The curators drew attention to both the static and monolithic—no longer applied—and fluid—while its suburbs are seen as the city as multicultured, richly layered, and social groups. The second was to most American life and all American eth-

nightmare or a middle-class utopia, and to acknowledge that it has become the var-

tious social geography, how do architects and artists interrogating the landscape in which most of us now live, and what changes in it are they discerning? As we face the sober task of reforming or even renouncing the patterns of our social geography, how do artists (who look at the world most acutely) perceive them? How do architects propose to revise them? By looking at the suburb as cultural and aesthetic terrain, can we identify how it remains the landscape of desire for so many who sacrifice to attain it? How are its mythopoetic and poetic roles sustained or shifting? How can we recreate, with greater ecological economy, the same satisfaction and delight that is clearly still being offered by suburban living (despite the loud and scornful cries of a derisive metropolitan intelligentsia)?

The curators focused on two key elements of the suburban landscape: its dwelling spaces and its retail centers. Since, after roadways, these are the main places of suburban development and transformation, the exhibition seemed to offer the hope of setting up readily comparable models through which to observe or reconsider the whole. Yet the curators seem to have forgotten all three goals that they laid out in the introduction almost before they began. This was essentially a drive-by or a fly-by show, a distanced landscape of aerial views, lawns, and impenetrably closed street front façades and front doors. Apart from Larry Sultan’s studies of the domestic settings, performers, and pets used in pornographic films in the San Fernando Valley, I can recall not a single image of a private interior space in the exhibition. Indeed, there was a curious avoidance of the human presence in gen-

eral: neither the blue collars of Bill Owens’s suburbs nor the pink polo shirts of Tina Barney’s were evident. Moreover, suburban adolescents and children—the raison d’être for the postwar suburb, and for more than forty years the chief protagon-
ists of our literary and cinematic cul-
ture—could be neither seen nor heard. Even depictions of the interiors of subur-
ban retail palaces were scarce, although these have been so lovingly and fiercely portrayed in film (e.g., *One Hour Photo, Clerks, 10 Items or Less*) that they are com-
ing to replace the diner and drive-in as the mythic social spaces of suburbia.

By wandering too widely over time and place, the exhibition very unhappily showed that those examples that did not address the avowed subject—the changing state of the American suburb—were much stronger than those that did. The works most distant from the topic were vastly more complex, layered, ambiguous, and acute than the works that addressed it. As a result, the images that came to dominate the galleries had little to do with the new suburban landscapes—except as archaeol-
ogy or points of reference—as any glance to the baffled visitors could confirm. Like the show’s anthological catalogue, which is dominated by reprints of gracefully slender, well-worn pieces of middlebrow journalism with cute titles such as “The Terrazzo Jungle” (an essay by Malcolm Gladwell that had appeared in the *New Yorker*), the overall project breaks apart on the rocks of its own generosity. The show simply lacked the scale to cover the topics and material in anything like the loose and open-ended fashion that was adopted. To do so would have required the scope of the Centre Pompidou’s *La Ville* (1994) or the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts’s *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis* (1992). Yet the curators were equally unwilling to follow the example of Barry Bergdoll in his recent prefabri-

## EXHIBITIONS

### Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis 16 February–17 August 2008


Yale School of Architecture 16 February–9 May 2009

What do the following images have in common? A recent photograph of the Wal-Mart in a tiny rural Pennsylvania town; Ed Ruscha’s aerial views of parking lots in central Los Angeles, taken fifteen years ago; an eighteen-year-old Andrew Bush photo meditation on the anonymity of migrant farmworkers speeding along a rural highway in Ventura County, California; topographic aerial photos of test tracks in the Mojave and Sonora deserts; the plan by the British architectural group FAT for parks in an industrial section of Rotterdam; the umpteen revisiting of Dan Graham’s 1968 Homes for America; Venturi, Scott Brown and Izenour’s *Learning from Las Vegas*; Jim Wines’s glorious and famously well-remembered *Ghost House* drawings of 1979; and Teddy Cruz’s now just-as-famous proposition to make hygienic new communities out of the crowded informal urbanism of Tijuana. All of these—whether in the city, the country, or the resort; old, recent, or new; Dutch or Mexican—had somehow strayed into an investigation of the architecture and art of the contemporary American suburb.

