

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Dianne Harris**, *Little White Houses: How the Postwar Home Constructed Race in America*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8166-5456-7 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-5332-4 (cloth)

It may be surprising to most readers that one of the most ubiquitous features of residential landscapes all across the United States has received so little scholarly attention as to be almost invisible – the ordinary postwar house. Dianne Harris' new book ably challenges this entrenched invisibility on at least two significant fronts: first, the fundamental lack of focus on articulations between race and architecture, especially in the historical accounts of mid-century suburban landscapes; second, the often missing analysis of built environments on the part of historians and others interested in the formation of popular racial thinking – even in the places such as newly developing mid-century suburbs, where nonwhite exclusion was most pervasive. Harris uncovers a fascinating and detailed history of such quotidian structures as split-levels, ramblers, and other styles of houses designed and built in the years between 1945 and 1960. These were critical years for solidifying ideas about home with the convergence of a massive building boom, increasing federal support for home ownership, emerging national popular media such as television, and changing conceptions of race and ethnicity leading up to the civil rights era. The book aims to dismantle the perceived naturalness of white middle class domestic life at this time, by showing the multiple ways representations of ordinary houses were carefully constructed worlds of invisibility and exclusion – of people of color, working classes, immigrants, and those outside the narrow gender and sexuality confines of the time.

Whereas architects and architectural historians have on the most part been interested in innovations in form, materials, and other design issues, Harris posits that we cannot understand mid-century houses or the processes of their representation (and their lasting effects) without

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situating analysis beyond this dominant view that “implicitly accepted racially restricting covenants and the social armature of the pre-civil rights era” (p.109). She draws on theories of cultural representation, race and ethnicity, as well as architecture and space, to develop a detailed look at how whiteness, home ownership, and citizenship became primary means through which American domesticity was valued at this time. Through this historical work, Harris analyzes and critiques the ways these houses and their representations in mass-media – a form of “spatial rhetorics” – have been implicated in the making of a racialized iconography of white American domesticity. In order to do this, Harris takes a different tack than most related studies which have been preoccupied with suburban planning and development at a regional scale. The book is organized by chapters focused on an interweaving of source materials (magazines, television programming, architectural drawings and graphics), concepts of home (privacy, consumption and identity), and domestic materials and spaces (storage and display, the yard). Drawing on her training as an architectural historian, Harris deftly analyzes both the houses, their contents, and their exterior domestic spaces depicted in various forms of representations, as well as the representations themselves in their broader contexts.

For scholars who are specialists in critical race theory, architectural or landscape history, or urban geographies and housing in the United States, portions of the broad conceptual entry points will be quite familiar. But the important work of this book is the way Harris weaves these together through her innovative and detailed analysis. That race is a fluid and socially constructed constellation of practices, experiences, and categories, and that culture and space are constitutive of one another will not be new to most readers from American studies, ethnic studies, and human geography; for many architectural historians, as Harris flags, this approach may be more novel. Harris writes, “If it seems to some readers that I see race everywhere in this study, perhaps my view can serve as a necessary corrective to the extensive body of architectural

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histories that have seen race nowhere” (p.3). In addition, Harris complicates the tendency to see this era of housing in terms of narrow definitions of white and nonwhite by analyzing popular and scholarly understandings of status symbols and the importance of home furnishings for new immigrants during these years, as well as how these visual codes were taken up and transformed in the production of national representations of ordinary houses.

One of the most significant contributions of the book has to do with casting *the house* itself as the central character. This makes possible two productive and innovative shifts in scale from more conventional understandings of suburban and urban geographies during these years (1945-1960): scaling up and down from the usual registers in which these residential landscapes have been studied. Domestic life in this historical time is very often drawn at the scale of a newly built cul de sac or a wide streetscape – in popular as well as scholarly imaginations. In these renderings, the everyday environs of home remain a kind of ticky-tacky black box surrounded by a moat of lawn. Harris’ approach shifts focus to the house itself, and includes detailed accounts of debates within design and magazine circles about the innards of these houses – for example, strategies to deal with the challenges of desiring increasing privacy while living in open plan designs, how to store burgeoning collections of consumer goods, and the ways relationships between interior and exterior embodied exclusionary practices on several scales. Harris’ handling of the house, its contents, and its immediate surroundings provides a means to see much more fine-grained detail, and to break out of familiar tropes. At the same time, by looking specifically at the house as rendered through popular magazines destined for a *national* audience, Harris shifts discussions of suburbs and suburbia as part and parcel of regional development dynamics in the other direction. This enables thinking the ordinary postwar house as one key node of nationally produced and distributed iconographies of domestic whiteness – again unsettling the sometimes stalled analysis of suburban landscapes where the house is seen merely as a

