

A History of the Strip Mall with a Look at Northfield, Ohio

[David Malkin](#)

HI 402

Prof. Benjamin Siegel

Prof. Robichaud

Introduction

Sometime at the end of April 2020, I found myself despairing deep in the woods behind my house. I was walking my dog for the second time that day already, thinking to myself, “so this is it.” The sky was a bleak gray and the grass was faded brown and the trees were barren and cold. I wandered past the skeletal steel structures that held up the power lines cutting across the wet and windy grasslands which dissected my suburban development. On the hill I had a view of cars going up and down Northfield road, the strip that is Northfield, Ohio. The pandemic was lonely and it destabilized my ability to plan for the future. So, I looked to the past. Why did everything look like this? I tried hard to escape my hometown in high school only to find myself forcibly back home for the lockdowns. I thought I had escaped the endless seas of cracked parking lots and gray roads. I was tired of having to drive through the Northfield strip yet again. A static and predictable landscape, I had to drive past it every day past Speedway on the corner, Pepper’s Market across from it, an empty storefront that Goodwill had moved out of in the 2010’s, Mixer’s Gentlemen’s club to the left, next to a Subway, Northfield Plaza to the right past the golden arches, followed by the MGM Northfield park casino and racetrack (“racino” as it is advertised), and succeeded by an isolated and gothic-looking abandoned Ford Stamping plant, responsible for producing parts for Ford automobiles. Why did everything look like this? Why was everyone ok with it? Why did my Russo-immigrant parents move here? The fast-food chains, the big-box stores, and the gas stations felt unattached from history, yet as if they’d be standing here forever. There is a way of life here that seems to almost be absent of one and this feeling is all-encompassing, as everything is taken for granted, while the area is deindustrialized, and everyone operates with very little knowledge or memory of the past.

The strip malls that surrounded me that Spring of 2020 serve as a microcosm for a central American experience for the majority of Americans. But in this study, I am using the case of Northfield Road of Northfield, Ohio to examine a longer history of the American strip mall. This paper will wave back and forth between the story of Northfield, Ohio and the larger story of suburbanization. In explaining the evolution of a strip mall, I will also incorporate the story of the Olde Northfield Township area, which is the original name of the area that now encompasses the communities of Macedonia, Northfield Village, Northfield Center Township, and Sagamore Hills. The goal is to reexamine the “common” in the American experience and what is more common than the drive-in strip mall?

Northfield is a village and relatively small area in northern Summit County, Ohio. Northfield road cuts directly through it as it is flanked by the archetypal anchorless strip mall and empty storefronts. Northfield Plaza sits next to the racino. The Commercial Real Estate Development Association defines the strip shopping center as, “an attached row of stores or service outlets that are managed as a coherent retail entity with onsite parking usually located in front of stores.”¹ The strip center does not have enclosed walkways linking the stores and it may be in a straight line or in an “L” or “U” shape. The ICSC (Innovating Commerce Serving Communities trade journal) defines the strip mall as an “attached row or service outlet managed as a coherent retail entity, with on-site parking usually located in front of the stores,” but also as specifically anchor-less. An anchor store is



Figure - Map of Northfield courtesy of Google Maps

¹ Sicola, Maria. “Commercial Real Estate Terms and Definitions.” *NAIOP Research Foundation*, 2017, 52.

a major outlet that is visited a lot and, in turn, brings customers to the smaller retail entities located on the strip.

Understanding the history of strip malls is integral to understanding American culture because it is a form that has come to dominate the American suburban landscape. This typology informs public space and conceptions of community. At first glance, the strip mall's purpose is only to sell. The seeming replicability of this form is obvious to anyone who has ever driven a car in supposedly disparate regions of the United States. In 2016, there were 68,730 strip malls in the US, according to one source,² double that of post offices, and equal to the amount of public elementary schools. This typology arises out of the intersection of the histories of suburbanization, development, and consumerism. As a cultural artifact, it is a testament to American consumerism and automobile dependence, one of the causes of sprawl. This does not just have to do with population density. Sprawl refers to a development occurrence that expands in an unlimited and "leapfrog" way outward from the core of a metropolitan area.³ In terms of land use types, it includes both residential and nonresidential development. The story of the strip mall will take place in the history of sprawl in suburbanization.

My driving research question approaches the advent of the strip mall through the perspective of community and place in America. The principal argument is that the strip mall examined through the lens of a public sphere acts as a microcosm for a history of a general kind of American lifestyle and culture. A community needs a place, and the strip mall provides such a peculiar place. What kind of cultural expression is there in an area with an absence of walkable public space where individuals and communities cannot linger nor commune? A public space, an

² O'Malley, Sharon. "Shopping Malls." *SAGE Business Researcher* (August 29, 2016). <http://businessresearcher.sagepub.com/sbr-1775-100682-2747282>. doi: 10.1177/237455680217.n1

³ Burchell, Robert W., United States, National Research Council (U.S.), Transit Development Corporation, and Transit Cooperative Research Program, eds. *The Costs of Sprawl--Revisited*. Report / Transit Cooperative Research Program 39. Washington, D.C: National Academy Press, 1998.

area of social life, is necessary for private individuals to meet and discuss a range of issues concerning themselves or their community. James Kunstler, with his *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993) notes that neighborhoods like Georgetown or Beacon hill are walking neighborhoods where, “you walk to a store – enjoying the felicities of the street as you go – and you are able to see other people along the way.”⁴ You might stop and chat with a stranger; “this is called *meeting people*, the quintessential urban pleasure.”⁵ Spaces where people can coexist and where a wide variety of functions can encourage unexpected activities and lead to natural conversation is what makes democracy possible.

Shopping is also a huge aspect of American social life and for many Americans, shopping at large shopping malls, shopping plazas, and strip malls will be the only time in their day they might encounter new ideas, sentiments, and the public at large outside of their private home, but the objective was only to look at strip malls.⁶ Many histories of the suburbs touch upon the rise of drive-in markets and the rise of the first shopping malls, as the two go hand in hand, for the shopping mall is entirely dependent on the consumers who live in the suburbs. In a sense, the shopping malls turn the citizenry into consumers, and in turn, the consumers inform the suburbs. Historians have examined the kind of public space that accompanies and creates the suburbs and about the type and quality that the mall represents. However, there has been a lack of attention to the strip mall alone.

It is a vitally important aspect of American life and culture to study because it equally represents so much about what Americans value and are deprived of. In order to understand American culture, one must study the typology where half of all Americans grow up around.

⁴ Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere : The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 1993, 127.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000, 211.

According to the latest census, approximately 175 million Americans live in the suburbs⁷ - just over half of the US population. To get anywhere, one has to own an automobile. In a country that claims to be the land of the free, the citizenry is oppressed by the conformist typology around them. This has sociological and cultural consequences, where place-making loses to drive-in culture.

As this introduction concludes, it is important to iterate that this project does not intend to make any value judgments like “good” or “bad” on the status of the strip mall, rather it aims to tell it how it is and was. The strip mall alienates individuals from each other and the larger community. People depart from their small domestic bubbles and travel in a world of one, the solitary journey within the car, driving to work, to the strip mall, and back home again. It might be the only chance at spontaneity in an otherwise predictable and regimented day. The strip represents America’s drive-in culture, but what kind of culture is this?

Beginnings

Planned shopping centers can make one feel a loss of connection to culture, place, or the past, but not at the Indian Mound Mall in Heath, Ohio. This shopping mall’s anchor stores include the AMC Theatre, FYE, the Big Sandy Superstore, Altitude Trampoline Park, Dick’s Sporting Goods, a JCPenney, and a currently vacant store that used to be a Sears. Built in 1986, named in homage to the earthwork mounds constructed by the Hopewell Indians in that area. Initially, the mounds were either effigies used for sophisticated Native American political or spiritual rituals. Ohio’s original settlers and inhabitants were American Indians. They arrived during the Paleoindian Period (13,000 BC to 7,000 BC). Mounds built by these native groups are still present today. South of Columbus, Ohio, the center of the state, there are a slew of these

⁷ Parker, Kim, Juliana Menasce Horowitz, Anna Brown, Richard Fry, and D’Vera Cohn. “1. Demographic and Economic Trends in Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities,” n.d., 1.

mounds sprinkled around that area. These earthworks were embankments made by groups like the Adena and the Hopewell for burial and religious ceremonies. However, the Mingos and the Delaware were the two tribes that lived in the Akron area, in Northeast, Ohio, where Olde Northfield is; “The area had been claimed by the powerful Iroquois confederacy as a hunting ground, which left northeast Ohio sparsely settled until Mingos moved into the area in the 1740s and the Delaware in the 1750s.”⁸ The Mingos were part of the Iroquois which also consisted of former Seneca, Cayuga, Mohawks, Oneidas, Onondagas, Tuscarawas, and some Mohicans. The Mingos lived along the Allegheny and Ohio River, but were eventually pushed further west and south by white settlers into central Ohio.

