

**Sprawlville: Coming Home to Suburbia**  
**A Documentary Proposal**

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## ***Sprawlville: Coming Home to Suburbia***

"The American Landscape is just an unbelievable mess. Some places are simply heartbreaking. You get the feeling that in some ways the country has culturally shot itself in the head." James Kunstler, the author of *Geography of Nowhere* and *Home from Nowhere*, lives in Saratoga Springs, New York, a place worth visiting. Besides having a small university, a world-famous racetrack, and some hot springs, Saratoga Springs also has something that is missing in most of America: a main street. Yet, with all the beauty and distinctiveness to be found in his small city, the first place Kunstler takes me to is a suburban subdivision. Here the houses all look the same: equal-opportunity ugliness. "I don't think we can overestimate the amount of depression, anxiety, and purposelessness that's being induced by environments like this." Kunstler goes on to imply that children living in subdivisions, places with no past and seemingly no future, are often the same kids who end up taking an assault weapon to class with them.

Yet some children find productive ways of venting their feelings of frustration and powerlessness. When considering his suburban childhood, director, Tim Burton says, "I had a kind of sensory deprivation growing up in Burbank. I said once that my childhood was like a kind of surreal, bright depression, and it was. I grew up in the suburbs, and somehow if you are deprived of certain feelings, there is a desire to get them out. Otherwise, you feel like you're going to explode." Burton channeled this frustration into his films, like *Edward Scissorhands*. He suggests that when children are deprived of outlets for self-expression, they feel an even greater need to express themselves. Many other artists quote an unpleasant childhood as a primary source of inspiration, their loneliness worsened by their suburban home-life, often isolated in a sea of grass and concrete. The majority of American children grow up in these places, where they must rely on parents to get around, and have little to do other than watch television and ride their bikes in endless circles around the cul-de-sac. These children want to act out, to express themselves. Kunstler told me, "I think one of the great delusions of our time is that suburbia is a great place to raise kids."

But wait a second; I grew up in a place like this. What does this say about *me*?

My documentary aims to address whether or not the suburbs affect its residents in a negative way. If so, then why we don't see it? How did we get to this point and how is it going to affect us in the future? Wasn't this supposed to be the American dream? How have the country, and its identity, been altered by this vast and relatively short suburbanization? More importantly, how has this influenced the individuals who live in this environment? *Sprawlville* is a personal exploration

of suburban happiness, a look into a nation that's gone into hiding behind their front doors and picket fences.

### **The Suburbs: A Brief Overview**

When I ask people who live in my hometown of Edison, NJ, what they think about it, the most common responses are, "There's nothing to do," and, "Everything looks the same." I'm often told that it's just ugly. People are critical about the town, but not for the right reasons.

Suburban sprawl is becoming increasingly more difficult to ignore. Films like *Bowling for Columbine* and books like *Asphalt Nation* and *Suburban Nation* have forced the issue into the national spotlight. Sub-developments, highways, and big box stores like Wal-Mart have become the predominant land development strategy in this country. Critics say this form of land-use literally paves the way for obesity<sup>ii</sup>, lack of community, diminished quality of life and irrevocable environmental damage.

Since cars are the only way to get around, traffic inevitably becomes a major problem. Parents spend more time driving to and from work than being with their family. Authors like Kunstler claim that fear, an increasingly American characteristic, is what makes us flee to settings where we do not have to interact with others or face the supposed dangers of the city.

But America wasn't always so afraid. Between 1900 and the 1940's, the idealized main street model flourished, with wide sidewalks and an overall mixture of business and residence. Places like this still exist, and people pay a premium to live there. A smaller house is worth much more in these areas because of the urban fabric that comes along with it. Not too far from where I live are the older towns of Metuchen and Westfield, which I often visit to recreate that unique sense of small-town city life. Sitting at a café where I can see a pretty street with lots of foot traffic is more rewarding than one in which I can only see the windshields of cars.

After WWII things began to change, when returning GI's were able to buy separate houses on government loans. The suburban exodus started to places like Levittown, Long Island, and Forest Park, Illinois. The advent of the Interstate Highway Act, signed by President Eisenhower in 1956, eventually allowed for mass suburban build-outs and beginning of the sprawl we see today.

