

URBAN FUTURES

# Suburban Planet

Roger Keil





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*'Suburban Planet* is a major contribution to emerging theoretical and policy debates. It is in the spatially "exploding" urban places that the urban drama of the twenty-first century will be played out against a background of economic volatility, social tension and environmental risk.'

**Terry McGee, University of British Columbia**

'Keil provides a crucial theoretical underpinning to show how a plurality of suburbanization processes are multifariously linked to urban expansion, yet constitute their own force and way of existing. This is the first book I know of that really engages this heterogeneity with all of its problems, weird splendour and ambivalent potentiality.'

**AbdouMaliq Simone, Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity**

The urban century manifests itself at the peripheries. While the massive wave of present urbanization is often referred to as an 'urban revolution', most of this startling growth worldwide is happening at the margins of cities.

This book is about the process that creates the global urban periphery – suburbanization – and the ways of life – suburbanisms – we encounter there. Richly detailed with examples from around the world, the book argues that suburbanization is a global process and part of the extended urbanization of the planet. This includes the gated communities of elites, the squatter settlements of the poor, and many built forms and ways of life in-between. The reality of life in the urban century is suburban: most of the earth's future ten billion inhabitants will not live in conventional cities but in suburban constellations of one kind or another.

Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's demand not to give up urban theory when the city in its classical form disappears, this book is a challenge to urban thought more generally, as it invites the reader to reconsider the city from the outside in.

**Roger Keil is Professor and York Research Chair in Global Sub/Urban Studies at York University, Toronto**

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# Suburban Planet ---

Making the World Urban  
from the Outside In

Roger Keil

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# Suburban Planet \_\_\_\_\_

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For the young people (you know who you are).  
Condodwellers in a sea of suburbs.





## Acknowledgements

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help. I also thank the editorial staff at Polity for their professionalism and guidance in bringing this book to fruition.

Sections of this text build selectively on previous or forthcoming published work by the author. These include a paper for Built Environment with the title 'Towers in the park, bungalows in the garden: Peripheral densities, metropolitan scales and the political cultures of post-suburbia'; an article co-authored with Pierre Filion, 'Contested infrastructures: Tension, inequity and innovation in the global suburb' in *Urban Policy and Research*; with Eric Charmes in IJURR on 'Post-suburban morphologies in Canada and France'; and with Sara Macdonald, 'Rethinking urban political ecology from the outside in: Greenbelts and boundaries in the post-suburban city', in *Local Environment*. Some overlap exists with chapters I have produced for John Harrison and Michael Hoyler's *Doing Global Urban Research*, Sage; Henrik Ernstson and Erik Swyngedouw's *Interrupting the Anthro-po-ob(S)cene: Political Possibilities in the Natures of Cities*, Routledge; Berger and Kotkin's *Infinite Suburbia*, MIT; and Jayne and Ward's *Urban Theory: New Critical Perspectives*, Routledge.

I have benefited from visiting professorships at the University of Aberystwyth, Université de Montpellier 1, Technische Universität Darmstadt, the Wits City Institute in Johannesburg and the University of Manchester. I have had the opportunity to speak to many audiences across Canada and the world about aspects of this project. I know that the feedback I received there made my thinking clearer. I hope that this translated into the writing, too.

I cannot let this go without acknowledging my Twitter community: Tweeps, you have been an endless font of information, sometimes too much to process, for this long trek I have been on.

Finally, my love goes to Ute Lehrer, at my side in the suburbs of the planet for more than a quarter of a century. If there were any suburbs on the moon, I am sure you'd also come along.

Roger Keil, Toronto April 2017



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Suburban Planet 

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Nova Lima, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

'[T]he tremendous concentration (of people, activities, wealth, goods, objects, instruments, means and thought) of urban reality and the immense explosion, the projection of numerous, disjunct fragments (peripheries, suburbs, vacation homes, satellite towns) into space.' (Lefebvre 2003: 14)

When it comes to how and where we dwell, work and have fun, we live in times of rapid change. Few periods in history, barring the industrialization of Europe, the urbanization of Latin America and the suburbanization of North America, have seen as much change as the period we are currently going through. We can assume that urbanization marks the moment of our shared experience as planetary citizens. The United Nations' *World Urbanization Prospects* (United Nations 2014) estimates that while in 1950 a total of 746 million lived in urban environments, by 2045 more than 6 billion are expected to be urbanized. This development has been widely understood now to be shaping global development goals in what some have referred to as the Urban Age (Burdett and Sudjic 2007; 2011; Bruggmann 2009). Such thinking has been subject to some serious methodological criticism as scholars have pointed out that we ought to think less of people in cities than people in urban society, less in categories such as global and megacities and more in terms like 'planetary urbanization' (Brenner and Schmid 2015; Gleeson 2014; Ren and Keil 2017).

While these critiques are incisive and important, the current book aims at an intervention on a different terrain. The notion of an urban age suggests in its core a move of urban populations from more dispersed into denser environments for residence, work and recreation. This move towards more compact spatial patterns for work and life is certainly borne out by the world's 'final migration' to move to the 'arrival cities' of the twenty-first century (Saunders 2011). The global migration of millions of first time urbanites in less developed countries is mirrored by a distinct move towards re-urbanization in industrialized countries that had been going through half a century of de-industrialization, suburbanization and urban decline. What is more, these processes have been welcomed and normatively prescribed by planners and urbanists responding to challenges of climate change and sustainability that are said to be met more readily in compact, denser cities. While such processes of re-urbanization, densification and compactness are real and imagined features of the urban age, this book occupies itself with questions of urban growth that are better understood if we take into account tendencies towards urban expansion, de-centralization and suburbanization. As we will explore in a sequence of historical, conceptual and thematic chapters, much of the urban age is, at closer inspection, rather a *suburban* age. We live on a suburban planet. This observation is supported by statistical evidence that shows, as has the work of Shlomo Angel and colleagues (Angel, Parent and Civco 2010; Angel, Parent, Civco and Blei 2010) among others, that the growth of cities' populations and activities is characterized by a disproportional expansion of those cities' territory. In other words, as the world urbanizes, cities also become less densely populated, their spaces less intensively used.

It is expected that in 2030 urbanized land on the planet will cover 1.2 million square kilometres. That is twice as much as in 2000. Urbanization at this incredible rate must give everyone pause. This ubiquitous trend will imply significant consequences for climate change, biodiversity and so forth (Seto, Güneralp, Hutyra 2012). In the near future, another