

American Studies 110
Society, Shelter, and Self
Roger Williams University
CAS 223
M W F 12:00-12:50
Spring 2008

Michael R. H. Swanson, Ph. D.
Office CAS 110
Hours: T, 9:30 - 10:00
M F, 1:00 - 2:00; W 2:00-3:00
Phone: 254 3230
e-mail: SocietyShelterSelf@msn.com

Course Introduction

INTRODUCTION

BOOK LIST

Rybczynski, Witold: *Home : A Short History of an Idea*
New York, N.Y., U.S.A. : Viking, 1986

Kidder, Tracy: *House*
Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1985

Stilgoe, John R. *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820 - 1939*
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*
NY: Oxford University Press, 1984

American Studies 110: Society, Shelter, and Self

American culture expresses beliefs and customs through the communities and shelters it creates. The suburb and the suburban house have become the archetypal symbol of the American Dream. Students gain insight into the relationship between their own beliefs/values about shelters and communities they inhabit, and how the American "Dream House" arises through synthesis of ideas from other cultures across time.

Roger Williams University College Catalogue

A FEW INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

I've printed the catalogue description for AMST110, just in case you've not read it, or have forgotten what it promises. For years, I've taught this course as one of several versions of American Studies 100, The American Experience. The other versions of the course focus primarily on the interior intellectual lives of Americans, the psychological lives shaped by the culture, and the sociological lives created as Americans interact with each other as families, communities, and also as strangers to each other.

The house (actually house and home--a closely related idea) is the stage on which the family drama is enacted. We know that practically no condition is more tragic, and indeed scary than homelessness is. Leaving one home and forming another is one of the rites of passage for us.

Cultures express beliefs and customs in the shelters they create. Simply put, as people travel, they observe differences in the ways that shelters (houses) and groups of shelters and other structures (cities, towns, villages) look. These differences are not random or matter of chance. They result from choices people make based on who they are, what they believe about the world, and the forces to which their cultural history has subjected them.

Because these differences are not random, people like ourselves can think about them rationally--and explain them. We can observe them with intelligence and sophistication, rather than bias and ignorance. We can see that our taste is just as much a product of our experience as others' tastes are products of theirs. How much this will increase our "freedom of informed choice and judgement" is open to debate. Our own cultures are not that easy to escape. Probably more important is that looking at the cultural creations of other people helps us to do the hardest things of all--think rationally about the creations of our own cultures.

Thinkers have long known that it is far easier to think clearly from a distance. The things with which we are involved as a matter of daily routine are so familiar to us that we rarely think about them at all. We just accept them the way they are, and use them as they have been handed down to us. This is probably true about houses, even though they represent for most people their most significant capital resource investment. Why this culture places such an emphasis on home-ownership is worthy of consideration, as well

COURSE MATERIALS

There is a LOT of reading for this course. None of it is difficult or technical, but it is going to require a significant time commitment on your part. Be careful that you purchase the books for this section and not those for one of the others. It may be a good idea for you to look the materials for all sections over, just in case you find that your interests really suggest you belong elsewhere

Rybczynski, Witold: *Home : a Short History of an Idea*
New York, N.Y., U.S.A. : Viking, 1986

I'm hoping that this book will prove to be a real "eye-opener." Most of us think that a common word like "home" represents a fixed thing. We're going to discover how subtle and changing our understanding of "home" has been. Our method of work at this time will be historical, and we'll look to see how what we value in a house has been assembled across time, drawing on the experiences brought to this country from a wide variety of largely European cultures.

NEWS FLASH!!! Professor Rybczynski is coming to speak on the campus this semester. I'll post the vital information—date, time, place, as soon as I have confirmed it.

Kidder, Tracy: *House*
Boston : Houghton Mifflin, 1985

If you are at all familiar with Tracy Kidder's work, you'll recognize that his particular talent is the ability to write a factual analysis of something without spoiling the story. People Magazine called this book "Powerful, rich, enjoyable...a suspenseful, gripping tale!" The subject of the book is the building of a house. It is a tribute to the author that such an "ordinary" and commonplace happening could be presented in such a way

Stilgoe, John R. *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820 - 1939*
New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988

I think every American knows what a "suburb" is. A significant number of you, perhaps the majority, most likely live in a suburb now, or have lived in a suburban area at some time in the past. Stilgoe is interested in the form or pattern humans impose on a place. He understands that suburbs have a visual signature, and that the look of the suburb is a quite deliberate thing a matter of symbol and icon representing an ideal of living to which suburbanites aspire, either consciously or unconsciously. The illustrations are very important here.

Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*
NY: Oxford University Press, 1984

Jackson is an urban historian and cultural geographer, and his book will make a nice complement to Stilgoe's. There will be more about the mechanics of suburban living and technological innovations which make the suburban lifestyle a real option for growing numbers of Americans. We'll see, too, how the suburb moves conceptually from a less desirable environment (a sub - urb) to the object of aspiration it has become.

