

# **Nature's Place:**

*From Suburbia to the Wilderness*

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the weekly struggle in American suburban neighborhoods between man and nature. It addresses a struggle that forces nature to conform to a manmade system of inorganic shapes and floral arrangement not found in nature. By documenting various types of landscaping design, I reveal a weekly war between homeowners and their front lawns - a battle to maintain an intangible sense of order and civility. Connections between the early landscaping architects and the overarching philosophy behind landscaping architecture in parks and its evolution into suburban neighborhoods. The focus of my findings is in the form of drawing, wallpaper installation, and architectural sample books. The three projects discussed in this paper will use drawing as a way to translate photographic reference, narrative illustration, and mark making into print and bookmaking. The result of my discoveries evident in the form of wallpaper installation, copper etching, and book structures that conceptually relate to the experience of living in suburban developments and nature.

INTRODUCTION:

“When Smiling lawns and tasteful cottages begin to embellish a country,” Andrew Jackson Downing, one of the nation’s first landscape designers, said, “we know that order and culture are established.” For much of American history, the healthy lawn has been an icon not just of prosperity, both individual and communal, but of something deeper: shared ideals, collective responsibility, and the ease of living that comes with conformity. An article from *The Atlantic* titled *The Life and Death of the American Lawn* goes so far as to say that “...proper maintenance (of the lawn) is part of the compact we make with each other, the logic goes, not just in the name of “order and culture,” but in the name, in some sense, *of civilization itself*.”<sup>1</sup> The philosophy behind landscape design sheds light on its roots and its intended purpose to subliminally instill a sense of order and culture into people. Andrew Downing thought of the American lawn as having “...the elements of a picturesque landscape were both natural and artificial.” In Europe, where a lot of Downing’s gardening aesthetics are based, lawns were a sign that the homeowner could afford to delegate a portion of their land to beauty rather than agricultural benefit. Downing’s philosophy was not only concerned with the aesthetics of lawns and parks but in the deeper thinking behind how plants were maintained and arranged to instill order and structure. The lawns in my suburban neighborhood of Pilesgrove, New Jersey are in line with Downing’s philosophy behind landscaping architecture.

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT:

Lawncare, in America, has roots connected to the early planning of Central Park in 1850. Horticulturalists and philosophers, during this time, took inspiration from the gardens of England and Rome as they were the best examples of a “picturesque” ideal American life. In the midst of the Industrial Revolution, Frederick Law Olmsted envisioned large expanses of the color green which he called “Nature’s Robe” along with the meandering, asymmetrical landscapes of *Sharawadgi* parks of England. The origins of Olmsted’s aesthetic vision of landscaping exist in 18<sup>th</sup> century England. He developed an aesthetic philosophy that revolves around discussions of the beautiful, sublime, and picturesque based on elaborate picture gardens of Rome. In America, lawns were originally designed to connect homes as shared domestic spaces. Some neighborhoods even go so far as to socially regulate their community through events like neighborhood walks and landscaping contests in order to instill a sense of communal pride. This harks back to the original philosophy of how early parks were planned and maintained.

In the suburban development I currently reside in, the properties are roughly two and a half acres large and the partition lines are established based on the property deed and in some cases are marked by a visual indicator like a bush, a fence or a tree line. When seen from an aerial point of view, the boundary lines between homes range from easily identifiable, rectangular shapes to borders that meander around the natural landscape that result in a more organic design scheme. The way these property lines

are defined informs my approach to how I developed the narrative and composition for a wallpaper installation project. The pattern reflects a version of the weekly battle between homeowner and nature as it relates to hedge trimming, grass cutting, and other tools used in lawncare.

