The Death of Romanticism in American Suburbia

In *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831), hallowed French author Victor Hugo wrote, “This will destroy That. The Book will destroy the Edifice” (181). One of the foremost Romantic writers of the nineteenth-century, Hugo spoke of the dilapidated state of European architecture that followed the emergence of the printing press. His assertion “was a premonition that human thought, in changing its outward form, was also about to change its outward mode of expression… one Art would dethrone another Art: Printing will destroy Architecture” (182). Through the advent of printing, Hugo foresaw the inevitable ruin of the great edifices of Europe.

Hugo did not see printing and architecture as wholly different arts; he saw them as different manifestations of the same art. He wrote, “architecture has been the great manuscript of the human race. And this is true to such a degree, that not only every religious symbol, but every human thought, has its page and its memorial in that vast book” (184). Hugo compared the book to the edifice, and connected them to the humanity that they expressed. Ultimately, however, Hugo lamented what to him seemed to be the passing of human expression from the laborious grandeur of architecture to the simple efficiency of the printing press.

Hugo was not entirely right. It is proof enough to look around and see the ocean of buildings that surround us to know that architecture has not lost its prominence in the days since the printing press; in fact, architecture has thrived. But neither was he altogether wrong. Architecture as a form of human expression has suffered since the days of Hugo and the
Romantics. Despite an attempt to sustain Romantic architectural principles by Frank Lloyd Wright, in the 1930s, the artistic edifice has fallen not merely out of fashion, but out of purpose. The Modern architect has replaced the Romantic architect, while successive technological advances have deemed Romantic architecture an anachronism.

This decline of architecture was not confined to Europe; it occurred worldwide, particularly in America. In tracing this decline, and in order to understand the degeneration that the American suburb has suffered, I track the devolution of architecture as it affected the landscape of American suburbia, from the Romantic period to the Modern period. American suburbia is particularly useful for tracking the decline of architecture, because, as James Kunstler writes in *The Geography of Nowhere*, the birth of American suburbia coincided with the arrival of Romanticism in the States (c. 1840) (40). Thus, at its beginning, American suburbia was a product of the Romantic period. American suburbia has also, since its inception, been an integral part of American life. Its persistent presence throughout the decades affords a continuum along which one can track, uninterrupted, the evolution of American suburban architecture from the Romantic period to the Modern period. Additionally, many Americans live in the suburbs—as of 2000, 50% of Americans call suburbia home (Hobbs and Stoops)—but it is doubtful how many of them are cognizant of the physical changes that the American suburb has undergone. Contrary to popular belief, suburbia is not an unchanging element of American society; it is most definitely today not what it was when it was first conceived in the nineteenth-century. Suburbia, one could say, has evolved as organically as human society throughout the last two centuries.

I argue that the American suburb has been the object of perceptible change over the years, and that this change reflects the high-culture changes of the eras. I trace suburban architectural evolution between the periods of Romanticism and Modernism, two major
intellectual movements of the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, and pause to look at a period of cultural overlap and the suburbs that emerged from this intersection of movements, in order to demonstrate how the architecture of American suburbia has changed alongside the larger cultural ideals it represented. In so doing, I confirm Hugo’s portentous declaration about architecture: Suburbia has lost its human artistry; instead, it has become the slave of industry.

