CHAPTER 5

The Look of the Suburbs

From a discussion of the broad dimensions of suburban landscape, we move now to a more detailed focus on specific and iconic aspects of suburban design: the plate glass or picture window, and the lawned lot. The picture window in particular has provided a resonant metaphor for poets. On a straightforward level it has allowed them to signal metonymically the larger physical, social, and ideological environment. More subtly it has offered a way of exploring the indeterminacy of suburban space (to quote Ashbery’s “The Bungalows,” discussed earlier, “How does it feel to be outside and inside at the same time” (Selected 114)) and of experimenting with a range of different viewing positions. As the chapter proceeds, it moves from an examination of the architectural “look” of the suburbs to an exploration of the actual process of looking, and from there to a discussion of various—perhaps unexpected—voyeuristic practices as exemplified by what I am defining as a suburban flânerie. Finally, we examine the place of that other icon of suburban development, the carefully manicured suburban lawn, asking how this feature further exemplifies the surveillant culture of the postwar suburbs and what it reveals about (particularly male) experiences of the suburban day-to-day.

Architecture

By the mid-1950s, pressure on land, even in the suburbs, coupled with demand on the part of new suburbanites for additional and more flexible space for their ever-growing families led to the spread of open plan and split-level housing (Hine 52–3). Such architectural developments mimicked Frank Lloyd Wright’s innovative prewar ranch houses. His novel
reorientation of domestic space was first apparent in the open ground-floor plan of his own Oak Park home (1889–90), flourished in his developing conception of the “Prairie House” (Levine, *Architecture* 8), and exerted a strong and lasting influence on the suburban architecture of the middle decades of the twentieth century.¹ For Wright, features like open plan spaces and glass walls fulfilled aesthetic, philosophical, and even democratic functions. The prairie house was, in his words, designed in order to “bring the outside world into the house, and let the inside of the house go outside” (qtd. in Levine, *Architecture* 30)). His “Usonian Houses,” which were built from slot-together blocks aligned within a metal grid on a concrete slab, were similarly designed to invoke and maximize such “sense of space as should belong to a free people” (Wright, *Natural* 14).

Editorial features in popular magazines in the immediate postwar years, complemented by poems such as “We Must Have Homes,” discussed earlier, spoke to a mass audience and helped to pave the way for architectural, technological, and social change. A regular feature, “Homes for Modern Living” by the *Ladies’ Home Journal*’s architecture editor, Richard Pratt, showcased the kinds of homes that might be available after the war. The January 1945 contribution, “Easy to Live In,” offers a half-page photo, a detailed line plan, and an enthusiastic description of one modern, single-story, three-bedroom family home with an innovative “inward-sloping” roof (chosen because it is easier and cheaper to construct and maintain than conventional structures) and open-plan living areas designed to promote “the pleasure of family living.” “Glass walls,” which will make the house more economical to illuminate and keep warm, and “such charming features as an indoor-outdoor garden” complete the design. The title of the article, “Easy to Live In,” and references to “the living convenience” of the open-plan design, illustrate the importance to the popular imagination of what a later article in the series called “liveability” (Mercado). “Nothing like this is available now,” warns Pratt, but new manufacturing techniques and the open-mindedness of the market, or “consumer acceptance,” are all that are required to make the concept a reality. In a final attempt at selling the dream, Pratt signs off:

> Where a house this size would have been composed of fifty thousand individual parts and pieces, the parts for one like this will be numbered in the hundreds, all ready to fit and fasten into place. And the more you like the houses that are made this way, the sooner you will have them. (116)

A letter to the *Journal* of April 1945 from reader Mrs W. H. Southworth of Madison, Wisconsin, indicates that Pratt’s plea may have met its target: