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Where the lawn mower stops: The social construction of alternative front yard ideologies

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Introduction

Visit just about any American neighborhood from coast to coast, and more often than not, you will see a unifying theme of front yards with green, well-maintained lawns. The lawn has truly become an American icon. In addition to being in almost every residential setting, it appears in business parks, shopping centers, public parks, and athletic facilities.

Lawns cover approximately thirty million acres in the United States (Jenkins 1994). In Iowa, the lawns of an estimated 870,878 single-family homes cover 592,000 acres, which equates to roughly 7,500 square feet of lawn per urban residence (Iowa Turfgrass Industry 2001). This patch of green carpet seems to be woven into, not only the American psyche, but the American social fabric as a whole. When asked what percentage of homes in central Iowa have a front lawn, an industry representative replied, "There is no percentage, just about everyone does" (Iowa Turfgrass Industry 2001).

Having a front yard with a well-maintained lawn in the United States is the norm, yet not everyone goes along with it. What type of person would not have lawn when almost everyone seems to want it? This study was designed to address this question.

Brief History of the Lawn

How did having a front yard landscape that includes a lawn become so popular? The American residential lawn started appearing in the eighteenth century when a few wealthy Americans, influenced by French and English aristocratic landscape architecture, began to adopt

them. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, has been credited with creating the first American lawn (Bormann et al. 1993). He established an English style lawn at Monticello, his home in Virginia. Jefferson particularly admired the pastoral landscape quality that took form when the buildings were blanketed with green around their foundations.

In the mid-nineteenth century, homeowners were being encouraged to cultivate their own “living green carpet,” as popular garden magazines and garden writers of the time called it (Bormann et al. 1993; Jenkins 1994). Golf, with its great expanses of turf, was also growing in popularity. Even the United States Department of Agriculture was involved, conducting research on turf that could grow in all climates of the country. These influences suggested what a front yard “should” look like.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the father of modern American landscape architecture, addressed America's need for better living environments with countless projects, including his 1868 planned community of Riverside (Tishler 1989). In Riverside, each lot had a lawn, and the houses were set back thirty feet from the street to give the entire development a park-like atmosphere. He believed that vast expanses of undulating lawn, incorporated with trees, would emulate a pastoral scene and give people a place to relieve the stress and toils of everyday life.

Originally, residential lawns were associated with upper class homes. They became a status symbol, and eventually status quo, for the middle class. With the invention of the lawn mower and development of lawn chemicals, maintaining a lawn became more feasible in terms of both time and expense. Another major factor that contributed to the booming development of residential lawns was federal funding for highways and veterans after World War II. Highways made access to the new suburban developments easier, and veterans could afford to purchase homes there (Bormann et al. 1993; Jenkins 1994).

The nearly universal appeal of lawns may be deeply rooted in the human subconscious. Balling and Falk (1982) found that people have an innate preference for savanna-like environments. They speculated that this preference arises from the evolution of humans on the savannas of East Africa. Characteristics of modern-day lawns, with their relatively smooth topography and color, can be likened to the setting of the savanna.

Social and Environmental Impacts of Lawns

Lawns provide people with social and environmental benefits. For instance, lawns help replenish oxygen. A 50 by 50-foot lawn is purported to produce enough oxygen for a family of four (PLCAA 2000; The Lawn Institute 2000). Lawns provide climate control by cooling neighborhoods. Lawns filter dust and pollen from the air, and they help prevent soil erosion by reducing runoff. They also improve water quality by filtering contaminants from rainwater.

Socially, grass, with its aesthetically pleasing color and uniform texture, fosters a sense of well-being. It provides a tough, yet soft, surface for recreation and sports. Often overlooked is the way lawns, which offer pleasant places for people to gather, contribute to people's emotional and sociological behavior (Eckbo 1950; Laurie 1979). For example, when people are in a beautifully designed vegetated space, their tendency is to become more at ease and more social with others (Kaplan and Kaplan 1982; Relf 1996; Ulrich 1985).

While there are many social and environmental benefits associated with lawns, there are also potential negative impacts. Social downsides include receiving pressure from neighbors to conform to the societal norm and hearing gas-powered lawn mowers at 6 AM on weekends. People's choices may also be restricted by city ordinances requiring that lawns be weed-free and maintained at certain heights.

Environmental issues include ground water and soil contamination from lawn chemicals. Concerns arise over the large quantities of potable water applied to lawns to keep them lush. A gasoline-powered lawn mower produces as much pollution in one hour as a new car does in thirty hours (Automobile Club of Southern California 1996). These problems are in addition to the associated economic costs of maintaining the aesthetic green carpet. The Iowa Turfgrass Industry (2001) estimates that Iowa residents pay \$77,120,000 per year for professional lawn maintenance. Considering the benefits and concerns, the presentation of a lawn is a social statement with many societal ramifications.

