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# MARKETING THE MANSION:
## REPRESENTATIONS OF GENDER IN SUBURBAN ADVERTISING

Despite the ubiquitous contributions of property developers, real estate agents, and marketing professionals to the spaces of our cities, only rarely have these professions been the focus of significant academic inquiry (Perkins et al, 2008). Promotional material disseminated by these professions is critically important in shaping impressions and understandings of a development for potential buyers. The language and images used reflect not only an idealized lifestyle, but show homebuyers the 'correct' way to live in a space. Advertisements ask consumers to dream their ideal life, while simultaneously suggesting only certain ways of thinking and acting are natural (Eyles, 1987). The way a particular development is represented though advertising will have a lasting impact on the types of relationships that recur throughout the life of the space.

More than any other place, the marketing of the suburbs has been imbued with highly aspirational language and imagery (Ward, 1998). 'The home' has evolved from a physical to an emotional construct, permeated with idealized concepts of family, nature, and community, with assumed places for father, mother, and child (Ward, 1998). The problematic nature of this construction has led scholars to characterize the suburbs as an "environment… that discriminate(s) against women" (Wekerle et al, 1980, 1). Though the suburbs have been critiqued extensively as marginalizing spaces (Wekerle et al, 1980; Fava, 1980; Tuchman et al., 1979), it is rare that this critique focuses on the conceptions and representations of a development though advertising. Eyles (1987) specifically identifies the effect of marketing materials on the reproduction of gender relations as an important gap in continued suburban scholarship. Social diversity has been studied in this context (Perrott, 2007) and Kern (2009, 2010) has examined how representations of women condo buyers play into neo-liberal city building narratives. Researchers have only tangentially addressed the implications of depictions of gender in suburban marketing practices.

This study is primarily concerned with identifying how gender is represented in suburban advertising, and whether that representation has altered over time. This study uses Henri Lefebvre's concept of the produced space to understand the implications of representations on the relationships that eventually occur within that space. It examines the importance of advertising to the creation of place, and reviews briefly some studies that have addressed suburban advertisements though different lenses. This study then examines the various representations of the suburbs and their potentially problematic relationships to gender. Finally, examples of advertising from the early suburbs to modern developments are deconstructed and analysis presented.

## LIMITATIONS

Though well positioned to examine the theoretical space of suburban advertising, the scope of this paper did not allow for first hand examination of the lived space of suburban developments. Analysis that might best be served by interviews with local developers and residents was limited to interpretation of available marketing materials. As well, because of the highly localized and ephemeral nature of property advertisements, historical examples are limited and conclusions regarding greater marketing efforts are difficult to draw (Ward, 1998).

As a male renter, I exist outside of the community studied in this paper and any remarks offered will be understandably incomplete. Hopefully this will be taken as a challenge and opportunity for further study, rather than a fatal argument flaw.

## ADVERTISING, PLACE-MAKING AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Primarily, Henri Lefebvre's 1974 book The Production of Space was concerned with the question: How is space produced? (1991). Space, he argues, is a manufactured phenomenon, constructed by repeated social interactions and practices. It is not an impartial actor in the social sphere, but instead reflects a history of reciprocal socialization. The relationships that evolve between individuals and their environments are mutually reinforcing – our experience of place is a product of both our socialization and the history of social interactions that have occurred in that environment (Sahak, 2008). This is why dissimilar people can experience environments differently and marginalizing spatial practices can remain ongoing despite significant intervention. Spaces, Lefebvre posits, are not neutral. They "necessarily embrace some things

and exclude others" (1991, 99.) Urban space in particular "asserts, negates, and denies" (1991, 99). In other words, though the space of our cities may seem neutral, it affects the way we interact, perceive, and conceptualize the world around us. Spaces must be considered active social actors with agendas and often considerable influence.

Lefebvre argues that the space in society is produced by the intersection of three things – spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces (1991). The study conducted here is primarily concerned with representations of space, or "conceived space" as it has been more simply defined. Before the first shovel breaks ground, developers have already begun to produce the space of a suburban development through marketing and advertising strategies. The way a developer conceives of, and then represents a future home forms a blueprint that can have a lasting impact on the type of relationships that will recur throughout the life of the space. Eyles (1987) agrees, arguing that housing advertisements especially shape meaning-systems, or sets of ideas and values that influence the way we think and act. Specifically, advertisements that make statements about nature, tradition, history, happiness, or harmony, imply a desire for continuity and preservation of existing social relations (Eyles, 1987). "The creation of localities significantly shapes reality" (Eyles, 1987, 2) both for individuals and for greater social orders.

Though Eyles was primarily concerned with advertising as reinforcing mechanism for capitalist social infrastructure, other studies have used Lefebvre's conceptualized space concept in a manner more directly applicable to this study. Opit and Kearns (2014), for example, conducted a site-specific investigation into the meaning of "community" in suburban sales and marketing material. They found that developers who extoll the virtues of a strong, vibrant, or diverse community tend to be more in attracting a highly specific population, namely youthful, active, outgoing, white families (Opit and Kearns, 2014). By providing an example of the ideal lifestyle – the 'correct' way to live in a space – the developer is implying that individuals who do not conform may be unwanted. Opit and Kearns (2014) conclude that developers who tout "community" as a selling point of their projects are more interested in the enforcement of homogeneity, rather than an actual diversity of lifestyles. This messaging produces a marginalizing and exclusionary space that actively promotes some populations and denies others. Lefebvre would argue that this has implications beyond the selling of the last home. The

relationships presented by the developer inform a spatial practice that influences power relationships for the life of the space.