Even before then, Ohio was part of the Connecticut Western Reserve, established in 1655 by King Charles. After the United States was founded and as it expanded, it offered exploitative treaties to tribes to claim Ohio for white settlers. Some of these were the Fort Stanwix Treaty, Fort McIntosh Treaty, the Mouth of the Great Miami Treaty and the Fort Harmar Treaty, which applied pressure to the Union of Ohio Natives, which allowed Indigenous peoples to call Ohio their territory.⁹ As settlers were coming into Ohio, the Land Ordinance Act enacted in 1785 which laid out legally how lands west of the Appalachian Mountains were to be sold and surveyed. This along with the Northwest Ordinance (1787) increased tensions on both sides. President Washington, in 1790, called for the removal of native peoples by formal expedition. Little Turtle, a Sagamore Chief of the Miami people, was defeated at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 and in the following year the Treaty of Greenville pushed Ohio’s tribes further into northwestern Ohio. Named after the Sagamore, today I live in the neighboring township to

⁸ *Native Americans and Early Statehood*. (2008). Black, White & Beyond: Multiculturalism in Greater Akron, An Interactive History. https://learn.uakron.edu/beyond/nativeam_earlystate.htm

⁹ Walton, Jessie. “The Forgotten History of Ohio’s Indigenous Peoples.” *Midstory*, July 16, 2020. <https://www.midstory.org/the-forgotten-history-of-ohios-indigenous-peoples/>.

Northfield called Sagamore Hills. Nevertheless, the Greenville treaty between European settlers and the several Indian groups such as the Wyandot, Delaware, Shawnee, Ottaway, Chippewa, Potawatomi, Miami, Kickapoo, and Kaskaskia, let the settlers claim Ohio as farmland.

Cheap and available land was taken and, in turn, Indian communities left or remained federally unrecognized. Soon, the towns of Cleveland, Hudson, Poland, Warren, and Youngstown propped up and the Western Reserve was called to open up for settlement. Once Connecticut achieved statehood, it sold a lot of its landholding to the US government for \$1.2 million in 1787 and by 1797, this area was surveyed and townships of five square miles were erected and arranged in 160-acre tracts. Northfield,



Figure - Wallace Farm photographed in 1900.

Ohio, itself is only 1.05 mi² which comes out to 672 acres. The boundaries delineated within the Treaty of Greenville were pushed further back with the Treaty of Fort Industry of 1805 and settlers could now cross the Cuyahoga River. This new boundary frustrated Indigenous tribal leaders. Certain groups, along with the Shawnee Chief Tecumseh, allied themselves with the British in the War of 1812 with the hopes of pushing settlers out. Tecumseh formed a native confederacy, but would die at the Battle of the Thames. The native confederacy folded soon after and the last Native Ohio tribe would leave in 1843.

The first settler of Northfield was Isaac Bacon of Massachusetts who purchased 160 acres, which was the first land sold in the town. He arrived the next year by covered wagon the same year the Sagamore Hills Township was established. Bacon came with his son-in law Jeremiah Cranmer, both from Massachusetts, and legend says that residents took the name Northfield after the town of Northfield, Massachusetts. Others say it is because it is located at the

north edge of Summit Country. The rest of Cranmer's family settled in 1810, and his grave is the oldest in the Northfield-Macedonia Cemetery. Bacon, however, was drafted into the army for the war of 1812 and sent to Cleveland. He was then discharged and shortly died, and his homestead was inherited by his son David.

In the early years of Olde Northfield, a small community was growing along the southern border called Brandywine. Industry soon developed. A saw mill was built on the north side of Brandywine creek by George Wallace in 1814. That same year Northfield was formally organized and the citizens wanted to incorporate Brandywine into the larger community. Once it was negotiated with Boston Township, Brandywine was annexed into Northfield. The next year Wallace moved into Brandywine and built a grist mill across from his saw mill on the creek and opened a store on the second floor of that mill. Along with both mills he also built a distiller and a woolen factory, and by 1830 Brandywine was also host to a distillery, tannery, and a carding mill. All of this building provided the impetus for the establishment of the village of Brandywine. The population of Brandywine reached its peak when there were a total of 11 households in the village run by the "Wallace Mills," referring to Wallace and his sons.¹⁰ At one point the town was described by a journalist as "a more lively town than Cleveland, and with better prospects."¹¹ In terms of schooling, five new schools were built in the township over the next decade including the one mentioned earlier that would operate into the 20th century. This background is important because it sets the context for the story of suburbanization and the arrival of the strip mall.

Origins of Suburbanization

¹⁰ Wallace Farm. "National Register Of Historic Places Inventory - Nomination Form." *United States Department of the Interior; National Park Service*, March 1, 1985, 25.

¹¹ Ibid.

The use of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (date) and his analysis of American society and for scale, along with accompanying discourse from Lewis Mumford's *The Culture of Cities* (1938) and *The City in History* (1961) helps frame the strip mall within its context of sprawl and suburbanization. The mention of Tocqueville is important because he shows the aristocratic impulse to move to the suburbs alone. One of the greatest French political theorists noticed an irony within American democracy; Alexis de Tocqueville, on his nine-month sojourn in the United States in 1831, found that there was a secret opposition of the rich to democracy. The democratic party of the 1830's and the common man triumphed and, "it has not ceased to model mores and laws to its desires."¹² The aristocratic party quietly retreated. Tocqueville writes, "the rich, therefore, would rather abandon the lists than sustain an often unequal struggle against the poorest of their fellow citizens. Not being able to take up a rank in public life analogous to the one they occupy in private life ... In the midst of the state they form as if it were a particular society that has separate tastes and enjoyments."¹³ Seen here is a tendency found in the origins of American society that approaches populism and democracy with immense skepticism. I follow Mumford who explains why the rich wanted to leave the city centers and isolate in the countryside their designed and manicured private oasis.

In my discussion of suburbanization, I will draw upon Kenneth Jackson's *Crabgrass Frontiers* (1985) which provides a comprehensive history of suburbanization. In this work he, asserts, "Suburbia symbolizes the fullest, most unadulterated embodiment of contemporary culture; it is a manifestation of such fundamental characteristics of American society as conspicuous consumption, a reliance upon the private automobile, upward mobility, the separation of the family into nuclear units, the widening division between work and leisure, and

¹² Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America* / Translated, Edited, and with an Introduction by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2000, 171.

¹³ Ibid.

a tendency toward racial and economic exclusiveness.”¹⁴ Americans are still grappling with the consequences of these physical and social developments of suburbanization. But the representation and meaning of the suburbs have changed. Jackson continues in noting that “The second distinguishing residential feature of American culture is a strong penchant for homeownership,”¹⁵ while, “the third and most important distinguishing characteristic of our housing pattern is the socioeconomic distinction between the center and the periphery.”¹⁶ Decentralization and sprawl are key aspects of suburbia, while social life and civil engagement suffer.

Suburban sprawl is a common theme of postwar American history. James Kunstler’s *Geography of Nowhere* (1993) examines and tracks the effects of suburban sprawl and the automobile, and Delores Hayden’s *Building Suburbia* (2003) expands the history of suburbanization. Kunstler emphasizes American automobile dependence and its effects on landscape. He writes, “In the early years of motoring, hardly anyone understood the automobile’s potential for devastation – not just of the landscape, or the air, but of culture in general.”¹⁷ The story of the automobile converges in the story of northeastern Ohio and Northfield. In 1997, Richard Longstreth’s *City Center to Regional Mall* emphasized suburban development from the roadside strip to the iconic American mall. In 2005, Ray Oldenburg’s *The Great Good Place* advocated for the need for new spaces—a “third public”—outside the private home and the workplace. Joel Garreau’s *Edge City: life on the new frontier* (2011) added to this literature by looking at the post-WWII moment of suburbanization of jobs and shops and industrial parks – what he calls “Edge Cities.” At the same time, others attempted to find alternatives to sprawl and

¹⁴ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere : The Rise and Decline of America’s Man-Made Landscape*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 1993, 86.

suburban forms, including Robert Bruegmann's *Sprawl a Compact History* (2005) and *Retrofitting suburbia: urban design solutions for redesigning the suburbs* (2009) by Ellen Durnham-Jones. Bruegmann takes a pro-sprawl position where he tries to debunk the myth that sprawl development patterns are uniquely American, or are solely the result of the automobile.¹⁸ However, this is where this project aims to disagree. Sprawl, especially, is a direct result of the automobile, which creates the social and cultural landscape by creating inadequate public spaces like the strip mall.

Perhaps most influential in this project is the framework of Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000). He tracks the rise and fall of communal trust and kinship ties, by looking at a variety of social trends, like union membership, time watching tv, time spent shopping, time spent eating out, time spent in the car, to name a few along with a variety of surveys, to illustrate his argument, that community had declined and that Americans are most distrustful of one another. He finds that, "most Americans today believe that we live in a less trustworthy society than our parents did."¹⁹ Trust and reciprocity has declined where a recent study of survey response rates confirms this trend where social disconnectedness seems to be part of this reason.²⁰ One important topic that Putnam discusses is how driving is an important domain of public intercourse to see changing patterns of reciprocity, where road rage has gone up and hitchhiking has disappeared. In regards to shopping however, he notes, "the suburban shopping experience does not consist of interaction with people embedded in a common social network."²¹

¹⁸ Burchell, Robert W., United States, National Research Council (U.S.), Transit Development Corporation, and Transit Cooperative Research Program, eds. *The Costs of Sprawl--Revisited*. Report / Transit Cooperative Research Program 39. Washington, D.C: National Academy Press, 1998.

¹⁹ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000, 139.

²⁰ Ibid, 142.

²¹ Ibid, 211.

Therefore, this project suggests that the strip mall is the result of a lackluster social environment, the consequence of a capitalistically designed sprawl indifferent to the citizenry that lives there.

Summit County and Its Industry

Summit County was established on March 3rd, 1840, and it included Northfield township. The name was chosen because it was the highest area bordering the Ohio Canal. Northfield Township was a desirable location thanks to its location around the many waterways, railways, and road intersections. The Cuyahoga River is its western border along with the Ohio Canal and the Township containing the Indian and Brandywine Creeks. The entire area is six square miles and the communities that developed within the township are Brandywine, Macedonia, Northfield Center, Northfield Village, and at the time an area called Little York.