Social Norms

A social norm is a process of mutual influences that results from similarities in the relationships and social interactions that occur among members of a group (Turner 1991). A feeling of "oughtness," which extends deeper than the notion of liking or disliking, develops (Turner 1991). It is a fundamental belief or moral obligation to adhere to something, even if one

does not agree with it. Consequently, those who don't conform to the social actions of the group risk being penalized or ostracized. In this study, having a well-maintained lawn is considered the "normative" practice; lawn conformists perpetuate this dominant societal norm. Those who do not abide by this norm, such as someone with a lawn that is not well-maintained, may be penalized by local ordinances or negative comments and actions from neighbors.

People who adhere to societal norms do not typically justify their actions (Mills 1972). Common, everyday occurrences, such as keeping your lawn maintained, are usually not questioned, because individuals simply accept them. Thus boasting about following a societal norm is not the same as justifying it (Mills 1972). When people boast about how green and weed-free their lawns are, they are not justifying the practice, since having a healthy green lawn is the norm. Someone who has a yellowish green lawn and describes it as "economical, because I don't waste money on fertilizer" would be socially justifying an alternate practice. A front yard with a lawn is the shared standard that almost everyone practices, so those who do not practice it probably have justified their actions.

Objective

While most American homeowners have lawns, exceptions to this norm exist. These range from front yards with reduced areas of grass to yards with no grass at all. The goal of this case study was to typify the person who does not adhere to this norm. The specific objective was to compare the attitudes of lawn conformists about front yards to the attitudes of lawn nonconformists. To achieve this, the primary investigator looked at homeowners through a social-psychological lens to reveal the characteristics of people who choose not to follow the societal norm and to see how they may differ from those who follow the norm. It evolved from principles of horticulture, landscape architecture, and environmental psychology.

Methodology

"Lawn conformists" were operationally defined as people having a conventional landscape front yard consisting of more than twenty-five percent lawn. "Lawn nonconformists" were those having lawn grass in less than twenty-five percent of the front yard.

Primary information about residents with conventional and alternative front yard landscapes in central Iowa was obtained from Iowa State University faculty members, landscape

architects, garden designers, landscape contractors, and garden centers. With this information, the primary investigator located potential participants living in single-family-detached homes in Ames, Des Moines, and Gilbert, Iowa. A snowball method, of asking participants about other potential participants, was used to expand the sample size. After receiving approval by the Iowa State University Human Subjects Committee, a letter was mailed to potential participants outlining the project and asking respondents to participate (Dillman 1978). The final sample included six participants representing lawn conformity and 18 representing lawn nonconformity. More lawn nonconformists were selected for this study to investigate the different types of people who chose alternative landscapes.

A face-to-face interview with each participant was conducted. Interviews consisted of twenty-one, open-ended questions about the participant's landscaping views and choices, such as: *What is the function of your front yard?* and *How do you control weeds and pests in your yard?* The interview also included nine attitudinal questions, based on a seven-point scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, and seven demographic questions. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Transcriptions were analyzed using content analysis methodology (Rels and Judd 2000).

To categorize the characteristic attitudes of lawn conformists and nonconformists, a typology, which is a classification based on shared characteristics, was developed. The criteria for the typologies were adopted from Roebuch and Frese (1976), who outline three sociological dimensions: achieved and ascribed characteristics, identities and perspectives, and behavior on the scene. The categories were then broken down into subcategories to represent the main nonconformist themes.

Results and Discussion

Demographics

Fifty-eight percent of the participants were male and 42% were female. They ranged in age from 28 to 74. On average, lawn conformists who participated in this study were younger (40 years) than nonconformists (55 years). Most of the lawn conformists' children were 14 or younger, while the children of nonconformists were mostly over 18. Only 40% of the lawn conformists grew up in a rural area, while 66% of the nonconformists did.

Participants' occupations ranged from retired telephone worker and auto mechanic to university professor and interior designer. Both groups had high educational attainment, with 83% of conformists and all of the lawn nonconformists being college graduates. There was a slight difference in their average household annual incomes (\$40,000 for lawn conformists and \$50,000 for nonconformists).

While lawn nonconformists spent almost the same amount of time (4.2 hours) working on their yards as lawn conformists (4.5 hours), nonconformists were less likely to use a lawn care company to take care of their lawns (28%) than lawn conformists (67%). In addition, lawn nonconformists were more likely to belong to environmental or conservation groups (78%) than the lawn conformists (33%).

Attitudes towards neighbors

Four of the attitude questions were about the respondent's neighbors. Both lawn conformists and nonconformists believed that their neighbors liked their front yards (Table 33.1). Both groups also tended to agree that having a well-maintained lawn improves their relationship with neighbors. However, lawn nonconformists were less in agreement than lawn conformists that they have a close relationship with their neighbors. Furthermore, lawn nonconformists tended to disagree that their neighbors influence how they maintain their landscape, while lawn conformists tended to agree. This is consistent with the literature on social norms (Turner 1991).

