexation that left cities unable to take in suburbs that had been developed precisely to avoid the problems of the city (8). After that the author bemoans the development of the auto (9), suburban development in the interwar period (10), and the role of federal subsidies in the spread of suburbanization (11). There comes a comment about the ghettoization of public housing that resulted because of a laudable unwillingness to make property rights insecure to put public housing in areas where its residents were not wanted (12), a look at the baby boom and the age of the subdivision (13), the drive-in culture of contemporary America (14), some whining about the loss of community in metropolitan American (15), and some stunningly false prophecies about the revitalization of the hipster urban ideal and the end of suburbs (16).

There is a lot wrong with this book, and little that is right. The book, of course, won awards from people who think like the author does, but such people pass out book awards that no one except their coterie cares about and pontificate while people ignore them and go about doing what they should be doing anyway, serving the culture hostile to metropolitan gigantism with its belief in high rises and high densities and a hostility to freedom of movement and a dependence on public transportation and public largess for ordinary people. When someone has an antithetical worldview to the author, it becomes clear why the author and others of like mind write as they do and think as they do, but their vision for an America with massive and dense metropolitan areas hostile to the car and siphoning off the wealth and property of the productive classes to cater to a politically leftist proletariat is not a vision I want any part of, which is why I have spent most of my life in suburbs and the rural areas of the United States where the dream of freedom, along with its costs, can be recognized and achieved.

[1] See, for example:

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2011...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2018...>

<https://edgeinducedcohesion.blog/2017...>

Michelle says

A really clear and cogent analysis of suburbanization in America: how it happened, why, and when. The author's big argument is that it wasn't an inevitability, a natural inclination to sprawl proceeding apace over a massive landscape - instead, it was the product of specific technologies and especially governmental policies. Those policies changed forever the fate of American cities and the nature of our suburbs, with implications of course for race, opportunity, education, and individual prosperity. IT clips right along with crisp prose and held my interest from the suburbs of eighteenth-century LONDON to America's first "walking cities" through the 1980s, when it was published. Boy would I like an update. Great read, essential American knowledge.

Mr. Monahan says

To begin with, Ken Jackson is a groundbreaking urban historian and this is his seminal work and masterpiece. It is a quite logical starting point for any 20th century urban historian or history student interested in the urban-suburban discussion.

According to Kevin Mumford, Jackson is the "first urban historian to note the postwar increase in black population in the cities, seeing Newark as a nightmare of problems." Published in 1985, Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier* exemplifies scholarship focused on structural forces instead of sociocultural factors—namely racism, discrimination, and segregation—in effort to explain contemporary urban history. Jackson's analysis is particularly useful to understanding modern urbanity, and Newark is one of the cities which his analysis continually gravitates toward. Jackson's study seeks to understand the evacuation of the middle class finds from cities, a phenomena that is a...recent manifestation of a dilemma that has confronted American cities for two hundred years. On the one hand, democracy seems to call for government to remain small and close to the people; on the other hand, efficiency and the regional character of many contemporary problems point to the necessity of government that is metropolitan in authority and planning.

Jackson shows suburbanization in postwar Newark; more specifically suburbs that fiercely opposed annexation by urban centers. In postwar America, annexation had become "no longer a viable process" for cities to cope with middle class exodus, because centralization and size had long ceased to be seen as desirable objectives. Suburban resistance to annexation demonstrates the external view that urban problems could not be solved, and thus, urban isolation was not only justifiable, but the only valid course of action:

In New Jersey, for instance, most suburbs flourish and try to ignore the fact that Newark and Camden, both seriously depressed and geographically small, must struggle with the whole range of contemporary urban

problems. The rich have long since departed; the middle class is almost gone...In Newark, the area of decline is practically the entire city because annexation has taken place only on a tiny scale, and the city does not have a substantial middle-class zone. Assimilation is often more difficult for blacks than for other minorities because movement from the ghetto involves movement into another governmental jurisdiction rather than simply movement into another neighborhood.

As Jackson relates, the emergence of elite suburban communities fostered the urban crisis or, as he calls it, the “crises of urban capitalism”, while simultaneously allowing suburbanites to enjoy the capitalist benefits afforded by the very urban population they seek to remain isolated from. These processes have since become known by Jackson’s contemporaries as the “balkanization of New Jersey.”

