Book Review of *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania*. Edited by Dianne Harris, Foreword by Dell Upton. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010.

Jennifer McStotts

As scholars under the interdisciplinary umbrella of urban studies begin both to contextualize their work with a regional or metropolitan approach on the one hand and to focus their work with a suburban studies approach on the other, it is fascinating to see a case study like *Second Suburb: Levittown, Pennsylvania* emerge and accomplish so much in one volume. What editor Dianne Harris endeavored to composite was a close reading of this Levittown—the second Levitt-planned community—as a text. As such the focus of the book is not on the context of Levittown, PA but on the community, its history, its construction and physical form, and its functional and social evolution.

As Peter Fritzsche writes in the epilogue: “In the 1950s, suburbia was premised on a kind of immunity from the problems of the city. And it retailed vague memories of once having been at home in small towns nestled in the countryside a generation or two earlier.” It can be difficult to place an unincorporated, planned community like Levittown, PA—given its unrivaled scale, its middle density, and its restrictive covenants—on the multidimensional spectrums from urban to rural, suburban or exurban, utopian dream or homogenous nightmare, reality or nostalgia, marketing or experience, social engineering or human nature. What Harris and her contributors seem to have intended was a specific and objective presentation (sometimes without argument) of the way in which Levitt & Sons produced the development and how it was populated and used. The authors neither vilify nor glorify the Levitts for their work or for their racially exclusionary practices, admitting that the company’s principals were neither inventors nor pioneers but unparalleled in their refinements of the planning, design, construction, and merchandising processes of moderate-income housing.

Because of its tight focus, *Second Suburb* isn’t a definitive work on urban (or suburban) studies, on race, class or any one of the contributing disciplines, but it is, nonetheless, an excellent resource for any urban studies or planning library, especially those interested in race, class, the suburban post-war boom, Northern integration, and planned communities. The book presents a thorough history of one place, exemplary of American suburbanization in that time and

region. What makes the book so unique is its focused and multifaceted approach to such a specific subject.

I imagine that structuring a case study of this scale must have been a challenge, and the solution Harris adopted was to move the reader from an internal to an external perspective on Levittown, from primary to secondary sources. Within the former are oral histories and personal recollections, including original archival research and interviews, excerpted memoirs, and the graphic reflections of artist and Levittown, NY resident Bill Griffith. For those most interested in accounts of working- and middle-class life, mid-century suburban construction, and Northern racial tension, the book is worth examining for these materials alone. In the second part, the scholarly essays move contemporaneously from general to specific topics and from the beginning of Levittown to today. While this works, overall, it presumes the reader comes upon the original materials earlier in the book with a basic understanding of the Levitts, Levittowns, and suburban development in the mid-twentieth century. (If used as a case-study text in a general urban studies or planning course, it might be useful to begin with Richard Longstreth's context-setting history — chapter six — instead of the earlier chapters).

That said, each of the selections presents unique contributions to suburban studies. Three focus on the site's history, including Longstreth's start-to-finish contextual presentation and two chapters on the race and gas riots in Levittown. Three other essays focus on the formal manifestation of Levittown, PA: how architecture reflected class; specifically how Levittown status was reflected in kitchen design, as was the Levitts' desire to cater to the housewife; and how Levittown, PA in particular had a lasting influence on American architecture through post hoc studies of its design. Within these chapters are figures of floor plans built in Levittown — some original, some recreated — as well as many excellent photographs of individual houses, streetscapes, and aerial views of various stages of development. One standout chapter by Christopher Sellers addresses the intersection of suburban values and environmentalism, beginning to address that Bucks County, the site of Levittown, has come to be known for its environmentally progressive policies. Harris and her contributors have illuminated the facets of what she describes as a lost gem, the lesser-known second Levittown. While I wished for contextual introduction sooner in the book, such as a beginner's tour of Levittown (both as a concept and this particular instance), *Second Suburb* is nonetheless a fascinating read, well-documented and vividly illustrated. It takes the reader into a unique moment of American suburbanization, and it is a necessary addition to any American urban history reading list. It would, I believe, be a valuable text for planning courses on suburban

development or for advanced urban studies courses examining race, class, and community outside of the urban core.