Similar to architects and engineers, landscape designers use a grid to plan where exotic trees, flowers, and shrubbery will be planted. Landscaping architects also take into considering how tall a tree will grow versus how thick a bush will be in the future. Essentially the “canvas” is alive, therefore time needs to be taken into account when composing the front lawn. A few homes in my neighborhood did not consider these changes resulting in overgrown landscaping that blocks driveways or leans over into a neighbors pool. Disputes between neighbors over the level of upkeep of his or her lawn is commonplace in suburban developments. While walking around my neighborhood gathering photographic reference material I also took notes on the various degrees of lawncare maintenance for each home. In later project discussed in this paper I used some of these photographs as studies for drawings. As I accumulated reference material for my book and wallpaper, I made sure to be as objective as possible in order to edit out my personal feelings in response to each homeowner’s aesthetic choices or lack thereof.

The third project discussed in this paper is about depicting nature undisturbed by mankind through the printing and the techniques used in copper plate etching.

While there exists a constant struggle to instill order and civility in suburbia, nature devoid of this intrusion is an entirely different experience. It is a dense world of interconnected relationships from microscopic ecosystems to massive rock formations carved out of time. Despite the fact that it is mostly undisturbed by mankind it is still a living neighborhood that struggles daily to preserve a kind of harmony between its inhabitants. This project uses copper etching for its ability to record layers and layers of mark making, drawing, and design onto a single plate. The end result is an abstract print which contains an archive of experimental imagery interacting with each other over time.

#### WALLPAPER DESIGN:

Maximalism, an obvious response to the minimalism art movement, is art with a visual excess or extra. "More is more" is the general thinking behind the movement. Wallpaper's ability to repeat any image endlessly over a surface makes it ideal for working within the philosophy of Maximalism. The creator of the *Where's Waldo* children's puzzle book series, Martin Handford, is someone who implements the idea of extreme excess in the form of hyper-detailed, wordless narrative illustrations. His wordless books depict many people gathered together in parking lots, ballroom masquerades, or a theme park with hundreds of tourists packed tightly together. Based

on the title of each book, *Where's Waldo*, the goal is to find a hidden character named Waldo among a fever dream of illustrations. Luckily for the reader, Waldo is simply dressed in blue jeans, a red and white striped shirt, and a beanie to match. Along with Handford's dense illustrations the viewer has to navigate through to find Waldo, there are also interconnected narratives that sprawl out across each double-page spread. In one of Handford's drawings called *Land of Waldos* the self-contained, wordless story begins to approach something more sublime and dream-like with hundreds of figures dressed like Waldo jammed into one image. In this particular spread, the only way to find the real Waldo is to spot the one with a cane and messenger bag. Essentially looking for a slightly longer needle in a stack of needles. Although Handford's work is primarily expressed in book form, his style of complex narrative is where I expand on in my illustration for the wallpaper pattern. The drawing that my pattern, *Residence is Futile*, is based on is a large (37" x 45") expansive narrative wherein which suburban landscaping has begun to take over the neighborhood. In my pattern, carefully sculpted shrubbery begin to fight back the way a hive minded organism like a fungus or an invasive enemy like a parasite would adapt and consume its host. Imagining landscaping with such sinister intentions allowed me to build a story that was visually sublime as well as terrifying. Throughout this complex drawing are several situations involving gardeners being attacked and some that are rebuilding their life after their home was consumed by the front lawn.



Another artist whose work shares a maximalist approach and one that I took inspiration from is Paul Noble. Noble creates massive drawings that, like *Residence Is Futile*, feature an aerial view of an invented town. In Noble's drawings, he creates buildings and other structures that are a complex mix of interconnected pipes, maze-like gardens, perspectival typography designed by the artist, and geometric domiciles for his inhabitants. In 2010, Paul Noble designed a wallpaper covering called *Ye Olde Ruin* (Fig. 1). The pattern is of a drawing that features several small architectural structures arranged on a grid. Although my pattern does not follow a rigid grid, it shares a sense of endless repetition by repeating on all four sides of the original drawing. The repeating illustration I created for my pattern is a meandering narrative that stretches over a large surface without a specific grid, making it difficult to navigate for the viewer to establish where the pattern starts and stops. Even though the pattern repeats on all four sides of the drawing it is easy to get lost in the narrative.