The key to all this expansion was the automobile. Back then, the average city-dweller might use a streetcar, subway, or trains to maneuver in their tight-knit communities. But as companies like General Motors grew in power, they began to remove streetcars from many cities, making the automobile appear to be the key to freedom. Moreover, owning a car became a symbol of success in its own right, and implied access to a country lifestyle. Visionary architects, such as Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, developed ideas for "park cities." Wright, when considering one of his own plans said, "Every Broadacre citizen has his own car. Multiple lane highways make travel safe and enjoyable."<sup>iii</sup> He went on, "No railroad, no streetcar...No headlights, no light fixtures...No glaring cement roads or works...No Slum...No Scum."<sup>iv</sup>

Indeed, the highway system has allowed the suburbs to push further and further into the country's diminishing open space, accelerating decentralized living and raising the amount of time people spend in their cars. Farmers soon discovered that it was far more profitable to sell their land to developers than to plant seeds for the coming season. Thus the national ideal of a pastoral middle-America, with its amber waves of grain, is quickly being replaced with the image of traffic-choked highways.

### **New Urbanism and Smart Growth: A Primer**

The main-street as we know it has become illegal. In most parts of the country, it simply would not be allowed to be built. This is because zoning laws written in the years following WWII were influenced by the booming automobile trade and subsequently left no room for public transit. These laws, tailored to the automobile generation, called for all buildings to be pushed back from the road in order to make room for parking. Architectural harmony and pedestrian convenience were placed low on the list of priorities, instead emphasizing a separation of commercial, industrial, and residential areas. In most cases, commercial buildings must be one story tall, and houses must be separated by lots, taking up a generous half-acre. The laws, developed by a select group of engineering firms, were then mass marketed to developing communities around the country, and have remained unchanged in the fifty years since conception. This eliminated the need for individual zoning in each town. The end result is that small town America, idealized in Norman Rockwell paintings and Frank Capra films, became almost universally outlawed.

New Urbanism is a recent land-use movement that has aimed to identify and solve the long-term effects of suburban development. Neo urbanist communities like Seaside, Florida, and Celebration, USA offer an uncommon possible solution.

These developments are built to resemble main-street America, and are designed around pedestrians, not cars. They have well-defined town centers, a mix of housing for people of different incomes, and apartments above stores. Even though such communities have been fiercely debated by developers and city planners, they have generally been successful.

When I visited Kentlands, one such example of neurbanism, I was impressed, even though the town wasn't exactly what I was expecting. The place reeks of new, it still feels like a new development, with little baby trees held up by posts and perfect-looking houses everywhere. Yet, I still felt it would mature into a very appealing community. The design was well thought out and there were many centers within the public realm, such as rec centers, and main-street style strips of stores, all within walking distance. It was kind of like taking a step back in time. I felt like the town was straight out of the 1920s, yet everything was sparkling-new. Everyone who I interviewed there seemed to love it.

Another solution, which deals with already developed areas, is called smart growth. Portland, Oregon, the pioneer of the program, sets the perfect example. All planning is done on a regional scale, instead of a town-by-town basis. A belt of highly restricted open space has been set up around the metro area, with a limited amount of developable space available within it. This causes denser development, leading to better public transportation options while preserving countryside close to the developed areas.

Unfortunately, places like Portland, Kentlands, and Seaside, represent a miniscule portion of the country. Only a handful of planned new urbanist communities have been built because investors and banks are less likely to finance something that is not a tested formula. They figure, "Why take the risk when sprawl still sells?"

And they're right. The truth is, smart growth is not always successful and doesn't catch on. The state of New Jersey spent years working on an ambitious statewide smart growth plan, called "the big map," which was abandoned in October of 2003. The plan, using a series of colors to demonstrate different development restrictions, was somewhat modeled after the way it works in Portland. It was very impressive, since it seems like every available inch of the state has been built upon or is about to be. But developers in New Jersey are just too powerful, and in the end, conservation and smart planning appear to have lost. In some ways this failure has proved sprawl to be a difficult foe.