## GENDER IN SUBURBIA

The suburban ideal has always been conflated with gender-values. The home in this context, was initially presented as an extension of moral and religious spaces. Women were responsible for the bearing and rearing of children in accordance with strong moral traditions (Hayden, 2003). Though female domesticity had been an ideology since the early 1800s, it was not until around the 1870s that it was "wedded with the cult of male home ownership" (Hayden, 2003, 6). As mass transportation and access to capital expanded the market for suburban homes, representations of the gendered domestic space followed suit. It has been argued that this marriage was so complete representations of the home and inseparable from representations of gender (Saegert and Winkel, 1980).

The home is both a physical space where certain activities are performed, and a symbol of a specific set of values (Saegert and Winkel, 1980). Many argue that the idealized version of the home presented by the suburbs actively limits the ability of women to seek a broad range of roles and satisfactions. (Wekerle et al, 1980; Saegert and Winkle, 1980; Hayden, 2002; Hayden, 2003). Hayden (2003) notes specifically that women's status in society is lowest in locations where they are most separated from public life. In the context of the United States, and by extension Canada, "the suburban home is the most important way of separating women and thus lowering an individual woman's status (Hayden, 2002, 68). As a housing form, low-density suburbs create physical barriers that increase social isolation (Fava, 1980).

Not only are gendered representations of the home pervasive, they have proven remarkably resilient and averse to change. Though most women undertake some sort of paid work outside the home (Fava, 1980; Greed, 2000), suburban representations have remained largely unchanged. Only gradually have developers acknowledged that two incomes are typically required to support a suburban lifestyle. In particular, depictions of the working mother, smaller families, and the increasing frequency of divorce have been slow to penetrate advertising (Ward, 1998). Instead, developers have hidden marketing for single parents behind the guise of "starter homes" (Ward, 1998), preferring to maintain a profitable ideology and its associated problematic dualisms, rather than recognize the realties of modern households.

It is clear that home and the roles of men and women have been conflated to a point where neither is easily separated from the other. Though this study focuses exclusively on gender in the marketing of suburban homes, the discussion presented here is relevant to of all housing types and tenures.

## CONNECTING GENDER AND PRODUCTION THROUGH ADVERTISING THEMES

Perrott (2007), Eyles (1987), and Opit and Kearns (2014) conducted their studies of suburban advertising by analyzing primary source materials for written and visual themes. Similarly, this study intends to show the themes present in different eras of advertising by analyzing depictions of gender and looking for similarities. Gendered relationships are represented though advertising in many ways. The dominant themes identified by Ward (1998), Hayden (2003), and Goffman (1979) are articulated here.

**Rigid allocation of domestic roles** - As Ward (1998) describes, marketing helped pair female domesticity with male suburban ownership. In this relationship, the male figure typically portrayed as responsible for earning income while the woman is associated with unpaid domestic labours. Advertising that equates order and harmony with "proper" gender roles falls into this category.

**Family** – The way a family is depicted has implications for the "correct" way to inhabit suburban space. Single men and women might have a different connotation than nuclear families. Goffman (1979) points out that often men and sons are depicted together, as well as women and daughters. Commonly, men are pictured slightly apart from the family, invoking the role as breadwinner, rather than caregiver. Opit and Kearns (2014) indicate that traditional depictions of family indicate a desire to preserve gendered power relationships and dissuade social diversity. What form a represented family takes will be an important indicator in analysis.

**Romantic Relationships** – Today, a typical suburban family might well involve a same-sex couple or other non-traditional relationship. In 2007, survey data indicated that 51% of self-identifying LGBTQ respondents lived in suburban areas (Doan, 2007). Representations of non-normative relationships in advertising would say volumes about the types of spaces a developer

wishes to create. Exclusively representing hetero-normative displays of romance implies that there is a proper way to love, and belonging in the development requires conforming with those expectations.

**Physical Subservience** – Goffman (1979) identifies numerous specific themes of physical subservience that are commonly represented in advertising, including: 'nuzzling' or 'cuddling', wherein one partner turns into the other for protection and comfort; 'height differentiation', wherein one partner is more physically imposing than the other; and, relative location of partners in a frame used to indicate power imbalance.

**Nature and Recreation –** Though depictions of a natural backdrop for a development would seem to be at odds with the urban or suburban environment, nature has a strong influence in housing advertising. 'Home as haven' imagery has been common throughout the existence of suburbs (Ward, 1998) and has been used to represent values of health and vitality. Though not explicitly related to gender, intersectionality theory suggests that asserting dominance over the natural environment has implications for gender hegemonies as well (Mann, 2011). Opit and Kearns (2014) similarly suggest that by representing natural elements and outdoor recreations, developers are indicating a desire for homogeneity and stability rather and equality and diversity.

**The Past** – As with nature and recreation, "neo-traditionalism" would indicate an implicit desire to attract normative life practices (Opit and Kearns, 2014).