In my drawing (Fig. 2), the bushes and trees have begun to fight back via imitation and accelerated growth. Some bushes burst out of rooves while others grow in elaborate shapes. In a few areas between homes, the shrubbery has started to imitate human forms, develop symbols for communicating, and attack the homeowners. Like a *Where's Waldo* puzzle book, the figures are hard to find amidst all the complexity of the illustration. Once the viewer has spotted a few of the people, the story becomes darker as the landscaping starts to attack and eat the inhabitants of this suburban

neighborhood. As a single image the story would play out as a somewhat linear narrative, however repeating the story allows the narrative to continue endlessly in any direction.

The installation site and available printing options were factors during the planning stages of the project. The wallpaper installation is designed for a specific location in the Philadelphia Art Alliance building and presented as part of a group exhibition in collaboration with The University of the Arts. While scouting the location a few months prior to the opening reception, I noticed that the foyer for the gallery felt more domestic than the rest of the more modern looking gallery space. The foyer of the second floor of the Art Alliance building still had some of the original wooden molding in the archways as you enter the rest of the gallery. In contrast to the standard white walls of a gallery, this entranceway provided a chance to see my wallpaper covering archways and hugging ornate, wooden molding that you might see in the colonial style interiors of suburban homes.

#### SAMPLE BOOK:

For this project I am examining the experience of house hunting in suburban developments in the form of a sample book. Sample books come in many forms and are used throughout the house hunting process by realtors, architects, interior decorators,

and landscape designers. One of the earliest forms of this style of book is called *Victorian Cottage Residences*, by Andrew Jackson Downing in 1842. The book contains illustrations of colonial homes as well as architectural floor plans for each home. The drawings are black and white and are realistic depictions of Victorian homes in a sentimental, picturesque vignette composition similar to American painter Thomas Kincaid's *Kitsch*. Each vignette is a unique compositional design based on the home's individual architecture. My sample book, *64 Picturesque Drawings of Suburbia*, while similar in its approach to *Victorian Cottage Residences* illustration style, is organized in a rigid square vignette format which introduces a sense of conformity common in suburban neighborhoods. The number 64 is based on a grid of 8 by 8 3.5" square drawings I established early on in the project in order to have a vague sense of conformity to build upon throughout the process. Instead of setting up an easel with a large drawing pad on a stranger's front lawn I decided to walk around my neighborhood and candidly take photos of landscaping and sections of homes that either followed a formulaic design or seemed more individualized based on the homeowner's personal expression. My housing development is also located near several farms. As a result, my gallery of photo reference are a mix of objective studies of suburban landscaping/architecture and picturesque passageways between homes and farms. The open areas between neighbors creates an arresting picturesque composition similar to Italian picture gardens or the sentimental oil paintings of

Thomas Kincaid. Unlike the comic illustration style of *Resistance is Futile*, the drawings for this book are more painterly and impressionistic based on the reference to Thomas Kincaid's overly sentimental portraits of cottage homes in the woods.

For *64 Picturesque Drawings of Suburbia*, I decided to keep a monochromatic palette in order to stay tonally faithful to the photography used during my research. I am also eliminating color as a nod to Ed Ruscha's photographic book, *Ed Ruscha and Some Los Angeles apartments*.<sup>4</sup> Ruscha's dry sense of humor and candid approach to photography was something I kept in mind while designing *64 Picturesque Drawings of Suburbia*. Each of the 64 drawings in my book is a 3.5" x 3.5" square vignette of various landscaping designs and architecture in my neighborhood. A consistent square format throughout the book creates an awkward compositional element that forces intimate pencil studies to conform to a repeating composition, similar to the homogenized banality of suburban planning.