Northfield Center got its name from being at the center of Northfield Township. The school house was the first building at the center built in 1825, but the first actual Town Hall was built in 1845 on the southwest section of the Square. In 1910, a brick building proclaiming “Town Hall” in art nouveau typeface still stands as the current town hall on Brandywine Road, near the town square. The town square, on the other hand, began construction in 1832 with a donation of a ½ acre to form the northwest corner and the next year another ½ acre donation formed the southwest section. Another ½ acre later and the Town Square was established.

By this time, the area was still inhabited by Native Americans and the wild Ohio woods. An article recalls that the Seneca, Chippewa, and Ottawa tribes had villages in Summit County and were frequently found among the white settlers on trading or “begging expeditions.”²² Moreover, industrialization would really take off in 1851 when the Pennsylvania Railroad was

²² Perrin. “Indians Among the Early Settlers.” 1881.
<https://www.northfieldcenter.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/kickapool.pdf>.

built through Macedonia. Brandywine suffered from a devastating flood in 1843, but the township would recover into the next decade with the new railroad. This small town would be left relatively untouched until work started to elevate the railroad tracks on Rte. 82, which cuts laterally across the Cuyahoga Valley. Yet, one of the most important occurrences of the history of Brandywine was the Pennsylvania Railroad built through Macedonia in 1852 until the ABC (Akron-Bedford-Cleveland) interurban car line was built, where Northfield Center served as service-stop between those points. The railroad brought industry and stimulated the economy while the streetcar line moved people to and from the city centers, but it was because of this that the township had shops lining along the streetcar line. The initial development of the streetcar suburb and sprawl is thanks to this expanding mode of transportation and the possibilities created for travel and escaping dirty and smoggy industrial life.



Figure - Map of Summit County 1891.

Motivations for Suburbanization

Originally, the suburb was an attempt to retreat from hectic city life and industrial urbanity. Seen as a dreamy escape, the idea of the suburb as the cottage in the woods came out of American romanticism. It seemed to offer a new lease on life and vitality as opposed to the consequences of industrialization and the smog of the inner city. Mumford; “But what of the incalculable losses through disease, through ill-health, through all the forms of psychological

deterioration from apathy to outright neurosis?”²³ The affluent sought to escape this and fled into an aesthetic using new forms and new appreciations of nature. It seemed to offer a new lease on life and vitality as opposed to the consequences of industrialization and the smog of the city center, which Mumford, echoing Dickens, calls “coketown.” The factory laborer felt strangled by city life. About the worker, Mumford notes, “after his weekly spree in the tavern or the brothel, the worker returned to the factory or the mine more cheated, more defeated, more empty of life, than ever.”²⁴ In this industrial town, most of civic energy orbited the factory and the city ceased to be what it once was, where old civic unity was fragmented with the division of labor. The half-factory and half-slum were a staple of nineteenth century industrial cities.

Romanticism as a cultural and literary movement was born in reaction to the scientific rationalism of the industrial revolution and romantic architecture flourished in the late nineteenth century in reaction to the harsh neoclassical styles of the city center. As an artistic movement, it moved away from the austere rationalism of the Enlightenment and embraced the emotionality of nature and the sublime, accompanied by the imagination and individual freedom. It was an eruption of pagan motifs and an appropriation of classical styles. Builders took the forms from antiquity and renaissance along with gothic architecture.²⁵ Imagine the cottage covered in ivy placed quietly along the gentle running brook. The atmosphere dewy and saturated; “In this manner, romanticism was anti-communal and anti-architectural, for all its tendency to exalt the institutional order of the Middle Ages. Lawlessness was the only rule it recognized and the wilderness was its only proper home.”²⁶ The houses in this era represent a new relationship to nature. It was looked upon as novel and controllable, as if there was an assumption that nature

²³ Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History : Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. New York: New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, 472.

²⁴ Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: New York : Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938, 180.

²⁵ Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: New York : Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938, 20.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 205.

itself would disappear anyway with industrialization. It had a familiar and stylized exterior, while the inside it was cozy, womb-like. Mumford states, “Instead of beauty, a new quality demanded comfort.”²⁷ The middle-classes would begin to catch on.

The appeal of the new suburb included pure air, water, quiet, space., and rural beauty. Soon, upwardly mobile aspiration would trickle down. Mumford demurs, “For the rising middle classes of the nineteenth century the romantic retreat took the form of building villas and suburbs, where the spreading agglomeration of Coketown could be temporarily kept at bay. In the city, Mars and Vulcan had become friends. Venus, neglected, sought the consolations of domesticity in a distant suburb.”²⁸ The flight to the suburb was an aristocratic impulse.

The developing middle-class suburbs offer that escape. Mumford elaborates, “At first, the possibilities of suburban living were limited to those who could afford a horse and carriage of their own, or who could make the daily journey to town by public coach.”²⁹ In the city, the area where the workers lived and worked standardized and the towns developed and extended. Kenneth Jackson explains that as the town spread out, it was “accompanied by the progressive destruction of open spaces; and as the periphery widened, the open country became ever more remote from the center.”³⁰ People who could afford to leave the city, left, and middle America developed.

The broad street, typical of small towns, arrived as a sign of progress before its full potential was realized as the prototype of the strip. This form’s initial use was aspiration in the aesthetic as “it was a symbol of *possible* traffic, *possible* commercial opportunity, *possible* conversion into more intensive uses: it thus provided an extra excuse for the fantastic land values

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 7

that were sometimes optimistically tagged onto the abutting properties.”³¹ Out of this early typology emerges the development of the strip. In Northfield, farms and shops lined Northfield road. Wealthy Americans settled nearby, hidden in the woods, however, like in the case of business tycoons F. A. Seiberling and Cyrus Eaton, who would impact the land and the history of northeastern Ohio.

Wealth in Ohio

Just 18 miles south of my home and through the Cuyahoga National Park was the Stan Hywet Hall and Gardens, a Tudor Revival mansion, known as the home of Frank Seiberling (1859-1955) a Canadian emigre and co-founder of the Goodyear Tire and Rubber company. Stan hywet is Old English for “stone quarry,” while the estate was built between 1912 and 1915. The Seiberlings amassed a massive fortune from manufacturing bicycle and carriage tires and their growth spiraled with the advent of the automobile, especially after a fruitful partnership with Henry Ford. After Seiberling came Cyrus Eaton (1883-1979), who purchased part of the Seiberling estate located in the Northfield Township in the early 1940s, which would later become my housing development, called Eaton Estates.

On the land was another Tudor-style home that faces the entrance to the development on Eaton Drive, which contains a giant silo once attached to an ancient barn, which was razed after the Eaton’s sold the land. Eaton was from Nova Scotia, Canada until he came to Cleveland for work at the East Ohio Gas Company. Under the tutelage of John D. Rockefeller, who put him to work at the company as a clerk and troubleshooter, went into business in 1907 by acquiring natural-gas franchises in Canada for New York Finance.³² Eventually he started his own energy company and built up an enormous banking and steel conglomerate. In 1929, his wealth was

³¹ Ibid, 8.

³² Gleisser, Marcus. *The World of Cyrus Eaton*. Ashland: Ashland : The Kent State University Press, 2013, 23.

estimated to have been around \$100 million, where most of it was lost in the Great Depression.³³

He would rebuild his fortune in the 1940s and 1950s, becoming the director of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.

Eaton is important in the story of Northfield because of his influence on the town and of what would become the suburban development. He bought Acadia Farms, conveniently placed between Akron and Cleveland, from Seiberling where his children would swim, fish, ride horses, and learn to drive³⁴. After Eaton's death in 1979, he would donate his farmland to Sagamore Hills, which resulted in the suburban development of Eaton Estates. It was built in 1999, the year I was born, and the name of my street is Deep Cove Drive, an homage to his hometown farm of Canada. Other street names in the development also refer to Eaton's past: Pugwash Circle is named after the Nova Scotia site of international meetings begun by Eaton in 1957;³⁵ Troika Circle is named after the unique three-horse carriage gift from his Russian Friends (he had strong views on *détente* with Russia and was friends with Nikita Khrushchev and Anastas Mikoyan, who both visited his estate in 1959);³⁶ Adelle Drive is named after his daughter's middle name, to name a few.

Streetcars

The escape from the city by railroad or carriage was available to the Seiberlings of America, before the advent of the



Figure - ABC interurban line, courtesy of the Olde Northfield Historical Center

³³ "EATON, CYRUS STEPHEN." In *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, 1. Case V

³⁴

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/local/the-news-leader/2013/06/19/horse-07/>

³⁵ Sclanders, Ian. "Cyrus Eaton's Hideaway for Brains." *Maclean's*, October 27, 1956, 2.

³⁶ Shakarian, Pietro, A. "Cleveland Visit 60 Years Ago This Week of No. 2 Soviet Official Anastas Mikoyan Reflected a Detente That Served Both Nations Well." *Cleveland.Com*. January 6, 2019.

