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The Surfaces of Long Island Mitchell Schwarzer

Long before cyberspace, there was suburban space. Before the blip society of mice and menus, there was a physical world of rapid movement across dim space, wood-paneled vista cruiser station wagons gliding amidst the scent of freshly mowed lawns, children biking along roads confined by fences and impelled by horizons of oil company signs. Like the desktop parallax that results from surfing the web, dwelling in the tract lands of post-war suburbia rendered any sense of place multiple and ambiguous. This was a world of automobile and television perceptions, of estrangement with the past, and of individuality constructed through mass consumption.

In 1963, before my sixth birthday, my family lived in a six-story brick apartment building at the intersection of Springfield Boulevard and Union Turnpike in eastern Queens. Our building was unusual in these far reaches of New York City, towering over single-family homes and garden apartments. Built during the 1930s, it followed the rhythms of the enormous city to the west, crowded with the events of history as much as the limitations of space. But that May, we headed east to a brand new subdivision in unincorporated Nassau County.

Our new community had no name. Smack at the southern edge of the last glacial advance in North America, it was between other places, neither village nor city. The developer named the subdivision “Country Village,” but nobody called it that; our new neighbors, most of whom came from Brooklyn and the Bronx, weren’t rubes. The names most commonly used—New Hyde Park, North New Hyde Park, Manhasset Hills—were dissatisfying, however, since they referred to places nearby. Overlapping jurisdictions complicated any hope for a singular identity; we were in the Town of North Hempstead, the Herricks school district, the Shelter Rock library district, and the Merillon Little League. The only stable designation was a number—zip code 11040.

The land had been a potato farm, yet the potato fields and farm buildings were gone by the time we first saw the site. Along Meadowfarm Road, tall elm and chestnut trees grew, the only ones in the entire area, tracing what must have been an entrance drive to the farmhouse. Otherwise, all that remained was a swampy pond, which in time was drained and lined by stone-faced concrete and a circuit of cherry trees. The pond was called Ritter’s Pond, presumably after the family who had owned the farm. But that was as much as we knew. Through my childhood no one spoke of the area’s earlier history. We tracked time’s movement not by lasting landmarks or the stories of elders, but by the succession of stores that opened and closed along Hillside Avenue or Lake Success Shopping Center.

In this unnamed, unsentimental place, my parents bought a fifth-acre lot and arranged to build a house. Our lot was near the pond and was empty save for a single chestnut tree that veered to one side. Years later, during a storm, it toppled over. Soon afterward, my father and I planted a blue spruce on the other side of the front yard, and for years my growth was measured by its ascending height. Later it, too, died.

We chose the house from four split-level models that could be visited under the elm and chestnut trees along Meadowfarm Road. The house began to emerge from the brown earth, seeming to blossom further each Sunday afternoon, when we would visit. My father documented its progress in elaborate detail. There are snapshots of my sister and me standing atop newly-laid concrete steps or bare floorboards and peeking out from the half-enclosed shells of closets. These images were deeply important to him, for they fixed his children’s identities to the birth of his longed-for home.

Our house model was special, my father said, because it was a “split-ranch.” The bedrooms, kitchen, living room and dining room were on the

top floor while the ground floor contained the garage, den, service functions and his medical office. It was a perfect arrangement for living, he said, since we wouldn't have to trudge up and down the stairs too often. On the evening we moved in, I kissed the newly painted green wall of my room.

For the first year or so we lived on a frontier. Absent clear property lines, our house was surrounded by poorly performing seed grass, unpaved streets and the lopsided frameworks of new construction and new neighbors. It was a world in the throes of creation, a stimulus to scrambles down into sunken foundations and up among high rafters. It was joy within the empty sleeves of expectant lives.

Over time, the frontier receded. Other houses were finished, painted and occupied. I remember resenting the new neighbors who unfairly prohibited entry onto their properties. To make matters worse, fences were erected on the sides of yards, curbing the unabashed glee of my adventures.

Rough edges of our home were smoothed over as well. A few years after we moved in my mother covered the green paint on the walls of my room with coarse yellow wallpaper, even though the paint was still bright. Soon after, she encased the kitchen walls and ceiling in a wallpaper riven by yellow and brown diamonds. The exterior finish of the house was repainted, changed from gray to blue; wooden doors were fronted by anodized aluminum doors; the concrete entrance steps were covered by fieldstone; a border of brick veneer was applied to the concrete walls around my father's office door.

