City Suburbs

Placing suburbia in a post-suburban world

Alan Mace

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City Suburbs

Suburbs are too often ignored in urban research as the peripheral regions of cities, or else studied in isolation from the city they surround. The phenomenon of the suburb must be explored in relation to its city counterpart – its characteristics, community and culture are unique yet inextricably linked to the city. In *City Suburbs*, Alan Mace situates the suburb in an increasingly urbanising landscape.

Mace investigates suburbs and suburbia in two parts: first, a theoretical analysis of the historical and contemporary literature on the development of the suburban area; second, through empirical research in London using the idea of a Bourdieuian housing field; concluding with discussion on the potential for a suburban research methodology.

Through a focus on London, the conclusions are used to illustrate the broader theories and research of suburbs which can be applied internationally. Ideal supplementary reading for undergraduate and postgraduate students interested in the development and structure of the city, and those on courses on urban planning, human geography, sociology and urbanism.

Alan Mace is Lecturer in Regional and Urban Planning at the London School of Economics. He is a qualified planner with considerable experience of community involvement in major planning applications and policy development. His research interests include shrinking cities/suburbs, community involvement in planning and the social impact of rural second homes.

This book is dedicated to SAM and DMM.

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Parts of this work are reproduced from my unpublished doctoral thesis 'London's inter-war suburbs: belonging in a mega-city region' undertaken at the Geography Department of King's College London.

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In conversation with Professor Sir Peter Hall[1]

In this opening section, edited material from a conversation with Professor Sir Peter Hall is presented. His interest in cities and their suburbs are many; several of his numerous books are cited throughout, reflecting his long experience of analysing what is happening in cities and regions employing a wide variety of methods. In this book a case is made for the importance of studying the suburbs in a way that brings together structural economic forces and the experience and perspectives of people; something that Peter has achieved over his long career. Examples from his more recent work include an analysis of the development of the polycentric mega-region more focused on economic drivers (Hall and Pain 2006), while *London Lives* is firmly rooted in the day-to-day experiences of Londoners, including in its suburban areas (Hall 2007). The opportunity is taken to broaden the gaze to suburban locations around the world and to consider similarities and differences at the international level. On another scale he also discusses London's suburbs; the theme of later chapters in this book. In the following exchange he raises a number of issues that run through the suburban literature, including the positioning of the suburb in the context both of globalisation and the development of mega-regions, and the balancing of time and space associated with the suburbs, including the matching of work and residential locations. Here, personal experience of London and its wider (informal) regions comes across as he talks of the outflow of commuters from London to regional centres.

Author: You are linked with the early identification of world city (Hall 1966) and linked to this the idea of ranking cities. I wondered whether you felt that this focus on world cities tends still to focus people on the centre rather than the suburbs.

Peter Hall: Well, I think, at a superficial level, people are obviously focused on the centre because that's where the tourists go,

1 This is an edited version of an interview carried out on 29 May 2012. Some material has been reordered for editorial purposes.

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that is where the professional tourists tend to go for their meetings and this is where the image of the city is established. So, the image of Shanghai is Pudong obviously, the image of Singapore is Marina Bay South, although Singapore's a bad case, because that's one of the rare cases which isn't suburbanising, because they can't. But, generally, the image is set by the centre city, but the reality, the dull reality, is of people living at the edge, even if, importantly, they actually have to work in the centre city and that is of course a big and growing issue.

Author: In your book with Ullrich Pfeiffer (Hall and Pfeiffer 2000), you observed that the urban future would be for many a suburban one. Has that observation really registered with urbanists?

Peter Hall: I think so, because I think it's generally accepted in the developing world, where the real urban growth is taking place, that almost by definition, most growth takes place at the edge. I mean, yes, some growth takes place both in the form of high-density luxury housing and also in the form of the reverse, which is highish-density slum housing within the city because people either can afford or, in the opposite case are driven to live as close as possible to where they can make some kind of existence work-wise; which leads to this proliferation of slums next to airports and so on in places like Mumbai, but I think these are exceptions. I think it's generally recognised that in vast areas of the world, including Latin America in particular, and Africa, and also, to considerable degrees in Asia, the vast majority of growth is seen to be outside the generally defined big city. Although in Asia you do have some densification inside the cities in places like Shanghai and some of it hops over in the mega-city region perhaps to the next city down the line.

