



# Suburban Dreams: Imagining and Building the Good Life (Albma Rhetoric Cult & Soc Crit)

*Greg Dickinson*

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*Jane Jacobs Urban Communication Book Award finalist*

Starting with the premise that suburban films, residential neighborhoods, chain restaurants, malls, and megachurches are compelling forms (*topos*) that shape and materialize the everyday lives of residents and visitors, Greg Dickinson's *Suburban Dreams* offers a rhetorically attuned critical analysis of contemporary American suburbs and the "good life" their residents pursue.

Dickinson's analysis suggests that the good life is rooted in memory and locality, both of which are foundations for creating a sense of safety central to the success of suburbs. His argument is situated first in a discussion of the intersections among buildings, cities, and the good life and the challenges to these relationships wrought by the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The argument then turns to rich, fully-embodied analyses of suburban films and a series of archetypal suburban landscapes to explore how memory, locality, and safety interact in constructing the suburban imaginary. Moving from the pastoralism of residential neighborhoods and chain restaurants like Olive Garden and Macaroni Grill, through the megachurch's veneration of suburban malls to the mixed-use lifestyle center's nostalgic invocation of urban downtowns, Dickinson complicates traditional understandings of the ways suburbs situate residents and visitors in time and place.

The analysis suggests that the suburban good life is devoted to family. Framed by the discourses of consumer culture, the suburbs often privilege walls and roots to an expansive vision of worldliness. At the same time, developments such as farmers markets suggest a continued striving by suburbanites to form relationships in a richer, more organic fashion.

Dickinson's work eschews casually dismissive attitudes toward the suburbs and the pursuit of the good life. Rather, he succeeds in showing how by identifying the positive rhetorical resources the suburbs supply, it is in fact possible to engage with the suburbs intentionally, thoughtfully, and rigorously. Beyond an analysis of the suburban imaginary, *Suburban Dreams* demonstrates how a critical engagement with everyday places can enrich daily life. The book provides much of interest to students and scholars of rhetoric, communication studies, public memory, American studies, architecture, and urban planning.

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