Social norms expressed

Content analysis of the statements of lawn conformists and nonconformists revealed characteristic attitudes towards front yard landscapes. Both groups shared some characteristic attitudes. Notable differences in attitudes between lawn conformists and nonconformists were also evident (Table 33.2).

The influence of neighbors, which was documented through attitude questions (Table 33.1), also emerged in the statements of respondents. One lawn conformist, who voiced awareness of the opinions of neighbors, said: "*The folks straight behind us obviously have a big vested interest in the way we keep our yard...Before we moved in, they asked our mutual friends—how well do they keep up their yard?*" According to Turner (1991), a social norm is a process of mutual influences between people: lawn conformists appeared to be much more influenced by their neighbors than were nonconformists.

People who deviate from societal norms risk sanctions from the group (Turner 1991). People might express those sanctions in the form of negative opinions. This was reflected by a lawn conformist who said, *“Their yards look like hell and it detracts from the whole house.”* Another noted, *“I like the fact that all the neighbors keep up their yards and have a lot of green grass. I would be upset if someone let their yard go completely wild.”*

Goffman (1959) claims that people’s day-to-day actions are similar to theatrical performances. These so-called “social performances” take place front stage and backstage. The front yard resembles a front stage for both lawn conformists and nonconformists, while the backstage could be likened to preparation work, such consulting plant catalogs or seeking advice at a garden center. Both lawn conformists and nonconformists were aware of their “front stages.” Lawn nonconformists, while expressing less concern for the opinions of neighbors than lawn conformists, still expressed a desire to get along with the community. One nonconformist said, *“Even though we don’t have grass—we do make an attempt to keep the yard well maintained so that the neighbors don’t take offense at our yard.”* Another said, *“I select plants that are already in the neighborhood, so there’s a willingness to be part of the community.”*

Apparent Justifications

The idea that everyday occurrences that follow social norms are usually not questioned and are not in need of justification (Mills 1972) was reflected in comments from lawn conformists. One lawn conformist said: *“I enjoy the wide expanse of green grass. And I don’t apologize for that at all.”* Another conformist stated: *“I think there’s a certain conception of what beauty is, the notion of a well-manicured lawn with grass that is green and mowed and shrubberies that have a sense of plan to them. Obviously, it’s a fairly common conception, I guess what it says about me is I’m well socialized.”*

People who do not follow the social norm are more likely to justify their actions (Mills 1972). Lawn nonconformists expressed thoughts that could be considered justification for their actions. For example, one said, *“A lot of people in this neighborhood walk by, so I planted a lot of those flowers so they would be able to enjoy the garden as they’re walking.”* Another nonconformist said, *“The neighbors are very precise, have very orderly yards. I love the freedom to do what I want to do, to plant what I want to plant.”* Another sign of justification came from some lawn nonconformists who voiced concerns about the costs of lawn care or the

time involved in maintenance: *“The plantings and the landscape are basically designed to remove as much of the yard as possible from mowing. ...It’s very low maintenance.”*

Purpose of a Front Yard Landscape

Differences between lawn conformists and nonconformists emerged in their answers to questions about the purpose of their front yards. Lawn conformists were more likely to feel that their lawns were primarily for appearance, noting: *“It doesn’t get used, yeah you know, just curb appeal”* and: *“So far, it’s purely aesthetic.”* Lawn nonconformists often expressed additional purposes. Some were tangible: *“I’ve also encouraged the neighbors to pick flowers if they want to.”* Other purposes were social: *“I think of it as a public garden because the sidewalk goes through it. People can walk through it and enjoy the flowers and the plants.”* Some purposes were more personal. One lawn conformist said, *“I just love working in the soil.”* Another noted, *“In my front yard I feel creative. I’m out here almost every day doing something, but it’s pleasure.”*

Chemicals for Lawn Care

A major difference between lawn conformists and nonconformists arose regarding chemicals for lawn care. Lawn conformists used chemicals to obtain a lawn that fit their ideals. One remarked, *“Ah, lawn chemicals. I do the full treatment. I know I probably apply twice as heavy as the bag says- it’s an environmentalist’s nightmare from that standpoint. I guess that I like a nice plush grass.”* Another stated, *“I’m not great with messing with chemicals ... I let a lawn company mess with it.”* Lawn nonconformists generally expressed concerns over the use chemicals. One remarked: *“Well, we were kind of worried that we’re surrounded on two sides by chemical users.”* Another noted, *“I have nothing against grass, I don’t like the use of chemicals...I guess my concern is there’s enough groundwater problems in Iowa.”* One expressed grave concerns: *“If there’s somebody who has a monoculture lawn and maintains it that way, that would bother me more than anything else I guess. I just don’t want the chemicals associated with it around.”*

