The normed family

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The Normed Family
Marc Angélil & Cary Siress

Norms lay the groundwork for a social order. They are engineered not only to steer group behavior, but also to organize territory. Take the example of Levittown, one of the first planned community projects in the late 1940s devised to answer the need for housing the middle class in post-war America. The prototype was centered on a model group: the young, nuclear, Caucasian family with two to three children – a select social unit to be housed in a mass-produced, free-standing, single-family dwelling on the edge of cities. The norm became a way of life for like generations to come. The formula is seemingly simple: father works downtown and mother is at home to care for the house and kids. Given this rather straightforward blueprint, it is no wonder that the real estate venture known as ‹suburbia› spread like wildfire throughout the country, and later the world. Entire bedroom communities were stamped out, serving in the process to revitalize capitalism by fashioning a new breed of consumers, and thus create new market sectors for the car, insurance, retail, and construction industries to mention but a few. Suburbia proved to be an ideal model for developers anxious to capitalize on the nuclear family and all its associated conventions. Yet this social order was based on a divisive policy, one that excluded those who did not fit the norm. The ideal family type worked to bracket other ethnic groups – most pointedly African Americans – out of the equation as is by now well known from Levittown, which had discrimination written into its founding legislation.[1] The rationale behind this move was that it was in the ‹best interest› for business. Property values could only be maintained with the proper type of residents – no poverty, no crime, no mess. And so, segregation as a value was built into the dream of a new frontier out there beyond the city. In this sense, suburbia is only one of the more obvious missed opportunities to use norms to integrate populations rather than divide them according arbitrary standards, which serve in the end to stigmatize those outside the norm.

1 See David Kushner, ‹Levittown: Two Families, One Tycoon, and the Fight for Civil Rights in America's Legendary Suburb› (New York: Walker and Company, 2009).

Illustration: ‹Bernard Levey (& Family), nuclear family in front of their home in the new Levittown housing development in Pennsylvania›, photograph by Bernard Hoffman, courtesy Getty Images, 1950.