Some time before *Notre Dame de Paris* was published in 1831, James Fenimore Cooper became popular in America for his *Leatherstocking* books. More than a series about the adventures of its protagonist Natty Bumppo, Cooper’s stories attempted to emancipate man from the mechanical stranglehold of the new industry, giving him this freedom through nature. As Robert A. Divine et al. write in *The American Story*, “Cooper engendered a main theme of American romanticism—the superiority of a solitary life in the wilderness to [a] kind of settled existence” (240). While the popular reaction to Cooper’s novels was not to go out and live among the animals, the intimacy with nature that Cooper conveyed in his writings would eventually lead Americans away from what they perceived as the vileness of the cities, and into suburban retreats enshrouded in nature. As Clifford E. Clark, Jr. writes, “building in the suburbs allowed an individual to combine ‘urban conveniences’… with ‘the substantial advantages of rural conditions of life’” (538). These Romantic suburbs—housing developments physically detached from the city and immersed in nature—allowed man to live comfortably and healthfully. This closeness to nature became one of the major characteristics of the suburbs of the day. The ideal that Cooper engendered in his novels was realized in part through the trees, plants, and vegetation amidst which suburbia was rooted. It therefore comes as no surprise that he resided in what would later become the village of Scarsdale, one of the first of the Romantic suburbs.
The Romantic architect, like his brothers in the other arts, was obsessed with the idea of self-expression in his creations. Talbot Hamlin, in *Architecture Through the Ages*, describes this obsession, writing that the true Romantic demands that architecture shall be ‘expressive’—that is, that it shall aim at definitely expressing specific emotions such as religious awe, grandeur, gaiety, intimacy, sadness…. All architecture is expressive; but, whereas the classic architect allows the expression to arise naturally from forms… the true romantic seeks expression first, with a definite self-conscious urge. (581)

The Romantic architects of American suburbia shared this fire, if not to the same degree. Andrew Jackson Downing, the father of the American Romantic suburb, writes in his book, *Victorian Cottage Residences*, “All domestic architecture, in a given style, should be a subdued expression or manifestation of that style adjusted to the humbler requirements… and the more quiet purposes of domestic life” (20). Because of its domestic function, Romantic suburban architecture was merely a diminishment of grander Romantic buildings. This moderated, but nonetheless powerful, expressiveness was what Downing championed in his designs. It was an expressiveness that would not be found in later suburbs.

Regardless of how expressive any given suburb was, all Romantic suburbs shared certain architectural features that reflected Romantic expressivity. To surround oneself with nature, as Cooper’s characters did, was considered ideal. Nature even often dictated how a building should be designed. Downing writes, “a cottage or villa should be of a cheerful, mellow hue harmonizing with the verdure of the country” (13) (fig. 1). Downing, in making the choice of a building’s color dependent upon the “verdure of the country,” interlocks the two, making them mutually dependent upon each other. In other words, nature’s influence on architecture was so
great that it became a cornerstone of Romantic suburban design. Nature was also often integrated into the physical spaces of the suburbs. In *Victorian Cottage Residences*, Downing provides detailed instructions for the ideal layout of the ground for many of his designs, going so far as to suggest for “the ornamental trellis across the lot… the following vines, remarkable for the beauty of their foliage and flowers…” (32) (fig. 2). Nature, no longer a mere ideal, became an essential part of suburban architecture, as expressively decorative as it was restorative.

A second architectural hallmark of the Romantic suburbs was picturesqueness. While Downing makes reference to the trait quite a bit in his book, he fails to define the subjective term. Andres Duany, Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, and Jeff Speck define picturesqueness as the “design [of] spaces that are satisfying not just on paper but perceptually, in three dimensions” (47). To them, the picturesque was constituted by the overall aesthetic satisfaction of a building. Downing does not leave us completely in the dark; he explains how he measures a building’s picturesqueness through a sense of balance. In one example, Downing identifies the picturesque in whether a building’s physical asymmetry invokes impressions of symmetry. He writes, “The pile of building represented, which is full of irregularity, is also symmetrical, for if we divide it by the imaginary line a, the portion on the right balances that on the left; that is, though not in shape, yet in bulk and in the mass of composition” (19) (fig. 3). Despite the asymmetry of the building, Downing asserts that it is indeed picturesque, by virtue of its implied symmetry; while the building is not actually symmetrical, it *is* balanced in its overall shape and bulk. While such balance does not necessarily encompass the picturesque, the determinant that Downing uses to identify it agrees with the definition provided by Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck—even if the definitions are separated by over a century. The picturesque is aesthetically pleasing, even when a building’s design would at first appear otherwise. Thus, it is easy to see that the
picturesqueness of a building was highly valued and sought after by Downing and his fellow Romantics.

