

KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

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FROM MALLS TO HOMES TO CARS, THE TRANSITIONING OF SUBURBIA

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Photos, sculpture, paintings, architectural models, videos and other sorts of art responding to contemporary suburbia by some 30 artists, architects and designers make up “Worlds Away: New Suburban Landscapes” at the Yale School of Architecture. An eclectic but altogether stimulating exhibition, it has a clear if slightly condescending message: it is O.K. to live in suburbia. Phew.

The message is not new, for this is the latest in a line of recent shows that have sought to portray the American suburb as considerably more interesting and quirky than we might have been led to believe. Many were in the New York region — including “Stalking Suburbia,” at the Westport Arts Center, “Landescapism” at the Islip Art Museum, “Sprawl” at the Jersey City museum and “I ♥ the Burbs,” at the Katonah Museum of Art.

According to the 2000 Census, quoted in the exhibition catalog for “Worlds Away,” more and more new immigrants, couples without children, single parents, retirees and young people now make their homes outside central cities. This plurality of people has made the differences between urban and suburban life much less distinct.

More culture, more diversity and more poverty have come to the suburbs — and yet there are elements that continue to define the suburban experience even as it changes. “Worlds Away” throws a klieg light on some of them, with art and architectural models arranged according to three themes: residential life, shopping centers and car culture.

Although the residential home is a pillar of suburbia, in recent years it has also become a flash point for urban planning issues, like traffic, sprawl and the fading character of suburban neighborhoods. Matthew Moore, an artist and farmer, takes up this theme in his series of large-scale earth works on parcels of his family’s farm outside of Phoenix; for one project, he hand-hoed the floor plan of a typical suburban house, soon to be sold for residential development, into a field of barley.

Strip malls were an inevitable extension of the growth of suburbia in the 1950s and ’60s, and for years they just kept on growing. But as suburbia changes, suburban retail is experiencing challenges, as witnessed in photographic projects that document the adaptive reuse of defunct shopping malls and stores. Julia Christensen has documented the second lives of abandoned big-box stores across the United States. “Big Box Reuse: Grace Gospel Church” (2007) documents a regional shopping mall that has been transformed into a megachurch.

The success and expansion of suburbia has always been dependent upon transportation systems, in particular roads. This theme has inspired a great deal of interesting new art and prospective architecture, making this one of the more compelling sections of the exhibition. Highlights include photographs by Edward Ruscha, Catherine Opie, **John Lehr**, Andrew Bush and Larry Sultan documenting elements of car culture, often in California. Ms. Opie’s dramatic, ghostly 1994 photographs of freeway interchanges are hauntingly beautiful.

My favorite work in this section is a model for an unrealized architectural design for Dallas, from 1976, which merges a showroom and a parking lot — the showroom is built into and under an elevated ripple of asphalt on the edge of the lot. It is by the environmental design team SITE,

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some of whose other projects showing here also dissolve distinctions between landscape and architecture.

But in the end this show leaves you with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it positively enhances our appreciation of the complexity of an environment that constitutes an ever-expanding slice of American life — these days, more people in America live in the suburbs than in central cities or rural areas put together, according to the 2000 census. But all too rarely are we really wowed by what we see here, for judging by the exhibits it would seem that suburban aesthetics remain mired in a cheap functionalism.

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