## **Life After the Oil Crash**

We have come to an age of total dependence upon the automobile. With no pedestrian street life, the opportunity to interact with the community diminishes. This all leads to issues of health and sustainability: with a country that is dependent on petroleum products, how will we survive, should the oil run out? This insatiable desire affects national policy on a massive scale.

James Kunstler says that the suburbs, what he calls "national automobile slums", are unsustainable. He feels that sometime in the next fifty years - or sooner - we are going to run out of oil and the America that we know now will cease to exist. He's worried that, "when the suburban spree is over, it's going to terminate in a lot of political mischief. When people are denied the kind of luxuries that others have had I'm afraid they're going to go out and vote for American Nazis."

Some scientists worry that after we reach peak oil, the demand for it would outstrip the supply. This would cause grave problems such as massive shortages of food, due to lack of fertilizers, and, of course, the inability to drive our cars to all of our suburban destinations. The current design of the country demands a constant massive supply of petroleum, and no one knows exactly what will happen if we don't get it.

## **The Appeal of the Suburban Myth**

Why, with all the detrimental aspects of living in developments, are Americans still streaming into the suburbs? Documentaries, essays, and books search for the answer to this question. They often claim that there's no alternative, and cite dated zoning laws, pressure from automobile companies, and lack of proper architectural training in planners. While what the experts claim often seems to be true, they never seem to back it up with actual evidence. For example, an expert quoted in a documentary might claim that a suburbanite might be unhappy having to drive sixty miles to work and will discuss why this is bad, yet the film never seems to examine if such a person really exists. But it's important for me to find the actual truth behind the situation. When someone gives me a theory, I'll test whether or not it's true. This will be one of the founding principles of my documentary.

If this is a real problem, is new urbanist planning the solution? When I first read Kunstler's work it immediately resonated with me. There are, however, a lot of people who disagree with it. Wendell Cox is a leading opponent to new urbanism. He wants me to believe that smart growth, as it's called, is the "opiate

of the planners.” He feels that new urbanists unjustly blame too many problems on sprawl. Suburban life is supposedly a healthier way to live; in it Americans are happier and have a higher quality of life. Apparently, if people didn’t want to live in places like this, no one would buy houses there, and developers wouldn’t be so incredibly successful. Upon my first reading of what Cox had to say, I thought that he was utterly misguided, if not insane.

Over time I’ve come to realize that maybe my initial reactions were wrong. If this landscape seems so unlikable then why do so many people choose to live in it? Isn’t this supposed to be the American dream? Why do millions of people from around the world dream of coming to the United States? When they finally get here, and see what most of the country is like, are they still happy?

### **What the People Think**

Identifying the negative aspects of such land-use is the first step towards solving them. Sometimes people who live in suburbia are blind to the problems surrounding their lifestyle, and sometimes they find unlikely scapegoats on which to place the blame. In doing my research I was shocked to find out that many people feel immigration is a huge cause of sprawl. One think tank’s report claims, “Federal immigration policy would appear to be the single largest factor in determining how much sprawl will occur over the next 50 to 100 years.”<sup>v</sup>

Edison has one of the largest and fastest growing Indian populations in the US. The main drags in town are filled with all sorts of great Indian restaurants and sari stores. Obviously, Edison can’t seem that bad to immigrants, since a recent study found that only two percent of immigrants who recently traveled to the United States are unhappy that they’ve come here.<sup>vi</sup>

One of the people I interviewed during my research was Larry Halper, one of the last remaining farmers in Piscataway, NJ. Piscataway is next to my town, and over the years I’ve watched it change from rolling farmland to another typical suburban community. It’s strange to drive through seemingly endless suburbs and suddenly see Mr. Halper’s grain silo. The incongruity is striking: his seventy-five acre farm is surrounded by developments on all sides. His family has owned and operated the Cornell Dairy Farm for over eighty years, though lately it’s become something of a tourist attraction, a neighborhood oddity.

Mr. Halper is angry with what’s happened to the town. He calls the local city council “a bunch of fascists.” He’s a bit of a curmudgeon, but one who certainly seems to love his farm and all of his kids, who gathered round while we talked.