While Ruscha's books are bound in a standard codex format, my book has more in common with the carpet sample books you would find at a hardware store. During the house hunting process around suburban developments, realtors and homeowner's go through volumes of carpet samples, color swatches, wallpaper patterns, and landscaping design books to construct an aesthetic that conforms to a given neighborhood's aesthetic. An early version of a sample book came from Andrew Jackson Downing's book, *Victorian Cottage Residences*.<sup>4</sup> It was an influential book of

houses which combined charming colonial architecture with agrarian, picturesque illustrations. Modern sample books come in a variety of formats depending on the products being displayed. Some of the color swatch sample books for house painting are flag books that spread out like a wheel from a center axis. Other sample books display carpet fabrics or drapery in an accordion book structure with tabs that can be flipped through or pulled out and rearranged according to the homeowner's preference. Building on these types of book structures I have created a variation on sample books called *64 Picturesque Drawings of Suburbia*. My book features 64 lithographic prints based on pencil studies of photographs gathered while walking around my neighborhood of *Laurel Hills*. I chose to work with a flag book structure to reference the types sample books one goes through while house hunting through suburban neighborhoods. Most of these sample books feature tabs that extend out from the spine or along pages to allow the reader to compare and contrast colors or materials. In my book, the face of each tab is a lithograph print of a pencil study based on the photographic reference I gathered while walking around my neighborhood. On the back of each tab is a geometric design meant to mimic architectural plans similar to the ones that accompany the illustrations in Andrew Downing's book, *Victorian Cottage Residences*. In between the accordion-folded spine are invented addresses printed with letterpress and placed next to each drawing the way one would see in a color sample book for interior decorating.

## INTO THE WOODS:

Mark making is an important component of a project that deals with the act of drawing as well as an investigation into the temporal, hidden world of forests. For a copper plate etching print titled *Into the Woods*, I work with a single copper plate, obsessively reworking the surface to create a layered image. Copper plate etching involves corroding or engraving into a metal surface with acid or a sharp etching tool, respectively. There are variety of techniques used to manipulate a copper plate. You can draw through a waxy substrate, called hard ground, in order to create lines like a Rapido graph pen. Another form of transferring an image, pattern, or texture onto a copper plate is to coat the metal surface with a thinner, sensitive material called soft ground. Unlike hardground, which dries as a hard, clay-like finish, soft ground is more reactionary to drawing with softer tools like a pencil or a found object placed onto the surface like a doily, a dead leaf, or a fingerprint. As a result, a plate coated with soft ground can accurately capture a quick sketch or an impression of a leaf by placing the leaf onto the coated plate, running it through the press at normal pressure, then etching the plate in an acid bath. Although soft ground is more sensitive to touch than hard ground the coating is still acid resistant. Therefore, the impression of a delicate leaf is recorded, etched, and printed from the copper plate. Along with a project that involves

a variety of drawing tools, substrates, patterns, and textures, I selectively sand away small areas or entire layers that were etched into the plate.

The first round of working on the plate is an obsessive doodle in no particular direction in terms of recognizable imagery. Like the rest of the layers, this first step is a way of creating a substrate that contains small sketched forms to create gestural marks, similar to the contour lines found in comic books as well as the layered mark making found in the old master etchings of Rembrandt. The subsequent steps deal with tree drawings, geometric shapes, and various forms of spit bite, open bite, and mezzotint. In between certain layers I am sanding away some of the metal surface to create a ghost image of the previous drawings. The advantage of using this printing method is that the metal surface is reworkable. This allows me to take the piece in different directions based on what is able to be inked and printed. It is an organic, reactionary process unlike the previous works in this paper. Each layer is an experimentation into line quality, painterly strokes, and other techniques associated with copper etching. The resulting image is a complex archive of marks, patterns, and textures based on interconnected relationships in the dense world of a forest. Similar to the work of photographer, Jitka Hanzlova, this piece is meant as a translation of "...a forest, perceived like the inside of a glove by a hand within it."<sup>3</sup> Hanzlova's photographs view nature from within, rather than an aerial or macro point of view. In contrast, my print

is the end result of a combination of traditional illustration, abstraction, and geometric design.

#### IN SUMMARY:

Discussed in this paper, I have developed works in the form of copper plate etching, wallpaper design, and bookmaking. All of which explore printmaking and book structure from the perspective of suburban neighborhoods and landscaping. Wallpaper installation allows for an expansive visual experience based on a large-format drawing and interconnected storytelling beyond the traditional narrative structure of a book or single image. While *64 Picturesque Drawings of Suburbia* sample book does not portray a story, it is instead a recreation of the experience of living in a suburban developments. A kaleidoscope of shared memories between people with similar upbringings in suburban environments. It is also an experience grown out of a philosophy of well-behaved conformity and picturesque moments rigidly organized into a sample book you might be sifting through when dealing with a real estate agent.