**Social Diversity –** Just as representations of LGBTQ romance or relationships would indicate an acceptance of differing sexual behaviours, representations of social diversity would imply acceptance of different cultural practices. A development that does not prescribe a correct way to life in the space, or that produces a space of tolerance, is likely to be more accepting of all marginalized populations, not just the represented one.

Though many other categories of representations could be included, these were deemed the most relevant within the context of this study.

## METHOD

Various examples of advertising for suburban developments were collected from texts, articles, and primary sources. Ward (1998) and Hayden (2003) catalogued a number of historical examples, while Perrott (2007) and Opit and Kearns (2014) were relied on for more modern representations. The websites of current Halifax developers, including Clayton Developments, Ramar Construction and Realty, and Rooftight Homes, were used to secure current primary source material.

Following the example of Perrott (2007), a content analysis was performed on gathered samples, coded using the thematic categories outlined in the previous section. Table 1 organizes the ads by their designation of historic (pre-1990) or contemporary (post-1990).

## FINDINGS

**TABLE 1: Instances of Gender Representation by Theme**

| Theme | Historic, n=12 | | Contemporary, n=31 | | Total, n=43 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rigid Domestic Roles | 9 | 75% | 3 | 10% | 12 | 28% |
| Family | 10 | 83% | 20 | 65% | 30 | 70% |
| Hetero-Normative Romance | 3 | 25% | 5 | 16% | 8 | 19% |
| Other Romance | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Physical Subservience | 5 | 42% | 8 | 26% | 13 | 30% |
| Nature and Recreation | 6 | 50% | 20 | 65% | 26 | 60% |
| The Past | 1 | 8% | 4 | 13% | 5 | 12% |
| Social Diversity | 0 | 0% | 2 | 6% | 2 | 5% |

A few noticeable trends emerge after coding and organizing occurrences of themes across historic and contemporary suburban advertisements. First, the instances of rigid gender roles and physical subservience fell noticeably over time. Representations of defined roles for men and women were nearly ubiquitous in historical advertisements, but they were rarely present in contemporary advertising. Similarly, men and women were represented with less physical differences in contemporary advertising. Depictions of family scenes were more likely to define men and women by clothing colour or activity, rather than physical stature or protective embrace.

Nearly all historic ads have some representation of family, but only half included visions of nature or recreation. More were likely to include images of relaxation than physical activity. A

type of recreation (running in the park, walking the dog, playing in a field, etc.) accompanied many of the family depictions in contemporary ads. Romance was more represented in older advertisements than in new, but in both cases, was always between a man and a woman.

The past was only minimally represented, though it was invoked in the majority of ads for one specific development in Perrott's study. Social diversity was only represented in one contemporary development and otherwise was not present. Figures 1 to 5 provide examples of representative selection of advertisements drawn from multiple sources and times.


**Figure 1:** "It's a promise!",1940s (Hayden, 2003, 8)

Figure 1 depicts a World War II serviceman promising his wife or sweetheart a house full of GE appliances after the war is won. This exemplifies the cult of male home ownership described by Hayden (2003). The man is purchasing the home for her. They are not purchasing the home together. There is also an implied domestic future for the wife, given her apparent excitement over kitchen appliances. This ad also shows example of physical subservience, as the woman is both smaller in stature and cuddling her husband. Finally, there is a clearly implied hetero-normative romantic relationship. Though not explicitly for a housing development, this ad is exemplary of themes throughout suburban advertising.

Figure 2 evokes the full suburban package. Though the advertisement has faded, the ordered, plentiful life provided by a suburban home is evident. The husband has clearly just arrived home to his waiting family and lit his pipe in the back garden sunshine while his wife and daughter attend to him. Again we see the common themes of family, gender subservience, and rigid gender roles. Figure 2 also brings nature into the suburban ideal as the husband relaxes, surrounded by gardens and sunshine.

Figure 3 offers a different depiction, perhaps of the next morning. This scene shows the suburban ritual as the male providers depart Hounslow to take the Underground to the city. Wives stand on the front porch to kiss them and wave goodbye. The only lone female appears to be stooped and carrying a large suitcase. Evidently she is not as carefree as the men leaving for work, or the women staying behind.


**Figure 2:** Building Society, 1930s
(Ward, 1998, 130)

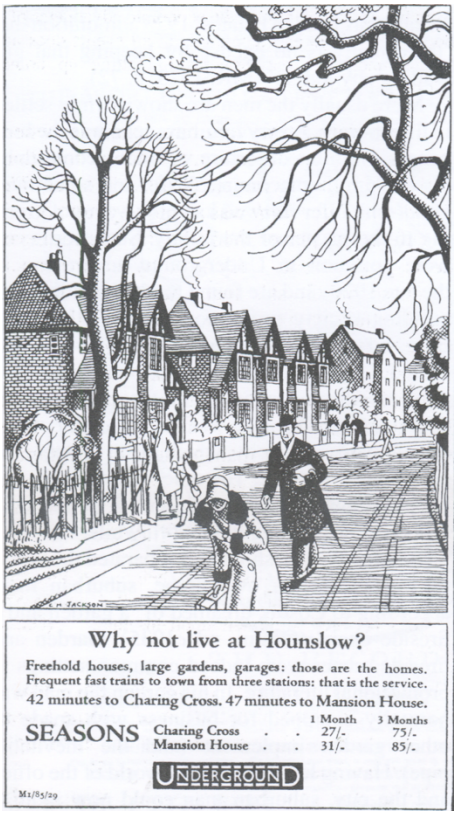


**Figure 3:** Morning in Hounslow, 1929
(Ward, 1998, 130)

Figure 4 is representative of the more simplistic messaging present in contemporary advertising. A man and women in an implied relationship simply frolic in a green field. There is no information about the housing development, just a message about the ideal lifestyle to be lived. To live in this development, one should be in a relationship with a tradition hetero-normative partner, and be fit, healthy, and happy. Note the blue and pink shirts, so the audience can be sure which is the man and which the woman.

