

Queen City

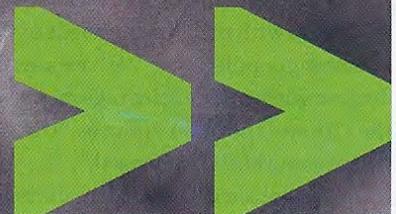
FRONTLINES

edited by AIESHA D. LITTLE

Cul-De-Sacked

A new documentary helps make the case for saving the Queen City's first-ring suburbs.

BY AIESHA D. LITTLE



Cincinnati Magazine August 2009



Director's Cut Andrea Torrice tackles America's widespread problem with sprawl in her documentary *The New Metropolis*.

The first half-hour segment of Clifton-based filmmaker Andrea Torrice's latest documentary, *The New Metropolis*, opens with images of suburban life in all its 1950s glory: nuclear families smiling broadly on manicured lawns, freshly paved roads, backyard gatherings. The next scene is less idyllic: cracked streets, boarded up buildings, abandoned shopping plazas. Through her camera lens, Torrice shows how the American Dream of home ownership has created an infrastructural nightmare and uncontrolled sprawl.

Narrated by actor Peter Coyote, this portion of the documentary, subtitled "A Crack in the Pavement," asserts that the aging infrastructure of first-ring suburbs across the country is now on par with that of city centers. The film, which will air on CET this fall—check www.thenewmetropolis.com for dates and times—focuses on Madeira and Elmwood Place, communities whose populations and tax bases have steadily decreased as families have moved outside of the I-275 loop. Torrice shows community leaders struggling to keep up with the growing needs of their remaining populations. "We have a serious decline within the entire region, not just the city and the older suburbs," she says. "All of suburbia is challenged."

An established independent filmmaker with several feature-length documentaries under her belt (*Rising Waters*, about climate change; *Forsaken Cries*, about the

1994 genocide in Rwanda), Torrice was drawn to the topic because of her childhood in a first-ring suburb outside of Newark, New Jersey, in the 1960s and 1970s.

"When I was growing up, everyone was leaving the cities for the suburbs," recalls Torrice, who moved to Cincinnati about 10 years ago, when her husband took a teaching job at the University of Cincinnati. "Cities were considered awful places to be, filled with crime and drugs. People moved farther and farther away from the city. I found out that a lot of people experienced that migration."

The experience is hardly unique. According to a Columbus-based smart-growth organization called Greater Ohio, from 1980 to 2007, the city of Cincinnati lost residents at a higher rate than Hamilton County. This means that a lot of those residents didn't leave the region; they simply moved outside of the city limits or into neighboring counties. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Warren County's population skyrocketed by nearly 31 percent from 2000 to 2008; Butler and Clermont counties grew by 8.4 and 9.8 percent respectively during the same period.

Gene Krebs, Greater Ohio's co-director, links this growth to car culture. "Southwestern Ohio is built on the assumption that gasoline will cost about \$1 a gallon," he says. "With current oil prices at [roughly] \$70 a barrel, a massive recession indicates that the pressure on the price for this commodity will keep going up. The question is, how do we adapt in a manner that is financially sustainable?"

That adaptation may come in many forms, such as employee-assisted housing, tax incentives for residents and businesses in urban areas, and smart-growth legislation. For her part, Torrice hopes her documentary will spur forward-thinking civic leaders to create more public policy that stems the tide of sprawl. "I feel like America has hit middle age and we have to rethink what our neighborhoods should be so that it takes into account the needs of future generations," she says. "All of these issues create an opportunity for us to rethink how we grow." ☺

SUBURBIA, DISTURBIA

McMansion Boom

According to *The New Metropolis*, Mason's population grew by 300 percent from 1980 to 2000 while Elmwood Place lost 50 percent of its population in the same period.

Door-to-Door Progress

"The New Neighbors," the second half-hour segment of Torrice's documentary, discusses racial integration in the revitalization of Pennsauken, New Jersey, a Philadelphia suburb.

High Tide

In 2004, *Rising Waters*, Torrice's documentary on climate change, was screened at the United Nations Earth Summit in Johannesburg, South Africa. It also aired on National Geographic's World channel in 110 countries.

Top Chefs

Torrice just started researching her next documentary on Cincinnati chefs who support the use of locally grown food. "There are some interesting characters in the restaurant business here," she says.