Apart From or A Part of Nature

Lawn conformists seemed to be apart from nature, almost trying to control it with their maintenance practices, whereas nonconformists seemed to be a part of nature. One

nonconformist summed up the feeling of being a part of nature: *“It’s a dialogue between the owner and nature.”* Another nonconformist expressed a strong relationship with nature: *“I need trees and plants. That’s what feeds my soul.”* A desire to control nature is evident in this conformist’s words: *“You know, weeds and all, completely taken over by the creeping charlie, dandelions, and crab grass and not mowed very often—that would upset me.”* Another conformist said, *“Somebody who never cuts the grass would annoy me, the grass is tall continuously or they got way too many trees- I don’t mind trees, but I don’t like to have a lot of trees.”*

Learning Nonconformist Lawn Behavior

Some theorists suggest that nonconforming behavior is a learned process, influenced by intimate personal groups and, to a lesser extent, associations with media such as television and newspapers (Clinard and Meier 1995; Sutherland and Cressey 1974). This may have been the case for some lawn nonconformists. One noted the influence of a parent, saying, *“My dad filled our yard with huge evergreens, so many trees, so there was very little grass, which can maybe be where my very little grass comes from.”* Parental influence was also expressed by another nonconformist who stated, *“I inherited the love of flowers from my mother who was into gardening.”* Another nonconformist noted the role of grandparents: *“My front yard looks very much like my grandparents’ front yard.”*

Some lawn conformists also indicated that their values were learned. One said, *“The lawn ethic is definitely from my Dad. He told me, ‘you don’t have weeds, you keep it watered, because that’s important.’... It’s a reflection of—you know...being a responsible person.”*

Types of Lawn Nonconformists

Lawn nonconformists were not all alike. They could be grouped into three subcategories. “Typical lawn nonconformists” (n=6) expressed all of the characteristic attitudes of nonconformists (Table 33.2). “Lawn conformist observers” (n=4) expressed many of the lawn nonconformist themes, but had a small portion of lawn that was well maintained. “Dandelion lovers” (n=8) expressed many of the lawn nonconformist themes, but had a small portion of lawn that was not well maintained. These subcategories of lawn nonconformists are not to be viewed as significant, but rather as illustrations of the levels of nonconformity observed in this study.

Perhaps they are an indication of how strong the social pressures are to have a lawn. One lawn nonconformist commented, *“This is my conversation to the neighbors. This is grass and is mowed. So, I maintain this strip here for them.”*

Conclusion

Aldo Leopold once said, “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and the beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it does otherwise” (Leopold 1966, p.262). The American lawn, with its chemical, water, and labor dependent nature, along with its associated economic costs, may not be right according to Leopold’s standard. What this study calls lawn nonconformity might really be conformity to American society’s norm of individuality, distinctiveness, and originality.

For some homeowners in central Iowa who chose not to have front yards dominated by grass, the choice was driven by concerns over the time and expense of maintaining a lawn. Others chose their alternatives for environmental reasons, and many had a strong anti-chemical view. . In fact, most of the lawn nonconformists belonged to environmental groups. Many also felt that their landscapes gave them a place to be part of nature. For some, the alternative landscape was a creative outlet.

People with alternate forms of front yards also held some views in common with people with traditional lawns. Both lawn conformists and nonconformists wanted their yards to be liked by their neighbors. Both believed a well-maintained lawn could improve relationships with their neighbors. Both spent similar amounts of time maintaining their yards. Lawn conformists and nonconformists were also very passionate about their front yard landscapes. Even though lawn conformists and nonconformists held different paradigms for the front yard, it was evident that, for both, “green nature is really a part of human nature” (Lewis 1996).

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Table 33.1

Attitudes^z towards neighbors expressed by lawn conformists and lawn nonconformists

Attitude	Lawn conformists	Nonconformists
"My neighbors like my front yard."	5.2	5.6
"Having a well-maintained lawn improves my relationship with my neighbors."	5.2	4.8
"Would you say you have a close relationship with your neighbors?"	5.5	4.4
"My neighbors influence how I maintain my landscape."	4.3	3.2

^z Based on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Table 33.2

Characteristic attitudes of residents of single-family homes in central Iowa towards front yard landscapes showing differences in attitudes between lawn conformists and nonconformists.

Lawn conformists	Nonconformists
Neighbors have influence	Independent; not concerned about neighbors.
Idea of low maintenance	Idea of low maintenance/Environmentally concerned.
Use of chemicals	Anti-chemical use
Feel the need to control nature	Feel a part of nature
Lawn must have good color and consistency	Use front yard to express creativity
Front yard landscape reflects the owner and house	Refer to native and natural qualities of the landscape
Yard care is work	Enjoy working with plants
Lawns are essential to the landscape	Lawns are negative