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The backyard transformed

Leisure time, dads at the grill and other strange encounters

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By Bill Owens, 1973

Barbecues, lawn chairs, gardens or chilling with neighbors: these are common associations with the summertime backyard lifestyle in Chicago and countless other large and small American cities and, of course, suburbs.

Throw in animal attacks, overturned school buses, anonymous sexual encounters and trees on fire and you've got less than half of the backyard experiences one encounters in "Beyond the Backyard," a photo show that opened last week at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, a Columbia College institution at 600 S. Michigan.

The backyard looms especially large in the suburbs, where single-family detached homes are sold partially on the basis of spreads of green behind sliding glass doors, the possibilities of wooden decks and swimming pools. A portion of the show demonstrates stereotypical suburban uses of the backyard, but it also challenges viewers to consider these spaces in an expanded sense. "Beyond the Backyard" exhibits a diverse range of images depicting how and where we experience leisure time.

Exhibition curator Karsten Lund's inclusion of photos from *Life* magazine and other local and regional publications confirms her idea of the backyard as a cultural norm "reinforced by advertising and media imagery over half a century." Many of these shots bolster the normalized view of backyards and their association with an idealized suburban life.



Watering Hole, by Amy Stein, 2005

Bill Owens, formerly a staff photographer at a suburban newspaper in Livermore, Calif., produced a remarkable survey of everyday suburban life in the 1970s, some of which are included in the show. He documents situations candidly and respectfully. But looking at the photos today conjures a wider context.

The scenes of suburban dads at the grill and moms watering lawns cannot escape associations with the critical commentary of recent years that pits suburban growth against urban decay, and argues for the regulation of sprawl to control traffic congestion, commute times, oil dependency and pollution.

To be sure, the sprawl of Chicago's suburbs, for example, cannot be blamed on the suburbanites themselves. Understanding their growth, rather, would require consideration of the post-war flight from cities, economic incentives as well as the technological innovations that have contributed to the growth of Chicago's regional population, a trend simultaneous with the city's own population decline.

The show is not exclusively about the suburbs. There are numerous photographs that attempt to document leisure life for low-income and working class people, and move beyond the postcard of the city.

Stephen Marc's "52nd and Harper" and "63rd and Greenwood, sidewalk living room game," for example, show South Side men using public and abandoned spaces-improvised backyards-to enjoy chess and cards. Mark PoKempner's photographs from the 1980s documents children jumping rope in front of their Chicago Housing Authority buildings, which are now demolished.

Such documentary photography, working in the tradition of social realism, grapples with and asks challenging questions about who has access to safe and stable gathering spaces in the city.

An undertone of the collected works in the exhibition is the portrayal of suburban life as cold, awkward and alienated, and urban life as communal and vital. But focusing on such cultural differences does not allow for better understandings of root problems that force some to make do with cement blocks and milk crates while others wallow in the excess of huge lawns and personal swimming pools.

By presenting documentary photos intermixed with staged fantastic and odd encounters, a sense of realism is passed through all the work. Still, you cannot help but double take when encountering the work of Gregory Crewdson, whose Hollywood-like productions result in elaborate staged photographs of bizarre events, such as "UT (overturned schoolbus, 2001-02)." The photo incorporates an overturned bus surrounded by small children and manicured lawns.

Another photographer, Amy Stein, presents shocking reenactments of human encounters with animals based on incident reports taken from her local newspaper. These encounters illuminate the edge of cherished private spaces by showing how they abut environments beyond control.

"Beyond the Backyard" features photographs taken by more 40 artists. Many of the shots come from the museum's own archives. The show runs through August 23 at the Museum of Contemporary Photography gallery at 600 S. Michigan. A talk entitled, "Changing Spaces, Shaping Places: Exploring our own backyard" is scheduled for Thursday, July 10 at 6 p.m. at the gallery. For more information, visit www.mocp.org or call (312) 663-5554.

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