<https://www.cleveland.com/opinion/2019/01/cleveland-visit-60-years-ago-this-week-of-no-2-soviet-official-anastas-mikoyan-reflected-a-detente-that-served-both-nations-well-pietro-a-shakarian-opinion.html>.

automobile, which was preceded by the electric streetcar and omnibus. Historian Kenneth Jackson notes, “the relationship between the electric streetcar and the spatial distribution of commercial activity is best illustrated by the development of the department store.”³⁷ The bus changed attitudes and commuting patterns to the city. Delores Hayden, a historian of suburbanization, notes, “in Boston, omnibus service was available starting in 1825 to carry passengers to outlying towns such as Cambridge and Somerville...By 1835, a steam railroad was also serving the Boston area.”³⁸ It would not be until 1852 where the first horsecar street railway in Boston operated between Harvard Square in Cambridge and Union Square in Somerville. However, the shift to the electric streetcar, or the trolley or tram, changed this pattern in the late 1880s. City governments would reward companies for establishing streetcar service by giving them exclusive rights to operate a line along a given street. It was because of this that large streetcar conglomerates had an integral effect on shaping urban and metropolitan areas by the turn of the century. Builders of homes subdivided lots, erecting houses on every acre of buildable land within an hour of the center of the city.

Soon, the stores learned to locate themselves at the intersection of the busiest transit lines. Even railroad stations and streetcar lines found themselves to have a kind of market area, where Mumford adds, “the very concentration of shops and parking facilities around the railroad station in the better suburbs even promoted a new kind of market area, more concentrated than the linear market along an avenue.”³⁹ The linear market is the emergent prototype of the strip mall. Moreover, Northfield road has its literal origins on the streetcar route, which itself had these linear markets.

³⁷ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 114.

³⁸ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 74.

³⁹ Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History : Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. New York: New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, 506.

Electric streetcars began expanding into Northfield just as the Gilded Age ended and the panic of 1893 set in. The streetcar line, a kind of electric trolley, would become central to the creation of the Northfield strip, which became a series of stops on a line running from Akron to Cleveland. Shops began opening along the railroad and streetcar lines. The initial development of the streetcar suburb and sprawl is thanks to this expanding mode of transportation and the possibilities created for travel and escaping dirty and smoggy industrial life.

Northeast Ohio had its own interurban trolley route called the ABC line (Akron, Bedford, Cleveland) that traversed Northfield village. The ABC line was first formed in 1895 and it was 35.5 miles long. It was very successful and many other railway lines popped up and by 1910, Cleveland had six separate electric interurban systems.⁴⁰ This was before widespread use of the automobile. According to Kenneth Jackson, “in the period between 1888 and 1918, when the automobile was still a novelty and a toy, the electric streetcar represented a revolutionary advance in transportation technology.”⁴¹ Streetcar companies encouraged pleasure-riding by establishing race tracks, beer gardens, parks, beaches, and resort hotels at the end of the line. A common enterprise was to



Figure - Interurban line service-stop Northfield

construct an amusement park at the end of the trolley line because it was usually profitable because people paid to ride at slow times.⁴² This is true in the case of Northfield road. Before Northfield Park was erected in 1956, it was a farm adapted into a greyhound racing track by the notorious mobster Al Capone in 1934. This track was originally called Sportsman's Park and is a ¼ of a mile dirt oval. It closed momentarily on the 26th of July, 1942 because of the Second

⁴⁰ “Interurbans.” In *Interurbans*. Encyclopedia of Cleveland History. Case.edu, n.d. <https://case.edu/ech/articles/i/interurbans>.

⁴¹ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 114.

⁴² Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 94.

World War, but reopened on August 26th, 1945. Notwithstanding, all along the transport line, shops and leisure establishments propped up. Hayden posits, “served by the omnibus, the horsecar, and the electric streetcar, these new build outs began as linear real estate developments along expanding transit lines.”⁴³ The ABC railroad line merged with other railroads in Northern Ohio, but would stop operating the line in 1932 during the great depression. These transit lines were primarily responsible for the emergence of the strip mall.

⁴³ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 71.

The Automobile

After World War I, however, the way Americans moved around began to change. While the automobile and the streetcar developed concurrently from 1890-1915,⁴⁴ The US government implemented the Federal Road Act in 1916 and a second one in 1921 which allowed middle class families to enjoy the automobile. This was thanks to rural interests such as the National Grange Association, which lobbied vigorously for better roads to and from the market.⁴⁵ With the first Federal Road act, it offered funds to states that organized highway departments where it designated 200,000 miles of road. This would be designated as “primary,” which indicated it was eligible for federal funding on a 50/50 basis.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, highway building was justified as a “form of social and economic therapy, and they justified public financing for such projects on the theory that roadway improvements would pay for themselves by increasing property-tax revenues along the route.”⁴⁷ This would have significant effects on the American landscape and would signal the beginning of the end of the streetcars – “by 1925 buses were beginning to replace trolleys on the outskirts, where the long distances made the streetcars less economical, at least during a time of cheap gasoline.”⁴⁸ Fortunes were made between 1870 and 1900 by streetcar companies, until it stalled, where the lines suffered from a lack of land to subdivide, overextension, poor management, and aging equipment.⁴⁹ However, the main cause of the demise of the passenger railroad system would not be by scaling blunder, rather by federal policy.

⁴⁴ Manning, Matthew J. “THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN STRIP MALLS: EVALUATING AND PRESERVING A UNIQUE CULTURAL RESOURCE.” Graduate School Thesis, Miami University, 2005, 10.

⁴⁵ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 167.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 164.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 169.

⁴⁹ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 93.

The advent and success of the automobile also killed the streetcar business. Private transportation flourished with general taxpayer subsidies as the road was defined as a public good, while mass transportation withered because of the government decision to categorize the streetcar as a private investment that should “pay for itself.”⁵⁰ Private streetcar companies were left with few options. Either they could build fancy streetcar suburbs like that of Shaker Heights, Ohio (where I would commute to school), or try to receive public subsidy. Propaganda for the road worked to where Kenneth Jackson writes, “thus, Americans taxed and harassed public transportation, even while subsidizing the automobile like a pampered child.”⁵¹ The other option was to raise the fare, which they could not due to regulation; “without additional riders, public subsidies, or higher fares, and in the face of a concerted effort by General Motors to eliminate street railways, the nation’s trolley systems could not last.”⁵² In fact, General Motors was the largest contributor to form a lobbying enterprise second to that of the munitions industry. The depression years would see a drop in patronage, but the final nail in the coffin did not come until the 1950s where bankruptcy and deteriorating service were the result of the national transportation policy that explicitly subsidized air and automobile travel while taxing railroads.⁵³ Public transport was systemically defunded by private interest groups and their lobbying efforts.

This along with the effects of the stock market crash of 1929 sunk the streetcar industry and the automobile had taken off. The effects of the automobile were widespread and pervasive and Northfield felt it. Henry Ford, master of the assembly line and introducer of the Model T Ford car, had his car priced at \$825 which is worth about \$25,400 in 2022. But, by 1916, the automobile became affordable for many people with Ford lowering the Model T price to about

⁵⁰ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 168.

⁵¹ Ibid, 170.

⁵² Ibid, 171.

⁵³ Ibid, 171.

\$375 (\$11,000 in 2022), but what car manufacturers wanted most was to eliminate all other transportation choices for Americans.⁵⁴ By the time the Ford Model T production stopped in 1927, the automobile was a staple of the normal middle-class lifestyle. Automobile ownership soared in the 1920s where developers reshaped buildings and plans to accommodate consumers in automobiles and manufacturers started deliberating about federal subsidies for roads.

The Township Develops

The Olde Northfield Township area developed as it entered the 20th century. Along with Northfield, it incorporated Macedonia, but was later separated into four communities. The Village of Macedonia split and was established as a village in 1905 until it became a township in 1912. The same year Olde Northfield was incorporated as Northfield. At the time, the geographical boundary of Northfield Village included the areas now known as Sagamore Hills Township and Northfield Center Township. For such a large amount of money per capita, Northfield Village was declared one of the “wealthiest municipalities” in the state.⁵⁵ Shops lined, Northfield Road, mills toiled in Brandywine, railroads went through Macedonia, Eaton with his fortune and his farm resided in Sagamore Hill, and as result the wealth caused several aggressive political skirmishes which then ended up in the division of the large community.

The 1929 election for Mayor of Northfield ended with the victory for the incumbent, William J. Burns. This was a frustrating election for a certain few; in 1930, the brother of Frank Seiberling, Charles of the Seiberling Rubber Company of Akron was upset with the election. Soon after the election, Burns took a distributed \$54,000 from the general, resulting in the

⁵⁴ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 119.

⁵⁵ mysagamorehills.com. “History of Sagamore Hills Township, OH.” Educational, n.d. https://www.mysagamorehills.com/community/township_information/history.php.

funding of public works and infrastructure.⁵⁶ Seiberling did not appreciate this. It included \$4,000 for the erection of a firehouse and its staff – it still stands today, connected to the current Northfield Center Township Hall. Roads improved and where town hall used to be before it moved to the brick building built in 1915 used to be a car repair.⁵⁷

Sagamore Hills Village was created in 1932 upon separation from Northfield Village, following recent precedent. That same year the ABC interurban line stopped running, but as evidence coming from the growth of the car, a new high bridge opened between Sagamore Hills and Brecksville the next year. The next decade, hard times hit and after a special election in the village, Sagamore Hills went from a village to a township in 1947. This eliminated a lot of debt thanks to the backing of Cyrus S. Eaton, Harry Miller, and Curtis Polcen, who were all appointed the township's first trustees.⁵⁸ The three then appointed a highway superintendent and a fire contract was enacted with the Northfield center Township for town hall and garage space. The same year the county engineer determined that the new township was responsible for maintaining the following roads: Highland, 1.5 miles; Brandywine, .5 miles; Northfield, 2.6 miles; and Dunham, .8 miles. Later, all of these roads were returned to the county. Today, the township has approximately 11,000 residents and 78 lane miles of roads.

