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Utopia Limited

HOUSTON'S RING AROUND THE BELTWAY

HOUSTON HAS FEW TOPOGRAPHICAL IMPEDIMENTS TO ITS CONTINUOUS CENTRIFUGAL EXPANSION. THE NETWORK OF CONCENTRIC, RADIALY CONNECTED FREEWAY LOOPS HAS PROVIDED AN ARMATURE FOR SUBURBAN TRACTS THAT SATURATE THE LAND LIKE HUGE OIL BLOTS, OOZING ACROSS AN INCORPORATED TERRITORY OF ABOUT 580 SQUARE MILES. FOUR OF THE LARGEST AND MOST SUCCESSFUL MASTER-PLANNED DEVELOPMENTS IN THE UNITED STATES ARE TETHERED AT THE OUTER EDGES OF THIS UNREPENTANT SPRAWL.¹ THE WOODLANDS, FIRST COLONY, KINGWOOD, AND CLEAR LAKE CITY ARE THE MOST PROMINENT OF A SERIES OF SELF-ZONED SUBDIVISIONS SMUGLY SURROUNDING A CITY THAT WOULD NOT ALLOW ITSELF TO BE PLANNED.

DISTINCT FROM mere subdivisions and Planned Unit Development schemes, these "new towns" have a considerable mix of land uses, including retail, commercial, social services, and parks. Each has a population ranging from 30,000 to 40,000 and an area varying from 10,000 to 25,000 acres (the grid of downtown Houston covers approximately 2,000 acres). During the 1980s, the majority of new-home starts in the Houston metropolitan area gravitated to the master-planned developments, indicating a victory in real estate terms for the fully planned suburb over the rest of the city.

A master-planned development is different from a city in that the development corporation guarantees infrastructure and services that otherwise would be the result of a democratically mandated municipal authority: it privatizes what has traditionally been the prerogative of the community. Home buyers, who pay a yearly fee to the developer or community association for maintenance of services (something like 60 cents per \$100 assessed value), are attracted because these havens of zoned orderliness appear free of the problems of the city, such as poor public schools, lack of recreation space, and high crime rates. These developments are, moreover, the ultimate eugenic experiment for PLUs ("People Like Us"), since they are generally reservations of that rapidly declining species, the aspiring white middle class. A

and were arranged 30 to a street with a community house in the center; this bears some correspondence to the conformity of suburban houses (which are now marketed by national mass builders like packages of potato chips) built on cul-de-sacs with a tot-lot or neighborhood park in the center. Utopians were obligated to change houses every ten years so they would not feel proprietary about their dwellings. Americans change their homes on the average of once every five years, usually for the purpose of trading up, and thus the house is always conceived in terms of the value it will have for some normative other who will be the next to acquire it. Utopia, now with the goal of private rather than communitarian well-being, is closer than was previously thought.

great deal of breeding goes on out in what might be called Houston's fertility crescent, where the safety of children, access to good public schools, and well-organized sports programs are the highest priorities.

Like the original Humanist paragon of planning, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) – the name of which is a play on words meaning "no place" – these settlements on Houston's edges cultivate a certain placelessness. Although each of the four developments described below reflects distinct topographical characteristics, and a great deal of design effort has been applied to their landscaping to create a market identity and special physical attributes, all give the

strong impression of being nowhere in particular and are in some ways interchangeable. The redounding lack of orientation created by looping roads and the anonymity and remoteness caused by the setback fabric of these environments suggest a kind of existential camouflage.

The cities on the island of Utopia were all identical and were located approximately 24 miles, or a six-hour walk, apart. The Woodlands is 27 miles and First Colony, Kingwood, and Clear Lake City each 22 miles from downtown, all on the circuit of the proposed Grand Parkway, Houston's beltway beyond the Beltway. All the houses in Utopia were of the same model

Suburban, low-density developments have, in the half century since World War II, become the site of the new majority of population distribution, accounting for more than 40 percent of the U.S. population in 1990. The suburbs are in general architecturally undistinguished and difficult to represent in plan or through perspectival means, and they seem beyond the pale of human drama, only suitable for the bathos of television serials. Nothing can happen in the master-planned landscape except sheltered breeding to ensure the survival of *Homo suburbanis*. Because of the suburbs' exceptional banality but overwhelming economic and social importance, there is something unexpectedly meaningful about their ascendancy. By inverting the conventional semantics and values of urban space, history and its oppressive janissaries, architecture and the city, have finally been usurped. Life on the edges of Houston is yet another instance of space apparently overcoming time.

The ambivalence of the suburbs as placeless places and history-free shapers of civilization is symptomatic of the semantic crisis of the late 20th century, when meanings no longer seem to adhere to words, when signs and referents are constantly betraying rather than portraying. Take, for instance, the fact that new suburbs such as The Woodlands or First Colony are generically called "new towns," that their advertisers promote them as "communities," and that they are usually broken down into 1,000- to 2,000-acre packages referred to as "villages." Not formally, structurally, socially, or in any other way do these developments resemble the entities referred to by the words that are attached to them. Was there ever a town without a

commercial nucleus, a village without a main street, or a community without historical continuity? The language is so delusional that recent arrivals to this real estate package deal, such as the offices of Duany and Plater-Zyberk or Peter Calthorpe, have felt it their rhetorical mission to supply a form that better corresponds to the name, in hopes of restoring the "traditional" values of the phenomenon the original words describe. But the rupture in meaning has already occurred, and there is no turning back.

The master-planned development's street patterns derive from the picturesque, curving streets deployed by Frederick Law Olmsted in such plans as that of Riverside, Illinois (1869), and from the patterns used to separate traffic that were devised by Raymond Unwin for the early garden cities in England during the first decade of this century. The practice of the latter led to street configurations that avoided frequent intersections and provided secluded streets. Arterial fast streets with internal loops and cul-de-sacs were the ingenious solutions.