While many farmers near dense metropolitan areas are selling their farms for development, the Halpers are fighting to keep their farm. In what appears to be an unprecedented case, Piscataway is trying to condemn the land under eminent domain and claim it as open space. Larry points out the absurdity of this to me: how can a farm that's already open to the public not be considered open space? After they do that they will sell it at market rate, to be developed into townhouses. Larry's got an arsenal of stories to prove that they could do something like this. He tells me about a woman around the corner who sold an acre of her land to the town for \$20,000 to build a library. She was appalled to learn that the town officials decided to sell it to a real estate developer for \$500,000.

Even with stories like Larry's, this case is not as black and white as it appears. Township officials explain it differently. They claim that the town only moved to condemn the land after they learned that the Halpers were trying to sell it to a developer to put up 100 houses. In an area that is already overcrowded and congested, the township's measure was intended to preserve one of the last remaining open spaces in the area. Apparently the condemnation was stopped, but then resumed when the Halpers refused to sell the development rights to the property for three million dollars. Incidents like this have shown me that even though things might seem cut and dried, I am always being forced to rethink my opinion.

Sometimes the best thing for a farmer is to sell out to a developer. According to Larry, a small farmer can sell about \$185 worth of corn from one acre of land. The costs for producing that acre are \$75, leaving him only \$110 of profit per acre. With a 200 acre farm he will only make \$22,000. Larry asks me, "Why shouldn't a farmer enjoy the rewards of selling his land?" When faced with those facts, I don't have a worthy reply. When I ask him how much it can sell for he tells me that it can be up to \$200,000 per acre. It would take the farmer 1,800 years to produce that much corn.

James Kunstler, however, has a long term vision. He points out the issue of food transportation. "Maybe one day we won't be able to ship a caesar salad two thousand miles. If oil becomes a real problem in the future, we're going to have to revert back to our regional farms." So what happens if by then, all the regional farms have been sold off? Maybe these suburbanites would like to try a new model of agriculture: rows of suburban houses with corn growing around them; soybean plants and swing sets, or maybe some lettuce where the in-ground pool used to be. Perhaps that's our future.

Some people are trying to look for more reasonable solutions. Randy Solomon, single and in his late twenties, works for a New Jersey-based think tank and lives in a development of townhouses that he hates. His employer, NJ Future, was the major organization behind the "Big Map," the now aborted state development plan. I spoke to him before its failure. He explains that he'd rather live in the city or the real country, not this. "There's nothing to do, I need to drive forty minutes to do anything with my friends. I hardly know any of my neighbors. The only real interaction that I've had with any of them has been when one of them yelled at me." I ask him to tell me about his view of sprawl and the first thing he says is, "Cancer. I think that it's cancer. Things are not built well. There's been no thought put into the development I live in." He describes his subdivision, Foxmoors, "It has no soul. It wasn't built by someone who really cared about it. It's basically low-maintenance human warehousing." It's sad that so many people my age live like this, with so little chance for interaction with their peers. But like Randy, they're forced to because it's affordable.

## **The Approach**

Talking heads can kill a good documentary. While I will make use of some interview footage, the real way I'm going to use the film medium is by testing out the experts' theories, conducting social experiments all right in front of the camera. I don't just want to prove these theories, I want to challenge them.

For example, I want to seek out the flaws in the supposedly flawless neo-urbanist community. If it's supposed to be the answer to our automobile-obsessed society, then why do people still need to drive cars everywhere? Likewise, when I'm in a typical sprawling community, I'll try to make people examine their surroundings and their reasons for living there. If given the option to leave, would they? What kind of place would they move to, and in fact, would it be truly different than the place they already live in?

The underlying question of my documentary goes beyond tests and interviews. The real question is: Can happiness be found in the suburbs? Can we go on living like this, or will our lifestyles have to change? I want to find true evidence beyond numbers printed in the paper- I want people's stories. I want to see their homes, their routine, their children's faces. I want to compare the lives of similar people living in different situations. Is a suburban mother better off living in a traditional main street town? Do teenagers act any differently in these different places? Ideally, I'd like the audience to agree with and relate to the interviewees- but then question their beliefs for doing so.

Finally, I've begun to suspect that a time is coming when diminishing oil and land will force us to abandon this lifestyle. What worries me is that by the time we actually realize this fact, it will be too late. My film will hopefully be a mirror we can hold up to our lifestyles, allowing us to examine our choices in a manner which will prepare us for the changes to come.