The Automobile, Continued

The car increased sprawl and increased the travel distance of individual Americans and their families, while the house, during the depression of the 1930s, became bare-boned and quickly built – “It was a cut-rate approach to shelter that did not always meet basic requirements

⁵⁶ Akron Beacon Journal. “NORTHFIELD SPLIT APPEARS IN FIGHT FOR TOWN POSTS,” January 21, 1930.

⁵⁷ Devine, Rick. Northfield's History. Interview by Diana Malkin. iPhone voice memo, January 13, 2022.

⁵⁸ mysagamorehills.com. “History of Sagamore Hills Township, OH.” Educational, n.d.
https://www.mysagamorehills.com/community/township_information/history.php.

for sanitation, health, or efficiency, because all of the parts – the neighborhood, the lot, the house – were bought and sold independently.”⁵⁹ The automobile increased the mobility of Americans and the frequency in which they moved. The car is a liberating vehicle: “this meant that, once a household had purchased an automobile, short trips were cheap, and children and spouses could be transported without the additional fare that would have been necessary on a streetcar.”⁶⁰ Fresh possibilities in living, working, and shopping were opened. In terms of the latter, “An increase in motor travel initially meant that it was easier for customers to get downtown for serious shopping, and some city officials blissfully suggested that the automobile would actually decrease traffic congestion.”⁶¹ But, in the words of Lewis Mumford, “the automobile was antithetical to the very meaning of the city.” The discussion of the street and the car proves to be a multifaceted story and legacy of suburbanization.

The widespread purchase of the car came out to be a paradigm-shifting force in American life – from newfound mobility to the changing of the American landscape. The decade after the end of World War I was when the car had its largest impact. The home buyer no longer had to confine his choice of residence to the nearest bus or trolley line. It completely reoriented the lives of commuters; increased their journey to work and allowed workers to find employment in areas outside of their own neighborhood. During the Great Depression, one would think that automobile driving would decline, but the opposite happened where “in all three deepest depression years, motor-vehicle registrations continued to rise, and the 1940 total exceeded that of 1929 by 4.5 million.”⁶² The Committee on Recent Social Trends in the United States under the Hoover administration in 1933 concluded, “the automobile has become a dominant influence in

⁵⁹ Ibid, 119

⁶⁰ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 173.

⁶¹ Ibid, 174.

⁶² Ibid, 187.

the lift of the individual, and he, in a very real sense, has become dependent on it.”⁶³ Not only would this affect roads, but it would change the citizenry’s attitudes to their homes as well.

People felt closer to their homes than their neighbors and the homes were more and more remote from city centers.⁶⁴

Yet, the street, how it was traversed, and the attitudes towards it changed as well.

Jackson explains, “changes in construction and financing of public rights-of-way reflected not only new technology, but also new attitudes toward the function of streets.”⁶⁵ Soon department store owners knew to locate at the intersection of the busiest transit lines. John Wanamaker of Philadelphia revolutionized the department store with his refined merchandising concepts of low-competitive prices, departmental organization, money-back guarantees, and large-scale advertising. And, “by 1872, prefabricated stores had been introduced, complete with windows and doors.”⁶⁶ The stores located along transit lines evolved and large-scale retailing moved away from central business districts and urban centers towards the suburbs and sprawl in between both world wars. Soon, gas stations, supermarkets, shopping strips, motels, small restaurants, and billboards started to line the way out of town.⁶⁷ Oil companies participated in political lobbies promoting the production of automobiles and roads and gas stations and car washes settled along the strip, “as oil companies organized franchises and promoted streamlined modern stations designed for easy visibility.”⁶⁸ The gas station was one of the first buildings to be found on the strip; “In addition to gas stations and supermarkets, roadside strips contained auto showrooms,

⁶³ Ibid, 187.

⁶⁴ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 119.

⁶⁵ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 164.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 127.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 159.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

diners, miniature golf courses, motels, and drive-in movie theaters by the late 1930s.”⁶⁹ The Sears department store chain started moving out to the strips and private individuals began patenting ideas for roadside commerce. As gas stations settled along the strip, smaller stations and livery stables were pushed out and the same thing happened with certain drive-ins and diners were pushed out of business momentarily by food franchises.

New Attractions

Brandywine, next to the Olde Northfield Township was split apart thanks to the highway system. Homes and old mills were bulldozed. When I-271 came in (the highway I took to school every day), it completely destroyed Brandywine.⁷⁰ This made for more traffic, but provided consumers to the flourishing village and strip. This point



Figure - Ice Farm before Northfield Plaza

best iterates why the history of the strip cannot be told without first comprehending the story of suburbanization.

New attractions along with the evolution of the shopping strip occurred in Northfield. On the land that Northfield Plaza and MGM Northfield Park sit on today was originally an ice house and farm. On that land, Sportsman's Park was built in 1934 to serve as a greyhound hound track, before rules and regulations around dogs. After Max Klein's term as mayor (1934-1938), under which park was built, constructed by the infamous gangster Al Capone.⁷¹ The



Figure - Sportsman's Park, 1926, courtesy of the Olde Northfield Historical Society

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Devine, Rick. Northfield's History. Interview by Diana Malkin. iPhone voice memo, January 13, 2022.

⁷¹ Derby, Kentucky, Belmont Stakes, Santa Anita Derby, Travers Stakes, Churchill Downs, and Belmont Park. "TOP 5 US HORSE RACES," n.d., 1.

track switched ownership and went from greyhound racing to midget car racing. Then, in 1956, Sportsman's park was torn down to make way for what is known today as Northfield Park. It opened for harness racing (horse racing) in 1957 and was built by developer Edward J. Babartolo, a successful real estate mogul.⁷² However, it was opened and owned by Walter J. Michael, an owner of other racing and betting parks in the Cuyahoga Valley.⁷³ The park's famous slogan was "Every 19 minutes, the place goes crazy."

Right next door, Northfield Plaza was built, also by Debartolo in 1956. Right across from it where a CVS pharmacy currently used to be a large cheese producing enterprise at the time, but it was burnt down.⁷⁴ Yet, further down the road, the Ford Stamping Plant was built in 1954, providing jobs and capitalizing on post-war growth of the automobile and roads. It manufactured steel bumpers, hoods, roofs, and quarter panels for Ford assembly plants. By 1978, it, along with another stamping plant in Cleveland, were making engines for more than half of all of Ford's domestic cars.⁷⁵ When it started running, the property tax base became one of the lowest in the county and the



Figure - Northfield Plaza, courtesy of the Olde Northfield Historical Society

⁷² Kent, Weeklies. "KALEIDOSCOPE: Racing through the Years; Some Sites Gone, Some Are Still Thriving," February 15, 2012.

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/local/aurora-advocate/2012/02/15/kaleidoscope-racing-through-years-so-me/19806027007/>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Goosman, Bessie. "History of Olde Northfield Township." Historical Society of Olde Northfield, 1973.

⁷⁵ "Ford Motor Co." In *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*. case.edu, n.d. <https://case.edu/ech/articles/f/ford-motor-co>.

village was able to offer many services that other communities had to pay for.⁷⁶ Both plants were efficient and operational up until the auto industry slowed down and reduced employment by 25% in the recession at the end of the 1970s.

Northfield Plaza on the other hand thrived during the recession. It was first built by Debartolo as well. In the 80s it was sold to Mid America management where it was then remodeled. It lost its JCPenney's anchor store in 1998 and its future was looking dim until it was sold to Plaza management, changing the name to Summit Plaza, bringing back shops and shoppers back after the decline at the end of the 1990s. The Ford stamping plant, on the other hand, did not fare well in the coming decades and closed in 2011.⁷⁷

The Strip

The history of the taxpayer strip is integral to understanding the history of the strip mall. Originally, they were designed and built for temporary use and as a source of income for approximately ten years until conditions in the neighborhood required a more permanent building. Life expectancy for these buildings was short. They were considered placeholders and not considered as permanent as the buildings along your average Main street. The style of these buildings was given little consideration as well and the effect was a long strip of unremarkable businesses extending down and along from the center of the city into the rural areas. Richard Longstreth remarks, "taxpayers had a useful purpose but almost never contributed to a sense of singular identity for the places they served."⁷⁸ Along these strips, upscale buildings of the

⁷⁶ Kainsinger, Jean, and Boob Kainsinger. "Through the Years with FORD MOTOR COMPANY'S WALTON HILLS STAMPING PLANT," May 2005.

http://waltonhillsohio.gov/pdf_waltonhills/en-US/HistoricalDocs/FordMotorCompany.pdf.

⁷⁷ Schoenberger, Robert. "Ford Workers in Walton Hills Look to an Uncertain Future; New Deal with UAW Calls for the Plant to Close." *Cleveland.Com*, October 19, 2011.

https://www.cleveland.com/business/2011/10/ford_workers_in_walton_hills_1.html.

⁷⁸ Richard Longstreth, *City Center to Regional Mall*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 63-65.

downtown area seemed frivolous. The taxpayer strips now represented a shift in mentality where quality of location was prioritized over quality of construction. Northfield started off as a taxpayer strip when shops lined along the interurban track.