**Figure 4: Happy Couple**
(Perrott, 2007, 41)

Figure 5 is one of the few representations of racial diversity in the sample images. Though more progressive in that aspect, the mother and grandmother pictured in the ad for the Waterberry Park community are depicted in the role of caregiver. Again, the imagery is much more specific, selling an ideal more directly than a home. The complete set of examples used for this study are included in Appendices A, B, and C.


**Figure 5:**
**Three Generations**
(Clayton Developments, 2016, retrieved from http://www.claytondev.com)

ANALYSIS

A cursory glace at the collected advertising materials would be enough to lend legitimacy to the claim of Saegert and Winkel (1980): the ideal of home is completely inseparable from gender. Nearly every suburban advertising document, save those that present only information on the physical aspects of the house, had obvious and potentially profound consequences for equitable relationships that try to develop in the space of the suburb. Not only are women continually represented as domestic creatures, they are often shown as physically subservient, and allowed very little autonomy of movement or action. Especially in older advertisements, gender roles are rigidly prescribed. Given the conclusion of numerous authors that the suburb limits the ability of women to pursue satisfactions outside the home, it would appear that Lefebvre is at least partially correct. Conceptions and representations affect the eventual relationships that occur in a space. Space is and can be produced.

The nature of gender depictions in advertisements has changed since the inception of the suburbs. Certainly more specific portraits of rigid gender stereotypes are of less frequency, though references to an "ideal" past have increased. The messaging contained in newer advertisements is much more simple, reliant on values conjured through images, rather than obvious and specific scenes. In some ways, this is actually more troubling. As suburban homes become less distinguishable by location or floorplan, developers have to more rigorously apply meaning-systems to differentiate otherwise similar projects. It is easier to see problematic representations in the ads of the past, but difficult to distinguish greater significance in a subtle meaning-system. Rooftight Homes, for example, markets itself as Halifax's "exclusive woman-centric home builder" (Rooftight, 2016). While this may sound promising, further advertising material does not invoke the feminist reimagining of the suburb discussed by Hayden (1981), the anti-patriarchal design process envisioned by Friedman (1999), or even simply housing for women who choose not to marry or are divorced. Beyond the "woman-centric" line, Rooftight appears to be selling the same product as other developers, one "with popular design features for the growing family focused on providing utmost convenience, comfort and true usability" (Rooftight, 2016). Opit and Kernes conclude that advertising that promotes difference is often a sales tactic for continued homogeneity. Though suburban advertising has perhaps become subtler, it is still largely creating a marginalizing space for women and other populations of difference.


**Figure 5: Woman-Centric** (Rooftight Homes, 2016, retrieved from http://www.rooftight.ca )

## CONCLUSION

The way developers and marketing specialists conceive of and represent the spaces of our cities has implications on the relationships and power structures that will inform the lived experience of developments. The suburbs are especially imbued with powerful statements about gender and the roles of men and women. This study indicated that representations often imply the "correct" way to live in a development is to conform to stereotypical gender roles wherein women are limited to a domestic, caregiving existence. Men and women who desire more egalitarian relationships and more satisfying and realized identities must also begin the process of reexamining the physical and symbolic ideal of home.

