

(Dis)Comfort In The Suburban Housing Dream: Unveiling Contradictions And Prospects In Polarized Suburbia Through A Constructed Debate

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In Flanders, northern Belgium, an essential status in the life of a person or family is assigned to “suburban living” (De Decker & Meeus, 2013). The suburban living dream represents living in a single-family home with its own garden, driveway, and garage. It is (over)loaded with meanings and expectations. The suburban living dream contains numerous qualities in people’s minds: space, peace, safety, greenery, good for children, and boss in/of your own home. Suburban living is also an important symbol of postwar social progress. However, this dream is linked to normative ideals about gender, race/ethnicity, and class that construct those who are “outsiders” and those that themselves may call “established” or “at home” in suburbia.

Using in-depth interviews with both established (16) and outsiders (11), we revealed two suburban dreams in the polarized Dender region (in Flanders). The Dender region is a place where a far-right anti-immigrant party won and continues to win many votes and where ethnic diversity is steadily increasing. The “established”, these people who have often lived in that region for many generations, feel that their suburban living dream is fading or are afraid that it will. On top of deindustrialization, unemployment and their children moving to other regions in Flanders, newcomers threaten them with a greater loss of status. The “outsiders” are people with an immigrant background who have often lived in arrival neighborhoods in Brussels and want to make the Dender region their home. By moving to the Dender region, they are taking a step closer to realizing their suburban living dream.

Although these two social groups share the same suburban housing dream, the feelings are different (loss versus hope). These two storylines collide, leading to strained relationships as both groups try to maintain or improve their societal position.

With the academic ambition to think about how to reduce polarization and increase inclusion in this region (and beyond), we set up a constructed debate on issues derived from our qualitative in-depth interviews. Through this fictional dialogue we explore opportunities for belonging to both groups by understanding how underlying factors such as dominance/power (or inequality), class, gender and race/ethnicity play a role in the design and use of suburbia. In addition, we also consider whether and how the construction of the suburban housing dream can be decoupled from the concept of whiteness. Using this constructed debate can help deconstruct the dominant social construction of suburban living (dream) and obtain new representations of multicultural suburbia. Moreover, we reflect on how the method of the constructed debate can also help identify and discuss other social challenges in urban planning.

Keywords : Housing, Polarization, Constructed Debate, Suburbia



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