

American Studies 100
Exploring American Culture
Roger Williams University
CAS 228
Wednesday, 6:45 - 9 :30
Spring 2006

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Hours: T, Th, 9:30 -11:00 W, 5:30 - 6:30
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Course Introduction

Book List:

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

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

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

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

AMST100: The American Experience

An introduction to American Cultural Studies. Considers the impact of culture upon individuals in relation to their present, past, and future. Particular emphasis on the family as cultural agent.

RWU Catalogue

A few introductory remarks

I've printed the catalogue description for AMST100, just in case you've not read it, or have forgotten what it promises. The general statement is an accurate description of what I'm going to try to accomplish with you in this course. The last sentence fragment, particular emphasis... needs to be qualified somewhat. The particular emphasis in this particular version of The American Experience is going to be upon a cultural artifact which is produced by the family and which shapes the family as well, the house. The house (actually house and home--a closely related idea) is the stage on which the family drama is enacted. We know that practically no condition is more tragic, and indeed scary than homelessness is. Leaving one home and forming another is one of the rites of passage for us.

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

Because these differences are not random people like ourselves can think about them rationally--and explain them. We can observe them with intelligence and sophistication, rather than bias and ignorance. We can see that our taste is just as much a product of our experience as others' tastes are products of theirs. How much this will increase our "freedom of informed choice and judgement" is open to debate. Our own cultures

are not that easy to escape. Probably more important is that looking at the cultural creations of other people helps us to do the hardest things of all--think rationally about the creations of our own cultures.

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

We also need to recognize that our concept of *home* stretches beyond the structure in which we live to include the environment of that structure. I'm not *just* thinking of the yard (if the structure has one), but the community as well. We speak, for example of our *home towns*. Consequently, we'll need to think about this, as well. And if this class is similar to classes in the past, most of its members live either in suburban communities or in small towns. We'll spend some time thinking about these environments, as well.

Course Materials:

There is a **LOT** of reading for this course. None of it is difficult or technical, but it is going to require a significant time commitment on your part. Note that this section of American Studies 100 is not the same as the other two sections. Be careful that you purchase the books for this section and not those for one of the others. It may be a good idea for you to look the materials for all sections over, just in case you find that your interests really suggest you belong elsewhere.

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

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

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

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

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

I think every American knows what a "suburb" is. Stilgoe is interested in the form or pattern humans impose on a place. He understands that suburbs have a visual signature, and that the look of the suburb is a quite deliberate thing--a matter of symbol and icon representing an ideal of living to which suburbanites aspire, either consciously or unconsciously. The illustrations are very important here. We need to stop thinking of illustrations as filler between the more important ideas, which we find in the text. Think instead of the illustrations as a different *kind* of text.

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

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

Course Work

I've taken an advanced look at my roster for this course and it pleased me to notice a number of familiar names. Welcome back, and I'm glad you wanted to have another experience with me. Those of you to whom this applies know one thing already, and that is that I have been moving more and more towards a course with a significant internet component to it. From my early days at Roger Williams I've provided a course overview at the beginning and then a series of weekly assignment sheets throughout the course, and that practice still obtains here. Beginning four years ago, I started creating websites for my classes, and that practice continues now. In fact, I intend not to pass out any paper to you, once the first two weeks of the course have passed. I will be introducing this course to you via the web, then passing sheets of paper out following that introduction. After I end the practice of passing out syllabi, you will be responsible for visiting the class website at least weekly and keeping current with the work ahead. If you want to have a printed copy of the course work, you can print one off on your own. There will be a "printer friendly" version available at the website.

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

I will also be using *blackboard*, a system with which many of you are already familiar. You will submit work for previews using the digital drop box, and work for final evaluation through the "Assignments" function. The only exception to this will be the annotated bibliography described below. I will accept that in hard copy format.

Written work must be submitted using one of these formats:

Microsoft Word

Microsoft Works

Word Perfect

Abi Word (*Abi word is a free word processor which may be downloaded by those who don't own one of the above programs*)

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

THERE WILL BE A TAKE-HOME FINAL, RATHER THAN AN IN-CLASS FINAL FOR THIS COURSE. It will have two parts, each of equal weight. I will distribute the questions to you about the middle of the semester.

There will also be two other take-home examinations as well, One of them will require an analysis of Tracy Kidder's book, *House* and the persons involved in the project. I do not think we will spend much class time discussing Kidder. Though factual, it reads like a good novel, and I hate to spoil the story and your encounter with the characters in it by analyzing it to death. I would prefer for you to read it on your own, and aim to have it finished by the end of February. I'll ask you how you're getting along by in a week or two, and if necessary, I'll apply a few touches of the lash.

The second of these will involve explaining ideas from the Rybczynski book and *applying* these ideas to the house built for the *Souweine* family (principals in Kidder's book) and to the house *you* consider "home".

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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

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

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

I want you to find these largely using the internet. It is good for you to get as much research practice as possible. You can, of course use other sources as well. However, you will quickly learn that the Internet is a very good way to access even local news stories.

The annotation for each one will include:

1. How you located the item. If you found it on the internet, include the website address and the search engine you used to find it.
2. A very short abstract (2-3 sentences) of the content.
3. A paragraph or two about what *this* particular item added to your understanding of the role of houses and homes in American culture.

The end product should be approximately *ten to twelve* pages long, (one page per item). Think of this as ten short papers spread over 13 weeks, and it shouldn't be too overwhelming. More on this shortly.

Percentages

The First two take-home exercises will each count approximately 15% of your grade.

The Take-Home Final will also two parts, each graded independently. Each will count approximately 20% of your final grade. The Final will be due **Wednesday evening, May 17**. Class will be held that evening, though it may be held off campus. (More about that later). NOTE that this is the last day of final exams. Make your plans accordingly.

The Annotated Bibliography will also be due Wednesday evening, May 17.

ATTENDANCE POLICY

I try to be as liberal as I can regarding excusing absences from class for illnesses and emergencies. I expect to be notified by e-mail *in advance* when you are going to be absent, unless the nature of the reason (for example, an accident on the way to class) makes this impossible. This class meets only once a week. Therefore, an absence is the equivalent of missing a week's work. **More than two unexcused absences will have a negative impact on your grade.**

I will generally provide a 10 minute break in the middle of the class. I also pass around an attendance sign in sheet. *I will pass this around following the break, and **not** before. It is your responsibility to make sure that your name is on the roster before the end of the class period.*