Downing instilled in his designs certain qualities that would come to characterize the entire tradition of the Romantic suburb. Of them, closeness to nature (often integration with nature) and picturesqueness stand apart. Nature and the picturesque, features of the Romantic style, were associated with the expressiveness of human emotions—emotions such as “religious awe, grandeur, gaiety, intimacy, and sadness” (Hamlin 581)—which were the Romantics’ ultimate artistic goal. However, American suburbia was born late in the Romantic period. By the time the Romantic suburb was firmly established on American soil, its parent movement had already entered into decline. The result was a vestige of Romanticism in American suburbia, surrounded and subsumed by the emerging Modernist movement and its ideals of industry. The brief period of cultural overlap that followed represented the last hopeful attempt at preserving Romantic architectural values in American suburbia. The period was characterized by an effort to harmonize Romantic and Modernist ideals—an effort headed by Frank Lloyd Wright.

When he was only sixteen, Frank Lloyd Wright—the renowned American architect—read Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*. Of the chapter entitled “Ceci Tuera Cela,” or “This will destroy That,” Wright later admitted, “That story of the decline of architecture made a lasting impression upon me… I believed Gutenberg’s invention of the shifting types would kill the great edifice as architecture” (Wright 112). Wright saw the dismal truth behind Hugo’s forecast. To him, the fall of the Romantic edifice at the hands of the nascent Modernist movement was imminent. He said,

There is no good reason why objects of art in industry, because they are made by machines in the machine age, should resemble the machines that made them, or
any other machinery whatever. There might be excellent reason why they should not resemble machinery. (107; emphasis original)

Wright saw that the machine was creating machine-like art, without the human quality so essential to authentic artistic expression. The expression of human emotions, championed in the Romantic period, was absent in the new architecture. Modernism, as Wright saw it, threatened to deprive architecture of its art, and turn it into a machine.

This realization horrified Wright, and thus, formed his architectural philosophies. His was a style that sought to unite dying Romantic architectural principles with the inevitable arrival of new Modernist ones. He declared, “I believe that romance—this quality of the heart, the essential joy we have in living—by human imagination of the right sort can be brought to life again in modern industry” (107; emphasis original). Wright sought to transplant the heart of Romanticism into the machine of Modernism; as the heart, Romanticism was indispensable in the sense that it, and only it, could pump life into the machine. Wright appealed to the architects of the up-and-coming generation: “The artist who condemns romance is only a foolish reactionary…. Listen therefore and go back with what you may learn, to live and be true to romance” (106-7).

Wright stood apart from the emerging Modernist architects by virtue of his loyalty to Romanticism. Drawing on his immediate predecessors, Wright’s architecture boasted many Romantic features. For instance, Wright viewed the relationship between nature and architecture as intimate. Hamlin writes, “[Wright] has seen… the inevitable bond between buildings and natural scenery; he has always tried to make his structures a living part of their environment” (644). Wright’s philosophy on nature and architecture was simple—nature and architecture were inextricably bound. Like the Romantics’, Wright’s designs were characterized by their
integration with nature. As he said, “The land is the simplest form of architecture…. [Man’s] creative faculties are conditioned upon this earth” (Wright 34) (fig. 4). Nature was the original edifice, to which man-made architectural forms were purely augmentative.

Wright was not blind to the trends of the time. Echoing the Modernists’ emphasis on the functionality of architecture, he recognized “that architecture is based on human life and exists for human people” (Hamlin 644). Noting the validity of the Modernist view, Wright acknowledged that architecture needed to be usable. But Wright was quick to assert that architecture need not sacrifice its beauty for function. He determined that architecture “must feed [humans’] spirits and their imaginations just as well as it shelters their bodies” (Hamlin 644). Architecture, he concluded, needed to be functional and beautiful, conducive to both practical use and spiritual sustenance.