Roadside strips really began to emerge in the 1920s. Stores on quiet rural intersections emerged (Tysons Corners). Longstreth states, “at times, consumer’s decisions to purchase automobiles have been invoked as an easy explanation for the transformation of American suburbs from carefully planned picturesque enclaves to the centerless sitcom suburbs, and then to the harsh asphalt of

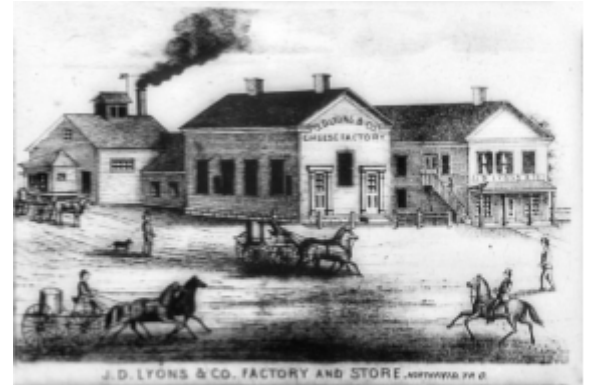


Figure – Cheese factory where the CVS is now, courtesy of the Olde Northfield Historical Society

an edge node like Tysons Corner.”⁷⁹ It is assumed that it were primarily cars that reshaped the American landscape and its roads, but Hayden suggests, “the activities of automobile manufacturers, commercial real estate developers, and the federal government have been far more important in determining patterns of transportation than consumer choice.”⁸⁰ Yet, free and convenient parking started to emerge in front of stores and this began to change customers’ shopping habits. Instead of going downtown, shoppers were making more trips to nearby stores.

Around the same time, corporate interests, like tire manufacturers and dealers, parts suppliers, oil companies, service-station owners, road builders, and land developers, began lobbying for new streets.⁸¹ What followed was general taxation to support public transportation. This in turn affected public perception in favor of the benefits of the automobile thanks to the intervention of public interest groups. Local governments applied general



Figure - CVS today

⁷⁹ Ibid, 158.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 106.

⁸¹ Ibid.

revenues in ameliorating routes for the motorcar. Jackson claims that the basic thrust for street improvement came less from idealism than from special interest, although rhetorically, these interests claimed they were acting on behalf of the common good; “by the 1920s, a coalition of private-pressure groups, including tire manufacturers and dealers were lobbying for new streets.”⁸² These taxpayer strips, or property-tax revenues, would be replaced by the strip malls of today.

Roadside strips boomed because of the new tax shelters for novel commercial projects. Real estate promoters of the commercial strip were attaching it to the centerless residential suburb. The strip expanded thanks to federal subsidies to developers, but these subsidies were indirect, so it was hard for officials or many citizens to know what was really happening.⁸³ In this way, the cities were ransacked by corporate America and the citizenry still feels it today. These taxpayer strips were originally thought of as placeholders, hence their feeling of impermanence. This resulted in a long and low strip of unremarkable shops coming from the center of the city into the rural countryside. Quality in construction has become less important than quality in location.

In the early days, the stock market crash of 1929 shed light on the weakness of the taxpayer strip approach, resulting in blighted streets and low property values.⁸⁴ To recover, developers created the planned shopping center. Early designs suggest a large influence of mass production principles working in tandem with the reality of a struggling economic environment. Plans outlined in *Architectural Record* in 1932,⁸⁵ called for specific commercial one-story

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 161.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 94.

⁸⁵ Lathrop Douglass...,” *Architectural Record* Sep. 1951: 13.

buildings, low to the ground, with lots of space for parking catering to the automobile.

Storefronts became uniform and originally seemed out of place.

Early designs also introduced the drive-in market, breaking away from the traditional urban pattern. Visual prominence was given over to the parking lot, separating the street from the store. The “L”-shaped plan was most successful at captivating the attention of passing drivers and bringing them to multiple shops once they parked. A hierarchy in this design was created where two large



Figure - Northfield Plaza April 1960

stores cushioned the smaller stores in between where the building and the form itself became a living billboard.⁸⁶ This layout distinguished itself from other strips but also gave consumers a break from the hectic busy streets.

A set of guidelines were doled out for developers starting in 1947 with the Urban Land Institute’s *the Community Builder’s Handbook*. Large planned shopping malls followed.

Although, these projects focus on the strip mall and not the planned mega-mall. Yet, planned projects all shared the same philosophy in its approach toward the parking lot, it was starting to lengthen immensely, and as mentioned earlier, Northfield Plaza was developed in 1956.

They were primarily created by the federal government and its tax benefits for more construction; “the federal tax code encourages businesses to abandon old structures before their useful life is at an end by permitting greater tax benefits for new construction than for improvement of existing buildings.”⁸⁷ There was an influential and secretive group of lobbyists called the Road Gang, formed in 1942. It included GM, Firestone Tires (a Firestone Complete

⁸⁶ Manning, Matthew J. “THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN STRIP MALLS: EVALUATING AND PRESERVING A UNIQUE CULTURAL RESOURCE.” Graduate School Thesis, Miami University, 2005, 17.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 190.

Auto Car actually rests in Northfield Plaza today), Mack Truck, and Standard Oil of California. They all played active roles in buying out one hundred electric trolley lines in order to replace them with buses. The Road Gang flourished during war time. Eisenhower made an advisory committee of executives linked to GM, Bechtel engineering, trucking lobby, and the Teamsters union. Lest we forget that in 1956, Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act. Helen Leavitt with her “Superhighway—SuperHoax” (1970) writes a scathing indictment of the highway system. One of the main arguments was that there was no real concern for national defense in its building, and that Congress had been bought and bullied.

After WWII, the streets and its establishments evolved further. Between 1920 and 1950, gas stations, or service stations, entered into another phase and became one of the most widespread kinds of commercial buildings in the United States. After 1945 the gas station evolved again into a more homogenous entity, standardized across the country, reflecting the mass-marketing techniques of billion-dollar oil companies.⁸⁸ Highway building, as mentioned earlier, changed affected roads but also, “in the process of creating routes into cities and towns, highway engineers destroyed many older neighborhoods, especially those inhabited by people of color.”⁸⁹ Road gangs in every state emboldened and propped up real estate, automobile, truck, oil, and construction interests when they provided billion-dollar infrastructure projects that opened up new suburban land for speculation and development.

City centers and its central business districts suffered thanks to the automobile. Motor vehicle registrations outperformed the actual number of parking spaces available in metropolitan areas. Large department stores like Sears and its “A” stores were encouraged to move to low-density areas where leases were cheaper and because of the automobile, it could be within

⁸⁸ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 162.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

reach of new customers. Jackson adds, “another threat to the primacy of the central business district was the ‘string street’ or ‘shopping strip,’ which emerged in the 1920s which were designed to serve vehicular rather than pedestrian traffic.”⁹⁰ Bypass roads encouraged people in the city to venture out to the outskirts of town. Shops would be found near streetcar and rapid transit stops, which were the prototype for the familiar highway stops which stretched far into the countryside.⁹¹ Here, stores like Sears were rarely formed into a unified whole as they were typically isolated from other stores. However, “the multiple-store shopping center with free, off-street parking represented the ultimate retail adaptation to the requirements of automobility.”⁹² In point of fact, Roland Park shopping center in Baltimore, Maryland was the first planned shopping center in 1896 as part of an affluent streetcar suburb. Accessible and easy parking gave stores an advantage over the establishments in the city. By 1984, almost two-thirds of all retail trade was done by 20,000 of the country’s large shopping centers.⁹³ This commercial reality was in response to the emerging primacy of the car.

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⁹⁰ Ibid, 257.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid, 258.

⁹³ Ibid, 255.

⁹⁴ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 162.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

Nevertheless, the widespread acceptance of the front parking area, meant that the “strip mall” was born. However, this new typology would soon have to compete with large pedestrian malls being built in neighboring towns. The strip mall still had its taxpayer strip financial structure. Every income producing structure, no matter the size, received a huge tax write-off. This included malls, gas stations, supermarkets, motels, fast-food restaurants, offices, rentals, apartments, and shopping centers. Of course, this hurt small businesses: “existing mom-and-pop operations such as small motels, diners, and retail shops did not benefit because the construction had to be new to qualify for the write off.”⁹⁶ Large chain operations took advantage of the tax bonuses. Interestingly, corporations, like McDonalds, cynically conceded that they were not in the food business, rather the real estate business. Hayden quotes, “the only reason we sell fifteen cent hamburgers is because they are the greatest producer of revenue from which our tenants can pay us our rent.”⁹⁷ It was government subsidies that led to the entire reconfiguration of the commercial real estate center. Essentially, it became a tax shelter and venture capitalists became attracted to it, accelerated the flipping of cheap buildings where, “each new round of accelerated depreciation led to another set of profitable losses.”⁹⁸ The federal government incentivizes suburban developers to cannibalize their own cities. This was done under the public’s nose. With this cheap real estate, the quality of the lived community was subjugated to finance.

Community

The Ford Stamping plant had an integral role in the community of Northfield. Its ground-breaking was in 1953 and production started next year, with much of the work having

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Hayden, Dolores. *Building Suburbia : Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000*. 1st ed.. New York: New York : Pantheon Books, 2003, 164.

moved to the area from Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.⁹⁹ They were all former mine workers happy to join the United Auto Workers union, Local 420. Many applicants initially lined up before the plant opened and there were so many people building the plant and so many new workers, that local residents were asked to offer rooms to construction workers.¹⁰⁰ There was such a demand for housing that it resulted in the residential developments in nearby communities including Walton Hills, Bedford, Macedonia, and Northfield village. This factory promoted civic responsibility. A history of this plant states, “Workers at the stamping plant have demonstrated their desire to be of service in the community and in Greater Cleveland. Both salaried employees and UAW local 420 members are involved with United Way, Harvest for Hunger, Wheelchair Olympics, blanket drives, and provide school supplies for local needy children.”¹⁰¹ The number of employees working for the plant peaked in the early 1960s where more than 5,000 workers were employed and that number dropped to around 900 by 2005 and only a few hundred by the time it closed for good.