*Worlds Away* announced three intelligent goals. The first was to escape the dichotomous, conventional image of the suburb as, alternately, a middle-American nightmare or a middle-class utopia, and to acknowledge that it has become the var-
ed and variously inhabited domain of most American life and all American eth-\n
nic and social groups. The second was to show that the characteristic portrayal of the city as multicultered, richly layered, and fluid—while its suburbs are seen as static and monolithic—no longer applied. The curators drew attention to both the growing interposition of suburban build-
ing environments in the metropolitan core and to the converse effect, as subur-
ban services and infrastructure become subject to the same rapid changes that once marked the city center. The third was to demonstrate—by showing architectural investigations and propositions as well as inquiries and reflections by other visual artists—how rich a canvas the suburb remains for social critique, story-
telling, memoir, predication, and myth.

The show may not address the central and unavoidable issue of the suburb in our times—its cataclysmic damage to the economy of man and the environment, not only in North America but now—as Indian and Chinese real estate investors follow our example—on a worldwide scale. Nevertheless, in a museum dedicated to contemporary art and design, the questions it suggested are appropriate: How are architects and artists interrogating the landscape in which most of us now live, and what changes in it are they discerning? As we face the sober task of reforming or even renouncing the patterns of our social geography, how do artists (who look at the world most acutely) perceive them? How do architects propose to revise them? By looking at the suburb as cultural and aesthetic terrain, can we identify how it remains the landscape of desire for so many who sacrifice to attain it? How are its mythopoetic and poetic roles sustained or shifting? How can we recreate, with greater ecological economy, the same satisfaction and delight that is clearly still being offered by suburban living (despite the loud and scornful cries of a derisive metropolitan intelligentsia)?

The curators focused on two key elements of the suburban landscape: its dwelling spaces and its retail centers. Since, after roadways, these are the main places of suburban development and transformation, the exhibition seemed to offer the hope of setting up readily comparable models through which to observe or reconsider the whole. Yet the curators seem to have forgotten all three goals that they laid out in the introduction almost before they began. This was essentially a drive-by or a fly-by show, a distanced landscape of aerial views, lawns, and
The most earnest new projects foundered in the seas of linguistic imprecision, while the supposedly playful ones were composed of patronizing and trivial one-liners. If this is the depth to which the newly conceptualist American architectural studios are probing, then the technologically and boringly trained young Australians and Swiss are going further—at least to judge from the inquiries into the morphology of the shopping center and the visual displacement of suburban high-rises that they exhibited at the 2006 Bien-nalle, which showed more imagination and with a far stronger sense of dialectic. And even the animators of Hollywood children’s pictures have a sharper nose for satire. WALL-E and Beyond the Hedge present a much deeper critique of waste, and a more somberly funny one, than Jeffrey Inaba’s smug and stylish trashcans. In opening the show, his elegant, gallery-bound pieces helped to set its tone—in which objects pertaining to a messy, provocative, and disorderly subject sit quietly apart, enjoying the wondrously solemn privileges of “works of art” in the anesthetic order of a contemporary white-cube gallery.

