Suburban Landscapes: Culture and Politics in a New York Metropolitan Community. *By Paul H. Mattingly*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xi + 333 pp. Index, notes, illustrations, maps, appendix. Cloth, $39.95. ISBN 0-801-86680-4.

Reviewed by Michael J. Birkner

Since the publication in 1985 of Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontier*, suburban studies have grown increasingly sophisticated and increasingly fragmented. Critics' complaints about suburban homogeneity and the sterility of suburban culture have been repeatedly tested and found wanting. Dozens of suburban case studies have enriched our appreciation of the vitality and diversity of suburban life, without yielding any new synthesis that would replace Jackson's thesis that the federal government and the automobile, respectively, played essential roles in shaping modern suburbia.

Although his subject is one affluent New Jersey suburb, Paul Mattingly's ambition is not just to add one more case study to an already groaning shelf. Rather, he wants to illuminate themes such as community formation and cultural identity in suburbia, the dynamics of social cohesion, and conflicting democratic politics—in short, suburbs as experiments in democratic community building. In Leonia, New Jersey, he believes he has located the raw material for this enterprise.

In Mattingly's view, suburban historiography should move beyond the topics of suburbanites' alleged exclusivity, homogeneity, affluence, and self-seclusion. Likewise, it should abandon its emphasis on the theme of "escape" from urban congestion, grime, and pathologies. And it must revise the notion that suburbs constitute a distinct ecosystem that is hostile to the cities most proximate to them.

Though he stops short of claiming that Leonia is a "representative" suburb, Mattingly suggests that its experience over the past two centuries reflects a different kind of suburbia than the one scholars are familiar with. Specifically, he delineates three stages of community building in Leonia, which he argues were essentially completed by World War II, when Leonia took on a "modern" complexion. In stage one (1859–1894), Leonia was a "voluntary organization," a cozy village that gradually but steadily shed its

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rural trappings and emerged as a bustling, ethnically and socially heterogeneous commuter suburb of New York. In this period, Leonia exemplified a regional phenomenon, in which new towns and boroughs cultivated nothing less than "a different brand of American community, one with urban amenities, without urban social ills, personal dangers, or fiscal and political mismanagement" (p. 52). At the core of this new community was the voluntary organization, including, in Leonia at least, clubs and literary societies whose memberships included people of all classes. Its residents insisted that their community reflected the best possible fusion of city and country values.

In stage two, Leonia depicted itself as a "country town." What made it so, according to Mattingly, was its sense of civic responsibility, conjoined with self-sufficiency and indifference to class distinctions. Mattingly quotes long-time residents who highlight Leonian neighborliness and egalitarianism. Drawing on census data, he underscores the ethnic and social diversity that marked Leonia in the early twentieth century as the urban working-class, much of it foreign born, sought a new start in a "country" environment a few miles from New York City and found Leonia congenial. In an analysis that complements the work of historian Margaret Marsh on affluent South Jersey suburbs (*Suburban Lives,* 1990), Mattingly shows that, before 1920, a high percentage of Leonians rented rather than owned their homes—though this percentage decreased markedly after 1925. Thus, his central point is that Leonians in stage two of community development enjoyed a "fluid" social order, in which there was no hierarchy of neighborhoods, ethnicities, or religions. This fiction was partly maintained by emphasizing the community's "Dutchness," even though the original Dutch influence had dissipated by the late eighteenth century.

Stage three was notable, Mattingly asserts, for the emergence of Leonia as a "Bohemian City" after 1920. This characterization came about when a significant artist colony took root, which helped to define the community's landscape as one that engaged both the great metropolis and the neighboring rural counties to its west. Leonians felt most comfortable in identifying their town as midway between these contrasting locations, while remaining distinct from both of them. After 1920, single-family homes dominated the landscape, a borough hall and parks were constructed, and a new commercial center solidified the downtown area. At the same time, residential

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segregation by wealth and class accelerated. But the differences were muted, Mattingly suggests, by the town fathers' new emphasis on "residential" Leonia. In fact, Leonia was en route by the 1930s to becoming what it is today: one of Bergen County's most affluent and exclusive towns.

Mattingly's descriptions of Leonia overlap his three-stage schema. He discusses insightfully the artists who lived there and whose work both subtly engaged city motifs and reflected the values of town leaders; he proposes a debatable argument that nonpartisan politics and the influence of a "civic league" moderated conservative Republican policies during and after the depression years; and he periodically takes up and counters Kenneth Jackson's thesis that suburbanites have willfully turned their backs on the city and its problems. Mattingly's grasp of pertinent historiography is impressive. This is, in many respects, an ambitious book, and therein lie its assets and its weaknesses. He too often makes generalizations that his evidence does not sustain, notably in discussing Leonia politics, the question of "escape" from city ills and the significance of the artist community. *Suburban Landscapes* should be read less for the specifics of Leonia's history (noticeably unrepresentative of most of Bergen County, New Jersey, where it is ensconced) than for its thoughtful effort to move suburban historiography along new tracks.

Mattingly has interesting things to say about the importance of memory in shaping suburban community, the role of art in shaping that memory, and the value of seeing suburban values as part of a dialogue with the central city. Although his prolixity tends to obscure some of his insights, Mattingly deserves credit for transcending traditional narratives that recount the "life and times" of a single (inevitably unrepresentative) community. *Suburban Landscapes* challenges readers to question conventional wisdom about suburbia and to grant suburban landscapes the same respect that has long been accorded cities, as interesting and occasionally exasperating places, filled with quirks and human mysteries to plumb.

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Bergenfield, New Jersey, 1894–1994 *(1994). He is currently writing a biography of Sherman Adams, Dwight D. Eisenhower's chief of staff from 1953 to1958.*

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