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component of broader patterns of territorial exclusion through lending and real estate policies and practices.

To focus the central argument of a book on particular visual and material fields and *not* present a gorgeous assemblage of text and image would be a shame. This is certainly not the case here. *Little White Houses* invites fascination with and serious consideration of the material worlds depicted within the images, as well as the images themselves – a hallmark of Harris’ training as an architectural historian, and one of the major strengths of her overall approach. The book itself is beautifully designed, and includes many representative illustrations discussed in the text and accompanied by detailed captions. Photographs from various archives and of contemporary homes built in the 1950s and other settings relevant to the discussions provide additional illustrations. For example, in chapter two, concerned with the development of visual codes in magazines depicting white domesticity, the images themselves contribute further dimension to the argument that these kinds of publications “form...a vast and significant archive for understanding the cultural work performed by houses and house interiors, as well as the representations of those sites” (p.81). Meticulous care was expended by magazine editors and others to ensure such representations were inhabited exclusively by white people conveying heteronormative and middle class signifiers. Staged photographs from the era showing prominently featured magazine racks in a variety of settings – professional photographs of an architect’s living room, shelves in built-in bookcases, tabletop displays – are highly effective at conveying the significance of magazines in general, as well as the practices of representation at work in and through them, and in so doing enrich the discussion in the text.

Long-running tensions about the relationship between ideological fields and how they may be taken up by people living their lives within them circulate beneath the text. Does the consumption of popular culture entail some degree of awareness and criticism? How are

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ideological frameworks distorted to enable their continual reproduction? Harris discusses these tensions early on, and clearly outlines the scope of this project as centered primarily on representations, rather than lived experiences. She writes, “I do not presume that Americans were naïve or completely unable to see or recognize the exclusionary rhetoric that was embedded in these cultural forms – instead, I work from a belief that the vast majority of Americans knew and deeply understood the economic value, political authority, and social clout invested in white identities” (p.12). Harris analyzes the sociospatial relationships built right into the house itself, and the exclusionary context in which the construction of these houses was made possible. This approach creates an interesting blur between material, visual, and imaginary worlds. And one that cries out for a host of subsequent fine-grained questions about how people inhabited and experienced these domestic environs. This is not her immediate project, but Harris’ important work provides a foundational terrain from which to explore, elaborate and complicate such questions.

Despite the primary focus on representations, Harris poignantly gestures towards lived experiences through memories of her grandparents’ own ‘ordinary house’ in California’s San Fernando Valley, where they lived after leaving Germany in 1933 and becoming established in the United States. Each chapter begins with a vignette based on their experiences settling into, furnishing, maintaining, and living their lives in their own house and yard. As Jewish immigrants, they navigated life in a landscape of single family houses, striving to fit in to the sorts of representations Harris analyzes in this book, and also to develop their own individual and meaningful domestic life. The stakes were high – “to be seen as other than white could be perilous and costly in a climate of nationwide and institutionalized racism, where anyone seen as ‘other’ could be denied housing, services, and societal benefits” (p.x) – and so, Harris’ grandparents’ home became an important domain through which to practice white identity.

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In the preface, Harris writes, “This book began as my way of trying to understand how seeing, reading, thinking about, and living in postwar domestic environments helped my grandparents and many others of their generation know what it meant to be a new citizen of the United States and how they navigated the waters of belonging in a country that appeared to offer, but clearly did not offer, equal opportunity for all” (p.x). Unfolding well beyond this evocative and moving personal entry point, Harris has contributed a major shift in perspective toward new and important ways to understand the history of postwar housing in the United States.

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