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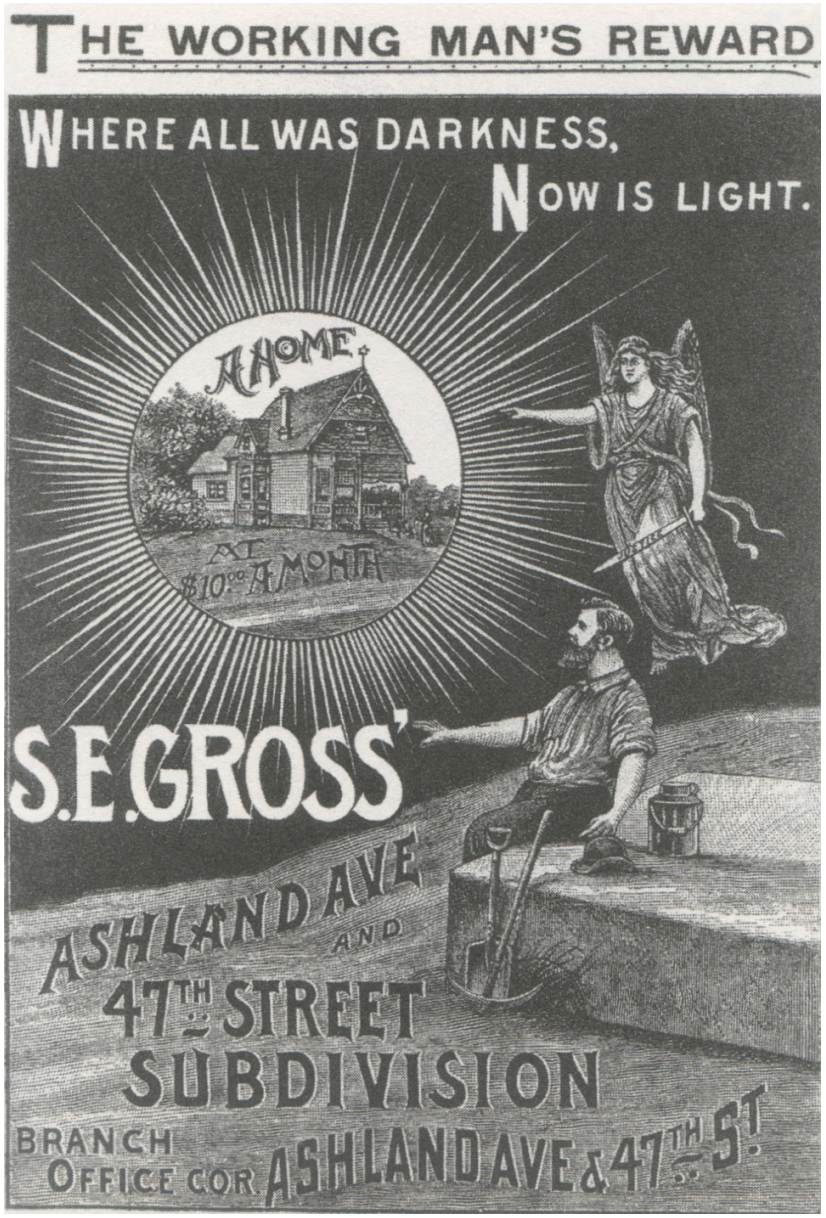
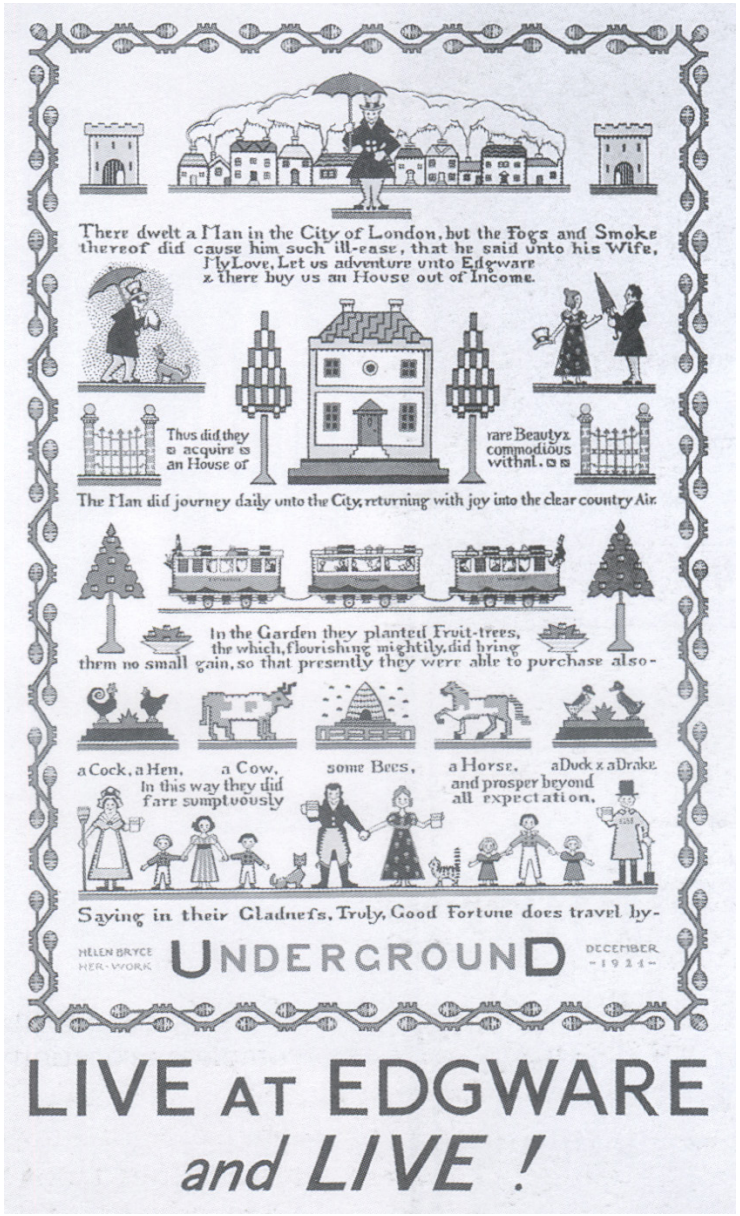
"It's a Promise!", 1940s (Hayden, 2003, 8)