I was recently in Cape Town; if you look at Khayalethu, it's twenty-five kilometres outside Cape Town, beyond the airport, it obviously began to be developed under apartheid, but its huge growth has been in the twenty years since the end of apartheid, since '94. At that point, of course, the pass laws were rescinded and anyone was free to live anywhere, the result was that the population of the Eastern Cape Province all migrated to Cape Town looking for work. Where could they go? They couldn't get into the centre, because that was full, so they went into this developing, formal slum – part of its being formalised is because it has been a big policy of the South African government to build basic new housing. But the whole point is that there are all these people living there, I

don't know, 400,000, twenty-five kilometres from Cape Town ... Where is the work? If there is any work, it's in Cape Town, so they somehow have to get to work. There is a train station nearby – the apartheid regime intended to build suburban railways to push the black population out – so there's that, they can get to work at a cost, and a time cost, but it's a very inefficient pattern. This is the pattern, overwhelmingly I'd say, throughout Africa, well, certainly throughout South Africa. It is burgeoning growth, as we said in the book ten years ago, which is fuelled really by desperation. It isn't a good form of growth in that the people are being pushed out of the countryside, virtually through starvation, to find what kind of living they can in the cities and they tend, therefore, to end up in these informal settlements in very bad places with very bad access into the cities. I think this is the pattern throughout much of the developing world where informal settlements have been the rule and 'Ullie' and I wrote about that of course in that book.

Author: Richard Harris has recently written on the problem of marrying the literature on Anglo-American suburbanisation with that literature on informalities and the mega-city (Harris 2010). Academically, do you see a problem in the separation of those two literatures; you appear quite comfortable talking about informality, slums, as suburban areas, but do you see them as suburban areas or something different?

Peter Hall: I think of them as suburban strictly in a formal sense, an academic sense. I'm well aware that the reality is horrifically different if you compare an Anglo-American, Australian suburb with the equivalent in southern Africa. There's no comparison except that the location, in some ways, is strikingly similar, as it's got to be. If you move people a long way from the main sources of work and support – the city – you've got the same kinds of living/working relationship wherever you go, whether in rich cities or poor cities or, as in South Africa, cities that are both very rich and very poor – 'dual cities'. One thing I would say is that some parts of apartheid African cities have weathered rather well. Soweto, which was notorious in the literature, is actually surprising if you go there because, in effect, it looks a bit like Harlow, which you never expect, because it has dual carriageways and brick houses and trees, but there are some shanty towns as well. So, there have been, slightly, some successes in building just basic housing of the lowest possible civilised standard with reasonable connections like rail, generally, or minibus – a combination of

formal and informal transport to get people to work – so there are some signs of encouragement in African cities, but also a lot of discouragement I would say. The good news is that in quite a lot of Latin America, but not, I think, to the same degree in Africa, you have upgrading, or upgraded suburbs. These, to me, are some of the most encouraging developments I've seen. If you look at a place I've actually visited over an extended period, which is Nezahualcóyotl in Mexico City; strictly it's outside Mexico City, just outside. I suppose it would be 1981 when I first went. That began as a vast, informal slum, the biggest informal settlement in Latin America, and probably the world, and it was pretty rough but even then, improving a bit. If you go back today, it's astonishing; it actually looks like a suburb! It's not exactly like a North American suburb, but it's more like a kind of ... Spanish suburb because it's rather high in density and more formal, but it's actually a decent place to live and, not only has it got all the basics like proper water supply and sewerage, it's got the metro out there, and you can get to work quite easily and it's just been absorbed into the structure of the city. Admittedly, there are further burgeoning shanty towns, some even further out of Mexico City, because it goes on and on, almost without end. But this is a pattern not unique to Mexico City; you can find it, I think, also in Argentina, in Chile and in other big cities in Latin America.

Author: Focusing on the Anglo-American suburbs, there are clearly great differences between American and UK suburbanisation but then they have common roots, common elements. Could you talk to some of the variation in the suburbs?

Peter Hall: Well, I would say they're very varied places because, as a majority of the population, or an increasing majority of the population, lives in places which are, strictly, in the technical sense – I go back to my academic, technical argument – are suburbs, then they're almost bound to vary and, of course, I don't think you can exactly generalise from what I would call the American/Australian experience to the UK experience. The UK is different, partly because it's European and suburbanisation is taking place differently in Europe from that other model, the New World model and partly because of special UK features. Although we mustn't [oversimplify], because there are similarities between the way suburbanisation has taken place here and the way it's taking place in Switzerland, the Netherlands and in Sweden, I think. [Nevertheless], there are significant differences and, I think, one of them is the

almost extreme obsession with town and country separation [in the UK], and the traditional planning mantra from Abercrombie, Unwin and all those [planning] pioneers has maintained itself to such a degree that you have had this continuation of the containment of urban England policy, which we analysed in 1973 (Hall 1973) and in fact, oddly enough, I think that I've said this recently to several people, the conclusions of that forty-year-old book still stack up, which you'd think is amazing, but they do, because of the same processes that have occurred. As they've occurred, what I think has happened, but I haven't analysed it, this is just from intuition, is that suburbs in this strictly technical sense have diversified hugely in character and so, in terms of the old English class system, you get very different class patterns as between, for instance, a few houses tacked onto a rather charming village in Oxfordshire and a more sort of bulk development that you get and find occurring around medium-sized towns, perhaps not that far away ... I think, as you get more and more local pressures – you've got multiple variance of suburb, in this country at any rate, and I think the same thing is happening in other countries, as I've observed in Germany, for instance, and in the Netherlands.