*Into the Woods* looks at nature in its raw, undisturbed state before it is pushed aside during the initial construction of suburban planning. A world rarely seen with a living archive of a wide range of symbiotic relationships in a constant state of flux. Drawing and printing with a copper plate allows for scenery, lines, and marks to build



a record of layered imagery onto a single metal surface. Rather than categorizing artificial pastoral landscapes found in my sample book, I see this final project as a way of allowing conversations in nature to interact all at once. the banality of suburbia versus wander out into a dense, uncontrolled wilderness of marks. A world developed without a plan compared to a suburban philosophy designed to use nature to instill order and civility.

## WORKS CITED

1. *The Life and Death of the American Lawn*, Megan Garber, The Atlantic, 2015
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3. *Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Various Authors, Edited by Simon Morley, The MIT Press, 2010
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6. *Ed Ruscha and Photography*, Silvia Wolf, Stiedl, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 2004
7. *Making Handmade Books*, Alisa Golden, Sterling Publishing Company, New York/London, 2010

## LIST OF FIGURES

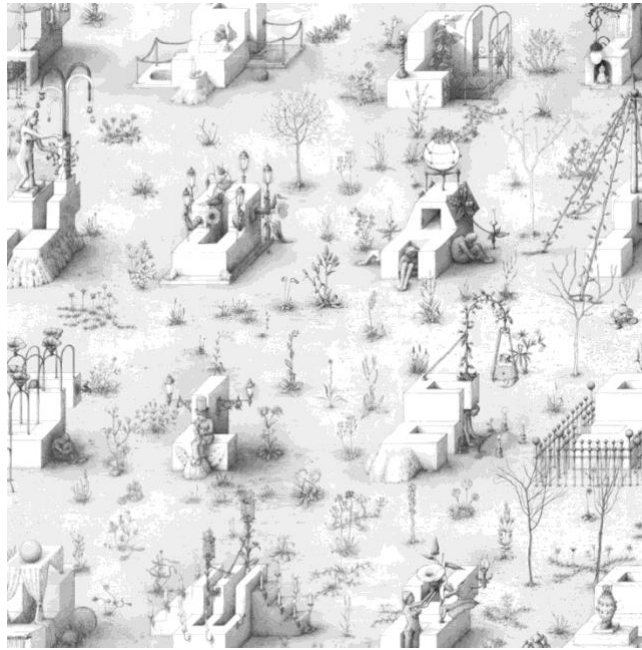


Fig. 1 *Ye Olde Ruin (detail)*, Paul Noble, Wallpaper Installation, 10' H x 16'8" W

