

Suburbia. Living the American Dream

06.03.–04.08.2025 | Exhibition Hall 2

Opening: Wed 05.03., 19:00

Suburbia traces the history of an ideal life-style that – starting in the US suburbs – conquered the world and is constantly reproduced by popular media. At the same time, the exhibition analyzes the contradictions of this model and its social and ecological consequences such as land consumption, soil sealing, and vacancy. The big question is: What happens next?

The American dream can be described with a timeless image: a large house with a yard, swimming pool, and two cars in the garage. A quiet, safe place for the nuclear family, close to nature and in people-friendly surroundings. Suburbia leads us into this world of ideas and images that has been hugely promoted by politics, business, and the entertainment industry. The cultural history of the single-family home has its origins in the upscale American residential areas of the early nineteenth century. After the Second World War, the typology was massively developed and rolled out on a broad scale. The exhibition sheds light on the economic, political, and social context of this rapid expansion in the USA and beyond. It becomes clear that the model is based on social, ethnic, and gender-specific segregation and devours a tremendous amount of space.

Curated by Philipp Engel for the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), the exhibition was adapted by the Az W and expanded to include an Austrian focus. Even in Austria a large share of the population still wants to realize their own version of this dream on the outskirts of the city. According to a recent study by the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (BOKU), the proportion of highly sprawling areas in Austria increased fivefold between 1975 and 2020 – particularly due to detached single-family homes, large-scale industrial parks, and shopping centers. As a result, traffic areas are destroying the landscape, the rapidly advancing sealing is threatening biodiversity and food security, village centers are becoming desolate, and households are ending up isolated and overwhelmed in an increasingly older society. The image of half-abandoned, aging houses and residential estates characterizes many parts of the country. Instead of building new ones, the question arises as to how the existing stock of these approximately 1.5 million single-family homes can be made usable for the future. Successful examples of conversions, repurposing, densification, or new forms of living and working are intended to demonstrate the enormous potential and attractive alternatives.

With a wealth of historical material, photographs, films, literature, artistic works, and everyday objects, the exhibition tells the story of the commercial success of single-family home and invites reflection on the future perspectives of this form of living.

Themes and Structure of the Exhibition

PART 1: Suburbia and the Invention of the Single-Family Home in the USA

Planning a Dream

When the industrial revolution reached the USA at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the big cities became engines of progress, but were also regarded as dangerous places and sparked a longing for a safe haven outside. New means of transport revolutionized mobility, led to the gradual settlement of the urban fringes, and transformed the surrounding regions into residential areas. The first gated communities, Llewellyn Park (New Jersey) and Tuxedo Park (New York), were built in the middle of the century. Especially the automobile became a symbol of freedom and marked the birth of large-scale, prefabricated housing developments that started springing up everywhere.

The Suburbia Boom

With government support in the form of generous loans for war veterans, suburbs were erected after the Second World War using the Fordist assembly line production logic. The baby and consumption boom took place in 11 million single-family homes equipped with all kinds of electrical household appliances – always accompanied by a television program that offered the new suburban families idealized versions of themselves, with identical skin color and the same experiences, age, and the same gender roles. In the 1970s, the photographer Bill Owens documented the contradictions of his suburban environs.

The Residential Nightmare

What began as a dream turned into a nightmare. The idea of a safe and cheerful place was gradually alienated by fear, paranoia, and crime. In the tradition of the American gothic novel, the house has always been a source of horror. With the mass production of houses, a new literary and film genre was established under the name "Suburban Gothic." The insecurity and threat of the suburbs are also a topic for photographers Angela Strassheim and Gabriele Galimberti. Kate Wagner caricatures the suburban houses in her blog McMansion Hell.

Post-Suburbia?

With the advent of New Urbanism in the 1990s, the death of the suburbs was announced in the face of the looming end of the oil age. Nevertheless, residential areas continue to expand and change. Today, eight out of ten Americans live in suburbs and 75 percent of residential areas consist of single-family homes. But suburbia has become more diverse in ethnic, social, and economic terms, as the photo series Suburban Chinatown by Jessica Chou and Contemporary Suburbium by Ed & Deanna Templeton show. Today's huge, complex, and dynamic landscapes may no longer correspond to their names.

PART 2: And in Austria?

Living the American Dream in Austria

The first part of the focus examines the question of how the American dream of suburbia came to Austria and was enthusiastically accepted here, what parallels with the USA exist, and what special features the developments in Austria have taken on.

Why Austrians Are So Attached to Their Houses

During a course at the Vienna University of Technology on the subject of single-family homes (conceptualized by Barbara Steinbrunner, Isabel Stumfol, and Lena Schartmüller), not only the factual level was covered, but also personal stories of specific single-family homes that illustrate the emotional connection of the builders with their homes.

The Effects on Space and the Environment

The effects this popular form of housing has on the appearance of the country, but also on climate change, food sovereignty, and our mobility, are clearly presented here.

Austria Is Completely Built, What Now?

If one assumes, on the one hand, that Austria is “completely built” and at the same time the desire for single-family homes as a form of housing remains the top priority, the task of converting and repurposing is increasingly gaining importance. Thirteen successful examples of life after the first single-family home existence give cause for hope.

Projects:

EinRaumEinHaus (OneSpaceOneHouse), Klagenfurt, Carinthia, 2021, Winkler+Ruck Architekten

House Sternberg, Velden am Wörthersee, Carinthia, 2016, Gerhard Kopeinig, Arch+More

House Kappellerfeld, Gerasdorf, Lower Austria, 2015, aap.architekten ZT-GmbH

Children's Adventure Laboratory KALO, Traiskirchen, Lower Austria, 2022, ASAP Hoog Pitro Sammer

Pimp up my roof, Munderfing, Upper Austria, 2012, X ARCHITEKTEN

Conversion of House B, Linz, Upper Austria, 2021, Schneider Lengauer Pühringer Architekten

House Haslat, Zwischenwasser, Vorarlberg, 2002, Architekturbüro Bruno Spagolla

House Fink, Lustenau, Vorarlberg, 2013, Julia Kick Architects

Ellenbogen “Haus mitanand” (House Together), Bezau, Vorarlberg, 2017, Hermann Kaufmann + Partner

Initiatives:

SauRiassl Syndikat, Altöttingen, Germany

Exhibition Mach mehr aus deinem Wohnhaus! (Make More Out of Your Home!), Göfis, Vorarlberg, 2019

ReHABITAT settlement, Mistelbach, Lower Austria, 2021–2022

RURASMUS at Grundlsee, Styria, 2024

Represented Artists:

Bill Owens, Angela Strassheim, Gabriele Galimberti, Kate Wagner, Jessica Chou,

Weronika Gęsicka, Ed and Deanna Templeton, Benjamin Grant

An exhibition organized by the Architekturzentrum Wien and the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona.

Curatorial Team: Philipp Engel (CCCB) / Lene Benz, Katharina Ritter, Agnes Wyskitensky (Az W)

Design: Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch

The press release, as well as high-resolution press photos, are available free of charge for download at www.azw.at/press.

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