Each year more surfaces arrived in packages from stores that lined Jericho Turnpike, Northern Boulevard and Old Country Road. It was as if all materials needed a companion, a tougher double impervious to weather or washing, a second skin more courteous to the outside world. Gradually, rooms, house and landscape lost shape under panel and veneer, varnish and siding, carpet and turf.

The houses in the subdivision also took on different appearances. Cosmetic elements were tacked onto their frames—colonial-like shutters, rustic shingles or facings, gentle gables above twisting wrought-iron columns. Each style of house had a version of a beveled picture window that opened onto a front lawn, but windows were typically covered by drapes to preserve privacy.

None of the neighboring houses had a precise architectural style to speak of. Nor did any emulate the futurism of the Modern movement. Instead, their weightless surfaces evoked a minimum of historical affiliation and artistic verve, without creating real statements or ties. Because we couldn't make sense of the roots of our houses, surfaces established anonymity. Our houses revealed little of our aspirations or our pasts.

Street names were similarly noncommittal. Certain names referred to actual landscape features (Pond Lane, Crest Road), others to imaginary landscapes (Brookfield Road, Lake Drive), still others to Merry Old England (Nottingham Road, Windsor Gate), royalty (Kings Lane, Duke Drive), or just about anything (Continental Drive, Joy Drive, Flag Lane).

The bleaching of houses and street names were aspects of melting-pot America, analogous to the slow fade of foreign conversations and vanishing rhapsodies of dumplings in the homes of our Jewish, Italian and Chinese neighbors. The only time our subdivision came out of its shell was after Thanksgiving, when nondescript houses began to sport Christmas ornaments. But this polychrome flurry of Christianity melted down as well, tamed by wreaths nailed onto the doors of non-Christian Asian families and electric window menorahs celebrating Hanukkah.

What really mattered on Long Island was the creation of a world of uniform surfaces into which everyone could fit. Like the tight jeans of the times, the surfaces of Long Island had to be pre-washed and shrunk into submission. Perfect lawns

would never come from seed. Mass-produced sod was needed, a flush glade of grass on the kelly shade of green rolled out onto the earth. Yet the lawn, queen of all suburban surfaces, exacted interminable labors. It had to be protected from drought by sprinklers, from weeds by pesticides, from autumn leaves by raking and from new growth by lawn mowers.

The surfaces of our houses and yards were consistent and unblemished. They had to look like the perfect worlds we saw on television and in magazines, or risk the wrath of the neighborhood. The hedges that shrouded concrete foundations were clipped into right angles; the tiles in foyers were glossed with synthetic coatings. Not even the asphalt driveway could be left to its own devices. Every other year, my mother and I applied hot, sticky, blacktop sealant to counter the effects of cracking and staining. In winter, under the first flakes of snow, we would rush out to shovel the driveway and keep its color solid black.

Inside the erasure of deviation was as extreme. In many homes, plastic runners covered that wall-to-wall carpets that in turn covered hardwood floors. Plastic jackets were fit onto sofas and chairs, lamp shades and even clothing hanging in closets. Plastic trees and flowers adorned hallways and tabletops. Food was stored in plastic containers. Late in his life my father sorted almost all his possessions into plastic Ziploc bags.

For years my mother spent her days battling dust, dirt and aging, anything that marred the presentable surfaces of her home. In the kitchen, linoleum protected the floor while Teflon pans, laminated counters and vinyl tablecloths allowed immediate erasure of a meal's aftereffects. Even while I was still eating, she would begin washing the floor under my feet and applying soapy suds to the tablecloth under my elbows; I was awakened many mornings by the sound and vibration of her vacuum cleaner sucking dirt from under my bed. Our house had to appear as if nobody lived in it.

In post-war Long Island, the great battle for order and hygiene that began in the nineteenth century extended to a cloaking of the dark and rusting aspects of life. Presentable surfaces repressed origins and memories, combatted difference and disorderliness, and promised safety and longevity. Their maintenance with cleansers, mops, vacuums, lawn mowers, sheers and shovels put the suburban home on a permanent war footing. In an age when we feared atomic attack, surfaces acted as an anti-ballistic system for the home. Polished and trimmed, they led us to believe we had attained final control over our lives.