### **Sprawlville's Five Act Structure**

This film will work as a loop starting and ending in my hometown of Edison, NJ, a classic example of a typical suburban township, and work its way to a national scale. The acts will be as follows:

- Act I: **"The American Dream"** will start in **Edison, NJ** with a bit of forest being torn down for construction of a new housing development. We'll visit a family moving into their brand new house, with no trees, and no lawn yet. Why are they so happy? How can they start a new beginning amidst so much destruction? We'll jump across the street, to a family that's been living there for years. They'll complain about how when they moved there it was nothing but forests and farmland, now it's just a much less appealing sea of houses. Are people afraid of the city, and is this the solution? If so, it seems to be a very popular one; everyone must really love the suburbs. If everyone loves them so much why do their kids always tell me that they suck? If they suck so much why do those same kids grow up and move back there? Everyone who actually moves out of Edison hates it, they never want to come back, yet it has become such a popular place for immigrants. Is my town the American dream? Whatever happened to that dream anyway?
- Act II: **"The Critique"** The documentary will move into the **Northeast** to show that this problem isn't just in Edison. This is everywhere. This is bad. What are the real problems? New Urbanism vs. The Suburbs. Pros and cons of each. We'll see a New Urbanist critique of the suburbs and a suburban critique of new urbanism. Which one is true? Are the suburbs really responsible for so many of our problems?
- Act III: **"People really hate this."** At this point we'll reach a **national level** and I will begin testing the theories from Act II, mainly that we're all incredibly unhappy about where we live and aren't doing a damn thing about it. I'll visit unhappy kids, who have no community life, and unhappy adults, who are commuting all the time. Then we'll bring it into the bigger perspective, taking on issues of oil dependency and sustainability. Are the

suburbs the indirect cause of the oil wars? What does a family whose son is fighting in Iraq have to say about it.

- Act IV: In **“Taking Action,”** I’ll see whether or not any of this is having any real effect on people. This is the crux of the debate, and therefore the film because I’m going to show if anyone is acting on this and if anyone is aware of the problems. I’m going to try to interview many people with differing or unorthodox opinions. I’ll meet up with eco-terrorists to get their takes on it, and the aggressive ways to which they respond to sprawl. We’ll visit a new urbanist community and see if it offers any real hope or whether it’s just more of the same. I’ll try to find out if any of these actions are causing any sort of change in people’s lives.
- Act V: **“A Country in Love.”** Back in *Edison*. This will be the conclusion of my research, and while it’s still open, my theory is that I will have proved to myself that we are in love with the suburbs, despite our criticism. Americans wouldn’t want to be anywhere else, anywhere far away from their big box stores, McMansions, and sprawling strip malls. In fact, our identity has become our lack of it.

## List of Potential Characters

Potential subjects include: suburban housewives, city dwellers (native and transplants), developers, recent suburban immigrants, eco-terrorists (in and out of prison), police, recent suburban transplants, farmers, traditional (non-new urbanist) zoning officials, experts (for and against new urbanism), construction and demolition employees, parents of soldiers, youth who live in the suburban and traditional communities, commuters, elderly who have been denied drivers licenses, and, of course, me.

## Logistics

*Sprawlville*, will be shot using a small four-to-five person crew over the course of three to four months. A typical crew will feature the director, producer, camera operator, sound recordist, and a production assistant. The crew size will be flexible, depending on the shooting situation and urgency. A basic crew and production package will be ready to go at all times. All key crew personnel positions have already been filled.

The production office will be in New York City, based on its proximity to Edison, NJ. Postproduction will begin as the film is being shot to allow for changes in the

production plan based on editing needs. For the most part we will be shooting on DV using a Panasonic AG-DVX100, offering an economical way to have a film aesthetic. Additional footage will be shot on Super-8 and 16mm as well as stills on 35mm and medium format as needed stylistically. The film delivery will be broadcast quality and able to be transferred to 35mm for a theatrical exhibition. Editing will take place at the offices of SnapFilms, a small New York production company specializing in small commercials.