Author: One possible link is the sustainability question and obviously a policy discourse around suburbia as inherently environmentally unsustainable. My sense is that the sustainability agenda, while important, is part of a very long and continuing critique of suburbia that sees it as inherently problematic, so I just wondered if I could ask you to talk to that policy agenda.

Peter Hall: First of all, yes, I do think that eco-justifications tend to be tacked onto other prejudices and it's what I call ecologically-conscious NIMBYism. Then, I think, you have to backtrack and say there is suburbia and suburbia. If you take the archetype of non-sustainability to be what's happened very recently in the American West, in particular in the desert states; Phoenix, Arizona, Las Vegas, Nevada, which came to such an incredible end with the [collapse of] Lehman Brothers that itself is just being unsustainable. If you then compare the opposite extreme, some of the best practice that I've been looking at recently, such as, for example, Rieselfeld [Germany] or like Ypenburg outside The Hague I think this represents really the opposite extreme in terms of how you can try to create sustainable suburbs.

Now, that said, the second type is an ideal rather than perhaps a realisation. It's not always realised in that the

performance doesn't always live up to the hopes and expectations of the plan. I could certainly talk to that but, none the less, there is, to me, an absolute world of difference between those miles and miles of sprawl outside Phoenix and what has happened in much of northern Europe in the last twenty years I would say. That's where we ought to be focusing our attention, on sustainable suburban development.

In the US they're moving in the right direction and I think, in some places, they're moving quite rapidly. It is remarkable that they're bringing mass transit back into American cities, admittedly from a base so low as to be almost unobservable, and one wonders how far these wonderful light rail systems go. Well maybe they go far enough in Portland and maybe in Denver, but I suspect they don't in many other places, which remain highly automobile dependent. I think that's always a problem, that these are drops in the ocean. It's a move in the right direction, but I think that the American discourses as I read it, as you know it, is so, so different that the penny has dropped for a few enlightened people on the east and west coast, but most of America doesn't buy it, it just doesn't buy it. So I do think that, increasingly, despite these good examples, America and Europe – I know a massive generalisation – but America and north-west Europe are probably now following quite radically different patterns of development, and increasingly it's the European model that's interesting and the American model that's completely outmoded and uninteresting.

Author: If I could turn to outer London, I would just like you to reflect on the key challenges and opportunities for the suburban areas in outer London.

Peter Hall: One of them I think concerns jobs. Some of us have been arguing for some time for making London more polycentric, and that was a real difference between Ken and Boris.[2] That is why I have to say I've increasingly found myself supporting Boris on some key London strategic issues, because he was promising more polycentric patterns of development, and he did begin to go that way, as you know, through policy initiatives in the suburbs. It proved remarkably hard to do. One of the puzzles that you observe is that employment has not grown within the major outer London centres, it's static at best, and is even decreasing here in Ealing. We have 1970s

2 Mayors of London: Ken Livingstone 2000–8; Boris Johnson 2008–present.

office blocks being turned into residential ... I could show you one, along the Uxbridge Road. There's a growth of higher-density residential here in Ealing Broadway, which is all to the good, but it's not accompanied by any growth of jobs, and it's possibly because the jobs are growing further out beyond the M25.[3] A case I incessantly quote, because it's something that happened to me one morning; I had to go out to Guildford, via Reading, it's a journey I never make, at any rate by train. I arrived at Ealing Broadway at 8:15 onto platform three, the platform I usually arrive at in the evening, and, to my surprise, I notice that there are as many of us standing on platform three as on the opposite platform, four, going in to London ... what is going on? The train is absolutely packed, and it's standing room only. About half of them get out at Slough, which is the first stop I think, and another quarter get out at Maidenhead, another quarter get out at Reading. They're reverse commuting into big, big lumps of office development in the outer metropolitan areas, as it used to be known, but some of these people live in Ealing, why are they reverse commuting to these places?

I've talked a lot about this since then to people who've also been looking at it, and it's not easy to see why. One reason could be that these huge office developments – Slough is the archetype, it's become synonymous with *The Office*, hasn't it – actually cater for people who drive as well as for people who come by public transport. That gives a certain advantage, developers like that, particularly, in drawing on big labour markets in the outer metropolitan area for people who can easily drive to work. Then, the people who come by public transport are just an add-on since, deliberately, job-related development in outer London tends to be very restrictive on car parking, developers don't like it, they would much rather go to residential.

But, there is a real issue here, high-density residential is, I think, attractive in outer London in a way that job-related development, with exceptions, isn't. There's a real puzzle. Even if you could do that and get the jobs, I think there's still a big issue, as we all know, in transport, and this may also be related, that you're inevitably going to draw on a kind of local catchment area for your labour force and how does that catchment area get to work? Well, it doesn't have, in general,

3 An orbital motorway that loosely approximates to the borders of Greater London, which is sometimes used to indicate 'inside' or 'outside' London's administrative area.

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