When the factory first came. Housing construction boomed in the Northfield area and in the neighboring town, Walton Hills. The old farm house was left standing and served as the employment office and the headquarters for the construction site. A small history of the factory writes, “Ford Motor coming into the area, Business also boomed.”¹⁰² Restaurants began to “appear out of nowhere” and these businesses supplied the stamping plant with services and

⁹⁹ Kainsinger, Jean, and Boob Kainsinger. “Through the Years with FORD MOTOR COMPANY’S WALTON HILLS STAMPING PLANT,” May 2005.

http://waltonhillsohio.gov/pdf_waltonhills/en-US/HistoricalDocs/FordMotorCompany.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ Marotta, Eric. “Former Ford Plant in Walton Hills Sold, to Be Redeveloped into Business Park.” *Akron Beacon Journal*, December 31, 2021.

<https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/2021/12/31/former-ford-plant-walton-hills-sold-plans-business-park/9049491002/>.

¹⁰¹ Kainsinger, Jean, and Boob Kainsinger. “Through the Years with FORD MOTOR COMPANY’S WALTON HILLS STAMPING PLANT,” May 2005.

http://waltonhillsohio.gov/pdf_waltonhills/en-US/HistoricalDocs/FordMotorCompany.pdf.

¹⁰² Ibid, 2.

became small support industries. Thanks to this factor, a great deal of money went into the community. When the plant started running production the property tax base became one of the lowest in the county.¹⁰³ Ford by this time offered the area 1,00 permanent jobs and in turn residential property was bought and new housing projects erupted. Northfield thrived.

When new streets and homes were built during the 1950s boom, like in the case of Northfield thanks to the stamping plant, large sociological changes were made to the family as a result to the new houses and new streets. A new lifestyle was unfolded based on conspicuous consumption and automobile dependence while inheriting the legacy of the industrial revolution in the shrinkage of the family unit: the three-generation family was split. Hayden notices that “compared to the streetcar suburbs, sitcom suburbs in the 1950s offered far less flexibility about multiple units and family types.”¹⁰⁴ The suburb of the post-World War II era was shaped by the legislative process as discussed earlier involving the authority of real estate, banking, construction sectors, and of the want of the planning and design professions. This period was a whirlwind of development and confusing for many citizens as it was hard to even discuss context due to the language of real estate speculation as well as housing and town planning.

Mentioned earlier, the Northfield Village farm land was purchased for the Northfield plaza shopping center and a whole housing development was built behind the plaza, where quite a few homes were purchased by Ford employees.¹⁰⁵ Within a few years, this area went from a rural small town to an industrialized area. From 1955 to 1965, all the schools, offices, public infrastructure, and emergency services were new and refurbished.¹⁰⁶ However, the company

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 8.

started experiencing labor troubles and Ford started to drop their land options which was a shock to the Northfield community. The report writes, “we thought that we ‘had it made’ forever.”¹⁰⁷

There was an industrial parkway with a lot of property that the community went out and recruited small businesses to fill it up. It was successful to an extent. But, the community suffered. Fare thefts suddenly exploded at the factory where an average of two automobiles were stolen from the employee parking lot weekly. Drugs also became readily available at the plant, resulting in drug busts by authorities at work.¹⁰⁸ According to the report, the situation was not solved until wholesale layoffs in 1979. This hurt the tax base in 1980, indicating that the stamping plant might close, until the union managed to keep it open a bit longer. Yet, through the 1980’s there was little community growth and property value still increased.

In terms of community in Northfield and the larger status of community in America, Robert Putnam with his *Bowling Alone* (2000) found that community cohesiveness, trust, and reciprocity in America peaked at the end of the 1950s and early 60s and began to decline ever since and provides many arguments for why this happened. He looked at political, civic, religious participation and connections in the workplace along with the effects of mobility and sprawl. He found that social trust has dwindled along with the public’s actual active participation in the culture, rather than passive; “By many measures, ‘doing’ culture (as opposed to merely consuming it) has been declining.”¹⁰⁹ What’s important about this book and its arguments is its analysis of the consequences of mobility and sprawl. He writes, “After World war II widespread car ownership combined with a government-subsidized road- and home-building boom to

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 9.

¹⁰⁹ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000), 114.

produce accelerated movement to the suburbs, not different in kind from the earlier trends, but different in degree.”¹¹⁰

In the case of Northfield, in the 1950s, the Ford Stamping plant and Northfield park, union membership was at its highest. He attributes this to the favorable effects of two world wars and the New Deal on collective bargaining. He writes, “The decline of manufacturing, the movement of commerce and jobs from the smokestack states of the Northeast to the anti-union Sunbelt, the increase in educational levels, and part-time employment... are plausible explanations for an investable decline in union membership.”¹¹¹ Union membership rates declined by 62% within manufacturing between 1953 and 1997. Overall, in terms of community-based and religious organizations, there was “modest growth in the first third of the century; rapid growth coming out of the Depression and World War II; a high plateau from the 1950s into the 1960s; and a sharp, sustained decline during the last third of the century.”¹¹² Putnam explains that unions created and depended upon social capital. These were and are networks of reciprocity.

Notes on the Suburban Lifestyle

When the shopping center was first conceptualized in the 1950s, Architects and developers saw the community shopping center as a civic, cultural, and social center, trying to replace that of downtown. Like that of Northfield Plaza, it provided essentials for nearby residents. This center tried to replace that unplanned and dowdy development along the commercial strip. By the 1950s, the strip was devoted to vehicular traffic, but retaining physical

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 208.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 82.

¹¹² Ibid, 80.

ties to nearby housing.¹¹³ In the post-war period, the Federal Housing Administration and Department of Veterans Affairs backed mortgages for millions of new homes and soldiers returning home from war and people wanting to move to the suburbs. However, with old friends and family spread out in the post-war period, isolation and loneliness set in. Notable architect Victor Gruen saw the shopping center as a way to create a social and cultural center for new residents.

In the sprawl, the strip mall presented itself as an ideal place for socialization. It provided amenities like the drug store, grocery, dry cleaner, laundry, shoe repair, bakery, barber, and beauty shops. The parking lots themselves became places for local community events. Soon, it became a family destination, part of a new shift in shopping practices as retail habits ventured into the suburbs. Although many services were provided, self-service became the norm and the shopping process itself became more of an event than a mindless task.¹¹⁴ They became weekly rituals for many suburban dwellers. The strip mall in the community presented itself as a marker that the community had finally “arrived.” The strip mall became a status symbol, a source of pride, and signaled the importance of community to those who drove by. By the mid-century, the strip mall became the dominant feature of the landscape.¹¹⁵

Suburbanization and the rise of the shopping mall went hand in hand. Federal tax policy encouraged the shopping center boom while segregator zoning policies excluded gathering places like local shops and restaurants from residential areas. In terms of the suburban shopping experience, Putnam notes, “The suburban shopping experience does not consist of interaction

¹¹³ Manning, Matthew J. “THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN STRIP MALLS: EVALUATING AND PRESERVING A UNIQUE CULTURAL RESOURCE.” Graduate School Thesis, Miami University, 2005, 41.

¹¹⁴ Manning, Matthew J. “THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN STRIP MALLS: EVALUATING AND PRESERVING A UNIQUE CULTURAL RESOURCE.” Graduate School Thesis, Miami University, 2005, 42.

¹¹⁵ Ellen Dunham-Jones and June Williamson, *Retrofitting Suburbia*, (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2009), 62-63.

with people embedded in a common social network.”¹¹⁶ Furthermore, “more and more of our time and money are spent on goods and services consumed individually, rather than those consumed collectively.”¹¹⁷ This shift completely transformed the life and shape of the suburbs which symbiotically changed the nature of civic life along the strip. These are integral moments in the history of mobility and sprawl. The rise of America's drive in culture reinforced then weakened America's sense of community. With suburbanization and sprawl, social life became privatized with a reduced concern and responsibility for one's neighbors and family as the more and more of our lives are centered from within the house.

The original suburban impulse to move to the suburbs was an affluent impulse historically conceptualized in the mid-nineteenth century. It was an escape from the geography and pressure of civic responsibility. Along with this renunciation, came the retreat from reality, and in the suburb, lay a paradox. Lewis Mumford explains,

“The individuality of the suburban cottage, now expressing itself in painful excrescences of “original” ornament, or again in no less painful imitation of historic styles – this ‘individuality’ was in effect a confession that the proud philistines of the period had neither the intellectual penetration to analyze their condition nor the courage and the imagination to transform it. The suburb was a pharisaic way of passing by on the other side: leaving the civic organism itself in the gutter.”¹¹⁸

There is a tension between elite and populist tastes and a tension between individuality and conformity. Mumford points out, “To be your own unique self; to build your unique house, mid a unique landscape: to live in this Domain of Anaheim a self-centered life, in which private fantasy and caprice would have license to express themselves openly, in short, to withdraw like a monk

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 245.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 216.

and live like a prince – this was the purpose of the original creators of the suburb.”¹¹⁹ In suburbia, they tried to have their cake and it too. He continues, “They proposed in effect to create an asylum, in which they could, as individuals, overcome the chronic defects of civilization while still commanding at will the privileges and benefits of urban society.”¹²⁰ Individuality began to express itself as solitude, rather than an identity set against a community.

