
Dianne Harris’ Little White Houses, an expansion on an earlier presentation delivered at the Warren Center for American Studies, analyzes the postwar formation of an American iconography rooted in ordinary domestic architecture. By examining a broad spectrum of house images – in popular advertisements, architectural drawings and home shows – Harris seeks to establish how such representations served as indices of identity, belonging, and authenticity.

With its national scope, Little White Houses is the first architectural history to focus on American postwar houses through the lens of visual culture analysis. Harris draws on humanist geography, anthropology, and sociology to establish how the depiction of ordinary homes reinforced cultural perceptions of race, class and ethnicity. Especially influenced by Pierre Bourdieu, Harris assesses domestic spaces and cultural capital as represented in television shows, advertisements, popular and trade publications, and architectural graphic standards. Drawing on significant historic material gleaned from archives and libraries nationwide, she is able to document identity politics associated with the media’s representation of the American home. Her brief address of how the exclusionist policies of the Federal Housing Authority (FHA) and the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB) affected building trades and the design community lends an additional dimension to her iconographic analysis.

As with any important foundational study, Little White Houses establishes a clearly articulated framework by which future studies may be informed. Profuse images representing homes, yards and household amenities are essential analytical elements; not a single one is extraneous fluff. While Harris’ avoidance of the American South is troubling, general readers and academics alike should take great interest in her provocative and groundbreaking book.

Keli E. Rylance, Head, Southeastern Architectural Archive, Special Collections Division, Tulane University Libraries, krylance@tulane.edu