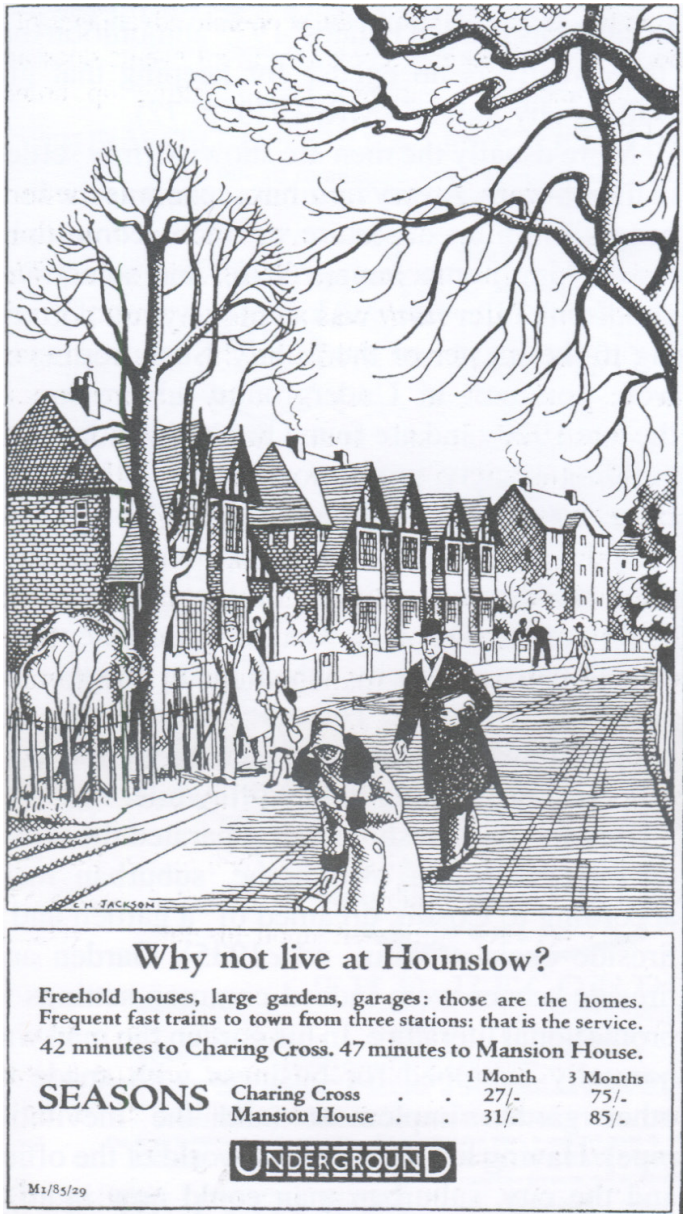



"The Working Man's Reward", 1891 (Hayden, 2003, 7)


"This Happiness...", 1930s (Ward, 1998, 130)

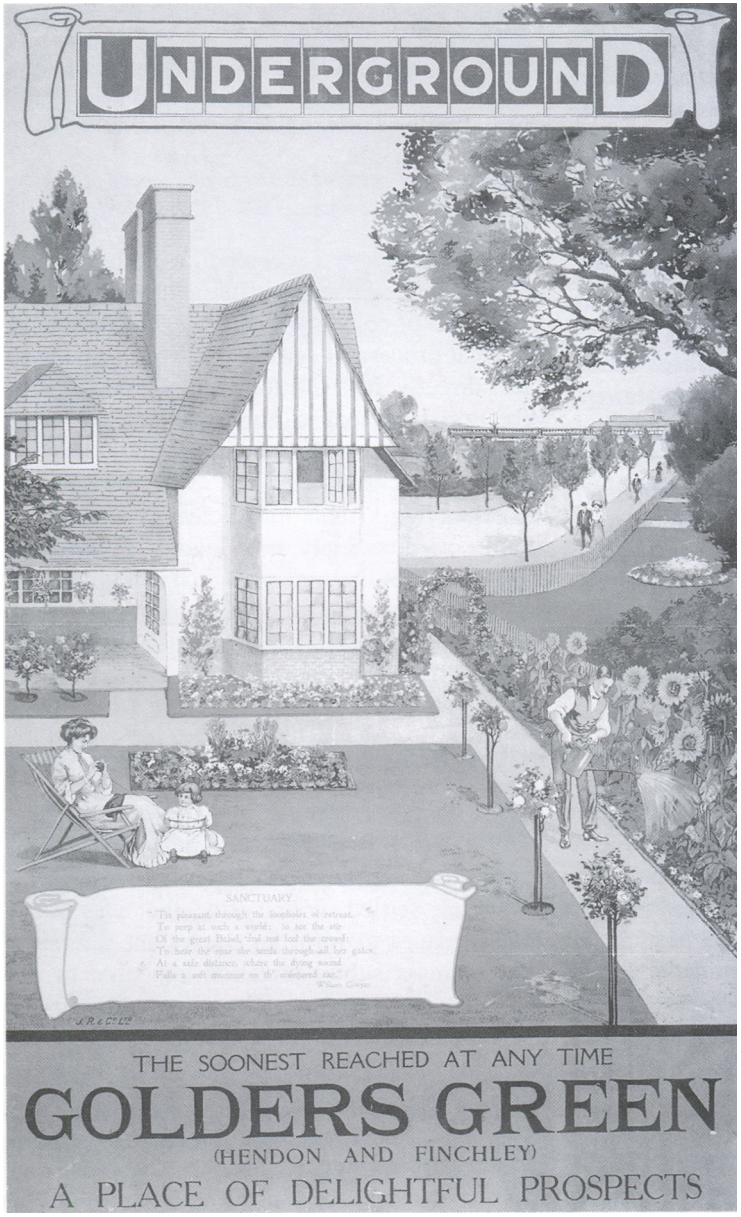



"Live at Edgware", 1925 (Ward, 1998, 118)