Locally, Houston's master-planned developments aspire to a combination of the elite 1920s Olmsted-style subdivision of River Oaks, which was given easy automobile access to downtown by Allen Parkway, and the quick-profit middle-class development of Sharpstown, Houston's version of Levittown, located in the next ring of western expansion on U.S. 59. Sharpstown, begun in the mid-1950s, supplied more-affordable houses on smaller lots with such amenities as schools, a golf course, and a shopping mall.³ The decline in the status and security of Sharpstown, which now embraces a significant minority population, is not likely to be repeated in the current new towns. The new new towns are not named after their developers and tend to have neighborhoods named after natural features, such as Bay Oaks in Clear Lake City, Sweetwater in First Colony, Panther Creek in The Woodlands, and Elm Grove in Kingwood. Although The Woodlands has some commitment to the concept of human diversity, the process of real estate competition has confined it to marketing strategies that inevitably focus on a middle-class clientele.

Squiggly street patterns as an alternative to the conventional grid made particular sense to developers during the car-crazed 1950s and were encouraged by the FHA guidelines for subdivisions, since they provided a method for keeping houses from facing directly onto loud and dangerous thoroughfares. But while such systems facilitated movement on a larger scale, they tended to fragment the urban fabric and limit interaction at the local scale. Viewed from the air, the patterns of arteries threaded with cul-de-sacs and internal loops bear a remarkable resemblance to plates of microchips found in the innards of a computer, a correspon-

dence first intimated by the novelist Thomas Pynchon in the 1960s, when he referred to suburbs in terms of printed circuits.⁴ There is a peculiar morphological resonance between the formal patterns in the item that densifies information into miniscule packages, tools that make spatial contiguities irrelevant, and the formal patterns of the system of maximum dispersal that produces irrelevant space.

The irresistible logic of these street patterns is determined by the primary role the automobile plays in American life. To drive in Houston is a political act. It means support of the industry that linked the city's economy to the destiny of the nation. The settlements at Houston's outermost limits are so intimately linked with the oil economy that the relationship cannot be seen as casual: Friendswood Development Company, an Exxon subsidiary, developed Clear Lake City (1963) and Kingwood (1972); Mitchell Energy developed The Woodlands (1974); and the Royal Dutch Shell



◀ ELS Architects, model of proposed Town Center for The Woodlands, 1992 - .



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The Woodlands

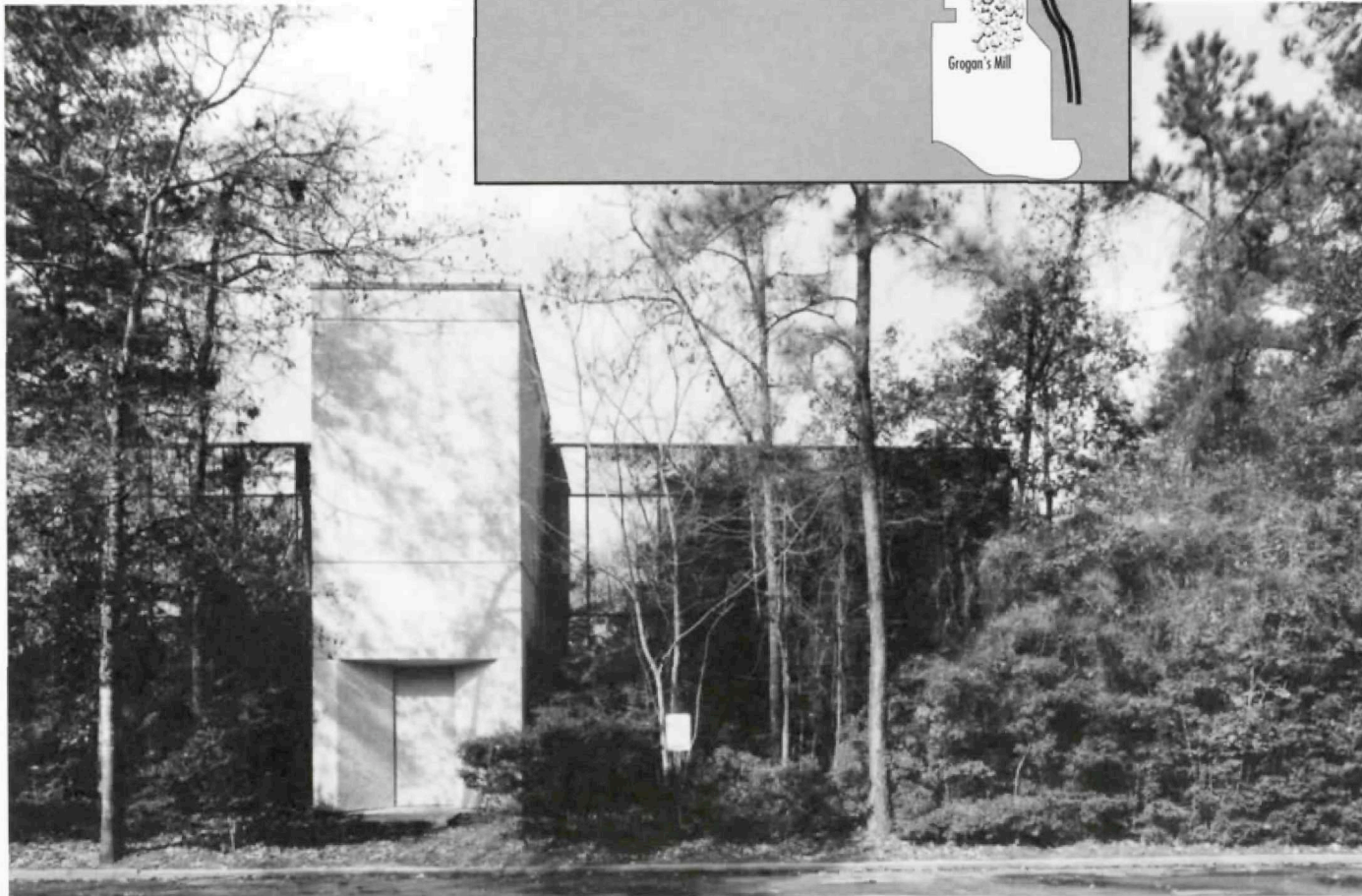
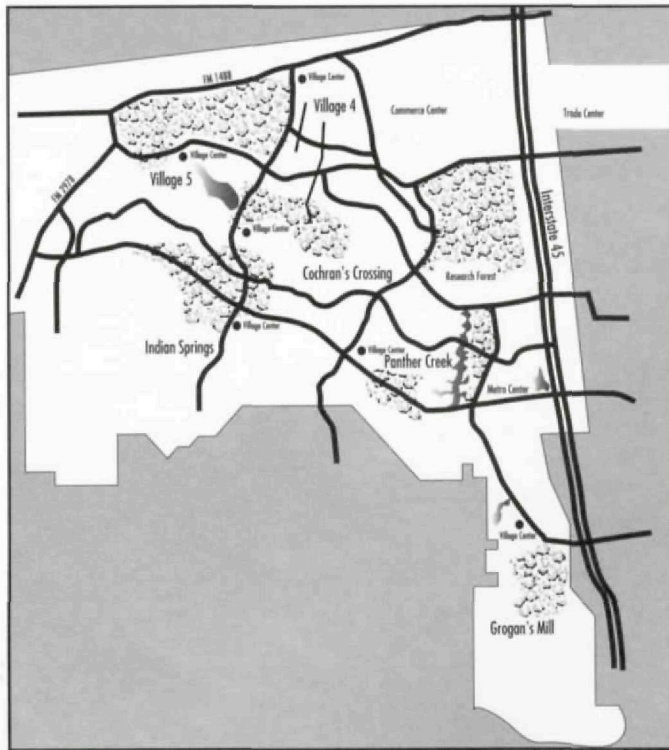
Pension Fund has replaced the Ford Foundation as the primary financial partner of the Gerald D. Hines-initiated First Colony (1976). (Mobil Oil is currently developing 11 master-planned suburbs throughout the Sun Belt.) It is, of course, in the interests of the oil and automobile industries to encourage development on the edge, thereby making the demand for their products integral to a way of life — a round trip to one of these new towns is equivalent to half a tank of gas in my car. That Gerald Hines and George Mitchell supported both light rail and zoning does not necessarily contradict this scenario, since these measures would benefit the center and the edge, where both developers have a lot at stake.

