Stephen Rowley, *Movie Towns and Sitcom Suburbs: Building Hollywood's Ideal Communities*

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Aurélie Blot

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- 1 *Movie Towns and Sitcom Suburbs, Building Hollywood's Ideal Communities*, by Stephen Rowley, a lecturer in the School of Global, Urban, and Social Studies at RMIT University, Australia, is a nice and complete analysis of the representation of small towns and suburbs featured in movies and sitcoms during and shortly after World War II. All along his study the author examines meticulously what he calls the *notional places* (7) (the representation we usually use to mentally visualize a certain category of place with its specificities) to consider how film and TV representations of spaces are featured to help define these notional places and then influence our feelings about these environments.
- 2 This work will especially please the researchers working on popular culture who want to understand the codes of the construction of a suburban landscape through the imaginary, as well as the close connection between fiction and reality. In fact, through a comparative analysis to explore the relationship between visual culture and urban theory, Stephen Rowley considers numerous detailed examples of movies and sitcoms in which the settings are parts of the American popular culture.
- 3 His aim is then to focus on some key threads of the cultural depictions of idealized towns and suburbs to find out how cultural depiction update to account for and deconstruct the shortfall of the postwar suburban experience.

- 4 The first half of the book describes the different representations of these spaces in Films and TV sitcoms at specific historical moments while the second half analyzes the physical responses to this imagery through the study of places imagined by Disney in the 1950s and early 1960s and the implication of the urban planning movement well known as the New Urbanism.
- 5 In the first chapter of his study, Rowley considers the representation of small towns in movies and the development of *notional places* through different criteria. To illustrate his analysis, he uses examples of movies and more specifically *Our Town* (Sam Wood, 1940) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946) in which the small town appears as a full character. In these two specific movies, the notional place of the small town is defined through different aspects:
 - development of Main Street
 - strong community institutions through the presence of a prominent civic precinct that recalls the importance of civic and religious institutions in the archetypal small town (police station, library, courthouse, Baptist church, Catholic church, Congregational church are meeting places that structure Main Street).
 - locally owned and socially integrated businesses such as drugstores. The storekeeper is well known by everybody and is an inhabitant of the town. It is synonymous with social interaction.
 - a classical architecture, mostly Victorian, to focus on stability and traditional values and a fluid interface between public and private spaces that is usually represented through porches which are private spaces that can be conducive to involvement in public life and interaction.
 - a highly walkable community: it allows the viewer to consider the town as an accessible place, synonymous with social interaction. This is why cars are present but essentially seen in motion, with only a few parked cars visible, while the railroad as a non-car transport is developed, permitting to determine the community as being out of time.
 - finally, there is an emphasis on the family unit as the structuring element of society. It is represented through an intergenerational reproduction of the social structure which underscores the notion of the town's continuity over time (the tree that had been planted by the great great grand-father).
- 6 All these elements participate to the definition of the *notional place* of the small town depicted in movies in the 1940s-1950s and installed in the cultural imaginary.
- 7 The second chapter, titled "Sitcom Suburbs", explains the development of the suburbs in the USA during the Postwar Suburban Boom before drawing a parallel with its representation in American TV Sitcoms in the early 1950s (26). Working as some sort of a propaganda, TV Sitcoms from the 1950s gave a very specific representation of the suburb as an idealized place to live. Thus, sitcoms like *Father Knows Best*, *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* were featured especially to promote this new way of life. While suburbs were represented in a derogatory way in movies to underscore the positive image of the small town, in sitcoms, it is the contrary. The suburbs are the new place to live and are represented as the best place to start a family. Unlike the small town in films, most of the episodes of family sitcoms are shot indoors to remind the viewers that the dream house is in the suburbs. These fictional families embody some sort of a 'too-good-to-be-true' middle class that is promoted through the program.