According to Jackson’s narrative, this process did not occur without Federal intervention. Franklin Roosevelt signed the United States Housing Act (Wagner-Steagall Act) on September 1, 1937, marking the first time the federal government accepted “permanent responsibility” for the construction of affordable housing. Thus began the process of USHA development of federally funded public projects, or what Roosevelt declared, “an attack on the slums of this country.” Jackson describes the bold venture of public housing as initially a “resounding” success, but ultimately as failing to fulfill the expectation of its supporters because, as Jackson puts it, there was never enough funding. Most significantly, however, public housing radically altered the “spatial distribution” of cities like Newark. On the FHA making it easier to secure a mortgage, Jackson writes, unfortunately, the corollary of [long-term, low interest mortgage] was the fact that FHA programs hastened the decay of inner-city neighborhoods by stripping them of much of their middle-class constituency...in Essex County, New Jersey, FHA commitments went in overwhelming

Yupa says

Boring and highly informative, just as I expected.

The suburbs, a manifestation of middle-class values, trick their inhabitants into thinking they are the norm.

According to this book, the availability of land, the rise of middle-class mores about the nuclear family, the American ideals of freedom, and a fear/disdain for minorities and immigrants all collided to cause the flight from cities and the creation of periphery suburbs. While the rebellious 60s and riots that broke out in urban America contributed towards the growth of the suburbs, this book shows how these dynamics that drastically escalated by 1980 had been taking place for a century beforehand.

I also found helpful Jackson's exploration of the shifting importance of the nuclear family in the 19th century, in addition to the escalating domain of 'private life' over public.

Highly recommended for anyone who grew up in the suburbs, or who are interested in the spatial/geographic development of the United States.

Stephen Matlock says

Very good book on the growth of suburbs and why they got that way--and what that means to what America is today.

Onefinemess says

Simultaneously really boring and really fascinating, it's a look at suburbanization in the US (and bits of it elsewhere as a matter of contrast).

Lots of information of value to come away with... but the damning critique of the government's housing policies and the loan appraisal system's (and a few other things I'm not aware enough to comment on) effect on (and indeed, as prime causes of) urban decay, ghettoization, racial segregation and any mashup concocted between them was the most intriguing part.

Things that make perfect sense once you see them lined up & spelled out, but that never occurred to me beforehand. Hint: If the government will only loan you money to build a house in the suburbs (as compared to in the city, or to repair a structure in the city), and only to white people then uh. Well, you know. Shit happens. Other factors at play as well, but almost all of them in the predictable manner.

Also, watching (imagining anyway) the changes that each new system of transportation brought is pretty fascinating.

I'm left with a phrase, not ever uttered in the book, and indeed, even argued against in the closing... but it's still what sticks with me:

“Cities Will Abandon Themselves”

THREE STARS

Because it was a little dry, but I still highly recommend it for any longtime US citizen (particularly homeowners) or student of US culture.

AskHistorians says

Classic history of suburbanization. A bit dated, but still a great read.

Simone says

This is a book I read for dissertation research. I normally try to keep the more dissertation-y grad school books off of my Goodreads, on the assumption that people aren't interested in them. But i've been doing a lot of historical reading on the development of the suburbs and urban spaces, which is slightly less inside baseball and more aligned with my general interest in spaces. Anyway, I really enjoyed this one. Considered a foundational book in the study of the US suburbs, it really lays out the historical development of suburbs in the United States. Jackson balances analysis of the suburbs with some links to the urban spaces.

Dave Courtney says

Crabgrass Frontier is chalk full of information on the social, political and personal development of suburb culture. It is at its core a data book, which might be another word for boring. But it presents the data in what I felt was an entertaining mix of stories and narrative development.

Perhaps most noted is that this is not necessarily an opinion piece. While Jackson is laying a framework, at least from my perception, for how the process of suburbanization negatively impacted the life of our cities, he is not necessarily arguing this as a point. He is merely providing the history and allowing the history to speak for itself, which is far more nuanced than simply allowing us to point a finger at the evil suburban institution, or for that matter the destructive antagonist of the automobile character.

One of the key learnings that I took away from this is that suburbanization was not simply the sole problem of the automobile. In fact, it began long before its emergence on the modern landscape. Rather, suburbanization arrived as a result of two factors: human interests and the new found freedom of public transportation. This challenged my assumption that it was the car that enabled the push towards mass suburbanization. Where Jackson then focuses most of his attention is on the social implications of these human interests in a world plagued by problems of inequality and the poor/rich divide. The central problem of suburbanization was not the suburbs themselves, but rather the human tendency to ignore the social implications that such divides could create.

Another learning I took away from this book was that suburbanization was not solely a North American problem (or reality). Jackson's focus is on America, but along the way he provides a window of comparison to the Countries that sit on the otherside of the great pond. Suburbanization, and the social interests that caused suburbanization to become a social problem, was playing out nearly everywhere, even if it took a distinct shape in America (which is probably more noted in the inability for America to tackle the problem today with the same attention as some of those places across the great pond).