THE LARGEST of Houston's master-planned developments, at 25,000 acres for a projected population of 150,000, is The Woodlands, and it is by far the most utopian. The developer, George Mitchell, has persevered with undying idealism in planning a real estate domain that will foster social diversity and respect for environmental concerns while attracting employment and culture. Mitchell is one of the great self-made *condottieri* of the energy business, one of the last of the Texan "can-do" entrepreneurs, and it is hard not to admire his progressive approach to environmental and social issues. The Woodlands indeed aspires to provide an alternative to existing urban and suburban conditions. But despite the expenditure of so much talent, imagination, and investment, the question lingers as to whether The Woodlands is appreciably different from the suburbs or its rival new towns.



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McHarg, Roberts & Todd, William Pereira & Associates, and Richard Brown & Associates, The Woodlands, Montgomery County, Texas, 1970–74.



Neuhaus & Taylor, architects, The Woodlands Corporation Headquarters, 1974.



Horst Berger and Sustaita Associates, architects, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion, 1990.

The most frequently quoted reason George Mitchell gives for having created The Woodlands is that the new town represents a sort of fiscal realpolitik by which to arrest the drain of tax dollars to autonomously controlled suburbs such as West University Place and Bellaire. Mitchell advocated a well-planned suburb that would remain within the city's ultimate jurisdiction.⁵ The Woodlands is unincorporated, and although currently it is more dependent on the services of Montgomery County and the more proximate city center of Conroe, it nevertheless lies within Houston's statutory extraterritorial jurisdiction. But even if the tax base The Woodlands represents is ultimately retrievable, the drain of employment, cultural, and housing possibilities it encourages is less than salubrious for the vitality of the urban core.

Mitchell started planning The Woodlands with an eye to obtaining federal subsidies and loan guarantees as part of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Title VII New Community Act. Approximately \$30 million of an

overall \$2.8 billion investment came through federal grants. The public funding is one of the reasons The Woodlands is so much better documented and more accountable in social terms than its confreres. It is also more conscientious about fostering public resources such as the Houston Advanced Research Center, or HARC (to which Mitchell recently pledged \$65 million in matching funds), and the Houston Symphony summer program. The terms of the New Community Act of 1970 stipulated that loans for development were guaranteed in exchange for provision of 15 percent low-income or assisted housing. Somewhat akin to the New Deal strategy of creating well-planned suburbs, such as the one built at Greenbelt, Maryland, for absorbing lower-income people from the inner cities, The Woodlands has continued to maintain, even after the terms of the initial contract lapsed, a small number of publicly assisted apartments. These constitute a far larger percentage of the available local housing than do the similar rental units available in Houston.⁶ Until recently The Woodlands mixed the price ranges of houses in each subdivision, which is contrary to the prevailing practice in other master-planned developments. Currently about a third of the population of The Woodlands is employed there, predominantly by corporate and research facilities. Light industry, projected for the future, would help diversify the class and racial mix.⁷

From the outset, The Woodlands was intended to be a new type of development, closer to nature. The expertly prepared marketing literature emphasizes environmental preservation "so that people may live in harmony with nature." In the first areas developed in The Woodlands, in the village of Grogan's Mill, the buildings are concealed with remarkable consistency by obligatory trees and shrubs. The result, however, is an anti-architecture. The houses of this era, mostly modest and wood-sided, are completely hidden in the trees. The five-story office buildings, just barely taller than the treetops, are sheathed in mirror glass that makes them disappear in the reflection of the sky and other natural features. Every act of building in these early stages followed a strategy that pardons uninspired design through the mitigation of the forest.

Mitchell, who in the 1950s commissioned one of the more interesting houses in Houston from Karl Kamrath, a devotee of Frank Lloyd Wright, was conversant with the principles of Wright's organic architecture. His own house was a variant on Wright's Hanna House (Palo Alto, 1936), which used hexagonal planning and broad sloped roofs to blend in with natural features. Among those working on the early stages of the planning, which included Kamrath and William Pereira, was Ian McHarg, the Scottish-born doyen of environmental landscape planning.⁸

McHarg made studies, including an aerial survey, of the site's ecosystems and recommended ways of placing drainage to reinforce the effluent patterns of the land.

