

is to inform citizens; (2) citizens are assumed to be informed if they regularly attend to the local, national, and international news journalists supply them; (3) the more informed citizens are, the more likely they are to participate politically, especially in the democratic debate that journalists consider central to participation in democracy; (4) the more that informed citizens participate, the more democratic America is likely to be.”

Most reporters I know would balk at the notion that *any* unifying theory underpins our work, but Gans maintains that this one is “widely accepted”—as well as fundamentally flawed. It’s “unrealistic,” “wishful thinking,” even “a substitute for thinking about democracy.” In his view, this self-mythology obfuscates the news media’s fundamental shortcoming: their failure to ignite a democratic fire under the citizenry.

Gans wants journalists to promote “citizens’ democracy,” which, in newsroom practice, turns out to entail one grim top-down directive after another. There’s little

room here for the underrated job of telling interesting stories in a compelling manner. Instead, reporters should borrow tactics from schoolteachers. The “first priority” of every news organization should be “to eliminate the continuing racial and class biases in the news.” Satirists should be given “protection against censorship and job loss.” And everyone, heaven knows, should spend more money: “If the news is as central to democracy as journalists argue, then more needs to be spent so that its impact is maximized.”

Gans yearns for media that connect with citizens, but, like a shocking number of media critics, he seems vaguely hostile toward weblogs and other online publications that do just that. A. J. Liebling famously observed that “freedom of the press belongs to those who own one.” In an era when just about anybody can own one, perhaps things aren’t nearly as dire as Gans thinks.

—MATT WELCH

HISTORY

*PEEKING THROUGH
THE KEYHOLE:
The Evolution of North
American Homes.*

By Avi Friedman and David Krawitz.
McGill-Queens Univ. Press. 212 pp.
\$24.95

Fifty years after a new kind of house and community began to dominate the landscape, a private home in suburbia—albeit a third larger than the average tract house of the Eisenhower era—remains the American dream. According to this short, smart book, however, what our mobile, mutable society needs are fewer McMansions and more homes that are various in form and flexible in function.

The midcentury modern home represented a triumph of newfangled technology over old-fashioned aesthetics. Tired of Colonials and Victorians and of both urban and rural life, postwar Americans flocked to brand-new houses and suburbs created not by architects and planners but by develop-

ers. The mass-produced homes—less crafted than their predecessors but more efficient to construct and run—were mostly occupied by wage-earning fathers, stay-at-home mothers, and their children.

This typical household no longer prevails, yet we’re stuck with its typical home, according to Avi Friedman and David Krawitz, respectively a professor and an administrator at McGill University’s architecture school. Our households are older, less traditional in makeup—many more occupants are unmarried—and smaller, averaging 2.5 members. Moreover, activities that once belonged to “the world,” from work to entertainment, increasingly go on at home. Nevertheless, what the Canadian authors call our “North American home” adheres to the midcentury template, inflated by the notion that “big is good, bigger is better, huge is best.”

One reason our homes and suburbs sprawl as our households contract is capitulation to the car. As James Kunstler observed in *The Geography of Nowhere* (1993), our

driving addiction, combined with single-use zoning, which separates homes from public spaces and services that are crucial to real neighborhoods, has created the barren “bedroom community,” designed not around human needs but around three-car garages, wide streets, and highway access to shopping malls.

Another factor driving our residential excess is an orgy of consumerism. We simply need more space for all our stuff. Friedman and Krawitz remind us, for example, that a “wired” home once meant a black telephone in the hallway and a TV in the parlor. They warn that the abundance of new electronic devices that supposedly connect us with the world in fact diminish face-to-face contact in the home, which risks becoming a mere “container for communication devices.”

Peeking through the Keyhole suggests that “labor-saving” gizmos actually *decrease* our leisure. Computers bring the workplace into the home, where new cooking and cleaning equipment raises housekeeping standards to four-star levels. Between the machines indoors and the wasteland outdoors, suburban life becomes, in developmental psychologist James Gabarino’s phrase, “technology intensive and often socially deficient.”

Friedman and Krawitz struggle with the academic temptation to let substance—particularly statistics—swamp style. Nevertheless, their book is full of fun facts. For instance, home equity of \$4 trillion accounts for more than half of Americans’ personal net worth. Ditching four appliances equipped with transformers—those blocky plugs on cordless phones and the like—yields the same annual energy savings as getting an energy-efficient refrigerator. The authors maintain that family life now revolves around the microwave oven, which has changed not only what we eat but also how we shop, cook, dine, and clean up.

Friedman and Krawitz argue that as a society, we must revamp old ideas about

home in light of new realities. In this anxious time of global political unrest, domestic economic uncertainty, and rapid social and technological change, readers may want to ponder whether their own homes are the adaptable sort that can, as the authors put it, “roll with life’s punches.”

—WINIFRED GALLAGHER

GREENBACK:
*The Almighty Dollar and the
Invention of America.*

By Jason Goodwin. Holt. 320 pp. \$26

In reading the historian Jason Goodwin, you get the facts, plenty of facts, because he’s a joyful researcher—but the facts are selected and arranged for his own special effects, above all his delicate sense of the absurd. The *mélange* will be familiar to fans of *Lords of the Horizons* (1999), his history of the Ottomans, those quaint people in fezzes and soft slippers who ruled a vast section of civilization for 500 years but about whom we know as little as if they were a mythic race of visiting aliens. A delight to read, *Lords of the Horizons* succeeds in sketching a lost world, so one pauses to plug it, emphatically.

In *Greenback*, Goodwin turns his attention to the dollar bill, and he makes a persuasive case that paper money is a specifically American innovation, one that has helped to establish the nation’s global caliphate. “In 1691,” he writes, “three years before the founding of the Bank of England and the earliest five-pound note, faraway Massachusetts became the first state since medieval China to issue its own paper currency.” The New World’s radicals and inno-



Some 8,000 different forms of state and private currency circulated during the latter half of the 19th century. Many of them sported extravagant designs, such as this two-dollar bill from New York’s Saint Nicholas Bank.