It is also worth saying that Jackson is not calling for an all-out war on suburbanization. Where he does allow for some personal opinion (in the end portions), he argues that it is not about creating an us against them mentality. The better way forward is learning how to utilize the current suburb structure to our collective benefit. The reality is that there are a variety of ways that suburbs came to develop, and a variety of ways that they became absorbed into the fabric of our modern day great cities. This has much to do with legislation that remains complicated and difficult to this day (the book expounds on the problem of annexation of suburb lands to boost population size).

Further though, it is clear that the biggest problem is one of mindset. History reveals that the move to suburbanite life began with the desire to create distance between the dirty inner city and the safety/privacy of life outside of the city. It creates a dividing line between social classes, even if not all of the motivations for moving to the private "country life" were necessarily bad. Perhaps even more fascinating is the way Jackson outlines the misguided notions of "country living". What people imagined (and still do) as a retreat back to nature was actually more destructive to nature than anything else, and in-essence led to the modern template for the typical nature-esque suburban grid that we have today.

It would be hard, even if it should not be singled out as the great evil, to avoid the tremendous impact of the car in this picture. Yes, Jackson does demonstrate that while the car might not have been the cause, it

provided the means to push the problem of suburbanization forward at a pace that remains unprecedented. What once was a social problem that played out in the public circle has now ignited into a full fledged problem of the private life. Public transport layed the foundation for people to no longer have to learn to co-exist across social lines, but the car began to erase public life as a whole.

Crabgrass is a beneficial book for anyone interested in policy, the history of suburbanization and city life/development, and the social implications of our city structures. While it is an informational book, I found enough of it to be presented in an entertaining way to be more than simply details. One downside I would note though is, in terms of it's evaluation of the modern landscape, the section that analyizes and acknowledges the shifting (positive) trends towards a redeveloping of the suburban mindset and a resurgence of downtown revitalization across North America is rather brief. This simply means that it stands in danger of being somewhat dated in terms of it's current application, even if it remains consistently helpful in pointing out the trends and developments that brought us to our relatively recent history of redevelopment. One might need to find another work, such as Walkable City, to help more fully in navigating where we are now. But all in all it is definitely worth the read.

David Dayen says

30 years old but fascinating about the unique development of suburbanization, its racial undertones, and the dovetailing with American abundance. The ending begins with a fatalism that develops into a somewhat prescient expectation of gentrification and urban renewal. But I just read a stat that low-density suburbs grew more in 2016 than any other area. We still love to shutter into our homes, maybe more so now that modern conveniences make leaving less necessary.

James Smyth says

"The US is not only the world's first suburban nation, but it will also be its last." Growing up in suburbia (like most of you) I assumed it was the natural order of things. The amazing 1987 book "Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States" by urban historian Kenneth T. Jackson disabused me of that notion. Moreover, it taught me about the pervasive power a conservatism based on selective memory and benign ignorance has to maintain structural inequalities.

There was so much amazing info I took 25 screencaps of Kindle pages (I'm happy to send them if you doubt any of the below points! The book itself is only \$8 on Amazon btw) but I'll try to sum up important points as follows:

1. Federal housing aid and tax deductions to individuals and infrastructural spending have overwhelmingly favored new suburban communities and outward development.
(ie 75% of gov't transportation expenditures in the US in the post-WW2 generation went for highways, 1% for urban mass transit; mortgage payments tax-deductible but rent payments aren't.)
2. Several state legislatures have even compelled cities to offer their services to suburbs without receiving corresponding tax payments. (For example 1/2 of education funds for Fulton County suburbs came from the City of Atlanta, a gov't with a separate jurisdiction, in 1937.)
3. City/county lines and zoning laws have been developed and used as weapons to keep the poor out of affluent communities and stuck together in housing projects--which, unlike all European countries, were concentrated in the inner city--and protect suburbanites from paying for social services for them.

4. Minorities, particularly African-Americans, were practically barred from moving to suburbs, both northern and southern, everywhere, by collusion, federal policy choices, etc. And since housing is such a significant element of personal wealth in the States, this also set them back economically for generations.
5. Roads went from community gathering places to dangerous arteries for cars in a single generation, and combined with other inventions like A/C and TV, made Americans much more socially inward than before. We're probably the biggest homebodies on earth.

There are a lot of great things about suburbs too, and the book describes these and why they were appealing! The nature, the comfort, etc. What makes the book so important is that it shows how all the things we take for granted and assume are ordinary and natural are actually the result of strenuous effort and policy choices based on values which could in fact be very selfish. Since I've lived in foreign towns and cities for 5 years, I've seen some of these issues already, but the book made them crystal-clear. Highly recommended, especially for anyone who wants to be involved in local politics.