The result has been a noticeable environmental difference in The Woodlands. The ethic is to live in the forest, and thus everything in The Woodlands is set back and hidden by trees. The architectural guidelines encourage saving as many trees on a lot as possible and then planting indigenous trees and undergrowth wherever needed. There are no front lawns in the earliest subdivisions, which for the suburbs was revolutionary. Recently the guided "natural landscaping" has given way to more conventional front lawns and fences in order to remain competitive with the norms of upscale real estate. The development company itself is an agent of this stylistic transition, sponsoring such projects as the newly finished Bear Branch Recreation Center by Royce R. Leachman, which uses classical compositional strategies, arches and monumentalizing massing, in diametric opposition to the earlier passive approach to the same program. The design of houses in The Woodlands has also evolved, from humble, faceless wooden structures to larger houses with imposing façades, cluttered with pseudo-historical decoration and foregrounded by high-maintenance yards.

About 25 percent of the land in The Woodlands has been set aside for public space for parks and recreation. This is considerably more than any of its competitors can boast, and the green spaces, which include 40 neighborhood parks and four golf courses, are easily accessible and often quite impressively unspoiled. The minor streets retain the look of country roads because they have soft shoulders without curbs or sidewalks. Instead of sidewalks there are 64 miles of paved hike-and-bike trails, which depart from the 150-mile network of vehicular roads to form an independent system through the less-disturbed natural habitats. Unlike those at the other master-planned new towns, which have some intramural hiking trails, many of the trails in The Woodlands really break away from visual contact with the subdivisions – a virtue that someday may become a liability. Although the crime rate in The Woodlands is relatively low, there have been isolated incidents in the past few years of minor crimes or intimidating confrontations on these paths, which, because they are not visible from the road, are perceived as less safe.

Although the efforts to coordinate the hydrological impact of settlement and to disturb the forest as little as possible proved less damaging than conventional clear-cutting, the pattern of The Woodlands' villages does not discourage the use of automobiles, which remain the most deleterious threat to the environment. Neither shopping, schools, recreation, nor employment is situated in a

way that would make pedestrian transits a realistic alternative. There are express charter buses going to downtown Houston, the Texas Medical Center, and the Galleria area, and there is the future option of a light-rail connection with downtown. But these commuter services cannot remedy the spread of local automobile-dependent patterns of movement. Housing for the elderly, for instance, is located far from any retail establishments. The needs of commuters in The Woodlands played a big role in the construction of the Hardy Toll Road, which provides a faster highway connection to downtown (the round-trip toll is insignificant for households with Woodlands-level incomes). This commitment to driving has been implicitly acknowledged in The Woodlands by the placement of public sculptures at major intersections of the arterial parkways, where there is no pedestrian activity.

Also problematic is The Woodlands' promise of community. Unlike conventional suburbs, The Woodlands promotes the idea that it will gather a diverse population and become a real hometown. Ancient Sparta or Mayan settlements in the Yucatán may have maintained a strong culture with a diffusely settled population, but overriding military and religious commitments provided the social glue in a way that is hard to imagine in an American suburb. During the early years in The Woodlands, when only a few thousand residents occupied the site, there was a stronger sense of togetherness. All the residents picked up their mail at the post office in the Grogan's Mill village center. Their children went ice skating at the Wharf or swimming at the YMCA. The residents, who mostly came from out of state (currently 46 percent come from outside the region), were eager to participate on the conscientious terms of the developer. Now that the population has grown to about 35,000 (the ultimate projected population is 153,000) and starting a new town is less of a novelty, the initial sense of intimacy among residents has declined. The post office was moved to an anonymous site, and mail is now delivered to each cul-de-sac. The skating rink has been closed because it was too expensive to maintain, although the Y is still a popular place.

The most frustrating impediment to a sense of community in The Woodlands is that there is no center; there is no place where the community can come together. The first "village" center at Grogan's Mill failed as a retail center – perhaps, one can speculate, because the architectural attitude was overly passive. On one side of the narrow pond of Lake Harrison is The Woodlands Country Club and Conference Center, designed by Edward Durrell Stone's office in the mid-1970s with a vague suggestion of Wrightian, wing-spread eaves. It is connected by a glassed-in wooden bridge to the other side of the narrow lake, where the retail facili-

ties are located. The buildings were somewhat cheaply built and, like all the first buildings of The Woodlands, recede timidly into the trees, making impossible the creation of the sort of visual connections that make urban space interesting. It is difficult to see the parts of this so-called center, let alone the whole. Lack of visibility from the road was particularly disadvantageous to retail. The Woodlands Information Center (Bennie M. González, 1975), an expressionistic collection of irregularly shaped wood-sided wedges in the midst of tall pines, is perhaps the consummate example of the camouflage style, building too carefully according to the dictates of the trees. Even a building of modest civic intent such as Taft Architects' Water Resources Building is lost on its site behind a thick buffer of trees that thwarts an axial view of the building's portico. The recently expanded HARC campus has indulged in more monumental tactics, with a framed gateway, emulating Rice University, and a stout brick-clad, limestone-corniced administration center. All of the signs in The Woodlands are restricted to two-foot-high sandblasted wooden panels, a nice nonaggressive touch that for the driver only increases the difficulty of finding things. The major public building of The Woodlands, the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Pavilion (Horst Berger and Sustaita Associates, 1990), which because it is the site of numerous rock concerts and the summer residence of the Houston Symphony should be the place that people from other parts of Houston are best able to find, is hopelessly sequestered in the middle of the forest. The thrusting peaks of its white Teflon tents, held up with soaring web trusses, make it the most interesting building of the development, yet it is not visible from any of the major roads.

The combination of too great a respect for natural features (many of which, like the concrete-lined Lake Woodlands, are artificially induced anyway) and a self-effacing desire for humble structures (which became instead an excuse for cheap ones) failed to create places of assembly, where a sense of social involvement might continually be regenerated. The supermarket at Grogan's Mill went through several tenants without success and is currently used as a public library. Most people went back to the strip malls located outside of The Woodlands on I-45 to fulfill their shopping and entertainment requirements.

The new village center at Panther Creek shows that some lessons have been learned. Randall's has opened a hypermarket that is quite successful and more encouraging of social contact than any previous sites in the new town. The trees have been thinned a bit so that the complex of stores surrounding the market is visible from both Woodlands Parkway and the secondary artery. This ensures a better psychological connection. But it

still does not foster the idea of public assembly the way a small-town Main Street does.

