



PRESS CONFERENCE

Tuesday, 19 March at 11:00 · Foyer of the CCCB
Streaming via [the CCCB's YouTube channel](#)

The “American dream” can be summed up in a mental image that seems frozen in time: a home of one’s own, surrounded by lawns, with a pool in the back garden and a couple of cars slumbering in the garage. *Suburbia. Building the American Dream* traces the cultural history of a lifestyle ideal shared far and wide by literature, television, advertising and cinema, and analyses the most controversial aspects of an urban planning model that has spread beyond US territory and reached our shores.

Journalist [Philipp Engel](#) curates this exhibition that runs at the CCCB from 20 March to 8 September 2024. In the final section, geographer [Francesc Muñoz](#) collaborates as adviser on this model in the local context.

Suburbia. Building the American Dream draws us into the imaginary of the idyllic family home and shows how this lifestyle has been sold and promoted by fiction and the entertainment industry. The exhibition goes back to the origins of residential neighbourhoods in the early nineteenth century, explains how they developed massively in the 1950s, and reviews the economic, political and social context of their relentless expansion across the United States.

Since the 1990s most of the American population has lived in this sprawling urban mass that has continued to spread, even beyond US borders. At a time when more and more families are pursuing their own version of the dream on city outskirts, the exhibition analyses the contradictions of an urban planning model based on social, ethnic and gender segregation. It also shows the impact of this highly unsustainable model, based on constant car use, with examples of developments around Barcelona and Madrid.

With abundant historical material, photographs, paintings, audiovisuals, literature, works of art and everyday objects, the exhibition situates us in the mental paradise of the model of residential development inspired by American suburbia, and invites us to rethink the value of the city and public space today.

Suburbia. Building the American Dream decodes an almost abstract landscape that is still valid in pop culture. It does so through the work of foremost creators who help us take a critical look at the famed American way of life. It includes works by **Jessica Chou, Gregory Crewdson, Thomas Doyle, Gerard Freixes, Gabriele Galimberti, Weronicka Gęsicka, Benjamin Grant, Todd Hido, Joel Meyerowitz, Matthias Müller, Blanca Munt, Alberto Ortega, Bill Owens, Sheila Pree Bright, León Siminiani, Amy Stein, Greg Stimac, Angela Strassheim, Deborah Stratman, Ed & Deanna Templeton, Kate Wagner and Christopher Willan**, among others.

SECTIONS OF THE EXHIBITION

1. PLANNING A DREAM



When the Industrial Revolution reached the USA in the first half of the 19th century, big cities became engines of progress, but they were also seen as dangerous places, in contrast with the opulent nature of the New World. With the emergence of the railway, the tram and the automobile, the mobility revolution prompted the gradual colonization of city outskirts, transforming the countryside into residential neighbourhoods.

From Llewellyn Park (New Jersey) to Tuxedo Park (New York), throughout the 19th century the first gated communities began to pop up across the United States. At the end of the century, after the West was won, the appearance of the tram gave the middle classes access to the periphery, giving rise to a new type of housing that led to an orderly arrangement of city grids. But it wasn't until the popularization of the famous Ford Model T that the US landscape was radically transformed, crisscrossed by roads that became freeways. The automobile became a symbol of freedom, marking the birth of the suburbs that were to spring up everywhere.

This first section includes historical material like the original lithograph "View of New York" by **John William Hill** (1836); *The American Woman's Home* by **Catharine Beecher**, the bible of "domestic feminism"; a Ford T Touring (1923) produced by General Motors, and films like *The Suburbanite* (1908), among other **Harold Lloyd** and **Buster Keaton** classics.

2. THE SUBURBAN BOOM



The suburban explosion was first and foremost demographic, occurring as World War II soldiers returned, eager to set up home. There was no room for them in the crowded cities. With the support of the state, which offered generous loans, suburbs were built using the Fordist assembly-line production logic. It was the “American way of life”, the start of a collective dream that fascinated the whole world.

And so the baby boom took place in 11 million single-family homes fitted with all kinds of electrical domestic appliances, presided over by a brand new television set on which the new suburbanites watched idealized versions of themselves with identical skin colour and the same war experiences, age, mortgage and feeling of uprootedness. The media echoed this phenomenon, and

cinema and literature reflected this standardized landscape in which a wife waited at home for her husband with a drink for him in her hand, children went everywhere by bicycle, and everyone had barbecues on Sundays.

Sponsored by the state, Suburbia became a paradise that excluded racial minorities. But little by little, by the sixties, the gates of paradise were opened to African Americans and other minorities, giving rise to a white exodus, the white flight.

As well as a variety of historical material, this section reviews sitcoms portraying the suburbs, from the 1940s to the present day. It also includes the famous illustration “New Kids in the Neighborhood” by **Norman Rockwell** and a broad selection of the photographs that make up **Bill Owens’ Suburbia** (1972), the first book of photographs about this American urban planning model.

3. THE RESIDENTIAL NIGHTMARE

And night fell on Suburbia. What had been a dream became a nightmare. The idea of a safe, healthy, happy place was gradually contaminated with fears, terrors and paranoias. Doors were bolted and alarms installed. After all, in the American Gothic tradition, the house, often haunted, had always been a source of horror—evil lurked there. With the appearance of mass-produced housing, a new subgenre called Suburban Gothic was consolidated, and began to manifest itself both in literature and in cinema. Unlike the traditional Gothic, in this new landscape the family residence was no longer tied to a specific territory, as it had been in New England; now, with its white picket fence and green lawn, it could be anywhere in the country. And evil came from outside, it threatened to invade the home and even undermine it. Under the guise of shiny normality, American suburbs always conceal cracks through which terror creeps.