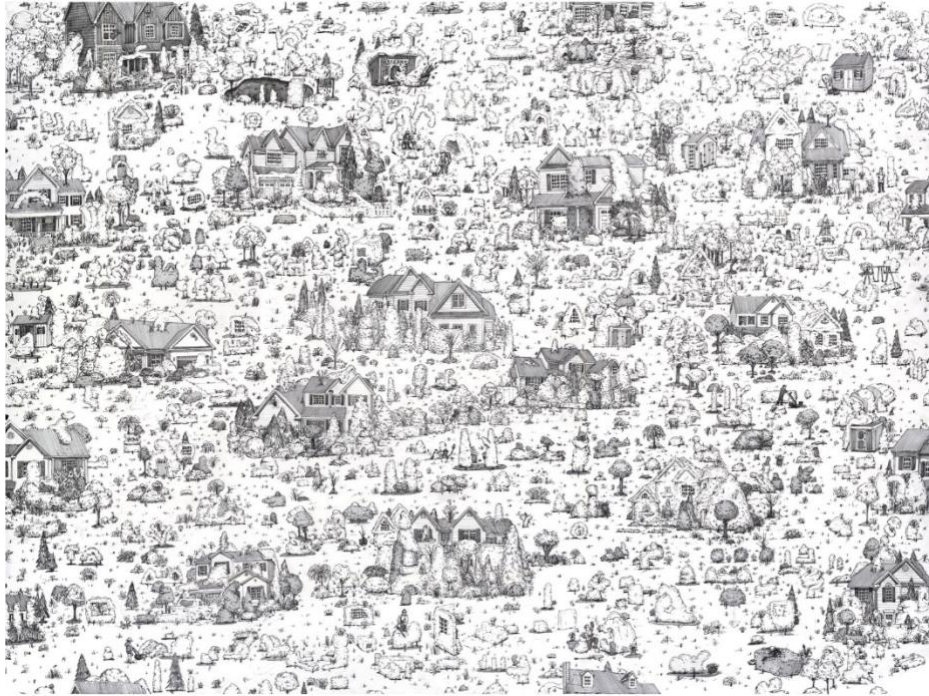


Fig. 2 *Residence is Futile*, Wallpaper Pattern Illustration, pencil on paper, Tim Furey 35" x 47", 2020



Fig 3. *64 Picturesque Drawings of Suburbia*, Digital Mockup artist book, 2020



Fig 4. *Some Los Angeles Apartments*, Edward Ruscha, artist book, 1965



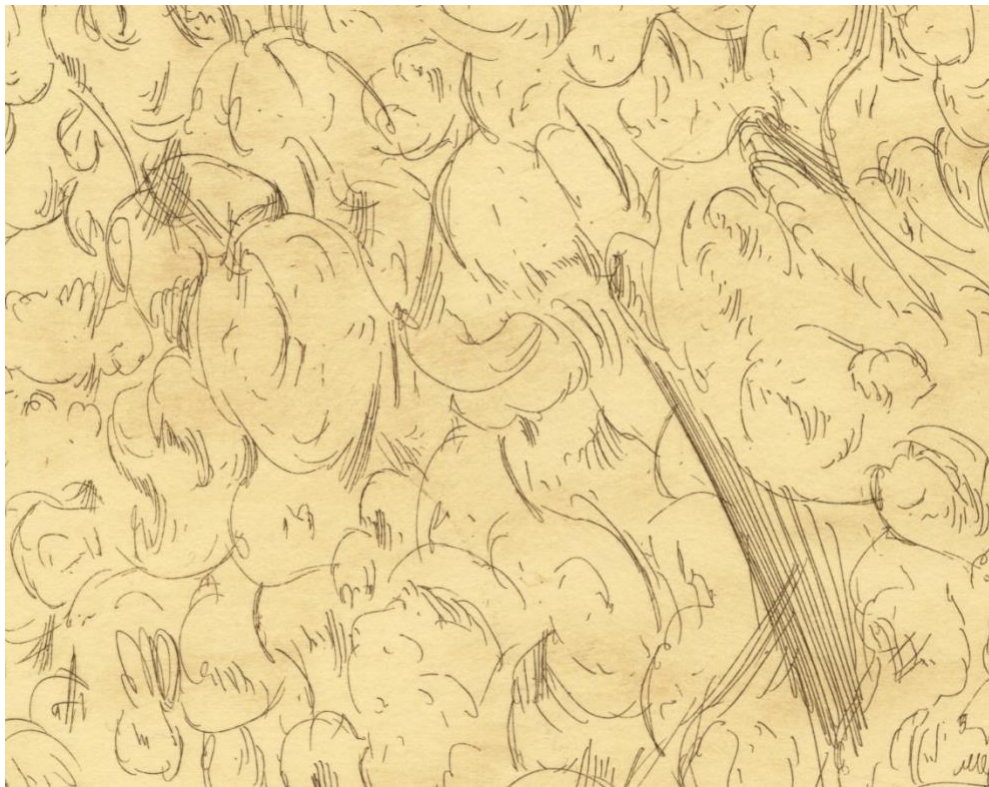


Fig. 5 *Into the Woods*, Tim Furey, Etching Print with detail image, 16" x 20", 2020