Standards of house design have also changed in response to the competition from Kingwood and First Colony. Many builders are producing grandiose mansions in the West University-South Fork Ranch idiom, with phony brick details, mammoth arched entries, and blind dormers. Natural landscaping is not appropriate to these statements of bourgeois self-importance, and high-maintenance yards have become the rule.

Few of the new, expensive houses are of much distinction except the enormous orange polygonal palace, a dubiously proportioned Taj Mahal, visible across Lake Woodlands from Woodlands Parkway. The design was mostly by the owner, an engineer from southern India who for 17 years has run a successful air-pollution-control company located in The Woodlands' business center. Its excess of taste – slender three-story columns are linked by alternating rounded and pointed arches, in vague emulation of Mughal style – masks an extraordinary steel-frame structure that allows the interior to have a very open section, 39 feet high, that shelters a marble fountain. There are other master-planned developments, such as First Colony, where such a house would not be allowed. It is to The Woodlands' credit that something remotely interesting, no matter how ersatz, got built. This exuberant aberration, expressing a trans-cultural affirmation of the American dream, met no resistance from the planners. The plan of The Woodlands allows for certain larger sites (in this case a two-and-three-quarter-acre lot) where exceptional houses can be built to give a sense of identity.

The missing ingredient at The Woodlands that is expected to change its entire social complexion is the new regional mall, currently under construction and planned to open in 1994. Optimistically called the Town Center (the same term is employed for the mall planned at First Colony), it does not promise at this stage in its development to add a greater sense of architectural or urban identity to The Woodlands. Codeveloped by Homart (a Sears subsidiary), the mall was designed by ELS of Berkeley and is a classic enclosed, double-loaded spine with anchor stores at each end. The first phase will be 550,000 square feet and its final phase 1.4 million square feet. Rather than occupy a position in the physical center of the new town, the mall is located on the easternmost edge of The Woodlands, adjacent to I-45, to catch freeway shoppers. It is completely surrounded by a broad apron of surface parking except on its southern side, where a link with Main Street is planned. The trees envisioned for the lot are insufficient to relieve its openness. An artificial lagoon has been dug to offset the center from the freeway and to

MLTW/Turnbull Associates, Charles Moore, and Richard Fitzgerald & Partners, Sweetwater Country Club (1983).



◀ Llewelyn-Davies Associates, First Colony, Fort Bend County, Texas, 1976.

ments and devote all their energies to transgressing the local limits. This had its most tragic expression a few years ago when a group of Woodlands teenagers went on a gay-bashing spree and murdered a man in the Montrose district. Last year, in an attempt to confront the problem, The Woodlands opened a teen center, a large clubhouse designed by Ray Bailey Architects, with a basketball court in the middle and video games in the side rooms. It is doubtful, however, that a mere container will be able to sublimate teenage aggression. Surveillance does not usually coincide with the concept of liberation or transgression. The weakness of the scheme for the town center is that it was not designed to answer these problems. It fails to provide enough interstitial room for slackers and, because it is hermetic, is unable to foster the streetlike connections that might permit casual socialization.

First Colony



connect the mall to a mile-and-a-half-long canal leading past the concert pavilion to Lake Woodlands. A transportation link is being planned at the canal level. Judging from the currently published plans, none of the buildings will come close enough to the edge of the water to make the water feature integral with commercial and social functions. There is no density imaginable and no reason for routes to intersect. The Rivercenter shopping mall on the San Antonio River Walk would have made an excellent model for stitching together outdoor assembly and recreational spaces with indoor retail. As planned, The Woodlands' mall is a thor-

oughly conventional scheme rather than one that would contribute to a real sense of community or place. The retail strips on the feeder roads on the opposite side of I-45 have recently been acquired by Mitchell subsidiaries and closed to eliminate the peripheral competition.

The single factor that might engender true solidarity among the residents, something equivalent to the threat of war, is the teenage problem. Teenagers in the Woodlands, like suburban teenagers everywhere, are the unanticipated factor that upsets the domestic tranquillity of most plans. The energy of sexual awakening is simply incompatible with the confinement of the single-family house, and there comes a point in a suburban child's life when sports no longer fulfill all of one's desires for contact with the world. Stuck out in the middle of nowhere, in an empty house (since both parents usually work), informed and stimulated through telematic excess, teenagers often become resentful of the ennui of planned environ-

THE PROBLEMS described at The Woodlands are present in all the other suburban new towns, where – perhaps because there is so little idealism – the contradictions do not seem as apparent. If The Woodlands is the best intended of Houston's new towns in terms of social conscience, First Colony is the most socially conscious. It offers no promises regarding nature, diversity, or any culture beyond that of sitcoms; its only reality is that this is status real estate. Adjacent to Sugar Land, which was the center of agricultural processing in this area, First Colony was preceded in the 1960s by Venetian Estates, a smaller subdivision of mostly one-story ranch-style homes situated on a series of artificially generated lagoons. Quail Valley to the southeast of First Colony, and Sugar Creek to its northeast, are smaller subdivisions begun shortly before First Colony opened in 1976. Since then, this area of Fort Bend County has seen a proliferation of master-planned subdivisions, including Greatwood, New Territory, Lake Olympia, Kelliwood, Green Trails, and Cinco Ranch, none of which has the size to sustain as many amenities as First Colony. Many of them in fact rely upon the higher degree of amenities and services, in particular the retail opportunities, of First Colony. (As investments, the smaller 1,000-to-2,000-acre developments reap the greatest profits, because they can

be realized in the shortest time and have fewer infrastructure costs.) Fort Bend County has the fastest-growing economy in the region, with "the lowest percentage of low income and highest percentage of high income in the Houston area."¹⁰ The county offers aggressive tax-abatement programs, and more than half of the businesses relocating there receive reductions according to the benefits they will confer on the county.¹¹

The success of these western zoned packages was due at first to the decision of the major oil companies, such as Conoco, Shell, British Petroleum, and Amoco, to locate their corporate campuses outside Loop 610 along Highway 6, in what has come to be known as the Energy Corridor. These postindustrial forms of high-income corporate employment are the perfect patron group for master-planned communities, and the relationship has become symbiotic, so that it is difficult to distinguish which has had a greater impact on the others' choice. Schlumberger Well Services recently

houses and retail are much more visible than in The Woodlands. This should not imply that they are more pleasant to look at, only that it is easier to orient oneself.