"Morning in Hounslow", 1929 (Ward, 1998, 136)

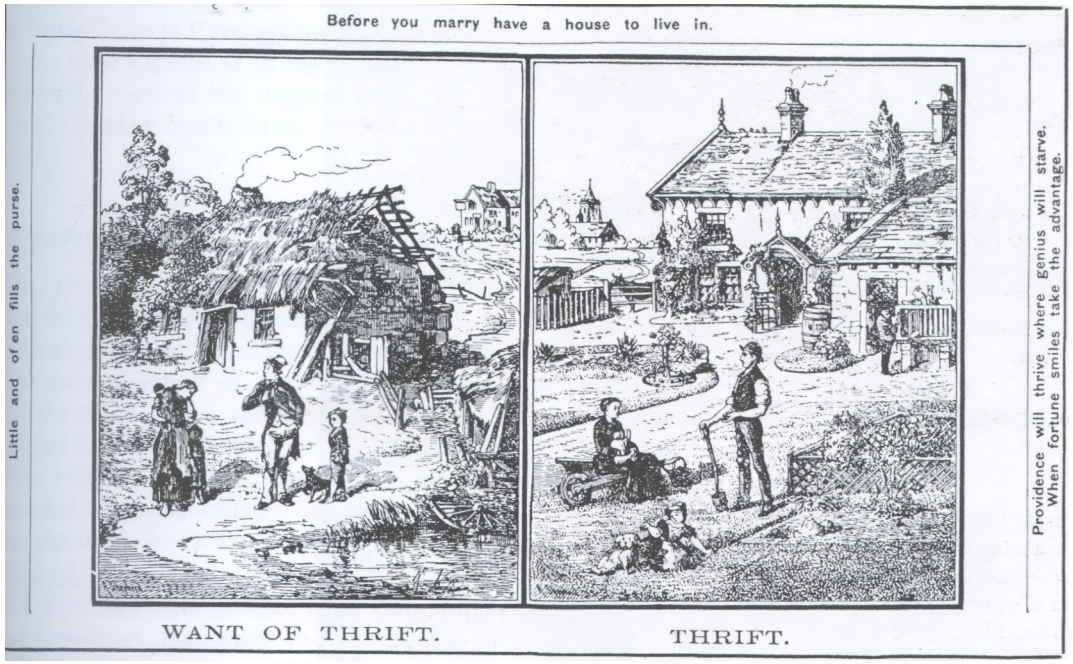

"The Nest", 1920s (Ward, 1998, 127)




"Golders Green", 1908 (Ward, 1998, 116)


"The Castle", 1930s (Ward, 1998, 131)


"Virgin Soil", 1891 (Ward, 1998, 120)

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"Suburban Dream", 1939 (Gardiner, 2010)
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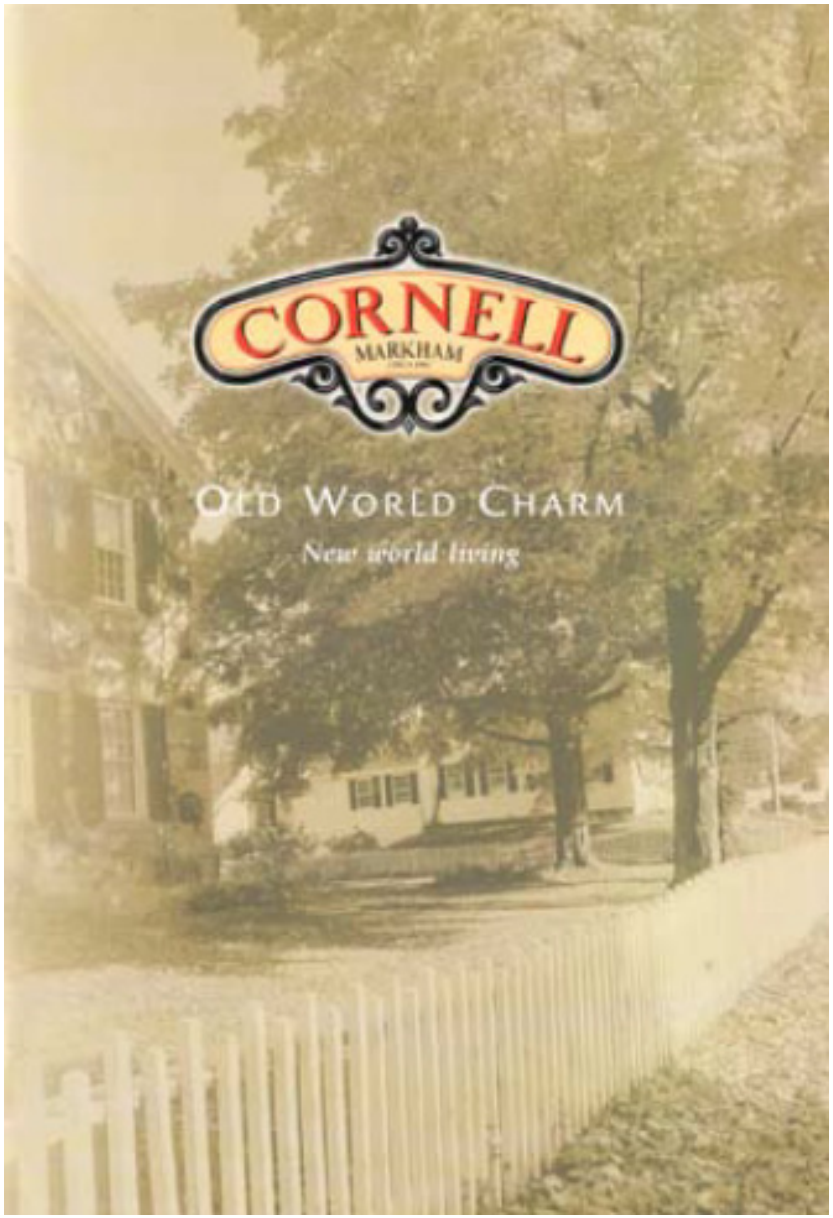