This was a point Wright stressed. He said, “Consider too that, ‘be clean’—‘the simplest way without waste’—was dignified as ceremonial in old Japan” (Wright 101; emphasis original). The “be clean” idea was one that the Modernists loved, but it was one that they saw as the aesthetic result of entirely functional design, in which beauty had no place. According to Wright, the Modernists misconstrued what it meant to “be clean.” However, Wright countered the Modernist misperception, saying,

The ceremonies of that ancient day were no more than the simple offices of daily life raised to the dignity of works of art…. For instance what is the important tea-ceremony of the Japanese but the most graciously perfect way, all considered, of serving a cup of tea to… guests? (101)

Comparing architecture to the Japanese tea ceremony, Wright argued that functional architecture could be designed to afford itself its very own beauty—not the misperceived “be clean” beauty
that the Modernists believed in. Much as the tea ceremony was a simple function elevated to
dignity, so could the edifice, with its functional design, be dignified.

Wright likewise held onto the Romantic ideal of picturesqueness in architectural design.
To Wright, the “be clean” movement had turned architecture into a practice of mimicry. He said
Today, it seems to me, we hear this cry “be clean” from the depths of our own
need…. Clean lines—clean surfaces—clean purposes…. When this edict inspires
organic results and not the mere picture-making that curses so called
“modernism,” we will here find the basic elements of style. (102)

Wright thus attributed “picture-making”—the pursuit of the picturesque by trying to mimic it—to
the Modernist architect. To Wright, the Modernists were erecting buildings of ersatz
picturesqueness, so he tried to correct them. He said, “Large, flat patterns involved with
textures… picturesque but with no thought of a picture… are entirely modern in the best sense”
(Wright 103). Though it is difficult to determine what Wright believed constituted the
picturesque, he unequivocally asserted that it was not achieved in trying to create pictures.

Wright believed in the Romantic ideal of the picturesque, and condemned the picture-making
practices of the Modernists. He even went so far as to say, “I should like to strike the pictorial
death blow in our art and craft. Of course I do not mean the picturesque” (103).

As an architect, and both historically and conceptually, Frank Lloyd Wright defied easy
classification. He straddled the Romantic and the Modernist movements, and his work
constitutes a body of hybrid buildings—buildings that reconcile both Romantic and Modernist
features. Wright saw the importance of preserving the human, artistic expression of Romantic
architecture in an increasingly industrious world. Most of all, Wright recognized the importance
of maintaining the “heart” of Romanticism in an world that threatened to replace it with the
machine. He once said, “the sense of romance cannot die out of human hearts…. Romance is shifting its center now… but it is immortal. Industry will only itself become and remain a machine without it” (Wright 106). To Wright, romance was the giver of life to the otherwise lifeless carcass of the (Modern) building. Romanticism was vital because without it, architecture would not only fail to express—it would fail to live.

While Wright represented a promising future for architecture and American suburbia, he and his fused Romantic-Modern designs did not last, due largely to the explosion of the automobile as a desired American artifact. The technological innovation of the automobile sparked a transformation in suburban design. As Gloria Fiero writes in *The Humanistic Tradition: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Global Perspective*,

> The Modernist revolution in the creative arts responded to equally revolutionary changes in science and technology. The transformation in technology began at the end of the nineteenth century with the invention of the telephone (1876), wireless telegraphy (1891), and the internal combustion engine (1897) which made possible the first gasoline-powered automobiles. In France and the United States, the mass production of automobiles was underway by 1900. (2)

The Modernist movement was rooted in the technological advances of the day, especially that of the automobile. Over the next five decades, the car would drastically change the face of the United States. As more and more people obtained one (or two or three), preferred modes of transportation changed; the railroad, for instance, fell out in favor of the car (Boyd and Pritch). This shift affected the design of American communities. Kunstler writes, “In almost all communities designed since 1950, it is a practical impossibility to go about the ordinary businesses of living without a car” (114) (fig. 5). The typical mid-century American lifestyle was
dependent upon ownership of an automobile. The widespread introduction of the car into the American lifestyle necessitated a revision in suburban architectural design—one that Wright did not provide for. Just as the Romantic edifice of Hugo’s Notre Dame had fallen to the technological advent of the printing press, Wright’s hybrid suburb—and what remained of the Romantic style—had fallen to the automobile.