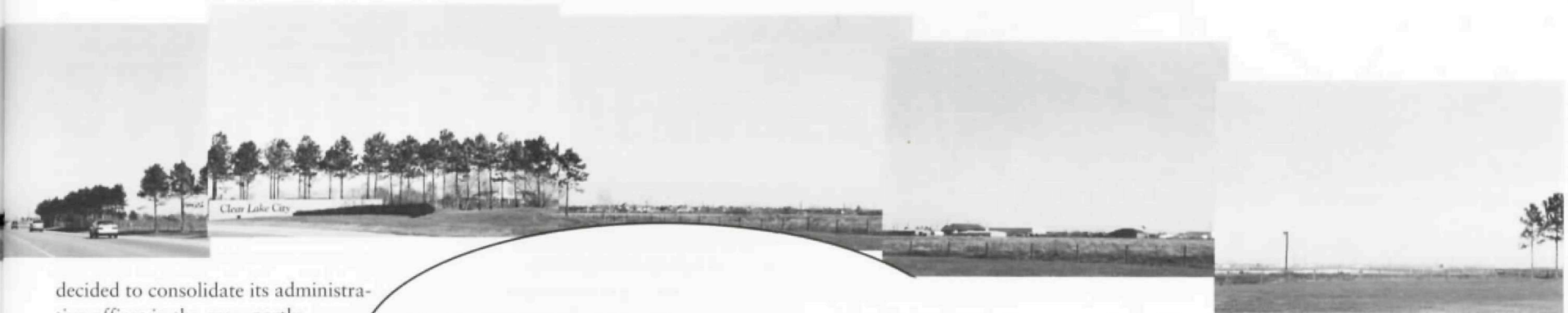
First Colony spreads out over 9,700 acres with a population of over 30,000 (projected build-out population is 50,000). The name implies the good WASPy stock of Pilgrim fathers but actually refers to the fact that Stephen F. Austin established the first (Anglo) colony in Texas nearby.

What is so astounding about First Colony is the sense of crowding where there is so much space. It is difficult, of course, to squeeze four-car garages onto standard suburban lots. If there is a style that is emerging in the expensive houses, it is not by accident. Sugar Land Development Company hired the firm of Ray Bailey Architects to develop design criteria. The builders were then educated through presentations and booklets about "enduring design characteristics" culled from the most admired parts of River Oaks and Shadyside. "Contemporary" houses (i.e.,

The developer, Gerald D. Hines Interests, owes some of its fame to its practice of hiring celebrity architects to make distinctive packaging for large commercial projects. In the privatization mentality of the 1980s, this meant that the developer took over as provider of the public realm, a transfer brilliantly portrayed in the fountain park at the base of the Transco Tower. At First Colony the firm of Johnson/Burgee was hired in 1982 to design an office park at First Colony's first freeway intersection. The only one of the buildings to be constructed is brick-clad, with a neoclassical tympanum placed at the top of the central wing and two wings spreading out at a 45-degree angle. It looks stranded, especially when glimpsed with the shimmering Fluor headquarters, the star resident of the office park, looming in the distance. Charles Moore and William Turnbull were engaged to design the Sweetwater Country Club in 1983 for the high-income neighborhood. Despite some interesting interior plays with light in this structure, its construction is generally

There are bike paths and greenswards at First Colony, but they are not conceived with the conviction of The Woodlands and are apparently little used except by joggers. First Colony is designed for those who like to drive. The ample retail areas have huge parking lots in front. The planned mall will be surrounded by parking, similar to the one planned for The Woodlands, except that its main axis will run parallel to the freeway. Among the largest green spaces on the First Colony map is the right-of-way of the high-voltage power lines. One idea that is currently being discussed is to copy an idea first used at Cinco Ranch: using white sand imported from Florida to create an artificial beach at the recreation center lake.

There is diversity at First Colony the way there used to be in the Old South. The only pedestrians to be seen are the domestics and gardeners, all people of color working hard to maintain the look of the American Dream while the occupants are off working hard to pay for it.



decided to consolidate its administrative offices in the area, partly because of the access to this type of housing.

In many ways First Colony reverses the strategies of The Woodlands. The landscape, mostly old rice and sugarcane fields, had few trees. The look of the development was created by introducing a new – and often striking – formal landscape. The SWA Group, which specializes in the landscaping of corporate campuses, has given an orderly look to the street-scape. The regular rows of teardrop-shaped, nonbearing Aristocrat pear trees that frame the last of First Colony's three freeway exits at Sweetwater Boulevard are a stunning reminder of the displacement of the regular agricultural striation of the land by the cash crop of single-family homes. During the past 15 years, 10,000 street trees were planted and paved sidewalks laid along every street to give the edges of the streets more definition. Some streets have the charm of Houston's older oak-lined boulevards, although the plantings have not been uniformly successful: Palm Royale Boulevard was lined with tall palms that were unable to survive in this climate. In the more expensive neighborhoods, decorative landscape features such as pergolas and fountains give a lush quality to the outdoor spaces. Because the landscaping is so ambitious, all of the

Clear Lake City and Kingwood

modern style, with flat roofs or strip windows) were thought to be inappropriate, as were styles not of Anglo derivation. A design for a house with onion domes and pointed arches was successfully discouraged. The result is a kind of nouveau riche Heimat style. Many of the houses at First Colony, especially those in Sweetwater Village, where the high-priced (between \$300,000 and over \$1 million) houses are, aspire to the girth of River Oaks houses with only a quarter of the land. They are abnormally high, capped with a big-hipped roof, studded with fake dormers, and smeared with Georgian or Colonial regalia. In contradiction to wood-frame construction, the typical First Colony house is liberally encrusted with gables, brackets, quoins, rusticated brick patterns, and pilasters. The rear elevations of these houses are almost invariably surfaced with cheaper siding materials. Such regular features as cathedral ceilings for the living rooms and private baths for each bedroom boost the square footage well beyond the needs of a modest family.

cheap, and the overall impression is that it has the biggest hips of the big hipped roofs in the development.