Andrea says

In understanding how on earth American cities developed as they did, there is probably no better place to start than this book. It is immensely well researched, marshaling a wealth of information that I found jaw-dropping at times. This makes it a bit too detailed on occasions, perhaps a bit harder to get through and I am no fan of reading ad nauseum that old garden city ideal or the building of early havens of wealth and beauty. I could have done with less of that, but so many of the tidbits are delightful, from the horse-car and its effects on the weak-willed:

"It is hardly too much to say that the modern horse-car is among the most indispensable conditions of metropolitan growth. In these days of fashionable effeminacy and flabby feebleness, which never walks when it can possibly ride, the horse-car virtually fixes the ultimate limits of suburban growth." p 42 (Miller - *Fares Please*)

to the rise of the automobile:

"There is something uncanny about these newfangled vehicles, They are unutterably ugly and never a one of them has been provided with a good or even an enduring name. The French, who are usually orthodox in their etymology, if in nothing else, have evolved 'automobile,' which being half Greek and half Latin is so near indecent that we print it with hesitation." *New York Times* January 3, 1899

He has a very broad analysis of suburbia's rise, and his main argument is that: "The spatial arrangement of cities depends less on ideology than on economics, less on national idiosyncrasies than on industrial development, technological achievement, and racial integration." I think he does a solid job of showing some of the economics (though I could have wished for more analysis of profits and power, and this is no critique of capitalism itself), industrial development and technological achievement.

But the mention of 'racial integration' points up where my main critique lies, because it was not integration that pushed anything at all, it was the immense push to segregation. He does a great job of unearthing and presenting the federal government's awful role in enforcing and promoting segregation through the FHA and HOLC, but it seems to me he fails to fully engage with the issue of racism, or its manifestation among white Americans themselves. Perhaps that is why he is so hopeful looking into the future...

Kaufmak says

Easily another classic if you are looking to know more about twentieth century US cultural history. But before all of that, perhaps the most haunting aspect of this book is the dedication to Jackson's son, who had died in a car accident. Just a gut-wrenching episode that I wouldn't wish on any one. ever.

The book itself is an excellent comparative text between American and European suburbs, the emergence of the modern suburb and the government's role in the shaping of US suburbs. It does focus on the uniqueness of the US model compared to the rest of the world, but doesn't hold it as yet another example of American Exceptionalism. It examines how the changes in transportation, financing and legal means (or neglect of legal means) created the suburban landscape we now see surrounding even the smaller cities within the US. Jackson also brings in the different aesthetic in the suburbs as opposed to the city, namely an appeal to a country/rural atmosphere as opposed to an urban one. It is really interesting looking at the street names and lack of organization often used in suburbs to give a sense of a country lane.

The most important part of the book is the look at the use of FHA loans for returning GIs and the use of red line practices, that went largely unchallenged by the government, in the development of how the suburbs came into being. It discusses quite effectively, that instead of what many would like to believe, that those that bought and moved out to the suburbs did so solely on their own, there was in fact a great amount of governmental aid, and extra-legal practices, that made the suburbs middle-class and overwhelmingly white.

Stephen says

For thousands of years, people lived in either the country or the city, but with the coming of the industrial revolution that changed, and especially in America. Seemingly as soon as they were able, the wealthy and later the middle class abandoned the cities in favor of neighborhoods set in the country, first commuting into the city and then commuting to other areas outside it once jobs followed the wealth out of town. Why was the traditional urban form abandoned for the suburbs to the degree that it was in the United States, and not in Europe? In *Crabgrass Frontier*, Kenneth Jackson chronicles urban flight and the making of the 'burbs, establishing that Americans have an historic cultural distaste for cities, inherited through England, and have been trying to have the best of both worlds, city and country, at least since the end of the 18th century. Wealth and technology first allowed a prosperous minority to establish separate country residences, and later government policy made ex-urban living the easiest choice to make, resulting in it becoming the cultural norm. Jackson begins detached and eventually waxes passionate as the suburbs' success prove to be at the expense of the cities, but he's never caustic.

The Revolutionary War was scarcely over before suburbs appeared on the American scene; even before horsecars, trolley lines, and the automobile, wealthy citizens of New York established their residences on the Brooklyn Heights nearby, and commuted by ferry. While the borders of cities have historically been slums, home to necessary but despised industries like leather tanneries, in the United States cities came to be ringed by affluence. Reasons for the wealthy leaving were varied, but a desire to get away from the city's "problems" -- the noise of industry and the presence of common working folk -- ranked high. The simplest explanation, however, is that they could. The United States had more land than it knew what to do with. At first, living outside the city and commuting to it to work was the domain of the very wealthy, but the arrival

of railroads allowed moderately wealthy persons to join in. The trolley and the introduction of balloon-frame homebuilding made suburban living affordable for more people, and saw a manifold increase in the number of these communities. This was not the beginning of sprawl, however: even as they multiplied, suburban communities remained distinct, walkable places.