The automobile changed suburban architecture in more ways than are visible. The newfound ubiquity of the car was the driving force for one of these changes. Kunstler writes, “The public realm suffered… with the rise of the automobile. Because the highways were gold-plated with our national wealth, all other forms of public building were impoverished” (121). Having spent all its money on infrastructural enhancements related to the automobile, by the 1950s, America had nothing left to allot to actual living and work spaces. Not that it would have mattered; the omnipresence of the car detracted from any beauty buildings might have retained. Kunstler writes, “Try to imagine a building of any dignity surrounded by six acres of parked cars. The problems are obvious. Obvious solution: Build buildings without dignity” (121; emphases added) (fig. 6). The solution Kunstler posits stands as a definite reversal of Wright’s architectural philosophies, which advocated the creation of functional buildings “raised to the dignity of works of art” (Wright 101 Emphasis added). Perhaps most affectingly, Kunstler writes, “The dogmas of Modernism only helped rationalize what the car economy demanded: bare bones buildings that served their basic functions without symbolically expressing any aspirations or civic virtues” (121) (fig. 7). Kunstler thus confirms Hugo’s grim prediction that the edifice would lose the artistic expressivity that gave it its human quality. By midcentury, the transformation was complete; like the machines that created it, American suburbia, dominated by doctrines of functionality, now serviced, but did not express.
With this repurposing of the suburb, old Romantic features, and newer Wrightian ones, were completely discarded. The Modernist view of nature, for instance, was industrious. Clifford E. Clark, Jr. noted, “[Suburbia]… pictured nature as a tamed and opened environment… The 1950s design standards conceived of the natural world in a simplified and controlled way that eliminated anything that was wild or irregular” (qtd. in May 172) (fig. 7). Unlike the Romantic architect, who let vines, vegetation, and trees grow in abundance upon the lots, and unlike Wright, who saw nature and architecture as the same thing, the post-automobile Modernist took nature and cropped it, cut it, and cleaned it until it served the purposes of the homeowner. As opposed to granting nature its own autonomy, as the Romantics and Wright did, the Modern architect lined it up along the sides of streets and sheared it. Artistic expression succumbed to industrious efficiency, and the Romantic ideal of nature was lost.

Trees were especially subject to the doctrines of utility adopted by the Modernists. As Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck write, landscape architects included trees to “create spatial definition when the buildings fail[ed] to do so” (79) (fig. 8). They go on to divulge some of the benefits of manipulating nature in such a way, including “the pedestrian’s sense of enclosure and comfort” and “shade” (79). According to them, the only place for nature in suburbia is along deficient streets, and only to serve its inhabitants. Whereas the Romantic suburb and the Wrightian suburb creatively integrated nature into their designs, the Modern suburb used nature simply to serve its own purposes. Even nature had somehow managed to become industrious.

Architecture of the Modernist period also abandoned the quality of picturesqueness so characteristic of the Romantic and Wrightian styles. Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck write, "The preferred technique of suburban design is to spin the buildings around in search of a pleasantly picturesque effect, rarely achieved. This aesthetic is
promulgated by planners and engineers with no aesthetic training and is a far cry from the true discipline of the picturesque. (47)

The picturesque, whose practitioners had already begun to dwindle in number at the time of Wright, had become an arcane art form, all but lost by the Modern architects. What had once thrived—what was once practiced and successfully employed by architects such as Downing and Wright—was now all but forgotten. But it was not merely the picturesque that was lost, and neither was it the abundance of natural forms. The Modernist suburb, with its emphasis on functionality and industriousness, ushered in an era free of the artistic expressivity that characterized the Romantic suburb. With this shift, American suburbia, as Wright feared, lost something human. Things with hearts live, but inevitably die; the Romantic suburb had its day, but eventually faded. The question is, will death ever become the Modernist machine?