COURSE WORK

I've taken an advanced look at my roster for this course and it pleased me to notice a few familiar names. Welcome back, and I'm glad you wanted to have another experience with me. Those of you to whom this applies know one thing already, and that is that I have been moving more and more towards a course with a significant internet component to it. From my early days at Roger Williams I've provided a course overview at the beginning and then a series of weekly assignment sheets

throughout the course, and that practice still obtains here. Beginning seven years ago, I started creating websites for my classes, and that practice continues now. In fact, I intend not to pass out any paper to you, once the first two weeks of the course have passed. If things work out as I hope, I will be introducing this course to you via the web, then passing sheet of paper out following that introduction. After I end the practice of passing out syllabi, you will be responsible for visiting the class website at least weekly and keeping current with the work ahead. If you want to have a printed copy of the course work, you can print one off on your own. There will be a "printer friendly" version available at the website. The URL for the class website is <http://amst110.homestead.com/index.html>

You will also note that I have a special e-mailbox for this class. The address appears on the header of this handout, and on every page in the class website, as well. I encourage you to e-mail me when you have a question or comment, and you'll get a speedy reply.

We will also be making considerable use of Blackboard. Consequently. **All written work for this course, except the bibliography project described below, must be turned in using the blackboard turn it in function.** Receiving electronic copies allows me to type comments on your papers—though of you who know my handwriting also know why you'll benefit more from typed comments than you would from scrawled ones. You may submit using any of these word processing programs: Microsoft Word, Microsoft Works, or Corel Word Perfect. If you have a word processor other than these, I can direct you to a pretty good one which is available *free*, so we can communicate with each other. If sufficient numbers of you are unfamiliar with Blackboard, I'll invite Ms. Bonnie Hatch, Information Technology Specialist for the system to come in and give a brief tutorial.

The major portion of your written work will be done outside of class.

THERE WILL BE A TAKE-HOME FINAL, RATHER THAN AN IN-CLASS FINAL FOR THIS COURSE.

There will also be a midterm-exam, but it will not be in traditional form. It will be based on Rybczynski and on Kidder, and will be done as a take-home.

Part of the take-home final will also require an analysis of Tracy Kidder's book, *House*. **The book is non-fiction. Please don't call it a novel**, though it reads like it could be one. I hate to spoil the story and your encounter with the characters in it by analyzing it to death. I would prefer for you to read it on your own, and aim to have it finished by the end of February. I'll ask you how you're getting along by the middle of that month, and if necessary, I'll apply a few touches of the lash.

* * * * *

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

I'd like you all to get a start on an ongoing semester-long project which we'll be doing. American Studies differentiates itself from American History partly on the basis of subject matter and partly on the basis of resources. American Studies tends to look farther afield for insights into the culture and its character, using a range of literary sources, artifacts, music, art, and popular culture of all sorts. By the end of the semester, each of you will be preparing an informal annotated bibliography on the topic Houses and Homes in American Culture. This will include at *least*:

- 1. One Novel
- 2. One Short Story
- 3. One Poem
- 4. One Essay
- 5. One Newspaper or Journal article
- 6. One Painting (high style)
- 7. One popular illustration
- 8. One piece of popular music
- 9. One Movie, Play, or Television Program
- 10. Other..... Something else, of your own choice or devising,

...in which *American* houses or homes are the focus. **Illustrations or examples from our texts are not eligible.**

GRADING:

The Midterm will have two distinct parts. Each will count approximately 15% of your grade and will be graded independently. I may, in fact, decide to distribute each section of the mid-term independently depending on how things go and whether or not we have disruptions.

The Take-Home Final will also have two parts, each graded independently. Each will count approximately 20 % of your final grade. The Final will be due at the scheduled time for the final examination. This may very well happen off campus. More about this later. I will publish the questions for the take-home final about the middle of April.

The Annotated Bibliography will be due the last class session of the semester. It will account for 15% of your final grade.

I want you to get to know each other and to feel comfortable collaborating with each other and with learning from each other. This is another way that the Blackboard system works to our advantage. On the class listing you'll find ways to e-mail each other and to create study groups.

Attendance Policy

I try to be as liberal as I can regarding excusing absences from class for illnesses, events scheduled by other classes or the athletic department, and emergencies. I expect to be notified by e-mail in advance when you are going to be absent, unless the nature of the reason (for example, an accident on the way to class) makes this impossible. Use the Class E-mail for this. **More than three unexcused absences will have a negative impact on your grade.**

I pass around an attendance sign in sheet. It is your responsibility to make sure that your name is on the roster before the end of the class period.

I'm looking forward to a semester in your company. I'm hoping all will feel free to participate actively in the classroom. I don't mind interruptions for questions and comments on what we're doing, and I'll try to be as responsive as I can to each of you as individuals and to the class as a whole.

Undergraduate Pledge to Academic Integrity

We, the undergraduate students of Roger Williams University, commit ourselves to academic integrity. We promise to pursue the highest ideals of academic life, to challenge ourselves with the most rigorous standards, to be honest in any academic endeavor, to conduct ourselves responsibly and honorably, and to assist one another as we live and work together in mutual support

For a number of years now, this pledge has been the centerpiece of the convocation which begins the fall term. It is worthwhile taking a minute or two to reflect on what it says. The twin supports of Academic Life are collaboration and independence of thought. In this class, there is no curve. In the largest sense, you're not in competition with each other, and to the degree that you can assist each other in learning you'll win nothing but praise from me. Yet it is equally important that each student exercise his/her own independent judgment, and have confidence in his/her own mind. Plagiarism defeats the whole purpose of the enterprise, and the University will not tolerate this particular form of intellectual theft. For the university statement on plagiarism, and for a general exposition of its Academic Standards, consult the [University Website](#).