CHAPTER 1

Constructing the Suburbs

The suburban housing developments that have dominated the popular imagination in the years since their post–World War II heyday are a recent manifestation of a phenomenon that is neither particularly new nor uniquely American. As a number of historians have shown, most notably Lewis Mumford in his classic *The City in History* and Kenneth T. Jackson in his still-unsurpassed *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, suburbia is a social, physical, economic, ideological, and, as this book will argue, cultural formation with long and variegated roots. This chapter maps key moments and factors in the construction of what we know as the postwar American suburbs; it begins with a broad historical overview, and then proceeds chronologically through to the middle of the twentieth century. The focus is initially on material pressures and changes (for example on the effects of housing shortages and road building) and then on the causes and consequence of ideological change (in terms of gender roles and racial segregation). Throughout, my interest is in poetry’s role in constructing and disseminating an experience and understanding of suburbia. As I will argue, poetry has been implicit from the outset in contemporary suburban discourse.

**Part One: Pre–World War II Suburbs**

In the middle decades of the nineteenth century, architects and landscape designers such as Frederick Law Olmsted, Andrew Jackson Downing, and Alexander Jackson Davis created what John Archer has called a “new American planning type, the romantic suburb” (“Country” 140). Inspired,
in part, by landscaped urban parks in England and aspiring to bring together the civilized and civilizing values of the American city and the aesthetic and moral virtues of the country, the picturesque or romantic suburb offered the promise of calm, stability, and order set amidst an uplifting pastoral backdrop.

For Downing, writing in his 1842 manifesto-cum-pattern book, *Cottage Residences, or, a Series of Designs for Rural Cottages and Cottage-Villas, and their Gardens and Grounds. Adapted to North America*, “rural homes and rural life” were beneficial both to the body and the soul: “how much happiness, how much pure pleasure, … in making the place dearest to our hearts a sunny spot where the social sympathies take shelter securely under the shad-owy eaves . . . as if striving to shut out whatever of bitterness or strife may be found in the open highways of the world” (iii). His “Design 1: A Suburban Cottage for a Small Family,” situated on a $75 \times 150$ feet lot, comprises a ground floor parlor with pantry and book area; a kitchen and bedroom with four large, and one small (presumably staff) bedroom over. Throughout, simplicity and unity of design are emphasized. A garden, organized into vegetable and ornamental areas, is provided. Potential buyers are advised that “in the suburbs of a town or village, the more common kinds of vegetables may generally be purchased as cheaply as they can be raised by the inmates of such a cottage.” However, residents may like to grow their own for “satisfaction” (35–42). In *Suburban Sketches* (1871), William Dean Howells notes of his family’s relocation to the suburb of “Charlesbridge,” “We played a little at gardening, of course, and planted tomatoes, which the chickens seemed to like, for they ate them up as fast as they ripened” (14). In these as in other contemporary accounts, the suburbs are figured as a new frontier—an Eden-like space ripe for development, a testing ground for pioneering traits of independence and self-reliance, and a locus for the consolidation of a highly gendered model of space and time.

Although early American suburbs were influenced by their European counterparts, they responded to a specifically American set of pressures and needs, ranging from the spiritual and aesthetic through the practical and technological to the social and ideological. Jackson dates the first planned American suburbs to the early decades of the eighteenth century when land developers began to sell residential lots within travelling range of the fast-growing cities of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. A more systematic process of suburbanization emerged from around 1815 and proliferated across the rest of that century (K. Jackson 13). Innovations in building, specifically the introduction of the “balloon frame” from around 1840 which allowed houses to be erected quickly and cheaply and with minimum craftsman input, facilitated standardization.