Because of the compulsion to enclose suburbia in surfaces, post-war subdivisions like ours were smoothly planed. They purveyed an atmosphere without texture, gesture, or gradation. Houses, yards, interior decorations and, over time, even cuisine and religion, lacked depth. They were faked and meaningless, or so it seemed to me.

Gradually, these bows to conformity, cleanliness and sanctuary turned the childhood expanse of a summer day into an adolescent summons for escape. The older I became, the more I reacted to the polyvinyl monotony around me, and the more I began to feel rumblings from the strata sedimented below the surface. I became fascinated by the rare vertical or depressed moment—blue water towers of coiled steel piping and mushroom tops, sumps intended for storm runoff and obscured behind chain-link fences and wild trees. To the west, the Creedmoor State Hospital for the mentally ill burst hundreds of feet above us, the bars of its skyscraper windows rousing images of madness, torture and vegetative existence. From Shelter Rock, the largest boulder on Long Island and a fragment from Ice Age glaciers, wafted the fragrance of the Matinecock Indians, the original inhabitants of this region.

My parents could never quite understand my complaints about Long Island and my longings for what my mother viewed as abnormal. They

were born in Poland before the Second World War, survived Hitler and made it to New York City. Although they had no prior knowledge of suburbia, home ownership in the Long Island suburbs became their life's goal—largely because the suburbs were new, spacious, safe and anonymous. Their attitude toward Long Island never weathered, even as old city neighborhoods gentrified, subdivisions became the archetype of artifice and the initial community of their neighbors dissipated. What mattered was that reaching suburbia had made them normal.

Most of our neighbors were also escaping something: the crime of East Flatbush or the Grand Concourse, a life of poverty in Sicily and then Canarsie, Mao's repression and then Chinatown's crowding. They, too, perceived Long Island's blandness and uniformity as a virtue. Who had time to dwell on the beige complexion of its landscape? Who had time to look at moons?

But growing up in suburbia is different from aspiring to live in it. To me, suburbia amounted to parole from a nightmarish past I experienced only virtually. I felt, as many children of the suburbs did, that Long Island was an affront to life. In this store-bought landscape of loping lanes, it seemed at times that only the young had ears resounding the immense cavity beneath them.

Because of their smoothness, because of their fakery, because of their elasticity, the surfaces of my childhood led elsewhere. They migrated into college dorm rooms plastered with posters of rock-and-roll heroes alongside those of great revolutionaries. They found their way into rowhouse alleys that ended in black walls and the sounds of Joy Division. They are present in my current urban neighborhood where constant home-improvement projects occupy the leisure hours of ex-suburbanites. The surfaces of post-war suburbia are slippery, prone to sliding into other surfaces of the commodified world and other stages of one's life.

Those early surfaces were aspects of a flattened *mise-en-scène* that I increasingly encounter everywhere. On prettified waterfronts, in historic preservation districts, on the reinvested blocks of skid row, we are confronted with the conspicuous importance of surfaces. Theming, merchandising and re-packaging buildings and landscapes is a national pastime. We live in a culture of accumulation and disposal, a culture in which the messages of buildings—like those of clothing and other products—must change with the fashions.

Since the 1970s, postmodern architectural debates have re-established the importance of surface decorations and signs. Unlike the supposedly transparent frameworks of Modernist buildings, whose appearance could be read as part of a zero-sum rational system, our contemporary view of buildings accepts ambiguity, duplicity and multiple meanings. It further concedes that buildings facilitate consumption and socialization. More than any other aspect of architecture, surfaces reflect these hard dealings of the surrounding world.

Perhaps the surfaces of Long Island were an early warning system of a paradigm shift toward digital reality, a state of existence in which almost all appearances are programmed, concealing and not all that real. I grew up in a landscape that camouflaged the past and difference, whose surfaces were a screen for the projection of a uniformly perfect, if thin, reality. Today surfaces change much more quickly. I live in a world that has given up wholeness, where the codes of visual discernment are fast, complex and contradictory. As we click from channel to channel, web site to web site, the meanings behind the surfaces is lost.

Thus the anarchy of the senses I experience nowadays eerily resounds the sensual straight-jacket I grew up inside of. Just as the surfaces of Long Island communicated more to each other than to the things they disguised, so, too, our digitized mediascape is unto itself, a towering wave whose surf isn't all that rough or revealing.