- 8 The type of Main Street that was developed in small-town movies is now either represented briefly or totally erased from the landscape, pointing out that social interactions are made in the residential district. At the end of this chapter, Rowley examines some examples of afterlife sitcom suburbs and speaks more specifically of the contemporary TV series *Desperate Housewives* (Marc Cherry, 2004). In this show, the suburb is represented as an idealistic place which is also terrifying because under the varnish of perfection looms the image of a bad suburb, a place of violence, crime and sadness. *Desperate Housewives* thus works as a satire of these sitcoms from the fifties. In fact, the TV series starts with Mary Alice Young, the voice-over of the TV series, who commits suicide in her house. It happens that the house is an updated replica of the Cleavers' house from *Leave it to Beaver*. Here, the creator Marc Cherry denounces this pseudo perfection that had been sold in these sitcoms in the fifties. Thus, Rowley uses this example as a smooth transition to his third chapter in which he demonstrates the switch from the ideal suburb to the bad suburb in films and contemporary TV series.
- 9 Hollywood movies developed this notion of bad suburbs from the 1950s to the 1980s suggesting the rising disenchantment of people living in the suburbs. In fact, there is quite a difference between the image of a dream suburb broadcasted by sitcoms and the real life in the suburbs. Actually the image sold by the family sitcoms is nothing but a pipe dream. Rowley explains that the situation is particularly difficult for the real suburban families since they are far from everything and especially far from the city. Men have to drive for hours to go to work and women are totally isolated and neglected. Thus, suburbs became a real issue for women who felt desperate to live in this gilded cage. This geographic situation led to nervous breakdown, unhappiness and disenchantment. A reality that is depicted through horror movies in Hollywood showing a new vision of suburbs as uncanny. This is the case for instance of *The Stepford Wives* (Bryan Forbes, 1975) in which women, who appear to be useless, are replaced by robots. Since the suburbs are synonymous with rigor and conformity, everybody must behave to correspond to the norms and codes of the precinct. The rules to follow and the pressure on families to make more money and keep a certain standard of living lead to unhappy families and unhappy homes. Therefore, the vision of the real suburb is quite negative and the aspects that could appear as positive are actually borrowed from the small town ideal (institution buildings, Main Street, drugstores). There is then an ambivalence between the image depicted on TV and the real aspect of suburbs. To thwart this negative image and change the cultural imagery, urban planners had the idea to reshape the structure of the city mixing the notions of the small town ideal with the suburb ideal. In this perspective, Disney attempted to create a fantasy community first with its theme parks and then with its towns considered as fake towns by Rowley.
- 10 Chapter 4 is dedicated to the theme parks created by Walt Disney that led to the creation of EPCOT (Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow). The theme parks function as some sort of movie towns that are built on "media imagery", that is "a place that was also a TV show" (Karal Ann Marling, 117). These theme parks were supposed to correspond to "the American ideas of work, comfort, domesticity and urbanism" (118). Rowley analyses the different criticisms that have been made on these fake towns and especially the notion of control, fakery and commercialization. He defines Walt Disney as an urbanist who came up with an ideal town through his project of EPCOT defining civic spaces and a community balanced with the notions of fakery and fantasy. As Walt Disney states, "We think the need is for starting from scratch on a

virgin island and building a special type of new community” (146). And this is what urban planners did through the cities of Seaside and Celebration.

- 11 The last two chapters discuss how urban planners made the “combination of a park, a town square and a mixed-use commercial Main Street” so exotic to Americans (150). Rowley studies the examples of Seaside that served as a setting for the movie *The Truman Show* (Peter Weir, 1998) and Celebration, the town inspired by Walt Disney. These new kinds of town are totally cinematic with a more compact community and a real interest in the experience of pedestrians on the street. This creation of new towns is called the New Urbanism that echoes the Hollywood small town depicted in movies. It relies on different elements such as: de-emphasis of cars, fluid interface between the public and private spheres, a population with a multigenerational link with the community and a close link between town and country. Contrary to the Hollywood small town in which families are the unit of construction, the New Urbanism underscores the family as part of the social experience creating physical environments more conducive to social interaction (160).
- 12 Seaside created in 1981 in Florida is the first New Urbanist town in which focus on the infrastructure of community is added to the design of the residential streets. Celebration was created in 1996 in Florida considering the idea of EPCOT by Walt Disney. This quiet little town offered a new way of life and for urban planners a new way to build cities. This town was made to create an improved version of everyday life, allowing wealthy people to live in a “suspension of reality” (166).
- 13 Using the last chapter as a way to consider media criticisms of these new types of towns and the New Urbanism, Rowley makes a lot of repetitions that could have been avoided on the notions of fakery, control and commercialization of these specific towns. However, the parallel drawn with movies like *The Truman Show*, *The Matrix* (Lana and Andy Wachowski, 1999) or *Dark City* (Alex proyas, 1998) is very compelling, considering the New Urbanism as a way to recall the notional places of movie towns and sitcom suburbs and reveal the uncanny and the artificial feel of these residential environments.
- 14 To conclude, we may say that *Movie Towns and Sitcom Suburbs* is well written and easy to read despite a few repetitions. One might consider it as a very informative read and a well-documented study with good references and complete analyses of movies and sitcoms. As Jim Collins states, this is a ‘benchmark work’ for anyone who wants to know more about the link between visual culture and urban theory and the influence of media and their cultural impact on people’s imaginary.

AUTHORS

AURÉLIE BLOT

IUT Bordeaux Montaigne