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DOMESTIC ANXIETY

An exhibition of contemporary photography probes the uneasy realm between city and suburb, and the ambivalent legacy of the buildings that define them. by Robert Klara

In Gregory Crewdson's *Untitled*, a digital chromogenic color print from his series *Beneath the Roses*, the viewer sees a young lady sitting in the front passenger seat of a Dodge, stopped at a downtown intersection beneath a traffic light. The driver's seat is vacant, the car's left door hanging open, as the woman directs her gaze uneasily down to a point beneath the dashboard, the scene anointed by the sickly nimbus of a traffic light's yellow beam.

The physical context of this photograph—we are in a depressed part of town, it seems, flanked by worn, shuttered storefronts, while only a gasp of sunlight escapes from a bleary horizon—as well as the uncertain predicament of the woman in the car (Has the driver abandoned her? Been shot?), percolate to form a sickly amalgam of uncertainty and foreboding.

And indeed, in *The New City: Sub/Urbia in Recent Photography*, there is much of that angst to go around. In this small but stirring exhibition on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, photographers have turned their lenses toward the countless idiosyncrasies (many of them, by necessity, architectural) that have grown from the ever-blurring notions of city and suburb—with neither enjoying the relatively clear demarcations it might have had back when "sub-urbia," as the exhibition's subtitle cleverly reminds us, was a mid-century Valhalla.

But *The New City*, on view until January 15, goes beyond a mere cataloging of urban and suburban failures, the stuff of abandoned storefronts and kidney-shaped subdivisions that are all too easily (and commonly) scorned.

Rather, as the relentless push of expansion directs the attention of the public, and architects, ever outward, the photographs in this exhibition depart from questions about what's being built today in order to probe the ditches and furrows where so many of yesterday's good ideas now lie.

We see, for example, Walead Beshty's eerie day/night stereograph of Oriental Gardens, a failed prefab development in New Haven, Connecticut; its Lego-block sophistication has since been answered by boarded-up windows. That day and night are indistinguishable between these two gelatin-silver prints points an accusing finger at the deadness of the design itself. Tim Davis's *Burger King* shows an old-line suburban tract house, complete with a station wagon parked out front. But the durable, postwar idealism of the

house's gabled roof and wreathed front door is disturbingly marred by the blurry reflection of a fast-food restaurant's sign in the window. Mass-produced lunches meet mass-produced housing; Is this tragedy or poetic justice?

A near complete absence of people in the images of these spaces supposedly designed for their benefit is the exhibition's ironic echo. In *Green Slope* and *Small Green Slope*, photographer Michael Vahrenwald zeros in on a grassy hillside whose bucolic charms suggest that children are about to come frolicking into view. Those expectations erode as one realizes that the hills are little more than the bulldozed border of a Wal-Mart parking lot.

Acting as a thematic anchor for the exhibition is Amir Zaki's digital laser print, *Untitled*, drawn from his *Spring through Winter* series. In it, the spectator is shadowed (nearly engulfed, as the image is over seven feet wide) by the cantilevered ends of two houses ramrodded into the dusty hills of Southern California for the sake of providing a view. The image's central position in the gallery is wholly apt, as the themes it suggests are integral for the examination of the suburbs that *The New City* clearly mandates: vanity over common sense, the lifespan of the temporary, a balance that is at best precarious.

To be sure, there is some fun here, too—though fun of a ghostly sort. The threadbare but embracing rooms shown in Corin Hewitt's *85 Union Street*—the suburban home of his grandmother, modeled as it appeared the day of her death—portray a domestic landscape lacking in pretension and redolent of a life fully lived.

In the end, *The New City* proffers no clean conclusions regarding what's properly praised or condemned about the complex and changing borderland where city and suburb meet and overlap. But it does serve up a compelling case for a longer examination of all that would bill itself as revolutionary and untarnishable. The environments shown here—well worn and sad, empty and even preposterous—are, if anything, hardly as glorious as the day they were new. ■



Amir Zaki's *Untitled* (facing page) weights *The New City* with suggestions of impermanence. Another *Untitled* (top) by Gregory Crewdson portrays the unease of a faded downtown, while Corin Hewitt's *85 Union Street* (above) evokes a sense of harmony in a deserted domestic warren.

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