

***Creeping Conformity: How Canada Became Suburban, 1900-1960.* By Richard Harris. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. Pp. 204, ISBN 0-8020-8428-1)**

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Harris indicates three major themes to be covered in this book. First is the issue of suburban diversity/conformity, i.e., the demonstration of how Canadian suburbs have moved increasingly away from diversity to the stereotyped homogenous entities of today. Much of this argument is built on the continued expansion of municipal and federal housing and mortgage regulations. Second is the question of how the house and social life are connected. Harris notes that suburbs have been mostly studied by social historians and urbanists (who mainly look at social life), and by historical geographers (who focus primarily on physical structures). He argues that little work has been completed on the relation between the two, but that his work will help fill the gap. Third is attention to the dialogue between critique and advocate of suburb. This is an attempt to give a balanced interpretation of space which is generally frowned on by social theorists, to give better perspective on academic and popular biases for and against suburbs and thus reveal some of the

true reasons for what they are, why they have developed the way they have, and what that actually means for Canadians today.

The term *suburb* lacks concise definition. As demonstrated in the history of suburban development (chapter two), it is not just/always a low-density residential neighbourhood. Harris' emphasis is on presenting the variety of types of suburbs in the history of Canada, and then showing how they evolved into the structured, conservative, high-debt, consumer-oriented enclaves that typify Canadian society today. During this examination, emphasis is placed on class, geography, and ownership. Particular attention is given to the reasons for the desire of urban families to build and buy their own properties on the fringes of North American cities. Harris follows this with a discussion of how suburbanization influenced the lives of those who moved into them: changing perceptions of urban life, the tendency of family life to turn inward, interest in local zoning and resultant forms of segregation, and the increasing role of schools as community centres.

The definition of *suburb* is often grounded in the relation to city (chapter three). Interestingly, Harris argues that suburbs are sometimes seen as spaces for community and that cities themselves often lack strong community, i.e., urban anonymity was thought to foster alienation whereas suburbs represented shared quests for moralistic community. With deteriorating cities (and exaggerated notions of such), improved transportation (street cars and then automobiles), and expanding factories (especially in the development of factory lines), employees and employers were increasingly decentralized. Between 1900 and 1929, however, a variety of patterns of suburbs emerged (chapter four). Harris argues that Canadian suburbs were "collectively diverse but individually homogenous" (74). He categorizes these as the affluent enclave, the industrial suburb, the middle-class suburb, and the unplanned suburb.

The development of suburban conformity (chapters five through seven) is largely a result of government regulations (e.g. building codes, health codes, and finance regulations). Harris argues that this shift can be seen starting in the 1930s and 1940s, and that little has changed since the 1960s (thus the dates chosen for his study). While regulation in these areas was certainly necessary (especially in the example of the unplanned suburb), their design discouraged natural growth of community. This is explored in depth when looking at post-Depression public housing and home ownership programs, many of which demanded the organized separation of residential housing, industry, business, and

civic/social spaces. The corporate suburb (chapter six) stands as the pinnacle of this system: completely planned and organized, yet, according to some scholars, homogenous, wasteful, and dysfunctional.

While Harris' text is an excellent introduction to the history of Canadian suburbanization, the relation between suburbanization and greater cultural, social, and environmental issues is underdeveloped. Harris' focus, however, is partly justified in consideration of the intended audience of the text. According to the University of Toronto Press, books in the *Themes in Canadian History* series "are designed for undergraduate courses and fill the gap between specialized monographs and textbooks. Each book summarizes the main themes of its topic, and provides historical detail as well as an outline of the main historiographical approaches to the material" ([www.utpublishing.com](http://www.utpublishing.com)). Hayden's *Redesigning the American Dream* is a much better source for understanding the relation between gender and suburb. Kenneth Jackson's classic, *Crabgrass Frontier*, goes further in examining the relation between community and suburb. Furthermore, James Howard Kunstler's works are much more detailed on the environmental and social impacts of suburbs. Despite this criticism, Harris's text is a significant contribution to literature on suburban Canada.

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