Sugar Land Development Company has helped establish the First Colonial style with the design of several commercial buildings such as the Williams Trace Shopping Center, site of the extremely successful Home Depot, and in several of the commercial facilities, where brick elevations are given some articulation with striated bands of different-color brick, string course moldings, and limestone corners. One of the neighborhood recreation centers uses a prominent Palladian archway for its bathhouse. By far the finest buildings are not those of the famous architects, but the excellent design for elementary schools by Spencer Herolz Architects. At the Austin Parkway School, an arresting free-standing wall shoots out on a 45-degree tangent to serve as a canopied walkway from the automobile dropoff point. The design was so successful that it was repeated on another site for the Colony Meadow School with only a slight variation in brick color.

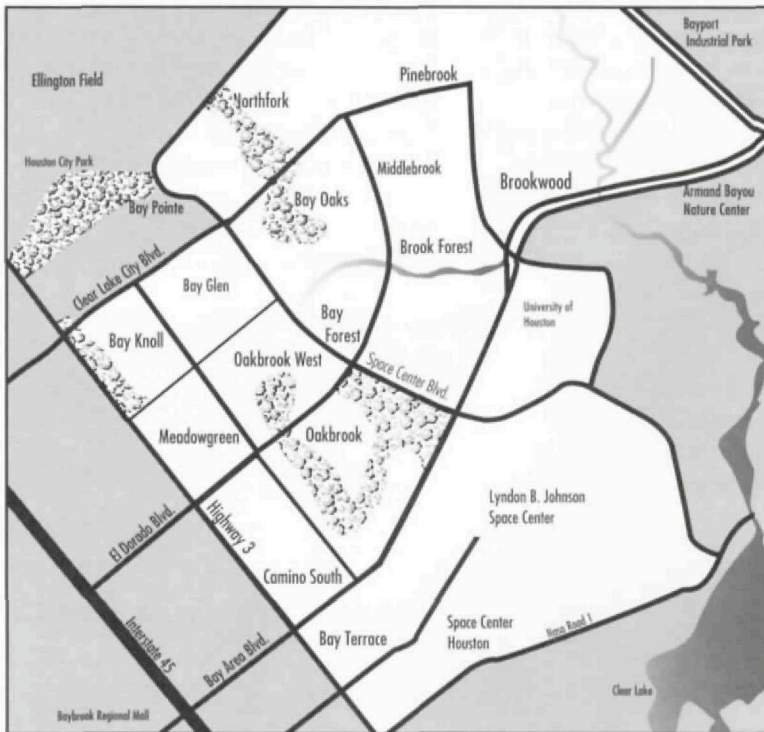
BOTH CLEAR Lake City and Kingwood are products of Exxon's Friendswood Development Corporation. They use nearly identical promotional literature and follow very similar layouts. Clear Lake City, the first master-planned new town in Texas, was begun in 1963 by Humble Oil and Refining and the Del Webb Company (famous for developing Sun Cities, Arizona), whose interest in the development was bought out by Humble shortly thereafter. It is located at the southeastern edge of Houston, off I-45 and near NASA, which opened in 1964. Kingwood is at the northeastern frontier, just north of the town of Humble, from which the Humble Oil and Refining Company, now known as Exxon, took its name. Friendswood has also developed Copperfield and Fairfield, both in the northwest quadrant of Houston, which are considerably smaller but similar in concept.

The logic of Clear Lake City, which has a population of 40,000 on 15,300 acres, is to provide a suburban setting for a major new employment center; about 80 percent of the residents work in the immediate

area. Following on the success of Sharpstown, Clear Lake City in many ways offers fewer amenities than the new towns founded a decade later. It occupies dubious land that once was used for oil exploration but no longer yields oil. The first thing one encounters from the off-ramp of I-45 are large oil pipes, surfacing and resubmerging into the soil. The breezes from the Ship Channel are seasoned with the unmistakable trace of petrochemicals. One of the big attractions

Clear Lake City and Kingwood have none of the landscaping coordination of First Colony, nor do they pay much attention to the natural features that are implied in their names and advertisements. Their approaches to siting and subdivision are more perfunctory.

Kingwood was developed on 13,000 acres belonging to the King Ranch on the edge of Lake Houston. The current population is 37,000. Built in a forested area much



Clear Lake City, Harris County, Texas, 1963.

of Clear Lake City, which is not legally a city, since it was incorporated into Houston in one of the most hotly contested annexation disputes in 1977, is Clear Lake, which is not "clear" and is near but not bordering the development. The brackish inlet contains the third largest marina in the country and is the site of great sailing activity. There is some genuine Gulf Coast feeling around the lake, probably because the master planners were not able to include it in the package.

Like Sharpstown, the first plots of Clear Lake City were tightly packed on long, wavy blocks. The later subdivisions seem to have learned from The Woodlands and First Colony and use cul-de-sacs and loops more astutely for greater privacy. One of the chief characteristics of Clear Lake City is that the major thoroughfares are lined with ten-foot concrete walls that shelter the back yards of the internal streets. This gives the subdivision a particularly impermeable and forbidding feeling, as well as walls that are truly ripe for graffiti. There are schools, big churches, and strip retail centers for the spiritual and physical needs of residents, but the landscape exudes about as much sense of community as a Motel 6. The Wetcher House by Peter Waldman, with its fanciful metal extrusions visible from across the Bay Oaks golf course, is one of the few instances of architectural achievement amid some very cheap-looking, expensive property.

like the site of The Woodlands, it bills itself as the "livable forest"; but despite such evidence of good intentions as Charles Tapley's design for a nature trail for the first subdivision, Trailwood Village, which won a *Progressive Architecture* award in 1971, there is less of an apparent crusade here to preserve the forest. The publicity brochure shows a lush carpet of forest, but the trees of Kingwood have been unceremoniously cleared for construction, which has left lots of bald patches. The sites for the houses are quite visibly scraped, and front lawns are uniformly installed. The wetlands around the lake are preserved by law, so very few houses are close enough to see the water, and the golf courses are set out in this area to exploit the unbuildable land. As in Clear Lake City, the retail is clustered in strip-center packages that would be interchangeable with anywhere else. Each of the subdivisions is segregated by price range. The schools and churches are there, and the publicity boasts that 95 percent of the high school graduates go on to college – but with incomes averaging \$83,000 here, should that be any surprise?