Advertisements in Cornell, Ontario, 2000s (Perrott, 2007)



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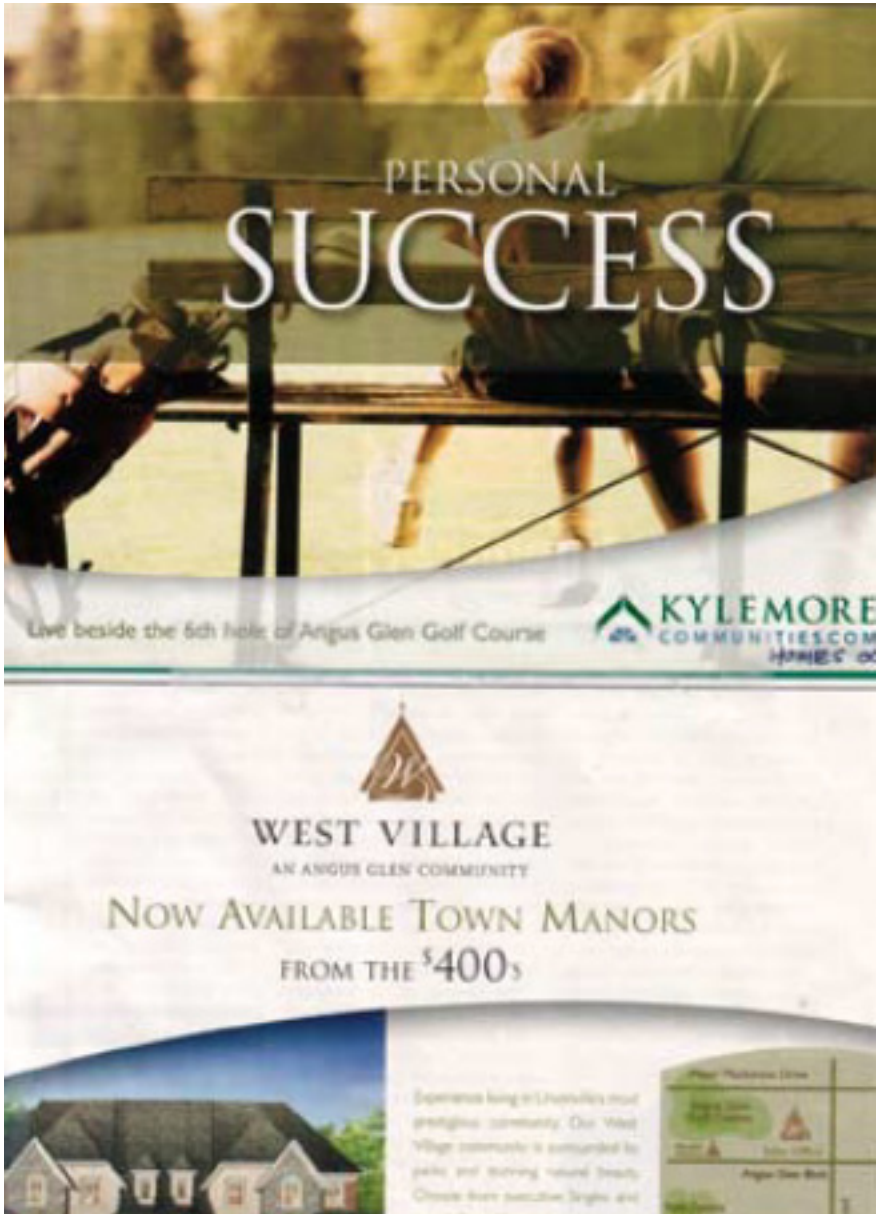


Advertisements in Ontario, 2000s (Perrott, 2007)





Advertisements in Auckland, NZ, 2014 (Opit and Kearns, 2014)


Clayton Developments, 2016
Retrieved from: http://www.claytondev.com




Clayton Developments, 2016
Retrieved from: http://www.claytondev.com

Ramar Construction, 2016
Retrieved from: http://www.ramar.ca


Ramar Construction, 2016
Photo by author