To be fair, the heart has not disappeared entirely from American suburbia. Romantic suburbs still exist, and are still called home by many Americans. But by no means do the many form a majority. Only the affluent and well-to-do can stake a claim in the fading relic; the average annual cost of living in current-day Scarsdale, for example, is estimated at $105,832 per household, making it the fifteenth most expensive suburb in the United States (Lubin). This economic exclusivity is a result of the increasing rarity of the Romantic suburb, itself a result of the rise of the Modernist suburb. With the production of Romantic suburbs ceased, and the widespread development of Modernist ones, the former is losing its ground. The Modernist suburb has dominated America, pushing its vestigial Romantic cousins to the margins of society. The Romantic suburb is slowly disappearing. Thus, while Romantic suburbs still exist, they have nothing ahead of them but an inevitable obsolescence.
As American culture passed from Romanticism to Modernism, so too did American suburbia shift its focus from artistry to industry, its quality from human to machine. The subsequent shift from Modernism to Postmodernism was architecturally marked by a rejection of stern Modernist mandates, but while it did not necessarily deepen the division between Romanticism and Modernism, neither did the change bring about a return to Romantic ideals. Just as Hugo lamented architecture’s artistic downfall, so too must we lament the death of romance that is upon us. The failure of the Romantic suburb to survive the cultural blow of Modernism is an established fact. The human expression and the artistry of the Romantic suburb have been replaced by Modernist industry. In this mechanical environment, Americans have fallen out of touch with fundamentally human ideals. Hugo saw just the tip of the iceberg. The passing of architecture represented a larger, much more massive death, spurred by the birth of the machine; it was the death of Romanticism, and the human ideals that it expressed.

Suburbia serves as a tangible record of the death of Romanticism America has suffered. But while the Modernist suburb has all but taken over American suburbia, the continued presence of the Romantic suburb, little as it numbers, demonstrates its resiliency. Still, it is weakening. We are at the risk of losing something important—a precious thing known as the heart, and the human expressiveness that it represents. Victor Hugo knew it, the Romantics knew it, Frank Lloyd Wright knew it—and I suspect we know it too. But romance may be the last we have seen of the heart, for it has left a cavity desiring of one in the world of the machine. If there is one thing to be gained from such scrupulous attention to American institutions such as suburbia, and to the way culture affects them, it should be this: In seeking to retain our humanity, are we to revitalize the heart, or give in to the machine?
Figure 1: Notice the “mellow hue” of Frederick Law Olmsted’s John Clarke Dore Cottage of Riverside Village, which stands in harmony with its natural surroundings (Zekas). Olmsted was mentored by Downing.

Figure 2: The proposed layout for “A Suburban Cottage for a small Family” (Downing). The trellis, for which Downing suggests nine vines, is indicated by c.

Figure 3: Asymmetry is disguised as symmetry (Downing).

Figure 4: The Ronald Reisley House appears one with the land; it is difficult to discern where the land ends and the building begins (Aguar).
Figure 5: The vast network of roads that span Levittown, New York demonstrates the new American dependence on the car (Forster).

Figure 6: The suburban mall, Villa Italia, surround by an ocean of cars (Lady). Buildings without dignity seem almost practical.

Figure 7: This suburban house in Levittown, New York is as bare bones as it gets. The presence of nature on the lot is also notably diminished (“Levittown, Long Island, NY”).

Figure 8: The trees in this aerial view of Levittown, New York line the streets at equal intervals so as to create “spatial definition.” The trees serve multiple purposes, all in service to commuters (Arieff).
Works Cited


