

# Ann Arbor: A Suburban Ballet

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*Ann Arbor's southwest side contains a neighborhood, Lansdown, that is entirely suburban in nature. This neighborhood contains long blocks, serves solely a residential function, and has buildings that were all built in a relatively short time frame. Yet it has a vitality and sense of community that have existed for several decades. The fact that a street life exists at all gives Lansdown a unique, attractive quality not found in many suburbs.*

*The street life in Lansdown starts every morning with the dogs. They are a vital element to this neighborhood and it can be argued that without the dogs, the community may not be nearly as tight. Daylight is not required for their daily walks, which happen long before anyone heads to work. The majority of residents are responsible and conscientious pet owners who find pleasure in the early morning activity. While taking my dog Casey on strolls to burn off energy, we cannot help but meet Champ, Spot, or Ruby. And while Casey greets his buddies and exchanges canine news, it is impossible to ignore the pet owner at the end of each leash. Although it is never a requirement that we all become close friends, our morning greetings are a remarkably efficient way to learn who belongs in the neighborhood.*

*Once the canines are returned to their homes, Lansdown comes alive with the morning rush, a well coordinated effort between commuters and school children. Although it can never be described as chaotic, rush hour certainly contains the greatest number of neighborhood players and the most condensed activity. Commuters are apparent throughout this stage. Some work in Ann Arbor relatively close to their homes, while others commute into Detroit or its suburbs. Most travel by car, but some walk to nearby bus stops. This neighborhood buzz grows as cars are warmed up, newspapers are picked up, and residents get started on their way.*

*Mixed with the commuters are school children, who start their day at various times depending on their grade level. High school students are the first to be seen, followed by the middle school students about 30 to 45 minutes later. Finally, the elementary students walk to the school at the neighborhood's center. The neighborhood was designed with sidewalks located between houses directing students into the schoolyard, and as those students living outside the neighborhood join the walkers via bus and car the school grounds become a mass of activity. The parents who accompany their children experience another opportunity to socialize.*

*As the school bell rings, the neighborhood again quiets down. Parents return home, many in groups of two or three, bringing with them the children who are too young to attend school. Others extend the walk they have started, taking their daily route through the neighborhood, many still with a dog in tow. The remaining parents leave Lansdown as they finally start their commute to work.*

*Once past the early morning rush, the activity level lessens but never ceases. Dogs continue to get walked. The exercisers come out walking, jogging, running, or perhaps biking. All are taking advantage of the peace and the cooler morning temperatures. Soon, homeowners can be observed taking care of yard work or gardens. Most often, this activity occurs in the front yards rather than in the back. It is remarkably easy to stop and chat with any neighbor. One commonly sees returning shoppers stop in front of a friend's house, get out of the car and socialize. As the morning becomes afternoon, the youngest children gather into playgroups. Like many of the neighborhood rhythms, this activity ebbs and flows, but never quite stops.*

*The pace of life picks up a bit when the school children return. First, the high schoolers arrive by bus or car. Many of them burn off pent up energy by shooting hoops or joining their friends to socialize. Middle schoolers and elementary students soon follow, playing basketball, riding bikes, or rollerblading. Physical activity seems to be highly valued in the neighborhood overall, so it is common to find children gathered in groups outside after school. A few can be observed tending to a job such as pet sitting or pet walking. Of course, many will be shuttled to other activities, but this neighborhood has managed to retain elements from a previous time when kids went outside to play.*

*Curiously, this neighborhood has the classic suburban quarter-acre lots with ample backyards that are often outfitted with nice play structures for the kids to enjoy, but the children do not play in the backyards. The kids prefer to be out front, the older siblings looking after the younger ones with parents never too far away, all acting as eyes on the street. As evening arrives, it brings with it the quietest period of the day. Commuters return and tend to wind down and relax indoors. Families gather to prepare and eat dinner, and help children with homework. Once these activities are finished, Lansdown sidewalk life returns, not as intense as in the morning but always constant. Physical activity returns as children gather and play outside again. Some commuters again can be seen walking and running, perhaps simply checking to see how a neighbor's home improvement is coming along. Other residents are outside attending to chores and yard work or gardening, sharing with neighbors the garden plants that need to be thinned out. A few leave to run errands or shop, returning in their cars and often acknowledging friends and neighbors. At times, a bustle of activity will be centered at the elementary school with evening activities bringing students, parents, and siblings back to the neighborhood center. School activities provide yet another way to become familiar with the neighbors, and an opportunity to catch up with those who do not live quite as close. The day's news and gossip is passed along.*

*As evening ends, the sidewalk and street activity quiets quickly. Residents retreat back indoors. Children take baths and get ready for bed, so this requires most parents to stay in and take care of family matters. However, the activity only quiets briefly. Adults start to filter outside again to enjoy the evening before retiring. And last but not least, the canines get walked again.*