

standing in line. When someone cuts in, self-appointed “line stewards” are likely to protest, at least by grumbling and perhaps by confrontation. If the interloper won’t back down, “there will be an uneasy interim during which many queuers will be watching carefully to determine whether the queue is disintegrating. The moment they sense that it is, they will stampede.”

Although some of Reisman’s observations don’t quite fit his microlaw model, with its sanctions for misbehavior, they’re still compelling. People generally prefer eye contact while conversing, he notes, but not when making embarrassing disclosures—hence the traditional psychiatrist’s office, with doctor seated behind patient. Reisman, who dedicates his book to Goffman, nicely describes the delicate dance of striking up a conversation with a seatmate on a long

flight, where a miscalculation can sentence you to hours of tedium: “Initially, the parties may move with extraordinary indirection and caution precisely because of the costs and even risks in getting involved in a rap session with the ‘wrong’ sort of person.”

Only connect, counseled E. M. Forster, but, as these books remind us, we are capable of connecting only so far. In strange interludes and ordinary ones, we can’t always see behind the masks. Reisman at times seems defensive—one suspects that his Yale Law colleagues don’t take microlaw quite as seriously as he would like—whereas Scheibe, who boasts that his students “often express surprise at the rapidity with which the three-hour period has been consumed,” comes across as a tad full of himself. But maybe it’s just me.

—STEPHEN BATES

## CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

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### *BRAND.NEW.*

Edited by Jane Pavitt.

Princeton Univ. Press. 224 pp. \$49.50

I have grown up with Cheerios, and Cheerios has grown up with me. When I was young, the cereal promised me muscle and “go power.” Now that I am middle aged, it is, I am assured, good for my heart. There are other ring-shaped oat cereals, but Cheerios is a tradition, and I am willing to pay more for it than for generic brands. General Mills charges almost \$4 a pound for the cereal, when even grain-fed beef is selling for less.

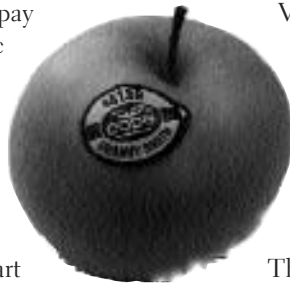
Cheerios, then, is a brand—part mythology, part relationship, part image, and, oh yes, part oats. A brand can offer satisfactions greater than the sum of the product’s parts. All of us spend much of our lives consuming things. Brands offer a way to organize this consumption and give it meaning.

Branded products have existed for centuries, but the late 1990s was a period of brand mania. The value of brands was thought to greatly increase stock prices. Established brands stretched into new

areas—it seemed that Nike’s swoosh and Coca-Cola’s dynamic ribbon would soon appear on everything. And individuals were urged to develop not simply a personal identity but a brand identity.

*Brand.New* is a product of this enthusiasm, a coffee-table book sprinkled with substantive essays by academics and others, prepared in conjunction with an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. There may seem to be something odd, decadent even, about so lavish a book filled largely with the commercial imagery that many of us see every day. Still, there are images you may not have seen before. The pink room filled with Hello Kitty paraphernalia—including wallpaper, appliances, countless toys and games, and a chair—and the rather solemn mother and daughter who collected all this sweetness make for a scene I won’t soon forget.

In writing that ranges from abstruse to zingy, the essays summarize current thinking about the mechanics and meaning of consumption. More complex conceptions have replaced the Veblenesque notion of the con-



sumer who buys to catch up and the Vance Packard view of the consumer as dupe. Critics now contend that people choose what they buy as a way of defining and understanding themselves and their society. Goods are a kind of language, and contemporary arguments turn on whether the language fosters or limits human expression.

Strikingly, the book says little about branding per se. Essays allude to how corporations manage and modify their brands, but not to how brands are most accurately valued, or how some brands have been successfully extended and others have not. If branding is a kind of language, we don't hear much from the native speakers. The title, with its dot-com period, makes a pretty good book about theories of consumption, a well-trod field, seem like something unique and exciting: an up-to-the-minute study of branding. In other words, it does the job of a brand.

—THOMAS HINE

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*AMERICAN DREAMSCAPE:  
The Pursuit of Happiness in  
Postwar America.*

By Tom Martinson. Carroll & Graf.  
288 pp. \$26

Another book about suburbia? They've been pouring off the presses lately, in a torrent of vituperation about the evils of sprawl, the depravity of automobile culture, and the sterility of suburban life. But this book is different. Martinson, a city-planning consultant and longtime suburbanite, has the novel idea that the 140 million Americans who live in the nation's suburbs are not all fools.

All good planners are first of all good social observers, and Martinson offers the rare planner's portrait in which suburbanites will recognize themselves. He points out that most of the vituperation comes from drive-by critics who glimpse suburbia only fleetingly and through an urbanist windshield. Accustomed to the more formal, structured form and life of the city, they see a wasteland of "visual chaos" and social isolation in the hinterlands, while overlooking the diversity of suburban experience and the social and community life that suburbanites weave by picking from geograph-

ically far-flung choices. At bottom, Martinson believes, the sprawl critics' critique represents one more battle in the venerable war between cosmopolitan "gentry" and the workaday yeoman class.

He mainly has in mind the New Urbanists, the suburbia critics whose photogenic new communities (such as Seaside and Celebration in Florida) and canny arguments for an updated form of 19th-century town planning have made them darlings of the national media. (See "The Second Coming of the American Small Town," by Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, *WQ*, Winter '92.) The New Urbanists rightly note the absurdity of zoning laws that make it virtually impossible to build anything like an old-fashioned town. But they have not been content to offer their ideas as just another choice for how to live; they insist that only a New Urban America will do.

The critics' various plans for remaking suburbia can be summed up in one word: centralization. This means denser, more urbanized communities, more mass transit, and no new roads. Martinson thinks the critics are blind to the powerful momentum favoring decentralization and to the preferences of suburbanites themselves. The suburban backlash against sprawl is a response, not to decentralization, but to "the congestion and disorder that seem to accompany rapid growth," he writes. "Becoming more like a dense big city—which is many suburbanites' very definition of congestion and disorder—is the last thing" they want.

What they do want is a more natural environment, which to Martinson suggests paying more attention to the larger landscape of suburbia, not just by preserving open space but by working to create a distinctive sense of place in each community. The germ of such an approach lies in the work of the great landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, who designed some of the nation's early suburbs. But Martinson notes that, with only a few exceptions such as Ian McHarg, most designers disdainfully turned away from suburbia after World War II. What will entice profit-conscious developers to seek out people like McHarg? Won't regional plan-