Kingwood has bike paths in emulation of The Woodlands (Clear Lake City is apparently the only new town without them), but they are fairly pathetic grassy alleyways, rather than wooded paths. The houses have the look of being too many square feet for the family they were built

for, but because of the trees do not seem quite as cramped on their sites as similar houses in First Colony and Clear Lake City.

Like all the other new towns, Kingwood is spread out in such a way that people do not need to come into contact. The sad relic of Humble, a town that once had a thriving Main Street, is not far away, stricken by a melancholy sort of emptiness that cannot compare with the hollowness of the master-planned environment. The lack of life and spontaneity in the new towns, wherever they are settled, is unsettling. While The Woodlands offers unique access to natural features and First Colony provides a cheery revival of grand landscaping, there is something mortifying about the way the new towns' evasion of the center's human problems is contingent on the invasion of the forests and fields, displacing whatever natural or landscape feature that was there and transmuting it into a name, as the ultimate act of semiotic instability.

HOUSTON'S NEW TOWNS are the latest outpost of what Robert Fishman in reference to the history of the suburbs called the "bourgeois utopia."¹² Although the 1982 film *Blade Runner* contained an advertisement for suburbs in outer space, it is difficult to imagine that real estate developers will be able to entice the middle class to move any farther than this from the center city. Yet retail establishments and jobs have followed – more than 10,000 people work at The Woodlands – making it conceivable for development to spread to an even wider orbit around these satellites.

Real estate agents in the new towns emphasize recreation and schools over all other features; the last priority in their pitch is cultural activities,¹² which are generally deferred to the center city. Seen from the new town, the center signifies poor schools, crime, and People Unlike Us. The viability of the edge plays no small part in the erosion of the center. Even the meaning of the word "center" has decayed, since one is just as likely to find a "center" on the edge.

If the new towns looked more like towns, they would not necessarily feel more like them. "Citizens make the town," Rousseau once said; but these people out on the edge, like most middle-class Americans, are perhaps too concerned about mobility, privacy, property values, and personal safety to really have time to participate in something like a community, which requires a continuous mediation of differences. For the bourgeois edge-dweller, history is a nightmare that can be awakened from as long as the mortgage payments are kept up.

New towns can be blamed for siphoning off the capital of the center and in the process helping to dissipate such notions as the public realm and civic virtue. They

are extravagantly wasteful consumers of land and resources. They reinforce social and ethnic segregation. But among the greatest disappointments of the new towns is that there is so little architecture in them. Out there where the new wealth is breeding, and where the most building is going on, the demand for architecture is, paradoxically, at its lowest and most uninspired. ■

1 In *Developing Successful New Communities* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1991), Reid Ewing identifies 58 master-planned new towns built since 1960 in the U.S. that have sufficient area, population, and diversity of functions to be called such. There are eight that merit this distinction in Texas. Nationally, the largest are Irvine, California (150,000), Coral Springs, Florida (75,000), Columbia, Maryland (72,000), Mission Viejo, California (70,000), and Reston, Virginia (53,000).

2 Kimberley Reeves, "And the Winner Is . . . Fort Bend County Master-Planned Communities," *Houston Business Journal*, 22 February 1993, p. 28. Arthur Andersen Real Estate Advisory Group data show that Houston leads the nation in sales of homes in master-planned communities.

3 Peter Rowe, *Making a Middle Landscape* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). Sharpstown was begun by Frank Sharp in 1954. It contained approximately 25,000 residences on 6,500 acres, commercial and retail space, a country club (that went bankrupt), and six schools. The developer coordinated the donation of ten miles of freeway right-of-way for U.S. 59.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 55. Rowe cites Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966).

5 Ann Holmes, "Town Without a City," *Houston Chronicle*, 1 November 1992, Texas section, p. 6: "My idea was that people would have the suburban lifestyle, in a carefully thought-out new town, and yet they want to be part of the big whole."

6 *Ibid.*, p. 8. Of 2,508 rental units in The Woodlands, 43 percent are subsidized; in Houston only 8,781 units are subsidized.

7 The Woodlands is extremely conscientious about self-assessment and completely open with its findings. Richard Browne, who worked on the Rouse development of Columbia, Maryland, during the 1960s, leads a team of planners, architects, and economists whose coherency and sense of strategies puts Houston's planning department to shame. The available statistics reveal that median household income in The Woodlands is \$50,000. First Colony claims that its median income is \$80,000; Kingwood's is \$83,000. The Woodlands gives a breakdown of its statistics, showing that elderly renters on fixed incomes lower the average and that those living in single-family dwellings average \$62,000.

8 George T. Morgan, Jr., and John O. King, *The Woodlands: New Community Development, 1964-1983* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1987), pp. 27-30. Mitchell began acquiring land in 1964. He discussed his idea in 1966 with Kamrath, who did an initial study. Cerf Ross made another plan in 1969, which was submitted to HUD. The plan was approved for further planning studies under the Title VII new towns program of 1970. Robert Hartsfield was hired away from Caudill Rowlett Scott as the new director of planning. The final planning team included Gladstone Associates of Washington, D.C., for economics and marketing, William Pereira of Los Angeles for master planning and design, Richard P. Browne of Columbia, Maryland, for development, engineering, and HUD liaison, and Wallace, McHarg, Roberts & Todd of Philadelphia for environmental planning. Pereira was chosen because of his work on the planning of Irvine, California, Gladstone and Browne for their work on Columbia. The initial plan was submitted to the federal authorities in 1971.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 34. McHarg suggested seven goals of land use: 1) minimum disruption of surface and subsurface hydrological features; preservation of natural woods; use natural drainage; preservation of existing species of vegetation; preservation of wildlife habitats; minimizing development costs; and avoiding life hazards.

10 Kimberley Reeves, "Census Indicators Put Fort Bend on Top of Houston-Area Counties," *Houston Business Journal*, 22 February 1993, p. 32.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

13 Ewing, p. 63. Ewing did a survey of marketing priorities of 27 new towns. From highest to lowest, they were recreation, location, workplaces, master plan, schools, shopping, transportation, neighborhoods, housing, and social and cultural aspects.