

mitchellmoss.com

articles

book chapters

op-ed pieces

reports

in the news...

Suburbia Strikes Terror in New York

New York Newsday - July 8, 1993

By Mitchell Moss

For decades, Americans have been moving to the suburbs to escape the problems of the cities. A house in the suburbs is supposed to provide a haven from the crime, congestion and corruption of city life. Suburbia offers the perfect blend of rural life - as reflected in street names like "Locust Lane" or "Meadow Path" - with proximity to urban jobs and culture. Sure, one has to commute to work and buy two cars, but the benefits - especially for the kids, who have good schools, ballfields and friends from similar backgrounds - are unbeatable.

For most suburbanites, the most important political issue is maintaining the quality of life. Typically, this entails zoning regulations to preserve property values and restrictions on real estate development that would attract "undesirables" to the community. Fear of crime, the unifying theme in all suburban communities, is expressed in the widespread deployment of home alarm systems, private security guards, gated communities and, of course, watchdogs. Beneath the suburbanites' tranquility is a caldron of anxiety: Can they avoid the turmoil of the cities?

Now it seems that the pot has boiled over - but not with results that anyone anticipated. It seems that the suburbs, not the cities, have become exporters of crime and social pathology. The comfortable suburbs surrounding New York City - while safer than most inner-city neighborhoods - are no longer simply safe havens for mobsters and white-collar crooks, but sources of urban crime as well.

During the past year, bedroom suburbs have provided the setting for terrorism, illegal drug sales, sex-related murders and extortion. Suffolk County's Michael Dowd, a New York City police officer, ran a sophisticated drug and protection ring; Manhasset's Sol Wachtler conducted an extensive campaign of blackmail and extortion against his former lover, New York City resident Joy Silverman, and her daughter. From the tree-lined community of Maplewood, N.J., Nidal Ayyad, a research chemist, allegedly plotted with the group that blew up the World Trade Center, while many other New Jersey suburbanites continue to drive across the George Washington Bridge to buy drugs from dealers in upper Manhattan. And then there's Joel Rifkin, the quiet gardener from East Meadow, Long Island, who ventured to New York City to find young women whom he would subsequently murder.

Clearly, it's time to reconsider the myth of the suburbs. Their pristine facades mask a troubled social system in which the fundamental form of community control - knowing your neighbor - no longer works. You cannot judge your neighbors by the beauty of their shrubbery or by the type of automobile in the driveway. The traditional appeal of the suburbs that those around you behave like you doesn't hold up anymore. The suburbs are acquiring the same social character of big-city communities where neighbors are strangers.

Perhaps there was once a time when suburbs were idyllic communities, but if that time ever existed, it has certainly run its course. The economic pressures on two-earner households have forced child care to be contracted out to nannies or babysitters. The local schools that were once the pride of property owners are now the source of conflict over higher taxes to pay for new afterschool programs. Even in the affluent community of Manhasset, the local library no longer receives automatic approval from the voters for its capital budget. On the Gold Coast of Long Island, the shopping mall has become the adolescents' unsupervised playground.

It's time to recognize that the boundaries between New York City and its suburbs no longer insulate suburban households from contemporary social and economic pressures - or protect the city from the small, but highly visible, cadre of suburban criminals. Neither the myth of the tranquil suburb nor the popular impression of the violent city are appropriate today. Both images are defective and divert us from the need for joint city-suburban initiatives.

In the meantime, whenever I see a station wagon driving through my Manhattan neighborhood, I hold my daughter's hand a little tighter. Who knows what evil lurks in the heart of suburbia and is stalking our city's streets?

Copyright © Newsday, Inc.