The final film will be feature length, approximately 90 minutes, with a 56:40 version available for broadcasts with time constraints. We have pre-commitments to screen the film at the Magnolia Film Festival and the Back Seat Film Festival, which travels to Philadelphia, Los Angeles, New York, and Baltimore.

## **Style**

Despite what may be argued in the case of cinema verité, I feel that the camera is not wholly objective; it is used by the filmmaker to make a point. I intend to make the look of the film reflect both my personal opinions and the mood that I feel the film should have. The visual style will help accentuate my points. For instance, in the first act, when I want suburbia to look overwhelmingly attractive, I will try to show its lushness, the sprinklers going off in the morning, kids playing soccer on endless green fields. Through the use of filters on set, and color correction in post, we will have very saturated colors and gorgeous photography. We'll wait around until magic hour to get the house to look as nice as possible. Interviews will be scheduled around what time of day will make it look best.

In later parts of the film I will revert to a less exaggerated style. I might play with blues and darker tones to accentuate the bleakness. We'll overexpose on sunny days just to show how bright it is in Phoenix when all the sun reflects off the roofs of SUV's stuck in traffic.

Previous films of mine have included extensive CGI, which will be used here to keep the film entertaining and easily express points. 3D modeling and animation will help demonstrate planning principles as well as criticisms of the suburbs. 2D motion graphics will add additional style and maintain a consistent theme throughout the film. The opening credits will be fake "vintage" postcards of towns all over America, emphasizing the irony of having postcards of purely homogenous, alienating suburban landscapes. This dated postcard image could also be used as a possible promotional flier for the film. Additional text, in the same retro style, will be placed on the back of the postcard to show a crew credit or the name of the film.

The pace of the film is going to be fast in order to keep the audience's attention. Interviews will not be too long and will rarely take place in a sit-down setting. It's important that people are shown in their typical surroundings, doing what they might normally be doing. Nothing will seem staged, instead it will seem like we are joining the subjects during their typical activities. This is important because it can visually tell an additional story without it having to be explained. Considering that this is a documentary about home, each subject will be identified in a shot standing in front of his house or apartment. This small key element will help tie all of the characters together.

## **Filmography**

The suburbs have been the focus of several technical documentaries, dealing with problems with suburban design and possible design solutions. These are often intended for planners and those already familiar with such topics. Most, having been produced by local public television stations, focus on a very specific region, addressing issues particular to that area.

*Subdivide and Conquer*, takes a look at the problem in the west, specifically, Colorado. It deals with the issues of vast areas of open space that are quickly being built over with subdivisions. As a solution it looks to Oregon, with its regional planning key use of protected open space. *Save our Land, Save our Towns*, takes a similar regional look, this time in Pennsylvania. The one-hour documentary is essentially a lecture by Thomas Hylton, a newspaper reporter from the area. He spends a while establishing the problems from a planning perspective and then offers solutions from a similar perspective. Other similar documentaries with a regional focus, which mostly feature talking heads and b-roll, include *The Sprawling of America: Fat of the Land*, about the Detroit area, and the New Jersey Network's *Race for Open Space*.

*This is Nowhere* focuses on an odd phenomenon that has resulted from sprawl. In it, the viewer is introduced to well off middle class Americans who have sold their houses and purchased RVs to live in permanently. They spend their time driving around the country and parking their RVs in Wal-Mart parking lots. What's odd about these people is that they have no real interest in the places they are driving to; often they will only see the area between the interstate and the closest Wal-Mart.

These films are successful because they educate the viewer about the issues. Few viewers go away without having a better vocabulary to discuss the issues. My

documentary, aims to do this, and more. I want viewers to challenge their beliefs while being entertained at the same time.

## Conclusion

The place that I grew up in troubles me and has problems that I feel aren't bothering anyone else. It's like our country is having a big old party on an edge of a cliff and doesn't realize that we're going to fall off.

Unlike the other documentaries I've seen on the subject, I plan to go into the suburbs, starting with my own home town, and investigate whether or not we are actually *happy* with our suburban lives. Is fear the only thing preventing us from finding a better place to live? I'm going to examine the problems listed by the experts and then go out and validate or disprove them, solely through personal encounters. I want to show both sides of the issue: those who find the suburbs enabling, and those who find it crippling. Moreover, I want to look for hope.

