

Enduring proximity: The figure of the neighbor in suburban America.

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Postmodern Culture

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Enduring Proximity: The Figure of the Neighbor in Suburban America

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“For it is a simple matter to love one’s neighbor when he is distant, but it is a different matter in proximity.”

—Jacques-Alain Miller (79–80)



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Figure 1.

Spite Fence

Eadweard Muybridge, San Francisco (1878)[1]

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Introduction

The figure of the neighbor in contemporary culture is both spatial and social: neighbors begin as strangers necessarily inhabiting proximate space. When that closeness is intense in duration, distance, and circumstance, it gives rise to potent, if not perverse, reactions. An estate owner’s three-story fence that imprisons and intimidates his neighbor (see [Figure 1](#)) is surely spiteful, but neighbors can be far crueler, as we know from the history of the battle to integrate U.S. neighborhood schools since the mid-twentieth century, or even the genocide waged against proximate others in Germany or Rwanda. Intensified by proximity, the presence of difference—inescapable

otherness—may press cultural norms past tolerable boundaries.

Of course, neighbors are not usually spiteful. The notion of neighborliness often connotes the benign, minor kindnesses bestowed among co-residents that punctuate a steady state of general disregard. But when irritations arise, they can mushroom into disputes that do not seem warranted on the surface. Neighbors wage battles with and against neighbors to defend unpretentious terrains that would appear insignificant. So perhaps neighborliness should be construed as a set of concerted practices by individuals in a relationship somewhere between friendship and enmity. The rhetoric of the neighbor condones interaction without intimacy or intensity; we especially resist vehement interchange for fear of antagonizing those among whom we must live. It is this repressed desire for something more or less than neighborliness that erupts in bizarre local disputes, often directed just outside the neighborhood.

The main reason neighbor relations are charged is sheer proximity. Unlike other social relations, including friendship, enmity, love, and even familial relation, space is inherent to neighborship. Unlike the “neighbor” at the office or the one seated beside us at a concert, residential neighbors live their daily lives near one another over extended periods of time. This remains true even in an era of increasing household mobility. Further, residential neighbors are in a significant and often causal relation. Their actions impinge upon one another, and at some levels, are mutually dependent: neighbors affect each other’s property values and make their street a safer or more dangerous place. We may like, dislike, or hate our neighbors, but we are locked in relation with them to some degree.

In this essay I scrutinize the figure of the neighbor through the architecture and planning of the American residential landscape. Neighbor architecture—that is, the forms of neighborhoods and all that goes into shaping them—has received little consideration in the study of architecture, as has the construct of the neighbor itself. Psychic and cultural negotiations concerning the latter are made visible to some extent in critical discussions of literal negotiations over neighborhoods;

when neighbors debate a proposed affordable housing complex, for example, their arguments about traffic, parking, and density are understood to reflect fears of difference. But there has been little critical reflection on established physical forms for neighborhood, in contrast to architectural styles for individual buildings or urban planning strategies for larger regions. The open-endedness of possible neighborhood architectures, I suggest, produces a new way of looking at residential architecture itself.

Just as neighbor relations are unlike other intersubjective relationships, neighborhoods are unique physical environments. Unlike districts, towns, or regions, neighborhoods embody a social relation linked to specific land use. A neighborhood is comprised of people living in close proximity in significant relationships, yet they are usually there by default. Further, the figure of the neighbor involves not only the space between strangers, but the relation of the house as a non-human object to its human occupants and the relationship between interiority and exteriority modeled therein. Bachelard writes in *The Poetics of Space* that “it is not enough to consider the house as an ‘object’ on which we can make our judgments and daydreams...



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