In the end, next to nothing was revealed by the exhibition except the extent of our general illiteracy—outside film—about what is perhaps the most critical architectural topic of our times. Stun-ningly, and to our shame, it showed how little our own discipline has done to generate or circulate a language to address the dilemma of “suburb.” One hundred and fifty years after it began to take its modern form, and a decade or two before it will destroy us, we have said less about the shape of the suburb and its taxonomy than that about the Renaissance villa. We cannot confidently define the very word or account for the evolution of its uses, though we can talk for hours about the definition of “ornament.” We have spent next to no time on the economic dynamics that create and compose the suburb, but can write endless exegeses on its isolated masterworks. From the Usonians of Wright to the churches and temples of Mendelsohn, the schools of Neutra, the office campuses of Saarinen, and the suburban villas of Breuer and Lautner, the suburb is where the great landmarks of American modernism lie. Efforts have barely begun to situate the suburb culturally and philosophically—as historians have endlessly placed and re-placed such built-world manifestations of social fabrication as the town, the city, or the garden—within the larger world of ideas. It is therefore no surprise to see, for one example, the American suburb conflated with the American small town in World’s Away, since we have yet to write the books that explain how the aspirations for suburb grew around the core of the town or how small-town sentiment, manners, and tale-telling (from Winesburg, Ohio, to Peyton Place) were incorporated in the mythic life of the suburb.

One hesitates to attack something so apparently harmless as a museum exhibition with such vehemence. But exhibitions like this one do more to convey architectural thinking to a general educated audience than a lifetime of professional journals or at least half a lifetime of shelter magazines like Dwell. Harm is done when curators become careless, casual, or lazy about a social phenomenon in such evident crisis that it cries out for studied.
provocation, rigorous analysis, desperate humor, or even a call to arms.

NICHOLAS OLSBERG
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Related Publication

The Raili and Reima Pietilä exhibition organized by the Museum of Finnish Architecture in Helsinki is the most ambitious to date on the work of Raili (b. 1926) and Reima (1923–1993) Pietilä (Figure 1). The exhibition is accompanied by a book (in Finnish) of the same title that documents their careers and contains background essays by noted Finnish architectural writers, including Kati Blom, Aino Niskanen, and Juhani Pallasmaa. Most of the materials on display are from the Pietilä office archive donated to the MFA by Raili Pietilä in 2002. Labeling the Pietiläs as “challengers of modern architecture” emphasizes their self-proclaimed rejection of the normative paths of architecture. While Reima wrote and lectured extensively about architectural theory, Raili was the confidante and muse on whom Reima depended unconditionally, providing invaluable complementary elements of play and curiosity in their investigations. The professional and personal inevitably overlapped. After Reima’s sudden death, Raili, an accomplished architect in her own right, continued the firm’s practice, including the maintenance and renovation of their existing works. Her dedication to their collaboration culminated in the archival organization of the office materials, a huge task for which she was uniquely qualified.

There are two parts to the exhibition: “Big” and “Small.” The Big Exhibition, organized chronologically, begins with drawings and projects from Reima’s childhood and concludes with the firm’s final design projects. A chest-high band of small images running horizontally around the room frames this rectangular space. Large photographs of built works are displayed above this band with sketches and drawings below. Other drawings in similar frames are placed on lower tables in front, and architectural models are displayed on taller tables in the middle of the room. Despite the evident logic of the layout, framed items in the Big Exhibition are crowded. Given the room’s spatial limitations, the designer of the exhibition, Roy Mänttäri, nonetheless did a commendable job.

The Small Exhibition contains freestanding acrylic display panels on the floor and other panels mounted on the wall. Many of these items were apparently salvaged from a 1971 Pietilä exhibition, Space Garden, at the MFA. There is also an informative film, directed by Anssi Blomstedt (in Finnish, 35 min., Finnish Film Foundation, 1987) Vuodenajat–4 Matkaa Raili ja Reima Pietilän Arkkitehtuuriin [The seasons–4 journeys into Raili and Reima Pietilä’s architecture]. In its many sections focused on individual works, Reima Pietilä provides valuable insights by explaining his design approach.

The Pietiläs distinctively departed from the central tenets of Finnish architectural form to develop modular proportional systems in keeping with the rationalized mass production of building elements, a typical interest of architects in the 1950s and 1960s. Pietilä’s attempt to transcend such geometric bounds, however, is evident as early as 1956, when he won the competition for the Finnish Pavilion for the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels. Drawings and models show Pietilä’s compounded use of right angles, multiplied to a point where the logic of the orthogonal...