Isolation became a staple, at first, of American wealth, and then of suburbia at large. Suburbs began their existence visibly with unity and isolation, while the rest would be swallowed up by the spread of the expanding cities. Aristocratic values of suburbanization trickled down and “The merging values of domesticity, privacy, and isolation reached fullest development in the United States, especially in the middle third of the nineteenth century,” remarks Kenneth Jackson.¹²¹ Life became boring without the social drama of group activity that the open country seemed to lack.¹²² This mass movement tried to make a caricature out of an archetypal suburban retreat. A cookie cutter archetype was created which would be utterly dependent on the strip malls around them. Thus, the ultimate effect of the suburban escape in our time is, ironically, an oppressively conformist environment in which escape is impossible.

Today

During the 1970s, the phenomenon of the super-regional mall expanded options for suburban shopping. It became a lure for teenagers, as evidenced from pop culture of the 1980s, and became identifiable collecting points for rootless families. In the 1990s big-box discount stores took demand away from the regional strip malls, especially Northfield. Commuters went

¹¹⁹ Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History : Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. New York: New York : Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961, 486

¹²⁰ Ibid, 486.

¹²¹ Jackson, Kenneth T. *Crabgrass Frontier : The Suburbanization of the United States*. New York: New York : Oxford University Press, 1985, 4.

¹²² Mumford, Lewis. *The Culture of Cities*. New York: New York : Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938, 480.

to large box stores in Macedonia which included Burlington Coat Factory, Walmart, Home Depot, Kohls, along with fast food drive-ins and restaurants. As strip malls were overshadowed by larger pedestrian malls, highway interstate passed over traditional strips, causing businesses to follow consumer traffic to new retail locations. In Northfield, it all went to Macedonia and the strip in Northfield and the strips all over America began to depreciate and decline.

Northfield's community was damaged with the closing of the Ford Stamping plant and workers were forced into retail. Today, Sagamore hills have stagnated and any kind of industry is largely absent. It lost a lot of its community from the closing of the stamping plant, and from the recession going into the 1980s and the end of the 1990s, and again in 2008.

America's drive-in culture weakened every day

Americans' sense of community.

In 1972, the owners of Northfield park sold the 84-acre site for \$7.4 million to Millstein Entertainment.

The Hard Rock International brand brought \$275 million worth of development to the harness horse racing track and transformed it into a sophisticated casino with over 2,500 slot machines, a Hard Rock Café, Steakhouse, buffet restaurant, bar, with live entertainment and conference facilities in 2012.¹²³ However, MGM Growth Properties LLC reached an agreement with Millstein Entertainment and sold the Hard Rock Rocksino Northfield Park for \$1.6 billion. I drove past the casino on the way to school seeing people walk to work here on the side of the road with no sidewalks, while patrons swerved out of the parking lot from the night before



Figure - Hard Rock Rocksino in 2020, courtesy of the Akron Beacon Journal

¹²³ Ott, Thomas. "Northfield Park Owner, Hard Rock Executive Discuss Racino Plans." *Cleveland.Com*, April 5, 2012. https://www.cleveland.com/metro/2012/04/northfield_park_owner_hard_roc.html.

following me onto the I-271 highway, driving in and out of Northfield indifferent to the people who live there – all by design.

The suburban shopping experience, and especially the casino business, did not consist of interaction with people embedded in a common social network. Today, America's social landscape has changed and the strip mall no longer pretends to be a place for social gathering. In 2022, a report by Credit Suisse predicts that one in four malls will close.¹²⁴ The rise of e-commerce, mass store closings and bankruptcies have caused retail stores to close at an increasing rate. Socializing can no longer claim that it happens at the mall, as it has become more and more privatized, delegated to social media and the private home. Large retail spaces are going bankrupt like Walgreens, Sears, JCPenney, and Macy's.¹²⁵ The COVID-19 pandemic hurt large and small businesses everywhere, however, a lot of the damage is coming from private equity. This is what is damaging large chains where cheap debt led to a buyout boom and companies made more money from real estate than the stores using the space. In terms of employment, in 201, US department stores employed 1.2 million employees across 8,600 stores.¹²⁶ Yet, in 2020, there are now fewer than 700,00 employees nationwide in the sector. Even MGM Northfield park suffered from the pandemic, with around 270 workers losing their jobs.¹²⁷

When the Ford Stamping plan was operational, the number of employees working for the plant peaked in the early 1960s where more than 5,000 workers were employed and that number dropped to around 900 by 2005 and only a few hundred by the time it closed for good. The

¹²⁴ Calfas, Jennifer. "1 in 4 Mall Will Be Closed by 2022, Firm Says." *Money*, June 1, 2017. <https://money.com/malls-closing-2022-credit-suisse/>.

¹²⁵ Close, Kerry. "12 Major Retailers Closing Stores Like Crazy," June 30, 2016. <https://money.com/retail-stores-closing-locations/?ref=/malls-closing-2022-credit-suisse/>.

¹²⁶ Del Rey, Jason. "The Death of the Department Store and the American Middle Class." *Vox*, November 30, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/recode/21717536/department-store-middle-class-amazon-online-shopping-covid-19>.

¹²⁷ Mackinnon, Jim. "270 Employees at MGM Northfield to Remain Jobless Because of COVID-19 Pandemic." *Akron Beacon Journal*, September 2, 2020. <https://www.beaconjournal.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/09/02/270-employees-at-mgm-northfield-to-remain-jobless-because-of-covid-19-pandemic/42377029/>.

community suffered in Northfield and on the national level. Robert Putnam finds that, “During the 1980s layoffs and job uncertainty grew primarily because of the business cycle, but during the 1990s restructuring came to be a regular tool of management, even during prosperous times.”¹²⁸ Lots of the creation and distribution of social community comes more and more from the workplace.¹²⁹ It also had a close association with Bedford high school where it offered an apprentice program to students that ended in the early 80s. Northfield lost this community engagement when the Ford Stamping Plant closed. There are many indicators of the loss of community in Northfield. A report states that in Summit County, the emergency departments had at least 1,059 opioid overdose visits in 2020.¹³⁰ The same report also predicted that the COVID-19 pandemic has likely led to an uptick in overdoses and deaths.

Yet, this is not the end of small towns or America’s small communities. High schools in America have started moving into abandoned malls,¹³¹ upcycling the space, along with post offices, school, and offices. Abandoned malls are being reused and upcycled. In the case of the Ford Stamping Plant that closed in 2011, its new owners are in the process of redeveloping it.¹³² The plan is to redevelop it into a large business park. The hope is for a mix of manufacturing, high-tech, and warehouse-logistic companies to come and fill the space. It is a 10-year redevelopment plan that will come with a lot of jobs and a new tax base, that is the hope.

Over the past five years, I’ve seen storefronts along the strip close. The dollar general went out of business for a year and a Goodwill store closed down. Jobs left for larger planned

¹²⁸ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000), 88.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 92.

¹³⁰ Shapiro, Ilene. “OAAC Recommends, Executive and Council Approve \$2.5 Million in Grants for Opioid Addiction and Recovery Services.” News Release. Summit County Executive, June 28, 2021.

¹³¹ Levin, Cleo. “The Eerie, Awe-Inspiring Images of High Schools That Moved Into Empty Malls,” March 31, 2021, 2.

¹³² Marotta, Eric. “Former Ford Plant in Walton Hills Sold, to Be Redeveloped into Business Park.” *Akron Beacon Journal*, December 31, 2021.

shopping spaces in Macedonia by the big-box stores. Even Putnam found that “more and more of our shopping is done in a megamall in yet a third suburb.”¹³³ Moreover, this shopping experience does involve interactions with people embedded in a common social network as earlier architects thought. Putnam found that the suburbanization of the last thirty years increased our financial investment in the automobile but also our investment of time. Between 1969 and 1995, the average trip to work increased by 26% and the average shopping trip increased by 29% and each trip was much more likely to be made alone where “private cars account for 86 percent of all trips in America, and two-thirds of all car trips are made alone, a fraction that has been rising steadily.”¹³⁴ When I was home because of the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt the isolation and lack of community.

It is interesting to imagine what the land looked like before this industrial sprawl. The Seneca, Chippewa, and Ottawa villages traded and went on expeditions with Northfield’s early settlers, but by 1831 only 2000 Indians remained in Ohio¹³⁵ and today there are no formal recognized tribal communities or nations left in the state. The Cuyahoga Valley National Park and its trails are the best record we have of an area before industrialization, for that, I am thankful I got to grow up nearby both the sprawling woods and the industrial sprawl, seeing the complexities in both. My parents moved here for work and my house was built the same year I was born, in 1999. For them it was a brand-new world, at the exact same time it was just as new for myself, so it has been fascinating to experience these lands together with all of its gains and losses.

¹³³ Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone : The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: New York : Simon & Schuster, 2000, 211.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 212.

¹³⁵ “Historic American Indian Tribes of Ohio, 1654-1843.” Rocky Ricer City School District: Ohio Historical Society, n.d. <https://www.rccs.org/Downloads/Ohios%20historic%20Indians%2038%20pages.pdf>.

Sprawl and the history of the strip mall illustrate America's loss of community in the form of public space. Everything closes at 8:00 and restaurants close at 10:00. Most of life has been privatized and although the strip mall in its history has moments of rise and decline, it inadequately serves the community as a public space outside of the services and goods it houses. It exists outside of the United States; however, it is a profoundly American phenomenon in that it engenders a particularly solitary experience – a kind of excess of individualism. From the trends touched upon in this project, it does not seem that the physical community will be returning anytime soon to the strip mall or to any physical space for that matter. Life will be increasingly



Figure - Northfield Plaza today

privatized and virtual, unless we evaluate and make better efforts to revitalize our social networks and urban environments. For that reason, the strip mall serves as a peculiar artifact of a particular lifestyle devoid of any semblance of community.

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