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<sup>i</sup> Lynn Hirschberg, "Drawn to Narrative," *New York Times*, 9 November 2003, sec. 6, column 1; Magazine Desk.

<sup>ii</sup> Barbara A. McCann and Reid Ewing, *Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl*, (Smart Growth America: Surface Transportation Policy Project, September 2003), 8.

<sup>iii</sup> Frank Lloyd Wright, "Broadacre City: A New Community Plan." *Architectural Record*, April 1935, quoted in Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation* (University of California Press, Ltd., 1997), 57.

<sup>iv</sup> "No Slum. No Scum.": Frank Lloyd Wright exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, spring 1994, quoted in Jane Holtz Kay, *Asphalt Nation* (University of California Press, Ltd., 1997), 57.

<sup>v</sup> Roy Beck, Leon Kolankiewicz, and Steven A. Camarota, *Outsmarting Smart Growth: Population Growth, Immigration, and the Problem of Sprawl* (Washington: Center for Immigration Studies, 2003), 9.

<sup>vi</sup> From "Now that I'm Here" a report prepared by Public Agenda for the Carnegie Corporation of New York

## **Bios of Key Crew and Personnel**

### **Matthew Semel – Director**

Born and raised in Edison, NJ, Matthew graduated from New York University's Kanbar Institute of Film and Television with honors. He has been shooting, directing, and editing short films and videos since the age of eight. Since then, he has directed numerous short films and documentaries, including his most recent *Studying for Life*, a dark comedy about standardized testing. He also has studied at Prague's FAMU film school, where he directed his first 35mm short. He's won multiple awards, including the Warner Bros. Production Grant. Matt has worked on a variety of film productions as an editor, director of photography, and producer. His work includes credits short films, documentaries, 3d animations, and music videos. He most recently edited Rainer Maria's music video, "Ears Ring", which has aired on MTV. Matthew works as a director, editor, and animator at SnapFilms in New York City, where he's worked on commercials for Wal-Mart and the cable channel Noggin.

### **Samuel Crow - Producer**

Native New Yorker Samuel Crow began making films with his friends in high school. He continued this work at Reed College, graduating with several shorts, his first few professional credits, and a degree in English. After stints at the Portland Opera, *The New Yorker* magazine, and *OurTown* magazine, as a theater and film critic, he founded his first production company at the age of 22. Since then, his Voodoo People Productions has produced work for clients such as Deutsche Bank, The Irish Arts Center, the VANS Warped Tour, Monster Energy Drinks, Studionext, various bands, political campaigns, and more. He teaches a filmmaking workshop each summer for the University of Mississippi, and his own productions have won numerous awards and found online, traditional, and educational distribution. He has recent produced works for actress Ellie Raab, and Irish theater artist Macdara Mac Uibh Aille.

### **Ramon Wilson - Producer**

Born and raised in Los Angeles, Ramon Wilson first worked in film as a child actor. In the years that followed he graduated from both Harvard-Westlake School and Yale University, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. While at Yale, Mr. Wilson served as the publisher of the daily campus newspaper, the Yale Daily News. Prior to returning to film, he worked as an investment banker at Merrill Lynch and with various media companies including

XM Satellite Radio. As a co-founder of Voodoo People Productions, he has worked on numerous film, television and music video projects. Many of the works produced by Voodoo People Productions have received critical acclaim and several have won awards.

### **Nicole Perlman – Writer**

Nicole Perlman is a graduate of NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Dramatic Writing Program. She won the 2001 Sloan Foundation Grant for Science in Film, the 2003 Script Magazine/Open Door Contest and is a current finalist for the 2003 Screenwriter's Forum Contest. In addition, she has worked on documentaries for both A&E Biography and the Discovery Channel, and at the BBC in London for the long-running soap opera "Eastenders."