To illustrate this residential nightmare, we take in historical materials of the atomic age, photographs of the dark side of suburbia by **Amy Stein**, **Todd Hido**, **Gregory Crewdson**, **Angela Strassheim** and **Gabriele Galimberti**, and **Kate Wagner**'s installation, "McMansionHell". **Alberto Ortega**, an artist from Seville resident in the US who has devoted himself to painting the suburbs at night, presents two works for the first time at the CCCB.

4. POST-SUBURBIA?



The appearance of New Urbanism in the 1990s began to herald the inevitable death of Suburbia due to the announced depletion of oil that has not yet occurred. Meanwhile, Suburbia continues to spread, transform and diversify. Today, 8 out of 10 Americans live in sprawl and single-family homes, representing 75% of the residential areas where new generations continue to dream of living. This is a new suburbia that is more open but also more unequal.

This suburb is made up of very diverse communities, as captured by the cameras

of the photographers **Sheila Pree Bright** (who portrays African American life around Atlanta) and **Jessica Chou** (who immortalizes the Asian community in Monterrey Park, California). New lifestyles also proliferate there, like at Huntington Beach, a "contemporary suburb" and surfing capital featured in the works of artist and skateboarder **Ed Templeton**.

This section also focuses on the environmental impact of this highly polluting city model, through the apocalyptic bonsai of artist **Thomas Doyle** and the satellite photographs of **Benjamin Grant**, a lethal panorama of the effects of the sprawling city.

5. SPRAWL REACHES OUR SHORES

The formation of Suburbia as a cultural phenomenon in Catalonia is a reality historically ignored by narratives about the Catalan process of urbanization, too focused on city growth and the ideological differentiation between an urban, Barcelona-based Catalonia and an "inner" Catalonia, the birthplace of what still today we call the "countryside".



Suburban Catalonia shows how, in many territories, urban growth no longer corresponds to the well-known metaphor of city growth as an "oil stain". In fact, an endless mass of oil stains has spread across the territory, giving rise to the same cloned reality everywhere: regional urban sprawl. The sprawl that is so commonplace today developed with the motorization of society starting in the latter half of the 20th century as part and parcel of a very heterogeneous cultural discourse: the ideological propaganda of the American way of life mixed with local traditions derived from criticism of

the built-up, crowded industrial city popularly disseminated in expressions such as “*la caseta i l’hortet*” (a little house and a garden) that idealized rural life. The path leading from those initial suburban choices to today’s regional urban sprawl is not a straight one, making the Catalan suburb a world yet to be discovered.

Christopher Willan has made a photographic reportage about the Catalan suburban world specially for the exhibition, which also includes **Blanca Munt**’s installation “Mira-Sol Alert” about the neighbourhood’s paranoid state of alert and an audiovisual piece by filmmaker **León Siminiani** that closes the exhibition.

CURATORS OF THE EXHIBITION

PHILIPP ENGEL

Graduate in Modern Literature from the University of Toulouse, with a thesis on Bret Easton Ellis. After ten years in the music sales and distribution business, he started to work as a cultural journalist, specializing in cinema and literature. He is currently a contributor to various periodicals, such as *Cultura(s)*, *El Mundo*, *Cinemanía*, *Sofilm* and *Coolt*.

FRANCESC MUÑOZ

Advisor of the fifth and final section of the exhibition, “Sprawl reaches Our Shores”.

Lecturer in Urban Geography, director of the Observatory of Urban Planning at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, and teacher at the Università IUAV di Venezia, where he regularly gives seminars. He has received prizes such as the Prize for the Best Doctoral Thesis Attending to Human Values in Engineering (UPC, 2004) and the Bonaplata Award for the exhibition *The Light Factory*, about the power station in Sant Adrià de Besòs (2014).

He has curated shows such as the commemorative exhibition of 30 years of democratic town councils, *Local, Local! The City to Come* (CCCB, 2010), and the exhibition *Architectures on the Waterfront* (Fundació Mies van der Rohe, 2019), and was a member of the Cerdà Year Advisory Board (2010).

He has published numerous articles and books about global transformations of urban landscapes, including *urBANALización: Paisajes Comunes, Lugares Globales* (2008) and *Estratègies vers la ciutat de baixa densitat: de la contenció a la gestió* (2011).

GENERAL INFORMATION

SUBURBIA. BUILDING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Dates

20 March to 8 September 2024
Open Tuesday to Sunday and public holidays from 11:00 to 20:00
Closed on Mondays except public holidays

Venue

Gallery 2 of the CCCB

Admission

6 € / 4 € concessions
Sunday from 15:00 to 20:00, free of charge subject to prior reservation

[Discounts and complimentary offers](#)

Credits for press release photos:

1. *Thomas Edison in the Garden of his Glenmont Home*, 1917. Thomas Edison National Historical Park, West Orange, New Jersey.
2. General Electric advertisement: *It's a Promise*, 1945. Private collection, Barcelona.
3. *Joel, Lynne, Paige and Joshua, Central Texas*, 2021. Gabriele Galimberti. Courtesy of the artist.
4. *Berwyn, Illinois*, 2023. Benjamin Grant. Images created by Overview, original images © Nearmap.
5. *Sant Quirze del Vallès*, 2023. Christopher Willan. Courtesy of the artist.

High resolution images of the exhibition at
[the CCCB's digital press room](#)

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