It was the automobile which allowed suburbia to truly transform the urban landscape, extending the ease of complete mobility to the entire middle class. At the same time, government policies promoted suburban expansion, directly and indirectly, by promoting home ownership through subsidized loans and highways. Having lost the wealthy and middle classes, their tax base, cities deteriorated further, prompting even more flight. At the same time, home loan and insurance policies favored the suburbs heavily, stifling attempts by those in the city to improve or protect their buildings. These policies were at times openly racist, denying coverage or loans to whole blocks if a Jewish or black family were to move in.

Motivated by a cultural preference for country homes over city living, enabled by the widespread availability of open land --and technological innovations like the rail line and automobile which used that land as a broad canvas to draw an entirely new kind of urban landscape - and further encouraged by government support, the Americans thus became suburbanized. The work, which Jackson introduces as an extended essay, ends with a reflection on where the suburbs are taking the American people. Built on cheap land, connected by cheap transport, and occupied by cheap buildings, Jackson believes contemporary sprawl to be not worth much in comparison to the city, and points to trends in the 1980s which might signal a turning point.

Thirty years after the fact, we know that sprawl recovered from those hiccoughs, only for its tide to slow and reverse in the later years of the 21st century's opening decade, influenced by the financial crisis and the new normal of high gasoline prices. The Millennial generation has displayed a sharp preference for city living over the burbs, and car ownership is on the decline. As Americans begin to rebuild their cities and the civilization which they foster, this look back at what caused their disintegration will prove most helpful. This comprehensive history of suburbia not only establishes why American suburbs are so different from those from across the world, but delves into the full range of factors that led to their creation: cultural, technological, economic, and political. Those wanting to understand the development of suburbia will find it a worthy guide, especially for its less strident tone as compared to an author like Jim Kunstler.

Related:

The Geography of Nowhere, James Howard Kunstler

Suburban Nation, Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Jeff Speck

Asphalt Nation, Jane Holtz Keay

Andrew Fairweather says

Jackson's approach is very well balanced--refraining from the temptation of holding any single issue responsible for the suburbanization truly unique to the United States in terms of scale, the first half of the book covers the early days of the nineteenth century. Drawing from writers and essayists from that time period who promoted the domestic life of the spacious country home as beneficial for the raising of children (among other things) over against the congestion of the city, these chapters double as a brilliant overview of the bucolic English overtones that shaded the entire point of view that fueled American assumptions of the city vs. the country. This first portion constructs the framework for what is to follow in the second half, which focuses on the twentieth century. This later portion digs deep into the policies which would shape the way suburbanization would occur on a mass scale after 1950, and the dramatic change in America's social

fabric which would result.

What I enjoyed most about 'Crabgrass Frontier' is that Jackson takes nothing for granted. He sees the market forces which shaped the way America would suburbanize as very carefully constructed rather than a result of invisible forces of the market. The New Deal policies which are often seen by the popular imagination as ushering a golden age of leftist policy effectively stoked the process of private home ownership which already taking place on a smaller scale at the time of the Great Depression. These New Deal policies did a great deal to ensure a particular path towards the privatization of American life--which, naturally, is synonymous with the planned economic and racial segregation of America which took place in the 20th century.

Other interesting bits within CF is his juxtaposition of the European model vs American model of urban planning. While the (especially continental) European model was usually determined through public initiative, the American model (not surprisingly) championed a public/private partnership whose duty it was to "respond" to market forces. Additionally, the traditional European city had similar forms of economic segregation as American cities--though the segregation was topographically in reverse, with the poor being shunned to the perimeter in the European model, and to the core in the American model. Basically, the European logic was that the farther you had to travel to work, the worse off your social standing was--quite unimaginable to most Americans who work in the city! Jackson's book even touches upon things which I certainly wouldn't have thought of such as construction practices (for example, the "balloon" construction model popular in America which made rapid and exponential assembly of homes possible) up against European structure which, for the most part, remained masonic in character.

Anyway, this is definitely a good one. Anyone who has flirted with the subject of housing in 20th century America will probably be familiar with some of Jackson's points on the effect of the automobile on the city and other similar observations, but this book should definitely be held superior for its simple delivery of dynamic insights.