### **Michael Akman – Director of Photography**

Currently residing in Los Angeles, Michael Akman has worked as the Director of Photography on dozens of projects, and is frequently commended for his outstanding cinematography. He has a strong background in both lighting and photography. His credits include *The Truce*, *The Vessel Pitches*, *Looking Out*, *Mickey Lee*, and *The Glass Ceiling*. Films he has shot have been recognized by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and have screened in festivals around the world. He completed the first phase of production on the feature *Straight Line*. Michael has shot commercials for Wal-Mart and HBO, a music video for Blue Note Records, and is attached to shoot the upcoming features *The Diary of Preston Plummer* and *95/96*. He graduated with honors in film production from New York University, and also studied cinematography at the Czech film school, FAMU.

### **Doug Letterman – 3D Animator and Designer**

Doug Letterman graduated from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts in 2001. His short 3D computer-animated film, *Wild Cinema* was a Wasserman semifinalist in NYU's First Run Film Festival. After graduating Doug designed graphics and animation for television commercials in New York City. Currently he works at Blue Sky Studios on their upcoming feature-length animated film, *Robots* as a modeler and developer.

### **Eric Modena – Editor**

A graduate of Boston University, Eric started out by working for Sesame Street. He's done documentary work for London based Café Productions several productions. Eric has worked as an editor on *Ferry Tales*, a film about a group of women that commute on the Staten Island Ferry, airing on HBO in 2005. Other credits include episodes of *Behind the Velvet Ropes* for the style channel. Eric currently works at New York based SnapFilms, where he recently edited *Sound Stories*, a series of documentary style network interstitials for The N, that look at the lives of American teenagers.

### **Susan Korda – Advisor**

An experienced editor and filmmaker Susan edited and was a creative collaborator for *Trembling Before G-d*, an acclaimed documentary on gay and lesbian Orthodox and Hasidic Jews. She was also the editor for the oscar-nominated *For All Mankind*. She's been an advisor on many projects, including several by the director of this film.

## **Personal Statement**

I make films because it is the medium in which I am most capable of expressing myself and creating work that resonates with others. It is the only art form in which I have been able to do this with such self-satisfaction. Another reason I enjoy directing is that, unlike many other forms of art, filmmaking is a collaborative process. I love working in teams where everyone's unique skills come together to make a better outcome.

I use my films as a way to share my views on the world in unique and exciting ways. I take ideas and scenarios that people are familiar with and play with them in unexpected approaches. For example, my recent film, *Studying for Life*, is a dark comedy, with an underlying comment on conformity that's also kind of a holocaust metaphor. It is my hope, that after watching one of my narratives or documentaries, that the viewer will see the issues in a way they had never considered. However, it's also important to me that my work does not take itself too seriously. I want the viewer to have as much fun watching the film as I had making it. I think that it's a good sign that, while it can sometimes be painful, I really enjoy watching my own work, even if I've seen it hundreds of times,

Within three to five years I would very much like to have created a feature-length documentary that has played in festivals and possibly aired on television. At the same time, I would like to be working on small projects, like commercials or music videos, things that let me exercise myself as a director. I hope to improve my skills and have an opportunity to frequently exercise them. I see this is a path to directing more films, both narrative features and documentaries.

I would like to work in a creative office situation, with other people who excite me and on projects that I enjoy. I dislike doing corporate work unless it allows me to learn something new. If I'm working on a project for a company I want them to allow some sort of experimentation or some sort of freedom and I am willing to do work that I do not love if it offers good opportunities. Ultimately, I need to be creative for myself on my own projects or it will not be worthwhile. I thrive in situations where the foals and expectations are well-defined. I like to be aware of my limitations, so that with time I can surpass them.

## Schedule

	2004					2005			
Quarter	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>		1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
Activity									
Research	X								
Fundraising	X	X	X	X		X			
Writing		X							
Preproduction			X						
Production			X	X					
Postproduction				X		X			
Distribution							X		

All aspects of the project should take this long, assuming fundraising goes as planned.

## Production Schedule

Production will take place over three to four months. Since small shooting crews will be used, the entire production will not take place in one continuous period, but breaks will be scheduled, as afforded, to allow review of the material and changes to the production plan as needed.

Starting in July 2004: (weeks are not consecutive)

Week 1: Edison, NJ

Week 2&3: NYC Metro Area and Saratoga Springs, NY

Week 4: Montgomery County, MD

Weeks 5 & 6: American West: Denver Metro Area, Phoenix Metro Area, Portland

Week 7&8: Edison, NJ and NYC Metro